



Moonshine (Cal Leandros Book 2)

By Rob Thurman

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After saving the world from his fiendish father's side of the family, Cal Leandros and his stalwart half-brother Niko have settled down with new digs and a new gig-bodyguard and detective work. And in New York City, where preternatural beings stalk the streets just like normal folk, business is good. Their latest case has them going undercover for the Kin-the werewolf Mafia. A low-level Kin boss thinks a rival is setting him up for a fall, and wants proof. The place to start is the back room of Moonshine-a gambling club for non-humans. Cal thinks it's a simple in-and-out job. But Cal is very, very wrong.

Cal and Niko are being set up themselves-and the people behind it have a bite much worse than their bark...

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Editorial Review

Review

A subtly warped world compellingly built by Thurman. (*Green Man Review*)

Cal's a sarcastic, sardonic narrator who pulls the reader into his world, both the good and the bad. (*Romantic Times*)

About the Author

Rob, short for Robyn (yes, he is really a she) Thurman lives in Indiana, land of rolling hills and cows, deer, and wild turkeys. Many, many turkeys. She is also the author of the Cal Leandros Series: *Nightlife*, *Moonshine*, *Madhouse*, and *Deathwish*; has a story in the anthology *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe*; and is the author of *Trick of the Light*, the first book in the Trickster series.

Besides wild, ravenous turkeys, she has a dog (if you don't have a dog, how do you live?)—one hundred pounds of Siberian husky. He looks like a wolf, has paws the size of a person's hand, ice blue eyes, teeth out of a Godzilla movies, and the ferocious habit of hiding under the kitchen table and peeing on himself when strangers come by. Fortunately, she has another dog that is a little more invested in keeping the food source alive. By the way, the dogs were adopted from shelters. They were fully grown, already housetrained, and grateful as hell. Think about it next time you're looking for a Rover or Fluffy.

For updates, teasers, deleted scenes, and various other extras, visit Rob Thurman's website and her LiveJournal.

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I was born a monster.

No big deal, right? Monsters are everywhere in this world. But I'm not talking your sweaty pedophile or your serial killer with a cold and silent harem buried in his crawl space. No, I'm talking about the real deal. Creatures that scuttled across the surface of this world when the air was sulfuric acid and the nighttime moon all but blocked out the sky. Scales and fangs, blood that doubled as venom, minds and bodies twisted in concert, dark legends come to life. These legends had always been a reality, but they were one that refused to register on modern human eyes. Monsters, they existed all right, and they were legion, so what was one more?

Although truthfully, I was only half-monster. My mother was human; my father something...else. When we were younger my brother and I had called them Grendels; the rest of the supernatural world called them Auphe. You say tomato; I say murderous death incarnate. It's all good fun. Auphe were the seed of the elf fantasy, believe it or not, but this seed was poisonous, and it would kill anything it touched. There was no blond hair or limpid blue eyes, no silken voices like a temple bell. There was only skin as palely transparent as that of a salamander, eyes the red of lava, and a mind blackened and putrid as a rotting swamp. Okay, they did have the pointed ears; I'll give you that. Sometimes legends do get the facts right, but that's not much comfort when a thousand metal teeth are buried in your throat.

Half-monster or whole, in the end it didn't matter. I had my weaknesses, same as anyone else. And I was facing one of them now.

Clowns.

Yeah, that's what I said. Clowns. I hate clowns. Always have. Point one out to me at the age of three and I would run wailing in the other direction as if the Hounds of Hell had been set on my diapered ass. Even now they still gave me a chill, and wasn't that pretty damn ludicrous? I'd fought creatures more monstrous than the mind could grasp. And I was related to things even worse than that, but bottom line, none of it mattered. I just hated clowns. And honestly, what self-respecting person doesn't? Name one, just one person whose flesh didn't crawl at the sight of them. Those puffy, bloated hands. The tiny gleaming eyes buried in pits of black paint. That maniacal grin awash in lurid scarlet, red as blood. Whose blood? you'd wonder uneasily to yourself. Could be yours if you didn't waddle away fast enough on chunky toddler legs. Then there were the people who dressed like cartoon animals, lolling plush tongues, glassy saucer eyes, and thick, unhinged laughs. They were nasty in their own right, but they still had nothing on clowns. Jesus Christ. Don't kids have enough to warp them in this world?

