

Excerpt from
VICIOUS CIRCLE
By Linda Robertson
[This text may differ from finished book.]

CHAPTER ONE

Half-past six AM. A ruggedly handsome man...Arthur, yes, *Arthur*...held me in his strong arms, gazing in my eyes with sensitivity and understanding and desire and he was about to kiss me and—

The sound of the garage door opening ruined my perfectly romantic dream. Blissful slumber broken, I shot out of bed ready to defend my home.

With a baseball bat in my white-knuckled grip, I eased an erratic path—to avoid the squeaky spots—down the stairs. I crept toward the kitchen; the eastern windows were still dark. Ahead, a door on the right connected the house to the garage. I could hear someone starting up the steps out there.

Holding my breath, I hefted the bat.

The door opened.

“Damn wærewolves dumping Krispy-Kreme boxes on the lawn.”

“Nana.” I sighed, relaxing and lowering the bat. I slipped it behind the door.

She didn’t even glance my way as she stepped in with the newspaper and a ragged-looking pastry box. Grass blades clung to her pink fuzzy slippers. The paperboy must have missed the driveway again.

She'd just moved in yesterday, so I wasn't used to her being here yet. Clearly, an 84-year-old woman didn't need as much sleep as I expected.

With a Marlboro pinched in the corner of her mouth, she shuffled across the kitchen and asked, "So you get up early nowadays, Persephone?"

I snorted. "No. And I didn't know that you stopped sleeping in."

"Well, as a matter of fact, the crack of dawn is my new alarm clock."

"You're still early."

"Blame the nurses," Nana said. Then she muttered, "They act like it's a boarding school. Get up. Take your medicine. Eat. *Exercise*. Play bingo. I'm paying for it, I should get to sleep and smoke whenever I want." She grumbled all the way to the trashcan, where she shook the doughnut box hard enough to make its cellophane top crackle. "This sat out there for at least two god-damned days, you know." This time she spoke louder so I knew she was talking to me.

"I've been busy," I said, "moving *your* things from Woodhaven." Mentioning the moving reminded me my muscles were sore. The rude awakening and my tense acts of stealth hadn't helped.

She looked at me and frowned, but I wasn't sure if her dour look was due to my words or my choice of pajamas—lavender panties and a cut-off purple tank top with the words *Round Table Groupie* in ancient-style letters on a shield. It's an accurate description. I've seen every movie and documentary ever made about Arthur Pendragon and amassed a collection of books and artwork based on Arthurian legends. No artist or actor has ever come close to capturing Arthur the way my dreams did, though. Funny that.

Nana tsk-tsked. "Where's your nightgown?"

I had a flashback of the long flannel gowns she'd made me to sleep in as a child. They were straight out of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." I wondered if, in her youth, she'd won a lifetime membership to a secret club called Clothiers for the Frumpy Woman. "These *are* my pajamas."

“That’s all you sleep in?”

“I lived alone until yesterday, Nana, so what I sleep in hasn’t been an issue.” Still, the cold October air swirling in made me wish I were wearing my robe. I shut the door she’d left open.

Nana shoved the pastry box into the trash. Little pieces of cut grass cascaded to the kitchen floor. “Damn filthy animals anyway.” Shuffling back to me, her hand smoothed priggishly up and over her mound of white hair. I knew what was coming next. I would have mocked her as she said it, but she was looking right at me. “Witches and wolves aren’t meant to mingle.” Nana still held to the old adage from long before the public emergence of other-than-human communities.

“Stop it,” I said. “They’re my friends.”

She took the cigarette from her lips and blew smoke up at the ceiling then pointed the glowing ash-end at the box in the trash can. “Some friends.”

I gave her an apathetic look and put my hands on my hips. I *had* started this day ready for a fight.

“They obviously don’t think much of you.” She turned down the hallway.

That wasn’t true. “I can’t help that you don’t like wæres. You are entitled to your own opinions, but don’t expect me to feel the same way.”

She snorted.

I suddenly became aware I had picked up that rude response from her.

Nana shuffled from the kitchen into the dining room then into the living room, newspaper still folded under her arm. “To them, you’re just some weirdo version of a confessional priest.”

Despite being fully aware I was being baited—I followed her. Not because I wanted a fight; I really didn’t. But I also didn’t back down when someone picked a fight with me. I felt compelled to stop this now, before it became a routine. I’d been forced to listen to her

spout her anti-wære opinion repeatedly during my years growing up in her house. Now, well, this was *my* house.

I stopped in the doorway. My old saltbox farmhouse is decorated in an eclectic attempt at Victorian. The living room—with its deep-red walls, stone hearth, and bookshelves filled with everything I own on Arthur—is my sanctuary. Posters of Camelot-themed paintings by John William Waterhouse, Sir Frank Dicksee, and other artists hung in big black-and-gold frames. This was usually a soothing room for me, but not this morning. “Confessional priest? What’s that supposed to mean?”

