

*Charlie  
and  
Randolph*



BY  
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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who still dare to dream even with the odds stacked against them.

And to my kids, who ate noodles/toast/cereal for dinner without complaint so I could get this book finished.

## Prologue

Helena

Sitting in her office at the Fated Fantasies Dating Service, Helena flicked off a text to Laney to let her know to arrange accommodation for Randolph and quickly received a reply: *No problem. Your last appointment has been canceled, so take the win while the to-do list is manageable and head home early tonight.*

Helena smiled. *Home*, she thought. *It'd be nice to have dinner with my family for a change.*

Helena looked at her desk. Despite what her calendar said, her to-do list was endless. *It will still be here tomorrow*, she decided. She grabbed her bag and took off out the door before she could change her mind.

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“Mommy, mommy!”

Nothing in the world could beat being greeted with such adoration and excitement after a long day. Today was no exception. Constantin came running full speed out of the front doors, and at the halfway mark, she launched herself down the steps that graced the entrance to their home. Thankful for her quick reflexes, Helena caught the giggling mass of limbs that seemed too long for her torso and was enveloped in raven black hair just like Helena's own, only thinner and straighter. Helena held her tight and took in her daughter's scent. *Gods, I missed this.*

Helena looked into her daughter's eyes. They shone as they always did, amber and gold, and full of life. The day Constantin had been born, when Helena had looked into her eyes for the first time, she had been astounded to notice just how human they were.

“My darling Constantin,” Helena murmured as she lifted the little girl higher. As Helena's grip tightened around the girl's slender waist, Constantin erupted into a fit of giggles.

“You're silly, Mommy. I don't need squeezies. I'm safe.”

*Safe*, Helena considered. *But how long can I keep things that way?*

“You sure are, my lucky little rabbit's foot.”

“Why is a rabbit foot lucky, Mama?”

“Well, well, little rabbit. Now that’s a fantastic question,” Helena said, smiling into the little girl’s hair.

“How many different answers does this one have?”

“Like many things in this world, little rabbit, too many for me to count.” Helena let Constantin wiggle free from her embrace, and when her sweet feet hit the ground, Helena dropped to meet her at eye level, and their noses touched. Head to head, nose to nose, they stood for a moment, and everything was right in Helena’s world.

But like all moments of beauty, they pass, and this one was no exception. Constantin huffed, and her infectious smile turned into a frown. “So many questions, so many answers, and everyone disagrees,” Constantin muttered.

Helena chuckled. “Ahhh, yes,” she agreed. “The world is a symphony of grays as opposed to black and white, my love.”

“You always tell me that, but surely a lucky rabbit’s foot is only lucky because of one thing that happened?”

“Well, you might say, surely, little one. But how big is the world? How many people spin around on this magical ride with us every single day? Must they all think the same things and see the world the same way as their neighbors or their friends?”

Constantin tried to wiggle out of Helena’s arms. “I just wanted to know why people think rabbit’s feet are lucky,” Constantin said grumpily.

“And for you, sweetness, I’ll see how many I can remember at bedtime.”

Constantin beamed up at Helena as if she’d hung the moon and the stars.

“You promise? I can’t remember the last time you tucked me into bed.”

Helena’s heart plummeted into her stomach. It was true, she’d been so caught up in saving the world, or at a bare minimum the Array, that she’d

horrifically neglected her family, and the stark reminder, accompanied by the hope that sparkled in her perfect daughter's eyes, made her shake off her feelings of incompetence and bask in that glorious smile.

At just eight years old, Constantin was the shining jewel in Helena's hoard, but she was more than that. This tiny little human, and her incredible father, Nikos, had given Helena more purpose than anything else before in her life. She met Nikos on a trip to Italy; that trip marked the beginning of a whole new chapter. At the time, she'd thought he couldn't have been more romantic—he'd swept her off her feet in a way Helena had never let herself believe possible. But when he'd followed her back to Santa Monica, turned up in her office, and pronounced his undying love for her, she'd swooned all over again. And now, all these years later, she was doing very little to honor his love and sacrifice. *How can I show him I still deserve the love he gives me so freely?*

She felt him approach her now as if sensing her thoughts and knowing her need for comfort, which could only be found in this man's arms. With the light of her life dancing at her feet, he came up behind her, slipped his arms effortlessly around her waist, and pulled her close. She relished his warm embrace, how his strong arms enveloped her, and she waited for his full lips, which always smiled as they came in and kissed her neck.

"Nikos," she breathed.

"You made it home for dinner tonight; I'm impressed." His warm earthy timbre held no judgment, some slight teasing, of course, but with those simple words, she was reminded just how much he truly loved her, despite her flaws. He knew who she was and the demons she fought. He might have been human, which terrified her more than anything else, but he would never let her down.