"They're only bodachs, Cal," Niko's voice came with a cool amusement that had me throwing him a black scowl. "You could handle a bodach long before you were potty trained. Granted, that was less than a month ago..."

My brother, his bedside manner was less hand-holding and more a nice brisk thwap to the back of the head. "They're not just bodachs," I gritted. "They're bodachs in clown makeup. And that, Cyrano, makes all the difference in the goddamn world."

The Roman nose made even more generous by Niko's newly shorn hair snorted. "Still with the clowns?" Several months ago Niko's dark blond hair, most often in a ponytail or braid, had trailed nearly to the base of his spine. Now it barely touched his ears—or would have if he hadn't ruthlessly skimmed it back. He had cut his hair in mourning, a custom of our Greek ancestors. It was one of the few tales our mother had bothered to share with us. The Gypsy clan she'd grown up in had roamed all of Europe hundreds of years ago. They weren't called Travelers for nothing. Before eventually making their way to the good old USA, they'd settled for a time in Greece, intermarrying with the natives on occasion although it was frowned upon by both sides. The result was an odd mixture of Rom and Greek traditions that had lost Niko his hair. I gave him hell about it, but not as much as I could have. After all, he'd done it to grieve my death, to mourn me. Smart-ass comments tended to shrivel in my mouth in the face of that.

And I had died, although it had been a temporary thing. First Niko had stabbed me, and then a healer friend had stopped my heart. My death had lasted only seconds, but dead I had been. Not that I held a grudge. It was all done in an effort to stop the creature that had taken control of me—a creature bent on remaking the world. On remaking me. Even a permanent death would've been better than what it had planned.

Yeah, for sheer awe-inspiring terror, that thing had given clowns a run for their money.

"Yes," I snarled. "Still with the clowns."

The carnival was closed for the night, all spiderweb metal and lonely winds rocking the buckets of the rides, especially those of the Ferris wheel. The wheel itself loomed like a petrified skeleton, the slouching beast that had never made Bethlehem. Here its carcass rotted, its bones a darkly encrusted silver hung with the white twinkle of diamonds. The lingering smell of grease and butter had turned rancid, and a cheap and torn stuffed dog, the prize in any number of fixed games, lay at the base of a garbage can. One blank button eye had been torn away leaving a raveled stuffing socket. Poor bastard, he'd missed his ride to the Island of Misfit Toys. The yellow bulbs strung here and there were either dead or dim as a candle flame. Beneath it all

there was the scuttle of rats' claws and the scuttle of something far more lethal. All in all, I could've chosen a better location for our first job. In fact, a mentally challenged plaster garden gnome could've done better.

"I liked working at the bar better." What was that in the shadows? The pale glimmer of greasepaint? "The only clowns in bars are smart-ass drunks who don't tip."

To my right, Niko continued to observe me with brotherly disdain. Dressed in black pants and shirt, he would've blended into the night if not for the lighter gleam of his short hair. He'd recently grown a closely shorn immaculately maintained goatee—probably to keep the zen hair ratio happy—which was equally bright against his olive skin. My own hair was indistinguishable from the shadows around us. Normally I pulled it back into a short tail, but tonight I let it fall free to obscure some of the full-moon shade of my skin. Niko could afford to give himself away; he was Bruce Lee with a bleach job. I, on the other hand, didn't mind a little extra help. Don't get me wrong; I could hold my own against most things that go bump in the night. Vampires, werewolves, boggles, ghouls...trolls were a little more problematic. Whatever was out there, I could face it, but this time....

Strong fingers came over and squeezed an imaginary round red nose that must've hung just before mine. "Honk. Honk," Niko said with the utmost gravity. Picture it if you will. One of the most lethal fighters in the tristate area, a man who in the game of kill-or-be-killed was solidly king of the former category, and he was honking. Honking. Jesus.

"You know, since you started getting some, you are really beginning to piss me off." I started into the depths of the carnival, not bothering to check to see if he was following. He was. It wasn't something I had to see or hear to know. Niko watched my back, always. The mountains would fall and the oceans dry to dust before that ever changed.

"One day, little man." A fleeting pat came on my shoulder. "One day."

