

## *The Isis Collar*

### Chapter 1

“You *have to* evacuate the school.” There was a hard insistence in my voice, because it was the third time I’d said that in the thirty minutes I’d been here. “We’re running out of time.”

Principal Sanchez stared back at me with annoying calm. “As I’ve already explained twice, Ms. Graves, you haven’t provided any evidence any of the children are in danger. I will *not* traumatize these kids or panic a hundred families just on the word of a clairvoyant who refuses to be named. I’ve already called the Superintendent’s office and sounded like an idiot. I even called the police station . . . as you requested. Nobody has heard any hint that anything is going to happen here today, and their clairvoyants would be the first to know.”

No. They wouldn’t. “Real life isn’t like the movies, Principal Sanchez. The only way the authorities know before an event is if the attacker has a huge ego and calls to taunt, does something noticeable or suspicious, or if someone close to the attacker gets scared and turns the person in.” The police agencies have some of the best mages, witches, and clairvoyants in the world, but someone determined to do harm can keep their intentions hidden. Otherwise there wouldn’t be any attacks . . . anywhere. There was no reason to mention the police weren’t the sole answer, since yet another terrorist attack had been front page news today.

The dapper Latina let out a frustrated sound and stood, laying her palms flat on the polished wood surface of her desk. “I’m asking politely, Ms. Graves. Please leave. Class is about to let out and I don’t want the children traumatized by your presence here.”

My eyes narrowed and I likewise stood. The kids had nothing to do with it. If she just didn’t want anyone to see me, why not stay right here in the principal’s office, where grade-schoolers only venture when forced? No, she was afraid of me and aggressively so. I knew I

should be calm and pretend I was her friend but I was stressed and it was making it hard to keep my anger in check. My fangs probably showed when I spoke, but to hell with it. “There’s no reason to be insulting just because you don’t believe me. Traumatized? Please. They’d never even know. I would remind you that *you* weren’t aware I’m part vampire until I told you.” I’ve spent a good deal of time in front of the mirror just to make sure the elongated canines don’t show very often. I was dressed nicely and not a soul had screamed or even flinched when I’d first arrived at the school and asked to meet with the principal.

At least she had the good grace to blush. “I didn’t mean it that way. I meant your *weapons*. I’m sure you’re armed because you believed you were going to face some unknown a threat the *clairvoyant* warned you of. However, there are very young children in this school who could be frightened by seeing you.” She glanced at the clock high on the wall behind me. “Thank you for your interest, but I need to get back to work.”

Right. Pfft. Geez! She made it sound like I was interviewing for a job at the elementary school, not trying to save everyone from unknown disaster. Like she could even see my weapons. Maybe I should go get Isaac, my tailor, and have her say that to *him*. My clothes are tailored specifically so nobody knows I’m carrying. Even cops haven’t noticed in the past. Admittedly, she was right about the source of the information. Dottie Simmons was a very powerful, but unknown clairvoyant. She was probably a level eight but had kept that a very careful secret her whole life--tricky to do in today’s hyper-regulatory atmosphere. Her age is probably the reason she’s gotten away with it. The State of California didn’t start testing grade school kids until the fifties—long after she was in school.

But the fact Dottie isn’t registered as a certified clairvoyant doesn’t mean she isn’t fully capable of predicting events. Without another word, I turned and walked out of the principal’s

office. I had to tense my muscles to keep from slamming the door behind me. The length of frosted glass might withstand the slam an annoyed child could give it, but the supernatural strength of a half-vampire Abomination would shatter it.

My cell phone was out of my pocket before I'd gotten ten feet down the hallway lined with lockers that only reached my neck. A quick speed dial put me through to the one person with the local police I thought might actually listen to me. Maybe. I hoped. I fidgeted nervously as I waited for Alex to pick up the line.

Heather Alexander had been my best friend Vicki's lover. We were friendly, but not close. I'd hoped we might get closer after Vicki's death. After all, we both loved her, both missed her. But if anything, our busy schedules and the pain of our loss had pushed us even further apart. Still, I knew she'd take this seriously, and she'd help if she could.

A harried but pleasant alto came onto the line "Alexander. Go ahead."

"It's Celia, Alex. I've got a problem."

The silence on the line told me I had her attention. Since in the recent past our mutual experiences have included greater demons, magical assassins, and international drug lords she knew to take me seriously. "What's the problem?"

I lowered my voice and squeezed into an alcove that held a pair of knee-high water fountains. I was glad I'd left my purse locked in my car. It and I both wouldn't have fit in the space. "I got an anonymous tip this morning from a clairvoyant I know. Something bad is going to happen at an elementary school today. But nobody will listen to me—which is ticking me off. I know a kid here, Alex. A little girl with siren blood. Her sister will be the first Atlantic siren since the Magna Carta was signed."

"The sister the one who helped you seal the rift last Christmas?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "Yeah. I owe her. Hell, the whole world owes her." Saving the world from the same demonic threat that had destroyed Atlantis had been a horrible thing to put on the shoulders of a twelve-year-old. "I want her eight-year-old sister not to have to go through anything else." It was the truth but that wasn't the only reason. My own sister had died when I was twelve . . . and she was eight. There was something about the Murphy family that had gotten under my skin. They'd purchased my Gran's house, and somehow I'd made it my mission to ensure that Julie Murphy made it to ten. It was a magical number in my head, for no reason I could think of.

"So what do you need from me?" She sounded willing to help, which was exactly what I needed.

"I need to clear out this place. Call the principal and tell her to evacuate the school."

A second long silence followed and then she burst out laughing. "No . . . really. What do you need?"

