

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood

Chapter 111-115

Book Two – Ch.#3

Darkness... Darkness, a damp surface and an overwhelming metallic taste greeted me.

I knew what it was before I even opened my eyes, my last memories immediately reminding me to what had happened. Or, at least, what had happened before I'd lost consciousness. Shaking, I pulled my exhausted body upright to see the damage for myself. ... To see the massacre

And it was a sight that made me want to throw up.

Bodies laid everywhere around me. Throats torn, claw and bite marks riddling their skin.

No one had survived.

No one had survived *me*.

I'd let it happen again, too weak to stop it. If I'd just regained control sooner, I could have gotten back up to my feet and finished them off, completing the mission per my instructions. But... no, I was a failure. A disappointment.

A monster.

The first time something like this had occurred was about four years ago, after my eighteenth birthday. I'd been in a training session with my former tutor, practising during an intense fighting session, when I suddenly felt the sickening change within. 'Former' tutor being the key word. They hadn't survived.

Ever since then, it had felt like a constant battle inside myself. Pushing down the creature lurking below the surface, hoping more than anything that I didn't lose control again. Because whilst I was used to death in my line of work, the sheer destructive energy of the wolf beast was so unhinged that it was too unpredictable to be of any benefit. It was something I had no power over.

That... and I was worried about what would happen if anyone ever found out the truth. Saw what I truly was.

And a shudder went down my spine at that very thought. However, right now, I needed to concentrate on damage control. I couldn't bring Miles back to life and I knew that I would need to face the punishment of that failure – face *his* punishment. But for now... for now I needed to clean up. And there was only one person to call for that. Crawling along the ground, I began searching for the burner phone I'd concealed on my person

earlier. I knew it would most likely be wherever my clothes had been torn to shreds but prayed it hadn't been broken during the lapse. Thankfully, I managed to find it after some unpleasant digging *Hello?" sung an overly positive voice on the other side, picking up after only two rings. I wisud at trvlr greeting, finding it so out of place given the grim scene surrounding me.

"Zac," I replied. My voice was completely serious, hoping he'd pick up on the less than subtle hint.

"Rae? Is that you, girl?" Sigh.

"Yes. I've got a level five situation at the construction site on Smith Street. Immediate assistance is required,"

"W-wait, what? A level fi—,"

"Yes. See you soon."

And I instantly hung up the phone, slumping myself back against a pile of building materials, too exhausted to do anything else.

For now, I would need to wait.

And wait I did for the next thirty minutes before a van finally pulled up on the scene, a lanky young man with blonde hair getting out from the driver's seat to assess his surroundings.

Though after taking only one look at the mess around me, his face instantly paled.

"Oh, God, Rae... Gross," he started. "You weren't kidding about the level five. It's been a while since you've left such a gory scene behind and I can't say I've missed it."

He walked behind to the boot of his van and opened it up to retrieve what he needed. The first item being gloves which he promptly equipped. Zac was a professional, after all.

He originally had been working for his parent's cleaning company for a few years, one that specialised in crime scenes, and naturally we'd crossed paths with one another given my line of work. Before long, he was operating closely with our own company, treating us with a customer priority regardless of the time of day or how bad the mess was – no questions asked, of course. My boss took a shine to him and he was eventually brought in full time as one of our own employees. Though somehow, in those years of us seeing each other, Zac had wrongly begun to assume we were much closer than we were. That this was more than a working relationship and, in fact, a friendship. "...Hey, I thought this one was meant to be brought in alive," he added, grabbing more equipment. "Why go to the effort of making it look like an animal attack?"

Because it was one.

But I didn't reply, the subject still too touchy right now. Instead, I merely gritted my teeth silently. "And do you have to do it while naked?" he continued, still not reading my mood. "Girl, if this is some kind of weird kink then I feel bad for anyone you sleep with."

Feeling done with the conversation, I stood up and began walking towards him. I didn't have the patience for his questions anymore and wanted to return home. "Did you bring me some clothes?" I asked, still not addressing his last statement.

He laughed at my unwillingness to talk and turned back to the van to retrieve what I needed. "Yeah, yeah, here. Lighten up, I'm just joking with you." I quickly grabbed the clothes and started pulling them on, hating how they clung to me uncomfortably. All I could think about was how badly I wanted a shower, hoping to wash away at least some of my frustration along with the blood. "Still so cold with me," he sighed dramatically in feint offence, a hand over his heart. But I just muttered a 'thanks' and left towards where I'd parked a car earlier in the day. The plan had been to drive off with Miles as soon as I'd knocked him unconscious, handing him over before anyone was made aware. What a disaster that had turned into.

Zac was still laughing behind me as I left, but it was as I'd walked a few feet that I suddenly heard him abruptly stop, almost as if pausing in thought. "Oh... and Raven?" he called out.

His tone of voice had changed, the humour absent from where it had been only moments before. And, reluctantly, I turned around to face him.

I could see how his eyes now held a sharpness to them, an intelligence there that made me freeze. Not the jokester, buddy-buddy friend that he'd acted as upon his arrival, but the kind of man who could hide your body without leaving even a drop of evidence behind.

The real face of Zac Greene.

I didn't speak, instead just continuing to meet his gaze unwavering as he spoke. "...The boss wants to see you," he informed me. This had to be a joke. I couldn't see how this day could get any worse.

