

PROLOGUE

LIKE MOLTEN GLASS

Seattle, WA
March 24-25

“Are these the people who broke into your house, sweetie?”

Brisia Rodriguez didn't look up from her cup of hot cocoa. She studied the white swirls of whipped cream melting into the chocolate instead of the pictures Mr. Díon slid across the polished wood table.

Interview station, her dad would've called the small, pale green-painted room with its table and two chairs. But this wasn't a police station or the FBI field office. She knew because she and her fifth-grade class had visited both with her dad on a career-day field trip last month.

“Is my dad okay?” she asked.

“He's in the hospital,” Mr. Díon said. “But your mom and sisters are with him right now. As soon as we're done here, I'll drive you over there, okay?”

Brisia curled her fingers tighter around the warm mug. “Will he be . . . all right?” She prayed she wouldn't have to ask the other thing, the horrible thing she never, *ever* wanted to say aloud. She was scared if she did, it'd come true like a reverse wish.

Nononono. Don't even think it!

She drew in a shuddering breath laced with the thick scent of creamy, hot milk and dark chocolate. Her stomach knotted.

“Brisia,” Mr. Díon's low, soothing voice felt like a hand to her chin, gently tugging her gaze up from the depths of her hot cocoa. “You're the only one who can help us find the people who hurt your dad.”

She looked at Mr. Díon. His purple eyes reminded her of sunlit violets. “I told the police everything,” she said. “They wrote it all down.”

“Yes, but the police don’t know who they’re looking for. But I believe *we* do,” Mr. Díon said, his voice as soft and warm as his eyes. “All you have to do is look at the pictures, okay?”

“Okay,” Brisia said. She lowered her gaze to the trio of photographs lined up neatly on the table between her and Mr. Díon. The first one showed a man with curly blond hair, a smile curving his lips. Laugh crinkles V-ed out from beside each green eye. He reminded her of that actor, Matthew McConaughey.

Standing in the hall inside her house, Matthew McConaughey Guy smiles, all warm and friendly, almost like he’s supposed to be there, even with the gun in his hand. But when his gaze flicks over to Brisia, his eyes are like ice.

“He was there,” Brisia said. “He had a gun too.”

“Alexander Lyons. Good job, Brisia. What about the next photo?”

Brisia shifted her attention to the middle picture and recognized the pretty red-haired woman. Only a hint of a smile touched the woman’s lips, but her blue-eyed gaze was open and direct. Brisia remembered the hushed urgency in the woman’s voice as she’d hurried Brisia to the front door after Matthew McConaughey Guy had sauntered from the room.

I want you to run to a neighbor’s house and have them call 911, okay?

Do you need help too?

Don’t worry about me. Just go.

“Heather Wallace,” Mr. Díon said. “Why did you think she needed help too?”

Brisia glanced at Mr. Díon. Had she spoken aloud? “Well . . . I could tell she didn’t like this guy,” she said, touching a fingertip against the first photo. “And she asked me to call 911. I don’t think she would’ve done that if she was one of the bad guys.”

Mr. Díon nodded. “Good observation. I’ll bet your dad’s proud of you,” he said, his violet eyes full of light. “Are you planning to be an FBI agent like your dad?”

“Yeah,” Brisia said, even though up until that moment all she’d ever wanted to be was a veterinarian. Helping and healing dogs and cats and guinea pigs. She wasn’t sure if that was a new truth revealing itself to her or if she was just saying it as a bargain-promise to God. “Are you an FBI agent too? Do you work with my dad?”

“I’m FBI, yes. But I haven’t had the pleasure of working with your dad.”

Brisia wanted to believe Mr. Díon. She really did. Dad had told her the FBI was a part of their family—a family that stretched all across the country and around the world. You trusted family, went to them when trouble knocked on your door.

But he'd said he was *Mr. Díon*, not *Special Agent Díon*.

She lifted her mug and swallowed her doubt with a sip of cocoa and whipped cream, sweet and warm. She carefully set the mug back on the table, trying to slide it back inside the little ring of chocolate it'd made on the polished wood surface.

You trusted family.

"I've never been here before," Brisia said, looking around the room. It still smelled faintly of paint. "Is this a new office? I don't see a two-way mirror. There's not even a camera up in the corner."

