

Chapter 1

I dressed carefully for the meeting. The setting was casual; since we were currently officeless, Dawna had agreed to meet Ms. Abigail Andrews, a potential client, for lunch at La Cocina. Unfortunately for me, my business partner had bailed on the meeting at the last possible moment, with what seemed to me to be a fairly flimsy excuse. This was just one of a whole number of things we were going to have to have a serious talk about in the very near future. I get that Dawna's busy getting ready for her wedding. I understand that she's distracted. But to not even have done the basic research on Ms. Andrews or filled out a client intake form was just sloppy. Dawna is better than that. She was better than that the first week she had started as my receptionist, years ago.

Graves Personal Protection was the company I'd formed shortly out of college. I was a bodyguard, and a good one. Until very recently I'd run a one-woman operation out of the top floor of an old Victorian mansion in downtown Santa Maria de Luna. Now that building was gone—long story—and I'd been forced to make the decision to expand the business or lose it altogether. I'd chosen to expand, but we were definitely experiencing growing pains.

Dawna Han Long and I have been friends practically since the moment we met, when she came to work for me. She's smart, beautiful, hard-working, efficient, and one of the most ambitious people I've ever known. I'd thought that offering her a piece of the action and partnership in the business would make her even more committed to its success. Thus far, not so much. I reminded myself, yet again, that we've been through worse than this more than once, and made it through just fine.

Still, no matter what I was feeling, I was about to take a business meeting. I needed to smile (but not show fang), look pleasant, cordial, and ever so competent. With that in mind I'd decided to wear a purple silk shell over black jeans, with my standard black suit jacket. Black and purple are among the few colors that really look good with my paler-than-pale skin tone, gray eyes, and naturally blonde hair. I had to work very hard to find ways to look good—but not too good. Bodyguards are never, ever supposed to outshine their clients. It's a rule. Unwritten, but a rule nonetheless.

I was armed to the teeth. No, I did not think Ms. Andrews was going to attack me. But a few months ago some quasi-religious extremists had declared “war” on sirens, and while I'd helped take out the top of their hierarchy, there were still a few stray nutjobs on the loose with an axe to grind. So I don't go anywhere unarmed—ever. Today I was wearing my Colt in an underarm holster and a new Derringer on my ankle, and carrying an assortment of spell disks. I also had on wrist sheaths that held a pair of very special knives. Made for me by a top mage, they are spelled heavily enough to be considered major magical artifacts. They're worth more than my car, possibly more than my house. Five years in the making, they are my most prized possessions. Last, but not least, there is a garrote hidden in the collar of my jacket. I've never had occasion to use it, but it's there nonetheless.

Most people think they should be able to tell if someone is a walking armory. Sometimes that's true. Fortunately for me, my jackets are well tailored and have enough magical spells on them to make them hang perfectly, concealing everything. I don't look completely non-threatening, but that's just as well. After all, a touch of intimidation is part of the service.

La Cocina is a tiny, family-run Mexican restaurant tucked up against the college campus. When I was an undergrad, my friends and I hung out there all the time, and we'd continued the

pattern long after graduating. Barbara and Pablo, who run the place, feel like my aunt and uncle. When they found out that I'd been bitten by a vampire and partially turned, Pablo made it his mission to come up with something nutritious that I could actually digest—no easy task since solids were impossible for me. He more than succeeded, creating one of my favorite things ever. It's called a Sunset Smoothie. It's made with cooked cow's blood, spices, and melted cheese, all blended together and liquid enough that I can actually eat it.

I made my way to the back of the restaurant, where there was an area that was fairly quiet and private. Barbara came over as I took a seat with my back to the wall and a good view of the door and proceeded to wait for my potential client.

I didn't have to wait long. She came a little early, a small, dark-haired, middle-aged woman with bright blue eyes. One side of her face was flawless. The other half didn't quite match and bore faint scars that were slick and smooth. She'd had major reconstructive surgery at some point. Her medical team had done a great job, but it wasn't perfect. My guess, the damage had been too severe. There's only so much even the best doctors and mages can do.

I assumed her use of a motorized wheelchair could be attributed to whatever had led to the reconstruction. She steered the chair through the restaurant carefully, but without hesitation, coming straight toward me. No real surprise that she knew what Celia Graves, bodyguard, looked like, considering how often I've been on the news in the past couple of years. She wore a traditional navy suit, her blouse a paler blue that exactly matched the color of her eyes.

I scooted a chair away from the table, making room for her. She slid smoothly into the space.