"You told him?"

"You know all scenes higher than a level three need to be reported," he said. "You wouldn't be able to hide it from him forever. He's your old man, after all."

I knew it would be reported eventually but I just hadn't expected it to be so soon. I'd thought that I'd at least have some time to collect my thoughts before facing him. To have a moment to breathe and calm down. Because to throw me inside a cage and be

told to fight to the death would be far less terrifying than facing him. Than facing *my father*.

He was the boss of our company and one of the most influential men in our entire country. A businessman with a net worth higher than any one person should need... and a less than honest means of acquiring that status. Only a man such as him would make deals in the form of death and deceit. Whatever was good for business, no matter the cost. God forbid you ever crossed him unless you wanted to find yourself in a situation like Miles was in no

I swallowed back my nerves, feeling anxious for the first time in many months. The feeling of fear inside the deepest depth of my gut, making me have to work harder to reign in the sensations threatening to overwhelm me. To remind myself of my training and keep calm.

It would be fine though. He was my father. I'd just... explain to him that it happened again. That they got the drop on me and took me unaware. That I lost control. But I groaned internally at that thought. I was meant to be better than this... and he would know it. No, I would need to face my punishment. "Don't look so grim, Rae," Zac said, his face easing into a friendly smile once more. "It's not the end of the world."

And I could only hope that was true.

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Book 2 – Ch.# 4

"Come in," said a deep voice on the other side of the door.

I'd only had to wait a few seconds for his response after knocking, but I wished there hadn't been a reply at all. More than anything else, I just wanted to walk away. I wanted him to not be there waiting for me in his office. But that wasn't the case.

After leaving the construction site, I'd done only the bare minimum in fixing my appearance before coming here. Showering within a few minutes and changing into some more appropriate clothing as quickly as possible. After all, I wouldn't be able to show myself in the state I'd been in after the accident.

There was no backing out now. With one final deep breath, I pushed open the door and faced the man I knew would be there.

Even in the dim light of his office, I could still make him out clearly as he sat behind his desk. His clean-cut dark hair and expensive suit only adding to his imposing presentation, his blue eyes having a way that made you want to squirm away under their gaze. This was the man many feared... and rightfully so. "My sweet Raven," he greeted, standing up as I entered. I moved to the centre of the room and avoided his

eyes, casting my own down to the ground in a sign of submission and apology. "Sorry for keeping you waiting, sir," I said. "I came here as quickly as I could."

"Ah... yes, understandable."

I heard as he walked around the desk to stand in front of me, his hand coming up to pinch under my chin. Instantly, my pulse began to quicken. What would be the punishment waiting for me this time?

"Look at me," he instructed, pushing my head up. "Tell me what happened."

There was no point in lying to him. He would find out the truth even if I tried to deceive him. He always did. There was no such thing as hiding a secret from Eric Reid.

"I failed to bring in Miles Kennedy alive, sir," I answered slowly. "I apologise for my carelessness."

He clicked his tongue three times in disapproval, causing me to flinch involuntarily in surprise at the abrupt sound. Despite that though, I still remained firmly in his grasp. "So disappointing, Raven," he scolded, "So unlike you."

"I... I lost control," I admitted,

"Ah."

And I felt as his grip then tightened on me, his other hand coming up to wipe something away from my temple. Upon him inspecting it closer-up, I saw that it was blood. I must have missed a spot in my haste to get here as quickly as possible. "Such a pretty girl on the surface, my Raven" he mused, looking at his hand as he rubbed his

finger and thumb together, removing the blood as if he'd just picked up some dust. "Yet looks aren't everything, as we well know. Did anyone see you?" His eyes flicked back to my own as he asked the question, shooting ice-cold fear through me.

"N-no, Father," I answered. "There were no survivors. Zac is the only person I've been in contact with prior to coming here and I had already reverted by then. He didn't see anything."

He held my gaze for a few seconds, almost as though he were trying to see if I were actually telling the truth.

Evidently, he felt assured by my response in the end.

"Good," he simply said.

And, finally, I felt his grip on my face ease off slightly, allowing me a moment of reprieve to breathe.

“You need to be more careful,” he said. “Do you want people to lock you away and experiment on you? Never forget that you cannot trust anyone. A parent’s love may be unconditional, but others will never understand and accept you for what you are.”

I could feel as tears wanted to sting at my eyes but I bit them back, knowing that showing weakness would not help my situation or appease him in any way. If anything, it would only make things so much worse. But I knew I shouldn’t let it weigh on me too much. It wasn’t as though I hadn’t heard these words countless times before. “I’m sorry, Father,” I whispered.

I didn’t want to speak too loudly, not trusting my own voice. But relief immediately flooded through me when he took a step away, and I watched as he walked back to his desk to sit down. With a quick shuffle in the draw next to him, he proceeded to pull out two glasses filled with what looked to be whisky.

Whisky... and a small plastic bottle I was all too familiar with. It was my medicine to help with anxiety and post ‘accident’ side effects.

“Here, take it,” he said, holding them out towards me. “And you don’t need to worry... I won’t be sending you for punishment.”

I quickly approached to grab the items, not wanting to test his patience. “T-thank you, sir,” I stammered in shock.

