

Bonds of Justice

NALINI SINGH



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

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To Kayo, Cynthia, Loma, Emily & Akbar

Because you all rock. Thank you for being my “tomodachi”!

JUSTICE

When the Psy first chose Silence, first chose to bury their emotions and turn into ice-cold individuals who cared nothing for love or hate, they tried to isolate their race from the humans and changelings. Constant contact with the races who continued to embrace emotion made it much harder to hold on to their own conditioning.

It was a logical thought.

However, it proved impossible in practice. Economics alone made isolation an unfeasible goal—Psy might have all been linked into the PsyNet, the sprawling psychic network that anchored their minds, but they were not all equal. Some were rich, some were poor, and some were just getting by.

They needed jobs, needed money, needed food. And the Psy Council, for all its brutal power, could not provide enough internment positions for millions. The Psy had to remain part of the world, a world filled with chaos on every side, bursting at the seams with the extremes of joy and sadness, fear and despair. Those Psy who fractured under the pressure were quietly “rehabilitated,” their minds wiped, their personalities erased. But others thrived.

The M-Psy, gifted with the ability to look inside the body and diagnose illnesses, had never really withdrawn from the world. Their skills were prized by all three races, and they brought in a good income.

The less-powerful members of the Psy populace returned to their ordinary, everyday jobs as accountants and engineers, shop owners and businessmen. Except that what they had once enjoyed, despised, or merely tolerated, they now simply *did*.

The most powerful, in contrast, *were* absorbed into the Council superstructure wherever possible. The Council did not want the chance losing its strongest.

Then there were the Js.

Telepaths born with a quirk that allowed them to slip into minds and retrieve memories, then share those memories with others, the Js had been part of the world’s justice system since the world first had one. There weren’t enough J-Psy to shed light on the guilt or innocence of every accused—they were brought in on only the most heinous cases: the kinds of cases that made veteran detectives throw up and long-jaded reporters take a horrified step backward.

Realizing how advantageous it would be to have an entrée into a system that processed both humans, and at times, the secretive and pack-natured changelings as well, the Council allowed the Js to not just continue, but expand their work. Now, in the dawn of the year 2081, the Js are so much a part of the Justice system that their presence raises no eyebrows, causes no ripples.

And, as for the unexpected mental consequences of long-term work as a J . . . well, the benefits outweigh the occasional murderous problem.

CHAPTER 1

Circumstance doesn't make a man. If it did, I'd have committed my first burglary at twelve, my first robbery at fifteen, and my first murder at seventeen.

—From the private case notes of Detective Max Shannon

It was as she was sitting staring into the face of a sociopath that Sophia Russo realized three irrefutable truths.

One: In all likelihood, she had less than a year left before she was sentenced to comprehensive rehabilitation. Unlike normal rehabilitation, the process wouldn't only wipe out her personality, leave her a drooling vegetable. Comprehensives had ninety-nine percent of their psychic senses fried as well. All for their own good of course.

Two: Not a single individual on this earth would remember her name after she disappeared from active duty.

Three: If she wasn't careful, she would soon end up as empty and as inhuman as the man on the other side of the table . . . because the *otherness* in her wanted to squeeze his mind until he whimpered, until he bled, until he begged for mercy.

Evil is hard to define, but it's sitting in that room.

The echo of Detective Max Shannon's words pulled her back from the whispering temptation of the abyss. For some reason, the idea of being labeled evil by him was . . . not acceptable. He had looked at her in a different way from other human males, his eyes noting her scars, but only as part of the package that was her body. The response had been extraordinary enough to make her pause to meet his gaze, attempt to divine what he was thinking.

That had proved impossible. But she knew what Max Shannon wanted.

Bonner alone knows where he buried the bodies—we need that information.

Shutting the door on the darkness inside of her, she opened her psychic eye and, reaching out with her telepathic senses, began to walk the twisted pathways of Gerard Bonner's mind. She had touched many, many depraved minds over the course of her career, but this one was utterly and absolutely unique. Many who committed crimes of this caliber had a mental illness of some kind. She understood how to work with their sometimes disjointed and fragmented memories.

Bonner's mind, in contrast, was neat, organized, each memory in its proper place. Except those places and the memories they contained made no sense, having been filtered through the cold lens of his sociopathic desires. He saw things as he wished to see them, the reality distorted until it was impossible to pinpoint the truth among the spiderweb of lies.

Ending the telepathic sweep, she took three discreet seconds to center herself before opening her physical eyes to stare into the rich blue irises of the man the media found so compelling. According to them, he was handsome, intelligent, magnetic. What she knew for a fact was that he held an MBA from a highly regarded institution and came from one of the premier human families in Boston—there was a prevailing sense of disbelief that he was also the Butcher of Park Avenue, the moniker coined after the discovery of Carissa White's body along one of the avenue's famous wide "green" medians.

Covered with tulips and daffodils in spring, it had been a snowy wonderland of trees and fairy lights when Carissa was dumped there, her blood a harsh accent on the snow. She was the only one of Bonner's victims to have ever been found, and the public nature of the dump site had turned her killer into an instant star. It had also almost gotten him caught—only the fact that the witness who saw him running from the scene had been too far away to give Enforcement any kind of a useful description had saved the monster.

"I got much more careful after that," Bonner said, wearing the faint smile that made people think they were being invited to share a secret joke. "Everyone's a little clumsy the first time."

Sophia betrayed no reaction to the fact that the human across from her had just "read her mind," having expected the trick. According to his file, Gerard Bonner was a master manipulator, able to read body language cues and minute facial expressions with genius-level accuracy. Even Silence, it seemed, was not protection enough against his abilities—having reviewed the visual transcripts of his trial, she'd seen him do the same thing to other Psy.

"That's why we're here, Mr. Bonner," she said with a calm that was growing ever colder, ever more remote—a survival mechanism that would soon chill the few remaining splinters of her soul. "You agreed to give up the locations of your later victims' bodies in return for more privileges during your incarceration." Bonner's sentence meant he'd be spending the rest of his natural life in D2, a maximum security facility located deep in the mountainous interior of Wyoming. Created under a special mandate, D2 housed the most vicious inmates from around the country, those deemed too high risk to remain in the normal prison system.

"I like your eyes," Bonner said, his smile widening as he traced the network of fine lines on her face with a gaze the media had labeled "murderously sensual." "They remind me of pansies."

Sophia simply waited, letting him speak, knowing his words would be of interest to the profilers who stood in the room on the other side of the wall at her back—observing her meeting with Bonner on a large comm screen. Unusually for a human criminal, there were Psy observers in that group. Bonner's mental patterns were so aberrant as to incite their interest.

But no matter the credentials of those Psy profilers, Max Shannon's conclusions were the ones that interested Sophia. The Enforcement detective had no Psy abilities, and unlike the butcher sitting across from her, his body was whipcord lean. Sleek, she thought, akin to a lithely muscled puma. Yet, when it came down to it, it was the puma who'd won—both over the bulging strength that strained at Bonner's prison overalls, *and* over the mental abilities of the Psy detectives who'd been enlisted into the task for

once Bonner's perversions began to have a serious economic impact.

"They were my pansies, you know." A small sigh. "So pretty, so sweet. So easily bruised. Like you." His eyes lingered on a scar that ran a ragged line over her cheekbone.

Ignoring the blatant attempt at provocation, she said, "What did you do to bruise them?" Bonner had ultimately been convicted on the basis of the evidence he'd left on the battered and broken body of his first victim. He hadn't left a trace at the scenes of the other abductions, had been connected to them only by the most circumstantial of evidence—and Max Shannon's relentless persistence.

"So delicate and so damaged you are, Sophia," he murmured, moving his gaze across her cheek, down to her lips. "I've always been drawn to damaged women."

"A lie, Mr. Bonner." It was extraordinary to her that people found him handsome—when she could all but smell the rot. "Even one of your victims was remarkably beautiful."

"Alleged victims," he said, eyes sparkling. "I was only convicted of poor Carissa's murder. Though I'm innocent, of course."