Laughing is just what I didn't want her to do. "That's what I need. My source is a level *eight* clairvoyant. The same person your former co-worker Karl used to get my memories back. When I got here, the magic shield was completely down and nobody realized it. Something's going down. I don't know *what* exactly yet, but . . . just get these kids out of here before bad things happen. I'm serious." I looked out the window at the empty swings and wanted to be sure they didn't stay that way. My gaze moved down to the brightly patterned floor tiles as my frustration grew.

"I'm serious too, Celia. Do you have any idea how many laws I would break by trying to evacuate a school with no orders from higher up? It would be my badge, at least. And possibly time in a *Federal* pen."

Crap. I let out a deep sigh and shook my head.

“*Miss Graves!*” The angry hiss of words came from my left and made me look up suddenly. Principal Sanchez and the heavy-set security guard with a name badge that read, “R. Jamisyn” were standing in front of me, arms crossed over equally broad chests. “I thought I’d made myself completely clear.”

I held my hand over the cell phone’s speaker and looked her in the eye. “You said you needed evidence. I’m trying to get it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No. I said it was time for you to leave.” She backed up a pace and waved her hand, motioning me out of my cubbyhole. Her eyes were pointed at the door and I had no doubt she wanted me on the other side of it. “Officer Jamisyn and I are going to escort you off school grounds. Then I’ll be speaking to the police about keeping you away in the future. I’m sorry it’s come to that but the bell is going to ring any moment.”

Crap, crap, *crap!* Now what? But the security guard had his hand on the taser in his belt and if I drew on him, anywhere close to school grounds, I’d not only be going straight to jail, don’t pass go, don’t collect \$200, but probably would lose my concealed carry permit. Or worse. I put the cell back up to my ear. “Do what you can, Alex. The nice officer is going to escort me away before I scare the kiddies.”

She sighed in my ear as Sanchez glared at me and pointed to the door. “Sorry, Celia. I’ll see if I can get a squad car to drive by, but I don’t think there’s anything else I can do. I hope you’re wrong.”

“Oh, yeah. Me, too. You have no idea.” I ended the call with a sigh as I trudged down the hallway ahead of Sanchez and Jamisyn. But as far as I stretched my vampire senses, I couldn’t feel any threat. So . . . maybe Dottie was wrong. Clairvoyants weren’t infallible. Even my former

best friend, Vicki, who had been a level nine, couldn't always read the exact when and where. If she could have, her murderer couldn't have snuck up on her.

As I reached the door, Jamisyn reached past me and opened it. I had no illusions he was being polite. He had his eyes on my every movement and I made sure not to give him reason to become aggressive.

The trees around the school were full of seagulls, perched in the branches like some weird interpretation of Hitchcock's movie. Yeah, I said *gulls*. They hang around me like lovesick puppies, ever since my siren blood woke up. At least they don't poop on my car anymore. "Go on, shoo. Go eat some fish at the dock." The birds obediently lifted their wings at my wave and flew away.

The bell rang as I stepped over the threshold, and I expected to hear doors opening and kids swarming the halls between classes. But it was absolutely silent when the bell stopped . . . eerily so.

That's when I felt the press of magic against me. A muffled explosion vibrated under the soles of my feet. I looked around down the hallway but other than the nearly silent bang, you could have heard a pin drop. What I was feeling wasn't the typical barrier against evil that so many businesses and houses have. This was a spell. "I think we have a problem," I said, turning back to Jamisyn and Sanchez.

The principal's face was frozen in position, mouth open. But no, not precisely *frozen*. I experienced what a thousand hummingbirds probably see every day. Everyone in the school was running in slow motion. Principal Sanchez and Officer Jamisyn were moving. In fact, I would bet they believed themselves to be moving at normal speed. But watching them was similar to the 'hyper-focus' I get when the vampire inside me wants to come out and hunt at sunset. Their

movements were a crawl.

Except this time, it wasn't me. It was broad daylight—the fact made more evident by the bright sun that was beating down on my sunscreen-slathered skin and making it sting.

I slid back into the school. I needed to confirm my suspicions. There was a window set into the door of the first classroom, and I stopped and peered in. Sure enough, the kids inside were half out of their seats, ready to pick up their pencils and notebooks.

This was not good.

Jamisyn opening the door must have triggered the spell. Or maybe it was me, stepping over the threshold. I raced from room to room in the first hall, my heels echoing in the silence. Every class was the same.

At first I thought that time had slowed, but a glance out the window showed cars moving at normal speed and pedestrians briskly walking down the shaded sidewalks. It was just the people in the school who were moving slowly. The reason for the spell came to me in a flash that made bile rise to my throat.

Maximum damage.

If nobody could get away from a bomb or a killer, everyone would die. It would be, sadly, child's play. I wasn't exactly sure why I wasn't affected. It could be the vampire blood, that I was outside when the spell started, or maybe the protection charm disks I had in my jacket. Either way, I knew now why Dottie had insisted that I went to the school when I'd wanted to stay under the covers and pull the pillow over my head.

The flash of red on the wall caught my eye and I chuckled at the irony of it. Most every kid who has gone to a public school has wanted to do it. Heck, most every *adult* has too, including me. I made a fist and smashed the thin glass on the front of the fire alarm, then pulled

the lever down.

Bells shattered the silence and echoed down the halls so loud it made my head throb. Out on the street, one or two people paused, but when nobody ran out of the school, they moved on, probably figuring it was a fire drill. In the distance, I could hear a phone ringing, only because it was a counterpoint in pitch.

That was good, because without a call from the office, or anyone answering when the dispatcher called, they would send an engine. Now I just needed to get the attention of the general public.

