

from the author of The Unearthly and The Vanishing Girl

THE BARGAINER SERIES BOOK ONE

rhapsodic

LAURA THALASSA

make

a

deal

if

you

dare

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Glossary.](#)

PROLOGUE

May, eight years ago

THERE'S BLOOD ON my hands, blood between my toes, blood speckled in my hair. It's splashed across my chest, and to my horror, I can taste a few droplets on my lips.

There's far too much of it staining the kitchen's polished floors. No one can survive that much blood loss, not even the monster at my feet.

My entire body shakes, adrenaline still pumping through my veins. I drop the broken bottle, the glass shattering as it hits the ground, and fall to my knees.

Blood soaking into my jeans.

I stare at my tormentor. His glassy eyes have lost their focus, and his skin its color. If I were a braver person, I would've placed my ear to his chest to just make sure that his cold, blackened heart had stilled. I can't bear to touch him, even now. Even if he can no longer hurt me.

He's gone. He's finally gone.

A shuddering sob pushes its way out of me. For the first time in what seems like an eternity I can breathe. I sob again. God it feels good. This time tears follow.

I'm not supposed to feel relief. I know that. I know people are supposed to mourn the loss of life. But I can't. Not him, anyway. Maybe that makes me evil. All I know is that tonight, I actually faced my fear and I survived it.

He's dead. He can't hurt me anymore. He's dead.

It takes only a few more seconds for that realization to hit me.

Oh, God. He's *dead*.

My hands begin to shake. There's a body and blood, so much blood. I'm drenched in it. It speckles my homework, and one fat droplet obscures Lincoln's face on my history textbook.

A harsh shiver courses through my body.

I stare down at my hands, feeling like Lady Macbeth. *Out damned spot!* I dash to the kitchen sink, leaving a trail of bloody footprints in my wake. Oh, God, I need to get his blood off of me now.

I rinse my hands furiously. It stains my cuticles and embeds itself beneath my fingernails. I can't get it out, but it doesn't matter because I notice the red liquid coats my arms. So I scrub those. But then it's on my shirt, and I can see it congealing in my hair.

I whimper as I do so. It doesn't matter. It's not coming out.

Fuck.

I lean over the granite countertop and assess the pink mixture of blood and water that stains it, the floor, and the sink.

Can't hide from this.

Reluctantly, my eyes slide to the body. An illogical part of me expects my stepfather to sit back up and attack me. When he doesn't do just that, I begin to think again.

What ... do I do now? Call the police? The justice system protects kids. I'll be okay, they'll just call me in for questioning.

But will they protect me? It's not like I killed just anyone. I killed one of the wealthiest, most untouchable men alive. It doesn't matter that it was self-defense. Even in death, men like him get away with the unthinkable all the time.

And I'd have to talk about it—all of it.

Nausea rolls through me.

But I have no choice, I have to turn myself in—unless ...

The monster bleeding out in our kitchen knew a man who knew a man. Someone who could clean up a messy situation. I only had to sell a bit of my soul to speak to him.

No cops, no questions, no foster care or jail.

You know what? He can have whatever's left of my soul. All I want is out.

I dash to the junk drawer, my trembling hands having trouble opening it. Once I do, it's short work grabbing the business card and reading over the peculiar contact information. There's a single sentence written on it; all I have to do is recite it out loud.

Fear washes through me. If I do this, there's no going back.

My gaze sweeps over the kitchen. *It's already too late to go back.*

I squeeze the card in my hand. Taking a deep breath, I do as the business card instructs.

“Bargainer, I would like to make a deal.”

CHAPTER 1

Present

A FILE FOLDER drops to the desk in front of me. “You’ve got mail, bitch.”

I lower my mug of steaming coffee from my mouth, my eyes flicking up from my laptop.

Temperance “Temper” Darling—swear to God that’s her name—my business partner and best friend, stands on the other side of my desk, a coy smile on her face.