She waved me off, then answered anyway. “You kennel them, alleviating their consciences so they can ‘go on’.” Despite the pseudo-drama she added to the last two words, she might have sounded somewhat sage-like but for her verbal—stumbling over the word “consciences”—adding a few more syllables than needed. In an attempt to recover, she quickly added, “Besides, friends don’t leave garbage on your lawn. Real friends are more respectful than that.”

Nana’s slippers had tracked cut grass through my house. Sore muscles make me cranky. I snarled, “I’d have thought that family, more so than friends, should be respectful.”

“They should.”

“You’re not.”

She turned. “What?”

I pointed at the floor. “You’re dropping grass garbage all over my house.”

“Where?” she demanded again, squinting at the floor.

There’s nothing wrong with her eyes, but she’s not above feigning elderly ailments when it benefits her.

I strode back to the kitchen and fetched the little broom and dustpan thinking that at least I’d only have to mow for a few more weeks. Of course, I’d be spending the next few months mopping up melted-snow tracks instead.

After I dumped the debris in the trashcan, I shot a glare through the dining room and into the living room where Nana sat. Nana was

safe from my glare, hidden behind the newspaper. She had parked herself in *my* cozy chair. It didn't help my mood to realize that it would now be *her* cozy chair.

"You have a valid point," I said, returning to the living room, "but I don't mind if my friends are negligent with a doughnut box. They're responsible enough to kennel themselves on full moons. That matters more to me and it should count for something to you."

"Right. It counts for something. It counts for them being stupid. Wolves change on full moons; witches raise energies and cast spells on full moons. Why they would want to be anywhere near you during a full moon is beyond comprehension."

"That's the only time it's safe! They're *already* going to change!"

The phone rang. I jumped, then hurried to the kitchen to answer it. A glance at the clock above the old olive-colored stove told me it wasn't even seven yet. Calls this early usually weren't good news. "Hello?"

A formal female voice said, "Persephone Alcmedi, please."

I was immediately worried: the caller pronounced both of my names right the first time. A rare thing. I hoped it wasn't the administrator from the nursing home. They told me to expect a delay and several headaches getting Nana's Social Security routed back to her and, before coffee, I just wasn't ready to think as hard as the admin was going to want me to. "Who, may I ask, is calling me at six-forty-three in the morning?"

"Vivian Diamond."

I knew of her—definitely not someone affiliated with the nursing home. She was the high priestess of the only Cleveland coven officially endorsed by the Witch Elders Council. Vivian's name-dropping social style didn't impress me and her manner of leadership tended to snub true practitioners in favor of schmoozing the deep-pocketed wannabes. Consequently, I didn't attend the meet-ups or open rituals she held. I did just fine out here in Ohio's farmlands as a solitary.

“I apologize for calling so early,” she said, her voice just a bit nasal, “but I need your help. Your name was recommended.”

“Recommended by whom?”

She paused. “Lorrie Kordell.”

Lorrie used to kennel here on full moons, but had moved closer to Cleveland for work. She was raising her daughter Beverley single-handed and single-incomed. I wondered how they were doing. Since she found a place in the city to kennel I missed the popcorn and Disney nights with Beverley. (Crunchy food and musical comedies covered up the sounds of the kenneled wæres nicely.) “How are you acquainted with Lorrie?”

“Who is it, Seph?” Nana called.

I hit the mute button and yelled back, “It’s for me, Nana!” Was she going to pry into everything?

“She recently joined my coven,” Vivian said.

Shocked, I didn’t answer. *This* was what Nana had meant. Wærewolves avoided magic rituals at all costs. The energies raised could cause partial body-shifts—usually the head and arms—but the mind suffered more than the body. During a partial-shift, the wære-mind could devour the human-mind leaving only a maddened, murderous beast. By law, police could kill on sight any wære in a non-full moon partial-transformation.

“Miss Alcmedi?”

“I’m here.”

“Miss Alcmedi?”

I undid the mute. “I’m here.”

“I’d like to meet with you. Today. Early, if possible.”

“Let me check my calendar.” Pulling my John William Waterhouse Day Planner from my purse under the phone stand, I flipped through the pages. It took effort not to fall into daydreaming over the artwork, but I dutifully scanned the appointment lines. The only notation was *column due 3PM* on yesterday’s date. I’d met the deadline a day early. A few Tarot readings for regular customers were penciled in later in the week, but no appointments had been formalized,

so my schedule was clear. Reading a high priestess's cards could lead to a larger Tarot clientele. The extra money would help me offset the cost of a live-in Nana.