I didn't respond, only twisted my shoulders slightly and kept moving. That wasn't a subject for discussion, not now and definitely not here. Niko was smart, so damn smart, but when it came to his baby brother he wasn't as calculating or logical as he could've been. Should've been. To me there were things that were clear, so clear, it made me wonder why no one else seemed able to see what I could so effortlessly.

"Cal?" Niko might not see what I saw, but he could see when something wasn't quite right. When you know someone your whole life you can read them quicker than the morning comics, even when they might not want you to.

I ignored the question in the shape of my name and walked on with my eyes searching every inky clot of darkness. "Cal." This time it wasn't a question; it was a demand. And knowing Nik, an undeniable one.

I can honestly say it was the only time in my life I was glad to see a clown. Even one who was doing his level best to disembowel me with seven-inch-long razor-edged nails. It shot out of a mound of trash, the furious motion surrounding it in a shower of stale popcorn, stained napkins...and fluttering hanks of children's hair. The silky strands hung like party streamers from jetty claws—the same claws that were flying at me. The old Scottish legend, as methodically stuffed in my head by Niko, said a bodach would slither down a house's chimney much like a satanic Santa Claus to eat whatever children it could find, flesh, skin, bones, and all. Every scrap...except the hair. It didn't like the hair.

I felt my stomach twist into a sharp-edged tangle until I recognized the silver locks for what they were. The

bodach held a dirty-faced doll in one multijointed hand, a doll with matching blond hair. The fall of hair from its other hand was nothing more than a rain of cheap polyester. It didn't change the fact that it all too easily could have been real. Bodachs aren't known for their willpower in the dieting field. It made the clown costume so chilling perfect...the ideal camouflage to snare the innocent.

Atop the grimy clown suit of blue, green, and curdled cream, under the ridiculous corkscrew wig and white paint, was the face behind the tale. The mummy brown skin was camouflaged by the thick pigment, but the thickly smiling lips did nothing to conceal teeth equally as brown from dried blood. When it grinned you would almost swear its head turned inside out, and it was grinning now like Jack the Ripper on Ladies' Night as it dropped the doll and came for me. I lunged to one side, grabbed the thing's arm with my free hand, and pulled, letting it continue its motion on past me. As the claws and bone white hand cleared my ribs with room to spare, I buried the muzzle of the Glock under a vulpine chin and blew off the top of its curly orange head.

The body fell with limbs twitching in the dance of the electrified. And the smell...on their bast day bodachs weren't exactly as fresh as daisies. A dying one put off a reek that would take paint off a car. It certainly took the edge off my appetite. Covering my mouth and nose, I felt the distinctive taste of bile creep into my mouth. "Holy shit. That is rank." It was a number of things worse than that, but I couldn't get into them without spewing my supper. One of the quirky little side effects of being not exactly human was an excellent sense of smell. I was no wolf, but I'd give a drug-sniffing dog a run for its money. Right now, however, the only running I wanted to do was out of range of this god-awful, hideous stench. Clamping my lips tight, I swallowed several times and blinked watering eyes. It was that pained moisture that had me doubting the sight before me.

The bodach had stopped quivering. Normally that was good, great even. All hail the conquering heroes. Strike up the band, toss us the key to the city, and slap some green across our palms. Unfortunately, normally wasn't the case here. It stopped quivering because it got up. That's right. With the top of its head split open like a rotten egg, it rose to its feet and grinned jack-o'-lantern wide around the blood pouring from its mouth. That was more than disturbing enough, but when it started talking...it was a whole new repulsive ball game.

"Little...boy...blue," it gurgled, each word fighting to the surface. "Blow your horn." It spit derisively, turning the ground black at its feet, and then pointed a claw at the gun dangling from my hand. "Blow your horn." Then it moved for me, not as fluidly as when it had first attacked, but neither was it coming at a slow stagger.

"You have got to be shitting me," I said in disbelief. As I spoke, the slashing claws came closer. But worse than that, so much worse, was that so did the smell. That, more than the other considerations, had me moving fast. This time I shot it in the kneecaps, assuming it had kneecaps. Whatever peculiar monster parts that allowed its legs to bend, that's what I put a few bullets through. It fell again, yet still it kept coming, dragging itself by jutting knife nails and clown-suit-covered elbows. So I shot those too.

