
Chapter 1

They're coming.

Rain hung suspended in air announcing the Enforcers' approach. Their purpose to hunt, capture and destroy... or worse.

Staying well within the deeper shadows, Chantel crept past an abandoned car, its frame the sole thing thieves hadn't stolen. A deserted factory and a warehouse surrounded by weeds lined the empty street, miles from the colorful French Quarter and the humans partying there.

Click, click, click.

She halted at the sounds, her pulse sprinting.

A raindrop plunked between her eyebrows. Startled, she swiped it away.

Click, click—

Rats skittered past her on the damp concrete, their tiny claws making the noise.

Not the Enforcers. Yet. Still safe.

She bolted to the other side where darkness obscured all illumination, turning the night murkier. Blending in with the scenery

—as she did when she prowled before reaping—was her best defense against her pursuers' attack. She hoped.

Lightning flashed, the area brightened to daylight.

Fuck. Crouched between the buildings, she shaded her eyes.

BOOM.

Thunder rocked the sky and shook everything beneath it, for a second. Then the world surrounding her went eerily quiet.

Something brushed her leg.

She spun around.

Rodents by the dozens rose to their back feet, their frightened squeaks and hissing traveling on the humid breeze, pinpointing her location.

No, no, no, no.

Desperate to shut them up, she pulled her latest perp's prefrontal cortex or PFC from an inner pocket, ripped the thing into numerous pieces, then pitched the morsels at the creatures. The brain matter sailed well over them. As one, they lifted their faces to follow the potential meal. A feeding frenzy ensued, the larger vermin barreling past their smaller brethren, long teeth tearing at what sustenance they could and devouring it rapidly.

At least the tidbits kept them quiet and prevented the creep, whose PFC she'd thrown, from being reborn to prey on other terrified victims. There had been too many. Reaping him without the proper authority was a service she willingly provided and one she'd completed on other pricks in the past. The bodies hidden beneath a newly poured road, deep within the bayous, or in abandoned buildings where no one would find them. If by some miracle they did, the skeletons wouldn't reveal how they'd died.

A perfect plan. Except she hadn't acted from a direct order, but an inner morality reapers weren't supposed to own, which brought the Enforcers here to catch her. If they could.

She tore between the buildings and struggled to keep her balance, overgrown vegetation, rocks and other debris doing its best to slow her down.

Lightning cracked. Thunder roared. Whipping rain competed against howling wind. Not here though. Across the street.

A side door hung off its hinges, the flooding from Katrina having rusted the metal. She darted inside the structure and stopped, utter blackness greeting her, the same as being blind. Swinging her hands in front to detect obstructions, she negotiated the space as well as possible.

Her foot hooked on something solid, pitching her forward. She slammed against a large, immovable object. *Shit, shit, shit.* Searing pain radiated from her hip to her thighs and chest, a squeal rising to her throat. Teeth gritted, she wouldn't—couldn't allow the sound to escape. Panting, she eased away from the barrier, possibly a table or machine, and edged around it, her gloves hampering her ability to feel.

She pulled the right one off with her teeth, gingerly tested whatever was in front and touched something slimy. Shivering, she put her glove back on and waited for the next light burst.

A bolt struck yards past this building, revealing its guts.

She dashed to the stairway, the steps rusted out in spots, the construction rickety. Climbing the damn thing made it sway, forcing her to pause until it settled. Rain and perspiration dampened the scarf covering her hair and face except for her eyes.

If she survived this, she'd reap an extra scumbag to celebrate.

The notion warmed her, chasing away the damp chill, the air stinking worse than wet dog fur.

Nose scrunched, she arrived at the next level and crawled across who-knew-what to reach the part facing the street, the crumbled wall affording a perfect view of everything below.

On her stomach, she merged with her hiding place.

New lightning knifed down, three bolts this time, each piercing the broken asphalt. Smoke rose from the cratered centers, the darkened plumes growing in size rather than dissipating within the wind. In stages, the vapor took form.

Biker boots appeared first followed by muscular legs clad in black jeans, then torsos and broad shoulders straining against dark long-sleeved tees.

She scurried back to the stairway, ran down several steps and jumped to the floor below, landing on her damn knees.

Ohhh. Pain swirled around her and her breath pushed out in what sounded like a deafening rush despite the persistent rumbling overhead. Determined to escape, she pushed to her feet, limped until she'd healed then traversed the area as she had earlier, reaching the corridor between the buildings. Never had she run as she did now, rounding corners and weaving between sections where humans once worked. She raced down one passageway then up another, traveling in circles for all she knew and didn't much care. Being in motion meant the Enforcers hadn't taken her.

