

Chapter One

Not again.

My gaze darted around the old school yard, searching for whoever had left the dead teenager on my front porch.

I was hoping the intruder was still nearby, close enough to catch and deal with myself—right now and for good—but the acre of grass and trees that surrounded our home and business was quiet.

No more than a minute or two had passed since the rattle of stones thrown at my bedroom window had roused me. I knew—this time—to go to the front door. But there was nothing. No cars. No autumn wind. Nothing. Even at one in the morning, at least an occasional car should have been zipping down the street that lay only a football field's length away. My home was a little over a

mile from the University of Wisconsin campus and it was a Saturday night, Sunday morning, technically; a few drunken students if no one else should have been traveling along Monroe Street, but the night was silent—deadly so.

I glanced down at the girl lying on her back on my front steps.

I almost stepped on her. There was something particularly disturbing about that. My hands shaking, I shoved the hair back from my face, tucked it behind my ears, and knelt next to her.

Maybe this one is different. A thin hope at best, but I clung to it, my fingers wrapping around the tiny wolf fetish that hung from a cord around my neck. The stone figure in my hand offered a small amount of reassurance, calmed me.

Maybe my first impression was wrong . . . maybe she was still alive. Maybe, unlike the first girl I'd found dead on my doorstep only weeks before, this one still lived.

I repeated the words in my mind: *maybe she is different. . . .*

A prayer to Artemis leaving my lips, I reached out, ready to lay my fingers against her throat. As I did, I couldn't help but take in her youth, her closed eyes. So *innocent. So like Harmony.*

My fingers curled back into my palm and my heart pounded; the words echoed through my head. Harmony. A flash of panic, then forced calm. It wasn't Harmony. My daughter was asleep, safe inside. I stood anyway,

started to turn back to the wide double door of the old school behind me—to check—but I stopped myself. My need to see her was just maternal instinct pushed into overdrive. I had to stay calm, controlled. I couldn't leave this girl alone, not yet. I glanced back at her.

I took a deep breath and kneeled again, but even as I did, I knew I was lying to myself. There was no heart beating inside the body beside me.

Still, I pressed my fingers to the girl's throat.

Her neck was stiff, hard to my touch. I ran my fingers down her arm, met with the same cold, unresponsive feel. She wasn't alive, hadn't been for hours.

A curse formed in the back of my head, but I tamped it down. Whoever, whatever this girl had been, she'd suffered enough indignities. I had no right to add to them. My duty now was to ease her passage, not soil it with my own anger, frustration, and fear.

I lowered my chin to my chest, reflected for a minute, and tried to slow my racing mind enough to draw on my past, my training. I didn't practice the skills taught by my Amazon high priestess grandmother, but they were still a part of me, as impossible to deny as the horrible truth of this girl's death.

Pretending the moisture threatening to escape the corners of my eyes didn't exist, I took one more calming breath, then did the best I could to fold the girl's stiff arms over her chest, touched my thumb against the bridge of her nose, and murmured another prayer. This one asking for free and peaceful passage of her spirit—

that whatever took her life wouldn't hold back her journey from this world to the next.

I tried to steel myself for what came next, but it was just as hard this time as last. The girl's body sighed, not audibly, more of a feeling, a whisper of energy as her soul slipped from her form and wafted away, hopefully to join whatever loved ones had preceded her in death.

The ritual drained me, a piece of my own spirit leaving with hers, accompanying her. I'd recover, but not until her soul found peace. By performing the rites, I'd promised her that.

Normally, I would have been myself again in a matter of minutes, hours at the most, but I had yet to recover from the last one.

Which meant something was terribly wrong.

Like finding two dead girls on my doorstep wasn't wrong enough.

I rested my weight back on my heels and stared down at her.

Just like the first one, she was young—under twenty. Older than Harmony, but not enough that I didn't still fight the urge to go check on my sleeping child. I forced myself not to, though. Harmony was fine. No one had intruded our home. Only the yard . . . the steps. That was as far as my visitor had got.

After successfully reassuring myself, my attention went back to the girl.

Did the similarity between the two dead teens stop with their age? Only one way to know.

I gently rolled the girl onto her side and pulled her thin T-shirt up, baring her lower back to the night air.