"What would be a good time and place for you?" Keeping Nana from crossing paths with clients would be better for all concerned.

"The coffee shop on East 9th about four blocks from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Say, one hour?"

Damn. She was seriously urgent. "I can just make it, unless traffic turns into a nightmare." I knew *of* her, but not what she looked like. "How will I know you?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'll know you." She hung up.

I hate it when people don't say a closing before hanging up. And she'd *know* me? How? I returned the phone to the cradle charger. When I turned, Nana stood in the wide doorway staring at me.

Her wrinkled face was expressionless. If I didn't know she'd always been that way, I might have thought all the wrinkles were hiding a reaction. "Who's dead?" she asked.

"Nobody's dead."

"People don't call this early unless someone died in the night." She paused. "Or do your 'friends' do that crap too?"

"The phone rings, Nana, and I answer it. Sometimes it's my friends and sometimes—"

"Fine."

Having her here was going to be like raising a spoiled teenager. She was going to roll her eyes, cut me off, and act like I was inferior.

She shoved a folded section of newspaper at me. "I'm done with this part." She turned and shuffled past the big oak dining table, pudgy hands rising to smooth over her dome of white hair.

The gesture reminded me I hadn't written her weekly hair appointment in my date-book. She insisted on keeping her hair in a beehive style, so it was more like maintenance than hairdressing. For a good portion of my childhood I thought her head was shaped funny. When I eventually realized it was all done with curlers and hairspray, it

diminished her scariness. I put the newspaper down, grabbed a pen and jotted the appointment in.

As I finished writing, the paper's front-page headline jumped out at me: *Woman Found Dead*. Underneath, in smaller letters: *Authorities suspect cult involvement*. Scanning the picture, I recognized the face of a crying young girl being restrained by medics, hands reaching toward the sheet-covered body on a stretcher. The girl was Beverley Kordell, Lorrie's daughter.

CHAPTER TWO

Vivian was late.

I'd opted to keep myself from crying by being angry. Transforming any other emotion quickly into anger may not be my best quality, but it can be useful. The nervous energy it stirs up, however, must be expended somehow. So, as I sat in the coffee shop waiting, my knees took turns bouncing in irritation and impatience. The soles of my burgundy suede flats were getting quite a work-out.

Wearing blue jeans, a maroon blazer, and a black tank top, my dark hair secured in a loose braid, I'd somehow managed a business-casual look though my mind was reeling as I dressed. I didn't care if Vivian thought I appeared professional or not.

Hunched over the article about Lorrie's murder, I re-read it for the fifth time, wishing the news were anything but this. Lorrie had been found in the bedroom of her apartment by the police acting on an anonymous tip. Beverley was asleep in her own room when the police arrived. The article said nothing about the cause of death, only that her body was "allegedly arranged in a ritualistic manner" and that "symbols were drawn on the walls with what authorities believed was her blood."

Despite the fact that this October morning came with more than the usual amount of Ohio fall chill in the air, I sipped on an iced mocha. My stomach was churning hot. The coffee's flavor was much too strong. I wasn't sure if the barista had made it wrong or if the bitterness was a projection of my present mental state.

Trying to find something good in the situation, the only positive I could see was that Lorrie knew a secret of mine I hadn't wanted to share. Now I didn't have to worry about it ever coming back to haunt me. The rest was all bad. I'd never see Lorrie again. And poor Beverley! So young—her tenth birthday was next month—and now alone.

I knew how rough that was. About her same age, I ended up with Nana. Beverley didn't have any living grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Poor kid. Who would she live with?

My eyes burned. I had to stop thinking about her or I'd start sobbing again like I had in the shower.

By now, blood tests would have revealed Lorrie's affliction and the murder would make tomorrow's headlines again. Another notch in the belt of those trying to prove the violence and danger of wæres in the community. Bad press like this made it harder for the good, responsible wære-folk trying to blend into society. I could imagine a terrible version of how this would play out: witchcraft symbols at the murder scene would spark an investigation of the local coven, then the news would break that Lorrie was infected. Some journalist looking for a Pulitzer would do an exposé and reveal Lorrie and Vivian were connected, leading to negative public outcry, and worse—Vivian and her coven enduring an inquest by the Elders Council. It had potential to become a witch- and wære-bashing media circus.

That was probably why Vivian had called me. She wanted someone uninvolved to do a more objective Tarot reading.

Not that my current state could be termed "objective."

I'd been eyeballing every woman who walked in for the last fifteen minutes. Downtown Cleveland at eight AM is a hub of hurrying businesspeople. Many women came and went, tidy in their office-wear

and comfort-pumps. I expected Vivian to be among them, incognito with a secretarial-type day job and a real life. But when I was finally approached at eight-fifteen, it wasn't by an executive-assistant.