Temper drops into the seat across from me.

I kick my ankles off my desk, reaching across it to drag the file closer to me.

She nods to the folder. “This one’s easy money, girl.”

They’re all easy money, and she knows that.

Her eyes drift around my cupboard-sized office, the twin of hers.

“How much is the client offering?” I ask, propping my feet up once more on the edge of my desk.

“Twenty grand for a single meeting with the target—and she already knows when and where you’re to intercept the target.”

I whistle. Easy money indeed.

“Rendezvous time with the target?” I ask.

“Eight p.m. tonight at Flamencos. It’s a fancy-ass restaurant, FYI, so—” her gaze drops to my scuffed up boots, “you can’t wear *that*.”

I roll my eyes.

“Oh, and he’ll be there with friends.”

And here I was looking forward to getting home relatively early.

“Do you know what the client wants?” I ask.

“The client believes her uncle, our target, is abusing his guardianship of his mother, her grandmother. The two are going to court over the issue; she wants to save some legal bills and get a confession straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Already, a familiar exhilaration has my skin beginning to glow. This is the chance to potentially help an old lady out and punish the worst kind of criminal—one who preys

on his own family.

Temper notices my glowing skin, her gaze transfixed. She reaches out before she remembers herself. Not even she is immune to my glamour.

She shakes her head. "Girl, you are a twisted motherfucker."

That is God's honest truth.

"Takes one to know one."

She snorts. "You can call me the Wicked Witch of the West."

But Temper's not a witch. She's something far more powerful.

She checks her phone. "Shit," she says, "I'd love to stay and chat, but my perp's going to be at Luca's Deli in less than an hour, and with L.A. lunch hour traffic ... I really don't want to be forced to part the 405 like the Red Sea. Shit like that looks suspicious." She stands, shoving her phone to her pocket. "When's Eli getting back?"

Eli, the bounty hunter who sometimes works for us and sometimes works for the Politia, the supernatural police force. Eli, who's also my boyfriend.

"Sorry Temper, but he'll be gone for another week." I relax a little as I say the words.

That's wrong, right? To enjoy the fact that your boyfriend's gone and you get time alone?

It's probably also wrong to find his affection stifling. I'm afraid of what it means, especially because we shouldn't be dating in the first place.

First rule in the book is to not get involved with colleagues. One evening of afterwork drinks six months ago, and I broke that rule like it'd never been there in the first place. And I broke it again, and again, and again until I found myself in a relationship I wasn't sure I even wanted.

"Ugh," Temper says, her 'fro bouncing a little as she leans her head back, her eyes moving heavenward. "The bad guys always love to stir shit up when Eli's gone." She heads for my door, and with a parting look, she leaves my office.

I stare at the file a moment, then I pick it up.

The case isn't anything special. There isn't anything particularly cruel or difficult about it. Nothing to make me reach for the Johnnie Walker I keep in one of my desk drawers. I find I want to anyway, that my hand itches to pull the bottle of it out.

Too many bad people in this world.

My eyes flick to the onyx beads that coil around my left arm as I drum my fingers against the table. The beads seem to swallow the light rather than refract it.

Too many bad people, and too many memories worth forgetting.

THE SWANKY RESTAURANT I walk into at eight p.m. sharp is low lit, candles flickering dimly from each two-seater table. Flamencos is clearly a place rich people come to romance each other.

I follow the waiter, my heels clicking softly against the hardwood floor as he leads me to a private room.

Twenty grand. It's a crap ton of money. But I'm not doing this for the payout. The truth is that I'm a connoisseur of addictions, and this is one of my favorite.

The waiter opens the door to the private room, and I enter.

Inside, a group of people chat amicably around a large table. Their voices quiet a little as soon as the door clicks shut behind me. I make no move towards the table.

My eyes land on Micky Fugue, a balding man in his late forties. My target.