Principal Sanchez had been right. Because I didn't know what sort of danger I was getting into, I'd put on every weapon I could easily find on short notice. One of those wasn't precisely a weapon. It was a distraction, a defense. I raced down to open the windows facing the street, pulled two 'smoker' charm disks from my inside pocket, and threw them hard against the nearest locker. The smoke is black and thick, a screen to disappear behind with a client in tow. But the smoke doesn't clog the lungs or sting the eyes, which is the nice thing about magic. It billowed out of the windows with me waving my arms to help it along. Now there was something to match the bells and people would come.

I raced back to the door and carried Principal Sanchez out, hoping that once I got her past the threshold, she would be out of the spell's influence.

It worked. "Each of us . . . what?" She blinked repeatedly as she realized where she was-- on the sidewalk, probably a dozen steps from the front door. The fire bells were ringing loud. Smoke was billowing out of the windows and people were running toward us. "Oh my lord! Fire!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to meet my eyes. "Listen to me. There's a

spell on everyone in the school. Probably tripped when we opened the door. There's been an explosion in the basement. I can't sense any fire, but I've got the fire department coming to get the kids out. We need to find out whether you can get back in the school without being affected by the spell again."

Some spells are like that. If you can break away from the influence, often it won't re-affect you. Without another word, she pulled away from me and raced back up the steps. I followed her in case she needed to be brought out again. But she didn't slow down, so I'd been right about the spell. She looked in door windows, as I did, finally realizing I wasn't lying. "I'm sorry!" She yelled it at me to be heard over the bells.

Everybody says that after the fact and I find it more than mildly annoying. I had to struggle not to frown or growl because this was not the time for recriminations. "Don't worry about it. We've got to get the kids out!"

She propped open the first classroom door and started to untangle the first child from her chair. I shook my head no and pointed toward the teacher. "If we get the teachers first, we'll have more hands!" I was already tired of shouting, tired of the noise that was making my head pound. Sanchez nodded and headed toward the front of the class, where a slim, older woman was staring at the clock and pointing, with a piece of chalk, at the door.

Like a lot of schools in the district, Abraham Lincoln was built on a single story and every classroom had a fire door that opened directly onto the playground. As principal, Sanchez had a key. The first thing she did was unlock the door and prop it open. It was the smart thing to do. She must have been a firefighter in a previous career, too, because she picked up the teacher like she was a cardboard cutout and tossed her over one shoulder before heading out the door. I did the same to an older brunette girl sitting in a chair in the corner. I was guessing she was a

student teacher or a college intern.

More people had arrived because of the smoke and were being directed by Jamisyn, who either had gotten away himself or had must have been pulled out by a passer-by. Sirens in the distance were getting louder. I set the girl down and shook her lightly to clear her head. While I was explaining what had happened to her, I spotted movement near the end of the building.

I had turned, taking a couple of steps in that direction when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned my head and was surprised to see Terrance Harris, one of the Santa Maria de Luna cops. He was a recently arrived Haitian immigrant, a level six mage. He'd been brought in to be part of the magical enforcement squad. I'd met him once before, at a Christmas party. He nodded toward the school, but I noticed that he was looking at a point near the rooftop of the building, on a ledge. I followed his gaze. I didn't see anything. "I knew when I saw you over here that this wasn't just a building fire. You set off smoke bombs because of the curse, didn't you?"

The distinctive accent didn't distract me. Instead, the words made me look at the unobtrusive middle-aged man suspiciously. "What do you know about it?" He looked like he was off-duty because he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, but it seemed awfully convenient to see a powerful mage at a place where an equally powerful spell had been cast. That 'they always return to the scene of the crime' thing is mostly true.

He pointed at the ledge. "I can feel it. The source of the spell is up there. It's a powerful one. I'm thinking it was done last night and set with a trigger or timer. It's too complicated and too public for someone to have done this just now."

Could I trust him? Would either of the mages I knew be able to tell me all that about a spell just by encountering it on the sidewalk?

Actually, yeah, they would. Bruno could for sure, and probably Creede, too. Bruno was a

level nine. Creede an eight plus. So maybe I shouldn't short change Harris. I turned to ask him if he could tell anything specific about the curse, but was distracted when I spotted more movement in the place that had caught my attention a moment before.

A basement window was being opened . . . from the *inside*. Okay, that just screamed sneaky. There were plenty of exit doors, why crawl out of a window unless you were up to something?

I gestured silently toward the dark-skinned man emerging from the open window. He was trying hard to use his camo clothing to blend in with the shadows. Terrance followed my gesture and started heading that way, pulling what looked like an actual carved wand from a holster on his belt. I don't know a lot of witches or mages who use wands, although I've seen them for sale in weapons stores.

Harris shouted "Police! You in the window. Freeze. Don't move!"

Crap. I'd been hoping for a little more . . . subtlety. I know there are laws that say they have to give that warning. It just seems like it gives the bad guys an edge when you can't sneak up on them. The man in the window pulled down on his cap and it became a face mask, just in time to keep me from getting a good look at him. As I expected, instead of not moving, he started moving faster, kicking to get out of the window before we could get to him.

Go figure.

Terrance raised his wand and twirled it in a fast circle before throwing power at the masked man. "*Glacia!*"

I knew that spell, which was, literally, 'freeze.' It should have stopped the guy cold in his tracks. Except that I was right about him being a spellcaster. He threw his hands sideways and deflected the magic. Toward me. Then he took off running down the street.

I kicked off my heels just as a wave of ice cold hit me and made my muscles tense. But there's a reason I spend serious money on protection charms. It only took a second for the medallion around my neck to heat and push away the cold. I didn't wait to have something more serious hit me. The best defense is a good offense. I put a hand inside my blazer, extracted a charm disk as I ran and brushed my fingertips over the raised lettering to be sure I'd drawn the one I wanted. Pouring on the speed, I hit the guy from behind with a flying tackle. We tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs and dirt. Before he could utter the next curse, I stuffed the charm in his mouth and slammed his jaw shut. The *Speak No Evil* charm is specially made for spellcasters. For the next hour, he wouldn't be able to say anything that could be harmful.