Mr. Díon laughed, his voice as soothing as the cocoa in her mug. "You'll make a good agent, sweetie. This is a special room we use to interview FBI agents and their families when . . . tragedy . . . strikes, so we don't need to monitor anyone. It's a safe place from the bad guys." Leaning forward, he rested his clasped hands on the table. "One more photo, then you're done."

"Okay." Brisia looked at the last photo and she inhaled in sharp surprise at the man captured in the picture. He looked way young, for one thing, younger than she remembered. Black hair, dark chocolate-colored eyes, white skin, a tilted smile on his lips, a black collar strapped around his throat. He looked happy and sure of himself. And what surprised her was that without all the blood on his skin, he was cute, like pin-the-poster-to-your-wall-and-sigh-over-it cute.

He didn't look like a monster.

But she knew he was.

He appears in front of her in a gust of air smelling of autumn leaves and Halloween apples. Blood smears his white face. She backs up until she bumps into the sofa. She freezes, her heart drumming, frantic and wild. He kneels down on one knee in front of her, leather pants creaking. A smile tugs at his bloodstained lips. He reaches a trembling, blood-smeared hand for her hair and slides a lock between his fingers.

She catches a whiff of something pungent and coppery. She sees blood on his pale fingers, glistening on his shirt, trickling from his nose. So much blood. But he's not

acting like he's hurt. Maybe it isn't all his blood.

A thought loops through her mind, numbing her heart and stealing her voice.

Where's Daddy?

"Did he hurt you?"

Brisia shook her head. She tried to blink away the tears blurring her vision, but she couldn't blink fast enough. Tears spilled over her lashes and slid hot down her cheeks. No longer ten-years old, but a bawling baby. And a baby couldn't help Dad.

"He was there," she said, her throat so tight, the words hurt. "He came outta my dad's office."

"Dante Prejean. Are you sure he didn't hurt you? Absolutely sure?"

"He didn't hurt me." She remembered the blood glistening on his shirt, smeared on his face, his hands. *He didn't hurt me, but he hurt Daddy.* She wiped at her eyes with the heels of her hands and another memory flashed into her mind.

The red-haired woman walks out of the hallway's darkness and stops beside the office door, a small black gun clenched in her hands. She looks at Brisia and her eyes widen.

"Help me," Brisia whispers.

The woman, face tight, lifts the gun and aims it at the blood-smeared man kneeling in front of Brisia, stroking her hair and speaking to her in a language she doesn't know.

But it isn't anger she sees on the woman's face, or even horror. It's sorrow.

Sniffing, Brisia wiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

"I don't see any Kleenex," Mr. Díon murmured, brushing a hand over his short caramel-brown hair as he glanced around the room.

"A lot of times it's kept under the interview table or in a drawer," Brisia said. Shoving her chair back over the low beige carpet, she peeked under the table. No box of Kleenex. Just Mr. Díon's polished black shoes and gray-trousered legs.

"I think we're about done, Brisia."

"So I get to go see my dad now?" she asked, sitting up and scooting her chair back to the table. She lifted her mug and took a swallow of the cooling cocoa.

Mr. Díon stood up and walked around the table. He crouched down beside her

chair. Brisia's fingers clenched around the mug, and for a moment, she thought she smelled copper and Halloween apples, saw blood against white skin. Her stomach rolled, queasy. She set the mug back down on the table.

"Before I take you to the hospital to see your dad," Mr. Díon said, his voice low and smooth, "I want you to close your eyes and go back to the moment you walked into the house this evening."

Brisia looked into his eyes. His violet gaze was flecked with gold and burning bright – rimmed with fire like molten glass. She'd learned in art class last year that molten glass could be shaped into anything.

Offering Mr. Díon a smile, Brisia said, "Okay." She closed her eyes.

You trusted family.

"I'm going to touch your temples, but keep your eyes closed, sweetie."

Brisia nodded. Fingers brushed aside the hair at either side of Brisia's head, then settled against her skin. Their heat made her feel drowsy, all floaty, like a balloon.

"Go to the beginning," Mr. Díon whispered.

A wave of dizziness swirled through her and when she tried to open her eyes, she couldn't. Fear rippled in, black and cold. "Mr. Díon? I don't feel good."