My skin begins to glow as I let the siren in me surface. "Everybody out." My voice is melodious, unearthly. Compelling.

Almost as one, the guests stand, their eyes glazed.

This is my beautiful, dreadful power. A siren's power. To compel the willing—and unwilling—to do and believe whatever it is I wish.

Glamour. It's illegal. Not that I really give a damn.

"The evening went great," I tell them as they pass. "You'd all love to do this sometime in the future. Oh—and I was never here."

When Micky walks by me, I grab his upper arm. "Not you."

He stops, caught in the web of my voice, while the rest of the guests file out. His glazed eyes flicker for one moment, and in that instant, I see his confusion as his awareness fights my strange magic. Then it's gone.

"Let's sit down." I direct him back to his seat, then slide into the one next to him. "You can leave once we're finished."

I'm still glowing, my power mounting with every passing second. My hands tremble just the slightest as I fight my other urges—sex and violence. Consider me a modern day Jekyll and Hyde. Most of the time I'm simply Callie the PI. But when I need to use my power, another side of me surfaces. The siren is the monster inside of me; she wants to take, and take, and take. To wreak havoc, to feast on her victims' fear and lust.

I'd be hard-pressed to admit it out loud, but controlling her is hard.

I grab a piece of bread from one of the baskets at the center of the table, and I slide over a small plate one of the guests hasn't touched. After I pour olive oil, then balsamic vinegar onto the plate, I dip the bread into it and take a bite.

I eye the man next to me. That tailored suit he wears hides the paunch of his belly. On his wrist he wears a Rolex. The file said he was an accountant. I know they make decent money, especially here in LA, but they don't make money this good.

"Why don't we get right to the point?" I say. As I talk, I set up my phone so that the camera records our exchange. For good measure I pull out a handheld tape recorder and turn it on.

"I'm going to record this exchange. Please say yes out loud and give your consent to this interview."

Micky's brows stitch together as he fights the glamour in my voice. It's no use. "Yes," he finally says between clenched teeth. This guy is no fool; he might not understand what's happening to him, but he knows he's about to get played. He knows he's *already* getting played.

As soon as he agrees, I begin.

"Have you been embezzling money from your mother?" His senile, terminally ill mother. I really shouldn't have read the file. I'm not supposed to get emotionally involved in cases, and yet when it comes to children and the elderly, I always seem to find myself getting angry.

Tonight's no exception.

I take a bite of the bread, watching him.

He opens his mouth—

"From This moment until the end of our interview you will tell the *truth*," I command, the words lilting off my tongue.

He stops, and whatever he is about to say dies on his lips. I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't. Now that he can't lie, it's only a matter of time before he's forced to admit the truth.

Mickey fights my glamour, though it's useless. He's starting to sweat, despite his placid features.

I continue eating as though nothing was amiss.

Color stains his cheeks. Finally, he chokes out, "Yes—how the fuck did you—"

"Silence." Immediately he stops speaking.

This sicko. Stealing money from his dying mother. A sweet old lady who's biggest failure was birthing this loser.

"How long have you been doing this?"

His eyes flicker with anger. "Two years," he grits out against his will. He glares at me.

I take my time eating the last of the bread.

"Why did you do it?" I finally ask.

"She wasn't using it and I needed it. I'm going to give it back," he says.

"Oh, are you?" I raise my eyebrows. "And how much have you... *borrowed*?" I ask.

Several silent seconds tick by. Mickey's ruddy cheeks are turning a deeper and deeper shade of pink. Finally he says, "I don't know."

I lean in close. "Give me your best guess."

"Maybe two hundred and twenty thousand."

Just hearing that number sends a slice of anger through me. "And when were you going to pay your mother back?" I ask.

"N-now," he stammers.

And I'm the Queen of Sheba.

"How much money do you have available in your accounts at the moment?" I ask.

He reaches for his glass of water and takes a deep swallow before answering. "I-I like to invest."

"How much money?"