“Miss Alcedi?”

She'd been here all along. As soon as the crowd thinned, she came to my little table and called me by name. Her name-badge read *Vivian, Manager*.

Her blond curls, twisted up with the ends wildly spraying out, reminded me of a doll from my childhood; I'd dunked her head in the toilet whenever I wanted to “wash” her hair. It had taken a toll. Vivian's hair, however, looked soft and the style suited her much better than it had my doll. Her make-up was flawless and, as she bit her lip, her too-white teeth glistened. No way she actually drank what she served unless she had them professionally bleached.

My knee stopped bouncing. “Hello.”

Under her apron, she wore a pretty cream-colored blouse with long sleeves and sensible cuffs. Paired with tan corduroy slacks and trendy shoes, she could have been one of her more business-like customers. Her jewelry, though, was over-done. Diamond stud earrings, a matching necklace and bracelet set in gold, and at least one ring on each finger. Apparently, Vivian took her last name as an accessorizing decree.

“Sorry I couldn't get to you sooner. One of the girls didn't show up. I'd have said something to you, but you went through Mandy's line.”

What I knew of Vivian Diamond came secondhand from Lydia, an elderly witch from whom I'd bought my house and land and who still lived about ten minutes from her former home. Lydia attended every meet-up and coven ritual without fail, then always found a reason to call or stop by and give me a report. Not that I asked her to; Lydia wanted me to get involved. She told me once that I'd make a better high priestess than Vivian. It was flattering, but I've never been interested in the role or the exposure that came with it. Lydia is one of those sweet

old ladies who is nearly impossible to say “no” to, but I managed, citing my youth as a disadvantage.

Still, here Vivian was and she didn’t seem *that* much older than I am—if, that is, I was correct in gauging her at thirty-ish. And she led the WEC-endorsed coven? Had been leading it for maybe eight years? From Lydia’s reports, I’d assumed Vivian would be fifty-plus.

Though most witches in the big cities aren’t as secretive about their path as their counterparts in smaller towns, Vivian wasn’t wearing any pentacles or goddess-symbol jewelry. I thought speaking quietly in code would be prudent. With a quick, room-sweeping glance, I lowered my voice and asked, “You wear the garter in the group?”

“Yes, but only when we’re doing a specifically Stregan ritual.”

I frowned; she’d taken my question literally. Strega is the Italian Wiccan tradition; in it, the high priestess wears a garter to show her status the way kings wear crowns.

Vivian’s expression darkened then, as she seemed to understand why I had asked. “I started young,” she snapped.

Questioning her authority must be a touchy spot.

A small sad smile curved her lips a fraction as she noticed my newspaper. “Let’s go to my office, shall we?” She turned without waiting for my reply.

I gathered my purse, newspaper, and velvet Tarot bag and followed her through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. She removed her apron, placed it on a wall-hook, and slid into a standard office chair behind a desk so neat it didn’t look used. The small space was well organized with oak filing cabinets and shelves adorned with bookends bearing the shop’s logo. On the highest shelf was perched the only thing that seemed out of place: a wooden box. It had rust-speckled iron workings and an old lock. I liked it; it seemed very Arthurian, like a cross between a suitcase and a pirate’s treasure chest. If I had to guess, I’d say it probably held some kind of successful-business spell items. Or maybe a charm that kept her rent from rising beyond the realm of profitability.

I lowered myself into the folding chair positioned opposite. The newspaper and purse went underneath, the Tarot bag stayed on my lap.

“Obviously you know about Lorrie’s death,” she said.

“Yes.” I smoothed the fringe on the velvet bag.

“I know who did it.”

My head snapped up. I hadn’t expected *that*.

Vivian’s chin dropped. Her fingers came up and fluttered about as if her shaking hands could wipe away the words she’d just said. Trying to cover the awkwardness, she shifted and almost put her face in her hands, but seemed to decide against it. Doing so would have messed up the impeccably applied cosmetics.

I waited for her to go on, but she remained silent. I didn’t need the cards to tell me what to say. “You have to go to the police.”

“I can’t.” She opened a drawer and pulled a tissue from a pocket-pack. She dabbed at her perfectly-lined blue eyes. “Look, if I start butting into police business, the police will start butting into coven business. I know how that game works and my coven is far too important to me.”

I was right. Her ability to be impartial and objective had totally evaporated. “You could call in an anonymous tip.” The police had already had one of those. If she wouldn’t be talked into it, I was confident the cards would convince her to do the right thing in the interest of justice.

Vivian exhaled a trembling breath. “This is not an issue for the police, Miss Almedi.”

“I beg to differ. Lorrie’s dead. She was *murdered!*”

“Even if I told them everything,” she said, “the police would never find the killer. It will go unsolved. They think it’s random because it looks random.”

