

Bloodline

A Reapers Universe Short Story

D. C. Gomez

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This book is for the dreamers and the rebels.



Chapter One



The restraints were secure around Lauren's wrists and ankles. They were the only things holding her to the seat as her unconscious body draped over the metal chair. Her bare feet were immersed in six inches of water. It had to be a dream, or maybe a nightmare. Lauren could feel her toes going numb, but she couldn't move. She couldn't even open her eyes. It felt like a heavy blanket laid over her, blocking all her senses.

"Wake up, little one," a male voice said in the distance. "I know you can hear me."

Lauren wanted to wake up, but somewhere deep in her mind a voice begged her not to. She couldn't understand the fear holding her back. The voice sounded pleasant, almost familiar.

"Now, now. We can do this the easy way or the hard way." The man chuckled. "What am I saying? It would all be hard."

Excruciating screams filled the air, and they were followed by that same chuckle, which played on repeat. It took Lauren a few minutes to understand she was the one screaming. Her entire body was on fire. It felt like the most painful sunburn she had ever experienced. Her mind told her to sleep, to ignore the pain.

"I said wake up," the voice commanded, slapping her across the face.

Lauren forced her eyelids open. Her brain was still on strike, refusing to make sense of the scene in front of her. She was in a small, dingy room with low lighting, and she was being electrocuted by Ronald.

“What’s going on?” Lauren’s throat was raw from all the screams ripped from it, all of which she barely remembered.

“I’m doing my community service, but this time it’s for the world,” Ronald replied. “I’m getting rid of your kind.”

“My kind?” Lauren asked. “What do you mean?”

Ronald was wearing a large raincoat with rubber boots and black rubber gloves. A pair of dirty safety glasses hung loosely from his face. Holding a pair of rusty scissors that were larger than daggers, he made his way around Lauren. Ronald leaned close to Lauren and cut a piece of her curly hair. Lauren tried to wiggle away from him, but Ronald held her in place by pulling her hair.

Lauren’s brain worked in slow motion. She couldn’t understand why Ronald was doing this to her. Tears rolled down her face as goose bumps covered her body.

“Is this because I’m bi-racial?” Lauren tried to rationalize her situation.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Ronald replied. “You know exactly what runs down your veins, you filth. You are an abomination to this world. Like all your kind, you will bleed for your sins.”

“What sins?” Lauren whined. “I thought we were friends.”

“I could never be friends with the likes of you,” Ronald replied. “I will ascend to the highest level of my sect after I get rid of you. Your disgusting flesh will join the rest on these walls.”

Lauren could not swallow. Her mind spun, and she tried not to puke. The ropes cut into her flesh, making the skin purple—a hard thing to see with her mocha complexion. The room was spinning, and Lauren could hear the screams coming from the walls.

Father, please let it not be human skins, Lauren prayed to herself.

“Ronald, you need help,” Lauren said.

“Me?” Ronald laughed in her face. “Last time I checked, you’re the one tied to that chair. I would like to say this won’t be painful, but it would be a lie. You will suffer for hours to come.”

Ronald walked over to a stain-covered table. From her angle, Lauren couldn’t tell if the stains were blood or dirt. It didn’t matter. The intent was the same. Ronald was nuts. She screamed as loud as she could, but Ronald only laughed in response.

“Scream,” he told her. “I love the taste of fear. But trust me, nobody will ever hear you.”

Lauren started hyperventilating, her breath nothing more than short pants, and she couldn’t focus on her sight. Ronald crossed the room, his fingertips gripping her cheeks so hard he bruised them as he raised her face. He held a sharp sculpting knife in his right hand and dragged the blade down her forehead. The pain was overwhelming, and Lauren lost control of her bodily functions. Urine ran down her legs, and she howled as Ronald dug the blade deeper.

Heat waves radiated from Lauren’s body, but she had no idea where they came from. As the pain increased, Lauren unleashed the anger, fear, and hatred until it flew from her body. With no warning, Ronald slammed against the far wall. Lauren watched in horror as, layer by layer, Ronald was skinned alive.

Ronald’s screams matched Lauren’s then. Energy radiated like the fallout of a nuclear explosion. Light blinded Lauren, and Ronald’s screams faded into the background. There was nothing left of Lauren’s emotional or physical energy, and she passed out.



“Lord, what happened to these people?” A man’s voice.

“This is a nightmare,” a woman replied.

“Help,” Lauren croaked, but the word was barely audible.

“Ma’am, you are okay,” a soft voice whispered in her ear. “We’re getting you out of here.”

Lauren struggled to open her eyes. She couldn’t focus on anything. A man carried her out of the room, and her mouth dropped in shock. The place was a battlefield. Blood and bones were the only thing remaining of the former Ronald. Even the wallpaper—or whatever it was—bled nonstop. Lauren could still hear the low screams coming from them. She was limp in the arms of the strangers, unable to move or think.

“I have a survivor,” the man yelled as they reached the outside world.

Footsteps rushed in their direction, and Lauren was handed over to two more sets of hands before she was laid on a hard surface. Blankets covered her blistered skin next, but it changed very little because nothing made sense at this point. The stars were shining with a pleasant glow, a direct contrast to the grim scene around her. Two men approached her cautiously, and she immediately started hyperventilating again.

“Ma’am, can we ask you a few questions?” an older gentleman asked.

Lauren struggled to speak and only nodded.

“Can you tell us what happened?” the gentleman continued. “Did you know the other victim?”

“His name is . . . or was Ronald,” Lauren whispered. “I went to school with him.”

Tears threatened to escape her eyes, but she forced them shut.

“Can you tell us who did this to you guys?” the gentleman prodded.

“There wasn’t anyone else in there,” Lauren replied. “Ronald brought me here and tried to kill me.”

“But who killed Ronald?” the second gentleman inquired.

“I don’t know,” Lauren cried. “He just started disintegrating in front of me.”

“That’s impossible,” the second one said.

“Do you think I did it?” Lauren fired back. “I tortured myself, skinned Ronald, and then tied myself back up. Really?”

“We are not saying that, ma’am,” the older man jumped in. “We’re just trying to find the person who did all this to you.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Lauren screamed.

Lauren’s breathing came in brief bursts. The world around her spun, and she couldn’t focus. Paramedics rushed to her side, pushing the cops aside in their hurry to get to her. They placed oxygen on her mouth and nose, and a cool towel over her forehead.

“Enough. She needs medical treatment,” one paramedic told the cops. “We’re taking her in.”

Lauren closed her eyes, not uttering a single protest as the paramedics pushed the gurney along. Cops and investigators swarmed the area. The outside of the house matched the inside. Blood splatter everywhere. It was hard to miss the location.



Chapter Two

In the middle of the night, the small hospital was usually deserted, but not this evening. No, it was buzzing with people. It wasn't every day the staff received the survivor of a vicious act. Nobody was sure what to do with the remains of the other victims. The coroner had collected as much of the tissues, bones, and muscles as she could. Without damaging the evidence, they would need a vacuum to collect the rest. It was the most gruesome scene any of the first responders had ever witnessed. The shock from what happened was spreading across the community. The real questions on everyone's mind was: where was the killer and how had the poor girl survived?

John, Lauren's father, paced the hallways of the hospital waiting for answers. The nighttime nurses avoided making eye contact with him because they had no answers. As soon as they brought Lauren in, she started screaming. She pointed at everyone she saw and screamed about monsters being there. One of the older volunteers offered to comfort her. Instead, she attacked him, claiming he was the devil himself and wanted her soul. The intensity of her screams shattered glass and a few light bulbs. A few innocent bystanders passed out from the power.

"John, thank you for coming," the doctor said.

"Doctor, what is going on?" John asked, running his hands through his disheveled hair. "Nobody will talk to me. I'm not allowed to see Lauren. Please help me."

"Lauren was brought in a couple of hours ago," the doctor explained.

“How is she?” the desperate father inquired.

“She suffered a few cracked ribs, burns, cuts, and bruises.” John inhaled and held back the tears as the news hit him. “That’s not my concern. She’s healing faster than anything I have ever seen. At this rate, there will be no physical damage by the morning.”

“How is that possible?” John asked.

“You can thank God because we have no clue,” the doctor admitted. “I wish her emotional and mental health was healing as quickly.”

“What do you mean?” John leaned in.

“We had to sedate her,” the doctor admitted. “It took five people to restrain her. She attacked everyone that got close to her. After what she experienced, I don’t blame her. But the attacks were not the worst . . . it was the things she was claiming. John, Lauren sounded like she was possessed.”

“Possessed?” John backed away from the doctor. “Is that your medical diagnosis?”

“Of course not,” the doctor said. “I’m a man of science. I’m speaking as a concerned father. I have a daughter myself. Her situation is rare. She’s going to need constant care, and you might need help. Something to think about.”

The doctor was summoned away, leaving John with his thoughts. Constant care? John wasn’t sure what constant care meant. Lauren was all he had after his wife died. His entire world revolved around her and her happiness. Everyone that ever met his child fell in love with her. She was the most loving and beautiful person in this world.

Who would want to hurt his child? John asked himself for the hundredth time. Nothing made sense.

“Mr. Moore, the doctor said you can see Lauren now,” an older nurse with deep red hair told him.

“Thank you,” John replied, following her to the ICU.

John's heart broke as he saw the bruises on his daughter. They restrained her arms and legs to the hospital bed. An IV was taped to her arm, as well as wires for the monitors and scanners. John wiped the tears from his face as he reached for his daughter. He hoped whoever did this would burn in hell.