"A little over twelve thousand."

Twelve thousand dollars. He's emptied his mother's coffers and here he is living like a king. But behind this façade, the man only has twelve thousand dollars at hand. And I bet that money will get liquidated soon as well. These types of men have butterfingers; money slips right through them.

I give him a disappointed look. "That's not the right answer. Now," I say, the siren urging me to be cruel, "where is the money?"

His sweaty upper lip twitches before he answers. "Gone."

I reach over and turn off the camera and the recorder. My client got the confession she wanted. Too bad for Mickey, I'm not done with him.

"No," I say, "it's not." Those few people who know me well enough would recognize my tone's changed.

Again his brows draw together as his confusion peeks through.

I touch his lapel. "This suit is nice—really nice. And your watch—Rolexes aren't cheap, are they?"

The glamour makes him shake his head.

"No," I agree. "See, for men like you, money doesn't just vanish. It goes towards... what did you call it?" I look around for the word before snapping my fingers.

“*Investments*. I moves around a bit, but that’s all.” I lean in close. “We’re going to move it around a little more.”

His eyes widen. Now I see Micky—not the puppet controlled by my magic, but the Micky he was before I walked into this room. Someone shrewd, someone weak. He’s fully aware of what’s happening.

“Wh—who are you?” Oh, the fear in his eyes. The siren can’t resist that. I reach over and pet his cheek. “I-I’m going to—”

“You’re going to sit back and listen, Micky,” I say, “and that’s all you’re going to do because right now, you—are—*powerless*.”

CHAPTER 2

May, eight years ago

THE AIR WAVERS in my kitchen, like I'm staring at a mirage, then suddenly, he's here, filling the room like he owns it.

The Bargainer.

Holy shit, it worked.

All I can see of him is a good six feet of man and a whole lot of white blond hair tied together in a leather thong. The Bargainer's back is to me.

A whistle breaks the silence. "That is one dead man," he says, staring at my handiwork. His heavy boots clink as he approaches the body.

He wears black on black, his shirt stretched tight over his wide shoulders. My eyes drop to his left arm, which is covered in tattoos.

Callie, what did you get yourself into?

The toe of the Bargainer's boot nudges the corpse. "Hmm, I stand corrected. Mostly dead."

That snaps me out of it.

"What?" He can't be alive. The fear that thrums through my veins is a living, breathing thing.

"It will cost you probably more than you're willing to offer, but I can still revive him."

Revive him? What is this dude smoking?

"I don't want him *alive*," I say.

The Bargainer turns, and for the first time ever I get a good look at him.

I just stare and stare. I'd imagined a creep, but wicked though the man in front of me might be, he is no creep.

Not even close.

The Bargainer is gorgeous in a way that only a few rare men are. He's not rugged, despite the strong jaw and hard gleam in his eyes. There's a symmetry to his face, a lushness in each one of his features that you see more often in women than men.

High, prominent cheekbones, wicked, curving lips, gleaming silver eyes. Not that he looks feminine. That's impossible with his broad, muscular frame and shit-kicking attire.

He's simply a pretty man.

A *really* pretty man.

He sizes me up. "No."

I stare at him quizzically. "No what?"

"I don't do business with minors."

The air shimmers and, *ohmygod*, he's leaving.

"Wait—wait!" I reach out. Now it's not just the air that shimmers. It's my skin. It's been doing that a lot lately—glowing softly.

He pauses to stare at my arm. Something passes through those eyes of his, something wilder than shock, something more untamed than excitement. The room around him seems to darken, and at his back, I swear I catch sight of something large and sinuous.

As quickly as the moment comes, it's gone.

His eyes narrow. "What are you?"

My hand drops. "*Please*," I beg. "I really need to make a deal."

The Bargainer sighs, sounding all sorts of put out. "Listen, I don't make deals with minors. Go to the police." Despite his tone, he's still staring at my hand, now wearing a distant, troubled expression.

