

1. Scarlett

Los Angeles, CA

On a Tuesday morning near the end of July, I huffed along my second-to-last mile of the Ballona Creek trail with a bargest loping happily at my side. The bikers and other runners, most of whom were passing us a speed that felt personally insulting, often did a double-take when they saw Shadow, but most of them were moving too fast to really get a proper look.

For the last four months, the two of us had been running some portion of the Ballona Creek Bike Path nearly every day. Once upon a time, Ballona Creek was supposedly a vast length of connected lagoons and salt marshes, but after a shitload of LA development it had degenerated into yet another mostly empty, concrete-lined channel without much reason to exist. (Insert joke about shallow LA residents here.) Eventually, the local conservation authority stepped in to “revitalize” the creek bed. Now there was a path running along the edge of the concrete channel, going from Marina del Rey all the way to Culver City, and to other trails beyond that.

I was hoping to run all thirteen miles of the larger interconnected trail at some point, but for now, I contented myself with sucking at Ballona Creek. Every morning, Shadow and I went in the Fiji Way gate and ran northeast on the trail for three miles to Slauson Avenue, where we stopped for water and turned around. After months of this, I could run most of the way back, but I had to start walking a mile from home.

I tried to run early now that we were deep into summer, but I’d had a work call last night, and Shadow and I hadn’t gotten going this morning until ten, when it was already eighty-seven degrees outside. I worried about her running in the July heat, but if the gigantic black dog-monster was bothered by the temperature, she wasn’t letting on. Shadow was the picture of graceful athleticism—in other words, the complete opposite of me. I was a wheezing, red-faced mess in the morning heat, dripping with so much sweat that I had to reach up and right my sunglasses about every five steps.

I longed to stop and sit for awhile, but on my left was a hot metal fence and a drop down to the disgusting creek, and on my right was another concrete embankment going *up*, to Culver Drive. It was like running along the interior bowl of a volcano. So I forced myself to barrel along, trying not to think about

how badly I wanted to be doing anything else. I would never bother with running if I hadn't accidentally created a career path where my life often depends on my ability to escape very quickly.

Jesse, on the other hand, claimed he *loves* running—he and Cliff took Annie in the jogging stroller most afternoons, with a somehow-still-energized Shadow—but to me, it's a boring, jarring grind that feels both pointless and impossible. Jesse and Cliff always ran south toward the beach, steering clear of the Ballona trail. He said it has too many bikes, but I suspected his avoidance has more to do with the Ballona Creek trail looking so much like the wide concrete channel of the LA River, where we fought the Wild Hunt two years ago.

Jesse didn't like to talk about that night, or the ley lines underneath the river, or how close we came to losing everything. But that was exactly *why* I chose this path every day. It was a reminder of why I had to be there.

As I slogged my way toward the overpass at Centinela Avenue, where there would at least be some shade, Shadow did one of her over-the-shoulder checks on me. Her tongue hung sideways out of her mouth in a happy grin, and she occasionally glanced over her shoulder at me with a certain look of benign tolerance, as if to say, *See how nice and slow I'm going for you?*

I would have said something sarcastic in response, but I didn't have the breath. Instead I gave her a pointed little wave, which caused the ring on my left finger to glint in the sun and practically blind me through the sunglasses.

I made a noise that came out like, "Yuarg!" and Shadow smugly turned to face the front again.

The engagement ring. It had been months since Jesse's proposal, but the ring still surprised me when I caught sight of it. The romantic bastard had tracked down a ring that was, before it came into my radius, thoroughly cursed. I made fun of him for his obsession with the symbolism—something about me taking bad things and making them safe again, blah blah blah—but I loved it: the ring, the proposal, the whole thing. Just...not enough to set a date yet.

Molly said I was stalling my own happiness for ridiculous Scarlettty reasons, but I chose to ignore her. The truth was, I wasn't sure why I was reluctant to wedding plan. I loved Jesse, I wanted to marry him, but something in me couldn't go there. Not yet.

When I was about ten steps away from the nice shady area, my phone buzzed in the zippered pocket of my running shorts. No one called me in the mornings, which made it a perfect excuse to slow down to a walk. Shadow felt the movements in her long canvas leash and slowed too, tossing me an annoyed glare over her shoulder.

"Not...my fault," I panted, tugging the phone out of the pocket of my leggings and lifting it out to show her the screen. It was a FaceTime call from Corry. "See? Real call."