Breathless, she slipped into another gap separating the structures, this one longer than the earlier ones. A new path that might lead her to a place where she could hide and be—

A male form stood at one end, available light exposing him. At least six-four, he looked in his early thirties, his head shaved, physique massive.

She pivoted and shot in the other direction, the opening still clear. *For how long?* Didn't matter. A primal instinct urged her forward and pressed her to look behind.

The Enforcer hadn't budged.

That didn't make sense unless he hadn't seen or detected—

She bumped against the building, her elbow taking the worst. Swallowing repeatedly, she cradled the sore spot and scrambled down the pathway to the opening on the other side.

Empty. No Enforcers.

Hardly believing her good luck, she still sagged against the structure to catch her breath. If not now, she'd soon collapse.

The air stilled, the rain dangling within it rather than falling.

Inner alarms sounded. *Run, run, runnnnnnn.*

The guy she'd seen stood to her side, the ring in his left nostril glinting in the dreary light, his virility unquestioned. Another one, as tall and approximately the same age, blocked her on the other side, his longish hair sun-streaked and voluminous, resembling a lion's mane, his golden eyes matching the creature's, the power he exuded no different.

Ahead, the third one approached, his height and age identical to the other two, his hair shoulder length and pure black, the same as his neatly trimmed mustache and beard, his skin bronze, dark eyes piercing, features rough and masculine.

Her pussy creamed.

Fuck that. Stop it.

She couldn't.

These three owned what human women adored, and what female reapers like her feared most. Sexual allure that enticed their captives to acquiesce no matter what they faced, whether imprisonment, annihilation, or reeducation, it being the worst.

She'd rather cease to exist than have them take away her will and braced herself for whatever happened.

The one in front reached her and smiled.

Her stomach fluttered at the engaging and promising gesture. She ignored her response.

He tilted his head from side to side, the raindrops swinging in the same direction to avoid touching him. "Who do we have here?"

His deep voice rumbled, a mild tease lacing it rather than threats. The same game she played with those she reaped. Scaring the damn fools did zip to secure their cooperation. Tempting them proved far easier.

Except she wasn't anyone's victim. No matter what he or his buddies did, she'd resist.

He glanced at his companions. They, too, waited for her response.

Nothing would make her give it.

“Let’s start over. Kahl.” The guy facing her looked at the one with the shaved head. “You know what to do.”

She threw a punch and kicked her feet to keep him from trying squat.

Chuckling, Kahl pinned her left wrist against the brick structure.

She clawed his stubbled cheek but her glove stopped her nails from breaking skin.

“Huntir.” The bearded guy spoke to the one who looked like a lion would if it assumed human form. “Some help here.”

He imprisoned her other wrist against the wall.

She kicked at whatever she could reach.

Huntir increased his hold on her. “I could be wrong, Rydan, but I think she wants your balls.”

Rydan stroked his beard. “In time. And in the way I demand.”

They laughed.

She bristled. “Let me go, you cretins. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No?” Doubt and amusement burned in Rydan’s dark eyes. “From what we’ve heard you’ve been a bad girl.” He wagged his finger.

If the scarf hadn’t covered her mouth, she would have bit him. “You heard wrong. The prick I took out tonight killed an entire family during a home invasion. Parents and little kids for fuck’s sake. One baby not yet walking. All for a few hundred bucks they had lying around, their real valuables in a safe he couldn’t open because he slaughtered the father before getting the combination. You call that good? You consider that right? You believe that’s sane? Who in the hell is going to miss him? Not his next victims, that’s for sure. Did you want their blood on your hands?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched.

Not from anger. Something else. Curious as to what, she

gazed deep into his eyes, a test she performed on those she reaped, determining whether they were decent or vile in their deepest core.

A faint spark burned within Rydan, signifying honor or integrity or whatever humans called the trait.

Hope surged. Despite Kahl and Huntir holding her arms, she leaned toward Rydan. “You know I’m right. I can see it on your face. Let me go.” She twisted her wrists. The others held tight. “The powers-that-be will never know. You have other paras to cow. Let me do my thing. I’m simply ridding the world of assholes that shouldn’t be here in the first place. Who decided they had a right to live while others had to die for their greed and amusement?”