"Honey. Lauren. Can you hear me?" John asked softly, aware it was probably false hope. "Baby, I'm so sorry."

Trying to avoid causing his daughter any more pain, John took her bruised hand in his. Her knuckles were bandaged, and heat radiated from her body.

"Ahhh," Lauren screamed as she woke up.

Her eyes were dazed, and she thrashed around the bed trying to free herself. Her luxurious curls were now matted to her face. Lauren growled like a wild animal, not resembling his sweet, loving child.

"Lauren. Honey. I'm here. Please calm down," John pleaded, trying to get a hold of her hand again.

The sound of her father's voice stopped Lauren's thrashing. Her breath was ragged like she had run a few miles. John rubbed her arms like he used to do every time she woke up scared after his wife died.

"Breathe, honey," he begged her. "I'm here. Nothing is going to happen."

"Dad," said Lauren. "They're trying to kill me. Please don't let them."

"You're safe now." Fresh tears ran down John's face. "Nobody is going to hurt you."

"Please take me home. Get me out of here." Lauren moved her head back and forth, not making eye contact with her dad.

John gripped her hand as hard as he could, but the process was getting more difficult. Lauren's body temperature continued to rise, making it even more tricky to hold her.

"Lauren, you need to breathe, sweetie," said John as the heat hurt his hand. "I need to get a doctor, honey. You're burning up."

“No, Dad!” Lauren screamed.

“This is dangerous for you,” John explained. “Please try to relax.”


John stepped away from the bed. As soon as he let go of her hand, Lauren started thrashing again. She was bruising her wrists and ankles even more from the force of her pulls. John feared she wasn’t feeling pain and would break a bone trying to escape. He rushed toward the door as two nurses came in the room. One had a large syringe in her hand.

“Nooo,” Lauren yelled. “Don’t touch me. You demons. Get away from me.”

The nurses reached her side as Lauren’s movements threatened to capsize the bed. John rushed to her, but the doctor turned him away.

“We got this, John,” the doctor told him. “Wait outside.”

He was helpless. John stepped outside the room, hearing the screams from his child and unable to do anything to stop them. Losing Lauren was not an option, and he would do whatever it took to get her back to health.



Chapter Three

Three Months Later

The assisted living facilities in the Fort Worth area were one of a kind—focused on young adults with disabilities. Lauren’s condition had rapidly deteriorated, and her screaming spells had become a daily occurrence. The violent attacks had escalated, too. Originally, they’d been aimed at those who came in contact with her, but now she’d started scratching and cutting herself. Lauren swore things were crawling on her. In her delusional state, she refused to eat or drink, convinced it was toxic to her.

Doctors prescribed a cocktail of drugs, from antidepressants to bipolar disorder pills. Nothing worked. John was the only one who could get near her without being attacked, at least for the first month. But that slowly changed. Lauren accused him of poisoning her.

After her weight reached ninety-seven pounds, John asked for help. Lauren was starving herself to death. Her athletic physique disappeared until only pale, sagging skin framed her body as if she was an aging woman. The medical community recommended admitting her to a special facility, one that would provide her with constant care, and even force-feed her nutrients via IVs. The option broke John’s heart, but he was tired. There was nothing left to do.

His daily visits turned to weekly. Nothing new ever happened with Lauren. She sat on a chair staring out of the window of her room in a hospital gown. They had to put adult diapers on her to avoid the daily

accidents. The screaming and scratching spells had stopped, but so had his daughter. The medicine kept her calm but in a state of limbo. Lauren rarely recognized people at this point. The care staff were encouraging, but John lost hope.

After his afternoon visit on Sunday, John returned to his apartment. His job offered him the option to work from home. Moving from their small town in south Texas to the Metropolis of the Dallas Fort Worth area was overwhelming. It didn't matter. As long as Lauren could receive the care she needed, then he would endure it.

John dropped to his chair in the living room as soon as the door closed behind him. City life was not for him. He got lucky and found a small apartment complex. The complex was two stories high, with multiple units spread around a community area. Paying for a place with a pool, gym, and basketball courts was ridiculous since John never used them. But he was able to get a first floor in a corner, making the price worth it.

Knock, knock.

John cringed. A knock at his door could only mean one person: Jessica, his neighbor. He was running out of excuses to push away her advances. His lack of judgment and the bottle of Johnny Walker landed him in her bed last month. Now he couldn't get rid of her. When Lauren found out, she was going to kill him. If she ever came back.

Knock, knock.

Ignoring the door was not an option. His car was outside. Jessica knew he was home. Not answering meant another scene where half of the complex got an inside look at his life as she shouted from the door. John took a deep breath and swallowed the shot of tequila he left on the table before going to the facility.

When had he become such a heavy drinker?

The alcohol was the only thing numbing his pain.

"Jessica, I'm not in the mood for this today," John announced as he opened the door.

“I really don’t want to know who Jessica is,” a tall woman with long red and purple dreads told John.

“Adelle?” John could barely get the name out.

The last person John expected to see was his mother-in-law. Adelle was a force of nature. With a perfect complexion a little darker than Lauren’s, it was hard to put an age on the woman. People guessed from thirty to fifty, the latter only if they knew she was a grandmother. While Adelle was all Cajun, her deceased husband and Lauren’s grandfather had been half Native American and Latin. John’s wife had inherited the best traits of both of her parents, making her breathtaking. To John’s relief, Lauren had taken after her.

“You’re a hard man to find,” Adelle told him. “New address, new phone number. If I didn’t know any better, I would say you are avoiding me.”

“It’s been a tough couple of months,” said John, not moving from the door.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Adelle asked.

“Only you,” answered John, looking over her shoulder.

Adelle didn’t need to turn around. A tall blonde and a redhead leaned against the side of a black Lexus. Neither female smiled at John.

“I would never impose,” Adelle answered.

John didn’t trust his mother-in-law or the circles she traveled in. Everywhere Adelle went, trouble followed. Having her in his living room was a recipe for disaster. Reluctantly, John moved out of the doorway and let her in. Adelle strolled through the threshold inspecting the small apartment, sneering at the dust-covered furniture.

“Where is my granddaughter?” Adelle asked, not waiting for John to close the door.

“Lauren isn’t well,” John answered.

“You don’t say,” replied Adelle. “I gathered that much without your help. Where is she? I know she’s alive because I can feel her. But her energy is dull and weak.”

“What are you talking about?” John asked.

“Are we back to pretending you don’t know what we are?” Adelle asked, looking down her nose at John.

“I don’t have time for your games and ridiculous riddles,” John answered. “They attacked Lauren a few months ago. She hasn’t been responding to treatment and her condition is getting worse.”

“Attacked how?” Adelle stepped inside John’s personal space, making him tremble a little. “Don’t make me ask you again, John.”

“They kidnapped her, tortured her, and made her a witness to a murder,” John admitted, trying to not show his discomfort.

“Did they find who did it?” Adelle asked, turning to face the window.

“No,” John answered. “They just found Lauren in a rundown house tied to a chair, with a pile of body parts disintegrating in a corner.”

“Who did Lauren say did it?” Adelle asked over her shoulder in a soft but stern tone.

“She claimed nobody else was there.” John sat back down in his chair. “According to her, the man fell to pieces after he tried to skin her alive.”

“Damn it,” Adelle said softly. “I’m too late.” Adelle spun around to face John. “Where is she?”

“Adelle, Lauren is being cared for by the best professionals around,” said John. “There is nothing you can do.”

“Really?” Adelle asked, chuckling. “You think a bunch of humans are going to handle a witch that just came into her powers? Don’t make me laugh.”

“My daughter is not a witch!” John shouted, jumping to his feet.

“Stop lying to yourself, John,” Adelle raised her voice. “You knew perfectly well who my daughter was. Did you think Lauren would not

inherit our powers? Stop wasting time and take me to her. You have kept her from us for far too long.”

“Lauren needs medical treatment,” John said.

“How is your medicine working so far?” asked Adelle instead.

John never answered.

“That’s what I thought,” Adelle told him. “I’m not leaving without my granddaughter. You can choose to be helpful or we will make you help. You pick. I’ll be outside.”

Without waiting for a reply, Adelle left the house. John believed Adele was insane. No sane person could truly believe they were a witch. Regardless of her threats, he would not lose his daughter. He had nothing to worry about. Taking Adelle to see Lauren in a safe medical facility would guarantee she wouldn’t do anything crazy. He debated taking another shot but talked himself out of it. Sucking in a breath, John walked out the door after Adelle.



Chapter Four

Texas had some incredible medical facilities, some more impressive than others. Adelle and her people followed John to a large white building with overly dramatic columns in the front. After a quick look at the structure, Adelle was sure the columns were purely for decoration. They weren't supporting the building or providing any type of practical use. Like the fake shrub in the front, the owners were trying too hard to create an air of comfort and richness. Adelle hated the place even without going in. This was not one of the better facilities in a city as large as DFW had.

“Get everyone ready,” Adelle told the redhead. “We won't be staying long.”

“Yes, mother,” the redhead replied.

“And Anabelle,” Adelle said, staring out the back window of the Lexus. “I want no witnesses.”

“Of course, mother,” said Anabelle, adjusting her red curls into a tight bun. “Samantha, make the call.”

The blonde smirked back. “Already done. She's coming home mother, we got this.”

