

CHAPTER ONE

GREEN BAY, WISCONSIN. SEVERAL YEARS AGO.

P AWLY TROTTED DOWN THE hallway while the bathroom door closed behind her. She stopped short after rounding the corner, finding the booth she'd been sharing with her brother and their friends empty. Along with the rest of the restaurant.

Tommy had some nerve. First, he had insisted she chug the first decent *affogato* they had served her after three times trying, just so they could go. And now he had coaxed their friends into ditching her. All because she wanted to pee before they left?

I know where you sleep, brother dear...

"I'm locking up the front door, miss," came their waiter's voice from behind her.

She turned and watched their waiter shuffle past, a bus tray in his hands. Dirty dishes clinked together as he set the tray down on their table. "I let your friends out the back. Here, let me show you."

A moment later Pawly stepped across the threshold into the alleyway behind the restaurant. She slid her hoodie off her shoulders and tied its arms together around her waist.

“Good luck to you all on the ice tomorrow,” their waiter said from behind the massive steel door. “Come see us again during next year’s tournament.”

The door’s hinges creaked until the thing slammed shut with a hollow *ka-thunk*. Darkness enveloped Pawly save for a small strip of stars twinkling high overhead between buildings and a flickering lamp opposite the alley from her.

Lana leaned up against a service door beneath it, twiddling at the dark curls above her ear with one finger. “Told them you wouldn’t be long, but they wouldn’t listen.” Pawly’s friend and teammate flipped her cell phone closed and nodded toward the street. “They’re over there.”

Pawly glanced over to the sidewalk where Tommy stood beside Lana’s cousin, Dominik, and clicked her tongue. “It was your idea we come here for our post-game hang out in the first place,” she said, stomping over to them. Then she drew back and slugged her brother in the shoulder as hard as she could. “What’s your damn hurry, anyway?”

“Hey, that *hurt!*” Tommy shook his wavy, red hair from his eyes and rubbed at his shoulder. “But worth it. Check it out.” He pointed at an orange splotch creeping across the moon’s face.

Pawly sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I thought the eclipse was *tomorrow* night.”

“While you were in the bathroom, our waiter said it was actually tonight.”

A Halloween eclipse. Of course. That explained the people dressed in crazy robes they had glimpsed on their way to the Resch Center earlier, laying out stones in a circle between two storefronts. Surely some sort of Wiccan high holiday or something.

She *tsked* and gave the moon a dismissive wave. “Our coaches told us all to keep our minds on our games tomorrow. Not stand around with eyes on the skies. Or heads in the clouds.”

“‘Our games *tomorrow*.’ Not today,” Tommy replied crossing his arms over his lanky chest. “Bad enough I’ve had to suffer through a hundred tellings already of your last-second slap shot story...”

“Coach told us to review our offensive plays, you know,” Lana said and sauntered up behind them.

Pawly slapped the taller girl on the shoulder. “That’s right, Lana. And everybody loves a comeback story like ours.”

Tommy sneered and tugged at the corner of his rectangular-framed glasses. “Says the captain of the team who barely scraped their way out of the loser’s bracket because *she* wanted to show off.”

Pawly blew a raspberry at him. Who was he to criticize her college placement strategy? She’d had everyone in the stands eating out of her palm by the time she sewed up her hat trick, putting her team ahead by a goal with a mere four seconds remaining in the third period. Surely there were big school scouts out there among them.

“Think we can still catch the eclipse, Stick Magnet?” Dominik asked with a nod toward Tommy. “Might be cutting it close.”

Lana waved her arm toward the throngs lining the street. “Your campground’s along this road, right outside of town. But many of the streets around here are closed off for the masquerade block party. Longer we wait, the easier it’ll be for your folks’ friends to get their RV out of here.”

Pawly glanced down at her watch. Not quite ten before nine. “Mom told us to meet her and Dad at nine p.m. sharp.”

Tommy laced his fingers together behind his head. “Mr. Biggs is a Navy man. He knows I might well be on NROTC sea duty halfway

around the world by the time the next total comes around. He won't let us miss this one."