"Blow your horn," it hissed, spraying blood. "Blow your horn." And on it wriggled with the jerky movements of a broken-backed snake.

Looking down at my gun and then back at the bodach, I was giving serious consideration to throwing the useless piece of shit at it when an infinitely patient sigh blew the hair by my ear. Tapping my shoulder lightly with the hilt of his sword, Niko asked calmly, "Are you done playing yet?"

The smug son of a bitch. I waved my gun hand and took a few steps back, hoping for more breathable air. "Yeah, sure. Knock yourself out."

Moving past me with silent grace, he hefted the falchion and then swung it with a speed that was a blur of shimmering silver. Broad and curved, the blade bit through the bodach's neck, decapitating it instantly. The head rolled, bounced off the side of my foot, and promptly tried to bite my ankle. I punted it hard and hissed as the smell clung to my sneaker. "We should've brought a tree shredder," I grunted, rubbing the back of my hand across my nose futilely. All right. Fine. If that was the way this night was going to be, I'd just have to roll with it. Grimly, I toed off my shoes and booted them and the stench far away from me. "Can I borrow a backup since this is next to friggin' useless?" I asked, shoving the gun into my shoulder holster.

I wasn't making an unreasonable assumption to think that Niko would have an extra something sharp on him. What would be far-fetched would be to imagine that his surplus consisted of only one. Niko could set off metal detectors from a hundred feet with all the weapons he carried. His hand disappeared in his long duster, less of a fashion statement and more of a repository of all that was lethal in the world, and reappeared with a small cardboard box. It wasn't quite what I expected and I accepted the box dubiously. "What the hell?"

"Explosive rounds." He continued as I gave a low whistle, "You'd be amazed at what they peddle in some dark alleys."

More happy than amazed actually, but it didn't stop me from immediately loading the gun. While Niko was a worshipper of the blade, I was of a more modern bent. If I could kill from a hundred feet away, hey, it meant fewer dry cleaning bills. What's not to appreciate in that? "Nice. Nothing like an early Christmas present."

"Are you set for any close-up work?" The tone was that of an old-fashioned nun asking if I'd done my homework. Only this nun walked softly and carried a razor-edged ruler. I snorted and pulled my own blade. This one was more a knife than a sword, but it was the type you saw in mail-order magazines...the kind that had mercenaries drooling over the ad. Coated with black teflon, the long thick shank was saw-toothed and capable of treating bone as if it were Jell-o. I might not eat and breathe them like Nik, but I could use blades and was smart enough to know they never jam or run out of ammunition. Guns were preferred; knives were practical. "I sleep with it, Nik. I damn sure carry it when we're facing killer clowns."

"The client said there's at least two more, maybe four. Check back in fifteen." He didn't bother to look at a watch. Niko claimed an innate understanding of the inner workings of time, space, and the universe in general. A result of all that meditation and martial arts training, a natural talent, or simply a desire to show up his little brother—whatever the process behind it, Niko lived as an example to us lesser beings. Pointedly, I checked the watch I'd fished out of last week's cereal box. "If I see one balloon animal, I'm waiting in the car." With that, I turned and jogged farther into the small maze of sagging tents.

I'd never been a fan of carnivals. My brother and I had spent a few years off and on in them throughout our childhood. Sophia, our mother or—, to be more precise, our whiskey-swilling egg donor—had plied her trade in some of the more run-down ones in the business. She was a fortune-teller; I didn't know the Latin term for money-grubbing con artist or if it was in any official medical journal, but Sophia hadn't met the nickel she didn't like or the person she wouldn't gleefully rip off.

Boys living in a carnival—it should've been exciting for us, fun. Carnies' kids got the free rides, the night's leftover hot dogs and cotton candy, the freedom to run wild from morning to midnight, when the place closed down. Heaven for anyone under thirteen, right? Heaven for about two and a half days and then the thrill palled quickly enough. It even put me off hot dogs for a few years, and I loved those damn tubes of mystery meat. But try eating them all day, every day for weeks on end with the only veggie of choice being fries or greasy popcorn, and it won't be long before you're trying to shoplift fresh fruit at the nearest store. Incipient scurvy aside, the summers had been miserable stretches of endless heat and humidity. Niko and I

spent most nights outside of our tiny trailer with sweat soaked pillows and a sheet to sleep on. Just the two of us under a sweltering soup of stars. Sophia liked her private time. She made money that way too. Infinitely practical, Niko had called her. Nothing like a bunch of fancy words when one of five letters would've done just fine.

