The Darkest Kiss

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Being thrown out of a tree wasn't my idea of fun.

Granted, countless nestlings all over the world went through this every year, but they only had to do it once, and for them it was simply fly or die trying.

I wasn't a nestling, and I wasn't built to die. Not easily, anyway. I was dhampire—the offspring of a newly turned vampire whose dying seed somehow created life in the werewolf who raped and then killed him—and my bones were extraordinarily strong.

Being pushed from a tree couldn't kill me like it did those countless nestlings. But God, it could still *hurt*.

I mean, werewolves weren't designed to fly, and muscles used to being either a wolf or a woman were having trouble with the mechanics of being a bird.

Not that I particularly *wanted* to be a bird. And

particularly not the type of bird I could now become. I mean, a seagull? A rat of the sea? Why that? Why not something more dignified and fearsome—like a hawk or an eagle? Something with useful weapons like talons and a hooked beak built for tearing?

But no. Fate had thrown me a seagull. I'm sure she was up there laughing at me right now.

Of course, I probably *could* become something else. The drug in my system that had caused the initial change into a gull would probably allow me to take other forms, but I wasn't about to risk it. The other half-breeds who'd been injected with ARC1-23 had changed into so many different forms that they'd lost the ability to become human again, and that wasn't a problem I was willing to face. Especially not when I'd already felt that moment of confusion, right after I'd first attained gull shape, when the magic that allowed me to shift shape had seemed to hesitate, as if it couldn't remember my human form.

That had terrified me.

So, much as I hated being a gull, I was going to stick with it, practice its form, until being a gull was as natural and as ingrained into my psyche as the wolf and the woman.

Maybe then I would play with other shapes.

Maybe.

"Riley, you cannot stay on the ground forever," a deep voice rumbled from above. "Learning to fly is a matter of perseverance. And height."

I muttered something unpleasant under my breath and rolled onto my back. A dozen different aches as-

saulted the muscles along my shoulders, spine, and arms, and made me long for the heat of a nice, deep bath. Though even a bath wouldn't do much for all the bruises I was beginning to collect.

Not that a bath was in my immediate future anyway, if old Henry had his way.

He was sitting in one of the top forks of the gum tree high above me, his bright red shirt contrasting sharply against the cheery yellow flowers that dotted the tree. His silver hair gleamed like ice in the dappled sunlight, and his nut-brown skin was as weathered and worn as the bark of the tree itself.

He wasn't Directorate personnel, but rather a friend of Jack's. He was also a hawk-shifter, and his family apparently had ties with Jack's that went way back. I'd tried some gentle questioning in an effort to glean something useful about my boss, but Henry had so far proved an unwilling gossiper.

"Riley," he warned again.

"Henry," I said, mimicking his cross tone. "I'm not going to have an inch of white skin left if you keep this up."

"Jack says you must learn as quickly as possible."

"Jack hasn't been thrown out of a tree a million times."

He laughed—a rich, merry sound that had a smile tugging at my lips despite my grumpiness.

"It's only twenty today. It took Jack a good thirty or so times a day—for a week—before he got it."

Jack might be a vampire now—thanks to the blood ceremony he'd taken over eight hundred years ago—

but he'd been born a hawk-shifter and had the advantage of coming from a family of shifters. If it had taken *him* so long to learn, then heaven help me.

I raised my eyebrows and pushed up into a sitting position. "You taught Jack?"

"I am not that old, little wolf. No, it's just something of a legend in our roost. Few hawks are so slow to learn." He laughed again. "There are some who say that's why he's bald. He lost his hair because he landed on his head too often."

I grinned. "Well, I'm glad to know it's not just us seagulls."

"You have spent most of your life as a wolf. It's natural that you would find the ways of flying difficult." He shook the rope tied to the branch near his legs. "Come."

"If it was as easy as coming, I'd be a natural." I rose, and bit back a groan as a dozen fresh aches erupted across my torso and legs. Damn, I was going to be black and blue by tonight. Not that it really mattered. It wasn't like I had anyone to go home to anymore.

Pain rose like an old ghost. I quickly shoved any thoughts of Kellen back into the box labeled "do not think about," then reached for the rope and began to climb. It had been two months since we'd split. I should be getting over it by now. Should be getting over him.

But I wasn't, and I wasn't actually sure I ever would. I'd loved him, and he'd walked away. And not for the reason I'd most expected—the fact that I was infertile, and a half-breed. No, he'd walked away because I was a guardian and wouldn't give it up. And the fact that I

couldn't, thanks to the drug and the havoc it was still wreaking on my system, hadn't made a difference.

He'd walked away. Become just another man who couldn't accept what I was. Another man who'd managed to smash my heart.