He gagged and coughed as the liquid in the charm slid down his throat. "You folkling titch!" He spat out the words and then realized what I must have done. He tried to curse me, but it came out as "*Beneficent Harmony!*"

Terrance, breathing hard from the run, pulled handcuffs from a holster on his belt. His skin was at least two shades darker than that of the man under me as he slapped the first cuff against the caster's wrist. "Good thing you did that. You don't want to even know what that curse would have done."

He was probably right. I kept my weight on the guy until the cuffs were on and then got to my feet. "Stay with him until the other cops get here. I need to find out what he did inside the building. I heard a small explosion coming from the basement a few minutes ago."

"Don't be an idiot, Graves. Let us take care of it. I'll call for reinforcements, they'll be here—"

"Too late," I completed. They don't even know they *need* to be here yet. Call it in, but I have to and keep getting those kids out. That's the important thing. I'll see what caused the

explosion.”

He let out an exasperated sigh as he pulled the other mage to his feet. “Then let me go. If it’s another spell, you can’t disarm it. If it’s a bomb . . . well, you don’t have authority do that either. There could be chemicals or toxins, and I’ve trained with them. Stay with the prisoner, I’ll go.”

I shook my head and finished picking up the charms I’d dropped when we tumbled. “I also don’t have authority to keep a prisoner in custody. Remember that most of the cops around here don’t like me. They’d love an excuse to lock me behind bars for the rest of my life.” It was a painful truth to admit. There were cops--people I’d gone drinking with, shared stories with--who now wanted me dead or locked up because a master vampire tried to turn me. They considered me evil, despite the fact I could stand in a church, wear holy items, and walk in the daylight. And since the “Zoo,” otherwise known as the California State Facility for Criminally Magical Beings, had been reduced to a wide piece of glass in the desert by a massive explosion, they’d have to find somewhere else to put me—probably somewhere far worse. No, thanks. I’d rather take my chances with whatever I found inside the school. “As for chemicals, I’ll stand a better chance than you. Vampires heal faster.”

Harris winced at my crack about his fellow officers, but he didn’t bother trying to deny it and I didn’t give him the chance to argue. I just sprinted back toward the building. He could either leave the prisoner and follow me, or stay where he was.

I really wanted to know what was going on in that basement, and call me crazy, but I figured the quickest route to find the trouble was to backtrack the crook. So I slipped into the building using the basement window that he’d left so conveniently open and took a look around.

I’d expected to find myself in a furnace room, maybe a closet. Instead, I was standing in a

music storage room. A beat-up old upright piano was tucked into a corner and a host of noise making implements like triangles, kazoos and tiny brass cymbals were stored in stacked and labeled clear plastic totes. A battered metal file cabinet had drawers marked with the names of various instruments.

I stopped, stilling my breathing, extending all of my senses to the max. I've developed quite the sensitivity to magic with my other predator senses. There are some less happy vamp side-effects as well, but I didn't have time to think about those right now. I wanted to find whatever it was the bad guy had been up to.

Nothing. At least not in this room. Crap. I moved toward the still-open door, listening as hard as I could.

The alarm was a distant rumble below the thick concrete slab above that all the older buildings in town have. The school on top had been scraped and rebuilt when I was a kid, but the foundation and main floor slab are probably a century old. Either the lower rooms didn't have bells or they'd been disabled. That's how I was able to hear the distinct sounds of someone fiddling with something. The noise was similar to when I'm having the oil changed in my car. Fabric rustling, the tink of different metals meeting, the squeak/scrape of screws or bolts turning under force. Subtle but noticeable.

I took off my heels and crept down the hall in nylon clad feet, staying on my toes so there was little sound and varying my steps so it was hard to determine the source. A hiss of air behind me made me turn. My Colt 1911 was in my hand and pointed at the hiss before I even remembered moving.

Harris was there, gun likewise drawn, but his was carefully pointed at the floor as he stared down my barrel. I opened my mouth to ask him what the hell he was doing here but he

responded by raising one finger to his lips so I mouthed the words, *Where's the prisoner?*

A quirky smile pulled at one side of his mouth. He motioned his hands together in front, wrists touching like handcuffs and then showed a long straight vertical line and mouthed *Flag pole*.

I grinned. Good move. I knew the guys on the hex squad were assigned magical handcuffs and they had some way of knowing whose cuffs they were when another officer came upon a cuffed prisoner. I don't know the science or metaphysics of it. I should probably ask some of the cops I know someday.

I let him slip ahead of me to take point. I had no way of knowing whether he was lying. I didn't think so, but having him in front of me meant I could keep an eye on him. Never a bad thing.

We walked down the hallway, checking the storage rooms for potential danger. I was sure we'd checked them all. Except . . . we *hadn't*. We got to the end of hall and I realized that while my eyes saw four doors on either side, my internal count said we'd only checked seven rooms. I frowned and that made Harris frown too. He shrugged and motioned to my worried face with a *What's up?* expression.

I didn't know if he'd understand but I mouthed the words one through eight as I pointed to each door. He nodded. Then I pointed to both of us, made walking motions with my fingers and extended five fingers and then two so I didn't have to lower the Colt.

His brow furrowed and he thought for a moment. Then he had the same realization as me and he mouthed *We missed one*.

I nodded while realizing I didn't know *which* one. *Spell?* I mouthed again.

Now his jaw set and I realized he was angry. He nodded and closed his eyes briefly. I

could feel his magic swell out in a wave that crawled along my body like bugs. I wanted to flinch or scratch but didn't dare take my attention off the hallway.