"Did you cook for me?" she asked as she spun to face him. Her heart skipped a beat, as it always had, and she hoped it always would when she looked at him. He was tall, much taller than she, and she was reminded of this as she looked up to inspect his warm, olive skin and sparkling dark brown eyes. Something about the way he held himself was as reassuring and strong as his stubbled square jawline. His full lips were turned up in his

usual smile, and he kissed her forehead. She breathed him in; he'd indeed been cooking and smelled of garlic and chili, but underneath the scent of his task, there was something uniquely him. He may not have been her Fated Mate, but he was her world, and his scent enveloped her, wrapped her in an embrace as comforting as his arms, and she let herself savor the moment.

"I always cook for you," he laughed. "If I didn't, you'd live on coffee and chocolate."

"You know me so well," she giggled.

"I love you," Nikos grumbled into her hair.

"I know," she whispered.

Nikos pulled away from her and extended his arm to escort her to the dining room. "Come along, little rabbit, let's feed your Mama," Nikos said, looking in Constantin's direction. When Helena looked at her precious daughter on one side and her strong, steady husband on the other, she shut out all thoughts of the Array from her mind. The wayward magic, the looming threat, the need to train the hedgehogs, the imminent security threats, the huge losses in her private life, and her feelings of inadequacy thanks to everything life had thrown at her—yep, all of that and more would still be there tomorrow. So, she set it all aside and enjoyed a meal with the two people who held her up with their mere presence, on even her darkest days.

Nikos had outdone himself: Spaghetti Bolognese, Greek salad, and homemade garlic bread. The scent of the food made her mouth water, but the lit candles and the perfectly set table made her heart swell.

"You did this for me?" she whispered.

"For us," he replied. "We've missed you, and every meal we share is a celebration."

Nikos pulled out her chair, and then, as soon as Helena was seated, he did the same for Constantin.

"Thank you, Papa," she murmured, her eyes glowing in the light of the candles. "I hope someone loves me the way you love Mama one day."

“Oh, little rabbit, they will. I’m sure of it,” Helena said warmly, ruffling her raven hair.

“Is that part of your magic, Mama?” Constantin asked quietly. “Can you see my future?”

Nikos knew everything there was to know about Helena, had met her dragon, and had seen her use her magic on more than one occasion. But together, they had decided when Constantin was born to protect her from that world for as long as they could, so her question not only rattled Helena but shook her to her core.

“What magic, sweetness?” Helena asked, trying to keep her tone easy and bright, but a tight edge crept in despite her best efforts.

“Your Mommy magic, of course,” Constantin said with a giggle. “Why?” she asked, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Do you have... are you... a witch?”

Helena and Nikos laughed in unison, and the tension in the air dissipated as quickly as it had come. Helena would never lie to her daughter, but this was a question with a simple answer. “No, my angel. I’m no witch, and sadly I can’t see your future. I know, in my heart of hearts, because you deserve all the happiness the world can give you.”

With the potential crisis averted, Helena loaded up Constantin’s plate with a little of everything on offer, leaving off the olives because she knew her angel did not like those. “Weird and bitter,” she’d said the first time she tried them.

They ate and laughed. Constantin talked about school, and Nikos spoke about work. It was normal, happy, and peaceful, and Helena hadn’t realized how much she’d missed this.

“How did you know I’d be home early tonight, and where are our guests?” Helena asked as they were stacking the dishes.

“I called Laney, of course. And our guests were more than happy to grab dinner in town tonight. Something about Archie having a new chef working for him that they wanted to try.”



“Ahh, I thought I had more appointments when the day started,” Helena said with a smile.

“She’s worried about you. We both are.”

“Mama, Mama!” Constantin said, bounding into the room freshly changed and in her pajamas. “It’s story time, you promised.”

“I haven’t forgotten, sweetness. Can I help Papa with the dishes first?”

“Nope,” Constantin said firmly. “I have a test tomorrow, and I need an early night, so it’s time for a story, right now.”

Helena carefully set down the stack of plates from her hand and smiled at Nikos. “Sorry darling, I really did plan on helping with the dishes this time.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, sure,” he replied teasingly. “Go and tell the girl her stories. You’re much better at it than I am.”

Constantin, her face fixed with a winning smile, grabbed Helena’s hand and pulled her out of the dining room, up the stairs, down the hallway, and into her bedroom directly opposite Helena and Nikos’s room.

The light, bright, airy space was a little girl’s dream. Helena and Nikos had spent weeks, if not months, bringing their vision for this room to life. Helena sucked in a breath as memories flooded her mind—her belly swollen with the life that was now pulling her over to the plush bed. Nikos dancing with her, both of them covered in paint. The pair of them arguing lightly over how to best follow the furniture assembly instructions. Nikos precariously perched on a ladder, reaching high with his drill in his hand to hang the huge drapes, and her using her magic to hold him in place. They had shared many memories in this one little room over the last eight years, and Helena was filled with renewed hope that they would share many more. She just needed the last of the Array mated, and it seemed the Fates had taken that task out of her hands.