He held up the glass in a ‘cheers’ and I reciprocated the gesture before taking out one of the small pills from the bottle. In one swift movement, I downed the drink and the pill without wasting even a second. I’d never been more grateful for alcohol than in that moment. 1

“...Because I will be needing your presence tomorrow,” he continued. “The mayor is holding a charity event and, with Miles now gone, it complicates several issues I was currently dealing with. Namely... there are important documents I believe could now be in the wrong hands. I’ve been told those ‘hands’ are attending the event tomorrow.” There were only two reasons I was ever brought to these events; as security... or, in rare circumstances, as a spy. Given his emphasis on ensuring I didn’t inflict injury during punishment, I could only assume it was the latter option. A few bruises weren’t of any concern if I were merely there waiting in the shadows as a security precaution. Facing important acquaintances though? Well, that required a high level of attention to my appearance. 1

But the people at these high-class events weren’t stupid. They would already know too well who my father really was under his businessman façade and would keep their distance. Most people knew but it was just that no one had the power to do anything

about it. Father had his hand in so many networks that it was impossible to ever pin anything on him. Given that, I wasn't exactly sure how I could be of any use... unless... unless he was hoping that I'd help with a more *intimate* persuasion.

...But who...?

"Ah... and who will I be becoming *acquainted* with?" I said delicately, trying to phrase it the best way I could

Immediately, father laughed so loudly that I almost dropped the glass from my hand.

"Sharp as always," he said, a dark smile spreading across his face. "I'm unsure of who exactly has the documents, but I have managed to pinpoint it to one family who Miles was close with. His warehouse bordered their land, a smaller town just north of here. Certainly not the bustling city we live in, but it's quaint. Has a certain... small charm, I suppose. Their own mayor is meant to be in attendance tomorrow." A town up north..? Nothing immediately came to mind, but perhaps they were too small to be mentioned during my studies. As far as I knew, it was mostly just wilderness up north. "Take this," my father said, handing me a manilla folder. "It has everything we know about him which, truthfully, isn't a lot. I trust in your training to handle it appropriately though. Just do as you do best. Flash him that smile of yours." I shifted uncomfortably at the thought, wondering how best this should be handled. Upon a quick glance at the folder, it looked as though the man, Victor, was a fair bit older. Married, even. Though no details of the wife. Widowed perhaps? How best to persuade a man was always a risky game without the full details. I would need to tread carefully.

"I understand," I replied, glancing back up at him from the papers.

Only it was then that I noticed his expression didn't match the light-hearted tone of his voice just now, instead finding his eyes boring into mine. "...You cannot fail this time, Raven," he said sternly. His words felt more like a mixture of both an order... and a threat. "The documents pertain to my business. Just find out if Miles sent the papers and then immediately disappear again. We'll handle the rest."

"...Yes, father."

That was the last thing we spoke about before I left back to my room. I already knew what would be expected of me tomorrow night and knew there were things to organise prior to the event. Now all that was left to do was prepare myself.

But upon finishing what I could, and despite my exhaustion, I found I still couldn't sleep well,

The entire night I was plagued by fits of nausea and nightmares. Nightmares of a wolf running through the forest, searching for something within its depths. Not the kind of peaceful naivety you'd expect a beast to feel as they lived out a carefree life... but one

of purpose. As if being beckoned forward by something... or someone, It was as if the black wolf and I were one, though I watched on only as a spectator. Observing silently as it sprinted through the trees with an increasing desperation, showing no signs of slowing. Running faster and faster ... running until, finally, a cloaked figure stood before it.

This is who they had been searching for, I could tell. The wolf's demeanour instantly changed to one of relief from its prior panic, walking closer until it finally laid before the person waiting there.

But, with a jolt of surprise, it was not the wolf who the figure then addressed... but rather myself.

As their arm slowly came up, I mutely watched as a slender hand reached out towards me in invitation, managing to also catch a glimpse of a feminine chin from inside the darkness of the hood.

...And it was within that glimpse that I then saw her lips as they started to speak.

“— Raven,” a different voice suddenly interrupted, cutting her off. And, with that, my eyes instantly flew open.

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Book 2 – Ch.#5 “Raven, wake up.

It's midday already,” continued the voice I'd just heard. I pulled myself up and winced, touching my forehead gently. A loud thumping pulsed painfully inside as a headache immediately looked to greet me. It seemed this day was already off to a great start.

“Raven!” the voice called again.

“I'm awake!” I yelled back.

Two minutes. That's all I was asking for. Two minutes to wake up and process... whatever the hell *that* had been. I could still recall it vividly, witnessing what I could only assume was the form I took when I became the beast. Perhaps this was my consciousness manifesting it. Appearing inside my nightmare due to how prevalent it had been on my mind prior to sleeping. After all, they say that dreams hold significance to the things you are worried about when awake.

Nonetheless, it was still surprising to see its appearance for the first time; if that depiction was even accurate at all. A coat of fur as dark as my hair with fearsome eyes. Was that truly the last thing some people saw before their death?

I shuddered at that thought. Regardless, I had to do my best to push it out of my mind as there were more important things to worry about today.

And with that final thought, the door then swung open revealing an older man with greying hair. He might have even been considered handsome for his age if it weren't for the several scars marring his face....