“Random? Occult symbols were scrawled on her walls with her own blood!”

Her voice came small and scared, “I know.”

No more excuses. “Would you like me to do a reading and see what input the cards have as you make your decision?” I was careful to word it that way. People always have to make their own choices.

“Oh, please!” She threw the soiled tissue into a waste basket. Then she started to laugh. “You think I asked you here to read my cards?”

My knee started bouncing again. “That *is* what I’m best-known for among witches.” Coldness was forming in my stomach that had nothing to do with the iced mocha. “Look, Ms. Diamond, I’m not into gossip. If you don’t want your cards read, then I don’t see what any of this has to do with me.”

Vivian assessed me, her blue eyes icy. “Lorrie told me how you helped her last year. Help her again.”

I froze. My heart leapt to my throat.

Had Lorrie told my dark secret? She’d vowed to never speak of it! And she’d told Vivian?

I’d done some Tarot readings for Lorrie last year. A real creep was stalking her and his dangerous intentions were clear in the cards. She didn’t have time or the grounds to get a restraining order so, to protect her and her daughter, I resolved to help. I confronted him. The situation with him got out of hand, though, and...I accidentally killed him. It wasn’t intentional or premeditated. The police never solved the case. I suspected they hadn’t tried too hard. The guy turned out to be a druggie and a convicted rapist, released from the pen on a legal technicality. Still, he was a human being and I’d taken his life.

I put on a confused smile. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. How is helping her move to Cleveland relevant?”

“Miss Alcomedi, I’m not talking about you moving her knick-knacks.”

“Then what did Lorrie tell you I helped her with?”

“She told me enough to know that your interpretation of the Rede is, shall we say, looser than most witches’.”

The Witches Rede is a code of ethics written in the twentieth century but based on older documents and traditions. Due to my

lineage—traceable back to ancient Greece—I consider myself more of a pagan, but I generally accepted the Rede’s standard.

I stood. “That’s not true.”

“Well, you’re obviously not as concerned about your karma as I am about mine. Besides, Lorrie’s murderer would anticipate me taking action. I’d be burning myself at the stake to even think about trying to confront him. But you...you, he’d never suspect.” She smiled confidently. “You’re only a name on the rosters, someone who won’t even attend local meet-ups. An inactive solitary.” The last sounded demeaning.

I wanted to retort something nasty, but I didn’t. First, what I had done *would* cost me karma-wise. Second, I chose to be solitary and refused to let her make me feel like it was a bad thing. A slow breath escaped me. Vivian knew about a very criminal action of mine, an action never publicly known or prosecuted. That made me extremely nervous. In fact, my legs felt weak. I wanted to sit down, but sitting might indicate I was interested and wanted to hear more.

“Her killer must be stopped,” Vivian added.

“I’m sure the police will see to that if you go to them.” I said it confidently, but I knew it was a lie. Lorrie was a wære. Out of fear, and probably power envy, otherwise fine police officers conveniently forgot their “Serve and Protect” oaths when a wære was involved. They even had a shoot-first policy. The police were protected by self-defense claims and frightened human juries—suspiciously such cases were all scheduled so a full moon would expose jury members who were wære—readily and regularly agreed with the police.

When officers refused to investigate a crime involving a wære, it was tolerated by their superiors and supported through “paperwork” claims. This meant that until the insurance companies, currently in litigation, reached an agreement with the individual states about police coverage, the officers could refuse wære-related duties because they were “far superior to normal risks.” The legal battles were spearheaded by lawyers for families of deceased officers who were left without financial compensation due to carefully worded loopholes.

I'd written in my column about the insurance companies wanting premium payments from a specialized task force created for crimes involving wæres and vampires. Likewise, the states were accusing the insurance companies of taking advantage of the times. Both sides argued vehemently because the coverage cut too deep into their financial pockets.

Privately I feared both sides would find a mutually agreeable solution: declare-open-hunting season on all wæres.

I didn't blame people for being fearful of something they didn't understand. After a couple of decades, humanity as a whole was still adjusting to the fact that vampires, witches, wæres, fairies, and other supernaturals had lived among them for thousands of years. They would probably never have known if it hadn't been for a freak mutation of wære genes or, some said, a military experiment that went bad. Up until then, if anyone heard a tale of someone being bitten by a "werewolf," they assumed it was fiction. After the wære "virus" appeared, it became a fact to fear.

When things changed, all kinds of other-than-humans had to come out of the paranormal closet. Just like all downtrodden minorities, they had to organize to protect themselves. For the wæres, the extermination threat was immediate. They reacted with a wære-enforced responsibility policy. They broadened their kenneling approach and developed a local-level system that identified all wæres to an area pack-leader. It went through some restructuring and refining processes, but it was all handled by their own, with the exception of proven sympathetic folks like me, so they could trust the security of their identities. It was working. In the last few years, instances of wære attacks had become rare.