She shook off the thought that threatened to consume her and clambered onto the bed next to Constantin. It’d been months since Helena had curled up in her daughter’s bed and told her stories as she drifted off to sleep.

“Now let me see.” Helena pretended to stop and think. With Constantin’s wiggling, petite frame securely wrapped around her body, Helena pulled the blanket up tightly around her most perfect creation and told her the story of the lucky rabbit's foot.

In a lofty tone, she explained how rabbits were known for their cleverness, speed, and fertility in African and African American cultures. In Celtic culture, how they symbolized the lunar deities and the moon itself, so, therefore, abundance, growth, and protection. In Chinese culture, they represent longevity, abundance, and good luck, so they were used to ward off evil spirits.

Helena looked down and saw Constantin’s eyes sparkling as they watched her lips move. “Is there more, Mama?” she asked.

“One more...” Helena hesitated. “... a long time ago, people thought witches could turn themselves into animals, and rabbits were a popular choice.”

“Because they’re so fast?”

“Exactly,” Helena replied.

“So why would you cut off a witch's foot?” she asked, concern creasing her brow.

“Well,” Helena said slowly, resolving not to lie to her daughter unless it was absolutely necessary. “Some people cut down what they don’t understand.” Helena couldn’t help but think of Clementine, Merti, and Martha as she spoke the words that resonated more truth than Constantin could ever understand (Helena could hope).

“But why?” Constantin pushed. She’d always been a sweet, curious, and empathetic soul.

“It can be scary for people to see, hear, and experience something that doesn’t make sense to them, and I guess magic sits on that list,” Helena said after a short pause. “But don’t you worry, little rabbit. For your Papa and I, you’re a good luck charm. We call you a little rabbit because you are fast, clever, and adorable. You’re our lucky rabbit’s foot, sweet girl, and as long as I breathe, you will always be safe.”

“And so are you, Mama.” Constantin took the cue that story time was over, and she snuggled into Helena’s side, let out a small huff of air, and then drifted off to sleep.

Helena heard Nikos’s soft footsteps coming down the hallway, and his face soon popped around the corner of the door, which was slightly ajar. “Come on, fierce dragon, it’s time for you to come to bed now.”

“Oh, I had some things I needed to—”

“Not tonight, Helena. Tonight, just for a few hours, you belong to us. Please,” he added.

“Of course. I’m sorry.” Helena slipped away from her daughter’s arms and tucked her in nice and tight. “Sleep well, little rabbit.” Helena spun a small swirl of magic over her head, asking the goddess to hold her treasured daughter safe as she slept, and for the gods to send her sweet dreams.

“I need to say something to you before we settle for the night.” Nikos's tone was warm and firm. Over the years Nikos had used it infrequently, but Helena knew it was his signal to her to hush and listen. He would never expect her to refrain from arguing if she disagreed with him, but he clearly had something on his mind, and his need to discuss it meant it was important.

“I’m listening,” Helena said, flicking her shoes off her aching feet and curling up on their bed.

Nikos sighed and paced. *Whatever he wants to say has been eating at him for some time*, Helena decided, watching him tap his fingers on his thumb as he did when he was worried.

“I know that you’ve been protecting us by sending us away... But,” he added, looking up to face her, “I won’t stand for it anymore.”

*Won’t stand for it? That’s a new one.*

“I understand you have a responsibility to the Array, to find out who is trying to bring them harm. I know you have your duty to your business, to them, and the Council. But you seem to forget sometimes...”

*Please don't say you, don't say you and Constantin*, she silently begged. *Please, I couldn't take it. I know, and I'm sorry.* Helena hoped her feelings weren't showing on her face.

“...you seem to forget just how much I love you; how much Constantin loves you.” Nikos slowed his pacing and came to kneel by the bed. She moved to him, and he took her hands in his, his eyes imploring her to hear him. “We don't need you to send us away to protect us. We need you with us. We need to be with you. You need to understand that we are a strength to you, not a weakness.”

Helena longed to remind him of the time those crazy scientists kidnapped them just to make Helena do what they wanted—and she had. Helena had no intention of letting anyone harm her family. That was when it had started, when she had begun to draw back from them, when she had started to send them away. She needed them to be safe, more than she needed to draw her next breath.

“I can't even begin to comprehend the burden you carry. But please, I beg of you, for your sake as much as ours, we are not a burden to you. We are your family. We are your reason to fight this, and to win. So,” Nikos said firmly. “I flatly refuse to be guarded from you or your life any longer.” Nikos tried to pull away, to stand, but Helena held him and pulled him closer rather than letting him pull away.