"You agreed to cooperate," she reminded him. And she needed that cooperation to do her job. Because—"It's obvious you've learned to control your thought patterns to a certain degree." It was something the telepaths in the J-Corps had noted in a number of human sociopaths—they seemed to develop an almost Psy ability to consciously manipulate their own memories. Bonner had learned to do it well enough that she couldn't get what she needed from a surface scan—to go deeper, dig harder might cause permanent damage, erasing the very impressions she needed to access.

But, the otherness in her murmured, he only had to remain alive until they located his victims. After that . . .

"I'm human." Exaggerated surprise. "I'm sure they told you—my memory's not what it used to be. That's why I need a J to go and dig up my pansies."

It was a game. She was certain he knew the exact position of each discarded body down to the last centimeter of dirt on a shallow grave. But he'd played the game well enough that the authorities had pulled her in, giving Bonner the chance to sate his urges once again. By making her go into his mind, he was attempting to violate her—the sole way he had to hurt a woman now.

"Since it's obvious I'm ineffective," she said, rising to her feet, "I'll get Justice to send in my colleague, Bryan Ames. He's an—"

"No." The first trace of a crack in his polished veneer, covered over almost as soon as it appeared. "I'm sure you'll get what you need."

She tugged at the thin black leather-synth of her left glove, smoothing it over her wrist so it sat neatly below the cuff of her crisp white shirt. "I'm too expensive a resource to waste. My skills will be better utilized in other cases." Then she walked out, ignoring the order—and it was an order—that she stay.

Once out in the observation chamber, she turned to Max Shannon. "Make sure any replacements you send him are male."

A professional nod, but his hand clenched on the top of the chairback beside him, his skin having the warm golden brown tone of someone whose ancestry appeared to be a mix of Asian and Caucasian. While the Asian side of his genetic structure had made itself known in the shape of his eyes, the Caucasian side had won in the height department—he was six foot one according to her visual estimate.

All that was fact.

But the impact was more than the sum of its parts. He had, she realized, that strange something the humans called charisma. People professed not to accept that such a thing existed, but they all knew it did. Even among their Silent race, there were those who could walk into a room and hold it with nothing but their presence.

As she watched, Max's tendons turned white against his skin from the force of his grip. "He got his rocks off making you traipse through his memories." He didn't say anything about her scars, but Sophia knew as well as he did that they played a large part in what made her so very attractive to Bonner.

Those scars had long ago become a part of her, a thin tracery of lines that spoke of a history, a past. Without them, she'd have no past at all. Max Shannon, she thought, had a past as well. But he didn't wear it on that beautiful—not handsome, *beautiful*—face. "I don't have shields." However, those shields were beginning to fail, an inevitable side effect of her occupation. If she'd had the option, she wouldn't have become a J. But at eight years of age, she'd been given a single choice—become a J or die.

"I heard a lot of J-Psy have eidetic memories," Max said, his eyes intent.

"Yes—but only when it comes to the images we take during the course of our work." She'd forgotten parts of her "real life," but she'd never forget even an instant of the things she'd seen over the years she'd spent in the Justice Corps.

Max had opened his mouth to reply when Bartholomew Reuben, the prosecutor who'd worked side by side with him to capture and convict Gerard Bonner, finished his conversation with two of the profilers and walked over. "That's a good idea about male J. It'll give Bonner time to stew—we can bring you in again when he's in a more cooperative frame of mind."

Max's jaw set at a brutal angle as he responded. "He'll draw this out as long as possible—those girls are nothing but pawns for him."

Reuben was pulled away by another profiler before he could reply, leaving Sophia alone with Max again. She found herself staying in place though she should've joined those of her race, her task complete. But being perfect hadn't kept her safe—she'd be dead within the year, one way or another—so why not indulge her desire for further conversation with this human detective whose mind worked in a fashion that fascinated her? "His ego won't let him hide his secrets forever," she said, having dealt with that kind of narcissistic personality before. "He wants to share his cleverness."

"And will you continue to listen if the first body he gives up is that of Daria Xiu?" His tone was abrasive, gritty with lack of sleep.

Daria Xiu, Sophia knew, was the reason a J had been pulled into this situation. The daughter of a powerful human businessman, she was theorized to have been Bonner's final victim. "Yes," she said, telling him one truth. "Bonner is deviant enough that o

psychologists find him a worthwhile study subject.” Perhaps because the kind of deviancy exhibited by the Butcher of Park Avenue had once been exhibited by Psy in statistically high numbers . . . and was no longer being fully contained by Silence.

The Council thought the populace didn’t know, and perhaps they didn’t. But to Sophia, a J who’d spent her life steeped in the miasma of evil, the new shadows in the PsyNet had a texture she could almost feel—thick, oily, and beginning to riddle the fabric of the sprawling neural network with insidious efficiency.

“And you?” Max asked, watching her with a piercing focus that made her feel as if that quicksilver mind might uncover secrets she’d kept concealed for over two decades. “What about you?”

The otherness in her stirred, wanting to give him the unvarnished, deadly truth, but that was something she couldn’t ever share with a man who’d made Justice his life. “I’ll do my job.” Then she said something a perfect Psy never would have said. “We’ll bring them home. No one should have to spend eternity in the cold dark.”

Max watched Sophia Russo walk away with the civilian observers, unable to take his attention off her. It had been the eyes that had first slammed into him. *River’s* eyes, he’d thought as she walked in, she had *River’s* eyes. But he’d been wrong. Sophia’s eyes were darker, more dramatically blue-violet, so vivid he’d almost missed the lush softness of her mouth. Except he hadn’t.

And that was one hell of a kick to the teeth.

Because for all her curves and the tracery of scars that spoke of a violent past, she was Psy. Ice-cold and tied to a Council that had far more blood on its hands than Gerard Bonner ever would. Except . . . Her final words circled in his mind.

We’ll bring them home.

It had held the weight of a vow. Or maybe that’s what he’d wanted to hear.

Wrenching back his attention when she disappeared from view, he turned to Bart Reuben, the only other person who remained. “She wear the gloves all the time?” Thin black leather-synth, they’d covered everything below the cuffs of her shirt and suit jacket. It might have been because she had more serious scars on the backs of her hands—but Sophia Russo didn’t strike him as the kind of woman who’d hide behind such a shield.

“Yes. Every time I’ve seen her.” Frown lines marred the prosecutor’s forehead for a second, before he seemed to shake off whatever was bothering him. “She’s got an excellent record—never fumbled a retraction yet.”

“We saw at the trial that Bonner’s smart enough to fuck with his own memories,” Max said, watching as the prisoner was led from the interrogation room. The blue-eyed Butcher, the media’s murderous darling, stared out at the cameras until the door closed, his smile a silent taunt. “Even if his mind isn’t twisted at the core, he knows his pharmaceuticals—could’ve got his hands on something deliberately dosed himself.”

“Wouldn’t put it past the bastard,” Bart said, the grooves around his mouth carved deep. “I’ll line up a couple of male Js for Bonner’s next little show.”

“Xiu have that much clout?” The trial of Gerard Bonner, scion of a blue-blooded Boston family and the most sadistic killer the state had seen in decades, would’ve qualified for a J at the trial stage but for the fact that his memories were close to impenetrable.

“Sociopaths,” one J had said to Max after testifying that he couldn’t retrieve anything usable from the accused’s mind, “don’t see the truth as others see it.”

“Give me an example,” Max had asked, frustrated that the killer who’d snuffed out so many young lives had managed to slip through another net.

“According to the memories in Bonner’s surface mind, Carissa White orgasmed as he stabbed her.”

Shaking off that sickening evidence of Bonner’s warped reality, he glanced at Bart, who’d paused to check an e-mail on his cell phone. “Xiu?” he prompted.

“Yeah, looks like he has some ‘friends’ in high-level Psy ranks. His company does a lot of business with them.” Putting away the phone, Bart began to gather up his papers. “But in this, he’s just a shattered father. Daria was his only child.”