Dominik glanced up at the sky between towering walls of bricked-over windows and ran a hand through his dark, spiky hair. "Let's hedge our bets, dude. If we split up, we can likely get your telescope set up in time. But only if we go like, you know, right *now*."

Pawly shook her head after Dominik and Tommy turned her way.

Dorks.

"Knock it off with the puppy eyes, both of you." She poked Tommy in the chest with one finger. "All right, I'll go run interference with Mom. But it's gonna cost you."

Tommy peered over the top of his glasses at her. "How much, exactly?"

"As I recall, it's my week to do dishes after we get back to Norfolk," Pawly replied, jamming her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "But not anymore, right?"

His freckles nearly disappeared as he flushed. "A whole *week*? SATs are coming up, you know. We gotta knuckle under and study. Can't much help you do that every night after dinner if I'm up to my elbows in dish soap."

"Hey, I'm behind practicing for my *cho dan* test, remember?" Pawly narrowed her eyes. "Besides, heaven forbid Mom get the idea you went and blew off our check-in."

Tommy studied the concrete at his feet and flexed his fingers. "Fine. Deal."

The edges of Pawly's mouth drew up into a satisfied smirk. "Didn't *think* you'd want to wax the *dojang* floor with a cotton ball after we got home."

"Come with me, Pawly," Lana said, flashing Tommy a sly smile. "I can show you a short cut to The Packing House."

“Thanks, Lana. But isn’t that out of your way?”

“Not at all. Dominik’s folks and mine are together at a pizza joint right down the street from there.”

“Think you guys could ask Mr. Biggs to swing past our grandma’s house afterward?”

“I don’t see why not, Nik. Come to think of it, it’s on the way to the campground.” Tommy jabbed his thumb at Pawly. “But don’t ask me what *she’ll* try to extort from you in return.”

Pawly batted her eyelashes and tugged at her fat pigtailed. “Oh, I would never dream of charging *friends*,” she replied in a syrupy voice. “I only do business with family.”

Tommy shot his sister a sideways glance and pushed his glasses back atop his nose. “So that’s what you call it, huh? Mind you don’t forget your violin case in your locker, then.”



PAWLY STUMBLED TO A stop and cupped her hands to the sides of her mouth. “Lana, wait!”

The other girl trotted in a circle and strode up beside her. “What...what is it?” she said between heavy breaths, hands resting on her knees.

Pawly shivered and glanced down at her freckled forearms. The hairs there all stood straight up despite the unseasonably mild night air. She rubbed at her biceps, recalling a similar all-over creepy feeling from a few years back. Right before the hospital called telling her mother a car had skidded through a stop light. Straight into Tommy’s bike.

“I...I have to go back.”

Lana straightened and put her hands on her hips. “What for?”

Pawly chewed at her lip.

It’s a twins thing, Lana. You wouldn’t understand.

Pawly nodded to the mouth of the alleyway. “The Packing House is that way, right?”

“Yeah. Through the parking lot and across the street. Can’t miss it.”

“Go on ahead to the pizza place and find your folks. If Dominik doesn’t show in fifteen minutes, come looking for us. All of you.”

Lana cocked an eyebrow. “What’s going on?” She gasped. “You don’t think the boys are hurt or in trouble or something like—”

“I don’t know!” Pawly buried her face in her hands and shook her head. “I just...just have a...feeling, you know?” She dropped her hands to her sides and met Lana’s gaze.

Don’t ask me to explain, Lana. I’m not sure I even could.

The taller girl wrung her hands and hunched forward. “Stop it, you’re...you’re creeping me out. Look, maybe if we went together, then we could...wait, what’s this?”

Pawly held out a business card in front of her, motioning her friend to take it. “The contact number here for my mom’s *dojang* is her cell phone. Have your folks call mine should you come for us.”

Lana squinted at the card and pursed her lips. “Who’s ‘Alex?’”

“My mom. Her name is ‘Aleška.’ It’s Polish.” Pawly turned and sprinted up the alley the way they had come before Lana could say any more.

Moments later, Dominik’s voice trailed off from around an alleyway corner.

“Behind you, Stick Mag—*oof!*”

Pawly rounded the corner in time to see Tommy spiral headfirst into a pile of broken pallets. Her brother’s teammate stood with his back to

the brick wall across the alley from her, arms pinned by a pair of men dressed in black.

