



CHAPTER ONE

I had to let the Beast feed tonight. I didn't want to, but if I didn't, what came next would be a lot worse.

I hurried along the rain-slicked Baltimore streets. The Inner Harbor area was still packed with people even though it was midnight. I wasn't here for one of its many bars or late-night eateries, though. It just happened to be between my apartment and the hospital where I worked.

I kept walking. It only took a few blocks past the Inner Harbor's more touristy area for the neighborhood to noticeably change. Abandoned buildings and iron-gated windows now dotted the rows of townhouses and mostly closed businesses. Foot traffic was also down unless you passed a bar. I was passing one now, and two twenty-something guys spilled out of it. With a sloppy smile, the brunet staggered after me.

"Hey, hot stuff, come here," he slurred.

"No thanks," I said firmly, and tucked some of my long, too-curly brown hair back into its ponytail.

"Come on!" he tried again.

Did he really think catcalling would work, especially on someone wearing medical scrubs? He was lucky I didn't take him up on his offer. Even now, my vision changed, showing red swirls haloing the catcaller's gloomy gray aura.

I tried to sidestep him, but he reached out and yanked me against him.

“Not so fast!” His hands ran down my sides, and—

Darkness stabbed out from my fingernails, turning them into sharp claws. I sank them into the catcaller. The Beast inside me clamped onto that supernatural tether, burning through the violence in the man’s psyche.

He screamed, and the red flares in his aura dimmed.

I snatched my hand away, shoving him and that inner Beast back. Otherwise, the Beast would consume the catcaller’s life force once it was done feasting on his violence.

The catcaller nearly fell. His friend caught him before he hit the pavement. My claws vanished with the same speed as the burn marks in my would-be groper’s skin.

“What the hell, Jackson?” his friend hissed, pulling the catcaller away. “Sorry, he’s drunk,” he said to me.

Jackson sagged in his friend’s grip. He was barely conscious from the Beast devouring his violent energy. The red flares were now gone from Jackson’s aura, too, leaving him haloed by what looked like an ashen cloak.

“What happened?” Jackson managed to mumble.

You became a snack, I thought grimly, increasing my pace as I walked away. *But unfortunately, I still need a meal.*

I never intended to be a nurse by day and a violence-eating vigilante by night, but here I was, twenty-six and doing both. Okay, a little more than both. I’d also given secret, supernatural assistance to a patient during my nursing shift tonight, even though doing so had consequences.

Desperate animals will gnaw off their own paw if left long enough in a trap. Well, *I* was the Beast’s trap, and using its power to heal made it desperate enough to gnaw through me unless I fed it what it craved most—violence.

I reached the next intersection, looking ahead to see if the Walk or Stop light was on. A bright light suddenly seared my vi-

sion. For a second, I thought it might be a passing car's headlights, and then I realized it belonged to a person.

That person moved out from behind a cluster of people waiting for the light to change. I expected to see a small, wide-eyed face. Auras that radiant usually came from children. Instead, I saw the wrinkled visage of an elderly man. He had pale skin, gray hair, and he was dressed like he'd been cosplaying as a nineteenth-century librarian.

Two men suddenly ran up behind the elderly man. *Their* auras were bloodred and unusually tall, looming and swaying over them. One pressed his hand against the man's mouth and dragged him off in the opposite direction.

The light changed. People crossed the street, oblivious to what had happened behind them. It was so fast, I would have missed it, too, if I hadn't been staring right at the elderly man.

I went after them. I normally didn't take on two guys at once, but the old guy was in trouble. That made these kidnappers my next meal. When the Beast was done with them, they'd be alive, but like the catcaller, they'd be a lot less dangerous.

His kidnappers moved unusually fast. I ran, but I still couldn't keep up. Thankfully, the man's aura left a trail of light that I followed. It led into an alley behind a pawnshop.

I normally avoided this part of town, but I kept going. The Beast's hunger grew with every step. It wanted to kill them. I wouldn't let it. I couldn't rid myself of the Beast, but I could damn sure keep it on a diet.

I caught up with the two captors in time to see them haul the man over a fence. Now they were in the back of a scrap metal depository. Moments later, I heard a cry: "Stop! That hurts!"