“I am so very sorry,” she whispered. “I would be lost without you. You and Constantin are the only thing that truly matters. I'll keep that front and center from this moment onward. No more sending you away. No more protecting you with distance, I just worry that...”

“I know you worry about Constantin finding out who you truly are...”

Helena nodded. “I don't want her to think of me as anything other than her Mama.”

“Then you underestimate her as much as you initially underestimated me. Here with us, you are a wife, mother, and fantastic storyteller. You bring hope to lost souls by helping them find their one true love, and you, my

delightful, fierce Helena, still steal my breath when you walk into a room. That's who you are. Everything else is a bonus."

She pulled Nikos up to meet her and slumped against his chest. "I don't want to lose you."

"I'm not a shiny penny, Helena. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. Let me hold you when the nights are long. Let me wash your hair when you're tired. But most of all, let me help and shoulder the burdens a little, and if you can't do that, let me remind you how loved and important you are."

"I'm so scared," Helena whispered. "I'm so worried I'm not enough to stop all of this. I don't know how to keep the Array safe."

"I know," he said. "And when you share that with me, I carry part of the burden, and that," he said, shushing her protests with his finger on her lips, "means you can carry on again tomorrow. So let me. My shoulders are plenty big enough, you know," he teased.

Helena had no words. She was in awe of Nikos's strong declaration, by his ability to see right into her and never once see the worst in her. He only ever saw the good, the worthy, the strong, the innocent, the girl from Wyvern who wanted to save the world. Helena knew that she would need his strength in the days to come. She would need to be reminded of who she was and why she kept fighting, even when all hope seemed lost. Right here in Nikos's arms was the only place she could be vulnerable. And if she could let go of even a shred of her doubts, it would make tomorrow a little brighter.

Here she was reminded that she got out of bed each morning before the sun had risen in the sky, for this, for him and Constantin. They were her why, and that made them her greatest armor.

"I love you," she whispered into his chest.

"I know," he replied. "And now it's time to let me love you."

# Chapter One

Charlie Hazelwood

“Hey, you’re coming tonight, right?” Garrick asked as they passed each other on the sweeping staircase. “For dinner.”

Charlie glanced up into Garrick’s smiling face and self-consciously ran his hands through his sandy blond hair. “Yeah, for sure. It’s adorable that Nikos wants to surprise Helena.”

“Yeah,” Garrick said in a dreamy voice. “It’s a whole different side of her, you know?”

Confusion flickered across Charlie's face.

“Helena: the family version,” Garrick explained.

“Oh, yeah,” Charlie said, shaking his head slightly. “Sorry, I’m a million miles away.”

“No surprises there. You and Helena have been working tirelessly. Nikos suggested that tonight, we put all the bullshit aside and celebrate. His words,” Garrick said lightly. “Elliot and Thaddeus are due back, too, so the whole gang will be back together again.”

“What are we celebrating?” Charlie asked, almost feeling as if there was probably a logical answer, but it seemed to elude him.

“The halfway mark?” Garrick said with a shrug. “Still being alive?” Garrick’s eyes bored into Charlie’s for a second. “How about guilty pleasures such as friends, family, love, music, food, coffee, or ice cream? I’m keen to celebrate anything that’ll make you smile again. You haven’t been yourself all week.”

“It’s nothing,” Charlie said, waving his hand and dismissing Garrick’s concern.

“I may not be as empathetic as Freddy, but we can all see something’s wrong. You can talk to me, you know. If you need to.”

“It’s not that there’s anything wrong...” Charlie replied cautiously. He wanted to talk to someone but always felt no one would quite understand. “It’s just that the threat is still looming. Me, Kerry, and Jinn... It’s hard to know how to prepare against a threat we can’t even identify.”

Garrick reached out a hand and placed it firmly on Charlie’s shoulder. “This is not your burden to carry. You’re part of a team, remember? We’re all here, ready and willing. So don’t be scared to...” Garrick hesitated and firmed his grip. “You’re not alone, okay?”

*Alone...* Charlie hadn’t always felt this way, but lately, since he’d retired and decided to come home... It was guilt that persuaded him in the end.

His life had been an endless fog of meetings and training. He’d missed so many calls, too many. Too busy with his career to be around for his friends, so they’d slipped away. His family was non-existent... Charlie sighed. More recently it dawned on him that the Array needed him, but there weren’t enough hours in the day.

He’d been too occupied to forge a life for himself outside of his career, and the cracks or gaps were beginning to show. In the months leading up to his inevitable retirement, he’d found himself asking the hard questions. Who was he out of his uniform? What did he have to offer the world outside of his service? He had lost years of his life that he would never be able to share with people because of its covert nature. And most importantly, was he worthy of love? Not the kind that came from being knee-deep in the trenches, but an unconditional, hearts-a-flutter type love, something unconditional. *Is love like that even real?*

“Charlie? Earth to Charlie!” Garrick tightened his grip. The action both soothed and grounded in one swift movement, and he managed to gather his wayward thoughts and plaster a grin on his face.