"Get the fuck out of bed and get your ass to the gym," he said sharply. ...And if it weren't for his terrible attitude. My eyes narrowed slightly at the intrusion, but I kept my calm. I'd found it better not to get angry with my new tutor, Gavin. Though nowhere near as competent as his deceased predecessor, he still was a formidable opponent' in a fight. One with a temper as short as his patience. And with that overbearing attitude, probably compensating for something else just as short-

"I have an event tonight, sir," I explained politely, forcing myself to appease him. "I'm expected to make an appearance in front of many important people. The boss should have already told you that I need to look my best."

He snorted in a laugh. "No amount of make-up is going to help you if you keep sitting on your lazy ass. Besides, I don't see how training would interfere with the event."

"And when I'm presented to these people covered in bruises from training, how do you suppose I explain that without a formal investigation being started? ...*Sir*" I tilted my head and stared him down, waiting for his reply.

oly.

But instead of his brow furrowing slightly in the realisation that I was correct, like what I was expecting, instead he did the complete opposite.

...He smirked. "Well, I don't suppose there'll be any issues running laps, then?".
Goddammit.

Four hours later my training session was finally done, leaving me with only a few hours to get ready for the charity event.

And whilst Gavin's inability to give me even a single day off certainly was a hindrance, what was most important now was to ensure I looked immaculate for the special assignment I'd be working come nightfall. Something easier said than done given the dark circles under my eyes. In preparation for the mission, I'd memorised everything that the manilla folder had listed on this foreign mayor, Victor Lycroft. But despite that information, and despite the fact I'd had many missions far more difficult than this before, I still felt... off.

Was it because of my lapse in control yesterday? Or perhaps the pressure to ensure I didn't fail

again?

Or was it because I knew my punishment would be the most severe to date if I came home empty-handed?

And I felt as another wave of nausea ran through me. ! "Raven!" a voice then yelled from down the hall. One of the maids. ...A call to inform me that it was time. Not wanting to delay any further, I quickly gathered my things. "Nice of you to finally join me," my father said as I slid into the limousine next to him. "...Apologies for keeping you waiting, sir." "Results are all that matter," he chuckled, sipping on a drink in hand. "I can see that black dress compliments your beauty perfectly. I doubt we'll have any issues with tonight's agenda, then?"

"Thank you, sir. I'm confident we'll have no issues."

"Father'," he corrected. "You're here tonight as my daughter. Remember that."

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"...Right, of course," I said, forcing a small smile on my lips. "Father."

It was so rare to attend events as Eric Reid's daughter that it was easy to forget how to act during those times. Not to say he wasn't my father, but my training had always been very strict growing up to ensure I was as beneficial as possible. My anonymity was considered one of the best benefits I possessed. Which was why this event was all the more stressful. Tonight, I would end up being introduced to many key figures, losing that faceless edge of the past. Restricting my ability to perform missions in the future. And it also told me one very crucial thing...

It told me that my father considered this mission more important than my best asset. So just what was so special about those missing documents?

"We're here," he said abruptly, pulling me from my thoughts, and I felt as the vehicle slowed to a stop.

It was only seconds later that a well-dressed man opened the limousine door and offered me his hand to help me out. Not that this was strange for this type of upper-class event. In fact, I was grateful for the gesture as I took him up on it, grabbing my floor-length dress together in my free hand to avoid tripping. "Thank you," I said, though I was unable to stop myself from immediately looking around at my surroundings.

The place was huge. The mayor's house was more aptly described as a mansion, all things considered. Vines crept up the walls of the three-story building, surrounded by a meticulously manicured garden on all sides. It was stunning, even more so than the summer homes my father owned. But there was something else about this place that

felt... different. Something in the air. Like a feeling of restlessness I couldn't seem to shake. Was I still feeling sick from the night before?

"Come on," my father said, gently grabbing my elbow. "Everyone will be inside."

I allowed him to lead me up the stone steps and through a set of large double doors that stood at the threshold.

Inside was much of the same; an interior to match its impressive exterior. I admired some of the fine art and decorations they had on display as my father led me through the hallway. But it was we reached another set of doors that I became truly surprised.

A grand ballroom was set up to accommodate the large volume of people in attendance. It was by far the most expensive looking event I'd ever personally attended, something that probably wasn't too difficult to accomplish given this was my first time being invited to such a prestigious event. Or, at least, being invited to accompany my father inside, as opposed to just running perimeter security on standby.

"Eric," someone said in greeting. I quickly refocused in as a man approached. A man I instantly recognised as he shook hands with my father politely. He was approximately the same age as him but where my father's features were dark, this man's were lighter with blonde hair. "Mayor Lewis," my father replied. "Thank you for inviting me to your lovely home. It's always a delight whenever I'm able to come visit." "Of course, of course!" he said, smiling. "I can't imagine a charity event without one of our most important sponsors. And I see you brought along a very beautiful date tonight! You lucky man." I shifted uncomfortably at the comment but was thankful that my father only laughed it off. "Ah, that is probably my mistake," he said gently. "This is actually my daughter... Raven." Lewis' face immediately went to one of surprise as he took in my appearance once more. "Oh... Oh, I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't know you had such a lovely a daughter! But I can see why you hide her away." *Social*. I needed to be social tonight. This wasn't a job I could accomplish from the shadows.