“I know.” The face of each and every victim was imprinted on Max’s mind. Twenty-one-year-old Daria’s was a gap-toothed smile, masses of curly black hair, and skin the color of polished mahogany. She didn’t look anything like the other victims—unlike most killers of his pathology, Bonner hadn’t differentiated between white, black, Hispanic, Asian. It had only been age and a certain kind of beauty that drew him.

Which turned his thoughts back to the woman who’d stared unblinking into the face of a killer while Max forced himself to stand back, to watch. “She fits his victim profile—Ms. Russo.” Sophia Russo’s eyes, her scars, made her strikingly unique—a critical aspect of Bonner’s pathology. He’d targeted women who would never blend into a crowd—the violence spoken of by Sophia’s scars would, for him, be the icing on the cake. “Did you arrange that?” His hand tightened on a pen as he helped Bart clear the table.

“Stroke of luck.” The prosecutor put the files in his briefcase. “When Bonner said he’d cooperate with a scan, we requested the closest J. Russo had just completed a job here. She’s on her way to the airport now—heading to our neck of the woods as a matter of fact.”

“Liberty?” Max asked, mentioning the maximum-security penitentiary located on an artificial island off the New York coast.

Bart nodded as they walked out and toward the first security door. “She’s scheduled to meet a prisoner who claims another prisoner confessed to the currently unsolved mutilation murder of a high-profile victim.”

Max thought of what Bonner had done to the only one of his victims they’d ever found, the bloody ruin that had been the once-gamine beauty of Carissa White. And he wondered what Sophia Russo saw when she closed her eyes at night.

CHAPTER 2

Nikita Duncan, Psy Councilor and one of the most powerful women in the world, scanned the biographical data in the confidential file in front of her, pausing for a second on the attached digital image.

The human male had a distinctive face. Sharp cheekbones, skin that spoke of a complex genetic heritage, and eyes that hinted of a parent from central Asia. But it wasn't Detective Max Shannon's appearance that interested Nikita.

No, she was interested in something far more important—his mind.

CHAPTER 3

The patient is no longer connected to the PsyNet by a single biofeedback link—her mind survived by anchoring its *entire* consciousness into the fabric of the neural network. Any attempt at separation will lead not only to death, but to the total and complete destruction of her personality.

—*PsyMed report on Sophia Russo, minor, age 8*

Sophia hadn't slept for twenty-four hours when she walked into the ironically named Liberty Penitentiary the next morning, but one could've guessed that from the crisp clarity of her tone, the smartness of her dress. She was taken directly to an interview room upon arrival. The assistant district attorney in charge of the case arrived a minute later.

Five minutes after that, she began the memory retrieval. Unlike Bonner's, this inmate's mind was full of nothing but forty years of living and violence. Some young Js got lost in the mess, but Sophia had learned to filter very well. She went directly to the memory of the day in question and took no more than the relevant minutes.

Humans tended to be suspicious of telepaths, and Js in particular, afraid the Psy would steal their secrets. The truth was, Sophia already had too many pieces of other people's lives in her head. She didn't want any more—especially the kinds of memories she was invariably asked to retrieve. In all her years of service, she'd found only four innocents. "I have it," she said to the A.D.A.

Asking the prisoner and his attorney to wait, he walked her to the waiting area outside the warden's office. "Could you project those memories to me?"

Nodding, she did as asked. This little telepathic quirk was what turned a Tp into a J. Most telepaths could transmit words and isolated visuals, but Js could not only retract, but transmit the entire memory in a continuous stream. This A.D.A. was human, shields no barrier. That could have been a handicap in other circumstances—however, given that this case had no associated cost benefit to the Council, he was safe from Psy coercion.

"Thank you," he said after she completed the projection. "That does put a different spin on things, doesn't it?"

She didn't answer, aware he wasn't talking to her. And even if he had been, she would've made no response. She tried not to "see" the memories anymore. It was a futile effort, but sometimes, she could distance herself a fraction.

The A.D.A. released a breath. "I'd like to go back and chat with the witness and his attorney. The jet-chopper will be arriving to take you back to the mainland soon."

"Please go ahead." She saw him looking around for the warden. "This location is tightly guarded. I'll be safe on my own."

"You sure?" A concerned look.

"I spend a lot of time in prisons."

"I guess you must at that. Alright, you've got my secretary's number. Give her a buzz if the chopper doesn't arrive in the next ten minutes."

"I will." Nodding good-bye as he left, she took a seat, outwardly calm. But the truth was, she should've never, ever been left alone. As she'd told the A.D.A., it wasn't because her physical position put her at risk. There were at least four double-keyed electronic security doors, full of bars and steel, between her and the first inmate.

It wasn't even because she might get scared sitting alone in such a cold, gray place.

She had witnessed thousands of moments of the most depraved violence and pain, but she herself didn't feel fear. She didn't feel anything. The Silence Protocol, the conditioning that chilled Psy madresses as it chilled their emotions, ensured that. However, in Sophia's case, Silence didn't work as well as it should. And everybody knew it. Most Psy would have been summarily rehabilitated, but Sophia was a Justice Psy. And Js were rare enough and necessary enough that they were allowed their little . . . peculiarities.

Of course, Js were also never to be left alone in "suggestive" locations.

Evil is hard to define, but it's sitting in that room.

The reminder of Max Shannon's grim words stayed her hand for a second. Would he consider this evil? Perhaps. But as her past was unlikely to ever again cross with that of a man who'd made her, for a fleeting instant, wish to be something better, she couldn't let him guide her actions. Because though what she was about to do wasn't in any official manual, like all Js, she considered it part of her job description.

The first scream came four minutes later. In spite of its shrill, piercing nature, no one heard it. Because the man who was screaming was doing so soundlessly, his mind locked in a telepathic prison far more invidious than the plascrete and mortar one that surrounded him on every side.

Even as he screamed, he was moving, unzipping his pants, pushing them down to his ankles, shuffling over to pick up a tool he'd hidden in the hollow leg of the desk his attorney had won for him. The inmate was a learned man, his attorney had argued, constituted cruel and unusual punishment to put him in a place where he couldn't write, couldn't keep his research notes. The attorney had never mentioned the tiny, helpless victim his learned client had put in a dog cage devoid of the most basic of human necessities.

However, the amenities he had taken such glee in winning were the furthest things from the inmate's mind at that moment. His hand clenched on the tool as he blubbered without voice, his will shredded like so much paper. Then the tool touched the flaccid

white of his belly and he realized what he was about to do.

Blood dripped onto the floor almost a minute after that—it took time to achieve that kind of damage with nothing but a shiv weapon made out of a toothbrush ground against contraband rocks until its edges were as sharp as . . . well, almost a knife.

The act of amputation was excruciatingly painful.

And it was long over by the time a short, compact man with black hair faintly touched with silver walked into the waiting room. “I’m sorry for the delay, Ms. Russo. Your jet-chopper arrived five minutes ago, but I wasn’t immediately able to spare an escort. Several prisoners decided to get into a ruckus in the yard.”

Sophia stood, briefcase held loosely in her left hand. “That’s quite alright, Warden.” The otherness in her settled back, its tail complete. “I’m still on schedule.”

Warden Odess escorted her through the first set of security doors. “This is what, your third visit here this month?”

“Yes.”

“Things going well on this new case?”

“Yes.” She paused as he cleared them through the second to last checkpoint. “The prosecution team feels certain of success.”

“I guess they’ve got an ace in the hole with you. Pretty hard to argue innocence when you guys can pick the memories out of the accused’s mind.”

“Yes,” Sophia agreed. “However, insanity or diminished responsibility pleas are quite popular in such cases.”

“Yeah, I guess so. You can’t see into their heads, right? I mean—know what they were thinking at the time?”

“Only by reference to their actions or words,” Sophia said. “If those actions or words contain any hint of ambiguity, the field is thrown wide open.”

“And, of course, the defense always argues that things weren’t as they appear.” Snorting, the warden stepped out into the bright light of the late winter’s day. Sophia blinked as she, too, exited. The light seemed too bright today, too intense, cutting across her retinas like broken glass.