“Sorry. Brain fog,” Charlie said lightly. “Thanks, Garrick. I’ll be sure to take you up on that. In fact, I was gonna ask if we could run some drills on the security system tomorrow. It’s full of holes, and it’s doing my head in.”

“Any excuse to fling magic around.” Garrick’s face broke into the mischievous grin Charlie knew him for. “Freddy and Lennox will be keen,

too, if you need them. And it'll give us a chance to throw Elliot in the deep end."

"The more, the merrier," Charlie replied, and he meant it. His career had given him a team, a found family, camaraderie, and colleagues with shared goals—all things Charlie sorely missed. He knew he needed to stop pushing these people away. If only he could work out how.

"Cool, see you in an hour. Nikos has organized a car for us."

"I'll be there."

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Daydreaming about his Fated Mate in the middle of a celebratory dinner for someone else felt a little duplicitous, but Charlie couldn't help but wonder, *when is it my turn?* Whenever he dared to think like this, his brain retaliated, reminding him that he never got to keep the people who got close to him, not even his family. This was potentially why the thought of having a mate filled him with equal measures of trepidation and excitement.

"Charlie. Earth to Charlie!" Garrick's voice snapped him out of his head, where he'd found himself a lot recently, and back into the room.

"Any idea what you want to eat?" Archie asked, gently placing a hand on Charlie's shoulder as if, in some way, he knew the depth of the thoughts that had been interrupted.

"Sorry," Charlie mumbled. "Give me a minute."

Charlie gazed at the menu. The prices boggled him, not that money was an issue for a man who had made his way swiftly through the ranks to become a Corporal for the United States Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance. But what bothered him was the unfairness of the pricing. It limited the people who could walk through these doors; he didn't feel worthy. He didn't feel he deserved to sit with these people, he didn't deserve to eat this fancy food and sip on fine whiskey. Charlie had struggled with these feelings since he lost his father when he was fifteen. "Survivors Guilt," the shrink had called it; even all these years later it still plagued him.



The sneaky beast snuck up on him at the strangest times. He had coping skills, but they didn't always help. *Worth a try*, he decided. He ran his fingers along the thick card menu in his hand, noticed the gilded lettering that danced before his eyes, and blinked until it came into focus. He breathed in the scents of the people all around him and listened to their laughter and indistinct chatter until he could finally make out some of the words. He ran his tongue over his teeth, and lastly, he imagined his father was sitting next to him, recalled his laugh in his mind, and felt the pressure of the imagined hand on his back.

“Can I have the tasting platter, please,” Charlie said, making eye contact with the server, whom he had felt standing at his left shoulder, waiting patiently and quietly for him to center himself and complete the simple task of reading the damned menu.

As the server nodded and smiled at him and then strolled away to place the order for the table, Charlie silently chided himself for letting himself get caught up in his head. His years of military training, having been responsible for the safety and well-being of hundreds if not thousands of Marines over the years, meant he should have been able to control his errant mind, yet it still managed to catch him off guard.

*Hey, hey, hey...* his excited hedgehog said, hopping inside his mind. *Can you feel that?*

This stopped Charlie's internal chatter in its tracks and forced him to sit back in his chair. He let his hedgehog steer him toward the new sensation that was gently vibrating through his body. His eyes immediately shot up to the vast glass windows that framed the streets outside. A tall streak of a man with unruly hair was strolling past the window at that exact moment, and the sight of him sent a flash of lightning through Charlie's body.

*What was that?* Charlie asked.

*Who was that?* his hedgehog chirped. *Why are you still sitting here? Go. Run. Chase after him!*

*That's mental*, Charlie chided, though he had to admit his body was equally as keen on chasing after the mystery man.

*Gah!* his hedgehog huffed. *You've let him get away.*

*Who?* Charlie huffed right back. *And why is it so important to you?*

*I thought for a second...* his hedgehog trailed off... *Never mind, it's clearly nothing,* he mumbled.

“Are you okay?” Kerry asked quietly from beside him. “You flashing again? You need to get out of here?”

Kerry understood Charlie in a way the others never could. It didn't matter that one of them had worked for the private sector and the other had worked for the Government. Kerry and Charlie had similar life experiences. They had both seen things neither of them would ever speak aloud. They were both victims of their addled and sometimes cruel minds, and Kerry seemed to be able to see right through Charlie, while the rest of the world seemed unable to see him at all.

Charlie reached out his shaking hand and gave Kerry's shoulder a soft pat. “Cover for me a minute, would ya?”