"Shhh. It'll pass. Just focus on what happened tonight."

The dizziness vanished, but an icy ball of dread lodged in her tummy. She gripped the sides of her chair to make sure she didn't fall out of it.

A thought breezed through her mind: *Everything's okay. You're safe and you'll be seeing Daddy soon.* She relaxed and let the thought curl through her like hot cocoa steam as she shifted her thoughts backward a few hours.

She opens the front door and walks into the empty living room. "Daddy?" she calls. "I forgot my iPod!"

And even as the memory and its sounds and images flowed through her mind, she felt each one being unthreaded and undone; like when her mom unhooked her knitting when she didn't like how the piece had turned out. Until it was just yarn, waiting to be knitted into something new. Or molten glass waiting to be shaped.

Then even those thoughts unraveled.

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A NECESSARY EVIL

Seattle, WA
March 25

Emmett Thibodaux stood at the threshold of the victim's home office, light from the hallway casting his shadow across the body on the floor.

FBI SAC Alberto Rodriguez was stretched out on the carpet like a man seeking relief for an aching back. But the thick, coppery reek of blood and the crackling of police radios from the living room told a different story.

Emmett flipped on the light.

Rodriguez stared up at the glass-domed ceiling light with half-lidded, milky eyes. His throat looked shredded, savaged. Blood had soaked into the front of his pale blue sweater, staining it a dark maroon that matched the blood halo soaked into the carpet around his head.

"Christ, did his daughter see him like this?" Emmett asked.

"No," his partner, Merri Goodnight, murmured from just behind him. He heard the whisper of suede against his windbreaker as she leaned forward to look into the

murder room. Caught a faint whiff of cloves. “Not according to what Abano told me. The kid only saw the perps. She didn’t know about her dad.”

“Abano? The fed in charge of the scene?”

“You mean the fed that *was* in charge of the scene?” Merri replied dryly. “That’d be him.”

“No doubt he’s one unhappy camper at the moment.”

“Given that the vic’s one of their own, that’s putting it mildly.”

“Yeah, well, wonder how he’d feel to learn that some of his own might be involved in the killing,” Emmett murmured. “The feds’ll be even unhappier when they realize we’re shutting this crime scene down altogether.”

Controlling and sanitizing the situation. A clean wipe. Scraping clinkers into the furnace to watch them burn, as his granddad used to say. No matter how you put it, the result was the same. Events were being altered at best and erased at worst.

A necessary evil in his line of work.

From the front room, Emmett caught a low murmur of voices from the TV that no one had turned off, hoping to catch the result of the Garcia-Dowd middleweight championship bout and the latest sports scores while processing the scene. No more police radio static or low, irked mutters.

The Bureau’s people had vacated along with the Seattle PD’s people. Hell, maybe they had all gone to a local tavern to brew up a booze-fueled bitchfest about the Shadow Branch’s glory-stealing theft of their case.

But nothing was ever what it seemed to be. Especially here.

Emmett stepped into the room, carefully avoiding the spatters of blood marring the cream-colored carpet near the threshold. He caught a faint whiff of piss just under the blood reek.

“ETA for our cleanup crew is ten minutes,” Merri said. “Gillespie’s supposed to drop by with instructions from HQ.”

“Wonder what’s taking so long? Usually Gillespie’s first on scene.”

“HQ probably put the chief on hold while they were busy trying to figure out who to smear the sticky, gooey blame on. Once they have that figured out . . .”

“Heads are gonna roll,” Emmett agreed. He allowed his gaze to rove around the

room, ticking off each item he saw as normal or not, a mental what's-wrong-with-this-picture game that he played at each assignment. Hell, not just at assignments or crime scenes anymore. He found himself doing it everywhere he went—at Safeway, the mall, in a movie theater, picking up the kids from school.

Gun on the carpet against the north wall, a Smith & Wesson—not normal.

Desk with neatly parked chair—normal. Black, four-drawer file cabinet—normal.

Opened gun safe containing a single box of ammo—probably not normal.

And the late Alberto Rodriguez sprawled on the carpet in a drying pool of his own blood—well, hell, not even *close* to normal.

But normal had nothing to do with what had happened in this house.