The Beast surged, sensing the violence. I didn't free it—I *never* willingly did—but I didn't force it all the way back.

The Beast's power scalded me. My skin felt too tight and my

pulse raced. I took my coat off, threw it over the fence, and cleared the six-foot height in one leap.

The kidnappers spun around. The hoods of their sweatshirts were now down, revealing that one was blond and the other had brown hair. The old man was on the ground, blood streaming down his forehead. The brown-haired kidnapper gripped a metal pipe, its edge dripping with crimson.

“Drop it,” I said.

They laughed.

I didn’t blame them. I was only five-four, with an average build, and I had no weapons. Well, none that they could see.

The Beast let out a growl through my throat that caused the two men to pale. Yeah, no normal person could make that sound.

“The hell?” the blond one whispered.

I sprang toward the pipe-wielding guy. My front kick smashed into his chest. He went down, the pipe clattering from his hand. Not laughing now, was he? With my mixed martial arts training plus the Beast’s added power, I’d kicked him harder than someone five times my size.

The blond guy lunged at me.

The Beast’s claws shot out. I was about to drive them into him when something knocked me over from behind. My forehead slammed onto the concrete. Pain filled me, my vision swam, and I tasted blood.

What the hell?

The dark-haired guy was still on the ground, and the blond was right in front of me. Who had hit me from behind?

I scrambled to my feet and whirled around.

Nothing. Whoever it was must’ve backed into the yard where the night’s shadows thickened to a dark gloom. The stench of cayenne and ozone washed over me, so thick I almost gagged.

I whirled back. The blond was still there, but the other kid-

napper was gone. A huge snake now rose up to stare at me. Holy shit, that thing was bigger than a telephone pole!

“Whatever you are, you’re dead,” it hissed at me.

It could *talk*?

My shock was costly. The snake’s strike slammed into me like a giant hammer. I fell back. Coils wrapped around me. I tried to fight it off, but it squeezed me like a massive fist.

Air burst out of my lungs. I tried to suck more in and couldn’t. Panic strafed me. I’d known there had to be other supernatural creatures aside from the one inside me. Now I’d finally found one, and it was trying to kill me.

The stench of agave drowned me as those coils squeezed harder. My bones groaned. Pain slashed through me. I tried to scream, but nothing came out. I was being crushed to death.

My skin burned and a vicious inner slash felt like acid. I knew that pain. The Beast was here.

Everything went black, and—

—I spat out a mouth full of ashes. The wind tried to blow more back in. I clamped my lips shut.

I was in the middle of the metal yard, naked and bloody. Nothing was left of the huge snake or the other kidnappers except piles of cold ashes swirling in the night breeze.

Dammit, I hadn’t wanted to kill them. The thing inside me was a murderer, but *I* wasn’t. Not by choice. Now I’d killed again, and it had been someone with a supernatural secret like me. All the answers I could’ve finally gotten, gone. The frustration cut like a knife.

At least I kept them from murdering that poor man. Unless the Beast had killed him, too? I couldn’t see his bright aura anymore. The Beast was full and satiated, and it had sunk too deep within me.

“Sir?” I called out.

No answer.

My heart lurched. The Beast normally only ate the violent, making their red auras an Open for Dinner sign to my supernatural stowaway. Don't ask me why it preferred them. No one gave me a *Beast's Guide to Binge Eating* when I became infected with the thing eleven years ago. At first, I thought I might be a werewolf, but sadly not. If werewolves were real, those lucky fuckers only had to deal with their inner monsters one weekend a month. I had to deal with mine every single day.

But if the Beast was hungry enough, it would eat *anyone*, violent or no.

"Where are you, sir?" I called out again, snatching my coat off the fence where I'd left it.

"Here," a pained voice groaned.

I put my coat on and ran toward his voice.

I found the man slumped by a large heap of scrap metal piled up for sorting. Blood streamed from his head, and clear liquid that might have been spinal fluid leaked from his nose. If I didn't do something, he'd die.

I put my hands on his head while pulling on the Beast's power. Three minutes later, I was bent over, vomiting from channeling too much magic, too fast.

Gentle hands smoothed back my hair. "There now, lass," the man said in a lilting Irish accent. "You're all right."