“Need to be alone? Or want some company?”

“Just need a minute,” he whispered back.

Kerry nodded and laughed at something Lennox had said. Charlie was aware of the whispers that followed him as he walked away from the table, but he knew Kerry would cover for him and be sensitive about it, too.

Charlie wound his way through the luxurious tables and chairs, keeping his head down and hoping his face didn't show the inner turmoil. He'd felt the spark from the stranger as they walked by, felt his inner instincts, and his hedgehog begging him to run. So why had he frozen? Had it been from worry? Uncertainty? Fear of having made a mistake?

This was one of those times that Charlie needed to be honest with himself. His instincts were rarely wrong, which meant he hadn't been worried that he might be wrong about who the curious man was to him. In truth, his hesitation had come from the fact that he might have been right.

That had been his mate. Of that much, he could be absolutely certain.

So now, on top of everything else he felt was wrong with him, he could add a new word to the list: coward.

*It might not have been him, his hedgehog chuffed in his mind.*

*You know as well as I do that's exactly who it was.*

*Let's go out now and see if we can catch a scent.*

*He didn't scent me either, remember? Too many people, too much distance between us. If I hadn't seen him with my own eyes, I never would have even known he walked by.*

*Then it stands to reason that he'll be back. The Fates will find a way to bring you together.*

*Or they've decided I'm not worthy...*

*You know that's rubbish. Shake it off, Charlie. Elliot and Thaddeus will be here soon, and I'm not sure what's brought on this change in you, but I can't say I like it.*

*Neither do I, Charlie admitted.*

*There's been a lot of change lately. Maybe it's all part of the adjustment?*

*Maybe. Or it's just as likely that I'm tired. The last few weeks have been mental, the past two after Elliot... We've been non-stop looking for the holes in Helena's security. She's been beside herself since her family came home.*

*Can you blame her?*

Charlie couldn't. Thoughts of Helena's family made his mind drift to memories of his own, but he shook those off. He was exhausted and already feeling more vulnerable than he would have liked. He splashed cold water on his face and looked at his haggard reflection. "You just need a decent night's sleep," he whispered to himself. "Eat, drink, laugh, clap Elliot and Thaddeus on the back, and then home again." *Maybe I'll even ask for a day off?*

With his hazel eyes locked on his reflection, he ran his hand through his sandy blond hair. It had grown out a bit in the last few weeks, and he made

a mental note to get that sorted as soon as he had some free time. *I'm too old for this shit*, he decided. And just because he looked in his mid-thirties, it didn't mean he was. Another hard cold fact was that he was closer to seventy in human years, and much of that he'd spent in pain, or in service to his country, and now that he was caught up with the Array, who knew what direction his life might take. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he dried his hands off on his pants before he pulled it out.

*You okay?*

He read the message from Kerry and grimaced before flicking off a quick reply.

*45 seconds out.*

"Game face," he muttered to himself.

## Chapter Two

### Randolph Holloway

Randolph bounced out of Helena's office and beamed a huge smile at the cute lady sitting behind the desk, Laney, Helena had called her.

"Thanks for your help, Miss Laney," he said with a grin.

"I hope your meeting went well," she replied, getting to her feet.

Randolph threw his hands up in front of him, giving her two vigorous thumbs up. "Thanks to you," he said.

"I did nothing more than get you in the door," Laney said, her cheeks flushing a light shade of pink.

"Well, it's appreciated, Miss. It truly is."

Laney cleared her throat and smiled at him. "Helena has asked me to set you up in one of the spare rooms. Are you okay with me doing that now? I'm hoping to get out of here at a reasonable time tonight."

"Is that Miss Helena a bit of a taskmaster, is she?" Randolph asked in a teasing tone.

"Oh, no!" Laney replied quickly. "She's an amazing employer."

"I have no doubt. But she's also a woman on a mission, and she expects those around her to run by her schedule, not theirs, yes?" Randolph raised his brow at her, and Laney gave a small smile.

"You sure have her pegged," Laney said quietly. "But I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," she added quickly. "Helena is smart and kind. She's loyal to a fault, and while she sets a high standard, she holds herself to those standards, too, not just her staff. It's an honor to work for her and play some small role in making her life easier. It feels good to be useful and to feel like I've done a good job at the end of each day. No matter what time I might get home," she added with a small smile.

"Well, this is all good to know," Randolph said quickly. "I've just applied for a position myself."

It was Laney's turn to quirk a brow. She looked him up and down, and Randolph didn't miss her look of surprise, though it was fleeting.

Randolph couldn't help the laugh that escaped his lips. "I know, I know," he said. "Why on earth would Helena consider a train wreck such as myself for a position in her prestigious company!" He doubled over now, the laughter pouring from him. Randolph knew he was walking the fine line between exhaustion and mania and tried to rein himself in. "Sorry," he huffed. "Sorry. Long day. Very, very long day."