“Ms. Graves.”

“Ms. Andrews. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I extended my hand. She shook it, her grip firm, but not too tight. Her eyes raked me up and down, taking my measure. I could understand that. Hell, most clients do the same. But there was something irritating in the way she did it. Her attitude was just a teeny bit rude. I forced myself to smile politely, but I knew already that this was going to be difficult.

It was the siren thing.

I am part siren. It wasn’t really an issue until the vampire tried to turn me. Somehow the magic he used activated the latent siren abilities in my bloodline. My awakened heritage brought me in contact with family I never knew I had, which is a good thing. But there’s a definite downside to that lineage. One of the primary reasons I asked Dawna to take any meeting with a female client was that, unless the client was wearing a charm, was infertile, or was gay, she’d pretty much hate me on sight.

Ms. Andrews wasn’t wearing a charm.

“I’d recommend the quesadillas, they’re quite good.” I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt, trying hard to radiate bonhomie and good will.

“Is that what you’ll be having?” The words were polite, but her tone of voice and body language were just short of hostile.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t eat solids.” I smiled, flashing just a hint of fang. It probably wasn’t polite, but she was pushing me, deliberately provoking me under an oh-so-polite façade. I’d take it in the interests of business, but only for so long without pushing back a little.

“Oh? I’d heard you’d made some progress in that department.”

Really? Where on earth had she heard that? It was true. I was now able to swallow most baby food, something I would never have dreamed possible right after the bite. But it wasn’t the

kind of information that had been passed on to the general public. I was very curious how Ms. Andrews had found out.

I gave her a noncommittal smile as Barbara arrived with water glasses and a menu for my guest.

Ms. Andrews wasted no time ordering, asking for quesas and iced tea. I ordered a smoothie, in part to be social—but also because I’m less inclined to have issues with my vampire nature on a full stomach. Abigail Andrews was irritating the hell out of me, but I was not about to let her get to me to the point where I scared a restaurant full of customers.

“So,” I said as Barbara disappeared toward the kitchen, “shall we get to it? What exactly do you want to hire me to do?”

“I want you to protect my daughter.”

“Why?”

She blinked at me, as if I had asked the most stupid question in the world. I didn’t grit my teeth and I kept my voice even and pleasant as I said, “What does your daughter need protection from?”

“Not what, who.”

I raised my eyebrows and gestured for her to continue.

“I adopted my daughter when her birthmother, my sister, was murdered by her husband. He is scheduled to get out of prison two days from now. He is a terrible man—a vicious, violent, killer.” She gestured to her chair, “*He* did this to me.”

“What’s his name?” I interrupted her. Yes, it’s rude, but she was gearing up for a tirade. And while her emotion was real, the speech itself seemed a little too pat, as if she’d rehearsed it in front of a mirror. I’ve run into that before, usually when the client is lying or hiding something

I really need to know. They rehearse the BS they plan to feed me so that they won't say what they shouldn't.

Unfortunately, it's what a client feels she or he shouldn't say that is most likely to bite me in the ass. If I rattle them, I can sometimes get the straight scoop. Temperamental as Ms. Andrews was, this might cost me the job. But I'd rather lose a potential client than get myself or my people killed by walking into a dangerous situation blind.

Abigail sat straighter in her chair, her expression shifting swiftly from startled to annoyed. But she answered, her voice crisp and precise. "Harry Jacobs."

"Which prison?"

"Excuse me?"

It seemed like a simple enough question to me, but I repeated it. "Which prison is he getting out of?"

"Why do you need to know—"

"If I'm going to be protecting your daughter from someone, it's generally a good idea to keep an eye on him. That way I can be ahead of the game instead of constantly reacting." Okay, I was making that up. But now that I said it, it seemed like a good idea. Assuming I had the manpower—which I was working on. If I actually hired one of the people I'd be interviewing tomorrow, I could sic them on Harry, if there actually was a Harry.

"Oh." She was somewhat mollified by the explanation, but shook her head. "I don't know."

Now that was weird. She knew he was being released, but didn't know from where? That made zero sense. My expression must have shown how dubious I was.

“I don’t,” she repeated with a bit more heat. “I got an anonymous call telling me he was getting out. So I called the parole board. I got the runaround for a bit, but eventually they told me that he was not being paroled, but was being released early for good behavior. I didn’t think to ask which facility he’d been in.”

Okay, I still didn’t buy that, but decided to move on. “How long was he in?”