A tattoo of a leopard snarled at me. What appeared to be a *telios*, the Amazon symbol of their family clan.

My lips thinned to nothing more than a line. Not the same, but similar. Now the hard part. I lowered the girl onto her back and again adjusted her shirt, this time to pull it low, down to the top of her right breast. A round circle of skin about the size of my balled fist was missing—the cut precise, even, and unending. Done with either great skill or care.

I stared blindly. The coincidence was too great. The tattoo on her back—a leopard, one of the twelve totems of the Amazon tribe. The other girl bore a bear. And both had the missing skin—exactly where a *gívnomaí*, personal power tattoo, would be. Removed either right before or right after their deaths.

Please, Artemis, let it be after.

The girl's blond hair caught in the breeze, tangling across her face, the motion in the dim light of my battery-powered lantern making her look alive for just a second.

I lowered my chin to my chest again and let emotion I'd denied earlier waft over me—sorrow, frustration, then anger. Someone was killing these girls . . . Amazon girls . . . and leaving them on my doorstep. A threat? Some kind of twisted gift? Or a warning?

Did the killer know the symbolism of the animals on the girls' backs and of the fetishes hanging from their necks? All Amazons did. Thoughts that had been nag-

ging at me, that I hadn't let fully form in my brain, forced their way forward. Two dead girls, both Amazons. Could the killer be an Amazon—or just someone the tribe had angered? If another body were to show up, would it bear yet another of the twelve totems? Was there a plan to target each family? If so, it would mean the killer had to be an Amazon. No one else knew about the tribe and certainly not the significance of our totems.

Pure cold rage shot through my body and, like the first time, I fantasized about hunting the killer down, exacting revenge for the young lives unjustly ended. Vengeance was as much a part of being Amazon as our worship of Artemis. Within the tribe, a band of warriors would have been chosen and none would have rested until the killer was found and destroyed. Her soul released, but not in the gentle manner I'd used with these girls. No, it would be torn from the killer's body, then grounded to earth. Cursed to stay locked for eternity in one spot, her only conscious world the moments of her own death playing over and over.

But then reality settled down around me—again.

I was no longer part of the tribe. A fact I didn't regret, but for these girls' sakes, for my family's . . . for a moment I wavered. Amazon justice was hard and fast. A tempting resolution to this ugly dilemma. But I had left that world, and even if I wanted to return, they wouldn't accept me back easily.

In fact, they would view any approach from me with suspicion, perhaps even enacting their hard and fast jus-

tice on me before bothering to gather tiresome details. And they'd be back in my life, in my daughter's life. My daughter, who knew nothing of her heritage, didn't even know Amazons were real and that she was one.

It was why I hadn't done anything about the first girl—or not much anyway. I'd released her spirit, then left her body where the police could find it.

It had been something, but not enough. I cradled my face in my hands . . . not enough by a long shot. The dead body beside me proved that.

What now? Nothing had changed. I couldn't do any more this time.

But hard as I tried, I couldn't let it go. Couldn't just stand up and cart this body off like I had the last. Forget her . . . or try to.

What about their families? Their mothers wondering when their daughters would come home . . . expecting them . . .

Amazons were seminomadic. Here in the U.S., they traveled from one "safe camp" to another, much like gypsies. Also, like gypsies, Amazons tended to skirt the edges of the law—thinking nothing of conning the humans they encountered out of property and money—my grandmother was a prime example of that way of thinking.

And because of these tendencies, Amazons, even those still fully immersed in the tribe, might not see each other for months. A mother could easily not hear from her barely adult child for that long and think little of

it . . . have no idea her daughter had been left, dead, on my doorstep. Their mothers could still be sitting at some safe camp, waiting, expecting . . .

My hands formed claws at my sides, my fingernails scraping against the concrete steps.

And what about the others—those not missing yet? Could my silence be endangering other young women? What if the Amazons had no idea they were being preyed upon—that there was a killer in their midst?

Two, then three fingernails broke down to the quick. I breathed out through my nose, ignoring the pain—forcing it and the nagging guilt building in the back of my brain out of my consciousness.