Laney was gawking at him as if unsure what to say. "I meant no disrespect," she mumbled after Randolph had finally gotten his laughing episode under control.

"I know, sweetheart, I know," he mollified. "I also know I'm not your typical Helena de Masque employee, but I am exactly what she needs."

"I have no doubt that Helena is smart enough to know that, sir," Laney replied. Randolph noted with relief that her tone had returned to normal. "Shall I show you to your room?"

"Please," Randolph said, giving her a slight bow. He needed food and coffee. Coffee always calmed his nerves when they were fraying.

An hour or so later, after he had settled in the luxurious room, showered, and changed into clean clothes, Randolph sat at his computer, but the words danced before his eyes.

*Nourishment*, his inner animal demanded. *We need food.*

*Yeah, yeah, keep your feathers on*, Randolph teased.

*We need to go into town.*

*Why town?*

*Please don't question me, we need to go to town.*

Randolph shook his head. His great potoo was a source of confusion at times. The creature tended to prefer solitude for the most part, so if he wanted to go into the city, there had to be a good reason, so why not just share it?

The great potoo made a strange sound inside Randolph's head that almost made him think the creature might have been laughing at him.

*If I tell you, you won't go. Now hop to it. We need to get moving.*

*Excellent, I feel much better about going now,* Randolph huffed, but he also knew his animal spirit would never lead him into danger.

Randolph decided to walk, to take in the sights and the sounds of the city around him. Once he was out on the street, he took a moment to adapt to the hustle and bustle. You couldn't deny that the streets had a distinct vibe, a frantic, but happy energy. In the distance, he could see the lights of a Ferris Wheel and the sounds of screaming and laughter. *I'd love to go on that one day,* he thought.

He walked past well-dressed people, likely heading off to dinners or to dance. When he wound his way onto the Third Street Promenade, his senses were assaulted. The whole street was a hive of activity. Street performers showcased their talents, the restaurants were all alive with movement, and people were even sitting outside huddled together at tiny tables to eat. Randolph's eyes bugged as he walked. The scents and sounds were varied, and it was so full of life he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to sit with someone who made him laugh as they shared a meal. *When was the last time that happened?*

Unable to answer his own question, Randolph veered out of the Promenade, instinctively making his way to Ocean Avenue. He caught glimpses of the sea and was keen to explore that area more, but before he could veer off again, his inner animal was suddenly on high alert.

He looked all around, trying to find the danger. All he could see were luxurious hotels, high-rise buildings, and a sea of lights in every direction. Randolph sensed no threat, but his animal was keening in his mind, eager for him to move forward. As he walked, his eyes roamed over shop displays. This stretch of road was mostly boutiques, not Randolph's typical shopping area, but he followed, listened, and waited for his bird to provide some context or clue as to where they were going.

Randolph caught the scent of Mexican food in the distance, and when his stomach rumbled in appreciation, he immediately quickened his pace. But he was momentarily distracted as the great bird made the most bizarre sound. Randolph looked left and right, but there was nothing. So, choosing to ignore him for now, Randolph kept walking toward the enticing smells. He strolled past a huge hotel, all glass and metal. It was beautiful in its own way, but not something Randolph would usually admire, so it was strange when he felt compelled to stop. The huge windows hinted to the patrons inside, but there was no way to see in. Though for some bizarre reason, Randolph was momentarily mesmerized. A strange warmth rushed over him that made him feel so out of control that he felt a fleeting moment of fear, and his legs began to move of their own accord, away from the strange feeling as fast as they could go. *Stop!* his great potoo said.

*There's nothing here but glass,* Randolph huffed back, and ignoring his great potoo's protests, he carried on walking as fast as he could without breaking into a run. When the Blue Plate Taco came into sight, he breathed a sigh of relief, though he couldn't be sure why he felt so rattled. The tables were overflowing with happy patrons dotted both inside and outside. *This is a great place to hide out and grab some food,* Randolph told himself. Moving quickly, he weaved his way inside and joined the queue of people waiting to order. Needing something to concentrate on aside from his erratic heartbeat, Randolph focused his attention on the grotesquely patterned vinyl beneath his feet.

*Why did you run?* his great potoo demanded.

*Seriously, who or what was in that building?* Randolph snapped back. *That was some strange voodoo. Some weird and scary shit.*

*Your destiny is waiting inside that restaurant, you moron!*

*Well, my destiny can wait. I'm hungry.*

Randolph continued to ignore his great potoo's frustration and tried to turn his attention to what he was going to eat. While he deliberated about whether to eat the chicken or the fish, he noticed with curiosity and agitation that his heart was still racing, his palms were sweaty, and his guts were churning. He let himself wonder for a minute, maybe two, if he should



go back to see if he could answer his great potoo's riddles. But Randall had always been a firm believer that a person made their own destiny. There was only one thing in the life of a shifter that was outside of their control—a mate—and there was no way a mate would be making him feel like this, would they?