My gag turned into a choked laugh. I sat back, wiping at my mouth. "More importantly, how are *you*?"

He gave me the sweetest smile. "Alive, thanks t'you. Thought you meant to kill me when you turned into a *beithíoch*."

Did he just call me a "behemoth"? Eh, that was a kind descriptor compared to whatever the Beast was. More importantly, I'd healed him, but now I had to leave town. Again. At best, whichever police officer took the man's report would think that he was

overwrought from the attempted kidnapping, but I couldn't take that risk. Not after nearly getting arrested in Georgia last year.

I bit back my disappointment. I was just starting to get comfortable here. I had a decent job, a place to live where the neighbors didn't question my late-night comings and goings, and even a pet now. Still, safety beat out comfort.

"Do you have someone to call to pick you up?" I asked him.

He gave me a look of such heartbreaking confusion, I patted his arm. As a nurse, I'd seen that look on countless dementia patients before. He didn't remember who to call.

"Do you know your name?" I asked in a softer voice.

His whole body trembled as he said, "No."

"It's fine," I said, patting him again. "I can still help you. Do you mind if I look in your pockets?"

He didn't mind, but to my dismay, he lacked a phone, wallet, or any identification. He only had a single, laminated business card with FRONTVIEW REPUBLIC printed on the front and a handwritten phone number on the back.

My brows went up. Frontview Republic was one of the largest commercial real estate and investment corporations in the Northeast. Their name had been splashed across headlines recently due to a big project in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

"Stay here," I said, and searched for the rest of my stuff.

I found my clothes and purse near the bloodstains and ash piles. The huge snake and the other kidnappers must have put up a hell of a fight. The Beast normally killed too quickly to draw anyone's blood.

I couldn't believe I'd finally come across another supernatural creature, only to still end up knowing nothing.

Rain started pouring in sheets. I used the deluge to wash the blood off my face and hands. Then I shoved the remains of my ripped-up medical scrubs into my coat's deep pockets. The rain

should wash away all the kidnapers' blood as well as their ashes, leaving no trace of their deaths behind.

I returned to the man and led him to an awning that blocked most of the rain. Thankfully, my burner phone was working, which meant the Beast had been free at least ten minutes. Nothing electronic worked around the Beast when it first took over. I dialed the number on the business card and put it on speaker while I checked the man for more injuries.

"Who is this?" a smooth baritone voice answered.

"Is this Frontview Republic?" I asked.

"Who is *this*?" the voice repeated with such command that I almost said "Raine Stone" before I caught myself.

The man's condition was tragic, but it had also saved me. He could tell everyone that he'd seen a woman transform into a huge creature that had killed two men plus a huge snake, and no one would believe him. Maybe I didn't have to move again after all.

"Do you know a sixty-something man with an Irish accent who dresses like he raided a Sherlock Holmes movie set?" I asked.

"Yes." His tone changed to palpable menace. "Where is he?"

"Safe," I replied shortly. "But he very nearly wasn't. Some men kidnapped him and almost killed him tonight."

"Oh?" The man's tone now became so velvety, I swore I almost felt it brush over me. "If you assisted in his rescue, then you will be well rewarded. Once again, where is he?"

"You must be rich," I said with all the annoyance I wasn't allowed to articulate when I was at work. "Only the wealthy think people help others for a reward instead of the simple reason that someone *needed* help."

Anger replaced that luxurious tenor. "If you don't tell me where Brendan is *right now*—"

"Brendan!" A delighted expression lit the man's face. "My name

is Brendan! And that's Remy. He takes care of me. Don't worry, Remy. The *beithíoch* is helping me."

Okay, that word wasn't "behemoth." It had too many vowels, but new words were the least of my concerns. Headlights shone along the road that ran between the recycling plant and the train tracks; a reminder that someone could stumble upon us.

"He'll be at the Helping Hands Shelter in twenty minutes," I said, and hung up. Then I smiled and held out my hand. "Brendan? Would you escort me down the street? It's not safe for a lady to walk alone."

His smile deepened his wrinkles. He'd seen the Beast inside me, so he knew I didn't need "escorting." Still, he held out his arm while his periwinkle-blue eyes brightened.

"I'd be delighted."