Odess watched as she blinked. “Guess it’s time for you to go in.”

Most people didn’t know that Js only worked one-month rotations before returning to the nearest branch of the Center to have their Silence checked. But Odess had been part of the prison system for over a decade. “How do you always know?” she asked, having worked with him sporadically over those ten years.

“That question is your answer.”

She tipped her head a little to the side.

“You begin to act more human,” he told her, his dark eyes holding a concern she’d never understood. “At the start, when you’ve just returned from wherever it is you go, your responses are short, distant. Now . . . we actually had a conversation.”

“An astute observation,” she said, realizing the tilt of her head for what it was—a sign of disintegration. “Perhaps we can have another conversation in a month’s time.” That was how long it would take for the conditioning to begin to fragment again.

“I’ll see you then.”

Sophia walked to the waiting jet-chopper with an easy, unhurried stride. She was in Manhattan proper by the time they discovered the prisoner bleeding in his cell.

Max had spent the night going over the Bonner case files, on the slim chance that the bastard would actually give up a body at some stage. In truth, every single detail of the Butcher’s crimes was already engraved on his memory banks, never to be erased, but he wanted to be absolutely certain of his recall. All that death, the pain, coupled with the smug arrogance of the man who’d ended many lives—it hadn’t exactly left him in the best frame of mind for what had to be some kind of a Psy joke.

“Commander,” he said, staring into the aristocratic face of the Psy who ran New York Enforcement, “if I can speak bluntly—”

“You rarely do otherwise, Detective Shannon.”

In most humans and changelings, Max would’ve heard in that statement a wry humor. But Commander Brecht was Psy. He’d looked at a rape victim with the same dispassionate gaze as he would a drive-by-shooter.

“So,” Max said, pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose, “you’ll understand where I’m coming from when I ask you why the hell you’d put me on this. The Psy hate me.”

“Hate is an emotion,” Commander Brecht said from his standing position by an old-fashioned filing cabinet that had somehow survived all attempts at modernization. “You are more of an inconvenience.”

Max felt his lips curve up in a humorless smile. At least you could never accuse Brecht of not cutting to the heart of the matter. “Exactly.” He folded his arms over the crisp white shirt he’d put on in preparation for a court appearance. “Why would you want the inconvenience of running an investigation into a Psy situation?” Psy were insular to the nth degree. They kept their secrets even as they stole those of others without pause or conscience. It pissed Max off, but all he could do was keep on doing his job. Sometimes, he won in spite of their interference—and that made it all worth it.

“You have a natural mental shield.” Commander Brecht’s tone was straightforward. “The fact that you’re immune to Psy mental interference may have been a stumbling block when it comes to your career—”

Max snorted. Fact was, with his solve rate and aptitude tests, he should’ve made lieutenant by now. But he knew he never would—Psy controlled Enforcement, and his ability to withstand their attempts at coercion, to run his cases as he saw fit, made him an unacceptable risk in any position of power.

“As I was saying,” the commander continued, his hair solid gilt under the streak of light coming in through the tiny window to his left. “While it may have been an obstacle in your path to a higher position within Enforcement, it is also an advantage.”

“I’m not going to argue with that.” Unlike so many humans, Max had never had to worry about whether he’d closed a case looked the other way as a result of subtle mental pressure—many a good cop had broken because of that simmering kernel of doubt that niggling concern that he’d been led to a particular conclusion. He said as much to Brecht. “I would’ve gone into private investigation if I didn’t have the shield—staying here to get mind-fucked wouldn’t have been at the top of my list.”

The commander walked over to his desk. “It’s beneficial for New York Enforcement that you decided to stay—you have the best solve-rate in the city. And you’re also, as the humans would say, mule stubborn.”

Max had been called a rottweiler once in a while. He took it as a compliment. “Still doesn’t answer the question of why you want me on a Psy case.” Command always assigned those to Psy detectives.

Max didn’t have a problem with that—so long as it was only Psy who were involved. But it angered the hell out of him when humans and changelings got shortchanged because a member of the cold psychic race was part of the equation. “The Bonner situation—”

“Is currently at an impasse according to the report you turned in last night. You’re going to wait him out, correct?”

Unfolding his arms, Max shoved a hand through his hair. “I still need to be able to respond quickly if he does decide to talk—know this case like no one else.” And though he’d run the Butcher to ground, his task wasn’t yet over—wouldn’t be over until he’d brought each and every girl home, giving their grieving families the peace of being able to bury their babies in proper graves.

To this day, he could feel the slight weight of Carissa White’s mother as she collapsed into his arms—it had been a snowy winter night when he’d gone to their pristine little villa, a villa Carissa had decorated with twinkling Christmas lights two weeks earlier. Max White had opened the door with a laugh. Later, she’d gripped his jacket and begged him to tell her that it wasn’t true, that Carissa was still alive.

And then she’d made him promise. *Find him. Find the monster who did this.*

He’d fulfilled that promise. But he’d made other promises to other parents.

No one should have to spend eternity in the cold dark.

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Brecht’s words crashed through the echo of another Psy voice—through the memory of a haunting statement so at odds with her glacial presence that Max hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her.

“The case I want you to work is high priority, but with room for flexibility should you need to fly back to consult on the Bonner case.” Brecht slid into the chair behind his desk. “If you’d take a seat, Detective.” A pause when Max didn’t immediately obey. “Your obsession with Bonner ended with the capture of a sociopath who would undoubtedly have continued to take lives if you hadn’t stopped his killing spree. However, if you let that obsession control you now, you’ll wind up dead of stress while he grows fat behind bars.”

Max raised an eyebrow. “Been talking to the Enforcement shrink?”

“I may be Psy, but I was also a detective.”

And because Max had seen Brecht’s case files, because he knew the man *had* been one hell of a smart cop, he took a seat.

“What I’m about to tell you can’t leave this room, whether or not you decide to accept the task.” Brecht’s eyes were a pale color between gray and blue, shards of ice encased in steel. “Do I have your word on that?”

“If it’s an Enforcement matter, it’s an Enforcement matter.” Irrespective of anything else, he still believed in the badge, in the good that they did.

Brecht gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Over the past three months, Councilor Nikita Duncan—”

A Councilor?

Yeah, that got Max’s attention.

CHAPTER 4

“—has lost three of her advisors by three very different methods. One was a heart attack, the second an automobile accident, the third an apparent suicide.”

Max’s gut went tight as cop instinct took over. “Could be coincidence.”

“Do you believe in coincidence, Detective?”

“About as much as I believe in the tooth fairy.”

The commander nodded. “Councilor Duncan does not believe in coincidences, either. She wants you to find out who is going after her people and why.”

“She’s in San Francisco,” Max said, the same instinct telling him that far more was going on beneath the surface than a simple and inexplicable—request for a human cop on a Psy case. But Max didn’t go straight for the jugular—there were better ways of getting information. “Cops down there aren’t going to like me stepping on their toes.”

“For the purposes of this case, you’ll be made a special investigator, with the authority to work across state lines. It’s regular practice with detectives who have the specialized skills to work a particular situation.”

That much was true. However, something else was equally true. “I’ve heard the Psy have their own version of a police force. I’ve never had to have thought a Councilor”—especially a Councilor with all her secrets—“would want them to take care of it.”

“Normally, yes.” The commander picked up a small data crystal and placed it on the desk between them, a silent prick to Max’s curiosity that made Max a cop who always, *always* found the answers. “However, the Arrow Squad is loyal to another Councilor, and if that Councilor is behind these attacks, then Councilor Duncan will not get the truth. Her own people have proved deficient in the skills necessary to take care of the task.”

Max thought over what he knew of Nikita Duncan. She was an astute businesswoman, one who made money hand over fist—unlike Councilors Ming LeBon and Kaleb Krychek, he’d never heard her name linked with a military operation, so it might be a legitimate fact that she’d found a gap in her resources once she eliminated this Arrow Squad from the mix.

