

# CHAPTER ONE

## First meeting

The stench of Black Magic drew her steadily down the hotel hallway. It grew stronger when she turned the corner. She recognized it now: it was a death spell. It was quite distinctive: a life was being sacrificed, a human life.

That was her gift, or curse, depending on how you looked at it. She could differentiate magic by scent alone; a death spell stank of wet leaves and worms, like recently turned compost. The only question was whether the spell was too far along for her to intervene. She wasn't risking her life if the sacrifice was already dead. She walked slowly, following the smell. When it lessened, she backtracked. There, Suite 562. The witch was using a cloaking spell, but it wasn't strong enough to disguise it from her.

She knelt beside the door, on the side closest to the hinges and palmed her cell phone. Useful things cell phones, especially the camera app. She positioned the lens against the small space under the door. A few seconds later, she was up and walking calmly away with several pictures. It wouldn't do to attract undue attention at this time. Once in the elevator, she looked at the images: yup, definitely a death spell. The good news: the victim had relatively few injuries, judging by the blood loss. The bad news:

the witch wasn't alone. There were four other men in the room. She snorted: not men, wolves.

The stench of the death spell had masked their scent. The camera angle didn't let Kathryn know if they were spectators or participants. If only the witch was torturing the victim, there was time. Kathryn swore under her breath when the next picture showed one of the men stabbing into the victim's shoulder. She had to act quickly or not at all. As she raced to her room to get her weapons, she wondered why the witch was casting such a complex and dangerous spell in a hotel room. A death spell took planning and equipment. It wasn't something you decided on the spur of the moment. Perhaps the conference attendees provided enough possibilities.

Kathryn checked the contents of her go-bag out of habit. She nodded to herself: everything she might need was there. She had the excuse of the costume party to explain her weapons, but she didn't want anyone asking questions about the origin or authenticity of her sword. She walked quickly towards the staircase. No running: people would remember seeing anyone running. Once in the stairwell, she flew down the stairs. She cautiously opened the door to the fifth room and saw a man kick down the door of suite 562. What the ...? She dashed down the hallway and plastered herself against the wall next to the open door. She stole a glance into the room and saw that the witch was throwing a spell, literally throwing as though she had something in her hand. The man ducked as Kathryn pulled a knife from her belt and threw it into the witch's eye. It wouldn't kill her, but it was enough to distract the witch and break her concentration.

Alrik threw the woman a look as she barreled into the room with her sword drawn. She raised it and swung at the witch, decapitating her. He watched even as he turned to attack a man coming at him with a knife in his fist. He quickly disarmed him and closed in. He snapped the rogue's neck and shifted to the right as another attacked him. His assailant came in low and swung a knife at his left leg. Alrik was able to deflect the thrust somewhat, but he sustained a long cut on his thigh.

The woman seemed to be helping, so Alrik mostly ignored her as she defended herself against yet another of the traitors. He finished off his assailant without trouble and turned to help the woman, but she'd already dispatched the last man.

"Well done," he growled. "Who are you?"

Kathryn was looking around. "Where's the fourth man?" she murmured.

"There is no other."

Kathryn paused in her search and looked her impromptu partner in the eye. "There's a fourth," she stated firmly.

"She's right," said a voice from the doorway. A shotgun muzzle preceded the rogue's entrance.

"You ruined everything," he whined petulantly.

Alrik shoved the woman behind him with his right arm as the witch's last accomplice fired his weapon. He felt the woman place her hand on his hand and release her sword in his keeping just as the birdshot hit his chest. His arm was already moving, and he split the attacker from hip to shoulder in an upwards crosswise motion. He watched the final rogue drop, spraying blood everywhere.

Alrik fell to one knee and exhaled heavily.

The birdshot was silver and burned like embers under his skin. He struggled to his feet. He didn't know the woman and wouldn't let himself be in a vulnerable position.

She looked at him before going to the door. She pulled a backpack into the room before closing the door.

"How bad is it?" she asked from ten feet away.

"I won't die," he growled. He might be injured, but if he chose, he could still reach the woman and kill her before she knew what had happened.

"Okay. I'm getting some salt and a plastic bag from my pack and then put the witch's head in it. I'm not taking chances with her. My hands will be visible. I'll move slowly, but this has to be done." She asked cautiously: "Do you have enough control?"

Alrik growled but backed up to give her room.

He was still in control but barely.