Flattening my fingers against the concrete until my knuckles glowed white, I forced myself to continue weighing my options. Choices—there had to be choices . . . something better than just ignoring all of this and praying it wouldn't happen again.

I focused, away from the current situation and the dead girl by my side, and toward the bigger picture: how to stop more girls from dying.

The next logical step, if anything about my life was logical, would be going directly to the police, but there were problems with that solution too.

I was an over-one-hundred-year-old Amazon. Something I hid, not only from society, but my own daughter. I'd spent ten years pretending, and so far I'd succeeded. But my mother and grandmother, who also lived with me, already raised eyebrows. They tried to hide their

heritage, both to humor me and to protect the tribe I despised, but their efforts wouldn't hold up under close study. Not to mention that bringing the police into the picture would also mean bringing in my mother and grandmother. They would realize—just as quickly as I had—that the girls weren't normal runaways. They were Amazons. And they would insist on informing the tribe.

Bringing me back to problem number one.

So, calling the police, like any normal grown adult *human* would do when faced with a dead body on her porch, was out.

I was trapped by my own lies, and it pissed me off.

My gaze dropped to the body beside me, zeroing in on a thin strip of leather barely visible beneath the hair covering her neck.

I reached out and let the thong run over my cupped hand until the tiny stone figure I knew would be attached to its end landed in my palm. A leopard, black, his lips pulled into a snarl. I could almost feel anger pulsing in the tiny creature. This girl, like the first, like me, wore her family totem on her back and around her neck. It was the only piece of out-of-the-ordinary adornment aside from the tattoos that both girls had worn. I'd taken the first girl's for that reason.

I lifted her head and slipped the totem free.

With the tiny leopard tucked inside my pocket, I felt a little better. I had a plan, too late for this girl or the previous one, but maybe it would keep there from being a next.

Still, I muttered an apology as I pulled the corners of the old blanket on which the girl lay over her body and bundled her like a newborn infant. I would perform what Amazon burial rites I could and leave her corpse where the police would find it—hopefully, soon.

It wasn't much, but this time—I patted the lump of stone resting in my pocket—it wouldn't be *all* I'd do. I couldn't—wouldn't—reveal myself to the Amazons or the police, but I also couldn't sit back and do nothing, not again.

This time I'd do my best to let both know something was wrong, that someone was preying on teens.

I glanced at my watch—almost two A.M. I had three hours before my grandmother arose and addressed the sun. I could make it to Milwaukee—or close to it—and be back before anyone noticed my absence. But I wouldn't have time to complete the second task—not tonight. The Amazons would have to wait. I'd need a full night to make it to the northern Illinois woods where the closest safe camp was located and be back home before dawn.

After taking one last moment to mourn her death, I flipped the girl's body over my shoulder and trudged to my truck.

At some point I was going to have to try and interpret what message the killer was sending me by depositing the girls on my front steps, but for now I had an even more solemn job to complete.

Chapter Two

"They found another girl's body today." Mother spoke from over my shoulder. She was concentrating on the small TV perched on our kitchen counter.

The camera focused on a body bag being lifted onto a portable gurney and wheeled to the back of a hearse-type vehicle. I picked up the remote and flipped off the morning news.

"Unfortunately." I shifted my gaze to my bowl of Cheerios and waited for Mother to step away.

She didn't.

"Aren't you worried?"

My mind lurched. Had she seen me? I glanced up at her, searching for some sign that she'd witnessed my early morning mission, but she just blinked down at me, her gray eyes void of any accusation.

Worried—by the deaths, she meant. I inhaled and willed myself to relax.

“Neither of the girls were found here . . . in Madison,” I replied, my eyes focusing on my cereal to cover my lie. A Cheerio slipped off my spoon and escaped back into the pool of milk.

“Yet,” Mother countered.

I pushed the spoon to the bottom of the bowl, crushing the cereal trapped beneath the utensil to mush. Why couldn’t she just let it go?

Harmony, my fourteen-year-old daughter, bopped out of her bedroom and bent over the oversized porcelain water fountain that dominated the entry to our unconventional home—a circa 1900 high school.

I took that chance to watch her, to breathe, relax. She was healthy, happy, and blissfully unaware her mother had been sneaking off in the middle of the night to tote a dead body far away from her protected little world.