The bargest made a little snorting sound, but I ignored her and hit the answer button. "Hey..." I took off my sunglasses and squinted at the screen. The sun was painfully bright, turning the phone into one massive glare. I kept moving toward the shade of the overpass. "What's...up?"

My attention was pulled for a few seconds by the runner zooming by me on the left, and I missed Corry's response. "What?" I said, hitting a button on the side of my phone to turn up the volume.

There was a garble of something breathy, and Shadow's huge muzzle swung around, her ears perking up with attention.

"Corry?" I slowed down even more, trying to catch my breath. Even with the phone a few inches from my face, I could only make out the outline of her face and hair. "You okay?"

"No."

It came through as a broken cry, but I forced my face to stay even and calm. Corry struggled with anxiety, and sometimes she just needed to cry and vent.

I finally reached the shade, blinking rapidly while my vision adjusted. "Where are you? What happened?"

"S-Scarlett...I don't..." Her voice was ragged, like she was struggling to catch her breath. I could finally see her face, and it was blotchy and swollen from crying. Her image was also moving jerkily as though she were running, so it took me a second to register the smears of red on one of her cheeks. I knew fresh blood when I saw it.

"Corry, hang on one second." I looked around me for witnesses out of habit, but not many people used this trail at eleven am on a hot weekday. Just to be safe, I ducked under the fence on my left, stepping off the path onto the downward slope of concrete. I leaned against the fence to brace myself so I wouldn't tumble and fall into the gross-looking water. When I dropped the leash, Shadow did that ducking doggie-limbo thing to follow me under the fence without being asked.

I raised the phone again, but before I could speak, the high-pitched whine of police sirens exploded nearby. I looked around me wildly for a moment before I realized they were coming from Corry's side of the call. "What happened?" I shouted over the noise.

Corry was still moving, but she raised her voice, too. "Louisa is dead!"

My stomach did a little flip over itself. Louisa was a vampire, one of the four young women Corry was looking after at Berkeley. Corry must have taken her out in the daylight for something. "They shot her!" Corry shouted in a broken sob. "I think they were aiming at me!"

My insides went cold. "Take deep breaths for me, honey," I said, with all the firmness I could pull together. "Are you hurt?"

"No..."

“Okay. Listen to me. I’m hanging up, and I want you to call me back after you get somewhere safe and quiet.”

“I don’t know where,” she wailed. Tears streaked down her face, smudging the smear of fresh blood. She wasn’t looking at the phone, her head whipping around wildly instead.

“*Yes you do.* Are you on campus?”

“Yeah.”

When I was dating Eli, he’d once spent a whole weekend reinforcing the doors and windows of Corry’s apartment at Berkeley. I’d spent that time scouting the security on the route to and from her classes. “You need people and cameras and a quiet corner to talk. A library or cafeteria.”

“I can’t,” she mumbled, the picture swaying around with her distraction. She was in shock, or very near it.

“Corry!” I turned it into a bark, and her face jerked down to look at me. “Do it *right fucking now.*”

“Okay!”

I hung up the phone. I needed to call Jesse, of course, but I decided to give Corry a couple of minutes to call back first. I found myself looking around in a daze of my own, one hand still steadying myself with the metal fence. There were no runners on the path, though I could hear the traffic whizzing by on Centinela just over my head. The sluggish creek water reminded me again of the river, the attack from the Luparii.

No. I wasn’t going to think about that now.

Doubling over, I slipped back through the bars of the fence, and Shadow ducked her massive bulk under the bottom rung to join me. She watched intently as it took me several tries to pick up the end of the leash. My hands were trembling.

“Someone shot at Corry in broad daylight,” I mumbled to her, even though the bargest would have heard the call much better than I could. I didn’t know what to do. Jump in the car and head for Berkeley? Should I try to fly? Dashiell was going to be furious about the shooting, and he had a private plane he’d probably let me use. But it was half a day until sundown. Should I wake him up? That was a DEFCON 1 move, and the only other time I’d done that, it had *not* turned out well. I considered a threat to Corry’s life to be more than serious enough to wake Dashiell—but would he agree?

“Who would shoot at Corry?” I wondered aloud. She was a null, like me, and that would always have value...but she wasn’t a particularly strong one. And she wasn’t a player in Old World politics. More importantly, she was under the protection of both the cardinal vampire of San Francisco *and* Dashiell. Hurting her would mean taking a hell of a risk. Why do that for someone with so little power?

I didn't want to be all "everything's about me," but hurting Corry would be a great way to stab me right through the fucking heart. Could someone have shot at her to hurt me?