Kahl cleared his throat. Embarrassment flickered in his brown eyes, a righteous spark in them too. The same for Huntir. Both as worthy as Rydan... if they allowed their good sides to come out.

“You guys know I’m right.” She used her most melodic tone, her pitch soothing and cajoling, similar to the Sirens’ voices from Greek mythology. Another reaper talent to make her job easier, other than having to take good people before their time. “You can’t deny it.”

Rydan’s features went slack, longing and wonder building in his gaze.

The same for Huntir and Kahl.

This was so easy it should have been a crime for her to do it. “Come on.” She upped her charm. “Let me—”

“That’s not how this works.” Rydan’s weak moment hardened to indifference. “You’re well aware of that, Chantel.”

His and the others’ effortless resistance to her voice shouldn’t have surprised her. Them already knowing her name certainly didn’t. Most likely, they had her lengthy file detailing each rogue reaping. Even so, she played dumb. “Who? I’m Dike.”

Rydan threw back his head and laughed, the sound rich and

thrilling. “That’s not what I heard.” He inched closer, their boots touching. “Considering the many guys who’ve been balls deep in you, you’re now telling us you’re a lesbian?”

“Dike with an i not a y.” *Men*. “She’s the Greek goddess representing justice.”

“No shit? Guess I’ll have to remember that when my next assignment lies as much as you do.”

“For. A. Good. Freaking. Cause.”

“Your words and misguided belief. Not ours. Let’s see what we have here.” He unwound her scarf. Her waist-length hair spilled out.

Kahl sucked in a breath. Huntir touched the fiery red tresses.

Rydan stared, lust flooding his face.

If it came to sleeping with them to beat this charge, she’d do so, more willingly than she wanted to admit. However, playing into their hands too soon wasn’t wise. “Do *not* touch me. Anywhere.”

Discounting her demand, Rydan removed the scarf and pitched it aside. Admiration and male hunger widened his smile. “You’re definitely something, aren’t you?”

Huntir and Kahl whistled long and low.

Beauty wasn’t something she’d asked for. Looks came with being a reaper. Long ago, those who created her kind decided gaunt men with fetid breath and yellowed teeth scared their victims rather than bewitching them, making it harder to secure the kill. Over time, she’d tried acid facials and carving deep gashes in her cheeks. Once she’d cut off her nose. Anything to keep from reaping innocents. Within seconds, her features healed, returning to what they were now, even bringing these dudes to their feet.

Time for some sugar. “Can’t we compromise?” She couldn’t have sounded breathier. “You can rough me up—you know, tear my clothes, pull out some of my hair, give me a few bruises then

say I escaped... because another reaper helped me. You can claim it was my lover.”

Kahl stroked her wrist, sending delightful warmth up her arm. “Would your lover be male or female?”

Whatever bought her freedom. “The sex makes no difference to me. You choose. I’ll spread the lies within my community to get you guys off the hook. It’s for your own good. You do not want to mess with me. I’m not worth it.”

“Is that so?” Rydan spoke to Huntir. “See to her foot.”

My what?

Huntir edged nearer, his fragrance bearing a primal scent belonging to a magnificent beast.

She inhaled deeply to catch more.

He hooked his ankle around hers so she couldn’t kick. Kahl did the same on her other side, trapping her completely.

Rydan looked down his nose at her. “You can make this easy on yourself or hard. Your choice.”

She bared her teeth.

“Very well.” He pressed close, his length molded to hers, his stiffened cock nestled against her mound, her boobs crushed to his chest.

His scent washed over her, a fragrance that brought to mind sultry nights and sex.

She trembled without meaning to.

He touched his lips to her ear, his breath heated and fresh. “You’re going to cooperate with us whether you want to or not, beginning now.” He stepped back. “Tell me where the vic’s PFC is or I swear I’ll search you for it and I won’t be gentle.”

Big fucking deal. The rougher the sex the better she liked it. She lifted her chin.

“Have it your way.” He cupped her boobs and thumbed her nipples.

Heat burst from her rigid tips to between her legs. She leaned into his touch then pulled back.

He arched one dark eyebrow and fondled her gently before going at her hard, as she preferred.

Pleasure swirled in her boobs then darted southward, settling in her sheath. Her lids sank to half-mast.

“Like that?”

He knew she did. However, she'd beg for annihilation before admitting it. Jaw clenched, she shook her head.

“Good.” He drew his thumbs over her peaked nipples. “Wouldn't want you enjoying yourself. You're not, right?” He cupped her pussy.