“Abano and his people have no clue about vampires,” Merri said, as though reading Emmett’s mind. But he knew she hadn’t; that was an issue they’d hashed out years ago. “They think Rodriguez was killed by multiple slash and stab wounds to the throat. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to enlighten them.”

Emmett chuckled. “They wouldn’t’ve believed you anyway.”

“Not at first,” Merri said, a smile quirking at the corners of her mouth. “You didn’t either, as I recall.”

“Still don’t,” Emmett drawled.

Merri folded her arms across her chest, slung her weight onto one hip, and arched an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. Don’t make me prove it to you, Thibodaux. Again.”

Emmett shook his head, smiling. “Once was enough, thanks.” He pinched up his trousers at the thighs, then crouched down beside Rodriguez’s body. The man’s ruined throat had been pierced and torn by sharp teeth.

“Not the neatest work I’ve ever seen,” Merri said, her voice pitched low, and now right beside him. After five years of working together, her speed and stealth no longer startled him. Most times, he even forgot what she was.

“Looks to me like one outta control vamp.” Emmett glanced up at his partner.

Merri tilted her head, her dark brown eyes studying all that remained of Special Agent in Charge Alberto Rodriguez, husband, father, Bureau man. “Young vamp, maybe. Or hungry as hell.” She shifted and glanced back at the doorway and Emmett followed her gaze.

High-velocity blood spatter speckled the doorway's wood frame and the peach-colored wall beside it. "Looks like Rodriguez got one good shot off, though," she said.

"He did," Emmett agreed.

Merri nodded at the gun on the carpet. "For all it was worth."

"So what stopped the vamp from killing Rodriguez's daughter?" Emmett said. "Why didn't he snatch up that kid and drain her dry?"

"Good question." Merri crouched down beside Emmett and he smelled spice and cloves from the cigarettes she smoked. "And I think I have the answer."

"Yeah? Let's hear it, then, Goodnight," Emmett said, his voice a low drawl, a little bit of Louisiana creeping in underneath his words. "You gonna tell me this vamp's got a soft spot for kids?"

Merri shook her head and her straightened black hair, gathered and glossed into a high and neat ponytail, swung like a pendulum across her shoulder blades. "Nope. Someone else shot him again."

"Yeah? Who?"

A smug smile curved Merri's rosy full lips. She lifted her hand and displayed a small, slender dart pinched between two fingers. "One of the other perps dropped the vamp with a trunk gun. I relieved Abano's techs of the one they'd bagged while processing the scene. But they missed finding the dart in the carpet."

Emmett grinned. "I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

"Because I'm a better field agent than you'll ever be?"

"That'd be it."

"Truth, brotah," Merri said, then chuckled, the sound warm and throaty. She slid the dart into an inside pocket of her black suede jacket. "Makes me wonder what else they missed."

"Truth, sistah. I'm guessing tons, but it doesn't matter. It's never going to court." Emmett rose to his feet, his knees creaking with the movement. An annoying new voice in the body-choir his joints, tendons, and bones had orchestrated ever since he'd turned forty. A body-choir that sang loud and strong when it rained. Given that he lived in Seattle, the singing was almost year-round and lusty as hell.

Looks like all those years of karate sparring are catching up with me.

“Do we know for certain that feds are involved in this?” Merri asked.

“HQ just said it was possible and to keep everything hush-hush until the perps were positively identified,” Emmett said, offering a hand up to his partner.

Merri snorted. “When *isn't* something hush-hush?” She grasped his hand, her dark brown skin bleaching out his hard-won tan, and he pulled all five foot nothing of her up onto her booted feet. “It isn't called the Shadow Branch for nothing.”

“Sing it, sistah. Wanna bet that even the director's dumps are classified?”

Merri shook her head. “Man, that's nasty. What's the matter with—” She straightened, her hand sliding free of his, her alert posture reminding Emmett of a hunting dog on point. She swiveled smoothly to face the doorway. “Our people are here.”

Emmett heard the front door open, then click shut. A cold draft of air swept into the room and goosebumped his skin. He heard the squeak of wheels underneath the background noise of the TV, felt the thud of footsteps coming up the hall.

“Three,” Merri murmured. “And Gillespie's reeking of Jōvan Musk as usual. Maybe that's why his wife left him.”