"But things have been quiet," I mumbled to myself. I was cleaning up the same old messes I always did, of course, but it wasn't like when we'd faced enemies in LA in the past. The only thing going on was Dashiell and Maven setting up their new government body, but I wasn't involved in that, not really. I just got the updates at our monthly meetings. And even if someone was pissed at Dashiell for trying to govern, I couldn't see how killing Corry could be part of their revenge.

A strange new thought popped into my head. Could it have been...random? A mistake, or a human shooter? That would be a hell of a coincidence, but maybe it was possible?

Shadow tugged at the leash. "I agree, we can't wait any longer," I said to her. Corry might not have reached a safe place yet—it took a few minutes to walk anywhere on campus—but at least I could be on my way to do something.

Starting with talking to Jesse, who would know a hell of a lot more than I did about human crimes. I would call him to come pick me up. Just ahead on my right, there was a trail switchback to the bike path exit on Centinela, which opened into a short dead-end road, Milton Street. I could have Jesse bring the car and pick us up there so we'd get home faster.

"Right." I felt better for having a plan. I lingered in the shady area just long enough to hit Jesse's number on my phone, then strode forward into the sun while it rang. I headed for the switchback with Shadow pulling me forward like a sled dog.

I never called during a run, and Jesse answered on the second ring. "Scar, are you okay?"

"It's Corry; something's hap—" But the phone was flying out of my hand as something dark plowed me to the ground. In the heat and shock of it I almost missed the familiar *crack* of a rifle right above us.

2. Scarlett

It wasn't a bullet that knocked me down. It was a bargest.

Shadow must have seen something—the metal glint of the rifle, maybe, or the car window going down. Whatever it was, she had reared up and half-spun in the air, putting her paws against my chest so the sniper's bullet hit her back instead of my chest. I caught the fastest, blink-and-you'll-miss-it image: an SUV up on Milton Street, metal barrel in the open window. Then Shadow's push knocked me completely flat on my back, and my skull cracked against on the concrete path. My phone skittered down the embankment toward the water, miles out of reach.

Shadow herself landed ungracefully on my chest, whooshing the air from my lungs. We fell so awkwardly that her heavy jaw struck my nose, which seemed to explode water balloon.

Shadow's unmoving form pinned my legs down, and there was a terrible, endless moment where I automatically tried to scream, despite the air knocked out of me. My mouth was full of warm, coppery blood.

I turned my upper body sideways to spit out the blood...which meant that the sniper's second bullet missed me by about ten inches, driving into the concrete instead of the back of my head.

Suddenly my head was clear. Ignoring the pulse of blood from my nose and my ringing head, I wriggled my legs free and grabbed Shadow's front paws, getting my legs under me so I could heave us both backward toward the shade from the overpass. She let out a terrifying whimper of pain when I moved her, but I paid no attention, throwing my weight back again, and then a third time, until we were safely under the overpass.

Putting my back against the embankment, I crouched with one hand on Shadow's chest, feeling it move as I tried to think defensively. My eyes jumped around, scanning the path. This was a perfect ambush spot. I couldn't get up the switchback without full exposure, but there was nothing to prevent the shooter from running in the Centinela gate and dropping onto the pavement in front of us. I wasn't sure why they weren't already here.

I moved my hand away from Shadow and reached for my right ankle. Even when things had been quiet in my job, I always ran with two throwing knives tucked into a compression stocking, one of them tipped with silver. I got one in my hand now, pushing out my radius to see what I was up against.

I strained myself, concentrating, but I felt...nothing. Whoever was after me had to be human. A human sniper, probably with at least one lookout.

That meant only one thing: skimmers. Humans who hunted the supernatural for sport or money. Not so long ago in Las Vegas, skimmers had killed my friend, Annie's biological father, Jameson, and had nearly killed me.

Until that second, I hadn't been afraid, not really—there was too much adrenaline, too much shock. But now I felt fear wrap itself around my spine and squeeze. In the years since I'd met her, I had never wished so strongly or desperately for Allison Luther. Shadow was a hunter, and I was more of a walking party trick, but Lex was a strategic thinker. "What would she do?" I mumbled out loud.

I couldn't see my phone; it must have slid all the way down to the water, or so close it wouldn't matter. Jesse would be on his way, but I had no idea how long it would take him, or even how long it had been since I dropped the phone.