The water fountain sputtered, spraying her blouse. Mumbling under her breath, she flounced off to the bathroom, but not before shooting me a “look.” Harmony didn’t appreciate the eclectic charm of the place as much as I did.

For once her teenage attitude helped me relax. I smiled, my eyes clocking each of her angry steps.

She popped into the bathroom, and I dipped my spoon into the cereal.

“She needs to be training.” Mother nodded toward my daughter.

My tiny bubble of calm was instantly burst. I had

enough things to stress about right now—like dead Amazons being deposited on my doorstep, all but gift wrapped. I didn't need Mother bringing up this old chestnut.

Through the open door of the guest bath, converted from half of what used to be the girls' restroom, I could see Harmony rolling a line of lip gloss across her mouth. She pushed her lips into a playful pout, then smiled at her reflection.

"She is training—to be a girl." I gave Mother a *drop it now* look. As usual, it had absolutely zero effect.

"She's past puberty. Her powers . . ."

I narrowed my eyes, my fingers tightening around the spoon. "What powers?" At Mother's bland stare, I continued, "Priestess powers are supposed to skip one generation, not two. If anyone was going to get Bubbe's powers, it would have been me and, as you know, my priestess skills are more than just a little lacking." I held my gaze steady, just long enough to let Mother know I wasn't going to back down, then shrugged as I continued, "So far as artisan or warrior talents, if those appear we'll deal with it. She probably won't even need special training. Besides . . ." I smiled, just to tick Mother off. "She might be a hearth-keeper."

Mother huffed out a breath. Warriors had little respect for any of the other talent groups, but for hearth-keepers? Let's just say if Harmony showed skills in that area, I'd find myself fighting Mother with more than just words to keep her from dragging my daughter back to the Amazons to discover her "true" calling.

Not that I thought there was much chance of that. There hadn't been a hearth-keeper in our direct line for six generations. Besides, I was hiding more than the appearance of the dead teens from my family. I was hiding another discovery—that my own powers had grown. Maybe the ten years of non-use had done them some good. Twisted as it seemed, maybe ten years away from the Amazons was making me more of one.

"You don't work at it." Mother picked up the conversation like I hadn't even mentioned the hearth-keeper possibility.

"And neither will Harmony." I dropped the spoon on the table with a *thunk*.

"And neither will Harmony what?" My little pitcher strolled into the kitchen, a pink backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Make it to school on time if she doesn't get moving." I slid the box of cereal and a carton of milk across the table toward her and used my bare arm to wipe up a spill of milk.

"Not *Cheerios*. Lindy's baby brother eats them, for God's sake."

I turned my frown on my daughter. We might not worship mundane humans' God, but I believed in respect.

"Sorry, *goodness*' sake," she said, with a complete lack of remorse.

"Here. Eat." My gaze on Mother, I stood and plopped a bowl of cereal down in front of my daughter.

She stared at the bowl. “But I’ll mess up my lip gloss.”

“Eat,” I demanded.

Mother arched one brow. I could read the gesture clear as day: *And this is what you want?*

I ran my hand over my head, my fingers tearing at my shoulder-length hair. I couldn’t deal with all of this right now. The constant battle over telling Harmony about our past was hard enough to contend with at the best of times—but today, having so recently discovered the second girl, having carried her dead body in my arms—I wanted nothing more than to turn tail and run. Instead, I wrapped my hand around the wolf totem that hung from my neck and prayed silently for strength.

Tilting her head, Harmony studied us. “You weren’t maybe . . . discussing . . .”—she shifted her blue gaze to Mother—“tattoos, were you?”

The prayer turning to a curse in my mind, I twisted around to face Mother more fully. Yet another old argument, and certainly not one I wanted to revisit today. Tattoos were more than body decoration for Amazons—a lot more. If done properly, they brought power to their owners. They were a blessing, and if the careful excision of the dead girls’ *givnomai* tattoos were any indication, maybe a curse.

“It’s not like *you* don’t have any,” Harmony continued, completely oblivious to the anger and frustration coursing through me. “Or like you’d have to worry about safety or anything. You could do it yourself.” She unzipped her

backpack and pulled out a catalog of standard tats my shop offered.