For me, this was normally the easiest part; talking to strangers and leaving a good impression.

So why was I finding it so difficult to concentrate?

My father must have sensed my lapse in normal etiquette, and I felt as his cold eyes turned towards me. As if silently prompting me to get it together.

Smile, Raven,' I told myself. Those were the words he'd told me just yesterday.

...And I quickly shook off my underlying discomfort "Mayor Lewis," I said, forcing my lips to respond. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. My father speaks of you often." ...To constantly complain or discredit his policies. But he didn't need to know that part. "Thank you so much for selflessly organising this event," I continued. "And to even do

so in your very own beautiful home. I feel as though the donation from our family won't come close to the generosity you are showing us tonight." I held out my hand and Lewis immediately took it, planting a small kiss in greeting on the back of it.

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"And so charming," he remarked to my father. "My word, Eric, you'd be best to lock this one

up."

He tries sometimes.

"She works herself so hard I barely need to worry," he lied, laughing. "She's got a knack for the family business. I basically had to tear her away just to come to tonight's event." "Is that so...?"And now he would be wondering how much of my father's 'business' I was actually involved with. Not that he would openly ask the question. There was a reason why Lewis didn't pry too hard, and it had a lot to do with the 'donations' received at events like this. A corrupt, yet symbiotic relationship of sorts. Lewis' inquisitive stare lingered a few seconds longer than I would have liked but I held my polite smile nonetheless. Showing him that I found his remarks welcome despite his jokes essentially implying I should be imprisoned.

Hilarious.

"Speaking of business, Eric," he said, turning back toward him. "Did you have a chance to overlook the new city proposal? I could really use your... opinion."

He meant money.

My father's eyes darted back to me, realising that this sort of conversation wasn't one I needed to be privy to, and quickly went back to the mayor. "Sure, let's get a drink and talk it over," he said, extending a hand for Lewis to lead them to one of the private studies. "I'm sure we won't be missed if we keep it brief." And with that, the two of them began to leave. "Make yourself at home, Raven!" Lewis called back out to me, right before they became lost in the crowd.

I gave him a smile and a small nod in acknowledgement, but exhaled in relief the very second they were gone. ...A feeling of relief that was almost instantly overshadowed by my discomfort settling back in. It was almost suffocating. A sensation of needing to escape, of being on edge. Something that only became gradually worse as I took in the unfamiliar faces of men and women around me. Seeing their mixed expressions as they judged me within just the silence of their eyes alone. ...I needed some air.

My legs began moving on their own accord, walking automatically towards the back door where a set of stairs led into the gardens below, and within moments I found

myself amongst the green vegetation outside. A cold wind blew by me, tousling my hair and catching my dress. Only I couldn't really feel it. If anything, I felt as though my head was burning up, the pulsing of my earlier migraine returning. Something wasn't right. But I couldn't be sure; was it because of this place... or was it me?

I continued to walk away from the event inside, allowing my body to do whatever it needed in order to be satiated. To lead me wherever it needed. And yet the further into the dark I walked, I couldn't shake the feelings churning within. As though I were becoming weightless, breathless.... It didn't feel too dissimilar to the way I felt when I lost control. Was that what was happening? Would I find myself in another pool of blood when I finally came to? Because I wasn't sure if I could handle such an ordeal so soon.

I immediately dove into the clutch purse I brought with me, searching for the small bottle of pills within. Not normally something I carried with me, especially so soon after an accident. Typically, I could go at least another few weeks before something happened again.

SNAP,

My ears picked up on the sound of something nearby. But it wasn't just the noise that made me flinch and rapidly reach for the dagger secured on my back. No, I could sense it now, even

amongst the other feelings currently overwhelming me. I could sense something stalking me from within the darkness.

...I wasn't alone. The wind picked up once more as I frantically spun my head around, looking for the danger. Looking for whatever was coming for me.

SNAP

Another branch. ...And I threw my dagger towards the noise behind me.

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With a thud, the dagger hit its mark perfectly. Only... it wasn't a threat like I was expecting. No lurking assailant,

No, it was a tree.

Shit

Truthfully, as I went to retrieve my weapon, I couldn't help but feel somewhat relieved. This wasn't the streets, nor was this a mission requiring deadly force. I was at a goddamn party, What the hell had gotten into me tonight?

It was if rational thoughts and behaviours were absent. What if the sound I'd heard was simply an animal who wandered in from the forest nearby?

But... that feeling of something being wrong. It was rare for my gut to be incorrect. And right now, my instincts were still screaming at me that something was happening, that something was approaching... that someone was....

Here.

Another sound of movement behind me instantly made me react, only now it was significantly closer. In fact, it was right behind me. I knew if it were only a patron from the event, they would have called out to me or made their presence known before approaching. But this? This was something else. This was as if someone was intentionally sneaking up on me.

I pulled the dagger from the tree and wielded it immediately, spinning around to defend myself against whoever was there. Against whatever was going to attack.

...And, instantly, it grabbed my wrist.

Moving faster than I expected, they managed to pull my hand backwards, disarming my dagger in one swift movement. A technique that would need significant speed and skill to accomplish. After all, my own ability was unnatural.