His wolf wanted to come out to protect him. The woman moved slowly but efficiently to bag the head. She sprinkled salt over the open neck of the witch's body as well as the body of the victim. As she did so, he could feel a lessening in the magic.

"You witch?" he was able to ask.

"No. I'm a werewolf, but I know magic. I can see it, smell it and sometimes counter it, but I can't use it. Does that answer your question?"

She continued to sprinkle salt in the hotel suite until her ten pounds were exhausted. She bent to pick up some of the birdshot. She breathed a sigh of relief when

she saw that the silver was peeling off. The pellets would be painful but not as much as solid silver.

She looked at the wounded werewolf. He still had her sword. His eyes were yellow, and his breathing was harsh. She didn't know if he was fighting the change or just the pain.

"My name is Kathryn. May I have my sword?"

"Alrik."

"What?"

"Name is Alrik."

"Alrik, I'm going to take my sword from your hand. Is that okay?" When he didn't respond, she continued: "Just nod if that's okay."

When he didn't answer either way, she resigned herself to the loss of her sword. A werewolf was a very dangerous creature, one that was wounded even more so.

She took one step towards the door and was suddenly pinned against the wall by his body. His teeth were against her throat while he continued to take deep breaths. He licked her neck and shuddered, and just like that, he was stepping away, handing her the sword, hilt first. She was shocked. She'd expected him to rip out her throat. She swallowed hard and started to tremble.

He captured her gaze and held it. "I won't harm you," he stated slowly. He waited until she nodded before moving back one more step.

Alrik was fighting the change, but it wasn't as bad as it should be. He'd recognized her scent: mate. He'd never scented a mate before, but his wolf knew instinctively who

she was. He did as well. He didn't need to protect himself from her. He needed to protect her from the rest of the world.

He growled to get her attention, not that it was necessary. She hadn't dropped her eyes and was staring at him. That meant something. He wasn't sure what, but he was certain that it was important. He wasn't thinking clearly. All he wanted to do was find a safe place to hide with his mate. She'd help him. Wouldn't she?

Alrik used his left hand to pull a phone from his pocket and pressed a few keys. "Suite 562, clean-up," was all he said before putting his phone back in his pocket. He watched her slide her sword in a back scabbard after wiping it against the bedspread. It didn't clean all the blood but enough.

"Alrik, we need to go," Kathryn said, surprising herself by including him. She'd learned the very hard way not to trust werewolves. Something about this man made her want to protect him, to help him when he was injured.

She walked to the door and took the 'Do not Disturb' sign off the doorknob. She also pulled a roll of duck tape from her bag. She bent down and placed a rolled-up towel at the base of the door and duck-taped it into position. When the door was closed, it would block the stench of decomposition from anyone passing by. It would give her more time to get out of the hotel. She wasn't afraid of the police, but she didn't want the wolves to find her.

She couldn't leave abruptly. That would signal guilt, and wolves loved nothing better than a chase. She also had to take care of Alrik's wounds. He was just standing there, watching her and bleeding. She stood and slowly approached him.

"We have to go."

"Go." He confirmed his understanding with a nod.

"We're both covered in blood. We'll stand out. It would be dangerous to be recognized."

"Kill."

Kathryn took a deep breath for courage. "There's a better way. You'll have to trust me."

He stared at her. He didn't agree or disagree; he just waited.

"There is a photoshoot for cover models going on downstairs. If you allow me, I can make us look as though we'd just finished up a session ourselves."

Again, there was no response. Blinking once, Kathryn reached out and touched him, placing her hand on his left shoulder. He growled low but didn't shake her off. She stepped forward and cupped his head in her left hand. Alrik leaned into the caress.

"I'm going to undo your hair," she said before reaching back and untying the leather cord at his nape. His hair fell to the middle of his back. His unbound hair would make him fit in during his walk through the halls. At a glance, he could pass for a model doing a particularly bloody cover. Secondly, it would help draw attention away from his eyes: they were wolf yellow.

She took his hand and walked out of the room, putting the sign on the outside and making sure that the makeshift odor suppressant was in position.

There was no way he could take the stairs. She led him down the hall to the elevator to get to the top floor of the hotel. She'd indulged herself in a penthouse suite for the duration of the conference.

She held his hand in the small confines and then pulled him along towards her suite.

"Oh my God. What happened? I'll call 9-1-1."

Alrik growled. It was so low that a human wouldn't hear it, but the chambermaid froze. She knew a predator was present even if she couldn't quite figure out the source of the threat.