For a long moment, I did move my eyes to watch Harris's face while he searched. Alex once told me that for every expression we see a person make, there are a dozen or more micro-expressions we don't. It's one of the first things an interrogator is trained to look for, because they're nearly impossible to fake. A twitch of the lip, a wrinkle over the nose bridge, even an eye flick away from the questioner—they're all indications of guilt or innocence.

Admittedly, I'm not well trained in such things, but from all indications, Harris was frustrated and annoyed. Whether with himself, me or the person we were searching for, I didn't know. He leaned toward me until his lips were right next to my left ear. My peripheral vision revealed he was carefully keeping his 9mm pointed low and away from me. "I'm going to walk back and touch every door. See which one I miss." His words were so low and soft that without the vamp senses, I would have missed them entirely.

I nodded and he moved away from me, crouching low enough that he couldn't be seen through the reinforced windows in the doors. I mouthed the words one through seven as he touched, but my mind said eight—the exact reverse of earlier. At the end of the hall, he looked at me with a question on his face. I just frowned, shook my head and raised five and two again.

My skin itched furiously from the high levels of magic around me. There was definitely a spell going on . . . some sort of powerful distraction or aversion charm. It didn't buzz against my skin the way wards usually do, but I could definitely feel it. Probably a good thing, too. If I hadn't I might never have even noticed the extra door.

Wait . . . doors. What if it was *just* about the doors?

I had an idea. I motioned for Harris to stay put. Crouching down I moved slowly toward

him but instead of looking at the doors, I kept my eyes on the floor and counted the *tiles*. There should be eight oversized tiles between doorways and six across the hall. At the point where the first doorway should be, I could see out my peripheral vision two door jambs. I counted another eight squares and again, two jambs.

But eight more tiles and . . . I could only see *one* jamb. On my left. Without looking up to see Harris, I pointed to my right. I crouched down on the third tile, closed my eyes and felt along the floor, sliding fingers along the edges of the tiles. Sure enough, when I reached the edge of the third tile, there was a gap between the floor and the bottom of an invisible door.

The problem I saw was that if the caster had spent the time and energy to do the slow-mo spell and the aversion spell, why not booby trap the door as a final fail safe? I would. And I always try to credit the bad guys with being at least as smart as I am.

I could still hear that shuffling and tinkering sound behind the door and would bet even money there was a person behind the door I couldn't see.

Harris joined me on the tile facing what appeared to be a blank wall. He mouthed, *You're sure?*

I nodded and raised my gun, aiming for a spot at about knee level. I moved over until I had my back against the wall. Harris followed and grabbed my gun arm and tried to yank my Colt away. He stank of sudden panic. But he was just plain human as far as physical power and . . . I'm not anymore. My arms didn't move.

Harris is a cop. Cops don't get to fire into blind doorways. Actually, bodyguards shouldn't either. But I was aiming low enough that it wouldn't be a kill shot, and I knew what ammo I'd brought. When I go into an unknown situation, I take the time to balance my bullets. One copper-jacketed safety round, one snakeshot round filled with salt and iron beads, and one

soft lead filled with holy water. Then the same over again. Various supernatural beasties react to different things, so usually one of the three will have an effect. Spells often don't account for mechanical threats. They're geared toward the human brain but not the tools it can use.

Before Harris had time to react and do anything more aggressive, I fired three quick shots. The gunfire echoed through the hallway and a sudden scream followed.

I dropped into a crouch, spun and kicked with all the strength I could muster from that position. A part of the wall flew inward on oiled hinges I couldn't see. It hit the drywall with a sharp bang and did not bounce back. I guessed that the force of my blow had embedded the knob in the wall.

A burly, tattooed man was rolling on the floor, shouting four letter curses that had nothing to do with magic, his hands pressed tight over a bleeding wound in his calf. The air filled with the scent of burning flesh. Either the iron or holy water had done the trick.

Harris gave me a hard look, but moved swiftly through the door. Raising his wand he threw a wordless spell at the man on the floor. He was instantly silent, though his lips kept moving. Hate filled eyes glared at the two of us.

"Holy crap, Graves!" Harris shouted. There was no need to keep our voices down anymore but the sound seemed to echo off the walls and blast into my ears with the force of an air horn. "What the hell were you thinking?!" The caster raised a hand and started to make movements in the air, but Harris grabbed him and threw him face down, wrestling with him until he could get a pair of flexible cable ties out of his pocket and around the guy's wrists. This time he didn't need my help, so I didn't offer. "You could have blown us both up!"

I didn't bother to respond. I was busy looking around the room. I saw the charred remains of a side of the ductwork. It was a small hole, not really big enough to do more than blow a hole

the size of my head. The edges were wet but not with water. I just couldn't tell what it was over the scent of charred metal.

But that's not what worried me. There was a . . . contraption in the center of the room. It was black metal and round, about twice the size of an ancient cannonball, and had what looked like valves coming out of the metal at odd angles. I've seen a variety of bombs before in training videos and this didn't look like one. Frankly, it looked like something that should be attached to an old furnace. It glowed with powerful magic that pressed against my chest hard enough to hurt, and had a digital display with a countdown timer, so bomb definitely came to mind. Two of the three bullets I'd fired were floating in mid-air right in front of me. Marks on the floor showed that they'd bounced off the tiles before becoming trapped in whatever spell was around the object. Apparently, it was sheer luck I hit the other caster with the snake shot, which hadn't ricocheted like the larger rounds. He must have some fae in his background to have the iron shot slip through his personal magic.

Harris had been right that I wasn't qualified to do anything about the . . . whatever it was in front of me. But I remember from college that any spell that required a physical casing to keep the caster safe was a nasty piece of work, so in my mind it *was* a bomb. The best thing I could do now was to call this in to the bomb squad and get the rest of the people out of the building.