“Thank you, my children,” Adelle told the ladies.

It took John longer than necessary to park his old Honda. Adelle watched him approach. She could only wonder how much he was paying for the facilities. He did very well with his job, but this place was easily costing him two hundred dollars a night. An absolute waste of money just because he wanted to be stubborn and not ask for help. Adelle

stepped out of the car when John reached her door. The madness of this situation would be corrected today.

John led the way inside the building. He moved with determination, sure of the location. They arrived at a reception desk in the building's front area. A young man in a pair of scrubs greeted them.

"Hello Mr. Moore, I wasn't expecting you back today," the young man said.

"Lauren's grandmother is in town, and we decided to come straight over," John replied.

"You're just in time. They just finished feeding her," the young man said with a smile.

Adelle's insides turned. She could feel the rage and her magic taking over. What had they done to her baby? She took several calming breaths to get her anger under control. Her body radiated heat, making John take a few steps away. Unlike many of the members of her coven, she wasn't a healer or a fixer. The goddess had not blessed her family with those gifts. They were protectors and destroyers. The warring nightmares that the world feared.

"This way," John told her, avoiding touching her.

At least the man was smart enough to keep his hands to himself. If anyone dared make contact with her, she would burn the entire place to the ground. Adelle had centuries to harness her powers, and even longer to learn how to control it. But this place unsettled her. Not even when her husband died had she been this upset.

They moved in silence down the hall. Adelle braced herself for whatever was to come. She couldn't feel Lauren's emotions. The normal cheerful and loving signature she was used to associating with her granddaughter was gone. There was a faint heartbeat but nothing special. John stopped in front of a door at the end of the hall. Not bothering to wait for her, he opened the door and marched in.

The smell of urine and disinfectant assaulted Adelle's overly developed senses. The room was orderly but dingy. A small lamp stood in one corner. The curtains were open, allowing the sunlight to flow in. Even the beauty of those rays couldn't cleanse the misery in the room. Adelle's heart shattered as her eyes fell on her granddaughter. She held back the tears, fury and energy threatening to explode.

Lauren's skin was pale. Her hair lacked the silky undertone it normally had. But Lauren's eyes told the true story. They were blank. Lauren never moved when they walked into the room. Her curious, active, and focused child was gone. All that was left was a shell of her former self.

"Do they normally leave people to soak in their own urine?" Adelle asked.

"What are you talking about?" John asked, rushing over to Lauren.

"You can't smell it." It was more a statement than a question. Adelle knew John couldn't detect the smell over the others in the room. "I'm taking her."

"No," John answered. "She needs twenty-four-hour care. You and your makeshift group of hippies can't provide the care she needs."

"And you can?" Adelle stayed by the door, not trusting herself not to examine the room. "All we have is a vegetable here. Is this your idea of care?"

"You don't understand," John said as he kneeled in front of his daughter. "She was cutting herself."

"No, John," Adelle snapped. "The one that doesn't understand is you. You had one job. One fucking job."

John's head flashed in her direction. Adelle rarely cursed, but her anger was running wild. She needed to get off of the floor and take Lauren with her.

"Lauren is my child," John shouted, crossing the distance between the two of them. "She is not a witch."

“Of course not,” Adelle mocked him. “She is a sweet, red-blooded girl like all the other ones that grow up to marry the high school football star. Don’t be a fool John, it doesn’t fit you.”

“I’m not playing, Adelle,” John said through clenched teeth.

“The only reason she is with you is because I promised Maritza I would trust you,” Adelle explained. “This is what I get in return. Your sole purpose was to protect her and explain her bloodline when she came of age. What did you do? Avoided my calls and kept her as far away as you could. The time for playing house is over. She is coming with me.”

Adelle marched out of the room and stood in the middle of the hallway, inspecting the horror they called a nursing home. It was a nursing home for young adults beyond help. Her heart broke a little more as she glanced at her granddaughter from the door.

“They will not let you walk out of here without my permission,” John told her, blocking her way from the room.

“Do you honestly think I need permission?” Adelle asked him, containing her sarcasm. “I will do as I please.”

Adelle turned in the direction they came from. Anabelle marched over wearing a long, flowing red cape. The light in the hallway diminished as Anabelle walked past. She made for a great red-riding hood. Too bad the wolf would never survive the night with this little damsel. Adelle was proud of her pupil. Lauren and Anabelle should have grown up together.

“Everything is ready,” said Anabelle.

“What are you going to do?” John asked, his eyes darting between the two women.

“We will clean up your mess, John,” Adelle said, taking hold of his arm. “Now.”

Anabelle dropped the hood of her cape and extended her arms in the air. According to Adelle, Anabelle’s magic always smelled like lilacs on a spring day. As Anabelle’s power expanded, the air became hard

to breathe, at least for the humans. She was strong enough to direct her power to specific targets. Clapping her hands together made every human in the building freeze. The poor nurse down the hall who was picking up the young man from a wheelchair froze mid action.

“God, what have you done?” screamed John, still being held by Adelle.

“I will take care of Lauren now,” Adelle told him. “Goodbye.”

“No, wait,” John shouted.

Adelle dropped her hand, and John froze with his hands outstretched. She adjusted the sleeves of her suit and walked around him.

“You know what to do,” Adelle said to Anabelle. “Wipe every memory regarding Lauren from any record available. I want nothing left of this incident anywhere.”

“Of course, Mother,” Anabelle replied. “What about him?”

“The things we do for our children,” Adelle replied. “I made a promise. Take him home, adjust his finances, and fix his memories.”

“Home, like that apartment?” Anabelle asked, wiping her hands on her cape.

“For the goddess, no,” Adelle replied. “To the home he shared with my daughter. Even this sorry excuse for a dad deserves better than that shithole. Do figure out who Jessica is and fix her too.”

“My pleasure,” Anabelle replied, bowing her head.

Three large men rushed into the room pushing a gurney. Adelle moved out of their way as they reached Lauren.

“Time to go, sweetie,” Adelle said as the men adjusted the bed for her granddaughter. “Make it fast, boys. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

“Yes, Mother,” the three men said in unison.

Adelle kissed her granddaughter’s forehead. She refused to cry. Everything was not lost. They could get Lauren back. It wouldn’t be easy, and Lauren would go through hell, but it was worth it. Once her men had

moved her child, Adelle strolled out of the room like Miss America. She held her head high and sucked in air. Her children—the members of her coven—were busy working their magic. She could taste their powers in the air. She didn't need to worry anymore. Lauren's case would be washed away from the prying eyes of humans.



Chapter Five

It was close to dusk by the time the convoy of witches arrived at their state in the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas. Adelle preferred being back in her home in Louisiana but having an untrained witch with Lauren's power was not safe for the population. They needed a secluded location with as much natural power as possible. Her coven made this site a yearly retreat. It was blessed by the goddess and had enough wards to keep away any intruders. She prayed they weren't too late to save her baby.

"Rocky, take her to the medical wing," Anabelle ordered.

"Yes, Anabelle," the man replied.

"Samantha, are the potions ready?" Anabelle asked.

Samantha held her breath as Rocky and his team pushed Lauren down the hall.

"They might not be strong enough," Samantha whispered. "I didn't know how severe her damage was."

"You're the best healer on this side of the Atlantic," Adelle said. "Make the adjustments."

"Mother," Samantha said, holding her breath. "I have never cleansed a soul so badly damaged. I'm worried."

"We all are," Adelle confessed.

"You should take a rest, Mother," Anabelle told her. "It's going to be a long night."

“That’s what I fear,” Adelle told them. “I’m going to take a shower. Tell me when you are ready. You’re going to need me to calm her down when she comes to herself.”

“Yes, Mother,” both ladies told her.

Adelle refused to give voice to her doubts. Her granddaughter would wake up, regardless of what they needed to do. Reeling in her own magic, Adelle walked up the stairs toward her room. The cleansing process would start soon, and she needed to be alert and not as emotional.



“Mother, head to bed,” Marcos whispered to Adelle. “We got this.”

It was three in the morning the following day. Her coven had been busy taking care of Lauren for over twenty-four hours. Each member added their skills to her healing, but Lauren was not reacting. Samantha monitored her vitals. Lauren’s heart rate was getting stronger, but everything else remained the same. The potions they were feeding her were cleansing her blood, but it was a slow process. Lauren had been given enough drugs in the last months to kill an elephant. It was a miracle she was still breathing.

“Wake me up if something happens,” Adelle told him.

“Of course, Mother,” Marcos agreed.

Adelle had lost a child less than a year after the birth of Lauren. A freak car accident, they said. Adelle refused to believe the reports. Maritza was an incredible driver and a talented witch. Her daughter was targeted, but she couldn’t prove it. Adelle had locked herself away from the world in her mourning, yet this powerful group of witches refused to leave her alone. She lost one and inherited eight. The goddess had a way of rewarding her suffering.

After squeezing Marcos’s arm, Adelle left the medical wing. Samantha had been a practicing surgeon before she joined the convent. Her last

miscarriage, the fourth in less than two years, had left her broken and lost. Her husband at the time had abandoned her for a younger woman that could give him kids, according to him. Adelle had found her peering from the top of an overpass ready to jump. The truth was that Samantha would've never had kids with that man. Years before their marriage, he'd gotten himself fixed. Adelle ensured he paid for his manipulation and torture. Samantha never went back to her old life, finding strength in helping others like her.

