

Chapter 1

It wasn't the memory that woke me. I have a nasty habit of constantly waking up with one hand under my pillow, grasping the hilt of my hatchet like the lifeline it is, coated in sweat and feeling as tense as a wire.

It was the smell of smoke from the burning bed next to me. The one my sister was currently screaming in.

I shot out of the bed like a bullet from a gun, getting as far away from the white flames as I could. Despite the horrible screams she was making, I knew Dro wasn't being hurt. At least, that was what she always told me.

Our bags were by the motel door, ready as usual. I only had the clothes on my back, so I didn't have to change. I grabbed my knives from the table, holstering them on either side of my ribs, and then threw my black military jacket— my lucky jacket— over my shoulders. I hooked my hatchet to my belt, shoved on my boots, and glanced at the bed where Dro was still screaming.

The fire had moved from the bed to the walls, to the curtains, and then to the ceiling. The cheap, peeling wallpaper blackened and rained down around her, like black snow in a whiteout.

Dro suddenly stopped screaming. The nightmare was over. She realized what was happening around her, and that it was time to leave. I was already waiting by the door with her bag and mine in hand. She jumped off her burning bed, completely unharmed by the fire. It had sloughed off her like a second skin.

It never got easier seeing her burning like that again, but when you're about to be smothered in what literally feels like ten thousand degrees, there are only two things that should cross your mind: Get out, and get out now.

Dro threw on her jacket and boots while I yanked open the door and took off down the hall. She would be right behind me. She always was. She knew the drill.

The rest of the motel residents were screaming and shouting for help into cell phones as the fire moved from room to room. I swerved around them as much as I could, but some I had to shove out of the way. Not very nice of me, but they didn't know what caused the fire. I did. Getting caught wasn't an option.

At the bottom of the second story, I could see the motel owner. He was roaring in outrage and panic. He was probably going to blame us for what happened to his place once the hysteria was over, seeing as we'd shown up covered in dirt and blood, demanding a room with no questions asked. Not that I was going to admit the fire had started in our room. It wasn't like we planned it.

We raced across the street, the motel now practically glowing with brightly burning red flames now that Dro's power had shut down. It would only last as long as she was conscious and in control of it, which happened about five times out of ten. There was no safe way to predict when Dro would be in control, and when she would simply lose herself.

It would take firefighters hours to put out the blaze, and even longer to figure out the cause. Not that they'd come to the proper conclusion, because cases of teenage girls spontaneously combusting weren't normal.

But on the other hand, my sister had never been normal.

Even if they had a psychic on hand to see the truth and make them believe it, it wouldn't matter. We would be long gone by then.

I ducked into a narrow alley behind a cheap, "genuine" Southern-style diner. It smelled like grease and stale French fries, but it was better than smelling something burning. Or sulfur.

I pressed my back to the wall, steadying my racing heart. I looked up at my sister, who was almost ready to cry. Her breath came in shuddering gasps, her arms wrapped around her pale body.

A dull sadness pulled at my heartstrings. I hated seeing Dro this way. She was blaming herself for what happened. A thing she hadn't been able to control, that she had been born with.

"Are you okay, Dro?" I said in a rush.

She was looking down, gripping her elbows tightly and bent over like a hunchback instead of a sixteen year old girl.

As sisters went, Dro and I couldn't look less alike. She was still a growing young woman, but she was becoming increasingly beautiful with each passing day. She was taller now and her perfect skin, once chubby from childhood, had stretched over her bones and turned into supple, womanly curves. Her hair continued to grow long in shining, white ripples down her back that for some reason wouldn't hold any hair dye we tried to use. Her lips were full and perfectly shaped, her cheekbones high and noble on her heart shaped face. Her eyes continued to glow an icy blue, piercing and striking against her snowy, angelic appearance.

I was taller than Dro, my skin a brownish gold. I was more of the athletic body type, my curves smaller and not worthy of a sculpture the way Dro's were. My black hair had been cut close to just under my chin because I hated when it got in my way during fights. My lips were thinner and my face longer. My eyes were the same chocolate color our father's had been. What I lacked in beauty, I made up in strength. My muscles were refined and powerful, my stomach and legs taut.