“Yes, Melanippe, it’s time,” a third voice chimed in.

Great, Bubbe was up. I closed my eyes a second, carefully slowing my heart rate, bringing my emotions back to a level that could pass for usual annoyance, then shot my grandmother a warning glare. If anything, it had even less effect on her than my mother.

Realizing I needed to put space between me and my too-observant grandmother, I picked up the milk and walked to the refrigerator.

“There’s one right here.” Harmony flipped open the catalog and placed a pink-tipped finger onto the page.

Bubbe shuffled closer and stared over her shoulder. By the grunt that followed, I guessed my grandmother didn’t approve of Harmony’s choice.

“It’s a *hacekomoe*,” Bubbe replied.

My Russian was rusty, but I could tell by my grandmother’s tone whatever Harmony had chosen, it wasn’t the source of mystical strength Bubbe had in mind.

“It’s pretty,” Harmony objected.

Another snort from Bubbe.

My emotions back under control—or at least well hidden—I wandered to the table and the open catalog. Harmony’s carefully manicured finger was flattened over the image of a tiny pink-and-purple butterfly. I grinned, thoughts of serial killers being pushed from my mind for at least a few seconds as I enjoyed Bubbe’s struggles with

one of the world's most dreaded adversaries—a teenage girl intent on getting, well, anything.

“What, you don’t like it, Bubbe?” I asked.

My response must have given Harmony hope. She beamed up at me, then jerked the neck of her mint-green T-shirt down to reveal the edge of a lace bra. “I was thinking I’d put it right here.” She pointed to the top of her right breast.

My smile vanished. “I don’t think so.”

“You have one there,” Harmony objected.

“Yeah, but it’s . . .” I pursed my lips, struggling to suppress the image of two round patches of skin peeled back from a pair of young bodies.

“Not a *hacekomoe*,” Bubbe burst into the conversation. “What strength will that give you? *Cobcem he*, I tell you.” Sputtering, she stomped off.

“Harmony, a tattoo—” Mother began.

“Isn’t for you.” I jumped in, the words coming out unnecessarily terse. “You’re too young. We’ve beaten this horse to death. End of discussion.” I picked up Harmony’s backpack, grabbing the catalog away from her when she moved to stuff it back inside. “Now you need to worry about getting to school.” I gifted her with the look I’d tried on Mother and Bubbe. This time it worked.

With a huff, she flung her backpack across her shoulder and stomped down the steps to the front door.

“You have to tell her sometime.” Mother pushed away from a pillar and strolled forward with feline grace.

I slipped the catalog into a junk drawer, then tramped to the nook where our upstairs computer sat. It was networked to three other computers, one in the basement where Mother worked out and Bubbe coned—make that *consulted with*, her clients—and two in my tattoo shop on the main floor, one in my office and the other at the reception desk. I'd given up the Amazons' nomadic way and with it their resistance to modern technology. Counting in my head to avoid screaming, I pulled out the chair and plopped down.

"Do I?" I asked.

"You know you do. Someday she's going to notice—"

I shot Mother a disbelieving look. "What? That she's stronger than the other girls? Or maybe more talented artistically? So? There's nothing unusual about either of those things."

"How about the fact that her great-grandmother is five hundred years old?"

"She doesn't look a day over seventy." I shook the mouse to snap the computer out of sleep mode, wishing I could snap Mother off as easily.

"At the very least, she should be working with me at the gym." Part of being a warrior, Mother didn't let go easily.

I gave up pretending to work. "Why? So she can learn to cleave a man's head from his shoulders with one swing of a broadaxe? Not a much-needed skill at West High—our property taxes get us that much, at least."

Mother wrapped a strong hand around my bicep, her gold snake bracelet brushing coolly against my skin. "The

mothers of those other girls”—she nodded her head toward the TV—“probably thought that too.”

I stared at the blue background of my computer’s desktop, my shoulders tensing.

The grip on my arm changed to a stroke. “It would be good for her . . . she should know how to protect herself. Especially with what’s going on. You may think we’re protected because of who we are, but you can never be sure. Without training, who knows? Harmony might be too much the *girl* you want her to be—defenseless.” Her hand dropped to her side and her voice hardened. “That last girl, the one they found today, she was just a couple of years older than Harmony.”