If Adelle planned on helping Lauren, she would need rest. Unfortunately, sleep escaped her, and she battled the demons of guilt and shame for leaving her granddaughter alone for so long. Thirty minutes of tossing and turning had her convinced it was a waste of time. She stood from her canopy bed and opened the window. The night breeze was soothing, even if it was a little chilly. Temperatures dropped faster in this part of the country compared to Texas. It was barely the start of October, and she could feel winter threatening to take over.

“Ahhh.”

A piercing scream traveled through the house, making the foundation vibrate. Adelle held on to the windowsill to stabilize herself. That kind of power could only mean one thing: Lauren was awake. Adelle rushed out of her room in her nightgown toward the medical wing.

“What is going on?” Clarissa asked.

Clarissa was the oldest member of the coven and Adelle's moral compass. An older Latina from Mexico with golden hair and piercing brown eyes, Clarissa's powers were as strong as Adelle's, except she wasn't gifted with death or destruction. The goddess gave her priestess the power of creation. Nature, animals, and even humans grew abundantly around Clarissa.

“She is awake,” Adelle informed her.

“She's more powerful than we thought if she can pull off a quake just waking up,” Clarissa said, walking next to Adelle.

“I fear there’s a lot Maritza didn’t tell me about Lauren,” Adelle told her old friend.

“We can handle anything.” Clarissa squeezed her arm and followed her down the stairs.

By the time they reached the medical wing, Marcos was panting on the floor, but conscious. It knocked Samantha across the room.

“I can’t hold on much longer,” Marcos confessed. “She’s going to break through my circle any minute.”

“Let me in,” Adelle told him.

“She is out of control,” Marcos pleaded. “She almost killed Samantha. I had to shield her, but I didn’t make it before Lauren blasted her across the room with pure, raw power.”

“I got this, my child,” Adelle said, rubbing his cheek. “If something goes wrong, Clarissa, you know what to do.”

The friends had rehearsed a plan to control Lauren’s magic. If Adelle wasn’t able to get through to her. It was a last resort, but they would bind her until she could control herself. Adelle prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

“Clarissa, get Samantha out of here,” said Adelle.

“Of course, but be careful,” Clarissa told her friend. “On three, Marcos, drop the shield.”

“This is madness,” Marcos replied, but nodded.

“One,” Clarissa counted as Adelle squared her shoulders. “Two.”

“Three,” Adelle finished for her.

Marcos made a circle big enough for Adelle and Clarissa to step through. Clarissa rushed for Samantha. The room was a disaster. Every medical instrument was destroyed, and sparks flew everywhere. The light bulbs on the ceiling had been shattered, and glass laid all over the room. Nothing was standing at all, and it really looked like a small bomb had gone off in the middle. Adelle searched the space, allowing her night

vision to take over. Lauren was nowhere to be seen. She could feel the acid rising in her throat and the panic trying to take over.

“Lauren, sweetie, it’s me, Gigi,” Adelle said to the destroyed room. “Honey, where are you?”

Adelle heard footsteps from the corner but didn’t move. She couldn’t afford to spook her granddaughter any more than she already had.

“Gigi?” Lauren sounded small and fragile.

“Yes, baby girl. It’s me.” Adelle held on to her nightgown to avoid rushing at the corner. Digging her nails into her thighs, she waited for Lauren to make the first move.

“Gigi, I’m scared,” Lauren whimpered.

“I know, baby girl,” Adelle told her. “But you’re safe here. You’re with family now.”

“Gigi,” Lauren cried and rushed at her grandmother.

Adelle embraced her. Lauren was more bone than muscle. Adelle was afraid of holding her too tight because she felt like she might break. Lauren held on to her grandmother with all the strength she had. Her thin arms wrapped around Adelle, and she took a deep breath to inhale the scent of her grandchild.

“Gigi, I’m so scared,” Lauren repeated.

“Baby girl, you are home,” Adelle told her. “I will let no one hurt you ever again.”

Adelle squeezed Lauren.

“They’re coming,” Lauren told her. “I can see them.”

“You need rest,” said Adelle. “We can talk in the morning.”

Lauren was shaking. It took effort to unleash so much power from her. Adelle was holding Lauren’s weight up to ensure she didn’t head-plant to the floor. They took cautious steps toward the door. Clarissa had disappeared with Samantha, and the only one left was Marcos, who held the doorframe for support.

“Lauren, do you remember Marcos?” Adelle asked.

“Hi,” said Marcos.

“You’re bleeding,” said Lauren.

“Been an interesting night,” Marcos told her.

“Thank you, Marcos,” Adelle said to him, leading the weak and struggling with Lauren up the stairs.

“Gigi, where is Dad?” Lauren asked, scanning the large house.

“I sent him home,” Adelle said. “He hasn’t slept in a few months, and it’s time for me to handle your care.”

It took Lauren several long minutes to climb the steps. Adelle was not in a hurry. She wouldn’t mind staying there all night as long as Lauren was still trying to walk.

By the time they made it to Adelle’s bedroom, Lauren was out of breath. Adelle was supporting most of her weight. Lauren fell on the bed shivering. Anabelle reached the door of the bedroom, but Adelle waved her away. She couldn’t afford for Lauren to get spooked again by not recognizing anyone around her. Just having her awake and moving was a tremendous victory. Cautiously, Adelle made Lauren comfortable in her bed.

“Honey, drink this.” Adelle placed her own tea to Lauren’s lips.

The tea was a soothing concoction that Samantha had created. It would clear the rest of the blood, and it would help her sleep comfortably through the night.

“Would you stay with me?” Lauren begged.

“Of course, my love,” Adelle replied, joining her granddaughter in bed.

Lauren shivered for a few more minutes before falling asleep. Adelle wrapped herself around her granddaughter, afraid to let her go. In silence, she gave thanks to the gods for keeping Lauren alive.



Chapter Six



Sunshine filled the room. Lauren blinked several times to adjust her sight to the blinding light. She wasn't in her room, or any place she remembered. None of the furniture looked familiar. After several months, her mind had been playing tricks on her. Lauren wasn't sure if she dreamed of seeing Gigi or if it was real. At this point, she couldn't tell, but she didn't feel fuzzy anymore. She was awake, and that was something she hadn't been in a while.

The bed she was sleeping on was extremely comfy, but curiosity and fear got the best of her. Lauren climbed out of the bed in a pair of PJs she didn't own and headed out the door. The place was huge. The long corridor led to a staircase. Closed doors lined both sides of the hallway. Inspecting the rooms sounded tricky, so heading out of the house was a safer option. Without wasting any more time, she tiptoed toward the staircase.

"Lauren?"

She paused. Lauren recognized the voice, even if she was miles away. She did an about face and smiled for the first time in ages at her childhood friend. Anabelle smiled back as Lauren rushed at her.

"Anabelle," Lauren said. "I'm not dreaming?"

"Unless your dreams have you running around in Aquaman PJs and awful hair, nope," Anabelle replied, pulling on Lauren's curls.

"It's so good to see you." Lauren hugged her friend again.

“It’s great to see you, too. We’ve been so worried about you,” Anabelle explained. “We’ve been looking for you everywhere and we couldn’t track you down until now. I’m so sorry.”

“Why do I have the feeling I’m missing something?” Lauren asked.

“Mother will explain everything,” Anabelle said, hooking her arm around Lauren’s.

“It’s so creepy you all still call her mother,” Lauren whispered to her friend.

“We will always see her that way.” Anabelle pulled Lauren with her down the staircase. “Are you hungry?”

“Not really,” Lauren replied.

“Too bad because you’re coming to lunch anyway.” Anabelle would not take no for an answer.

“Lunch? What time is it?” Lauren asked.

“Close to two,” Anabelle replied as they entered a large dining room attached to the kitchen.

“Lauren!” three voices screamed in unison.

The first to reach her was Clarissa. Anabelle stepped back to avoid getting trampled.

“My sweetie dear Lauren, I’m so happy you’re finally awake,” Clarissa said, holding her cheek. “It is so nice to see you standing.”

“That sounds really shady, Tia,” replied Lauren.

Ever since she could remember, she had been calling Clarissa aunt. The woman was the closest thing she had to a distant relative. Clarissa, like Gigi, had a way of grounding her.

“I’ll take shady as long as you’re moving around.” Clarissa gave Lauren another bear-hug and kissed her forehead.

“Now, stop hoarding all her attention,” Rocky told Clarissa.

“You can wait your turn, you big bear,” Clarissa replied, slapping his hands away from her.

Lauren untangled herself from Clarissa and hugged Rocky. In a single swoop, he picked her up and spun her around.

“It is so nice to see you, little one,” Rocky said, putting her down.

“I didn’t know I was so missed,” Lauren told him. “If I knew that, I would have visited more.”

“You’re here, and that’s all that matters,” Rocky replied, messing her hair some more.

“Now I really look like a hot mess,” said Lauren, trying to tame her out-of-control curls.

“You look beautiful,” Samantha announced. “Let me look at you.”

Samantha held her at arms’ length and did a quick inspection.

“Do you always have to be in doctor mode?” Lauren asked, maintaining a straight face.

“It’s not my fault you keep me gainfully employed,” Samantha replied. “But you have color on your cheeks and your eyes are clear. Great start. Now, with some proper food and a few more glasses of medicine, you should feel like a million bucks.”

“A few more glasses?” Lauren questioned her old friend. “How many glasses have you given me so far?”