Eventually Sophia outstayed her welcome and we moved on. Haven't gone to a carnival since. I also have a love of air-conditioning that will never die. Luckily, it was spring now. The only sweat on me now was a cold one, prickling the nape of my neck. Damn clowns. Leaving footprints in the damp dirt, I padded along in socked feet trying to follow the bodach scent. It was so strong now your average human could've picked up on it, no creature-feature DNA needed at all. At the base of the Ferris wheel I circled once, then looked up with pessimistic expectation. Sure enough, the son of a bitch was waving at me. Waving, threatening to eviscerate—it was one of the two. Exhaling, I holstered my gun and checked out the controls. The wiring was torn out in massive chunks, making the ride as dead and petrified as it had appeared from the beginning. Adding insult to injury, my final poke in the innards of the control box had the wheel's white lights flickering and dying.

Wonderful. Goddamn wonderful.

My socks went the way of my shoes and I began to climb. I wasn't afraid of heights. A nice, normal fear like that? Where would be the amusement factor there? But as I pulled myself up by metal handholds covered in soot and grease and felt the slide of oil under my grasping toes all in near-total darkness, I wouldn't have minded saying I'd had better days. Within seconds the ground below disappeared, swallowed up by blackness. If you fell, you would have no idea when you would hit...until you did. Some would consider that a blessing. Not me—I liked to see the bad news before it took me down. Continuing upward with a grunted exhalation, I felt a quick bite to the heel of my hand and the warm flow of blood. From the dull twinge it wasn't too bad and I kept on. Far above, one car rocked rhythmically...back and forth, back and forth. It was almost hypnotic, the motion.

"Cradle will rock," the voice crooned from above. Barbwire and ice, acid-etched glass, not exactly made for singing. Like an ice-pick through the ear, it went on and on. 'Rock-a-bye. Baby. Rock-a-bye."

Nursery rhymes and the smiling face of a child's supposed best friend. Bodachs might not be the most powerful of the monsters out there, but they seemed to be smart...in their own predatory way. Whether they were smart enough remained to be seen. With four of them in a place like this, it amazed me the place wasn't swarming with cops. They couldn't have been here long or children would've gone missing by now. Lots and lots of children. Up until now I hadn't heard of bodachs. No big surprise. There were lots of boogeymen that hadn't pinged on my radar. If it hadn't tried to eat me in the past and wasn't currently gnawing on me in the present, I wasn't going to worry about it. Let Niko memorize the mythology section of the public library; he loved that stuff. Or get the scoop from our new business partner. She had contacts in the after-sundown crowd. If that failed, hit up our friend by default Goodfellow. He'd been around since the dawn of time, our own Avatar of Annoyance; if he didn't know about it, it didn't exist. One way or the other somebody—somebody besides me, that is—could get the info and fill me in. And if Niko wanted to photocopy the picture and blurb about our current baddie and pin it to my jacket, I actually might read it on the ride over. Or I might finish the latest naughty women-in-prison paperback instead. You just never knew.

I kept climbing and the bodach kept serenading. That alone would've been enough for me to kill it. When I had nearly reached the apex of the metal framework, the car continued to rock about two feet above my head. Bracing myself, I balanced as best as I could, then snagged the rising and falling lip of the metal bucket with both hands and surged over it. A red-and-green-clad back was turned to me, the colors appearing as pastel

shadows of themselves as the clouds parted overhead to reveal a pale sliver of moon. Wig gone, white paint smeared to show patches of the wrinkled brown skin of its hairless head, the bodach continued to rock, shaking the metal beneath my feet.

"Rock-a-bye, baby," came its singsong. "Rock-a-bye."

It was enough. More than enough. If my ears weren't bleeding already, they soon would be. "Bozo," I growled. "You need to shut the hell up." Reluctantly, I left the gun in its holster. I couldn't be sure of the result of firing an explosive round up here, but catapulting headfirst to the ground was a possibility that would end my bodach-hunting days but quick.