Comparing Dro and me was like comparing snow and dirt. She told me I was beautiful, but I knew Dro said it only because she thought the best of me.

"It's my fault," she whispered, not meeting my eyes. "I burned it down. Someone's probably dead by now."

I moved from the wall and placed my hands on hers. "Look at me, little sister." She did, familiar tears streaking her face. "You didn't mean to do it."

She hadn't. Dro was the type of girl who wouldn't hurt a fly, even if that fly was buzzing half an inch from her face and trying to get into her eye. Dro helped people. She cared about them. She never hurt them on purpose.

Not like I did.

I wish I knew what to tell her so she would believe me. I didn't want to think of myself as a bad sister. A bad person, yeah. I had made some nasty enemies over the last few years, and I'd never been able to see eye to eye with the law. But I put Dro before anything and anyone else. She was the only person who mattered to me, the only person I would do anything for. She was the one who kept my head on a swivel when I thought I was going to lose it. And I was the reason she hadn't lost all hope and given in to whatever was chasing us.

We still didn't know what they were. Six years living under the radar, four of which were spent working for one of the most ruthless, vicious drug cartels of Mexico, hadn't exactly afforded me a lot of time to brush up on my monster knowledge.

Though it did teach me how to fight, how to avoid the cops, and how to inflict severe pain on my enemies. Whether they were human, or something else.

I glanced down the alley, making sure nothing was watching us, then glanced at my sister.

"What did you dream?" I asked.

She winced, but she wasn't crying anymore. "The usual. Monsters torturing me, burning everything I touch, ripping people apart with my bare hands."

Her voice started to shake again. She was ready to have another break down. While I would have let her cry it out, this wasn't the place or the time.

"Come on," I said. "We should get out of here."

I started turning out of the alley when the smell hit me. Rotten eggs. The scent of monsters.

The air ripped open like a wound, shuddering and pulling apart to reveal the red, flaming misery of another world. I couldn't tell for sure, but my guess was that I was looking into Hell. It was the only place I'd heard of that was always on fire.

Out of the tear came a skinny red monster. A Red, I called them. It was about six feet tall with a

scrawny humanoid shape, but sexless with poreless, blood red flesh and vicious black claws on its hands and feet. Its thin, oily hair hung in wet strands around its head and in front of its ugly pointed ears. Its eyes were almond-shaped and pitch black, its lips peeled back in a savage snarl that revealed a row of serrated teeth. It sniffed the air through its slitted nose, then charged at me.

Reds were fast. Very fast. But so was I.

As soon as I saw the world open, I threw off my backpack and started reaching for one of the slim, throwing knives in my jacket. There was no point in running from the monster. Not when I knew I could kill it.

I ducked down as it swiped its claws at me, stabbing my knife into its stomach. The monster growled but didn't act like it was really affected by the wound. I stabbed it again and again as quickly as I could, hoping to damage it before it could get a shot in at me, or get to Dro.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw it swing at me with its other hand. I pulled back and twisted out of range, the claws skidding along the back of my jacket. I dropped to the ground and kicked its legs out from under it, but the Red tucked and rolled instead of staying down.

I was trying to push up from my crouch when it pounced on me.

My back slammed against the ground, my head cracking on the pavement. I winced and stabbed the monster in the ribs over and over, until it dug its claws into my shoulders. I let out a cry of pain as the nasty talons punched into my flesh. The Red used the claws hooked in me to lift me up and slam my head back into the pavement. Then again. And again. And one more time just to make sure I would be bleeding.

The world spun around me, but I still tried to fight. The monster opened its jaws, rearing its head back to strike.

It froze when a sharp knife was shoved into the back of its throat. Dro stood behind the Red, twisting the blade with a disgusted look on her face as the monster bled thick, black blood. That sort of strike would have killed a human. But this thing was obviously not human, and my little sister had just made it angry.

The Red got off of me and raced for her, but I shot to my feet. I nearly collapsed from the wave of vertigo, but I would think about my possible concussion later. The monster had Dro pressed up against a wall. She had nowhere to run.