“Busted,” Junior announced from the doorway.

While Rocky was big uncle material, Junior had always been Lauren’s secret crush. His Native American heritage was clear in his defined cheekbones and incredible black hair. Lauren always wanted to run her fingers through it but was never brave enough.

“Don’t you have some place to be?” Samantha chastised him.

“I’m done with my work,” Junior replied. “I’m here to see if Sleeping Beauty finally joined the world of the living.”

“Stop being a jerk,” Samantha told him.

“Oh, he’s just being himself,” Lauren said, avoiding eye contact with the elusive man.

“Not everyone can be this irresistible,” Junior told them, staying away from the group.

Samantha and Anabelle both rolled their eyes, but Lauren held her breath. It was hard to disagree with the man, at least in her opinion.

“So, is anyone going to explain where I am and what’s going on?” Lauren asked.

The group stopped joking and went very still.

“What is going on?” Lauren asked, searching each of their faces.

“That’s a conversation between you and your grandmother,” Clarissa finally spoke.

“And it’s time we finally have it,” Adelle announced as she entered the dining room. “Do you all mind leaving us?”

Adelle didn’t have to ask twice. The group cleared out in under two seconds. Anabelle squeezed Lauren’s hand for moral support on her way out.

“This can’t be good,” Lauren said, rushing toward her grandmother.

“I missed you, little one,” Adelle said, hugging Lauren back. “So good to see you moving around.”

“I miss you too, Gigi,” replied Lauren.

“We need to talk,” Adelle told her. “I would recommend sitting down for this.”

“Okay,” Lauren said, taking a seat next to her grandmother.

“What do you remember of the last three months?” Adelle asked. “Do you remember the attack?”

“Bits and pieces,” Lauren confessed. “Everything is still a bit jumbled.”

“It will get a lot clearer as the drugs they gave you leave your body,” Adelle reassured her. “Just think back as far as you can.”

“I remember going to get coffee with Ronald after our class,” Lauren said, closing her eyes. “Then I woke up in a nasty room tied up. But nothing made sense. Gigi, who kidnaps biracial kids in these times? I haven’t even heard about the KKK doing that anymore.”

“Honey, this has nothing to do with your race,” Adelle clarified.

“What?” Lauren asked. “But he kept repeating something about my kind. He even said something about the others and his group.”

“After the attack, did you see anything strange?” Adelle pressed on.

“Gigi, I was high on drugs. I saw tons of crazy things,” said Lauren, blowing off the question.

“Lauren, I need you to concentrate.” Adelle placed both of her hands on the table and focused on her granddaughter. “Did you see anything you couldn’t explain but thought maybe it was a dream?”

Lauren closed her eyes and concentrated. She knew the question was ridiculous, but she didn’t want to disappoint her Gigi. After several long minutes, she shook her head.

“Gigi, this makes little sense,” Lauren explained, closing her eyes. “I thought I saw demons dressed like nurses. And humans with horns, extra eyes, and weird skin colors talking to me.”

“Lauren, open your eyes please,” Adelle requested in a low tone.

Trying to clear her mind, Lauren took a deep breath before doing as she was told.

“Holy shit!” Lauren screamed and fell backwards, trying to get away.

Adelle was holding a ball of blue fire in her hands. There were no flames in the room that matched that color, but the ball of fire was there. Adelle walked around the table, looking down at her granddaughter. Lauren squealed, crawling away from her family.

“Oh God,” Lauren prayed. “I’m dreaming. Please, please wake me up.”

Adelle tossed the ball from one hand to the other. Lauren crawled farther and farther away until she hit the wall. In one smooth motion, Adelle dropped to the ground in the Lotus position.

“I’m sure Junior would appreciate you wiping the floor for him with your clothes, but that is not the most effective use of our time,” said Adelle. “Running away will change nothing.”

“Change what?” Lauren asked, her heartbeat racing at triple time. “That I’m losing my mind and seeing things. Or that I’m dreaming and can’t wake up.”

“That you are a witch,” Adelle said, extinguishing the flame.

Lauren banged her head against the floor, speechless.

“You are not crazy, honey,” Adelle explained, but she didn’t reach for her. “Your powers manifested during your kidnapping. It’s the only reason you’re still alive. Something I’m extremely grateful for.”

“Are you saying I killed that guy?” Lauren asked, gagging.

“You transmuted his energy back to him,” Adelle clarified. “That’s very different.”

“If that was true, why wouldn’t you tell me before?” Lauren demanded.

“I’m telling a semi-grown woman now, and she is crawling on the floor.” Adelle pointed at her. “How would an irrational teen take it? Not to mention, your father has a strong aversion against the truth.”

“Dad knew?” Lauren struggled to sit back up.

“Your father refuses to acknowledge anything magical,” Adelle said. “Did he ever allow you to watch Harry Potter?”

Lauren laughed, remembering the fights with her dad about the books and movies. She was the only kid in her grade that hadn’t read or watched the series. It wasn’t until her summer vacations at her grandmother’s that she could indulge in the fantasy world.

“I made a promise to your mother that we would do it his way,” said Adelle. “It never occurred to me that the cult would find you. Or that your father would leave you so unprepared.”

“I have a Taser and a gun,” Lauren defended her father. “Dad didn’t leave me helpless in the world.”

“And how well did those things serve you that day?” Adelle asked, making Lauren wince. “This is not a discussion about your dad, but

about you. You are my blood, Lauren. My magic flows through you. You are now a member of this coven.”

“No, no,” Lauren said.

Before her grandmother could speak again, Lauren rose to her feet and ran. She didn't know where she was going, but she wasn't a witch. Her grandmother did not have a coven. That was not magic she saw her grandmother doing. She was still asleep, and this was a horrible nightmare.



Chapter Seven

The cool night breeze hit Lauren's skin, but she couldn't feel it. Her body was scorching through the thin material of her nightgown. Lauren had refused to head inside the house after dusk. Instead she laid upside down in a tree, praying to fall and break her neck.

"I jumped off a three-story house when I found out I was a witch," Samantha said from the ground.

Lauren glanced down and found Samantha sitting on the ground under the tree. Samantha never looked up, instead tossed rocks in front of her.

"My mother said I was an abomination who needed to die," Samantha continued. "Broke both of my legs and a couple of ribs. The pain was so excruciating I passed out. Too bad the impact manifested my healing abilities. Before the doctor could see me, I healed. That night I ran away from home."

"Aren't you supposed to tell me how great it is to be a witch?" Lauren asked.

"Great?" Samantha asked with a chuckle. "Please. Growing up was a freaking nightmare. Humans discriminate against other races, so how do you think they treat those they don't understand?"

"Is this supposed to be a pep-talk?" Lauren turned over to better look at her friend.

“You don’t need a pep talk, sweetie,” Samantha answered. “You need the truth.” She took a long breath before continuing. “None of us asked for this. That includes Adelle. She had centuries to adjust to it.”

“Centuries? How old is Gigi?” Lauren climbed down from the tree and sat next to Samantha.

“Over three hundred and fifty, I think.” Samantha replied, looking up like those people who count on their heads. “Hard to say because she stopped counting a while back.”

“That’s impossible,” said Lauren.

“Impossible is only what your mind lets you process,” Samantha told her. “The truth is a whole different animal.”

“So what? I just admit I’m a witch and join this merry crew.” Lauren laid on the grass.

“You’ve been part of this crew of misfits since the day you were born,” Samantha said. “We’ve been watching over you your whole life. You claiming us won’t change it. But not accepting your bloodline just puts you and us at risk.”

“What do you mean?” Lauren didn’t want to face Samantha.

“Do you honestly think those fools won’t come back?” Samantha’s question made Lauren shiver. “You’ve been thinking it. You’re smart enough to see the possibilities. Not only are you able to see the supernatural world now, we have enemies chasing us. They won’t stop, Lauren. We are at war. Been at war. Each coven has a mission, and ours is to protect. If we’re busy watching your back, who saves all the other ones that are taken?”

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty?” Lauren froze.

“No, baby girl,” Samantha whispered. “I’m just telling you the truth. We will never leave you alone. Fuck the rest of the world. You’re one of us. Family comes first. The fact that Adelle couldn’t feel you for the last couple of months was driving her nuts.”

“I’m scared,” Lauren finally confessed.

“You should be,” Samantha said. “It’s a scary thing you’re facing. You have the power to destroy the world and take away life. That’s no joking matter.”

“I killed a man. Not killed, butchered a man. How do I deal with that?” Tears fell down Lauren’s cheeks.

“You ask for forgiveness to whatever deity you like,” Samantha said, reaching for Lauren’s hand. “Then you train. That way you never accidentally kill again. When you unleash hell upon others after that, it’s because you mean to do it. But trust me, that piece of scum deserved to die. I just hate you were the one that had to do it.”

“Are you the group’s designated spokesperson?” Lauren asked, changing the topic.

“By the goddess, no,” Samantha laughed. “That job belongs to Clarissa, or Elizabeth when she’s here. I just won the Rock Paper Scissors match.”

“You battled to talk to me?” Lauren couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“I told you before, you’re family,” Samantha confessed. “We all had horrible experiences assimilating our gifts, or curses if I’m honest. The difference is, we were alone. You aren’t and will never be.”

“Now what?” Lauren asked, facing the night sky.

“You eat, get healthy again, and we train,” Samantha answered.

“How bad is the training?” Lauren asked softly.

