

Siren

I

“TELL ME AGAIN WHY ARE WE HERE?”

Sigmund Greer—fellow homicide detective and my cousin—looked through the windshield and asked that question with his face scrunched into a frown.

The subject of his disapproval? A high school on Chicago’s South Side abandoned three years ago thanks to budget cuts, the exterior foreboding despite the bright morning sunshine.

“I dreamt about this place last night,” I confessed.

“Your radar?”

“That’s your name for them now?” The new term earned Sigmund a skeptical, elevated eyebrow along with the question.

“You hate it when I call them visions,” he said.

Sig followed when I exited the vehicle. I grabbed my badge from the dash, hung it around my neck, and rounded the car to the trunk, removing my taser. I’d bet my eyeteeth something preternatural lurked in that building. Some nonhuman creatures shrugged off bullets, but electricity almost always incapacitated.

“Visions makes me sound like I should be sitting in front of a crystal ball wearing a headscarf.”

“Hence radar. It’s like that movie,” Sig said.

“What movie?”

We approached the school, bypassing the front entrance since a heavy chain secured both handles of the door. If anyone had made it into the building, they had found another way inside.

“Eric Bana played a New York cop. You know the one.”

“Deliver Us From Evil?” I asked in an incredulous tone.

Sigmund snapped his fingers and pushed through an opening in the chainlink fence leading to the rear of the school. “That’s the one.”

“Perfect. Bring up the movie about demonic possession while entering the creepy building.” I ducked through the opening and followed him.

“How’s your headache?”

“Couple more hours and it’ll be gone. Just once I’d love if the visions didn’t come with a migraine.”

Sig nodded, but kept his eyes focused on the building. “Safe to assume since this thing tripped your radar we’re dealing with the supernatural?”

“Probably,” I muttered.

“What are we looking for?”

I sighed in frustration and replied, “I don’t know.”

“Come on, Roni. You’re the expert on this crap.”

“Taking a handful of courses at Northwestern doesn’t make me an expert.”

“The force only requires Paranormal and Supernatural 101. The six additional classes you took make you CPD’s resident expert.”

Sigmund tested a set of double doors with a firm tug. We moved on when they didn’t budge. Weeds sprouted up through cracks in the pavement behind the school. Some grew like scraggly bushes. Others, tall and thick, bore more resemblance to small trees than weeds. Cheap plywood sealed the windows along the ground floor, while the upper windows had become victims of target practice for rocks, bottles, and possibly bullets. Residents in the neighborhood were more likely to turn up the volume on the television than to make a 911 call about shots fired.

I continued to survey the area while Sigmund hunted for a way in. A sweet scent teased my nostrils when we rounded the back. Without people or flowers in the area, the smell must have originated from inside the building.

“You ever wonder how many cases have gone cold because we are looking for mundane answers to a supernatural problem?” he asked.

I nodded my agreement. Since the Unmasking in 2014, an event where some supernatural and paranormal creatures went public with their existence, I’d asked myself versions of the same question.

Sigmund released a quick whistle. The burst of sound caught my attention as he pushed aside the plywood covering the bottom half of a door. He crouched to the side of the opening and panned the flashlight beam from one side to the other. Once he determined it was clear, he drew his gun from his hip holster and crawled inside. Armed with my taser, I followed.

A suffocating, absolute darkness encircled us. The pockets illuminated by our flashlights caused everywhere else to feel that much more oppressive. Paranoia invaded my psyche with tactile illusions of something crawling over my skin. Nonexistent eyes watched us from open classroom doors.

I swept my beam along the floor over layers of dust and dirt that left no telltale sign of footprints. We cleared the main floor two classrooms at a time. I searched the right. Sigmund covered left. The front office we investigated together. Sigmund checked the principal’s office while I tugged on a locked door to the left. Everywhere reeked of mildew, rot, and that sweet floral scent, but after clearing the first floor, I’d yet to find its point of origin.

We climbed the stairs to the second level, exploring each room in the same fashion before moving on to the top floor. Sunshine from broken windows provided light, but even areas soaked

in sunlight retained that oppressive sensation created in the darkness. The center of my back burned. Every time I turned around, I expected to find something there. Ready to attack.

I exited the last classroom and glanced down the end of the corridor. Were we too early? I paced the width of the hallway and tried to recall details of the dream while I waited for Sigmund to emerge from the last room. I thought the room in my dream had been a locker room, but the school didn't have a gym. Maybe I'd translated the dream too literally. The ground could have been a symbol for something. Outdoors, or maybe a lab, or teacher's lounge? We hadn't located a teacher's lounge.

“Sig?”

I approached the room he searched and found it as empty as the others.

“Sig?”

I stepped back into the hallway and called his name louder before I moved back into the room where he should have been. No trace of him remained. I walked to the front of the room and looked behind the teacher's desk as if he were playing some elaborate joke and hidden underneath. A cop for over ten years, Sigmund wouldn't just wander out. Something had taken him without a struggle and without a sound.

I put my back to the wall and returned the way I came. At the doorway, I glanced out into the corridor when I heard it. Faint at first. I stared at the ground and concentrated on the sound. Singing from a female. High-pitched and horrible. I imagined it might be how Mariah Carey would sound if she gargled with sharp rocks and punched herself in the throat before singing.

The sound oozed out of an overhead air duct and grew louder as I moved closer to the vent. When I tilted my head back and sniffed, the sweet flowery scent tortured my nose.

Air duct.

Basement.

Goddamnit, Sigmund.

I took the closest set of stairs down to the first level and followed the vocalization, no longer filtering through the ventilation shaft but flowing freely all around me. I pursued the voice to the previously locked door in the office, now ajar and lit from within by a flashlight beam. I held my flashlight and taser chest high and edged the door open with my foot.

In the tattered remains of a filthy ball gown, a creature stood in front of my cousin's crumpled body. The beam of the light reflected over scaly skin with a translucent glow. Round, black, lidless disks stared at me from eye sockets on a face without a nose. Thin, nearly nonexistent lips closed and plunged the room into blessed silence.

My eyes dropped to Sigmund, and I must have lowered the taser, because when she stepped forward, my arm raised and leveled the weapon at her chest. She opened her mouth, and the screeching resumed, but louder and more painful. My equilibrium shifted. The fleeting but sudden sensation of vertigo pushed a rush of salty saliva into my throat.

Her singing morphed into a shriek.

I pulled the trigger, but the prongs found only empty air. She struck me, or threw me, maybe both. Darkness aided the speed of her movements. By the time I realized I was airborne, my back slammed against the wall. I rolled but stayed on the ground and drew my gun. I fired five shots into the air in front of me. The muzzle flare captured random snapshots of the creature getting struck by bullets.

One caught her in the shoulder. Two more struck her chest. The sound of retreating steps followed another shriek. I scrambled forward and slammed the door shut, using my weight to hold it closed while I cast the light over the room.

Alone. The bullets repelled her but didn't appear to do any real damage. My beam of light stopped on Sigmund. He sat up and stared at me, pupils dilated wide despite the light.

“Sigmund?”

“Where is she?”

“Gone. What happened? Are you all right?”

I stood and moved to my cousin, offering a hand and helping him to his feet.

“Odds are high.”

Relieved at his reply, I shone the light in his face for visual confirmation. He looked fine, save a film of something translucent and slick around his lips and coating his chin.

“What did she slobber on you?”

Sigmund grinned stupidly, wiped his palm across his chin, and licked his hand clean. “She tastes like honey.”

Gross. What the hell was she?

What the hell was in her saliva?

What the hell had she done to my cousin?