But there was no mistaking the situation now... He had me trapped. Disarmed, alone and basically pinned against the tree behind me. My only chance was that I could kick him in the stomach, create some space, assess the situation and

And...

And then the world seemed to just... stop.

Piercing through the panic in my mind, the feeling of sparks erupting along my arm soon became impossible to ignore. Like pleasurable tingles dancing along my skin... stemming from where the man still held my wrist. In confusion, my eyes slowly trailed upwards, starting from where his hand still held me, up until, finally, I looked upon his face. Until I met his eyes. His dark eyes, staring into mine. Invoking an overwhelming sense of longing and familiarity inside me. As if I knew him... as if I always had... and as if he were....

As if he were....

'Mine.'

The word was whispered inside my head. But it didn't feel like it came from me.

Mine... mine... mine....'

It kept repeating, becoming stronger, almost as though it was trying to force itself past my lips. To speak aloud, for whatever reason. But I pushed it back. "Not quite the moment I always envisioned," he said. His voice quickly hit me and resonated inside. Like honey melting away my pain, melting away the burning that had been there just moments before. Now there was only him. Only his presence that overwhelmed and threatened to make me forget everything I knew.

'Mine.'

What was I doing again? Those lips of his drew my attention... Watching them with a newfound curiosity. Would they be soft? Or perhaps more coarse?

'Mine.'

And that dark brown hair...what would it feel like to touch? To run my fingers through it?

"Do you often pull knives out on strangers?" he asked jokingly, his lips turning in a smile.

...That smile.

A small expression that made me forget how to breathe for a second. It was the most perfect smile I'd ever seen. If that was the last thing I ever saw, I would have no regrets.

"...Hello?" he prompted when I still hadn't spoken. I quickly looked back up to his eyes, finding their colour now different. No longer the dark orbs I'd first witnessed... but hazel in colour. A mesmerising combination of green and brown.

"...Pardon?" I managed to ask, having not taken in anything he'd just said to me. "I said 'do you often pull knives out on strangers'?" he repeated.

And I immediately pulled myself out of my trance.

...Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me? I snatched my arm away from his grip and squeezed by the tree, making a foot or so distance between us. Putting aside my odd fascination, I couldn't refute the facts of my current situation. One where I had stupidly let my guard down against someone who had stalked me from the dark

"Woah, calm down," he said, gently holding his hands up. The sentiment was partially lost though as one of those hands still held my dagger. "I didn't mean to scare you." "Do

you often sneak up on vulnerable women without announcing yourself?" I asked, turning the question back on him. "Attack them out of nowhere?" He laughed a little at that, a sound that made my body react accordingly. It was almost silky, coercing me to relax despite my resolve to remain guarded.

"'Vulnerable' women?" he queried. "Seems to me that the only 'vulnerable person being attacked here is myself. I wasn't the one pulling a dagger. You were. I guess I didn't realise it was that kind of party."

Party. Oh, fuck.

It was then that I took a moment to look at his attire and noticed the tailored suit he was wearing, one that was fitted perfectly to his body shape. Moulded along every curve to show off every one of his muscles. *Enough*

I pushed away those thoughts again, just long enough to piece together what this meant. ...That I'd just tried to kill a guest.

A guest of one of the most prestigious events of the year, hosted by none other than the mayor himself. An event that I, myself, was meant to be leaving good impressions and working towards gaining information. Getting myself thrown out now would mean instant failure.

...It meant punishment. It meant... I needed to get out of here. Hastily gathering up my dress in hand, I took several cautious steps away, never taking my eyes off him as I tested to see if he planned to follow. But when he simply looked back at me confused, I knew it was now or never.

...And so I ran.

I started running back towards where the house was up ahead, cursing the heels I'd been obligated to wear, cursing my stupidity and strange behaviour. Cursing my body, my mistakes, my emotions.

And when I reached the steps, I started running up them without even looking back. I just needed to make it inside first. So long as I was the initiator, I could still maybe turn this story around.

I'd just tell them he attacked me. That I was the victim. That I left for some air in the garden and he pulled a knife on me. Anyone could see how he was twice my size, surely people wouldn't find it too difficult to believe.

I ran through the door and into the ballroom once more, scouring the room around me until I made contact with a set of eyes staring directly at me.

Cold blue eyes that made me shiver.

My father. He took one look at me and must have realised something was wrong, if not just due to my short absence from the event. And to my dismay, he started making his way over to me. “Raven... where were you? What’s going on?” “I uhh... I’m...,” I started, feeling the conflict building inside.

“Raven?”

What was I meant to say? I needed time to think this through properly. But if the man came upstairs and completely exposed me, then I needed to be building my version of events now.

However, every time I went to open my mouth to start explaining the lie, it was as if something inside me would instantly close my mouth again. Just what was this insane obsession I had with him? “Raven? What’s going...,” my father started, but his voice slowly trailed off. It trailed off as he caught sight of someone entering the door behind me. The very person I’d just nearly killed. “Well, this is unexpected,” he mused quietly to himself, his brow furrowing. The man’s eyes instantly locked back to my own and I felt another shiver of longing spread through me. Something I quickly tried to shake off given that it was definitely not the time for that.

“Kieran,” my father greeted, walking towards him. It was only then that those hazel eyes snapped away from me. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

‘Kieran’.

That was his name.