“A little over twenty-two years. I don’t see why—” she stopped speaking in mid-sentence. She was obviously angry now. Red spots had appeared on both cheeks; her breathing was rapid and a little ragged. The overreaction told me I was right. Something was amiss. She’d intended to keep me off balance, maintain control. She wanted her daughter protected, but she didn’t want me to know from what. Not acceptable. If I’m going to put my life on the line, I want to know *all* the details. It can make the difference between success and failure, or success with a major hospital stay.

“This isn’t going to work,” she said grimly as she rolled away from the table and turned to leave.

She was right about that. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said. I was lying. I wasn’t sorry at all. “Before you go, can I give you a bit of advice?”

She turned her head, giving me an unfriendly look over her shoulder.

“If you hire someone ethical, they’ll maintain confidentiality. But they have to know what they’re up against. Tell them the truth. All of it.”

She gave me long, a narrow-eyed glare before setting her chair in motion. She motored smoothly past Barbara, who was heading for our table, carrying a pitcher of iced tea. Barbara watched her go, lips compressed in a thin line. Turning to me, she said, “I take it I should cancel her order?”

“Yep. And bring me a margarita if you would.” It was a little early, but all things considered, I figured I deserved a drink. While I was waiting, I pulled out my phone and dialed Emma’s number from memory. She answered on the first ring. “Hey girlfriend,” I said, “you got any plans for the day?”

“None I can’t change. What’s up?”

“You know all those boxes cluttering up my house?”

“The ones from when your Gran moved?”

“And the ones Dottie had sent over before the office blew up, and the ones with Vicki’s stuff from Birchwoods... .” I tried to think if there were any others.

“You still haven’t gone through Vicki’s stuff?”

Vicki had been my best friend. She’d died a couple of years ago, the same night I was attacked and partially changed by the vampire. She’d stuck around as a ghost for a little while, but eventually had moved on to her final reward. I still miss her every single day. Until just recently I simply hadn’t had the heart to go through her stuff and sift through those memories.

“Not yet. You know how she was about pictures.” Emma laughed. I’m sure that like me, she was remembering all the times Vicki had pointed a camera at us, or had someone else photograph the three of us together. “I’m thinking there should be some good shots of all of us.”

“I’d be happy to help. Will Dawna be coming?”

“Nope. She’s busy.”

If Emma heard the irritation in my voice, she chose to ignore it. “Her loss. See you at your place in an hour. I’ll bring the wine.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter 2

“All right, spill it.” Emma plopped down into the armchair, mock-glaring at me. “You’re upset about something. I can tell.” Emma is petite and pretty, with naturally blonde hair and blue eyes. A former gymnast, she’s built rock solid. Today she was wearing shorts and a tee-shirt, but even dressed for sorting through boxes, she looked pressed and neat. I wonder sometimes how she does it.

I sighed in response to her question. She knows me so well. Being with Matty has relaxed her a little, but only a little. Ah, Matteo DeLuca, he is the love of her life, and the brother of my current love Bruno DeLuca. Matty is currently working on getting a transfer out one of the militant orders of the priesthood to the regular branch, so that he and Emma can get married. It’s funny, I would never have thought to put the two of them together romantically, but it works.

I was glad I’d invited Emma over to help. Being around happy people always cheers me up. Emma was radiantly happy, and it showed. Of course, she’s in love, and Matty loves her just as deeply. I took a second to be thankful that the two of them found each other. Life is crazy at the best of times. Love should never be taken for granted.

I forced my mind back to the topic at hand. “It’s Dawna. She bailed on a meeting with a client. A *female* client.”

“Seriously?” Emma shook her head. “Crap.”

“She said she had to take Chris’s mom to the airport,” I explained.

“Isn’t that what cabs are for?”

“Thank you,” I said with vigor. “That’s *exactly* what I said.”

“And?”

I shook my head. Dawna hadn't given me a further explanation, so I had nothing to share. "She hadn't even done the preliminary paperwork. If she had, we would never have made the appointment. It was a complete waste of time. The woman was lying through her teeth and it would have been evident with even a simple examination."

"Ouch."

I took a deep breath. "It'll be fine."

"Unh hunh." Emma packed a lot of skepticism into two little sounds.

I sighed. "I'm scared. I think . . .," I paused, trying to find the right words. "Okay, maybe I'm nuts, and I don't have any proof, but that ever since our office building was blown up, Chris has been pushing Dawna to quit. She told him no before, but I think she may give in to him after all."