"I *can't*." If only he knew. "Please, help me."

His gaze moves from my hand to my face.

The Bargainer gnashes his teeth together, scowling like he smells something bad. Stares at me in all my bloody, disheveled glory. More teeth gnashing.

His eyes sweep the room, lingering on my stepfather. What does he see? Can he tell it was an accident?

My teeth begin to chatter. I hug my arms tightly to my chest.

In spite of himself, his eyes return to me, his gaze briefly softening before it hardens all over again.

"Who is he?"

I swallow.

"Who. Is. He?" the Bargainer repeats.

"My stepfather," I croak.

He stares at me, his gaze unflinching. "Did he deserve it?"

I release a shuddering breath, a tear slipping out in spite of myself. Wordlessly, I nod.

The Bargainer scrutinizes me for a long time, his gaze moving to the tear sliding down my cheek.

He glances away, grimacing. The man rubs a hand over his mouth, paces two steps away before turning back to me. “*Fine*,” he rasps. “I’ll help you at”—more teeth gnashing and another raking gaze which pauses on the tear on my cheek—“*no cost*.” He practically chokes on the words. “Just this once. Consider this my pro bono for the century.”

I open my mouth to thank him, but he raises his hand, his eyes pinching shut. “*Don’t*.”

When he opens his eyes, they pass over the room. I feel the magic pulse out of him. I know about this side of our world—the supernatural side. My stepfather built his empire on his magical ability.

However, I’ve never seen *this* kind of magic in action—magic that can make things inexplicably occur. I gasp as the blood dissolves from the floor, and then the countertop, and then my clothes, and hair, and hands.

The broken bottle follows. One moment it’s there, the next, it vanishes. Whatever enchantment this is, it tickles my skin as it passes through the room.

Once he’s done with the crime scene, the Bargainer heads towards the body.

He pauses when he gets there, peering curiously down at the dead man. Then he stills. “Is that who I think it is?”

Now is probably not a good time to tell the Bargainer that I offed *the* Hugh Anders, the most powerful stock market analyst out there and the man who, for the right price, could tell you just about anything you wanted to know concerning the future. When a drug deal was going to go down, whether the threat on your life was harmless or real, if you were going to get caught for the death of an enemy. If he wasn’t the world’s best seer, he was at least one of the richest. Not that it saved him from death.

Oh the irony.

The Bargainer lets loose a string of curses.

“Fucking cursed sirens,” he mutters. “Your bad luck’s rubbing off on me.”

I flinch, well acquainted with sirens’ predisposition for misfortune. It’s what landed my mother an unwanted pregnancy and an early death.

“Have any relatives?” he asks.

I bite my lower lip and shake my head, hugging myself tighter. It's just little old me, myself, and I in the world.

He swears again.

"How old *are* you?"

"I'll be sixteen in two weeks." The birthday I'd been waiting *years* for. In the supernatural community, sixteen was the legal age of adulthood. But now that very fact could be used against me. Once I hit that magical number, I could be tried as an adult.

I'd been two weeks away from freedom. *Two weeks*. And then this happened.

"Finally," he sighs, "*some* good news. Pack your bags. Tomorrow you're moving to the Isle of Man."

I blink, my mind slow to catch up. "What? Wait—*tomorrow*?" I'd be moving? And so soon? My head spins at the thought.

"Peel Academy has summer sessions starting in a couple weeks," he says.

Located on the Isle of Man, an island smack dab between Ireland and Great Britain, Peel Academy was *the* premiere supernatural boarding school. I'd been dreaming of going for so long. And now I would be.

"You're going to attend classes starting then, and you're not going to tell anyone that you killed Hugh fucking Anders."

I flinch at that.

"Unless," he adds, "you'd prefer that I leave you here with this mess."

Oh God. "No—please stay!"

Another long-suffering sigh. "I'll deal with the body and the authorities. If anyone asks, he had a heart attack."