I turned my attention to Harris, who had not only gotten the caster into the cuffs, but had dialed for the bomb squad on his cell phone and was explaining about the masking spell. I waited for him to hang up the line and asked, "Do you need me to stay here, or should I go back and help the others?" I really, really hoped he said no. Yeah, I had come down to investigate, and I'd stay and help if I had to. But I have my limits. I'll fight me some monsters, face bad guys with guns. I'll even face demons. But *bombs*?

The prisoner was now sitting sullenly against the wall, ankles and wrists both bound tight. It would make it impossible for him to walk, let alone run or fight. I put my Colt back in its holster.

Harris smiled while the other man glowered. “Nah. Nathan and I are old friends, aren’t we? He won’t try to escape and embarrass himself. Besides,” he assured me, “the cuffs are spelled higher than he’ll ever get out of. He’s not going to get away. Let me get him in a fireman’s carry and I’ll go up with you. We’ll leave this,” he nodded at the machine, “to the experts.”

Fine by me. More than fine. Really. I turned to go through the door, as he bent to grab the prisoner, but the moment I reached the threshold, things . . . changed.

A subtle whisper of will pushed at me. It was magic all right, but not the brute force of the two men we’d encountered thus far. This was something entirely different. It eased through the protection of my charms like water seeping through microscopic cracks in rock.

*Touch it...*

What the . . . ? I could swear I heard a woman’s voice, a warm alto that beckoned to me. I was grabbed the door jamb to steady myself . “Harris? Something’s wrong.”

His voice was breathy and panicked when he responded. “I know. I hear her too. We need to get out of here. Now!”

Nathan was smiling slightly, apparently listening to the voice too. But he wasn’t able to respond and I knew that I certainly had no plan to do what she was telling me.

And yet I found my head turning, until I felt like an owl, with my face pointed so I could nearly look down at my backside. The muscles in my neck and shoulders began to protest; a throbbing rose in my left temple. But these minor pains were no distraction from the words that

hounded me.

*Touch it...*

My fingers started moving without conscious thought, trying to reach for the glowing aura that raked along my skin.

“Don’t do it, Graves!” Harris was apparently fighting his own battle against the voice because my glance revealed he’d moved as far away from the machine as the room would allow and was now sitting on his own hands.

“I don’t want to. Do something, Harris. You’re the mage. Haven’t you got anything your bag of tricks to make us both deaf or something?”

He let out a laugh that was part sarcasm and part fear. “I wish it was that easy. It’s in our heads, not our ears. I could knock us both unconscious, but then nobody will find the bomb before it blows, and they’ll have more people in the building searching for us.”

He was right. Bomb teams usually have a mage, a straight human and a psychic. If the psychic foresees that the bomb will go off before it can be disarmed the squad simply evacuates everyone and puts a containment field on the area but don’t go in. Standard practice, which is why the psychic is usually the team leader.

*Touch it...*

The cracks in my protection were widening. I could feel the muscles in my arm tingling. My hand was beginning to disobey my command to grip the jamb. I tightened my grasp with what felt like my last ounce of free will. The wood splintered under my fingers as my knuckles grew white and the tendons of my hand locked into position.

But I had two hands . . . and while I’d put all my energy into keeping my left hand still, my right had developed a mind of its own. When my right arm began to raise and reach

backwards, I started to panic. It wouldn't be easy for me to touch the shield with that hand, but if the voice could make my body contort or dislocate, it would be possible. The pain in my head had grown from an ache to blinding agony. Muscles aren't intended to be stretched to their limit and kept there---even vampire muscles that heal constantly. "Harris, you've got to do something! This is magic . . . you're magic, do something. Freeze me in place if you have to, or knock me out or make me start screaming so people can find us." Because now I was part of the problem. I just knew that if the voice wanted me to touch the shield, that touch would either set off the bomb or cause other things to happen that I wouldn't like. I could feel it in my bones.

I heard voices outside now, but they seemed too far away, given the size of the building. Maybe that's how we were able to sneak up on Nathan in the first place—sound dampening on the room kept him focused on his task.

I was beginning to think he wasn't the bomb's creator. He was likely just a hired hand brought in to make sure nobody got to it before it blew. Maybe he was the intended trigger--the one the voice we were hearing was meant to control.

Another sharp pain stabbed through me. My right arm was struggling to touch the glowing sphere, even as I fought to keep a grip on the door jamb and keep my feet planted firmly on the floor. I was not going to take even a piece of a step back toward that *thing*. If my body was going to betray me, it was damned well going to have to work at it.

So why not make the problem part of the solution? "Harris? Can you cast at all?"

His voice was breathy when he started to reply but strengthened as he talked. "Little bit. Nothing too complicated."

Thankfully, what I hoped for wasn't complicated at all. But it was only going to work if the Nathan *wasn't* in here with us or just outside. By now, I didn't think the either of the mages

Harris had caught was the creator of our little problem. This magic felt . . . feminine somehow. And I was the only woman here to my knowledge.

“I need you to make a tripwire. Cast a spell so that if the voice *does* make me touch the bomb, the second spell will go off.”

“And what’s the second spell?” Harris sounded skeptical, probably because he realized I was admitting we might fail here. I was going to fail pretty soon. He was right.

“Set the bomb to implode. We contain the blast in this room and force the bomb in on itself.”

His voice was flat now and sounded hollow. “That would kill us.”

I forced my eyes to the right as far as they would go so I could at least meet his wide brown eyes. “But the kids won’t die, and the building won’t be turned into little pieces that will punch through the neighbors’ roofs.” I paused long enough to pull on my shrinking reserves, keeping my body from obeying the powerful force that was turning me into a puppet.