Kathryn placed herself between Alrik and the woman. He growled again and held her tightly to his side. Kathryn put her hand on his forearm said pleasantly to the chambermaid: "It's just make-up. We were doing a cover shoot downstairs."

"A cover shoot," the woman repeated skeptically.

Kathryn shook her head and added a little laugh.

"Do you think either one of us would be standing here if we were really hurt?"

"I guess not," the chambermaid said with a frown, wanting to be convinced.

Alrik was still softly growling. Kathryn squeezed his arm in an effort to get him to stop. She risked a quick look at him. He was definitely in attack mode. She needed to wrap this up quickly without having this woman call anyone.

"The best part is that I get to wash up," she said with a knowing smile.

"Wash up? I don't understand. Of course, you're going to wash up."

Kathryn tilted her head towards Alrik and smiled again.

"Ohhh. Wash up," the woman said, finally understanding what Kathryn was trying to convey.

"Right. If you'll excuse us..."

Kathryn pulled forward and Alrik followed. She cast one last glance at the chambermaid and saw that she was checking out Alrik's backside. She wouldn't be calling 9-1-1.

She pulled her key card from the top of her boot and opened the door. She pushed Alrik inside and was pushed back against the door when it closed.

Alrik had been patient. A good hunter learned patience early. He had Kathryn alone and in a safe place. This room smelled of many people, but the scents were old, faded. The only scent that mattered was Kathryn. He had to fill his nostrils with her scent again.

He lowered his head to her neck, where her scent was the strongest. He could smell apricots, mint, werewolf and woman. He growled when he scented fear.

He whirled to meet an enemy.

There was no one. Alrik turned back to Kathryn, but she had ducked around him and was already moving across the sitting room towards the bedroom. YES.

He watched as she removed her shoulder harness and then her boots. She started on her shirt, and he felt himself grow hard. He lifted his hands to take off his shirt and hissed in pain. He took a deep breath and tried to rise above the burning.

"I need to take out those pellets. Sit down," Kathryn ordered as she opened the closet and searched through her luggage. "Aha, here it is. I knew it would be useful, but I thought it would only provide inspiration."

She moved out of the closet with a small box.

She opened it to reveal a small metal ingot, about four inches long by two inches wide. "It's a rare earth magnet. I can use it to pull out the birdshot. I know, silver isn't magnetic, but the birdshot is actually small steel ball bearings plated in silver."

Alrik still wasn't able to make out much of what she was saying. He knew she wanted to help him. Isn't that what mates did? He was pleased when she peeled off his shirt, and he let her push him down on the bed.

He raised his arms to bring her to him, but the pain stopped him. Kathryn reached and helped him raise his arms above his head. He exhaled against the burning this caused him. He wanted to pull his arms back, but any movement was agony.

He waited to see what she would do.

If necessary, he could move against the pain, but he didn't want to.

He watched as she fetched a glass from the bathroom and climbed on the bed with him. She took the metal into her palm and ran it against his skin. He could feel the pellets move, burning him. He grabbed her hand. She wasn't supposed to hurt him.

"The birdshot has to come out. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but the silver will slowly kill you if it stays in. I'm only trying to help," Kathryn explained.

Alrik understood finally. He pulled his hand back above his head and tried to relax his muscles. He growled, but he didn't stop her again.

His mate began the tedious task of pulling out the pellets one by one using only a strong magnet. The battle adrenaline had worn off and it HURT. He could feel the movement of each piece of metal worming its way out of his chest. She would then lift the magnet from his skin and scrape it against the glass to dislodge the metal sphere. Then, she would be back to torturing him again. He fisted his hands and endured the procedure but couldn't suppress the growling.

She apologized again and again whenever she pulled out a particularly deep pellet. She also tried to talk to him to distract him from the pain. Didn't she realize he needed all his concentration to keep from attacking her? He slowly regained his senses as the effects of the silver were negated. After a tortuous ninety minutes, the burning was gone.

"You can stop. The pellets are all out," he managed to say.

Kathryn looked into his face and realized the effort to hold still during her ministrations had cost him dearly. He was gray, and there were white stress lines around his mouth. His chest was red from the forty-two small wounds, still oozing blood. She hated to see his pain, but it wasn't over yet. He needed to clean up. There was still some particulate matter in the wounds: dirt, small pieces of shredded shirt, even some pieces of chest hair which had been forced into the wounds from the projectile force of the shotgun blast.