A shiver passed over my skin and I closed my eyes. The dead girls delivered to me, the message—it couldn’t involve Harmony. Could it?

Mother waited, a questioning expression flitting across her face.

Forcing myself to answer, I replied, “I’ll think about it—there’s no rush.”

The buzzer sounded—signaling that my office manager and artist-in-training, Mandy, had arrived and it was time to get downstairs to the shop. We wouldn’t open for a few hours, but I’d agreed to work with Mandy this morning on some basic skills like sterilization and making stencils. Glad for the escape, I deserted my computer and stood to leave.

“You never know how much time you have, Mel. Remember that.”

Swallowing the lump that had formed in my throat, I turned on my heel and left the room.

Mother's words haunted me all day. I was stubborn and at times lied to myself, but I would never do anything to endanger Harmony. But had I endangered someone else's child? By keeping the discovery of the first girl from the Amazons, had I made it easier for the killer to take the second?

If so, I was going to rectify that tonight—at least somewhat.

It was after one in the morning. I'd driven two hours as fast as I dared—south from Madison, across the Wisconsin-Illinois border to a spot in the northern Illinois woods. It had taken me another fifteen minutes or so to find the rough path that led to the safe camp—an old farmstead surrounded by trees.

There were six such safe camps in the U.S. All were located in areas as remote as possible, never too close to a major city. The closest town to the camp I was visiting had a population under two thousand. There were cities of fifty thousand-plus within an hour's drive or so. The Amazons tended to go to one of them, where they could blend in more easily, for most of their business. The camps all had cover stories; they were explained away to any curious locals as church camps, vacation time shares, or charity operations that trained delinquent girls. And there were wards too, defensive spells that didn't completely hide the camps but made the entrances less no-

ticeable and would lead any intruders on meandering walks that always took them back where they'd started. Luckily, the ward used here was a simple piece of magic. To outsmart it you didn't have to unwind it, just know it was there. Which I did.

The barn was closed up, horses left to wander freely inside the fenced area that included the house and over two acres of cleared pasture. I crept past a palomino mare, placing my palm flat against her side to calm her. Mother had the real talent with horses—came with the warrior skills—but I'd spent enough time with the creatures to at least be comfortable . . . and most important, to make the horses *think* I was comfortable. Just like Amazons—show a horse you were nervous and she'd push you as far as she could. That was the one horse skill I'd truly mastered—hiding absolutely any sign of discomfort, no matter how much the horse got in my space.

As if reading my mind, the mare turned to nose me. I shoved my hand against her velvety skin and pushed her face away from mine. With a soft snort, she wandered away.

I stood motionless, alone, staring at the dark house, wondering who was inside. Anyone I knew? Anyone I missed? Anyone I hated?

My heart began to beat loudly, my blood growing thick in my veins. My brows lowered and a growl formed at the back of my throat. At that same instant my hand brushed against the bulge in my pocket where I'd stored the two necklaces I'd taken from the dead teens. I shook

my head, knocking aside the old resentments and past wrongs to concentrate on why I was here. I pulled the two figures free, holding one in each fist. A leopard and a bear: two of the most powerful totems.

Powerful or not, the totems hadn't protected the girls. A shudder shook my body and I clenched the small figures more tightly in my hands. My thoughts were wandering, my emotions taking over. There was no time for that. I had to leave these symbols so the Amazons would find them, so they would know something was wrong, and I had to do it quickly.

Focusing on my task, I crept toward the house. A few feet away I sensed magic—protective or destructive, I wasn't sure. I paced a few feet to my right, then my left, and quickly decided a second more intricate ward had been set up encircling the house. Perhaps the Amazons were aware they were being targeted, or maybe the current high priestess assigned to this safe camp was just more cautious than Bubbe had been when she held the position.

I paused briefly and noticed for the first time that the horses didn't wander within the warded circle. The animals probably worked as a first line of alarm. The ward was something more . . . disturbing, at least to whoever triggered it.