“Alright,” he said, eyes narrowed. “But mental shield aside, there’s got to be some other reason the Councilor asked for me. What skills make me so special?” He was damn good at what he did, but there were excellent cops in San Francisco.

“Don’t disregard your shield so easily,” the commander responded. “It’s one of the strongest we’ve ever encountered in a human.” An implied confirmation that Psy had tried to break through it any number of times. “However, you’re correct. There is something else—you have friends in the DarkRiver leopard pack. Councilor Duncan seems to believe that that friendship will make it easier for you to run the investigation in her city.”

Ice crawled in a slow spread through Max’s veins. Clay Bennett, the changeling male Max knew best, was one cool customer. Max wouldn’t put it past the leopard pack to whittle down their enemy piece by piece—they were predators after all. But—“Is Councilor Duncan’s daughter mated to Lucas Hunter, the alpha of DarkRiver?” Sascha Duncan’s defection from the Psy world had made news across the country.

“Yes, but they no longer have any kind of a personal relationship.”

Max nodded to show he’d heard, but the fact of Sascha’s existence, her relationship with Lucas, put his mind at ease. Because while they might be predators, the cats were also big on family. He couldn’t see them culling Nikita’s people on the sly. “If I do this,” he said, knowing he couldn’t let it go now, his curiosity a steel blue flame inside him, “I’m going to need full access. If Duncan has her people blocking me at every turn, it’s going to be impossible for me to do my job.”

“Councilor Duncan understands that.” Brecht picked up the data crystal and moved it in front of Max. “This has the background information. However, as you can imagine, there are areas of considerable sensitivity. That’s why you’ll be working with a Psy partner who’ll help you in relation to the peculiarly Psy aspects of the investigation, and who will be tasked with filtering certain data.”

Max had known he’d need a Psy advisor, but the second part of Brecht’s statement made his hand clench on the crystal. “How the fuck is he going to realize what’s relevant and what’s not?”

“*She*,” the commander said, “is to work intimately with you.”

“Makes no difference to the question—what qualifications does this ‘partner’ of mine have to make those decisions?” Max was just used to working alone, he liked it that way.

“She’s a J,” the commander said. “Has been operative since she was sixteen. She’s now twenty-eight.”

Anticipation licked along his spine. “What’s her name?”

“Sophia Russo.”

His mind reacted immediately—an image of haunting eyes in a face marked by violence, a voice that said things it shouldn’t say, a body that made his own itch to thaw out all that ice. It was then, as he considered if the latter was even possible, that he was hit by the import of Brecht’s words. “Twelve years of active service? Most Js don’t last that long.”

He’d worked with at least twenty over his eleven years in Enforcement. Each had retired before the age of thirty, and, he realized, he’d never seen any of them again. It hadn’t struck him as odd before, because Psy weren’t exactly the type to send Christmas cards, but the fact that not one, *not one*, had ended up working in another area of Justice—either they had one hell of a retirement plan or . . . Given the cold-blooded way the Council treated its own people, the possibilities were chilling. And Sophia Russo had been a J for

twelve years. She had to be reaching “retirement” age.

When the commander spoke, he didn't address Max's implied question, didn't tell him what happened to Js who reached the end of their working lives. “Ms. Russo has considerable experience in interacting with humans—you should find her a satisfactory partner.” A pause. “Detective, I need an answer today.”

Max played the data crystal over his fingers. He still wasn't sure what the hell he was doing considering working for the Psy, the real reason why Nikita had asked for him, but if you stripped away all the bullshit, one thing remained unchanged—he was a citizen. And Nikita Duncan was a citizen. “I'll do it.”

Sophia sat across from the M-Psy in charge of her evaluation at the Pittsburgh branch of the Center, her hands placed on the table, her eyes calm.

“There's been,” the M-Psy said, “a report of an incident at Liberty Penitentiary.”

She didn't fall for that trick, didn't respond. Because he hadn't asked a question.

“Did you have anything to do with that incident?”

“What was the incident?”

The M-Psy looked down at his notes. “A pedophile mutilated himself.”

It was easy to keep her face expressionless—she'd been practicing since she was eight years old and about to be euthanized. “Was he human?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps he felt remorse,” she suggested, knowing the creature in that cell had felt pity only for himself, for the fact that he'd been caught and locked up. “Humans have emotions after all.”

“There's no indication he felt remorse.”

At least the man hadn't managed to fool the prison psychiatrists. “Is he speaking?”

The M-Psy shook his head. “Not coherently.”

“Then it's impossible to know if he felt remorse,” she responded with total equanimity. Perhaps she should've felt guilt, but of course, she was Silent. She felt nothing. But she knew what that prisoner had done, knew every tiny detail of the horror he'd imprinted on a young, unformed psyche. Sophia had buried the memories even as she extracted them from the child's mind, leaving him with a week-long blank in his past that would only unlock when he was old enough and strong enough to bear it.

It was unfortunate that the trick didn't work on children who were born with the J facility. If it had, perhaps she would have had a different life . . . Perhaps.

The M-Psy tapped something on his datapad. “This is the third such incident in the past year where you've been in close proximity.”

“I need to be in prisons often,” Sophia replied, though her mind was in another room in a well-appointed cabin two decades in the past. “My chances of being near an incident are higher than that of an ordinary individual.”

“The J-Psy Management Board has determined that you need to go in for reconditioning”—the M-Psy turned his datapad so she could see the authorization—“especially given your recent contact with Gerard Bonner.”

“I have no disagreement with that.” They'd poke and prod at her during the reconditioning process, but Sophia knew what they'd find. Nothing. Complete or partial memory erasure might not work on Js, but a woman who made her living retrieving the memories of others got very good at clouding her own when necessary. “Would it be possible to schedule it today? I need to appear as an expert witness in a case first thing tomorrow morning.”

Total reconditioning—known as rehabilitation—effectively turned the individual into a vegetable. But the basic reconditioning that Sophia had gone through any number of times took a bare few hours to complete. Add a full night's sleep and she'd be functioning at peak efficiency again when the sun rose.

The M-Psy checked his schedule. “We can slot you in at six tonight.”

And, Sophia thought, she'd lose several hours to a semi-conscious state—when time was running out for her at an inexorable pace. But all she said was, “Excellent.”

“There is another matter.”

Sophia looked up at the comment. “Yes?”

“The Management Board has reassigned you.” The M-Psy sent an electronic file through to Sophia's organizer. “You've been selected to work directly for Councilor Nikita Duncan as a special advisor.”

The first step, Sophia thought, having expected the transfer on some level. Js who began to show too many cracks were phased out step-by-step. By the time they disappeared, nobody remembered they'd once known a Justice Psy by that name. Nobody realized the J had simply vanished, never to be seen again. “My duties?”

“Councilor Duncan will brief you—you have an appointment with her at one tomorrow. Given the time of your court appearance, you should have no difficulty making your flight.” The M-Psy stood. Paused. “I haven't been authorized to inform you of this, but you should have time to put your affairs in order.”

Sophia waited. The words were unusual, could well be another trap.

But when he spoke, he gave her the answer to a question that had been circling in her mind for months now. “This reconditioning will be your last—your telepathic shields are too severely degraded to allow for a further reset.” Cool green eyes met hers. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” *The next time she walked into a Center, only a shambling, empty-eyed shell would walk back out.*

CHAPTER 5

The child has been damaged on a fundamental level. Any attempt to save her will require the allocation of considerable time and resources with no guarantee of a productive return.

—*PsyMed report on Sophia Russo, minor, age 8*

Just over twenty-four hours after his conversation with Commander Brecht, Max exited his gate at San Francisco's domestic terminal with a single suitcase and one very pissed-off cat in an industrial-strength carrier. A cat whose yowling was starting to make people look at Max with the narrow-eyed stare reserved for those who beat their dogs and ran their horses to exhaustion.

"Max!"

Looking up, he saw a familiar tawny-haired figure. Putting the suitcase and carrier down, he picked Talin up in his arms and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Damn, you look good, Tally." Her face glowed with health, her freckles golden against skin that had managed to retain the burnished hue of summer even in the crisp chill of January.