Vampires, thanks to their magnificent and well-funded propaganda machine, had a head start: humans bought into their alluring image long before the virus. The fairies convinced citizens they were benign in a brilliant-if-utterly-false public relations campaign and weren't considered as threatening as wæres. Neither were witches for the most part.

But the change of a word or two in certain laws and we'd all be lumped into a single "shoot-on-sight" category. Large portions of every group organization's dues went to cover costs for political lobbyists and legal eagles trying to keep that from happening.

That complex cycle of legal logic was just the human side. The machinations of the Witch Elders Council—WEC—was infinitely more intricate and ambiguous. That was why I stayed away from them.

"No. If the American justice system decided to deal with him, influential people would find a way to free him. But we both know what a joke that idea is. The laws won't touch him. We're on a precipice here, Miss Almedi. If we don't show people that we witches will police our own like the rest of the unnatural population, this world is going to get very ugly, very soon."

I agreed with that theory, but I didn't intend to tell her that.

Carefully, she said, "The murderer needs to be stopped immediately and permanently."

"And you want *me* to stop him 'immediately and permanently'?"

"Yes."

"Lord and Lady!" I continued feigning confusion. "I don't think we're on the same page here."

"Don't be coy, Miss Almedi. It doesn't become you."

I wanted to smack that smug smile off her smirking face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do. As a solitary perhaps you don't realize how information and details sometime come out during spiritual discovery. It can be like hypnosis and therapy and confession all rolled in one. And you're not a good liar."

I stared. My meditations were like confessional therapy, but they were private.

"I know what you did to Lorrie's stalker. Simply do it again." She shrugged. "This guy deserves it even more. He didn't just threaten her, he murdered her."

I could not believe what she was proposing or the gall it took to propose it. “Who the hell are you to be pushing for this? You’re not an Elder. You’re just a high priestess in Cleveland.”

“A high priestess with goals, Miss Alcmēdi. And a plan. The WEC can’t deny me a seat if I save their asses now can they?”

Still, I would not acknowledge anything to her. “Contrary to whatever Lorrie may have told you—”

“I pay well. Say...a hundred thousand?”

I tried to keep my eyes from bugging out of my head. This witchy coffee shop manager had a hundred grand of disposable income? What the fuck was in the coffee here?

The dollars jazzed me and cooled the heat of her earlier insult. Nana had very little money—enough basically to keep her in cigarettes and blood-pressure pills. Since college, I’d made a fluctuating income as a freelance writer. After landing a few well-paying magazine articles, some sporadic technical writing, and constant frugal living, I had managed to buy a house on twenty very rural acres. I could keep it only because farmers rented the acreage and my little column was running in several newspapers now. It had been nine papers until last week; now it was six. A certain newspaper conglomerate was acquired by another. The parent company’s owner had lost family to a wære attack a decade ago and had no intention of running a column designed to create sympathy for those afflicted with the virus. I could’ve handled the resulting decrease of income, but now that I would be providing for Nana too, it would hurt.

Vivian’s money would be a welcomed financial cushion—but no. I wasn’t a killer for hire. Nor did I want her to have leverage of any kind on me. Lorrie’s story was hearsay and Vivian had no proof. If I admitted it, she might try to blackmail me. If I didn’t, she had nothing. I wondered if her office was bugged or if I was being filmed by a hidden camera.

I slung my purse and velvet bag over my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Ms. Diamond. I think you clearly misunderstood Lorrie.”

“Two hundred thousand?”

After giving her a nasty look, I turned to leave.

She didn't let me get far. "What about poor Beverley?"

I stopped with my back to her, my hand hovering over the knob. *Grab it, turn, and stay out of this.* My conscience was torn. *You have to help Beverley! No one else will!*

I turned back to Vivian. "If you were Lorrie's friend, you'd tell the police what you know. But you're a coward who's chosen to hide instead."

"I'm not hiding!" Vivian stood. "Lorrie's will names me as guardian for Beverley. I have an appointment with the Department of Social Services at ten." She sank back into her chair. It rolled a few inches, though she didn't seem to notice. "Granted, it indicates more of a connection to her than I'd like the public to be aware of, but...I never thought I'd get custody. Nobody ever thinks the worst will actually happen."

I wasn't willing to sympathize with her. In fact, I was wondering how Lorrie could come to think so much of Vivian as to make her Beverley's guardian. I felt a stab of jealousy that Lorrie hadn't picked me.

"You don't understand," Vivian sniffled and wiped her nose with another tissue. "I can't raise Beverley like this. Not with me being the reason her mother's dead!"