I considered my options. Disabling the spell was my gut instinct—more to prove I could than from need—but I quickly realized the folly of such a plan. If I unraveled the spell, the Amazons would know one of their

kind had left the necklaces—one of their kind with priestess skills. They would not suspect me; I was only thought of as an artisan, but Bubbe would quickly come to mind.

With that decided, I looked for a likely spot to leave the fetishes. My first thought was to tie them onto one of the horses' manes, but I couldn't know which animal would be ridden first. Horses were an important part of Amazon life, but nowadays more tradition than necessity. There was no guarantee the animal I chose would be ridden or groomed today—and I wanted the necklaces found soon. Instead, my gaze traveled to the horses' replacements—a couple of battered trucks, a panel van, and a pair of ancient imports.

After selecting one of the imports, the one without a cracked windshield, I wrapped the two thongs around the driver's door handle. To make sure my trip didn't go unnoticed, I dragged a wooden bench from under a nearby tree and laid it across the hood.

After brushing off my hands, I was ready to go, except for one thing. I glanced back at the house. The priestess who had set the ward was experienced and obviously wary. And I'd had the necklaces in my possession for some time, close to my body, even. Odds were she would be able to detect something of me on the objects.

Made me doubly thankful I'd come prepared to erase all signs of myself from the scene. I reached into my jacket and pulled out a bundle of juniper and a lighter. Burning the herb and spreading the smoke would cleanse

the necklaces and the area of my presence—completely, I hoped.

I tapped the light on my watch—after two A.M. I was running out of time. I knew nothing of the habits of the particular Amazons in this safe house. At least I didn't think I did. I hoped the major players had changed in the ten years since I had left. But nervous high priestesses and queens tended to be nocturnal. They could start moving around at any time. Not to mention I still had the drive back to Madison. The high priestess in my life, Bubbe, could very well be up before I returned.

Still, I had to do what I could. Pulling in a breath, I flicked the lighter and counted to myself as I waited for the herbs to crackle and catch. Within seconds, smoke streamed out of the bundle. Murmuring a prayer of forgiveness for my lie of omission, I waved the herbs around, paying extra attention to the car, bench, and necklaces. When I was done, I snuffed the herbs with a handful of dust and shoved the still-warm sticks back into my jacket.

It was then I noticed the horse. I could almost see the imprint of my palm shining back at me from where I'd placed my hand on her side.

Damn. Relighting the herbs was out—waving a bundle of smoldering sticks around a horse was never a good idea, especially when you were trying *not* to be noticed. The best I could do was rub the actual dried herbs over the spot and hope that did the trick. I broke off a few bits and walked toward the mare, empty hand held up.

She let me get within three feet before backing up and

letting out a whinny. Then, shaking her head, she began to buck—setting off a chain reaction that soon had fifteen horses stampeding around the paddock. The mare raced once around, then ground to a halt in front of me, the white spot on her nose dancing up and down as she tossed her head.

She was laughing at me, the bitch. *Wrong animal, but the sentiment held.*

A window flew up in the house and I knew Amazons would flow out the doors in minutes. With a curse, I wrapped my arm around the troublemaking mare's neck and threw myself onto her back. This time she played along; at a gallop we raced across the paddock. As we approached the fence, I prayed she'd been trained well—she had. Without breaking stride, she vaulted, clearing the gate by inches.

We rode on, down the gravel path, until I could see the spot where I'd left my truck. As I slid down her side, she stood patiently, waiting. Remembering the juniper, I reached in my pocket, only to find it gone.

I stared at the mare for another beat, wondering if the Amazons would sense me on her. She stared back, still waiting. Realizing I'd already wasted too much time, I shook off my uneasiness and smacked her once on her rump. Only then did she move, taking off down the path back toward the camp.

Definitely well trained. I stared after her . . . wondering. Then I shook my head and forced myself back in the present.

When I left the Amazons, I left everything about them, even my family, for a time. It was too late for regrets now. Besides, if the mare belonged to whom I suspected, she wouldn't let childhood friendships stop her from hunting me down—not if she learned I was the one who'd sneaked into the camp.

She would want answers, and she wouldn't be subtle about getting them. Just like she hadn't been subtle ten years earlier when she'd stood with the High Priestess against me.