“*Christ*, Merri.”

“Just saying.”

A white-uniformed medic with a neat 'fro and hipster black-framed rectangular glasses paused at the doorway. He nodded at Rodriguez's body. “He ready to go?”

“More than ready,” Merri said.

The medic stepped aside as Merri and Emmett walked from the room. They passed the gurney parked in the hall waiting to receive Rodriguez's remains and the blonde female medic standing at its head. She nodded as they passed, a nod Emmett returned.

SB Section Chief Sam Gillespie stood in front of the sofa, his hair buzz-cut to black stubble, the outline revealing a hairline in high retreat. At six one, he stood two inches shorter than Emmett, his skin just a shade lighter than Merri's. Beads of rain glistened on his wire-framed glasses and on the shoulders and collar of his deep blue Gore-Tex jacket. He held the handle of a black satchel in his right hand.

Gillespie's lips stretched into the taut line that he considered a smile.

“Thibodaux,” he greeted. “Goodnight.”

“Chief,” Emmett returned, stopping beside the sofa. His gaze fell upon a mug resting on the coffee table. The red letters etched upon its white surface read GROUCH, a mug Rodriguez was most likely sipping from just a few hours ago, unaware that death was climbing in through the laundry room window.

“Chief,” Merri muttered as she strode past him to the front door. She flung it open, drawing in deep breaths of the moist air in noisy, drama-queen style. Rain pattered against the front steps and along the crime-scene-taped-off paving stones leading to the front door.

Gillespie *was* a little heavy-handed with the cologne, but at the moment, Emmett was grateful to smell something besides blood and piss and death.

“How’s Rodriguez’s daughter doing?” Emmett asked.

“Okay, I imagine,” Gillespie said. “Her memory’s been scrubbed by now.”

“Christ,” Merri muttered from the doorway. “She’s just a kid.”

“One who’s still alive,” Gillespie said, “*because* of the memory scrub. In the bad old days, she would’ve been turned into another victim of this official and tragic ‘burglary gone wrong.’”

Emmett nodded, and shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. True enough. Lost time, missing memories, and a few misfiring synapses were a helluva lot better than the cold and permanent alternative.

But nothing said he had to like either option.

“Seems the Bureau has a few rotten apples in the proverbial barrel.” Gillespie dropped the satchel onto the carpet. “The daughter positively IDed the suspects as FBI SAC Lyons, SA Wallace, and Dante Prejean—a vamp member of some top secret project.”

Emmett whistled. “Wallace? Wasn’t she just named as a hero by the Bureau a couple of weeks ago for taking down that serial killer?”

“The Cross-Country Killer—Elroy Jordan,” Merri supplied from the doorway.

Gillespie nodded. “She was. But she ran into Prejean during the course of that investigation. It’s now believed he corrupted her.”

Merri snorted. “If he did, then he was only working what was already inside her.”

Gillespie lanced a cold, icicle-sharp gaze her way. “Wallace just kicked her career

into the gutter, Goodnight, and after she'd been offered the Seattle SAC position. Her service record was sparkling with intelligence, ability, and drive—full of promise. I think *corrupted by bloodsucker* is as good an explanation as any.”

Emmett agreed, but he kept that opinion unvoiced. A rush of cold air smelling of cloves and rain swirled to a stop beside him.

“No offense,” Gillespie said.

Merri held his gaze for a moment before asking in a crisp voice, “So what’s the lowdown, Chief?”

“We’re confiscating all evidence gathered by the SPD and the FBI,” Gillespie said, his gaze traveling around the living room, as if envisioning how the scene would be officially reimaged and restaged. “We’re making sure that statements already given to the SPD and the feds by the Rodriguez girl and her neighbors vanish.”

“Any of the neighbors facing a wipe?” Merri asked.

Gillespie shrugged. “Could be. That’s for someone else to decide.”

“What kinda TSP was Prejean a part of?” Emmett asked.

“HQ’s playing this one real close to the vest,” Gillespie replied. “All I was told was that it was a joint project—us and the feds—devoted to the study of sociopaths.”

The image of Rodriguez’s ravaged throat and empty eyes popped into Emmett’s mind. *The study of sociopaths*. A chill touched his spine.