She held back an oath. Her slit had drenched her crotch, proving her arousal and leaving her no chance to lie.

He laughed softly. “Good girl. You know what I like.”

“Fuck. You.”

Straightened, he wrapped his hand around her throat and used his thumb to lift her face to his.

She averted her gaze.

“Uh-uh.” He tightened his grip. Not enough to kill her, as she hoped, to end her miserable existence, but to let her know he ruled.

Like hell.

“Come on, Precious. Look at me.”

She closed her eyes. “Screw. You.”

“In time, believe me. And a lot. Possibly more than you can take before you're able to sate my carnal needs. But then, the choice isn't yours.”

“Yeah?” She faked a laugh. “Nor is my response your call. Force yourself on me, demand I do anything to pleasure you and I'll play dead. See how you like that.”

He shrugged. “If you're simply playing, which you will be, the game might be fun.” He traced her jawline.

Her skin tingled and her mouth dried.

“However, I believe you'll give up your fight quicker than you believed possible. For now though... Huntir. Kahl.”

They released her.

Before she could determine why, Rydan turned her to face the building then pushed her into it, her cheek hitting the bricks.

Her breath spilled out, outrage overtaking her shock. “That’s it, hurt me. Prove what a big man you are.”

“I will.” He ground his rigid cock against her ass. “But first, we have business to take care of.”

As Kahl and Huntir held her arms above her head and anchored her feet with theirs, Rydan frisked her... slowly, sensuously, his touch gliding over every part, exploring as he willed.

She bit her lower lip, needing the pain to keep from responding. No good. He swept over her inner thighs, presumably looking for her perp’s PFC, but collided with her anus and cunt instead.

Pleasure coiled in her pussy, demanding release. New moisture escaped her cleft. She dug her gloved fingers into her palms so she wouldn’t tremble.

He stroked her stomach, waist and ribs, tickling her.

She laughed then killed the sound.

“Sorry.” He buried his face in her hair, his weight imprisoning her further.

Her pussy grew congested, a pulse beating deep within its depths.

“Didn’t mean to make this too pleasant,” he said.

Another smug comment from him and she’d chew off his nuts the first chance she got. “Does pawing women who don’t like it turn you on?”

“I was thinking the same about your response to what I’m doing.” He squeezed the sodden fabric between her legs. “This definitely answers my question” He turned her to face him, his nose touching hers, their mouths a breath apart.

Raw power and strength poured from him, melting her insides. Despite her best intentions, she softened, her lips parting.

If he intended to kiss her, she wasn't certain she could or would fight him off.

He held her gaze, his determined. "Where's the item you took from the human you reaped?"

His breath skipped across her upper lip, warming but not taming her. He could wait for her answer until the universe ended, and she still wouldn't give it.

His complexion darkened. "Tell me now or regret it later."

A snappy retort refused to come, leaving nothing except despair and honesty. "Nothing you or your friends do to me could be worse than being created a reaper and having no say in hurting good humans. Forced to leave the monsters, who should die, to roam as they want, wrecking lives and dreams. Yeah, your later really scares me."

He lowered his head, his hair brushing her chin.

Her fury turned to yearning. *Please, I have to have reached him.* All it would take was one clarifying moment on his part and he'd see things her way.

After several deep breaths, he straightened. "You have no idea what's in store at our lair."

She'd heard rumors from other reapers. An Enforcer's den wasn't Disneyland by any means. Neither was her existence. "You could change that, if you wanted."

Kahl spoke, "Yeah?"

His low-pitched voice registered in her stomach, the way a throaty sax does, his spicy scent exuding male power and something indescribable but sexy as fuck.

Looking skeptical, he pushed his face toward hers. "How is this change supposed to happen?"

He couldn't be that clueless. "By being nice?"

Huntir shook his head, his blondish locks bobbing around his rugged features. "That's not our job and you know it." His resonant tone was as vibrant as the others. "You broke the rules and now you pay."

She bounced on her heels as well as she could given their ankles trapped hers. “You could be different if you wanted. It would only take one kind decision. All I’m asking is for you to—”

“Quiet.” Rydan clasped her neck. “Not another word unless it’s a confession.”

“You mean admitting I was wrong? No fucking way am I—”

He claimed her mouth, his tongue plunging deep inside. Taking without asking. Possessing without pause. Making the world spin and her ears buzz. His taste otherworldly, as close to divine as any male could get.

She sagged against him.