“Shut up, I said!” roared a third black-clad man before driving a softball-sized fist into Dominik’s stomach. With a moan, his chin slumped to his chest.

All the muscles in Pawly’s face stretched taut. It hurt to even breathe. Every follicle in her skin tingled. Bright red poured in from the edges of her vision until only the eyes of Dominik’s attacker remained, leering at her from behind a ski mask. She had no idea who these guys were. But she knew for certain they were all about to hurt.

“Coward!” she screamed in a raspy voice she barely recognized as hers.

She dashed to his flank to coax him into lunging for her. After planting her foot, she launched herself sideways. She braced her fists and drove her elbow up into a pressure point below the thug’s ribcage. His breath rushed out with a satisfying *whoosh* before planting his face on the pockmarked concrete.

Pawly bounded atop a trash can and pushed off toward the two men holding Dominik. One dropped her friend’s wrist and ducked. She rolled sideways over her shoulder. Upon impact with the wall, she slammed her heels down hard on the other man’s face before he could do likewise. Then she looped one arm around Dominik’s shoulder and drilled her elbow into the crouching man’s temple.

Momentum carried the three of them tumbling across the alleyway. They crashed into a recycling bin, sending discarded plastic bottles flying everywhere.

Pawly sprang to her feet after working herself loose from Dominik, prepared to defend them. But their remaining opponent just lay there, unmoving. She let out a long sigh and the red haze retreated, enabling her to see clearly once more.

While the tingling in her skin subsided, Pawly rolled Dominik onto his back. “Nik! Nik, can you hear me?” she shrieked as she patted at the sides of his face.

“You bitch!” came a voice from behind before Dominik could answer.

Pawly lurched to the side, landing on her elbows and one knee. Adrenaline and muscle memory took over as she pulled her other knee to her chest and thrust her leg out behind her with all her might.

Her attacker responded with a pained shriek when her heel slammed into the man’s groin. After the thug collapsed to the pavement, a groan from the pile of pallets drew her attention. Pawly turned to see Tommy bat splinters of wood away from his face with one arm and sit up.

“Where’s Lana?”

“Sent her to find her folks, don’t worry. Are you okay?”

“I’ll live,” her brother replied with a nod.

Pawly stepped over to where Dominik’s attacker lay whimpering, both knees drawn to his chin. “So will this asshole, I suppose.” She reached down and yanked at the top of the man’s ski mask. “Whoever he is.”

Wood debris crashed and clattered about as Tommy sprang to his feet. “Holy shit, Pawly. That’s Neil Symers!”

She made a face and glared down at the man. “And he is...?”

“The Bobcats’ left wing.”

“The *Bobcats*?”

Pawly swore and knelt beside the man she had clubbed in the head with her elbow a moment before. “How about this guy?” she asked after exposing his face for Tommy to see.

“Derek Witherspoon. Their center and team captain.”

“And him?”

“Jace Rzycki. Starting goalie.”

She let out a disgusted sigh and stood. “These pricks couldn’t wait until *tomorrow* for your team to kick their—?”

The haze percolated back into Pawly’s field of vision like a pot of water beginning to boil. *If the whole fucking squad is after us, then Lana might be...*

“Shit, guys. These two know who we are!”

Pawly turned and saw three more young men rush out from behind a dumpster, their hoods removed. Her skin pricked all over her body while she fixed her narrowed eyes on them. Blood oozed from where her nails dug into her palms as a primal scream ripped from her throat.

Then everything went red.



SHE WAS RUNNING, MUSCLES in her legs and arms working their rhythmic pattern. Though Pawly sensed her eyes were wide open from the wind rushing past her face, she couldn’t see anything except hazy red silhouettes all around her. Her chest tightened and her heart raced. An instant later her vision returned, as if someone had flicked on a light switch. She gasped, able to make out the raised lettering on each brick lining the alleyway walls as she ran past. From pavement to roofline, every single one of them.