“Excruciatingly painful,” Samantha confessed.

“Damn,” Lauren said, smacking Samantha’s arm. “Shouldn’t you try to sugarcoat that?”

“Why? So, you can be mad when it’s worse than you think?” Samantha said. “No ma’am. I don’t play those games. Be prepared. Clarissa has you for potions and spells. That’s a tough one. Rocky for weapons and self-defense. And of course, your grandmother for your innate powers.”

“What do you have?” Lauren asked.

“Nothing,” Samantha replied. “I’ll be at the lessons to make sure you don’t hurt yourself too much. But anyone under one hundred is not allowed to train. According to the senior crew, we are not experienced enough.”

“What?” Lauren sat straight up. “Are you seriously telling me Clarissa and Rocky are also ancient?”

“Oh, wait a minute.” Samantha rolled on her stomach. “You are not getting me in trouble now. I did not say ancient. All I said was over one hundred. Do not get me killed with those two.”

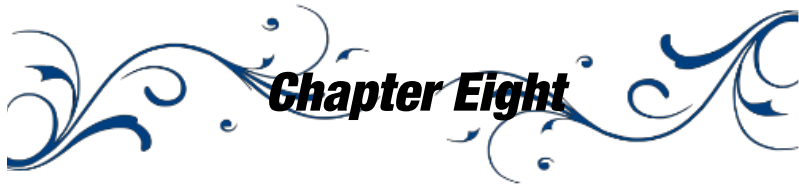
“Chicken,” Lauren told her.

“Smart. There is a difference,” said Samantha. “Are you hungry yet? I’ve been waiting all day to have coconut pie, but Marcos won’t let me. He said you get the first slice.”

“Basically, you just need me for food,” Lauren teased.

“And your charming personality.” Samantha stood and reached for Lauren.

It took Lauren three seconds to decide. She could accept her fate and embrace this witch thing, or she would spend the rest of her life in hospitals or nursing homes drugged all the time. Her options were limited, but Samantha was right. At least she had family.



Chapter Eight

Samantha wasn't lying. The training was awful. Lauren's life had become a repetitive cycle. She woke up before daylight and ran three to six miles with Rocky. For a six-foot-tall linebacker type, Rocky put her to shame. The man could run for hours at a seven-minute pace. Lauren was struggling to keep up, but she wasn't even able to talk during the torture session.

Running, backpack hiking, or straight push-ups and sit-ups were her normal routine. Unless Rocky felt generous that day and they did laps at the nearby lake. His definition of a treat was to die for. The water was freezing, and after forty-five minutes of nonstop swimming, she could barely move her arms. If training for the Olympics was a requirement for being a witch, this life was overrated in Lauren's opinion.

After her morning crippling routine, it was off to chemistry hell 101—her new name for her sessions with Clarissa. At one time, Clarissa used to be her favorite person in the world. Not anymore. On her second day of class, Lauren set the curtains on fire and Clarissa slapped her hand with a ruler. Clarissa was channeling her inner nun because she was good with that thing. Being the only student in Clarissa's class also meant Lauren had her undivided attention. Her life sucked.

They split the afternoons between weapons training and power lessons. The weapons training made no sense to her. Rocky said it was a true necessity. Blending in with humanity was easier when they didn't know you had powers. Being able to handle a 9mm made that a lot

simpler. Besides, a gun had a way of discouraging nosy people from asking too many questions from a pretty girl.

Who knew being pretty was such a big problem? Lauren asked herself after another long session with an ax.

She hated to admit it but throwing knives and axes around was her favorite part of training. It also came naturally to her.

“Are you listening to me?” Adelle dropped a pile of books in front of Lauren.

“Huh?” Lauren replied.

“That’s what I thought,” said Adelle. “What are you thinking about?”

“How boring my life is,” Lauren answered, giving her grandmother a fake smile.

“Boring?” Adelle asked. “Is that what you think?”

“We’ve been making balls for the last four weeks,” Lauren whined. “When are you going to teach me something useful? Like not ripping people to shreds.”

“Not useful, really?” Adelle moved next to Lauren. “Make an energy ball and throw it at that plant.”

“Why?” Lauren questioned her grandmother for the eighth time that day.

“Now!” Adelle ordered.

Lauren swallowed her next words and prepared to follow instructions. It wasn’t like that blue ball was going to do anything. Focusing her mind, Lauren spread her hands and summoned the light. Ordering her thoughts, she shaped the strange blue energy into a ball the size of a softball. She was still working on making it bigger, but so far that was the best she could do. Lauren’s years of playing sports came in handy, and she threw the ball like one would a basketball through a hoop. Perfect hit.

“Score!” Lauren shouted.

The ball hit Clarissa's immaculate *Dracaena Rikki Cane* tree. Within seconds, the blue energy engulfed the plant and turned the striped leaves to ash.

"Oh, shit." Lauren rushed to the tree, hoping to save it.

By the time she reached the poor tree, the four-foot plant was a goner. The trunk was dissolved by the flame, and even the pot was charred. Adelle blew out Lauren's flames before they spread to the rest of the classroom.

"Clarissa is going to kill me," Lauren announced to the poor tree. "I'm dead."

"Oh, not dead," Adelle said. "Probably grounded for at least a week."

"That's not fair," Lauren told her. "You told me to do it."

"I told you to send a deadly weapon to an innocent tree, and you did it," said Adelle. "If I told you to throw it at Clarissa, would you have done it?"

Lauren never replied, instead she bit her lower lip.

"Whose fault is it for not learning about their power?" Adelle returned to the front of the classroom. "Just because the magic is not affecting you doesn't mean it's not powerful. I need you to take this serious or you're going to hurt someone."

"I'm sorry." Lauren dropped her head and returned to her desk.

"Why are you apologizing?" Adelle asked, crossing her arms.

"I don't know," Lauren confessed.

"Then don't apologize," Adelle said. "I don't need empty words with no meaning behind them."

"Gigi," Lauren started. "It just didn't feel like I was doing anything. I sure didn't realize I could do that."

"Honey." Adelle kneeled in front of her granddaughter. "You aren't going to master your powers in a month or two. It's not that simple. But you have made amazing progress. You're able to keep it from escaping you when you're mad. That's the first step."

“What’s the next one?” Lauren asked, kicking the desk in front of her.

“Summon it at will,” Adelle said, winking at her. “The small sphere is the first one. In a few months, you will take out a building without breaking a sweat. Or eating yourself into a coma trying to replenish your energy.”

“Is that why I’m eating all the time?” Lauren needed confirmation of her insane appetite.

“What did you think it was?” Adelle stared at Lauren, shaking her head.

“The miles Rocky was making me do each day,” Lauren confessed.

“That’s just to build your stamina,” Adelle told her. “The extra food you’re inhaling is to fuel your powers as they grow. Once you hit your maturity point, you won’t need as much.”

Lauren’s stomach grumbled. She wasn’t hungry, but the mention of food had made her stomach talk.

“Sounds like it’s time for a break,” Adelle said. “Let’s stop here. I’ll need to go online and order another plant for Clarissa before she kills us both.”

“Thanks Gigi.” Lauren gave her grandmother a kiss and rushed out of the room.

Anytime she could avoid cleaning the classroom was a victory in her book. Marcos was making tilapia for dinner, and Lauren wanted to be the first one in the kitchen. Besides being the security expert for the coven, Marcos was an incredible cook. Lauren wasn’t sure what Marcos did for security. Anabelle had explained that he created wards, or force fields, to keep people out and magic in. Or something like that, but she wasn’t sure. Right now, she was more concerned with his cooking skills.

The training classrooms were on the opposite side of the residential side of the house, near the medical wing. In case the magic went crazy, they wouldn’t burn down the bedrooms. Remembering what her little

ball had done to the plant, she realized anything bigger could make a hole in the ceiling or the floor. Magic was a scary thing.

“Are you sure?” Anabelle asked.

Lauren stopped outside of the door to the dining room. Anabelle’s voice sounded strained. It was not polite to eavesdrop, but she felt even worse interrupting. Before she could turn around, Junior spoke.

“Yes,” Junior said. “They’re keeping at least three girls in that building. I’m not sure how many members they had, but the location looked pretty secure.”

“Excellent work, Junior,” Anabelle said. “Pass the intel to Elizabeth. She should head back any day now. We need more information and a way to get those girls out.”

“On it,” Junior replied.

Lauren held her breath. She needed a quick excuse in case Junior came her way. Fortunately for her, he didn’t. Lauren rushed into the dining room.

“I want to help,” Lauren told Anabelle.

“Help?” Anabelle asked. “With what? What are you talking about?”

“Getting the girls out,” Lauren answered.

“Has anyone ever told you it’s not polite to eavesdrop?” Anabelle questioned her, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said. “It was an accident. But I want to help.”

“Everything is being handled, so don’t worry about it,” Anabelle told her, turning toward the kitchen.

“You know that’s not true,” Lauren pushed her agenda. “They’re running out of time.”

Anabelle stopped and focused her full attention on Lauren.

“You can’t imagine what it’s like to wake up facing one of those maniacs,” Lauren told her.

“I do,” Anabelle confessed. “I was on a mission when they grabbed me. If it wasn’t for Mother, I wouldn’t be here.”

“See, we have to do something.” Lauren knew her friend well enough to understand she didn’t need pity. Anabelle wasn’t sharing to get sympathy, just stating a painful truth. One that made Lauren feel less misunderstood.