The Bargainer eyes me curiously before remembering that he's annoyed with me. He snaps his fingers, and the body levitates. It takes several seconds to process the fact that a corpse is floating in my kitchen.

The Bargainer looks unfazed. "There's something you should know."

"Uh-huh?" My gaze is fixed on the floating body. So creepy.

"Eyes on me," the Bargainer snaps.

My attention snaps to him.

"There's a chance my magic will wear off over time. I might be powerful, but that pretty little curse all you sirens have hanging over your heads might override even my magic." Somehow he manages to come off as arrogant even as he's telling me his powers might be inadequate.

“What happens if that’s the case?” I ask.

The Bargainer smirks. Huge asshole. I’ve already got him profiled.

“Then you best start utilizing your womanly wiles, cherub,” he says, his eyes flicking over me. “You’ll be needing them.”

With that parting line, the Bargainer disappears, along with the man I killed.

Present

POWER.

That is the heart of my addiction. Power. I was once crushed under the weight of it, and it almost swallowed me whole.

But that was a long time ago. And now I’m the formidable force.

The restaurant’s private room glows softly under the candlelight. I lean in close to Micky. “So this is what’s going to happen. You are going to return that money you embezzled back to your mother.”

His previously vacant eyes focus on me. If looks could kill ...

“Fuck. You.”

I smile, and I know I look predatory.

“Listen closely, because this is the only warning I’m going to give you: I know you have no idea what I am. But I assure you, I can ruin your life, and I’m just enough of an asshole to consider it. So unless you want to lose everything you care about, you are going to be respectful.”

Regular mortals know that supernaturals exist, but we tend to separate ourselves from the non-magically gifted, simple reason being that fun shit like witch hunts tend to pop up when mortals get too intimidated by us supernaturals.

I reach for my purse.

“Now, because you can’t be a good son on your own, I’m going to help you,” I say conversationally. I pull out a pen and a series of documents my client gave me out of my bag.

Shoving Micky’s plate out of the way, I lay it out in front of him.

One is a written confession of guilt, and the other is a promissory note, both documents drafted by my client’s lawyer.

“You’re going to repay every penny you stole—with ten percent interest.”

Micky makes a small noise.

“Was that fifteen percent interest I heard?” He shakes his head furiously.

“That’s what I thought. Now, I’ll give you ten minutes to flip through the document, and then you’re going to sign it.”

I spend those ten minutes sampling the wine and food that Micky’s guests left behind, kicking my heels up because, ugh, *stilettos*.

When the time’s up, I collect the documents from Micky. As I flip through them, I peek over at the man himself. His face is now coated with an unhealthy sheen of sweat and I bet if he removed his dinner jacket, I’d see huge rings of it beneath his armpits.

I finish flipping through the document. Once I’m done, I slide them back in my purse.

“We’re almost done here.”

“Al-most?” He says the word like he’s never heard of it.

“You didn’t think I’d leave you to just a few paltry signatures did you?” I shake my head, and now my skin is doing more to illuminate the room than the low lighting is. The siren in me loves this. Toying with her victim. “Oh, Micky, no no no.”

And this is where I stop toying with Micky and go in for the kill. I lean forward, putting as much power into my voice as I can manage. “You are going to right your wrongs. You’re never going to do this ever again, and you are going to spend the rest of your life working to be a better person and earn your mother’s forgiveness.”

He nods his head.

I grab my purse. “Be a good son. If I hear you haven’t been—if I hear anything at all that reflects poorly on you—you’ll be seeing me again, and you don’t want that.”

He shakes his head, his expression vacant.

I stand. My work here is done.

A SINGLE COMMAND is all it takes.

Forget I exist. Poof, your memory scrubs away my existence.

Look away. Your eyes move everywhere but me.

Tell me your darkest secret. Your mouth and mind betray you.

Give me your riches. You’ll clean out our bank account in an instant.

Drown.