CHAPTER THREE

"You're the reason Lorrie's dead? Explain."

Vivian returned my stone-cold stare with a steady self-satisfied look that said she knew she had me now. That really ticked me off. "You already understand what danger I put her in, Miss Alcmedi."

“Yeah, I do. But when did you know?”

“From the start.” She glanced down. “I knew she was a wære from the start.”

“Then why? Why would you let her risk it? Why risk it yourself? ‘An’ it harm none’.” I quoted the Rede’s first phrase.

Vivian hit the desktop. Her glare blazed. “Don’t you dare quote the Rede to me as if I don’t know it! You have no right to quote that to me, hypocrite.”

I admit it *was* rude; as hgh priestess she has to know the Rede and all the various codes and laws backwards and forwards. But calling me a hypocrite? “You’re not spotless either.”

Vivian looked me up and down, then squinted at me thinking so hard I almost expected to smell smoking brain cells. But her heated anger eased, slowly. Drawing little circles with her finger on the top of her desk, she finally said, “My interaction with Lorrie wasn’t risky. We met privately at her home once a week. We never did energy- or spell-work. It was just a faith and prayer Goddess-thing for her. She needed it.” Vivian paused, swallowed, and continued piously, “Lorrie continued to kennel for her monthly security, but she came to me for her soul’s solace. She needed spiritual guidance in her life as she dealt with what she’d become. She feared hurting Beverley or, worse, that Beverley would come to fear her and run away.”

Her self-righteous tone did nothing to endear her to me. “Did you warn her of the danger?”

“Lorrie wasn’t ignorant! She knew the dangers and, yes, of course, we discussed them. As I said, I simply counseled her on issues of faith.” Her gaze strayed along the edge of my newspaper. “I didn’t know the bill for guiding her spirituality would be this high. I didn’t think the council would find out.”

“Wait a minute. The council? You mean the Witch Elders Council?”

Vivian nodded grimly. “WEC *did* this.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I sat in the folding chair again. “Are you saying they knew you were spiritually counseling a wære and because

of it they—as a group —violated the Rede to have her murdered?” Me breaking the “An it harm none, do as ye will” law was bad, but I’d done it unintentionally. For the council to sanction it knowingly was a different matter.

Vivian resituated herself in her chair. “Not WEC exactly, but...”
“But?” My tone was harsher than I meant it to be.

Vivian latched onto it with a snotty little smile. “Am I ruining your perfectly naïve concept of the world?”

I really, really didn’t like her. “I’m *not* naïve.” *Am I?*

She sat back in her chair, exuding arrogant confidence. “The Elders aren’t above the temptation of corruption, dear girl. And they’ve never had a deep love for PAW.”

PAW is the acronym for Packs and Allied Wæres. The wæres’ version of WEC, they administered the “responsibility policy.” I copied Vivian’s position as best I could, right down to the impassive expression. “You better start explaining why WEC would feel it necessary to take such actions.”

“The less you know, the better.”

“I disagree.”

“Too bad.”

“Then the answer is no. I’m not buying you an Elders’ seat and I’m not getting involved in a WEC versus PAW pissing contest.” I got up and left her office without looking back. This time it was easy.

Crossing the wide seating area, however, my steps grew sluggish. I felt so sorry for Beverley. Her devoted mother was dead and nobody was going to do anything about it. Not one governmental agency would do a damn thing to help her or solve the case. There would be no justice for Beverley unless I did something...

But this was madness. I couldn’t do *this*. What was I thinking? Entertaining the idea was just plain stupid.

Some of my anger vented on the coffee shop door; I shoved it open so hard it rattled. I half-stomped to the crosswalk that led to the parking area I’d left my car in.

“Miss Almedi, wait!”

Vivian's voice came just as I arrived at the crosswalk. I crossed my arms and waited, letting her come to me. I told myself if the light changed, I was crossing. Vivian arrived first. Before she could speak, I held up my hand and then I did the talking.

"WEC may not like you counseling a wære, but they wouldn't act against the Rede. Not like this. A verbal or written first warning would have been logical and if you didn't comply, then they could renounce you and strip you of your position." If she wanted one of their seats so bad, why would she risk it this way? "This whole story stinks and I don't believe you."

Her chin lifted somewhat. "If you bothered to come to a few of the local meet-ups," she retorted, "you'd know that WEC isn't as lofty as they'd like everyone to believe."

I didn't budge. Lydia never mentioned anything about the meet-ups discussing WEC for good or for bad.

"Look," Vivian bowed her head and rubbed it wearily. "I know about your column and I'm concerned about giving you details. I have to make sure that nothing I say to you is in any way considered an interview. And you have no right to scold me for 'hiding' when you won't even use your real name for your column." She crossed her arms, mimicking me. "Who are you hiding from, I wonder?"