I stated the reality for the first time, and I hated saying it. “Face it. We’re probably going to die today, Harris. Let’s make it have some meaning, huh?”

He was silent long enough that I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me. But then his voice came, sturdy and resolute. “Okay. For my little girl upstairs, I’ll do it.”

## Chapter 2

Crap. He was a father of a kid in this school? No wonder he was nearby. “Geez, Harris. I didn’t know.”

He shook his head as I yanked my hand back once more. “That’s why I was here instead of at work. I was supposed to take her for testing.” He shook his head, as if to clear it. “We don’t know what this thing is going to do. If we don’t keep it in this room, there’s no telling what’ll happen. Willow might have to go through life with only one parent, but she’ll be alive. If it has to be a choice, I choose her.”

I did my best to blink back the tears that formed in my eyes. “Willow’s a pretty name. What grade?”

“First,” he said, sounding distracted. “She wants to be a ballerina when she grows up. Now shut up. I have to concentrate if I’m going to pull this off. You just keep your hands to yourself and away from that freaking bomb.”

*Touch it . . . now!*

My whole body jerked with the command and I had to struggle with everything I had left not to obey. I didn’t know if the caster of this particular spell was listening and realizing what we were doing or if it was just a timed command for whoever was in the room to countdown to the event. But either way, the new order was more urgent and my skin was twitching in earnest now, my fingers stretching while my arm shook with the strain of keep from reaching those last few inches. I still had command of my feet and as long as I kept them pointed toward the door, anatomical limits would keep me in check.

*Relax . . . let your mind drift.*

Oh, crap. While the caster might not be in the room, this new command made me realize she knew Harris and I were here. She was reacting to my plan. Oh, crap. I felt tension seep out of my body, the same way the magic had crept in. If my leg muscles relaxed, I'd fall right over onto the bomb. My heart was beating like a jackhammer even as my eyelids drooping, like I was trying to stay awake when I'd been driving too long. "You need to speed it up, Harris. The voice is trying to make me go to sleep, so I fall over and set off the bomb."

"I'm hurrying. I'm hurrying. Just hang on for a few more seconds and I'll wrap the spell all the way around you."

I yawned, then shook my head, wanting nothing more than to curl up and rest, like a cat in a sunbeam.

Wait. A *sunbeam*. That's exactly what I needed. Moments before, a tree's shadow had lain across the basement window, casting the room into darkness. Now the sun had moved on and bright sunlight streamed into the room. The sunbeams flowed through the spell with only a slight change of color before hitting the wall right next to me.

Sunlight was no longer my friend. But the enemy of mine enemy was acceptable today.

I leaned sideways as far as I could, letting my relaxed muscles work in my favor. I kept my hand on the doorknob to limit the swing of my body but soon my face was square in the warm sun.

Imagine being in a tanning bed set on high or standing in front of a blast furnace with your eyes wide open. The heat was intense and immediate and made me hiss in pain. That was good because it awakened the vampire inside. Normally, the supernatural part of me isn't an issue except near sunset. But I wanted that part of me to feel the burn right now. The witch was

playing games, trying to beat down a weak, human foe. But I'm not human, and she wasn't going to win against me.

I hissed again and then roared from the pain. Reflexes snapped my neck around, taking me out of the sun. I turned toward Harris, seeing him with the most extreme version of vampire hypervision---that registered people only as colored auras that smelled of . . . food. Thankfully, I'd had a nutrition shake before coming to the school, so I wasn't particularly hungry. But I had no doubt that I was glowing lightly and my eyes were probably red, because Nathan, the hired wand, straightened abruptly and started to kick away from me. His eyes were wide and the pulse in his exposed neck was racing, the thundering of his pulse making me aware of his fear.

*Relax . . . touch it.*

I turned and snarled at the bomb, "Go to hell, bitch."

Harris didn't seem worried, but mostly I think that was because he wasn't really looking at me. He was concentrating on the runes he was drawing on the tile with his wand. They shone gold as he wrote, as if the wand was a glow in the dark marker. "Keep your head together, Graves. Think about the kids."

While I needed the predator's strength of purpose, I also needed my humanity and compassion. That balance was something I worked on daily; I always want to know that I could bring myself back from the brink in a crisis. "I'm okay. Just keep working." My voice was low and snarls lurked at the edges of my words. They made Harris look at me for the first time.

"Aah!" He jerked back and half-crawled away from me, smudging one of the runes in the process. "Jeez, Graves. They weren't kidding about you down at the station house."

I'd opened my mouth for a scathing reply when the colors surrounding the bomb began to flicker. I didn't know what it meant but I was betting it wasn't good. "Can you see that?"

He nodded. "I'm on it. I just need to mark down this last rune." He held the wand like an artist's brush and stared at the circle of glowing symbols, preparing to write the final rune. The weird thing was that even though I didn't recognize more than three of the sigils, the ones I did know didn't have any business being in the same spell. Harris was either doing something really creative or he was making things worse . . . intentionally.

Wasn't he sitting on his hands earlier? What changed?

A specialized charm slid into my right hand almost without thought and I used that hand to motion to the floor. "Seems like shaping the blast to channel *up* is sort of counterproductive to keeping it in the room, don't you think?"

Harris froze, his wand hovering over the tiles. "What?" His voice was a throaty whisper that sounded more *alto* than baritone. It was just what I was afraid of. It had gotten too easy to move in the past few seconds. The witch's attention was somewhere else, and now I knew where. She'd gotten inside Harris's head and was about to make him do her dirty work. If he survived, he'd at least lose his job for failure to shield and might go to jail as an accessory.