Drown. Drown. Drown. You die.

That was someone’s favorite back when the world was young, back when sirens got their reputation for coaxing sailors to their deaths.

Drown.

Sometimes, when I'm left alone to my own thoughts—which is fairly often—I wonder about those women, the ones who hung out on the rocks calling out to sailors and coaxing them to their deaths. Did it really happen that way? Did they want them to die? Why did they prey on those particular men? The myths never say.

I wonder if any of them were like me—whether their beauty made them victims long before it gave them power. Whether some sailor somewhere abused those women before they had a voice at all. Whether they grew angry and jaded like me and used their power to punish the guilty as payback.

I wonder how much of the tale is true, and how many of their victims were innocent.

I prey on bad men. This is my vendetta. My addiction.

I climb the staircase to my Malibu beach house, my feet sore from the hours spent standing in heels. In front of me, the slate grey paint of my house peels away from the wooden slats. Bright green mold grows along the roof's shingles. This is my perfectly imperfect home.

I step inside, and in here, the air smells like the ocean. My home is simple. It has three bedrooms, the tile countertops are chipped, and if you walk through it barefoot, you'll get sand between your toes. The living room and bedroom face the ocean, and the entire back wall in both rooms is nothing more than giant sliding glass doors that can open completely onto the backyard.

Beyond my small backyard, the world drops away. A wooden staircase winds its way down the coastal cliff my house is perched on, and at the bottom of it the icy Pacific Ocean kisses the sandy California shore—and your feet, if you let it.

This place is my sanctuary. I knew it the moment the real estate agent showed it to me two years ago.

I walk through my house in the dark, not bothering to flip on the lights as I strip my clothes off piece by piece. I leave them where they fall. Tomorrow I'll pick them up, but tonight I have a date with the sea, and then my bed.

Through my living room windows the moon shines brightly, and my heart is filled with such unending longing.

I've secretly been glad that Eli has to keep away from me until the full moon passes. As a lycanthrope, he has to stay away from me during the Sacred Seven, the week surrounding the full moon when he can't control his shift from man to wolf.

I have my own reasons for wanting to be alone around this time, reasons that have nothing to do with Eli and everything to do with my past.

I step out of my jeans as I enter my bedroom to grab my swimsuit. Just as I reach back to unclasp my bra, a shadow darker than the rest moves.

I stifle the shriek bubbling up in my throat. My hand gropes against the wall next to me until I find the light switch. I flip on the bedroom lights.

In front of me, lounging on my bed, is the Bargainer.

CHAPTER 3

October, eight years ago

“Hi, THIS IS Inspector Garrett Wade with the Politia. I’d like to ask you some questions regarding your father’s death ...”

My hands begin to shake as I listen to the message. The Politia is looking into this? They’re like the supernatural version of the FBI. Only scarier.

There were supposed to be no questions. The authorities were supposed to stay away. The Bargainer had made sure of that.

That pretty little curse all you sirens have hanging over your heads might override even my magic.

I sit heavily on my bed and rub my temples, phone clutched in my hand. Rain pelts against my dorm room window, obscuring my view of Peel Castle, the castle-turned-academy where all my classes are held.

It’s only been five months since that fateful night. *Five months.* Too short to enjoy my freedom, but too long to ever appear innocent to the authorities again.

I missed my opportunity the moment I took the Bargainer up on his offer.

Peel Academy and the life I’ve made here could be taken from me. All in an instant.

I take a deep breath.

The way I see it, I have three options. One, I can run away and give up the life I’ve made for myself. Two, I can call the officer back, go in for questioning, and hope for the best.

Or three, I can contact the Bargainer and have him fix this. Only this time, I’d owe him a debt.

It’s an easy choice.

I push off my bed and head to my closet. I pull out a shoebox from the top shelf and open it up. The Bargainer’s black business card lay hidden under other odds and ends, the bronze lettering somewhat faded since the first time I held it.