It ignored me. I wasn't offended. My brother did it all the time. No, being ignored didn't offend me, but neither did it stop me from puncturing its spinal column with ten inches of Teflon-coated steel. I didn't give it a second chance to turn around. I wouldn't have given it a first if the caterwauling hadn't driven me to the edge. It was a predator, a child-eating monster. I was going to kill it regardless. Why the hell would I wait for it to turn around? As the knife slid home with a crunch of bone and a spurt of moon-silvered blood, the bodach folded quietly forward. There was no twitching, no thrashing, and no more goddamn singing, just blessed silence. Notch one on the Cal side of the board. Still grasping the handle of the knife, I placed a foot on the bodach's back and gave a hard yank without results. Those suckers didn't come cheap, and I liked this one. I wasn't leaving it. I tried again. Trapped in bone, the blade still wouldn't budge. Swearing, I added my other hand to the grip and gave one last yank. With the harsh sound of metal against stone, the knife finally pulled free. I held it aloft and gave it a flip to free it of excess blood. "Long live the king," I muttered under my breath.

At my feet the body of the bodach had settled back into its crumpled position, its white-painted hands splayed palms up at its sides. It was the contrast I noticed first, dark against pale. In the light of day the color might have been olive tinted or honey brown. Under the come-and-go moon it was gray.

The gray of a corpse.

Lots and lots of children, I'd thought. How lucky that hadn't happened. How amazingly lucky.

Fuck.

The small hand was curled next to the bodach's, a miniature shadow of a hideous counterpart. There was the glitter of sparkle polish on the tiny nails. Pink, I thought. Pink or lavender. It was hard to tell in the dark. I pulled the monster off her in one ragged motion.

"Hush, little baby." There was a heated breath on the skin of my feet and I looked down to see painted lips writhe in a grin baring bloodstained teeth. "Don't say a word. Not a word."

This time the serrated blade went into an eye, puncturing it like a rotten plum. And it didn't stop there. Neither did I.

By the time Niko found me I was sitting in the car. I'd kept the windows down to hear him on the offchance he called for help. It was a remote possibility at best. Like he'd said, we could handle a few bodachs. I might not be old enough to drink just yet and Niko only a few years past that point, but we were adults. Big, grown men with even bigger weapons. We could take a bodach or two.

"Problems?" He leaned in the driver's-side window.

"You get them all?" I countered impassively with my own question. I didn't look up from the dashboard. I'd thought about turning on the radio as I waited. A distraction would've been...good. And although it was an old car with an even more ancient sound system and only one working speaker, the radio worked...mostly. But the thought of accidentally tuning into a slow ballad made the silence seem sweet. No more soft, soft singing, not tonight.

The door opened and Niko slid behind the wheel. He wasn't much on letting me drive his elderly baby. Take out one fire hydrant and you're branded an insurance risk, go figure. From the corner of my eye I watched as he turned on the dome light and looked me over. I knew what he saw, a study in black bodach gore. It had splashed me liberally from my neck downward. I'd tried to wipe it off, but it was as sticky and thick as tar. Short of kerosene and a ruthlessly wielded scrub brush, the shit wasn't coming off. "You got them?" I repeated as he continued to study me in silence.

"That's a given," Niko said without an ounce of arrogance. "Although mine weren't quite as...mmm...permeable as yours." A finger touched an inky swath that coated the back of my hand. The blood clung to his finger and stretched between us, a clot of black spiderwebs, when he pulled away. Niko winced in empathy for the rough night I'd have cleaning off the stuff. "Maybe some sort of lotion mixed with a citrus juice will get it off. We'll experiment, come up with something." Heedless of the further mess on the back of my neck, he laid his hand there and squeezed lightly. "Now, what happened?"

There wasn't much point into putting it off. It wasn't anything I was prepared to share with anyone else, but Niko wasn't anyone. He was everyone, the only true family I'd ever known. And with him I wouldn't have to say the words. Raising my eyes to his, I let him see what lurked in mine.

"Ah, damn. Damn." For a fleeting moment, he rested his forehead against mine. Then he straightened to drop his hand from my neck and ask bleakly, "Where?"

