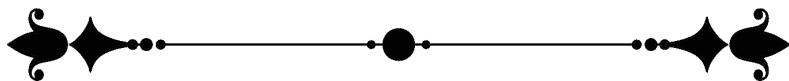


CHAPTER ONE

FLOWERS FOR THE DEAD



No one should have flowers sprouting from their chest. Even fungi have the grace to wait until the corpse has started decomposing before they fruit.

I should know. I'm a druid.

The sardonic thought made the grim crime scene bearable. At my feet lay the hollow echo of a human being, red and blue cop lights strobing over him. Blank eyes stared up at the ghostly moon. Dark clothing clung to bloated flesh in wet wrinkles. But the grotesque garden blooming in his chest stole the show.

Flowers glistened among green leaves, their petals reflecting a myriad of colors in the crime scene illumination. And not just any flowers. Moondrops. A cutesy name for a dangerous plant that fueled elemental water magic.

Worry crawled through my belly and nested. Those blossoms had no right to be here. Not here in this guy. Not here in this world. Moondrops bloomed only under the care of waterkin and only in secret places rich with fairy dust...

Park Point on Lake Las Vegas, Nevada didn't fit the bill for any of those.

"What do you think?" Detective Jim Ramirez asked in a flat tone as though this was just another crime scene.

What I thought was that I needed a believable lie. Moondrops growing in a dead man's chest drove the fairy realm's secrets to the brink of spilling over into the commonkin world. My job was to make sure that didn't happen.

The corpse accused me of having my priorities wrong, the creep-show stare demanding justice. But justice wasn't a

sentinel's first duty. Protecting faykin and fairy secrets were. I soothed a twinge of guilt with the knowledge that if the Pact broke, a lot of commonkin would end up dead right alongside us faykin.

"It's a wicked weird flower patch." I tucked my auburn hair under a cap and snapped on latex gloves as I knelt next to the forensic tech, Maria. "Were they inserted posthumously?"

She wore a plastic jumpsuit with those scrunchy booties over her sneakers, like a shower cap for your shoes. "C'mon Lily. You think I can tell that from here? I would guess yes, just on logic, but I'll only know after the autopsy."

"Sure. No other wounds though? Something in the neck? Drugs?" Her valley girl twang brought out the worst of my Bostonian accent and almost had me dropping my ah's like they were hot, but I muscled through, hanging onto every arrr.

"Nothing except the chest. Which is, like, plenty." Maria touched one of the silver petals. "Any idea what these are? I've never seen them."

"They're not from around here." That part at least was true. "I'll need to do some research, though it looks like a species of, well, lily." I grinned sheepishly at her. "Mind if I snag a sample?"

Every blossom stolen now was one that couldn't infect a human. Too many people had a sprinkling of fairy blood. If the moondrops activated their latent talents for magic, a whole lot of families could be burying their dowsing aunty Jane or uncle Joe. Magic coming online had a tendency to be explosive. I had to get these dangerous little beauties out of commonkin hands before they accidentally killed someone.

Someone else. This guy was well past that stage.

But snagging the other plants would have to wait. I was a druid, not a miracle worker. Stealing evidence from the crime scene was beyond me.

Maria held up a little baggie with a flower in it. "Figured you'd need at least one. The coroner will extract the rest."

I tucked the flower away. "When's the autopsy?"

"Sunday, maybe." She shrugged, her mouth set. "Monday, more likely."

At least I had the weekend to clean up the mess. With an inward groan, I added it to my to-do list. Far above buying a loaf of bread, maybe even higher than snatching some sleep. But hopefully lower than spending at least an hour or two with Emiko. The thought of her made me want to smile, but I swallowed the expression as inappropriate to the moment.

Someone called for Jim on the other side of the scene, close to the yellow tape that held back the onlookers. And there were onlookers galore.

Parker Point was a secluded slice of paradise where the rich and infamous played on the waters of Lake Las Vegas. Gawkers pressed as close to the tape as they dared, shocked whispers long gone, replaced by the delicious gossip phase of rubbernecking. A flurry of flashes punctuated their conversation here and there. Journalists circled the scene like vultures over a fresh kill, documenting every moment of violence in the golden-gated community of the very wealthy.

Jim cleared his throat from the shadows behind me. "I'll go see what's going on. Stay here." He squelched away from the lakeshore.

I turned my attention back to the corpse and the plants in its flesh. "How deep do the roots go?"

"Check it." Maria peeled back the stem to show the roots plunging into the open chest cavity. "So, like, the perp carved a hole through the ribs, planted the flowers and wrapped the roots around his heart." She moved the green stems to show me the internal organs, brown tendrils enveloping them. "Seriously, what's up with people?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Sick as her scenario was, the truth would disturb the skeptical forensic tech even more. Some nixie or other powerful waterkin had turned this poor guy's chest into a flowerbed.

The roots hadn't been wrapped around his organs. They'd grown there while he was still alive. Someone on my

side of the street had killed him for power. And I couldn't even promise the dude any justice.

Sometimes, life sucked.