“Lauren, we need a plan and the rest of the coven to help,” Anabelle explained. “Adelle will never approve a mission with this little info. These are dangerous people. We could cause more harm than good.”

“Then let’s go get more info,” Lauren offered. “We can’t just sit around not doing a thing while girls are probably getting tortured.”

“The two of us are not strong enough to take on a whole building full of men with guns,” Anabelle explained.

“We aren’t,” Lauren agreed. “We’re just going to watch and make sure the girls are still alive.”

“This is a horrible idea,” Anabelle said.

“But are we doing it?” Lauren grabbed her friend’s arm.

“If I don’t go with you, you’ll find a way to do it alone,” Anabelle told her. “I would need to restrain you to keep you in the house. That is a waste of energy.”

“We can do this,” Lauren told her.

“No, we can’t,” Anabelle corrected her. “We’re going to check the building out, get some recon photos, and head back. Deal?”

“Deal.” Lauren bounced up and down on her toes.

“I recommend you stop the happy dance unless you want the entire house finding out,” Anabelle warned. “We’ll meet at ten this evening by the car garage. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am,” Lauren said

Lauren gave Anabelle her best military salute and ran out of the room. She couldn’t afford for her friend to change her mind. Magic and powers made little sense to her but saving a girl’s life did. If she could help, she would. Nobody deserves to die at the hands of a bunch of lunatics.



Chapter Nine

The house was empty. It was a strange occurrence because the place was usually bustling with activity from the rest of the coven moving around at all hours. This evening it was completely different. Lauren was grateful for the convenience. She quietly left her room and headed out of the house. Anabelle was going to be waiting by the car with weapons ready. All they needed to do was leave the house without being noticed.

The outside world was holding its breath. Not even the crickets were making noise as Lauren rushed toward the garage. The garage was about a quarter of a mile from the house and was a huge facility housing over a dozen vehicles. Lauren avoided running so she wouldn't attract any attention, but she walked as quickly as possible. She was used to hearing frogs in the night, but tonight there was nothing. It was either going too well, or this plan was getting ready to crash in their face. Lauren still prayed to her God. She hadn't met the goddess, but if she could help, she would gladly make her acquaintance.

"Let's go," Anabelle said as soon as Lauren walked in.

Lauren hopped in the passenger side as Anabelle climbed into the driver's seat of a black SUV. According to Marcos, all their vehicles were bullet proof and even spell proof. Butterflies were making a nest in Lauren's stomach and she couldn't get still.

"Leaving without us?" Junior said from outside the passenger's window as Anabelle started the vehicle.

"Ahhhhh," Lauren screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Not very stealthy, Lauren,” Samantha told her from the other side.

“What are you two doing here?” Lauren asked.

Anabelle shook her head and leaned into her seat.

“We’re coming with you,” Samantha repeated.

“How do you know where we’re going?” Lauren asked, trying to play it off.

“That one alone,” Junior said, pointing at Anabelle, “at this hour is probably a booty call. The two of you together could only mean trouble. So, we’re coming.”

Junior and Samantha climbed in the backseat, not waiting for a response.

“You don’t even know where we’re going,” said Lauren, facing their new passengers.

“Give it up,” Anabelle told her. “You aren’t winning here.”

Anabelle drove out of the garage but barely made it twenty feet out the door. Another black SUV blocked her path.

“What in the hell?” Lauren asked.

Anabelle slammed her head on the steering wheel. Junior and Samantha giggled from the back seat.

“Can this get any better?” Anabelle mumbled.

Rocky and Marcos stepped out of their SUV and marched toward the group.

“You’re not leaving this compound without us,” Rocky informed them.

“We’re just going for ice cream,” Lauren lied.

“Perfect,” Marcos replied. “Rocky loves Ben and Jerrys. We’re coming.”

Marcos smirked, and Rocky’s death glare said volumes. Just like that, neither one believed a word she said.

“If you want to leave this place, you’ll let us follow you,” Rocky announced. “Or Adelle is dragging you by those pretty curls back in the house.”

“Mother knows?” Anabelle asked. “Never mind. If you all are here, of course she does. Lauren, it’s your call. This is already a nightmare.”

Lauren rubbed her temples, trying to allow her mind to process all the information. In their current situation, they were not leaving without everyone coming. How safe was that for her family? But if Rocky was right, there was no way to leave without them.

“Fine,” Lauren finally told them. “Let’s make this a party.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Rocky said, clapping his hands. “I’m assuming you’re going after the girls?”

“Are we really that predictable?” Lauren asked.

“Yes,” Junior replied for the group.

“Not always,” Samantha added. “But that was the only big thing that happened today. Where else would you be going?”

“You all suck,” Lauren told them. “Let’s just go before Clarissa joins us.”

“We love you, Lauren,” Marcos told her, making a heart with his hands.

Lauren had the urge to flip him off, but somehow, she restrained herself.

They’re just trying to be helpful, Lauren told herself.

The truth wasn’t making her feel better, but oh well. Anabelle put the SUV in gear again and eased down the driveway. Lauren was waiting for her grandmother to pop out of the bushes and stop them from going. The way this night was going, it wouldn’t surprise her. Next time she would pay more attention to her gut feelings. It might save her a lot of disappointment.



The drive was less than an hour to their destination. According to Junior's directions, the building the girls were being kept in was on the outskirts of Eureka Springs. Anabelle drove in silence, staying within the speed limit. Lauren wasn't too familiar with the cities in Arkansas. If she heard of Eureka Springs before, she didn't remember or care. All she knew was they needed to find the girls.

When Anabelle parked, Lauren looked around the place as if confused.

"That's the one," Junior said from the back seat.

Junior was pointing between his table and the building across the street from them. There was nothing impressive about the location. It didn't feel like a temple of doom, just a four-story abandoned building in the middle of nowhere.

"Are you sure?" Lauren asked. "It's not very impressive."

"Do you want a neon sign announcing their evil schemes?" Junior asked, full of sarcasm.

"That would be awesome," Lauren confessed.

"If only we were that lucky," Samantha said. "What's the plan?"

"We need to find a way in and search the building," Anabelle answered.

"I have just the person for that job," Samantha informed them, stepping out of their vehicle.

She jogged toward the other car, not bothering to look back. Samantha leaned into Rocky's window.

"What is she doing?" Lauren asked.

"Wishing on a star," Junior replied.

"What does that mean?" Lauren looked over to the backseat.

"It means there is a fifty-fifty chance Rocky will agree," Anabelle clarified.

"What exactly is Rocky's power?" Lauren asked, but stopped when Rocky left his SUV and marched to the building with Samantha.

“He can manipulate earth elements,” Anabelle told her.

“I’ll be damned,” Junior replied, staring at his friends. “I can’t believe he actually agreed. You’re a lucky charm, Lauren.”

“Great,” Lauren replied. “Maybe I’ll turn into a bowl of cereal or a leprechaun.”

“You would make for a cute leprechaun,” said Junior.

“Get ready you two,” Annabelle ordered, watching Rocky.

Rocky and Samantha were standing next to one wall of the building. There were no lights on near them. Rocky spread his arms wide, and with slow, deliberate movements, he touched the wall. In a matter of minutes, Rocky had created a doorway on the bricks.

“That is freaking amazing,” said Lauren.

“He is good,” Anabelle admitted. “Grab your weapons and let’s go.”

Junior and Lauren followed Anabelle across the street. Marcos joined them on the other side.

“Junior, take lead,” Rocky ordered. “Anabelle, you’re next. Lauren and Samantha go afterward. Marcos and I will take the rear.”

“Moving,” Junior announced before charging in.

“If anything comes your way, pull the trigger,” Rocky told Lauren as she walked in.

Anabelle and Junior crouched by a hallway when Lauren made it through the portal.

“There’s a stairwell at the end of this hallway,” Junior told them. “The girls are on the second or third floor.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover,” Marcos told them. “Anabelle, can you narrow it down?”

“It’s a pretty enormous building, but let me try,” Anabelle said, closing her eyes and laying her hands on the floor.

“What is she doing?” Lauren asked Marcos.

“She can sense heat signatures and neutralize them,” answered Marcos. “One of my many gifts.”

“That’s impressive,” Lauren said.

“Not when dealing with large spaces,” Anabelle added when she opened her eyes. “Fortunately, this old building has a shitty electrical current, so it’s not causing too much interference. I have readings on both the second and third. But more on the third.”

“That’s a start,” Rocky confirmed. “Junior, you scout the second. If you find the girls, come and get us. The rest of us are heading to the third.”

“Is it safe for Junior to go alone?” Lauren asked.

“Who says I’m alone?” Junior held up both of his 9mm guns. “Besides, who would ever shoot a hot girl?”

“What—” Lauren didn’t have time to finish her sentence.

Junior transformed into a tall blonde in a tiny red mini-dress, with overly large breasts and a tiny waist. Lauren gasped at the transformation.

“Reason number seven why I avoid hot girls,” Marcos announced.

“Where are the guns?” Lauren asked, walking around Junior and inspecting his transformation.

“I knew I trained you right. Focus on the big picture.” Rocky tapped Lauren on the back.

“Oh, I have them, trust.” Junior’s voice was melodious in his higher feminine tone.

“Junior, go. We’re wasting time,” Rocky reminded them. “The rest of you stay close and quiet.”