A growl emerged from the green-eyed man on Tally's right, his gaze vivid against rich, dark skin. "Once, I'll allow. Kiss her again and all you'll be kissing is the asphalt."

Grinning, Max put a laughing Talin on her feet and held out his hand. "Nice to see you, too."

Clay shook it. "Hello, Cop." His eyes went to Max's feet.

And Max realized Morpheus had gone utterly silent the instant they neared the couple. Glancing down, Max saw the black-haired ball of indignant fur staring at Clay. "I think he's trying to figure out what the hell kind of cat you are."

Talin bent, went to reach through the bars as if to pet the cat.

"Don't," Max warned, one hand on her shoulder. "He bites."

"He bites Tally," Clay said, looking at the cat with eyes that were no longer human, "I'll show him *my* teeth."

"Shh, now," Talin said, stroking Morpheus gently on the forehead. "He's just mad about being cooped up, aren't you, gorgeous?" Looking up at Max, she mock-whispered, "Clay gets snarly on flights, too."

"Watch it," Clay said, but the curve of his lips made Max grin. Man was well and truly a goner.

"I'm glad you brought him," Talin said, rising to her feet. "He'd have missed you."

"Nah—he'd have found another sucker to feed him," Max said, knowing the former alley cat had the survival instincts of a rat on a sinking ship. "But since I'm not sure how long this'll take, I figured Morpheus might as well come and see the world with me." Nodding thanks at Clay as the changeling male grabbed his suitcase, Max took the carrier. "I appreciate the pickup."

"I voted to leave you stranded," Clay muttered.

Talin linked her arm with Max's. "Don't mind him. Secretly, he loves you."

"Very secretly." Max's heart went tight in a good way at seeing Talin so happy. They'd become close during the investigation in several missing kids a while back, but he'd known her on and off for years, their beats colliding in New York. She'd worked with troubled kids—and Enforcement was always picking up those kids.

But it wasn't just that. He and Talin had a connection, one they'd never really articulated but which was simply understood. They'd both been children caught in the foster-care system, understood the scars that could leave. It wasn't the kind of thing you could really explain to anyone who hadn't lived through it.

But Clay got it. Max didn't know the big man's history, but the connection Max shared with Talin was slowly being formed with her mate as well. Max had taken them to dinner the last time they'd come up to Manhattan, had ended up getting well and truly drunk with the leopard. Talin had herded them home from the bar, promising to tear the hides off them the entire time, but she'd tucked them both in that night—pushing Max down onto their hotel couch and telling him to stay put.

Grinning at the memory of the pulsating rock music she'd played the next morning as punishment, he looked down at the woman's mane of her hair. "Did you check out the apartment?" He'd e-mailed them the details of the place where he'd been put up for that duration.

"It's near Fisherman's Wharf," Talin said, "not that far from the Duncan building. Nice area—close to the shops."

Clay glanced up as he stowed Max's bag in the trunk of the car. "You sure you don't want to tell us what you're doing for Sascha's mother?" His eyes were human again—and full of a keen intelligence, as befitted one of Dark-River's top men.

"Sorry, can't say anything. Not yet." Max put Morpheus in the backseat. "I might be able to share more once I know what's going on." Getting into the seat beside the still silent cat, he strapped up and waited for Clay and Talin to get in. Except . . . "What the—" Reaching beneath his thigh, he found himself holding some sort of a weird pink-haired doll with joints in impossible places.

"That's a Metamorph," Talin told him, turning to look over her shoulder. "They change into animals."

"Huh." He played with the little toy, managed to figure out the mechanism, and voila, he had an improbably pink wolf on his hands. "Like a changeling."

"Yep. Clay keeps buying them for Noor even though she already has at least a dozen." Talin was twining her fingers with her mate's free hand even as she teased him. "One look from those big brown eyes and he folds."

Clay lifted up her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "You don't complain when I melt for your big gray eyes."

“Clay.” Blushing, Talin nonetheless blew her mate a kiss.

Relaxed by the byplay, Max leaned back in his seat—after checking to ensure a still silent Morpheus was okay—and thought about the e-mail he’d received while waiting to board the airjet. It had come via the commander’s office.

Sophia Russo will meet you in San Francisco.

Anticipation thrummed through him—his body didn’t seem to want to accept the fact that the woman was more likely to freeze than balls off in the night than consent to tangle with him in the male/female sense.

But Max had stopped being ruled by his hormones around the age of sixteen, no matter that this J with her night-violet eyes full of secrets tugged at him in the most visceral of ways. Using the time he had before his flight boarded, he’d made a few phone calls, including one to Bart Reuben to get an update on Bonner. The prosecutor had had nothing new to report on that front, but when Max mentioned he was going to be working with Sophia, he’d said, “I got curious about her, did some digging.”

Max had been startled by a sudden—and forceful—surge of possessiveness. “Why?”

“Those gloves,” Bart had replied. “I realized I’d seen them before, on a J I worked with a long time ago. I know they mean something, but I haven’t figured out what yet. However, I did find out something else very interesting.”

Fighting off his unexpectedly strong response to the idea of Bart investigating Sophia, Max had forced his tone to lighten. “You’re going to make me beat it out of you?”

“No, a bottle of single malt whiskey will do.” He’d been able to hear the laugh in his friend’s voice. “Seems like over the past year, our Ms. Russo has developed a curious little habit of being in close proximity to some very nasty people who decided to mutilate themselves in creative ways.”

“That’s not surprising, given how long she’s been a J.” A cop would have to be willfully blind to miss that occasionally homicidal “quirk” of J psychology. It was always impossible to prove anything, of course, even if a cop felt so inclined given the nature of the individuals the Js invariably targeted, but the Corps policed itself very effectively—it wasn’t good for their image to have their people start going nuts in public.

Even as the thought passed through his head, Max had found himself disturbed by the idea that Sophia Russo might be going slowly insane. “Why hasn’t she been yanked from active duty?” It had come out harsher than it should have.

Bart, thankfully, hadn’t noticed. “She’s very, very good at her job,” he’d replied. “But she’s reaching her use-by-date. One of these days, she’s going to disappear just like every other J I’ve worked with over the years.”

Now, as the car entered the hilly streets of San Francisco proper, Max thought of the last words Sophia had spoken to him, and he felt a low burn of anger in his gut at the idea of her having a “use-by-date.”

Sophia took a seat across from the exotic-looking woman who might well sign the order for her rehabilitation once she was deemed obsolete. It should have concerned her, if only on an intellectual level, but Sophia wasn’t affected by much at present.

So soon after a reconditioning, with her mind piercing in its clarity, the facts were undeniable: her shields against the PsyNet were rock solid—for the simple reason that all Js were drilled remorselessly until they mastered that skill—but the shields that protected her on a day-to-day basis, her telepathic protections, were paper-thin. Any number of occurrences could incite a devastating mental wave.

Results could range from shock and psychic disintegration to death.

Councilor Nikita Duncan raised her head from the file on her desk as Sophia was thinking she’d prefer a sudden and total death over a psychic collapse. Far better that it all end in a sudden, bright burst of agony, than to find herself weakened and at the mercy of those who had none. She’d been helpless once in her life—never again would she allow herself to be in that position.

“Ms. Russo”—Councilor Duncan’s voice was precise—“I believe you had a court appearance this morning?”

“It was at nine,” Sophia said without pause. “I was finished and on my way here by ten thirty.”

“So you’ve had a chance to read the file I e-mailed to you?”

“Yes, I went through it on the airjet.” What she didn’t add was that she’d spent the majority of the time looking at the small digital image of the man she’d be working with, a man she’d never expected to see again in the course of what remained of her lifetime.

The photo had been taken earlier this year, and there’d been something in it that said he’d been laughing just before the photographer pressed the shutter, those uptilted eyes lit from within. She’d found herself fascinated by the difference between that image and the grim-faced man she’d met outside the interrogation room in Wyoming.

“Do you have any questions?” Nikita asked.