I'd had just about enough of the whole damn "love and relationships" thing. So much so that, since our split, I'd been keeping pretty much to myself. Of course, I was a werewolf, so the moon heat would always ensure sex was a part of my life. But that one week was about it for me and men. It seemed that love and I were never going to find a happy medium, and as much as I still wanted the whole picket fence ideal, I just wasn't up to coping with the whims and foibles of men right now.

Chocolate, coffee, and ice cream where far more reliable when it came to providing a good time, and at least *they* would never disappoint me.

I just had to thank the fast metabolism of a wolf for the fact that I hadn't put on any weight over the last few months. If I were human, I'd be the size of a house.

I reached Henry's branch and edged carefully past, sitting down and letting my feet dangle. My fingers were clamped around the branch tightly and I avoided looking down. Since my last fall off a cliff—the same one in which I'd gained my gull shape—my stomach had been getting a might queasy at even the slightest hint of a drop. Though I suppose that jumping repeatedly out of this tree and landing face-first on the ground below—and not breaking any bones—was going a long way toward curing a little of my unease.

I took a deep breath and blew it out softly. "So, explain it all to me one more time."

"A bird does not fly by simply flapping its wings," he said patiently. "Hold your arms out now, and try moving them really fast."

I did, feeling like a fool. Luckily, we were on Henry's estate up in the Dandenong hills, and well out of the way of curious passersby.

"Now, try turning your arms as you move them. More air motion happens as you twist your arms, does it not?"

I nodded, though to be honest, the difference was negligible. But then, maybe I'd hit the ground one too many times and my skin just wasn't up to feeling anything anymore.

"This is how it works with a bird. On the downstroke of the wing, the leading edge must be lower than the rear edge. And it doesn't just move down, it moves down and back, providing lift and forward movement."

"Yep, got that totally." Not.

He clipped me lightly over the ear. "Enough of the smart mouth, young woman. You can do this. You just need to think."

"All the thinking cells are either too bruised or knocked senseless," I muttered, edging a little farther along the branch so he couldn't hit me harder.

Anyone would have thought I was a teenager back at school again. I used to get clips over the ear for my smart mouth then, too.

"Think," he said. "Down, back, then up. Not up and down. Now change."

I blew out a breath, then shifted position and called to the magic that lay in my soul—the magic that had been altered to supply the form of the gull as well as the wolf. Power swept through me, around me, changing my body, changing my form, sweeping me from human to gull in the blink of an eye.

"Go," Henry said.

I spread my wings, closed my eyes, and jumped. Felt myself falling, felt the old familiar sense of panic roll through me, threatening to overwhelm. To freeze.

So I tried to concentrate on moving my wings instead. *Down, back, up, down, back, up.*

And miraculously, I was no longer falling. I squeezed open an eye, saw the ground sweeping past underneath me, and opened the other eye. I was *flying*.

"That's it," Henry said. "You've got it, my girl!"

"Woohoo!" The sound came out as a harsh-sounding squawk rather than any actual word, but for once I didn't care. I was *flying*. And it was such an amazing, powerful feeling.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long enough. Maybe I was so wrapped up in the sensation of flying that I actually forgot to fly, because suddenly the ground was approaching at the rate of knots and I was tumbling through the grass and twigs and dirt again.

I shifted to human shape and spat out a mouthful of earth. "Well, crap."

Henry laughed. He was lucky that I wasn't up there

with him, because I would have damn well pushed him off the branch.

"It's not funny, Henry."

"No, it's hysterical. Most fledglings at least learn to land with some dignity by this time. I fear you and Jack are two peas in a pod."

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the blue sky that seemed as impossible to reach as ever. "If all this makes me go bald like him, I will not be happy."

"You flew, Riley," he said, amusement still evident in his voice. "It might not have been for long, but you flew. Soon you'll get a grip on the mechanics of it all."

"Even with my coordination? Or lack thereof?"

"Even with."

I grunted and hoped like hell he was right. When I glanced at my watch, I saw it was nearly three. I'd been at this whole falling thing for nearly six hours, and I'd just about had enough.

Of course, a crash course in flying was the least of my problems. Jack wasn't happy that I'd waited so long before telling him about the change, and lately he'd been taking every opportunity to chew me out. According to him, a broken heart was no reason for stupidity. I was beginning to think he'd never been in love. Or that it had happened so long ago that he'd forgotten the pain of it.

"I think I'll call it quits for the day, Henry. My bones are feeling a little battered."

"Go on up and help yourself to a shower, then. I think I'll go for a fly myself, stretch some of the kinks out of my wings."

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"You will, my girl, you will."