She climbed off the bed, taking the glass full of pellets and the magnet with her. Alrik slowly sat up in a rolling maneuver that didn't stress his muscles. He sat on the edge, taking shallow breaths, waiting until he could stand with confidence. Kathryn had

disappeared into the bathroom. He could hear the water running and guessed that she was washing up. He looked down and saw the blood running freely down his chest. He sighed.

He'd have to clean that up before Kathryn could do any bandaging. He pushed forward and stood up. He fell back as his left leg gave out. The pain of the silver pellets in his shoulder had masked the leg injury. He felt it now.

He unzipped his pants and tried to remove them one-handed over his hips. It wasn't going to happen. He dropped his head back in defeat.

"Come on, I'll help you," Kathryn said as she bent to remove his boots. She started to pull at his pants and was surprised when the cloth stuck to his leg.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she chastised.

She wet a small towel and used it to moisten the site enough to remove his pants. There was a six-inch cut along the outside of his left leg. It is shallow at the top and at least an inch deep at the bottom.

"Alrik, this is bad. I need to clean it out."

"Don't apologize, just do it," he said.

"I have some analgesic that works on wolves.

It will numb it for a while. Let me use it on this."

At his nod, she opened a jar and smeared the contents into the wound. It was cold, and it hurt. He was surprised that the pain subsided quickly. She also took the opportunity to smear some cream on the punctures on his torso.

"it doesn't last long, but it will help when I wash it all."

"Why didn't you use it before?" he asked, angry that she'd let him suffer.

"Nothing numbs silver injuries," she answered simply.

She pulled him up and half-carried/half dragged him into the bathroom. There was a huge, free-standing tub, and she rolled him into it. She started the water and planned to wash him using the shower attachment.

She rinsed him down and reached for the soap.

"No."

"I have to use soap," she began.

"No. Yours."

"Mine? But ..."

"Yours," he said forcibly.

Kathryn shrugged. She put down the bar of soap and reached for a bottle of her own soap.

She made it herself. She hadn't suggested it as it smelled of apricots and mint. She put some on a washcloth and gently cleaned his chest. He just lay there and watched her. When she finished, he dropped his head and relaxed. The numbing cream should be at its maximum efficiency, so she reloaded the washcloth and washed his leg. The blood was still flowing sluggishly. She would need to use some butterfly tapes to hold it closed.

Alrik smiled inwardly when he realized that the washcloth was going around his genitals. His mate was skittish. He knew she didn't have another male in her life; her scent was hers alone. But was she a virgin? The thought intrigued him. He allowed his

thoughts to continue in this vein. He knew he'd have to change soon, and that would hurt. Too soon, Kathryn had finished cleaning him.

"Wash my hair."

His mate raised her brows at this obvious command, but she moved around to the head of the tub and wet his head. She poured some shampoo and gently massaged his scalp.

He'd never had anyone wash his hair since he was a small child, and that was centuries ago. It was pure bliss. Once again, it was over too soon.

She'd dropped the washcloth on his groin. He made short work of cleaning that part of his anatomy. He braced himself and stood up. He walked out of the tub and fell to the ground on all fours. She rushed over to help him but pulled back when she realized he had started to change.

Kathryn knew from personal experience how painful this was. It was worse when you were injured, but Alrik would heal faster in wolf form.

She busied herself in the bedroom, stripping the bloodied towels off the bed. She'd have to take them with her when she left. She couldn't leave evidence of any injury, especially not werewolf blood. She didn't worry about the room downstairs: Alrik had called for a clean-up.

She tried to ignore the sounds of the change happening in the other room. There was a lot of growling as well as the usual sounds of muscles changing and bones popping. She was surprised when less than a minute later a large, make that a very large, black wolf stepped into the bedroom.

He had to weigh at least three hundred pounds.

Kathryn had never seen such a large wolf. Alrik was a big man, but that didn't always translate into the size of the wolf.

"You changed before I could put some tapes on your leg. I also have some pain killers that work on wolves. The cream will wear off soon, and you'll need it. Will you take some?" Kathryn knew that an injured wolf was very dangerous. Thus far, he'd been in control, but she didn't want him going over the edge. When he merely stared at her, she sighed and put away the powder.

She looked into his eyes and saw intelligence but not the self-awareness of a man. Alrik was deep into the wolf. She should have explained before he turned.