I met Maria's brown eyes. "Was he killed in the water?"

"Found there at least," Maria said. "A witness out for an evening fishing run says he saw a weird shape on the surface. Turned out to be our vic. I'll need an autopsy to confirm whether he was dead or alive when he hit the water."

"Who was the witness?" Not for the first time, I wished my consultancy with Henderson PD covered more than just plants. I would need to track the fisherman down on my own. Even if all he'd seen was an illusion, it could still be a clue.

"Stephen something or other." Maria shrugged, turning back to the body. "They've already taken him down to the station. He's probably in for a rough night."

"And this guy?" I pointed at our victim. "Have we got ID?"

"Yeah, we got a driver's licence. Preston Williamson."

Squelching footsteps yanked our attention away from the body. Jim returned with a stranger prowling in his wake. Tall and lean, the man was built like a panther, all lithe grace and hard muscles. A park ranger uniform sat well on him, like a soldier dressed up for parade. Golden hair tumbled to his shoulders in loose waves, framing sharp cheekbones and striking eyes that glittered like a pair of fireflies.

I squinted, shaking my head to clear it, but the glow stuck around.

"Lily, Maria, this is Caeden." Jim waved at the newcomer, apparently unfazed by the twinkling irises.

Caeden nodded at us, his gaze cool and guarded and literally shining. "Pleasure to meet you."

He sounded almost like my Opa, with that faint thickness of a German accent on his vowels. I peeled a glove off and slid one finger into the unobtrusive pouch hanging from my belt. As my skin touched the fairy dust, power

zinged through my veins. Without an ogham stave, all I could do was pierce illusions, but that was enough.

Caeden shifted ever so slightly. Behind the park ranger act, his skin was glowing black. Not a human shade. More like a black diamond with a fire inside it. Some kind of high fairy. Bad news. My pulse stuttered as though I'd walked into a snake pit barefoot and heard rattling.

But the hits just kept on coming. Behind the illusion of pretty brown eyes, beyond even the light I'd seen, the real deal shone. Tiny stars burnt cold and distant where his irises should be.

A fucking eirnacht.

My gut sucked in as though punched, but I kept my breathing even. Showing weakness to a high fae was a quick way to end up in a bad deal. Eirnachts were the aristocracy of magic, enforcers of the fairy courts, responsible only to the monarchs. I'd met a few before, and it was always an ass-clenching experience.

Why the hell was this fucking guy hanging out in the middle of a commonkin crime scene? I pasted on a grin as fake as silk roses, hand curling on the butt of my Glock by pure instinct. "Hey there, Caeden. What drags a park ranger to our little slice of murder?"

His smile didn't quite reach his star-filled eyes. "I am just checking if there's anything I can do to help. Given the... unusual circumstances."

My gaze flicked back to the Little Shop of Horrors sprouting from the vic's chest. "Unusual" was one way to spin it.

"You got anything yet?" Jim hooked his thumbs onto his belt, wagging heavy eyebrows at me.

Unlike Maria, Jim wasn't a total skeptic. He suspected I did things he couldn't explain. It was why he always called me in, even when the murder wasn't as...botanical...as this one. He was also a friend, and I hated lying to him. But my duty as a sentinel took priority.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Jim. I'll take the flower home and see if I can turn anything up."

Maria put her hands on her hips. "Caeden, you're like, the local ranger, right? You ever see any of these lilies?"

A small smile quivered at the corners of his mouth. "No, I don't think those are native." His gaze returned to me, eyes drifting to my cleavage. No. To the small silver pin shaped like a musical note that clung to my blouse—my sentinel shield.

Caeden's eyebrows arched into elegant question marks. "Are you Lily Harper, who wrote her thesis on Revolutionary Phyto-Partnerships?"

How in the hell did he know that? "Yeah." With effort, I kept my voice steady.

"That was a fantastic read and a Ph.D. well deserved. Have you continued to meet with success using companion planting?"

Jim shifted from foot to foot. "Does this have something to do with the vic?"

"No." I stripped off my other glove to hide my shaking hands. This eirnacht had done his research. I had to get him in private and figure out why he was here. The courts didn't send freaking noble elemental mages just for funsies. "Jim, I'll check the flower in the lab and see what I can come up with. Caeden, I'd love to stay and chat, but it's late. If you're interested, we could meet up sometime to discuss... gardening."

Caeden smiled, irony gleaming in his starry eyes. "Certainly. I'm new in town, so name a place, if you don't mind."

"How about the Mystic Mirage tomorrow for lunch?"

Behind me, Maria snorted at my suggestion, because of course she did. The Mystic was exactly the kind of place she hated, all candles and crystals and other stuff to keep the commonkin entertained—and hide the real fae beneath the convenient shield of woo.

Caeden nodded. "It will be a pleasure."

I turned back to the other two. "Unless you got anything else for me, Jim, I'm headed home."

"No problem." He gave me that eyebrow waggle again. "I'll let you know what the autopsy says."

"Wicked." I retreated to my truck for the long drive to the edge of the desert.

Fucking fairies. There was no way this was a coincidence.