Emma's expression grew pained enough that I had the sinking feeling I'd hit the nail on the head. . . hard. Crap. I must have looked curious, because she blushed and frowned.

"I can't talk about it," she said. I wondered if Dawna had said something to her or if Emma's clairvoyance had picked something up. In either case, she wouldn't tell me what she knew. If it was Dawna, Emma wouldn't break a confidence, and if it was her magic, well, Emma and I both knew that sometimes talking about a vision of the future could make it come to pass. Or not. Either way, it was usually a good idea to say nothing.

I gave Emma a look that spoke volumes, before going into the kitchen to get us some drinks.

I poured Emma a glass of the wine she had brought, but I was in the mood for something different. *Let it go*, I told myself as I rummaged in the freezer for one of those pouches of pre-mixed, frozen cocktails. Available at the grocery store, you could just stick 'em in the freezer for

a half-hour and they're ready to go. Tasty, too. I found what I was looking for, salted the rim of a glass, and poured myself a margarita before heading back into the living room. I passed Emma her glass and raised mine.

"L'chaim!"

"To life!" Emma agreed, clinking her glass with mine before taking a long pull. "So, I understand you've put some ads out and are hiring. Are you looking for anything specific? Maybe someone male, and a mage?" She put a teasing note in her voice, but she was at least partly serious.

I shook my head. "No. Bruno made it very clear. He wants to work at the University. Besides, I couldn't afford him."

Bruno DeLuca: my fiancé in college, now my lover, my friend, and one of my favorite human beings on earth. He's got power—he'd made those amazing knives of mine—plus brains and money. He's sexy as hell. He can raise my pulse rate just walking into a room, even after all these years. You'd think I'd jump at the chance of bringing him in to the company. Other people certainly do. I've seen some of the offers that have come his way from really major players.

It was her turn to give me a narrow-eyed look. "Unh hunh, like he wouldn't change his mind if you asked him. That's not why you're not doing it."

Ouch, that stung—probably because it was the truth. Bruno did want to work as a professor, to get out of the rat race in the private sector. I respected that. He'd made a ton of money making artifacts, but he'd wound up having no control over who used them or for what purposes. He didn't like the idea of something he made being used for evil, but more than that, my honey is all about control.

That's one of the main reasons I didn't want him as a business partner. He's a take charge kind of guy, and I wanted to be the one in charge of the company. I'd already dealt once with a man who wasn't able to follow my lead in a crisis. The results had been spectacularly ugly. I wasn't going through that again. No way.

"Fine," I admitted. "You win. I want to run the company and I don't think he'd follow orders any better than John did. Been there. Done that. Wasn't fun."

Emma didn't even try to argue. Instead, she stared across the room, her eyes growing just a little vacant. She could have been looking at the future—she's a clairvoyant after all. Or it could just be a reaction to the alcohol.

I didn't ask. If she wanted me to know something, she'd tell me. Instead, I put my empty glass down on top of a magazine on the coffee table and reached for a box.

There were a lot of boxes. I've been living in the same place for several years now, and for a while now, I'd cleaned up once or twice a year by throwing anything I wasn't immediately using into a carton. Add that to Vicki's boxes, and Gran's, and the ones from my office—before and after the bombing—and there were plenty of boxes to go through. I didn't expect we'd crack more than a few today.

The box I grabbed wasn't a packing carton. It was smaller and flatter and clearly marked with the logo and image of the VCR had once held a VCR. It was also labeled, in my Gran's neat, block handwriting. "FAMILY PHOTOS."

"Aha!" I settled back into my seat and opened it. Lifting the lid revealed a messy stack of photographs, some having aged badly, the colors faded; others stuck to the thick backing paper used for shots taken by my Gran's old instant camera.

“Ooh, I love pictures. Let me see.” Emma all but leapt out of her seat. Moving aside a stack of boxes, she plopped down on the couch beside me.

Smiling I started passing photos to her, explaining each one as I did. “This is my Grandpa Peahi on his boat. He called it *The Dreamcatcher*. He always said he named it that because it’s how he caught my Grandma’s attention, and it was where he proposed to her. He was out at sea on it, all alone, when he had the heart attack that killed him. Gran couldn’t bear to look at the boat after that, so she sold it.”

“So, is he the ancestor with the siren blood?”

“None other. I think it’s why he loved the water so much.” I set the picture aside. I’d see if my Great Aunt Lopaka wanted a copy. She’d told me before that she and Grandpa were close before he left the siren islands.