Kieran... ‘Kieran’... it fit him perfectly. I kept repeating it in my head, relishing the small bit of information I was now given. “Apologies, have ‘we met?’” he asked my father, still accepting his hand to shake nonetheless.” My memory can be terrible.”

He didn’t know who my father was? I tensed up at that reaction. Managing to find someone who didn’t know my father was pretty absurd. Who in this city *didn’t* know him? Unless.... “Not for some years,” my father laughed. “You were still quite young when your father and I briefly met. How is Victor, these days, anyway? Is he not here tonight?” Oh... Double fuck ...And just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse.

A Gift from the Goddess by Dawn Rosewood Chapter 115

Book 2 – Ch#7

Kieran Lycroft. Victor Lycroft, my target’s, very own non.

How had I managed to screw things up this badly? within twenty-four hours, I felt like *my life* had gone from being careful, structured precise, into what I could only describe as *complete* erratic shatbles.

And worse still, it was as if I had no control. Control over my situation, over myself and especially no control when it came to this man, Kieran.

*Unfortunately, my father wasn't able to make it tonight," Kieran replied "Heliad an important matter come up and sent me in his stead to extend our town's support."

I could smell his scent so vividly, the wind now no longer masking it from me so intoxicating yet inviting... I'd never come across anything like it before.

"A shame. But nevertheless, I'm glad you could join us. I've heard that you'll be taking his place upon his retirement. Is it common to elect representatives based on family in your town?"

Kieran gave a half laugh and looked around for a second, almost as if the question made him uncomfortable.

"We're just all very close up north in Ashwood. My father is a great role model and inspired me to take over for him I'm honoured that the people of my town agree."

His eyes then flicked back to my own, a look of curiosity and... something else that I couldn't quite place mixed in. But whatever it was, I wanted more of it.

"Oh, apologies, where are my manners?" said my father, extending a hand towards me. "Allow me to introduce you to Raven."

"Raven? I'm glad to finally catch your name," he said, then turned back to Eric, "You know, we actually had a moment to meet in the gardens just now."

....Oh no... please, no.

My father raised a brow in confusion. "Oh? Is that where she ran off to?"

"You wouldn't believe it but..." Kieran chuckled lightly, apparently finding the whole thing hilarious, "she must have gotten quite the scare because..."

And it was then that Kieran finally looked back towards me, his sentence slowly coming to a stop

as our eyes met.

"...Because..?" my father prompted.

"Oh... She ah..." Kieran stumbled, quickly clearing his throat. "...She jumped in surprise. I guess I accidentally snuck up on her."

"That's certainly uncharacteristic of her. My daughter is normally a hard one to take unaware."

"Your... daughter?" Kieran asked, confused. "Raven is your daughter?"

"That's right."

*And, and she grew up here in Loudila Olly?"

why indeed, was what I wanted to know too. What questions did he have questioning something so personal. Clarification once would have been sufficient, if needed at all. He didn't need to know my life story

Kieran was now staring at me with a more serious expression, the joking tone now gone "on, nothing she just doesn't act like most of the people I've met in the city"

And what was that supposed to mean?

But laughter erupted from my father, clearly not bothered like I was "No, I don't suppose she *does* I raised her with a good head on her shoulders I'm happy to hear she doesn't act like most overbearing city people do."

"Right..." Kieran agreed, but his voice still sounded distant in thought.

"Raven actually adores the outdoors and nature, something I know Ashwood has a lot of. Can't seem to keep her away from wanting to always be in the fresh air. Isn't that right, Raven?"

Love the outdoors? Sure, I went running occasionally, but I wouldn't say it was a hobby or a defining trait of my personality.

I was puzzled by that comment, yet still too focused on trying to figure out Kieran's reactions, that I didn't immediately understand what my father was doing. How he was lying in order to establish common ground between us.

And in doing so, he was telling me that my target had changed for the evening.

With Victor

now not attending the event, I would be needing to utilise the closest thing to it

His son.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this stressed.

"Raven?"

My father's voice pulled me from my head after I still hadn't spoken.

I wasn't acting in the way I was meant to be and he knew it. Hell, even if I were successful in finding out about the documents, I wondered if I was still going to face some sort of repercussion for my odd behaviour all night.

I weighed up my options quickly, debating which outcome here would be worse, and ultimately, I made a choice I never expected to make. Especially not since I was so sceptical of him. But something inside pushed me on, and I wanted to have faith in that feeling,

And so I decided to trust the man I'd only just met. Trust in the fact that, if he hadn't instantly exposed me as I thought he would, then he probably wouldn't do so.

"Oh right, I'm so sorry," I said, acting out a small head shake and overly polite smile. "I seem to be a bit out of it tonight I should have given you my name before, that was so rude of me."

My face never faltered but I kept my smile in place, hoping *to*

and the elephant didn't notice too much though, his lips turned into a smile and he held a hand

No need to worry, it's never too late for introductions," he said. "Kieran Lycroft, pleasure to meet

myself and a friend of my father's, and instantly regretted it.

That same feeling of marks began to spread through the contact with his skin, making *me* lose concentration. And his smile felt so nice and warm, making me painfully aware of thoughts that I was so desperately trying to suppress,

After planting a small kiss on the back of my hand, he let me go, and I found I'd forgotten whatever I was meant to be saying

"See All is forgiven," he joked

I took a second to blink and clear my head before scrambling to put back on the face I needed to show, trying to not let on just how affected I really was.