"Top of the Ferris wheel." Along with the bits and pieces of the world's deadliest bodach. Little girl lost and not a cop in sight. How could that be? How could she not have been missed? I rubbed a hand across my mouth and exhaled, "A little girl."

Niko's thoughts were running along the same lines as mine. "It must not have taken her here at the carnival. Perhaps they're too unsure of their new hunting ground, don't have their bolt-holes set up just yet. She was probably taken from town. From her bed. Her parents may not even know that she's gone."

The carnival was upstate, about three and a half hours from our home in the city. On the outskirts of the small Hudson Falls, it would be simple enough for one or more of the bodachs to slip into town and disappear with a child—a child smelling of soap and toothpaste with her fingernails painted the color of Easter eggs.

"Did you touch her?"

It was a question I expected. Fact was, I almost had. Despite knowing better, I'd reached down to touch the curve of a still cheek, stopping myself only at the last second. "No. But she was there when I killed that son of a bitch. Not a lot of room in one of those cars." And if I stopped to think about it, really examine it, it would be safe to say bodach wasn't the only blood I was wearing. The dirt on my bare feet had a red tinge, one that didn't come from the muddy ground. Leaning my head back against the seat, I closed my eyes and

said, "Can we go? I want to take a shower."

"We'll go," he promised. "I'll only be a minute." He climbed back out and I heard the murmur of his voice at the rear of the car.

"He didn't touch her, but there could still be DNA at the scene. I don't believe the police will buy a kidnapping by a literal boogeyman," Niko was saying with a dark irony. "And I'd like to keep my brother from being entered into a criminal database. I need you to clean it up. Thoroughly."

"What about the child?" That was our client's voice, gruff and bass enough to shake the glass in the car windows. He was...truthfully, I didn't know what he was. Maybe a giant of some kind, maybe not. He worked in the carnival sideshow as Bartholomew the Bull, World's Tallest Man. He might've been; I don't know. He was about eight feet. Damn big for a man, although not so much for a giant. The second mouth high on his forehead he kept concealed by a long hank of ginger-colored hair. The faint pattern of scales along his oversized jaw he passed off as bad skin, and the heavy gold hoop hanging bull fashion from his nose distracted from the overly liquid brown of his eyes. He did a good job of going stealth among the sheep, but it wouldn't stand up to an intense scrutiny, the kind that would come from a police investigation once kids started disappearing. Having the bodachs on his home turf was bad news for a live-and-let-live kind of monster, but Bart was a little too slow on his feet to catch them. Strong enough to rip them limb from limb, yeah, but just not quick enough.

And that's how we had ended up here. Half a year ago when we'd been on the run from the Auphe, we'd had to take money where we could get it. I'd used a fake ID to work in a bar and Niko had pulled bodyguarding gigs for a guy who paid all his employees, including his accountant, under the table. Once we'd defeated my extended and bloodthirsty family, we'd had more options...but our talents were still fairly singular. Starting our own agency seemed a natural choice, at least for now. We planned on still doing the usual mundane babysitting of the famous, rich, and attention seeking. But there were other potential clients out there as well. We had more than one foot in the shadow world of the inhuman, and their money spent just the same. And this time we didn't limit ourselves to being bodyguards. If you had the money, we were willing to at least listen. Maybe we would discover if your favorite succubus was seeing you and only you. We might pull a job delivering a shipment of cursed jewelry. Or we could end up as glorified exterminators...like now. It sounded humorous, but it didn't feel that way. Not now.

"Put her in the water," came Niko's reluctant reply. "A pond, lake. Make it a place they'll soon find her, but also one that will take care of washing the evidence away or at the very least degrade it."

"And the bodachs?" Bartholomew ground between overlarge teeth, sounding more disgruntled. It could be he thought cleanup should be included in the price, but those are the breaks. We kill. We don't clean. You have to have some standards. I kept my eyes shut. I'd been swimming in bodach stench so long now I could barely even smell myself anymore. Turning my head to the side, I tried to surrender to the weariness seeping from my overstrained muscles.

"As if I give a damn where you put those bastards," Niko said with icy sharpness. There was the rattle of cash as Barty-boy decided to not push his luck and forked over our fee.

Hardest fifty bucks I'd ever made.

Users Review

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