I clenched my fist around my knife and rammed it into the Red's back, making it stiffen in pain. I kept stabbing as it whirled, throwing out its hand. I narrowly leaned away from the slap, but drove myself forward again and shoved my knife into its heart. I stabbed as fast as I could, twisting the knife until it finally went down.

By the time I delivered the last stab, my arm was almost numb. It throbbed with pain and was soaked in hot, sticky blood. Monster blood burned, but I had too much adrenaline coursing through me to really care.

Then the monster began to dissolve.

The chest caved inward, the way it does when someone stomps down on it. The skin turned black and crusty, breaking off like broken glass. Then it evaporated and blew away, like it had never existed at all.

There wouldn't be any evidence, but that still didn't tell me what the hell had just happened. I didn't know of any monsters that turned into ash when they died. But at least I knew it was dead, and that was the only thing that really mattered to me.

I stood up and straightened my back, beginning to feel the full extent of my injuries. My head was swimming, the hairs at the back of my neck felt sticky, my shoulders were throbbing with pain from being clawed, and the demon blood was continuing to burn me.

Still, I'd had worse. Not that I counted this little encounter as a positive thing.

"You're bleeding," Dro said in a quiet voice across from me.

I looked at her, slowly sheathing my knife, trying to act like that simple movement wasn't pure agony to my shoulders.

"I'll be all right," I rasped out, my breathing still heavy from the fight.

She took a tentative step closer to me. "I'm sorry, Constance. I was trying to get there sooner, but—"

"You know the rules," I told her. "Leave the fighting to me."

Dro was tougher than she looked. She had to be, given the way we lived. But deep down she was just too gentle, never wanting to hurt anyone or anything. She wasn't comfortable with a weapon in her fist or blood on her hands.

Not like I was.

Dro frowned and looked at my injuries again, taking another step toward me. She didn't hesitate, reaching out and pulling away the collar of my shirt to see the wicked wounds on my skin. Her frown deepened and she gently touched the broken skin on my shoulder. Her hands began to glow a strange golden light, and she began to heal me.

There were many words a person could use to describe Dro. Special. Gifted. Strange. All of them were true, because she wasn't human. I wanted to pretend she was, but it was impossible to do when she healed my injuries with a single touch. Or when she told me she could read other people's thoughts if she concentrated enough. Or when she heard, smelled, or saw things way before I did. Or when she had the nightmares and burst into flame.

None of it changed my love for her, but it did scare me. More than I wanted to admit.

I winced as her magic worked on my damaged flesh. It didn't exactly hurt, but it was uncomfortable. Like taking a dip in icy cold water and then immediately splashing into a hot bath. The pins and needles feeling sent a shock to my nerves and my brain saying something was wrong.

No shit, brain. Thanks for reminding me.

But doing this meant I could fight again, and Dro could feel like she had helped me when she hadn't been strong enough to kill the monster herself.

She moved onto the back of my head and I couldn't help but stiffen. It just felt so *wrong*.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay," I told her, forcing my shoulders to drop and relax. "It just feels weird."

Soon enough, Dro had finished healing my wounds. Aside from the dirt and bloodstains on my clothes, it was impossible to tell I'd had been in a fight. Even though she only had a few minor scratches, I made her heal herself. I'd been overly protective even when we were kids, and it had only gotten worse as we got older and our lives spiraled out of control. There was nothing I wouldn't do for Dro. Nothing I wouldn't steal, no law I wouldn't break, no monster or man I wouldn't kill.

I would burn the world to a cinder to save Dro.

After she healed and I'd concealed as much of the blood as I could, I rearranged the bag on my back and started walking out of the alley with my strange little sister behind me. The town was small and while the fire crews were on their way, it would take the sheriffs a few more minutes to get here.

More than enough time for me to steal a car and find somewhere else for us to run. When Dro had a nightmare, it meant monsters were close. I didn't want to get into another fight if I could avoid it, even if they weren't the things I feared the most.

The monsters scared me. The cartel and the federal Marshals hunting us scared me.

But Dro scared me more.