

Prologue



Hawkins Hollow
June 1994

ON A BRIGHT SUMMER MORNING, A TEACUP poodle drowned in the Bestlers' backyard swimming pool. At first Lynne Bestler, who'd gone out to sneak in a solitary swim before her kids woke, thought it was a dead squirrel. Which would've been bad enough. But when she steeled herself to scoop out the tangle of fur with the net, she recognized her neighbor's beloved Marcell.

Squirrels generally didn't wear rhinestone collars.

Her shouts, and the splash as Lynne tossed the hapless dog, net and all, back into the pool, brought Lynne's husband rushing out in his boxers. Their mother's sobs, and their father's curses as he jumped in to grab the pole and tow the body to the side, woke the Bestler twins, who stood screaming in their matching My Little Pony nightgowns. Within moments, the backyard hysteria had neighbors hurrying to fences just as Bestler dragged himself and his burden out of the water. As, like many men, Bestler had developed an

attachment to ancient underwear, the weight of the water was too much for the worn elastic.

So Bestler came out of his pool with a dead dog, and no boxers.

The bright summer morning in the little town of Hawkins Hollow began with shock, grief, farce, and drama.

Fox learned of Marcell's untimely death minutes after he stepped into Ma's Pantry to pick up a sixteen-ounce bottle of Coke and a couple of Slim Jims.

He'd copped a quick break from working with his father on a kitchen remodel down Main Street. Mrs. Larson wanted new countertops, cabinet doors, new floors, new paint. She called it freshening things up, and Fox called it a way to earn enough money to take Allyson Brendon out for pizza and the movies on Saturday night. He hoped to use that gateway to talk her into the backseat of his ancient VW Bug.

He didn't mind working with his dad. He hoped to hell he wouldn't spend the rest of his life swinging a hammer or running a power saw, but he didn't mind it. His father's company was always easy, and the job got Fox out of gardening and animal duty on their little farm. It also provided easy access to Cokes and Slim Jims—two items that would never, never be found in the O'Dell-Barry household.

His mother ruled there.

So he heard about the dog from Susan Keefaffer, who rang up his purchases while a few people with nothing better to do on a June afternoon sat at the counter over coffee and gossip.

He didn't know Marcell, but Fox had a soft spot for animals, so he suffered a twist of grief for the unfortunate poodle. That was leavened somewhat by the idea of Mr. Bestler, whom he *did* know, standing "naked as a jaybird," in Susan Keefaffer's words, beside his backyard pool.

While it made Fox sad to imagine some poor dog drowning in a swimming pool, he didn't connect it—not

then—to the nightmare he and his two closest friends had lived through seven years before.

He'd had a dream the night before, a dream of blood and fire, of voices chanting in a language he didn't understand. But then he'd watched a double feature of videos—*Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—with his friends Cal and Gage.

He didn't connect a dead French poodle with the dream, or with what had burned through Hawkins Hollow for a week after his tenth birthday. After the night he and Cal and Gage had spent at the Pagan Stone in Hawkins Wood—and everything had changed for them, and for the Hollow.

In a few weeks he and Cal and Gage would all turn seventeen, and that was on his mind. Baltimore had a damn good chance at a pennant this year, so that was on his mind. He'd be going back to high school as a senior, which meant top of the food chain at last, and planning for college.

What occupied a sixteen-year-old boy was considerably different from what occupied a ten-year-old. Including rounding third and heading for home with Allyson Brendon.

So when he walked back down the street, a lean boy not quite beyond the gangly stage of adolescence, his dense brown hair tied back in a stubby tail, golden brown eyes shaded with Oakleys, it was, for him, just another ordinary day.

The town looked as it always did. Tidy, a little old-timey, with the old stone townhouses or shops, the painted porches, the high curbs. He glanced back over his shoulder toward the Bowl-a-Rama on the Square. It was the biggest building in town, and where Cal and Gage were both working.

When he and his father knocked off for the day, he thought he'd head on up, see what was happening.

He crossed over to the Larson place, walked into the unlocked house where Bonnie Raitt's smooth Delta blues slid

smoothly out of the kitchen. His father sang along with her in his clear and easy voice as he checked the level on the shelves Mrs. Larson wanted in her utility closet. Though the windows and back door were open to their screens, the room smelled of sawdust, sweat, and the glue they'd used that morning to install the new Formica.

His father worked in old Levi's and his Give Peace a Chance T-shirt. His hair was six inches longer than Fox's, worn in a tail under a blue bandanna. He'd shaved off the beard and mustache he'd had as long as Fox remembered. Fox still wasn't quite used to seeing so much of his father's face—or so much of himself in it.

"A dog drowned in the Bestlers' swimming pool over on Laurel Lane," Fox told him, and Brian stopped working to turn.

"That's a damn shame. Anybody know how it happened?"

"Not really. It was one of those little poodles, so they think it must've fallen in, then it couldn't get out again."