The next shot was of Ivy, blowing out the candles on her fourth birthday cake. It was one of those cakes that had a doll in the middle so that the cake looked like the doll’s poufy dress. It had been iced so that it looked quite a lot like Scarlett O’Hara from *Gone With the Wind*—a dark-haired woman in a big hoop skirt. Ivy had been so delighted. She’d played with that doll all day, every day after that, swiping clothes from my Barbie to dress her. Looking deeper in the box, I saw that same battered doll, dressed in a faded orange swimsuit and buried in photos. I shuffled through more pictures and spotted several of me in my ballet clothes. There were even a couple of shots of me on stage at one of my performances.

Every photo held a memory, most of them good. There were few images of my father. My mother had thrown most of them out in the great purge after he left. I had grabbed a few and hidden them under my mattress, unable to bear losing that last bit of the past. I still had them;

they were in the drawer of my nightstand. I never looked at them anymore, but they were still there.

Em and I flipped through the box of memories, chatting happily. My psychiatrist had tasked me with finding pictures of myself and my baby sister from shortly before Ivy died. I picked out a few, but discovering that box put an end to the cleaning for the day. Emma and I just sat, drinking and talking, until it was time for her to leave and meet Matty for dinner.

I was sorry to see her go.

I returned most of the photos to the box and closed it reluctantly, leaving only a pair of photos out on the coffee table to take to my appointment tomorrow.

I wasn't hungry, but I fixed myself some food anyway. I have more control over my vampire nature than I used to, in part because I've learned not to go too long between meals. Tonight's menu was from the assortment of baby food I had stocked up on: squash, plus pureed chicken and noodles, warmed in the microwave, with a bit of organic applesauce for dessert. Not exactly haute cuisine, but so much better than the full liquid diet I'd started out on after the bite that I wasn't about to complain.

I ate at the kitchen counter, then rinsed the dirty dishes and put them in the dishwasher. It was nearly full, so I went ahead and started the cycle. On impulse, I fixed myself another drink before heading back into the living room.

The place was a wreck. Just looking at it was depressing. I knew I should finish going through the boxes, but I *so* wasn't in the mood. Nor was I willing to put them back as is. After some internal debate I decided that I would deal with them tomorrow, and on impulse I sat down in front of the computer.

I scolded myself for being stupid and indulging my idle curiosity. I had plenty of real work to be doing. Abigail Andrews had very definitely not hired me. Nobody was going to pay me for what I was about to do. But something about our meeting just kept bugging me. I couldn't seem to let it go. So to satisfy my very unprofitable and probably unhealthy curiosity, I brought up my favorite search engine and began doing a little research. I felt a momentary flash of annoyance with Dawna again—this was work she should have done.

There was nothing on Harry Jacobs. Well, not quite nothing. There was a Harry Jacobs who owned a used car lot in Tulsa; I found links to videos of a couple of seriously bad commercials he'd made. But they were recent, and he was not in prison, so I was willing to bet that he wasn't the right Harry. There were other Harry Jacobses, but nowhere near Santa Maria.

So I tried Abigail Andrews. Again, nothing useful.

Now I know not everybody lives a newsworthy life. I'm sure there are plenty of people who have no identity online at all. But Abby had some seriously interesting scars. There would normally be some record of anything that had given them to her—even a simple car wreck. But I was getting nada. In my head I heard that ancient childhood taunt: *liar, liar, pants on fire, your nose is as long as a telephone wire.*

As an experiment, I typed in Emma's name. In seconds I was looking at a whole history of her achievements, including all of her gymnastics titles and her second place finish in the tri-state spelling bee back in grade school.

Similarly helpful results popped up when I searched Dawna's name.

But nothing on Harry, and nothing on Abby.

I wasn't even a little bit surprised. Feeling distinctly grateful that I hadn't been hired, I shut down the computer. Taking my drink with me I went into the bathroom and ran a hot bubble bath. The combination of alcohol and hot water might just relax me enough to get to sleep.

###

Friday morning came too soon to suit me. I know a lot of "morning people." I am not one of them. Still, I managed to haul my sorry butt out of bed and stumble into the kitchen, where I proceeded to pour myself a cup of coffee and took up a position by the French doors to see what the weather had to offer. It was beautiful. The sun was shining, not a cloud marred the perfect blue of the summer sky. Later in the day I expected it would be miserably hot, but now, it was perfect. Setting down my coffee, I reached for the bottle of sunscreen I keep by the door. I slathered high-SPF lotion over every inch of skin not covered by the sweat pants and tee-shirt that were my usual nightwear and pulled on my favorite picture hat. On impulse I detoured into the living room to snag the pair of photographs from the coffee table. I stuffed them into my pants pocket on the way out the door.