He shifted shape and stepped off the branch, swooping low past my head before soaring up into the blue. I watched his brown and gold form until it disappeared, and couldn't help the touch of jealousy. I wanted to fly like that, I really did, but I was beginning to doubt it would ever happen.

With a sigh, I dragged my battered body to its feet and walked over to the tree to retrieve my clothes. The magic that allowed us to shift shape didn't always take the best care of the clothes we were wearing, so I tended to shed my outer layer for these lessons and just wear strong cotton undies and a T-shirt. Of course, that meant more scrapes and bruises than I would have gotten if I'd worn jeans and thicker tops. But, like most weres and shifters, I healed extraordinarily fast. Jeans and tops weren't as easy to fix or replace. Not when I had a brother who kept blowing the family budget.

I grabbed the bundle of clothes and headed back to Henry's tree house. Not that it was actually a tree house—just an old wooden house built on stilts, so that the living areas were high in the canopy of the surrounding trees. The light that filtered in through the windows had a pale, green-gold look, and the air was always rich with the smell of eucalyptus and the songs of birds. I loved it, despite my fear of heights. It had to be heaven for a bird-shifter.

I rattled up the stairs and made my way to the bathroom, taking a quick hot shower before getting dressed. Brushing my hair took a little longer than usual. It had

grown amazingly fast in the last few months, and now streamed in thick red layers to well past my shoulders. The only trouble was it tended to get horribly knotted, especially when falling out of trees onto leaf-littered ground.

Once it was tangle-free, I swept it into a ponytail to keep it that way, then collected my purse and car keys and headed out. But I'd barely made it back to my car when my cell phone rang.

I knew, without a doubt, that it would be Jack. And it wasn't my strengthening skill of clairvoyance that told me that.

It was experience.

Jack always tended to ring when I least wanted or needed to work.

I dug through the mess of my purse until I found my vid-phone. "You gave me a week to learn to fly," I said, by way of greeting. "It's only been three days."

"Yeah, well, tell it to the bad guys." Jack's voice was etched with a tiredness that matched the dark bags under his eyes. "The bastards seem to be going out of their way to be pains in the asses lately. Just like some guardians I know."

I'd already apologized a hundred times for not telling him about the bird thing, so if he thought he was going to get another one, he was out of luck. Falling to the ground a gazillion times had knocked any sense of regret out of me. Besides, as much as I liked Jack—both as a boss and as a vampire—he could give the rest of us lessons when it came to being a pain in the ass. "So what have you got for me this time?"

"A dead businessman in Collins Street. The Paris end."

I raised my eyebrows. The so-called Paris end of Collins Street was filled with beautiful old buildings and mega-rich companies and businessmen. They had to be, just to be able to afford the rent there. It certainly wasn't the sort of place you'd expect us to be called into. Though I suppose when death came calling, it really had no respect for wealth or location.

"So are we talking a street death, or inside a building?"

"Inside. He was found in his office by his secretary. No signs of a break-in, and no obvious signs of foul play."

I frowned. "So why were we called? It sounds more like one for the regular cops than us."

"It's ours because the victim was Gerard James."

Who was obviously someone I should know, but didn't. "So?"

"So Gerard James was the head of the Nonhuman Rights League—the party intending to run several nonhuman candidates in the next state and federal elections."

"And his death is a political hot potato, so the cops have hand-balled it to us?"

"Precisely."

Meaning the pressure would be coming down from on-high to solve this case quickly. Great. "I gather he's not human himself, then?"

"Nope. He is—was—a hawk-shifter."

"Does he have family in Melbourne?"

"Elderly parents living in Coburg. Gerard's a self-made man, and there were rumors of a contract being taken out on him several months ago."

"Well, there are probably plenty of humans out there who'd go to great lengths to stop nonhumans getting into government."

"The rumor was investigated and appeared unfounded."

So why was he now dead in his office? "Have you called in a cleanup crew?"

"Cole and his team are there already. Kade will meet you out the front of the Martin & Pleasance building in half an hour."

I glanced at my watch. It was nearing three-thirty, which meant the daily traffic snarl had already began. "It'll take me longer than that to get there."

"Not if you speed."

Amusement ran through me. I had a somewhat checkered driving history—the last car I'd actually owned I'd driven into a tree, and to this day I have no recollection of the event. Though given I ended up in a madman's breeding center immediately after it, I very much suspected *that* particular accident wasn't my fault. But I'd had several mishaps in Directorate cars since that were, hence my surprise at Jack's order. Hell, it was only last week he was lecturing me about it, saying that any more accidents might send his budget into the red.

"If you're ordering me to travel fast in a Directorate vehicle, this *must* be urgent."