*p bow about i buy you a drink in apology?" I managed to say, acting on auto-pilot. Though I silently cursed the slight slutter in my voice. "I would love to hear more about Ashwood."

Oh, you would? sure, I'd love a drink"

I couldn't be certain, but it was almost as if he found this funny. Borderline mocking me. But I suppose laughing at me for whatever reason was better than the alternative ways t his encounter could have gone. And yet even though I knew that, I still couldn't help but feel mildly bothered by it I didn't enjoy feeling like I was a joke

I'll leave you two for now, then," my father said, touching my arm, "It would be best if I checked in with some other acquaintances anyway. I'll be around if you need me."

His grip tightened on me without warning, though not obvious enough for anyone to notice, and I picked up on the double connotation of his words. I'll be around if you need me ' meaning he was around and would be keeping an eye on me,

I gave him a small nod and hoped that it showed a confidence that, in actuality, I was so badly lacking in that moment

*Shall we?" Kieran asked behind me once my father had left

And with that, the two of us walked to the bar and ordered our drinks.

I knew now

was the time to do what I did best. It was the time to stop letting myself become overwhelmed and just focus entirely on the task at hand. Something that, with my track record to date, I was yet to fail even once in doing One of my specialties had always been in this particular areas of intimate persuasion.

*I'm so sorry again," I said as we waited, making sure to sound as friendly as possible "I really don't know what came over me earlier and hope that you don't think I'm some sort of unhinged,

I timidly laughed a little at myself and tucked a look of guilt behind my mask, hoping that he was. subconsciously picking up on the social cue Normally, I would have reached a hand out and gently touched his arm but the thought of those sparks possibly being there made me keep my hands to myself

"No not at all," he replied "The whole thing was a bit funny and will make for a great story *

My smile froze in place at that:

* Story? O-oh... no, you don't need to tell anyone about that, it's so terribly embarrassing, "I unid stiffly "How about we keep it a secret just between us? Like our own htle inside joke? I would * really* .. appreciate it."

Touch bis hand. Raven, 'I told myself, knowing I needed to commit to this,

But I really didn't want to Thai feeling of losing control was one I despised, and even being around him was proving to be difficult.

Thankfully, the drinks arrived at that moment, and I used grabbing the glass as an excuse to do something else

*Cheers," I said, quickly taking a sip. Maybe another five of these and my nerves would finally be calmed

But Kieran was slower to follow suit, his eyes watching me closely in a way that made me nervous Definitely not in the way I would expect a man to be acting around me by now. He seemed almost. Wary.

"You know you can drop the act already?" he said suddenly. It was so out of the blue that it almost made me choke on my drink.

I coughed and quickly grabbed a napkin nearby to cover my mouth, trying to clear my airway.

What do you mean? I finally managed to ask after a moment.

*I mean that your father isn't here so you can relax," he said. "Or is it that you're scared of something else?" He then leaned in a little closer." .Is it that I scare you, Raven?"

Had I been too forward? Or maybe I wasn't coming across genuine enough? No one had ever called me out for pretending before.

But he wasn't entirely wrong. On either assumption. Something that only added to that fear,

* I don't know where you got that impression," I said, still trying to smile. "I've been enjoying your company immensely. In fact, I was really hoping you'd tell me more about Ashw-."

"How about we play a game then," he said, cutting me off. "How about... if I can guess exactly what you're thinking, then you'll stop the pretences and just talk to me normally? No more fake smiles or batting your eyelids just normal. Like that girl who pulled the knife in the gardens."

I'm not pretendi-," I tried to object.

*But, if I'm wrong.," he interrupted again. "If I'm wrong, then I'll give you your dagger back.. and

I'll tell you whatever it is you are clearly trying so hard to find out about me."

I froze for a second as I heard his terms of the bet, wondering how the hell he could have picked up on my true purpose so easily. Would a stupid game really give me the answer I wanted?

Oi, at least, I *could do that... Oh I could just switch up my approach.

"Fine, fine," I said, sighing. "You got me. I was trying to be polite for the sake of my father. But it's true that you showed some great skill in deflecting though. I was surprised Do you enjoy fighting too? Is it common where you're from to learn that or-

*- _And you're still acting," he said in disappointment, leaning back to take a sip of his drink. "But it's almost impressive how quickly you can change faces. Just a bit unnecessary, if I'm being completely honest."

My eyes narrowed at him.

Just who the hell was he? If he was a keen fighter and could pick up my mannerisms so easily, was he also trained in a similar field?

Obviously, there was something missing here and it was something that was definitely *not* mentioned in the information folder for his father, Victor.

"My bet still stands," he continued. "I don't know about you, but I would much rather have a conversation without the theatrics."

I tried to come up with another idea, wondering if I could somehow still spin this around, but eventually I found myself contemplating the game once more.

"So, let me get this straight... you're going to try and guess exactly what I'm thinking?

"Yep."

"And I can be thinking of anything I want?"

"Sure can."

I was silent for another few seconds, trying to figure out how he could rig this unfairly, but ended up deciding that the odds were in my favour.

Because, after all, what was the worst that could happen?