A little strip of private beach came with the guest house. It's a little rocky, and the currents are tricky, but I swim there anyway when the water isn't too cold. When it is, I just sit on the rocks or under a beach umbrella and watch the gulls and the waves. I'm part siren—the ocean soothes me. But I've seen plenty of humans who do the same exact thing when they can. There's just something about the sea.

Today I needed some soothing. This afternoon I was due at the therapist for a pre-teleconference therapy session. I needed it. I so didn't want to have to deal with my mother and her issues. I'd rather be doing anything else. Seriously, *anything*. Demons, vampires, zombies:

I've faced them all. And I'd rather do any of that again than deal with my family history. But there you go. You do what you have to do.

I clambered up on the rough surface of my favorite rock and stared out to sea. When I thought I was calm enough to handle it, I pulled the first photo from my pocket. Old and faded, it had been taken with a technology that no longer even existed. I remembered that day so clearly. It had been my birthday. My father had grabbed the Polaroid and snapped a shot of me right out of bed, blonde hair tangled and sticking up as I stood there in my Barbie PJ's. Ivy was in the background, looking small and adorable, her wide blue eyes staring at the cartoons playing on the television, completely oblivious to everything else going on in the house.

I'd also brought the shot of Ivy with her cake. I hadn't said anything to Emma, but this was the last picture of my sister. Gran had taken it just about a week before three of my mother's male "friends" had kidnapped my sister and me. They'd hoped to get Ivy to use her gift of speaking with the dead to find treasure—they'd seen something in the news about a kid in Florida who had done that. They tortured me to get her to cooperate. Instead, she'd called up zombies from a nearby cemetery. She was powerful enough to call them, but didn't have the knowledge or experience to control them. The thugs died a gruesome death. My sister did too. The only reason I lived was that I'd been tied to a table and couldn't move. Movement draws zombies like honey draws flies.

I sat on the rock, tears flowing so hard I couldn't see the picture in my hand.

For years, my memories of those horrible events had been magically suppressed, my emotions blunted so that I could function, if not heal. Unfortunately, the magic that had suppressed them had been negated by something that had happened to me a few months ago.

And I got to feel my feelings for the first time in years. So though these wounds were old, they were still raw.

I blame myself. I always have. They call it survivor's guilt. Why did I survive when she didn't? She was my baby sister. I was supposed to protect her.

An icy breeze blew against my face, freezing the tears on my cheeks.

"Ivy."

My sister's ghost was here. She comes to me often. Well, less often lately. In the 18 months or so since my mother went to prison, Ivy's spent a lot of time there instead. But she seems to sense when I'm most upset, and then I can count on seeing her.

Ghosts are the spirits of the dead who remain tied to something or someone until they can achieve some specific purpose and move on to their eternal reward. It's pretty typical, for example, for ghosts of murder victims to stick around until the murderer is caught and convicted.

I don't know why Ivy's ghost is tied to me. I suspect that she's waiting for me to forgive my mother. If that's the case, she may be with me until I die. Because, try as I might, I can't seem to let go of the past. I love my mom. But the guys who took us were her *friends*. They wouldn't have known about Ivy and me if she hadn't blabbed about us at the bar; wouldn't have been able to kidnap us if she hadn't been fucking passed out from booze and drugs in some dive somewhere, leaving us home alone. They'd even used her keys to get into our apartment.

No, I was not ready to forgive my mother. Not now, maybe not ever. I just don't want that to cost me my relationship with my grandmother. Gran has always been there for me. But she refuses to see or hear anything negative about my mother. She's a classic enabler. Our conflicting attitudes about my mom have come way too close to destroying our relationship. The only reason I agreed to family therapy was to try to save my relationship with Gran.

The cold wind that marked my sister's presence blew my hair back from my face and made the fabric of the beach umbrella flap loudly. I held out the photograph. "Do you remember this? It was your birthday."

The wind stilled, the air around me growing so cold that goose bumps covered my flesh and my breath misted the air. A hint of frost appeared on one corner of the photo. A moment later the cold vanished. Ivy was gone. Where to or why I had no idea. She'd be back eventually. We were tied to each other until I could figure out a way to free her. In the meantime, I needed to get inside and get cleaned up. Sitting here brooding was not going to make things any better and would only make my mood worse.