I threw the charm in my hand hard against the floor. The 'boomer' is all light and sound, without the energy that might set off the bomb. Still, it packs a wallop to the senses. I was expecting it, so I closed my eyes and accepted going immediately deaf. Harris and Nathan took the effect full on and were stunned into unconsciousness. I only had a few moments if the flashing of the magic shield around the bomb was any indication. As fast as I could I hauled Nathan up in a fireman's carry and yanked Harris to his feet by hauling up on his wand arm. I swiped my foot across his runes as I passed, just to make sure whatever he'd written wouldn't make things worse.

It wasn't a solution, but it was the best I could do. I was out of the room like a shot,

running smack into a band of six officers. Five were in riot gear, two of them with the words “BOMB SQUAD” in big white block letters on their chests. The sixth didn’t need the lettering. He was in full protective gear, and the runes and sigils that had been drawn on his suit glowed like magnesium in the dim light of the basement hallway.

I startled them, which was bad enough. Far worse, I was a scary vampire-looking creature dragging a mage officer and carrying another “victim.” It was quite possibly the worst first impression I could make and all guns turned my way and pointed at my chest in a flash.

My best defense was a good offense. “I’m Celia Graves, I’m a professional bodyguard.” I dropped Nathan to the floor, and raised my hands. “The bomb’s in there and it’s about to blow! We need to get the hell out of here!” With the door open, everyone could see the fast-flickering magic and it certainly looked like Harris wasn’t able to walk without help.

All heads turned to the two officers with *bomb squad* printed on their flak jackets. The man on my left nodded, one sharp movement of his head. Or, actually, *her* head, because the voice was female. Grabbing the transmission button on her radio she called. “All personnel, clear the area. NOW!”

I heard the thunder of footfalls overhead, and muted shouting in various languages. The cops grabbed Harris and Nathan away from me and hurried toward the stairs at the end of the hall.

I followed but wound up in the lead going upstairs. They were burdened, I wasn’t. Logically I should have carried the others but I wasn’t about to protest at the time.

I called over my shoulder as I reached the landing. “Are all the kids out?”

The nearest cop cocked his head and stared at me for a long second. Then he nodded and responded in a light tenor. “We think so. The firefighters unlocked the emergency doors in all the

classrooms so it's going faster.

Thank God. Seriously. I'm not particularly religious, not a true believer like my gran, but at moments like this? Oh yeah. I pounded up the last of the stairs, into the main hallway. It was illuminated by sunlight. The power had been cut, but every door in the place was open. I started to sprint for the main exit when I saw a flash of movement, a bit of color coming out of a doorway on my right.

A kid. Small and dark skinned, with ribboned pigtails and huge dark eyes. What in the *hell* was she still doing here?

I'd done enough running this morning that the bottoms of my hose were trashed, but I still skidded a little when I slowed to scoop her up. I didn't even think about being in full vamp mode.

She totally freaked out.

"Vampire!" She shrieked, kicking and hitting at me. She was tiny but she was fierce, fighting me for all she was worth. It made it hard to hold onto her without hurting her. I swore as sharp little teeth dug into my forearm. "Let me go! What have you done to my Daddy?"

"Willow?" Harris' voice behind me sounded stunned, a little groggy, but at least he was talking. The cops dragged him, arm extended backward as if to touch his daughter, past the room at a run, expecting that I would follow.

"DADDY!"

"It's all right baby. I'm here."

It would've been touching if I wasn't bleeding and in pain. Oh, and terrified. Let's not forget that. Because the bomb was about to blow. I could feel it. The magic had built to a climax, power crawling across my skin in burning waves that literally stole my breath.

Like all magic, the blast was taking the shortest route to air, straight up. The edges of the

floor in front of me began to glow, power misting around the edges of each tile until they began dissolving in front of me. I was going to plummet into the basement carrying a child who couldn't survive the fall.

I ran into the nearest room to escape the collapse, but the tiles were giving out here too. No doors close enough. There was only one way out and it was going to hurt.

It's hard to describe the feeling of jumping feet first through a closed, reinforced-glass window. The shock to the spine is first as the metal wires try to slow down your momentum. But I'd put a lot of force into my flying kick, the magical explosion gave us an extra push, and the window gave way. It wasn't a clean break by any means. I wrapped my jacket around Willow's face and head as best I could as slivers of wire and glass tore at my legs and arms. My body did fit through the window opening but the metal wasn't kind to my shoulder as the blast pushed me through. I landed hard on my back on the asphalt and my shirt rode up as we skidded for a solid thirty or forty feet. Road rash isn't a fun thing as it's happening but I couldn't turn over or move my arms for fear of hurting Willow.

So I endured it, knowing I'd be picking pieces of gravel and glass from my back and scalp for hours a week or more. At least it would only be hours a week rather than a year, with the accelerated healing.

A pair of officers rushed forward to help, taking Willow from my arms and pulling me bodily toward the perimeter that had been set up across the street. I saw Harris and the other cops near the ambulances.

Every muscle in my body ached and itched and I couldn't seem to focus my eyes, which I worried about. Then I saw a friendly face. Julie Murphy came racing toward me as I cleared the yellow tape, her blonde pigtails flying behind her. She wrapped me in a hug. "Celia! They said

you'd never make it out in time."

I let out a pained chuckle. "Never count me out, kiddo. I'm tough to keep down." She pulled away from me and smiled. Then she noticed her arms, which were covered with smears of red. She started screaming for help. I guess I was bleeding and didn't realize it. Oh, yeah. I should have realized I was bleeding from the pain in my back. Duh. That was when my body started to protest and pain rushed through me in a wave fast enough to make my stomach roil. The paramedics raced my way with bags in tow. One of them smiled at me and I recognized him.

But then he frowned at just about the time the ground raced up to meet me. I don't remember whose arms caught me as my nose connected with the curb.