“In other words, their monster slipped its leash and they want us to fetch it. Do I have that right, Chief?” Merri said.

Gillespie nodded. “Pretty much.”

Emmett nudged the satchel with the brown toe of his Dingo boot. “What’s that?”

A wry smile tugged up one corner of Gillespie’s mouth. “It’s your monster-catching kit. Cuffs, drugs, chains.”

“We know how to handle vampires,” Emmett said. “Monster or not.”

“Not this vampire. He’s enhanced.”

“*Enhanced?*” Merri asked. “You fucking kidding me?” She dropped a hand to her hip, her dark brown gaze direct and challenging. “Why the hell would anyone enhance a vamp? It’s not like we need it.”

“I wasn’t enlightened on that account,” Gillespie said. He removed his glasses,

held them up to the overhead light, and peered at the rain-spotted lenses. “But I *was* told that adrenaline implants to boost his speed, dexterity, and strength had been installed. So be prepared—he’s going to be a helluva lot faster than you’ll expect.”

The chief had never been a good liar and his little oh-look-my-glasses-are-dirty routine gave away the lie. He knew a lot more than he’d just handed out about the *enhanced* vamp. Emmett tapped a *listen close* finger against the back of Merri’s hand.

“Our assignment, Chief?” Emmett said.

Gillespie slid his glasses back on. “Intercept and detain our perps. Prejean is priority one, Wallace priority two, Lyons number three.” He slipped a hand inside his Gore-Tex jacket and withdrew a plastic-encased flash drive that he handed to Emmett. “All pertinent data including files, photos, destination, and instructions. Study it on your way to Damascus.”

The medics, the blonde in the lead, wheeled the gurney and its dark, plastic-body-bagged contents through the living room and out the open front door, wheels thumping down the steps. The male medic pulled the door shut behind him.

Even through the fog of Jōvan Musk, Emmett caught the nostril-pinching stench of blood and death.

“Our perps are in Damascus, Oregon?” Emmett asked, curling his fingers around the flash drive, tucking it tight against his palm.

Gillespie nodded. “We have reason to believe that Lyons might’ve taken Prejean home. Satellite scans of the area and of Lyons’s home in particular revealed Wallace’s Trans Am and Lyons’s Dodge Ram parked in the driveway.”

“A safe bet that Prejean’s with them,” Merri commented.

“HQ’s thought too,” Gillespie said as he walked around the sofa to the hallway. He stopped in front of the murder room. “And they’ve got a good five or six hours head start, so move your asses. We’ve got a plane waiting for you at Sea-Tac. Rendezvous with Holmes and Miklowitz at the airport and bring them up to speed. You got stay-awake pills, Goodnight?”

Merri nodded. “I do.”

“Good.” Gillespie’s jacket rustled as he folded his arms over his chest. He stared into the office.

Slipping the flash drive into his trouser pocket, Emmett bent and wrapped his fingers around the satchel's handle. "Chief," he said, straightening. "Is there anything else we should know about the project or Prejean's *enhancements*?"

Gillespie swiveled around to face them, the lenses of his glasses reflecting light, his arms still folded over his chest. "I wish I knew," he said quietly. "Be careful out there. Don't take any chances—especially with Prejean. Hell, not even with Wallace and Lyons. I know HQ wants them alive, but it's not worth your lives. Not to me."

"Might be better to take our time and wait for Prejean to Sleep," Merri said.

"Maybe so," Emmett said. "But then he could hole up someplace we won't find him. So I think moving our asses is our best option."

"Then let's hit the friendly skies and catch us some bad mofos."

"Truth, sistah."

"Be careful," Gillespie said again, voice low. His gaze once again fixed on the office's blood-spattered interior. "And *that's* a direct order."

"Roger that, Chief." Emmett exchanged a glance with Merri as he strode for the front door and the fresh air beyond. Doubt and a frown pinched the skin between her eyes. A dark realization glimmered in her eyes, the same realization rolling around in Emmett's skull.

He and Merri were being ordered into the forested hills of Damascus on a goddamned bureaucratic ass-covering operation without knowing the truth of what they were up against.

A monster waited for them in the forest's dark heart, a monster who savaged a man in his own home, but left his daughter untouched.

A monster named Dante Prejean.