“Not at this stage—the assignment appears straightforward.” Other than the fact that she’d been paired with a human who made her think thoughts that weren’t only impossible, but so outrageously impossible that she wondered if she was already walking the cracked and twisted road to irrevocable insanity.

Nikita’s eyes turned into pieces of jet, hard, cutting. “Before we continue, I want to make one thing explicit—I don’t want any ‘incidents’ while you’re in my employ.”

“I don’t know what you’re referring to, Councilor.” Sophia kept her face expressionless—it was a fiction, but it was a fiction that would keep her alive a little longer. Long enough to speak to Max Shannon again, to find out what it was about him that made those last forgotten slivers of her soul, her personality, shimmer with unexpected fragments of light. At the same time, the other part of her whispered that he was smart, that he’d discover everything about her and turn away once he knew. It would hurt. And the broken girl inside of her, the secret hidden beyond Silence, was tired, so tired of hurting.

“I’ve said what I have to say,” Nikita said after a small pause. “Break the rules and you’ll pay the price.”

Sophia knew enough of Nikita to understand that that was no idle threat. The Councilor was rumored to be a viral transmitter, able

to infect minds with the most fatal—and if she chose, viciously painful—of psychic weapons. “Understood.” Rising to her feet, she picked up her organizer. “I do have one question that doesn’t relate directly to the case.”

Nikita waited.

“According to my immediate supervisor, you specifically requested me.” Sophia hadn’t been aware that Nikita even knew her name. “Was there a reason for that?”

“It made more sense to use you than to take a fully functioning J out of the system.” Cool, pragmatic words.

Except for one thing.

Sophia knew Nikita was lying.

Max’s mind had circled back to Bonner by the time they arrived at the apartment—having stopped to pick up a few supplies on the way. Forcing himself off the topic, if only to deny the bastard the satisfaction of knowing he’d once again got everyone dancing to his tune, he looked around the apartment while Talin played with a Morpheus who was still miffed at his recent imprisonment. Evidently, judicious use of cat treats and Talin’s stroking hands seemed to be bringing the sulking beast out of it.

“Nicer place than I expected,” he said to Clay. Big bedroom, living area, kitchen, and bath. And he had windows. “Guess being a special investigator pays more than being a detective.”

Clay walked to join Max at the window near the dining alcove. “Good view from here. We’ve had a lot of heavy fog in the mornings, but it makes for some spectacular sun-rises.”

“Yeah.” Lowering his voice, Max asked, “How’s Jon?” The teenager had been kidnapped, held in a Psy lab, and tortured before being rescued. Last Max had heard, he was giving Talin and Clay fits with his tricks.

Clay grinned. “Still a smartass teenager.”

“So, normal?”

“Yeah. He’s got a crush on one of the young dominant females—poor cub. He doesn’t realize how nice she’s being to him by not kicking his ass.”

Max grinned, relief a crushing wave inside him. “I bet she thinks he’s adorable.”

Clay snorted. “I think it’s more a case of ‘aw damn, he’s a baby, I can’t hurt him.’ ”

“Ouch.” Max winced, feeling for the kid. “That’s got to bite.”

“Uh-huh.” A very feline look appeared on Clay’s face. “But, you know, he’s determined as hell. A few years down the track and you’ll know who knows.”

“Max?”

Glancing around at Talin’s voice, he saw Morpheus purring in her lap. Ungrateful alley cat never purred for Max. All he got were sniffs and snarls. “Yeah?”

“Do you want me to take him home with us?” Worry marked her expressive features. “He doesn’t look like an inside cat.”

Max scowled on Morpheus’s behalf. “Damn right he’s not. He’ll find a way out of here within the day.” And probably come home with a few new scars to add to his already prodigious collection.

Talin scratched the traitorous cat behind his ears. Morpheus’s eyes all but rolled into the back of his head. “Well,” she said, sounding dubious of Max’s claim, “if he starts to pine for some greenery, you know where I live.”

“Morpheus’s favorite hobby involves garbage cans—I think he’d have an aneurysm in a forest,” Max muttered. “Is he really purring?”

“Of course he is. I know how to treat cats.” A sultry glance aimed solely at her mate.

Max rocked back on his heels, feeling like a voyeur and—if he was honest—a little bit envious as well. He’d give his right arm to be loved like that . . . to love like that. But fact was, he wasn’t capable of that depth of vulnerability, and he was honest enough to know it, to never make promises he couldn’t keep.

One woman had kissed him on the cheek as they parted and said, “You threw away the key to your heart a long time ago, didn’t you, Max?”

He’d smiled that night, because she was a woman he respected, a woman who remained a good friend, but afterward, he wondered—had he thrown it away or had the lock become permanently warped, incapable of opening?

The discreet chime of the doorbell silvered into the air, into his thoughts. “I’ll get it.” Walking across, he opened the door.

And knew he’d been waiting for her since the second he set foot in this city of fog beside a sparkling bay.

CHAPTER 6

Any skin-to-skin contact with a human or changeling, even a Psy with inadequate shields, may destroy what remains of your telepathic protections. Avoid all physical contact.

—Advisory letter to Sophia Russo from the
J Corps Medical Division

Sophia was unprepared for the visual impact of Max Shannon, no matter that she'd met him previously. He was the kind of man some women would want to own, she thought, having run across such females in the course of her career several times. They would see him as a trophy, a prize to show off—never realizing that they were attempting to leash a vicious storm.

Though Max was beautiful, what saved him from crossing the line into a more delicate prettiness was the obdurate hardness of his jawline, the unflinchingly adult expression in his gaze. Those eyes said that Max Shannon had looked into the void—and come away with a piece of it in his soul.

Then he spoke, drawing her attention to those well-shaped lips. “Sophia.” He'd braced one hand on the doorjamb, didn't pull down to offer to her.

She appreciated the gesture—many humans took it as an insult when she refused to shake their hands, never realizing that the common courtesy could cost her everything. “I thought I should let you know I'd arrived. I've been placed in the apartment next door.”

Max glanced to his right. “That'll make things easier.” Easy words, but his tone said something else.

“I won't be spying on you, Mr. Shannon.” Something long dormant in her stirred at the challenge she read in him. “To be quite frank, your personal activities hold no interest for either me or Councilor Duncan.” Not quite the truth. Nikita might not care about Max Shannon's personal life, but Sophia found herself compelled to know the man behind the enigmatic mask of an Enforcement detective.

The edge of a smile touched Max's lips, but it was his eyes that mattered. They never lost that blade-sharp gleam that told her he was calculating her every move, her every act. “You just want me for my detecting skills, is that it?”

She didn't know how to respond to the patently nonserious question—she'd been dealing with humans her entire adult life, but she'd never dealt with someone who evoked this odd . . . *fascination* in her. It had begun with the way he looked at her but was now a wholly independent thing. And the fact that it was already so strong so soon after a reconditioning, meant she had far less time than she'd previously believed before her telepathic shields sheared forever.

Someone spoke behind Max at that moment, and he turned, dropping his arm from the doorjamb. That was when Sophia saw the two other individuals in the room. A human female and a male who was clearly *not* human. She took a step back and to her left as the couple exited to stand to her right.

“Clay, Talin, this is my . . . partner”—a pause she knew had been intentional—“Sophia Russo.”

The man gave a nod, while the woman smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

Sophia nodded in response, wondering how this Talin could stand with such calm beside the male who was unquestionably a predator. And since this was San Francisco there were only two possible conclusions—only one once you factored in the way the green-eyed man had moved, with a fluidity at odds with the muscular size of him. “You're members of DarkRiver?”

“You must be new to the city,” Talin said, tucking back her hair to reveal an ear adorned with a dangling earring made of irregular glass beads in the colors of autumn. “Most people recognize Clay.”

“I've been to San Francisco before,” Sophia replied, intrigued by the odd shapes of the beads, the way they'd been put together. There was no conformity, no perfection. “However, I deal almost exclusively with humans and Psy.” Changelings had authority over all crimes that involved just those of their race.

“Sophia's a J,” Max said, leaning one shoulder against the doorjamb.