This wasn't helpful. *Breathe, Scarlett, you idiot, and think.* Okay, the shooters had picked a perfect ambush spot, which meant they'd done their research. They'd tried to avoid a face-to-face confrontation, probably because Shadow was deadly as hell. I may not have had supernatural powers, but I could still hit a moving tennis ball with a throwing knife at fifteen paces.

For the first time, I looked properly at Shadow. She was sprawled out on her side, breathing in short shallow pants, her eyes unfocused and staring. I swallowed hard. The Luparii spell had made bargest skin permanently bulletproof, but we hadn't exactly tested it since I'd altered the spell during the Wild Hunt battle—and certainly never with a high-powered rifle.

I crouched over her so I could get a closer look. All the blood on the ground seemed to have come from my nose and a few scrapes on my hands, so she wasn't shot. Reaching over her, I felt along the pebbled, hairless skin of her back until my fingers ran over something *wrong*—a kind of dent in the bones of her back, caving inward. My breath caught, and Shadow whimpered at the touch, a sound that twisted my heart.

There were questions here, about the bargests' skeletons and bone density and magic, but I shoved them aside for later. "Shadow, can you get up?" I asked. "I think we need to move."

She gave me a dubious look, her meaning as clear as day. *Where?*

Fair question. If the skimmers hadn't come down the path yet, they probably wouldn't try now that we'd had a moment to collect ourselves. Which meant they were probably moving in another direction, like farther down Milton Street to get a better angle under the overpass. We couldn't stay here.

I started to move, then froze. What if they didn't go down Milton—what if they went to the top of the overpass itself and each took a position on Centinela? There had to be at least two skimmers—I'd seen the rifle barrel in the passenger window, so there was likely a driver. If Shadow and I ran out either side of the path under the overpass, we would be the world's easiest targets to someone

overhead.

In other words, we couldn't stay put and wait for Jesse, but we couldn't leave the overpass either. Great. I looked around for a second, my eyes landing on the massive concrete wall at the bottom of the channel, before the creek. It was sturdy enough to hold up a busy city street, which meant it could stop an awful lot of bullets. "We'll hide behind the bridge support until Jesse gets here," I told Shadow quietly.

The support was parallel to the path and as wide as the overpass it supported...which meant we were going to have to get under the fence, scabble down the concrete decline, and duck out from under cover for a second to get around it. If we could move fast enough, they wouldn't be ready for it.

I stood up. "Come on, Shadow, we're doing something dumb," I said, trying to lift her onto her feet.

Shadow's eyes rolled up at me, and her clubbed tail thumped once on the ground in frustration. "No. I won't leave you here," I said firmly. "Come on." Shadow struggled for a second, trying to roll to her feet, but then she fell back onto her side, panting, eyes on me.

Seconds were ticking by, the pain in my head all but screaming at me. I made myself say the only thing that might move her. "Shadow, I'm staying with you—so if you don't get up I'm going to die."

It worked. She began struggling upright, and I went around to her back, sliding my fingers carefully under her pelt to heave her to her feet. It took longer than expected—something in her spine had definitely been affected—and the whole time I felt exposed. How long had it been since the second gunshot? Two minutes? Less? What were they doing?

Once Shadow was on her feet, I snaked my hands under her belly to help support her weight. Then I sort of duck-walked us toward the fence, where she had to lower her bulk down again to squeeze under, a process that had her whimpering in pain and me cursing myself for the plan. What if the shooter was long gone, and I was doing permanent damage to her spine by making Shadow go through this?

But I didn't stop. Clumsily, I wormed my body through the middle bars of the fence and landed on the other side so I could help Shadow duck under the lowest bar. We were on the other side and half-sliding down to the support beam when the second attack began.

It wasn't a gunshot this time—it was two large metal boxes, dropped off either side of the overpass. I caught the movement of one out of the corner of my eye and spun to see the other one drop with a thud. Each box was about the size of a filing cabinet drawer, and when they hit the ground the boxes' insides sort of popped out of their casings. They were filled with what looked like a hundred round metal softballs clustered together, emitting a high-pitched ringing.

Inside me there was some sort of chemical reaction between my half-assed survival instincts and every movie I've seen in the last twenty years. Without really understanding what I was doing, I dove down lengthwise next to Shadow, wrapped one arm around her, and pulled hard, log-rolling us down the short embankment, at the very edge of the concrete support. I couldn't turn and get us around it in time, so I made an instant decision and kept throwing our collective weight farther down, rolling us toward the water.

Just before we hit the surface, I caught a glimpse of the first orange and green bursts of explosion, and then everything went black.