"You'd think somebody would've heard it barking. That's a lousy way to go." Brian set down his tools, smiled at his boy. "Gimme one of those Slim Jims."

"What Slim Jims?"

"The ones you've got in your back pocket. You're not carrying a bag, and you weren't gone long enough to scarf down Hostess Pies or Twinkies. I'm betting you're packing the Jims. I get one, and your mom never has to know we ate chemicals and meat by-products. It's called blackmail, kid of mine."

Fox snorted, pulled them out. He'd bought two for just this purpose. Father and son unwrapped, bit off, chewed in perfect harmony. "The counter looks good, Dad."

"Yeah, it does." Brian ran a hand over the smooth eggshell surface. "Mrs. Larson's not much for color, but it's good work. I don't know who I'm going to get to be my lapdog when you head off to college."

“Ridge is next in line,” Fox said, thinking of his younger brother.

“Ridge wouldn’t keep measurements in his head for two minutes running, and he’d probably cut off a finger dreaming while he was using a band saw. No.” Brian smiled, shrugged. “This kind of work isn’t for Ridge, or for you, for that matter. Or either of your sisters. I guess I’m going to have to rent a kid to get one who wants to work with wood.”

“I never said I didn’t want to.” Not out loud.

His father looked at him the way he sometimes did, as if he saw more than what was there. “You’ve got a good eye, you’ve got good hands. You’ll be handy around your own house once you get one. But you won’t be strapping on a tool belt to make a living. Until you figure out just what it is you want, you can haul these scraps on out to the Dumpster.”

“Sure.” Fox gathered up scraps, trash, began to cart them out the back, across the narrow yard to the Dumpster the Larsons had rented for the duration of the remodel.

He glanced toward the adjoining yard and the sound of kids playing. And the armload he carried thumped and bounced on the ground as his body went numb.

The little boys played with trucks and shovels and pails in a bright blue sandbox. But it wasn’t filled with sand. Blood covered their bare arms as they pushed their Tonka trucks through the muck inside the box. He stumbled back as the boys made engine sounds, as red lapped over the bright blue sides and dripped onto the green grass.

On the fence between the yards, where hydrangeas headed up toward bloom, crouched a boy that wasn’t a boy. It bared its teeth in a grin as Fox backed toward the house.

“Dad! Dad!”

The tone, the breathless fear had Brian rushing outside. “What? What is it?”

“Don’t you—can’t you see?” But even as he said it, as he pointed, something inside Fox knew. It wasn’t real.

“What?” Firmly now, Brian took his son’s shoulders. “What do you see?”

The boy that wasn’t a boy danced along the top of the chain-link fence while flames spurting up below and burned the hydrangeas to cinders.

“I have to go. I have to go see Cal and Gage. Right now, Dad. I have to—”

“Go.” Brian released his hold on Fox, stepped back. He didn’t question. “Go.”

He all but flew through the house and out again, up the sidewalk to the Square. The town no longer looked as it usually did to him. In his mind’s eye Fox could see it as it had been that horrible week in July seven years before.

Fire and blood, he remembered, thinking of the dream.

He burst into the Bowl-a-Rama where the summer afternoon leagues were in full swing. The thunder of balls, the crash of pins pounded in his head as he ran straight to the front desk where Cal worked.

“Where’s Gage?” Fox demanded.

“Jesus, what’s up with you?”

“Where’s Gage?” Fox repeated, and Cal’s amused gray eyes sobered. “Working the arcade. He’s . . . he’s coming out now.”

At Cal’s quick signal, Gage sauntered over. “Hello, ladies. What . . .” The smirk died after one look at Fox’s face. “What happened?”

“It’s back,” Fox said. “It’s come back.”

One



Hawkins Hollow
March 2008

FOX REMEMBERED MANY DETAILS OF THAT LONG-ago day in June. The tear in the left knee in his father's Levi's, the smell of coffee and onions in Ma's Pantry, the crackle of the wrappers as he and his father opened Slim Jims in Mrs. Larson's kitchen.

But what he remembered most, even beyond the shock and the fear of what he'd seen in the yard, was that his father had trusted him.

He'd trusted him on the morning of Fox's tenth birthday, too, when Fox had come home, bringing Gage with him, both of them filthy, exhausted, and terrified, with a story no adult would believe.

There'd been worry, Fox reflected. He could still see the way his parents had looked at each other as he told them the story of something black and powerful and *wrong* erupting out of the clearing where the Pagan Stone stood.

They hadn't brushed it off as overactive imagination, hadn't even come down on him for lying about spending

the night at Cal's and instead trooping off with his friends to spend the night of their tenth birthday in the woods west of town.

Instead they'd listened. And when Cal's parents had come over, they'd listened, too.

Fox glanced down at the thin scar across his wrist. That mark, one made when Cal had used his Boy Scout knife nearly twenty-one years before to make him, Cal, and Gage blood brothers, was the only scar on his body. He'd had others before that night, before that ritual—what active boy of ten didn't? Yet all of them but this one had healed smooth—as he'd healed from any injury since. Without a trace.