She noted the corded forearms revealed by the rolled-up sleeves of his vivid blue shirt, noted, too, the easy grace with which he made even the smallest of movements—this man, she thought, was built along the sleek lines of the low-slung cars preferred by many of the emotional races.

Her gaze clashed with his at that moment, and the question in them made her aware they were all waiting for something from her. Breaking the contact—which felt oddly, inexplicably intimate—she took a step to her left. “I'll leave you to your visit. Detective Shannon, if you'd just let me know when you're ready to start—”

“We can start now,” he interrupted, still in that lazy position against the doorjamb. If she hadn't seen him in Wyoming, she might have been fooled into believing him “safe.” But she had seen him in that prison. Not only that, she'd read the file that chronicled his stubborn, relentless pursuit of the Butcher of Park Avenue. She knew the danger that lay beneath the languid charm.

“We'll leave you to it, then.” The woman named Talin stepped forward to kiss Max on the cheek, breaking Sophia's line of sight. “But I was hoping you'd have dinner with us,” she said, turning to include Sophia in the invitation.

Max glanced at his watch even as Sophia curled the fingers of her left hand into her palm. What Talin had just done, that easy contact . . . it had been ordinary. Human. And it had made Sophia brutally aware of the gulf between her and this cop who

presence, whose watchful eyes, fanned the fires of rebellion in her.

“It’s almost three now,” Max said, his voice low and smooth—and disturbingly abrasive against Sophia’s skin, “so how about dinner around seven? We should be ready for a break by then anyway.” A glance up at Sophia from those eyes that saw far too much. “That work for you?”

She didn’t know why she said, “Yes, that’ll be fine,” when she should have demurred from the social invitation. As her response to Max demonstrated with manifest clarity, she’d failed in her attempts to be the most perfect of Psy. But she was in no way similar to a human. She was, in all probability, even less “human” than most of her brethren, her psyche having been worn away by the corrosive acid of the images stored in her brain.

Clay said good-bye then, his voice deep against Talin’s softer tone. As the couple left, the leopard male’s hand on his mate’s lower back, Sophia found herself the sole focus of Max’s perceptive near-black eyes, the eyes of a man who was used to stripping shields, unearthing the most deeply buried of truths. “Come on in,” he said, “unless you need to grab anything from your place? We should go over the details, make sure we’re on the same page.”

“Yes, I’ll retrieve my organizer.” The words came out calm, though her heartbeat had turned erratic. “It’ll take me only a minute or two.” Stepping to her door, she pushed through and picked up the small case she’d left on the coffee table. She should’ve walked straight back out, but she took a minute to breathe, to check her PsyNet shields for any minor fractures that might betray the swift movement with which her recent reconditioning had begun to degrade.

Satisfied that everything was holding for now and certain, too, that her secrets were safe from a cop who saw too much, she went to Max’s. His living area was empty. Assuming he’d gone to retrieve his own notes, she closed the door and took a seat at the small table in the dining alcove near the window.

She’d just opened her case when a huge black cat jumped onto the chair opposite, placed its front paws on the table, and looked at her with one gray and one brown eye. Physically startled, she nonetheless contained her reaction—that aspect of her conditioning was so much a part of her, it no longer took much effort to maintain.

The cat continued to stare at her.

Curious as to what the creature would do if touched, she extended a hand and brought her fingers to its nose. It sniffed at the leather-synth of her glove before proceeding to stare at her again.

“Ignore Morpheus.” Max walked back into the room and picked up the cat to drop him easily to the floor. The feline padded off its tail in the air. “He likes to stare people out.”

“I see.” She found herself following Max’s movements as he put some cat food and water into a split feeding dish. He’d changed into jeans and a black T-shirt that bared his arms, the color an austere contrast to the golden warmth of his skin tone. “Have you had any further contact from Bonner?”

Sleek black hair fell across his forehead as he shook his head and rose. “No.” A single harsh word. “Bastard’s probably waiting for us to crawl back to him.”

“He’ll wait a long time.”

To her surprise he said, “If I thought he’d tell us the locations of the bodies if I crawled, I’d do it without hesitation.”

The answer added another layer of complexity to his personality, made the fascination inside her grow. “Most males, especially those drawn to a career in Enforcement, would consider that an insult to their pride.”

“Pride is meaningless if you can’t keep your promises.” Washing his hands after making that cryptic statement, he wiped them with a towel and came to take a seat opposite her. “First things first”—all cop, not even a trace of the deceptive charm she’d seen in the doorway—“here’s what I know.” He recapped the situation. “Do you have any more information?”

“I don’t believe so.” She made herself concentrate on the screen of her organizer. “As far as I can tell from your summation, we were given identical files.” Except that hers had included an image of Max Shannon, an image she’d saved to an encrypted file.

Max leaned back in his seat, waiting to speak until she’d lifted her eyes to him. “Have you been to any of the scenes?”

“No. Kenneth Vale’s—the apparent suicide’s—apartment has been compromised to the point where it’s useless as far as any forensic examination is concerned,” she told him, having checked that with Councilor Duncan. “However, it was left intact to give Council psychologists a chance to examine it in case it threw any light on Vale’s personality. His suicide is considered an unusual case.”

Max narrowed his eyes. “You talking about the method he used to hang himself?”

“Yes.” Sophia couldn’t imagine the demons that would drive a man to choose such a long, tortuous form of death—if indeed, he had chosen his death. “I’ve been given the codes to access his apartment.”

“Good, we’ll go have a look. I’m guessing we’ve got nothing on the heart attack victim—file says he was cremated,” Max said, tipping back his chair.

“They would have taken samples of his blood, checked for—”

“I e-mailed Nikita from New York,” Max interrupted, “asked her about that. Seems like the samples have mysteriously disappeared.”

“Interesting.”

“Isn’t it?” He tapped his finger against the table, and it wasn’t a restless movement. “What about the car the third possible victim was driving when she had her accident?”

“It’s being held at a private facility here in the city.”

“Well, that’s something at least.” Scowling, he tipped his chair even farther back. “Would’ve been better if Nikita had called us right away instead of waiting several weeks after the crash—but I guess she figured she could get to the bottom of it herself.”

Sophia couldn't concentrate on his words, her attention held by something else altogether. "You'll fall over if you keep doing that."

He shot her an amused look, continuing to hold the precarious balance. "Used to drive my foster families nuts."

His openness about being in the foster-care system was unexpected. And it made Sophia give in to the seeds of rebellion, to ask a question that a perfect Psy would have never asked. "You weren't with one family long term?"

"No. Longest was six months," he said easily, and tipped his chair back down on all four feet. "I assume Nikita had her tech check the vehicle out?"

She nodded, a strange realization taking form inside of her. Max hadn't had parents either, not in reality. He was like her, at least in that way. She wanted to share that with him, with this man who'd seemed to *see* her from their very first meeting, but she didn't know how, having no capacity or experience at building bonds with another individual. "Yes," she said instead, harshly aware how remote she sounded, how inhuman . . . as if she was already dead. "However, Councilor Duncan has authorized the expenditures required to get an independent report if you think it necessary."

"I'll decide that after I have a chat with the mechanic." Pushing back his chair, he rose to his feet, the scent of his body—so close, so warm, something darker—sweeping across her senses. "But first—Vale's apartment."

"Alright." She stood, aware her movements were not as graceful as his—her body felt jerky, disconnected. "If you'll give me a moment to change out of my suit."

"You had court this morning?" He reached out to open the door for her, the action making her pause for a second. Men never did things like that for her. It wasn't because she was Psy—she'd watched any number of males do the same act automatically for females. But they always seemed to want to distance themselves from the violence she wore on her face—as if they were afraid it would catch.

"Sophia?"

She realized she'd been quiet too long. "Yes?"

"How did the case go?"

"How it always does," she said, unlocking her door with gloved hands that were a constant reminder of who she was, and who she'd be till the day she died—no matter the need to rebel, to break the chains of a past that refused to set her free, there could be another tomorrow for her. "I told the judge and jury what I saw. That is all I do."

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