Ahead she saw four or five boys running, who she took to be Bobcats. Each wore a black sweatshirt with the exact same stitch pattern connecting the sleeves to the back. A growl rumbled forth from deep within her chest after they rounded a corner, but it was not of her doing. Every part of her seemed to act of its own accord, as if by

instinct, with Pawly's consciousness unable to do anything about it. She was just along for the ride.

Pawly figured she should be panicking about now, but found herself consumed by a different sensation altogether. The tingling in her skin from earlier penetrated all the way through to her bones, invigorating her, refreshing her, comforting her. As if her body was reassuring her conscious mind that it knew exactly what it was doing.

The boys skidded to a halt short of the chain link spanning the alley. They turned as one toward Pawly, faces twisted like the Edvard Munch painting featured last week in Sister Agnes' art history class. Their cries became ever more desperate as Pawly crept closer to them. One even knelt before her, clenching his hands together as he wailed.

She stopped before the kneeling boy and yanked him to his feet by a fistful of his shirt. Though he had to weigh much more than her, he felt no heavier than the body pillow laid across her bed at home. Ignoring his panicked gibberish, Pawly fixed her eyes upon her reflection in the boy's mirrored shades. Her throat clenched, squeezing out something between a grunt and a squeak.

No, wait, that can't be...

A monster stared back at her. Gray fur covered its eyes and forehead like a mask. Snowy white surrounded the thing's mouth and chin. Long, thin wisps of hair stuck straight out from either side of its nose.

Anger welled up within her. Had the bastards dressed her up like their fucking team *mascot* while she'd been out? She jerked the boy's face close until pain erupted across her face. With a yowl, she dropped the boy and covered her bruised nose with both hands. And noticed the black, fleshy pads covering her palms for the first time.

Pawly drew one hand to her face. She cringed after her fingers brushed the side of what felt like a snout, jutting forth from where her nose had been a moment before. She held out her hand, palm facing

her, and flexed her fingers. Long, black claws emerged one by one from each fingertip.

Her lips drew tight alongside the sides of her muzzle. She felt the night air upon her gums and realized she was grinning. And that her body was within her control once more.

Pawly narrowed her eyes and brandished her claws beside the boy's face. "Not so tough *now*, are you?" she tried to say, but all that came out was a ragged snarl. It must've sounded fierce all the same, since the boy launched into a new round of hysterics. After dropping him, the punk collapsed to the concrete and clutched his knees to his chest.

She drew a breath and nearly gagged. A pungent odor flooded her nostrils, coming from a puddle growing around the seat of the boy's pants.

Something landed beside her. Pawly drew back by instinct and glimpsed the faint residual of a female form occupying that space only a split-second before. Stars appeared an instant later after something whacked the back of her head but good. She spun around to face her attacker, her body asserting control over itself once more. "M-Mom?" Pawly's mind commanded her mouth to say, but it could only manage a pained whimper.

What is she doing here? Oh, God, don't let me hurt her. Wait, does she even recognize me?

"Pawly! Can you hear me?" came her mother's voice, clear and strong as she brushed her blond bangs away from her eyes.

"Yes, Mom, I can! What the hell is happening?"

Her mother's brow knit. Obviously, she didn't speak Tasmanian Devil either.

Mr. Biggs' dark features emerged from the shadows a moment later. He called out to the punks and waved an arm toward the alleyway behind him, as if he were helping them try to...

Pawly whirled about and slashed at the boy trying to tiptoe past her. He shrieked and dropped to the pavement, clutching at the gash on his arm. Pawly joined him after a blow landed behind her right ear, twice as hard as the last one. She howled and threw both arms over her head.

The exhilarating scent of fresh blood stirred up by the boys' flight from the alley set the gray hair covering Pawly's arms and legs tingling. Pain forgotten, she pounced and slammed Mr. Biggs into a brick wall as he passed with all the force her body could muster. Pawly then took off down the alley after the boys, her mother hollering something after her she couldn't quite make out. She turned her head enough to glimpse Mom following her. And closing fast.

Pawly pressed forward, the scent of blood ahead and a loud yowl from behind egging her on. Her instincts took over, unwilling to permit any interloper deny her *her* quarry. The red fog crept toward the center of her vision with every step, every leap. With a moan, Pawly at last surrendered herself to the electrifying sensations washing over her.