Junior strolled down the hall, swaying his hips. To Lauren’s astonishment, the man knew how to work it better than she did. She wondered if Junior could transform himself into anything, because if he could, that was amazing. Gigi had said her powers were impressive. Right now, she was feeling like the weak link in the chain.

Adrenaline stopped her pity party once they made it to the stairs. Lauren’s heart was pounding in her chest, and she felt like she couldn’t get enough air. The group maintained their militant formation with

Marcos taking the lead. The air shifted when Marcos opened the door and created his shield. He did not take any chances of being ambushed in the building.

The third floor had an open atrium. Small offices were scattered around the perimeter of the bundling, but the center was empty. Rocky signaled for everyone to search a room except Lauren. He made sure Lauren stayed by his side as they marched to the west side to inspect that area.

Rocky moved with efficiency, getting the doors opened and searching the place. They entered an office with no windows, finding a connecting door. Lauren followed Rocky inside to discover four girls tied to the ceiling naked. Bruises covered their bodies. One had a busted eye, two were missing patches of hair and even skin, and they'd twisted the legs of the last one into odd angles.

"Oh God," Lauren exclaimed, rushing to the girls.

"Be careful now," Rocky warned. "Make sure they aren't wired with explosives."

"They're buck naked," Lauren said louder than she meant to, making the girls squirm. "Where would they hide them?"

"Inside them," Rocky clarified.

Rocky did a quick search of the girls with his powers and nodded in approval. He went inside the adjacent room as well.

"Let me get the others," Rocky told her when he returned to the room. "Can you cut them down?"

Lauren nodded. She had never considered the possibility of the girls blowing up if she moved them. Inching cautiously around them, she pulled out her knife.

"Please don't," one girl begged.

"We're getting you out," Lauren said, trying to calm them down. "Please trust me."

Lauren waited for all the girls to nod before getting closer. Cutting around a terrified grown woman was a lot harder than she imagined. It took her several attempts before getting a good enough angle to free the first one. The girl was too weak to support herself, and Lauren had to help her to the floor.

They heard gunshots outside the room, and that was followed by what felt like an earthquake, or maybe an explosion. Chaos erupted outside from all around them.

“Damn it!” Lauren screamed, holding the girl. “Now what?”

Lauren pulled out her gun but wasn’t sure what to do. She didn’t want to leave the girls alone but wasn’t sure how to help her friends. Lauren didn’t have to decide. The door at the back of the room opened, and the largest man she’d ever seen rushed in. He was bigger than Rocky, at least seven feet tall. The man pointed his gun at Lauren, who was still on the floor with the helpless girl.

“Well, aren’t you cute?” the man told her. “You will come with us as well.”

Lauren froze. The gun dropped from her hands, and she couldn’t remember any of her training.

“Your friends are too busy with a few surprises so they can’t help.” He laughed at her as he crossed the room.

Lauren’s nerves sped up, making her magic ripple from her body. Panic was setting in, and she knew she needed to do something before this brute dragged them away. Focusing her powers, she made a softball of energy and threw it at the man. Her aim was off, so all she did was singe his sleeve. Lauren crawled away from the man, dragging the helpless girl with her. They would not take her that easily.

“Time to say goodbye,” the man announced.

“Goodbye,” Junior told him, pulling the trigger.

Brain matter splattered across the back walls. One of the bound girls passed out. The one with the broken legs spat on the destroyed body. Lauren and her new friend cried from fear and joy.

“We need to work on your aim,” Junior told Lauren, now back to his male body.

“We need to work on a lot of things,” Lauren confessed. “Thank you.”

“Always,” Junior said, crossing the room toward the back door. “Give me a second to secure this area.”

Lauren nodded as Junior rushed into the back room.

“Can you stand?” Lauren asked the girl.

The girl nodded, trying to cover herself. Lauren stood and took off her jacket. At least Lauren had a few layers on. She handed it to the girl as she helped her up.

“Let me get them down,” said Lauren.

Lauren wasn’t sure how she was going to get the girl with the broken legs down without hurting her more. Her legs were badly damaged, and bones poked through skin at odd angles.

“I’m so sorry,” Lauren told the girl.

“I can take it,” the girl answered in a strangled voice. “Please get me down.”

“Allow me,” Junior said, walking into the room.

Grabbing the girl like a small child, he picked her up. He nodded at Lauren, who quickly cut the ropes from her wrists. As soon as the girl was free, Junior left the room carrying her. Anabelle and Rocky came in to help with the rest.

“Can you walk now?” Lauren asked the first girl.

The girl nodded.

“You’re among friends. Please go with them,” Lauren told her.

Anabelle gently took the girl’s arms and led her out of the office.

“They’re both badly hurt, but not as bad as the one Junior took,” Lauren said, inspecting the two remaining girls.

“I can walk,” one girl told them.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Rocky. “Lauren, go with her. I’ll carry her friend.”

Lauren took the girl’s hand and strolled out of the office. The outside area looked like the landing zone for a tornado. Offices were ripped off the wall and scattered across the floor, which had large holes that ended in the basement. The ceiling wasn’t doing much better, with wires hanging from all different locations. Samantha rushed toward them, dodging a broken support beam.

“What happened?” Lauren asked when her friend reached her.

“The usual,” Samantha answered. “We were being sneaky. They caught us, and all hell broke loose. Slow down, Lauren, and let me see if I can help her.”

Lauren stopped in place and allowed Samantha to do her magic. Placing both of her hands on the side of the girl’s head, Samantha started her healing process. It didn’t take long for the girl to stand a little straighter. The skin mended, and even some of her hair grew back.

“I’ll be able to heal the rest when we get back to the medical wing,” Samantha told her. “That will help you walk out of here. And here.”

Samantha took off her jacket and wrapped the girl in it.

“Let’s go,” said Samantha, taking hold of the girl’s other side. “Marcos is ready with our goodbye gift.”

Lauren didn’t ask. Whatever Marcos had in mind, she hoped it was damaging enough. This place was evil and needed to be wiped from the planet. Lauren focused on helping the girl walk. They would need to help her down the stairs, but that would be a blessing. At least she was alive.



Epilogue



Lauren was stretching outside of the house. Her muscles ached from the previous night. She ignored the pain and continued her routine.

“By all that is holy, what are you doing here?” Rocky asked as he ran up to her.

“How long have you been running for?” Lauren asked, looking at her watch.

“Just warming up, nothing serious. Just twenty minutes,” Rocky told her. “I figured you would sleep in today.”

“Never again,” Lauren announced. “I’ll be up when you’re up, and I’ll train as long as you train.”

“Who are you, and what have you done with my Lauren?” Rocky checked her temperature.

“I’m serious,” Lauren said, swatting his hand away.

“Me too,” Rocky told her. “What happened to the whiny kid?”

“That kid almost got killed again,” said Lauren. “I froze.”

“It happens to everyone the first time,” Rocky replied, lowering his voice. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No,” Lauren said. “It’s the fire I need to get better with. You were all right. I’m not ready. I can barely hold on to a gun when things get crazy. I can’t aim my magic when I’m nervous. I can barely breathe.”

“You’re being a bit dramatic now,” Rocky told her.

“They were healers, teachers, growers,” said Lauren. “None of them were fighters. They couldn’t defend themselves. Do you know how long it’s going to take them to heal that trauma? Years.”

“You know this how?” Rocky asked, leaning in.

“I heard Clarissa tell Gigi,” Lauren admitted, blushing as she spoke.

“You are a menace. Eavesdropping . . .” Rocky said with a soft chuckle. “But what are you going to do about it?”

“I want to be a part of this coven,” Lauren announced. “Not the little kid you all watch out for, but a real member. I want to help. That means I need to get better.”

“So, no more whining about how long the runs are and how far we’re going?” Rocky turned his face to one side, examining her.

“I’ll complain and whine because I would hate for you to think you’re not working me hard enough,” Lauren told her. “But I’ll do them all.”

“In that case, my young apprentice,” said Rocky, taking off his shirt. “It’s time to get to work. We need to have at least three miles completed before the sun is up.”

“Lead the way, sensei,” Lauren answered, adjusting her ponytail.

She would endure the pain of training, the long classes, and dangerous power sessions. She had to. For the first time, Lauren had found her purpose and her tribe. It meant her life should be better. There were people like her, innocent girls, that she could protect. But first she needed to learn how to protect herself.

A Note from the Author

My Dear Reader,

I would like to start just by saying Thank You! Thank you for taking a chance on this story. For allowing me to become part of your journey, and for your love for reading. You are the reason I write, and I love every minute.

Now a quick insight into the creation of this story. The inspiration came from a TikTok video that a dear friend sent me. I was so disturbed about the idea of this man finding out that his wallpaper might be made of something more than paper. I never intended to write a story, but the idea wouldn't go away. While this piece is darker than what I normally write, I still love it. At the end, I embrace writing quirky characters, action-adventures, and dark humor.

If those things appeal to you, I hope you stay in my tribe. We are always better when we are growing together. I really hope you enjoy this story. I can't wait to hear your thoughts. Just send me a note at author@dcgomez-author.com.

Before I go, I would like to thank a few incredible ladies that make my life so much easier. The amazing Ms. Kayla Wilkinson, who does an incredible job as my developmental editor. Also, the fabulous CR Gerardi Designs for the gorgeous cover.

Want to stay connected? It's super easy. You are now part of my newsletter and I hope to hear from you. But you can also join my Patreon group if you would like more goodies. I can't wait to hear from you.

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With love,

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