*Could it be?*

As Randolph pondered about the possibility, it was finally his turn to order, and the decision was made. His need for food won out, and he still had a report to write for Helena. His future, the destiny he created for himself, hinged on that report blowing Helena's mind, so with that thought taking priority, Randolph chose the fish; it would be good for his brain, and he needed all the help he could get. He added an energy drink to his meal because he was rattled, and the coffee he'd had in his room hadn't helped as much as he hoped it would.

*Focus, he demanded. We have work to do.*

But it took a long, long time for his brain to be able to focus again. He paced the floors of the restaurant and found himself people-watching, or more accurately, couple-watching. They dominated the patronage of the Blue Plate Taco tonight. It didn't matter where Randolph looked; all he could see were happy, smiling people who looked very much in love. Out of the myriad couplings for him to fixate on, it was an older couple that captured his attention. This wasn't unusual, as a rule. Randolph was oddly fascinated by the way humans aged. He'd been born roughly sixty years ago, yet people seemed to treat him as if he was young and dumb. He was the first to admit he barely looked to be more than his late twenties, but that was beside the point. Randolph watched as the couple leaned closer to one another as if sharing a secret. A soft whisper from one made the other laugh, and Randolph had an insatiable desire to know what the joke was. He wanted to experience how it felt to know someone intimately, to understand another person in a way that only lovers seem to be able to do.

Shocked by the sudden change of direction in his thoughts, Randolph was relieved when his order was ready to be collected. It meant he could get out of here, away from the lovers who had caught his eye and piqued his

curiosity, and hopefully away from the scary thoughts plaguing his mind tonight.

His long legs fell into an easy stride, and he had intentionally chosen to take a different route home—whatever destiny had waiting for him could wait. He told himself the longer walk would do him good, and used the extra time to ruminate on his life so far and daydream about what his future might hold. All the while, his eyes took in the sights around him, and his ears stayed alert for possible danger; these were things he did naturally, a reflex, and it had kept him alive this long.

As a rule, Randolph didn't believe there was peril around every corner, but he was always on the lookout, just in case. He was observant, he couldn't help it. Particularly at night, he had impeccable vision, and thanks to the way his brain took in and processed information, he rationalized that it was only natural that he would want to understand people and how they interacted with one another. That's what had happened in the diner, nothing more.

His particular skill set and ability to see the world with untainted eyes had served him well in his life and in his career. That was, until he'd become so disillusioned by the work he was doing, not so much the work itself, but what his higher-ups did with his findings, that he found he couldn't stomach it any longer. His decision to leave and branch out on his own had shaken Randolph to his core. The army was the first place he'd felt like he truly belonged, but when you have a mind like his, you have very clear ideas about right and wrong, and what the army did with the information that passed through his hands was often the worst types of bad.

When he was seventeen, Randolph enlisted, started basic training six months later, and within a year, his whole life changed. He found himself a far cry from his rough neighborhood where the best-dressed person was clean. When he'd applied, he'd simply hoped he could get away from his deadbeat dad, but what he got in return was access to a whole new world, one that was neat and orderly, where his skills and need for routine were a strength, not a reason to be beaten.

During basic training, he'd been earmarked to become a Military Intelligence Analyst, so when he entered his advanced individual training, he felt like he was on cloud nine. As an analyst, Randolph was responsible for collecting and interpreting intelligence information. In that world, his logical thinking and observational skills were an asset. Randolph's busy mind was able to see patterns where others might miss them, could assess a slew of data in half the time of his peers, and with his attention to detail, he never once missed a thing. He soon soared through the ranks, and his security clearance grew with his career.

It was during this time that Randolph realized that no matter how skilled he was, the people in charge very rarely made what he deemed the right choice, which was why Randolph now worked for himself. Self-employment meant that Randolph had some level of control over what happened with the information he uncovered. He had a team, a small one, but even though some of them had been with him for years, he couldn't say he trusted them with his life. The opportunity to help Thaddeus, and by extension help Helena, would mean Randolph would consider his debt to the man paid in full, another huge bonus.

As his mind drifted through time, it simultaneously categorized everything around him, while also compiling and drafting his report for Helena, something that was just about done by the time he returned to his room. It never ceased to amaze him how his brain worked on finding solutions while his mind was busy elsewhere. *It's all about priorities, I guess.*

*Your priorities are all wrong,* his great potoo grumbled.

*My priorities have kept us alive this long,* Randolph retorted.

*That may be true,* his bird replied, *but what's the point in life without a little excitement, a little risk, a little love?*

*Love leads to hurt,* Randolph said firmly.

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