So she knew I was the writer behind my byline: Circe Muirwood. I was surprised, but not much. All the wæres who kenneled at my home knew that. If Lorrie spilled my secrets to her, that was the smallest of them. I ignored the dig. "Did you get a verbal or written warning? Did you know Lorrie was in danger?"

"No!" Vivian stomped her foot and dropped her arms to her sides to emphasize the word, then leaned closer to whisper. "That's why he must be stopped. Lorrie never knew. She never had a chance! And hers was not a simple isolated incident. At first, WEC used him discreetly, but now..." She glanced furtively at some people approaching from up the street.

“Sounds like you need to get the support of several coven leaders and confront the council. Sounds like ‘they’ need to be stopped, not ‘him’.”

“No. They’ve lost control. He’s become a rabid watchdog. He’s taking it upon himself to act like surveillance and security and he’s begun to act whenever he feels it is necessary. He’s out of control.”

The people were close and the fact that their presence bothered Vivian made me resolve not to let it bother me. I said, “They should tighten their grip and restore control.”

“They can’t tighten their grip on him!”

“Why not?”

Vivian waited until the pedestrians had passed us before answering. “He knows too much now. If they try to stop him, he’ll use what he knows against them.”

“Maybe he should. If things are so bad, a restructuring might be therapeutic.”

Vivian clenched her hands into fists. “You can’t possibly understand what you’re saying. If you were active in your community, your opinions might be worth something to me.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked. “You’re not a council member.”

“I have close friends seated in WEC.” She said it with an arrogant toss of her head. “I’ve made no secret of my ambitions to be voted in, Miss Alcmadi, but I have to wait two more years to finish my decade of coven-service to be eligible. By then, he may have destroyed the council and, like I said, if I save their asses, they have to give me a seat immediately. With him gone, they will have to revert to the old ways. The time-honored ways. He knows I intend to change things; that’s why he did this. To stop me. That’s why I am the reason she’s dead.” She gave me an imploring look. “If he isn’t stopped, if we don’t show we will take care of our own problems the government will legislate our annihilation. There is no other way.”

“There’s always another way.”

“A way that stops a killer, avenges your friend, saves the council, *and* stops the government from wanting us all dead to make life easier? You have something that accomplishes more than that?”

She had me there.

“He’s already created countless orphans, Miss Alcmedi. And Beverley will not be the last. Beverley herself might be in danger,” Vivian edged closer. “Are you willing to take the job or aren’t you?”

My stomach churned. The roof of my mouth turned pasty. Sweat dampened my neck and palms.

I had acted to keep Beverley’s mother alive once before, to keep Beverley from becoming an orphan. In the guilt I’d suffered after what happened, I consoled myself with knowing that Lorrie and Beverley were safe.

Had I scarred my karma for nothing?

Karma-wise, I couldn’t abandon Lorrie’s spirit now as if she hadn’t mattered. I had *killed* for her. Accidental, yes, but I had blood on my hands. If I didn’t avenge her now, well, stuff like that makes ghosts go insane. Her spirit might refuse to cross over, and lash out in frustration as a phantom. This was a wrong I had to make right.

Then there was the matter of Beverley. How could I live with myself if something happened to her? If I had the opportunity to do something to save her from further harm and refused?

“I’ll take care of it.” I was glad my voice sounded confident.

Vivian smiled. “Good.”

“I’ll have to know where to start. And I’ll need a contact number for you. One that will reach you at any hour.” I handed her one of my business cards and a pen; she wrote her cell phone number on the back.

As she handed it to me she said, “His name is Goliath Kline.”

I repeated it in my head a few times, though I doubted I could forget that name. “Your ‘donation’ will be in cash.”

“Half now. Half afterward.”

“Agreed.” I dropped the card into my purse. “Tomorrow at four, at the coffee shop.”

The gleam in Vivian's eyes disturbed me enough that I found myself wondering if the coffee shop had security cameras. I decided I should have someone else pick it up for me. Someone who'd smell a trap if Vivian had one in mind. "A friend of mine will collect it. And Vivian?"

"Yes," she said with a condescending grin. It made me happy that some of her lipstick had smeared on her teeth.

"As for your meeting with Children's Services concerning Beverley, you have some rather lofty parental shoes to fill. I'll be watching you."

Her smile disappeared. She knew a challenge when she heard it. She blinked, clearly shifting gears. "How will I know your bounty collector?"

"Trust me. When he walks through your door at four, you'll know exactly what he's come for." I hoped Johnny didn't have plans for tomorrow afternoon. He was the only one I could think of that might be able to handle this and not ask a billion questions.