It was that mark, that mixing of blood, that had freed the thing trapped centuries before. For seven nights it had stormed through Hawkins Hollow.

They thought they'd beaten it, three ten-year-old boys against the unholy that infected the town. But it came back, seven years later, for seven more nights of hell. Then returned again, the week they'd turned twenty-four.

It would come back again this summer. It was already making itself known.

But things were different now. They were better prepared, had more knowledge. Only it wasn't just him, Cal, and Gage this time. They were six with the three women who'd come to the Hollow, who were connected by ancestry to the demon, just as he, Cal, and Gage were connected to the force that had trapped it.

Not kids anymore, Fox thought as he pulled up to park in front of the townhouse on Main Street that held his office and his apartment. And if what their little band of six had been able to pull off a couple weeks before at the Pagan Stone was any indication, the demon who'd once called himself Lazarus Twisse was in for a few surprises.

After grabbing his briefcase, he crossed the sidewalk. It had taken a lot of sweat and considerable financial juggling for Fox to buy the old stone townhouse. The first couple of

years had been lean—hell, they'd been emaciated, he thought now. But they'd been worth the struggle, the endless meals of PB and J, because every inch of the place was his—and the Hawkins Hollow Bank and Trust's.

The plaque at the door read FOX B. O'DELL, ATTORNEY AT LAW. It could still surprise him that it had been the law he'd wanted—more that it had been small-town law.

He supposed it shouldn't. The law wasn't just about right and wrong, but all the shades between. He liked figuring out which shade worked best in each situation.

He stepped inside, and got a jolt when he saw Layla Darnell, one of that little band of six, behind the desk in his reception area. His mind went blank for a moment, as it often did if he saw her unexpectedly. He said, "Um . . ."

"Hi." Her smile was cautious. "You're back sooner than expected."

Was he? He couldn't remember. How was he supposed to concentrate with the hot-looking brunette and her mermaid green eyes behind the desk instead of his grandmotherly Mrs. Hawbaker? "I—we—won. The jury deliberated less than an hour."

"That's great." Her smile boosted up several degrees. "Congratulations. That was the personal injury case? The car accident. Mr. and Mrs. Pullman?"

"Yeah." He shifted his briefcase to his other shoulder and kept most of the pretty parlorlike reception area between them. "Where's Mrs. H?"

"Dentist appointment. It's on your calendar."

Of course it was. "Right. I'll just be in my office."

"Shelley Kholer called. Twice. She's decided she wants to sue her sister for alienation of affection and for . . . Wait." Layla picked up a message pad. "For being a 'skanky, no-good ho'—she actually said 'ho.' And the second call involved her wanting to know if, as part of her divorce settlement, she'd get her cheating butt-monkey of a soon-to-be-ex-husband's points for some sort of online NASCAR

contest because she picked the jerkwad's drivers for him. I honestly don't know what that last part means except for jerkwad."

"Uh-huh. Well, interesting. I'll call her."

"Then she cried."

"Shit." He still had a soft spot for animals, and had a spot equally soft for unhappy women. "I'll call her now."

"No, you'll want to wait about an hour," Layla said with a glance at her watch. "Right about now she's getting hair therapy. She's going red. She can't actually sue her skanky, no-good ho of a sister for alienation of affection, can she?"

"You can sue for any damn thing, but I'll talk her down from it. Maybe you could remind me in an hour to call her. Are you okay out here?" he added. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm good. Alice—Mrs. Hawbaker—she's a good teacher. And she's very protective of you. If she didn't think I was ready to fly solo, I wouldn't be. Besides, as office manager in training, I should be asking you if you need anything."

An office manager who didn't jump-start his libido would be a good start, but it was too late for that. "I'm good, too. I'll just be . . ." He gestured toward his office, then walked away.

He was tempted to shut the pocket doors, but it felt rude. He never closed the doors of his office unless he was with a client who needed or wanted privacy.

Because he never felt quite real in a suit, Fox pulled off the jacket, tossed it over the grinning pig that served as one of the hooks. With relief, he dragged off his tie and draped it over a happy cow. That left a chicken, a goat, and a duck, all carved by his father, whose opinion had been that no law office could be stuffy when it was home to a bunch of lunatic farm animals.

So far, Fox figured that ran true.

It was exactly what he'd wanted in an office, something part of a house rather than a *building*, with a view of

neighborhood rather than urban streets. Shelves held the law books and supplies he needed most often, but mingled with them were bits and pieces of him. A baseball signed by the one and only Cal Ripken, the stained-glass kaleidoscope his mother had made him, framed snapshots, a scale model of the Millennium Falcon, laboriously and precisely built when he'd been twelve.

And, in a place of prominence sat the big glass jar, and its complement of dollar bills. One for every time he forgot and said *fuck* in the office. It was Alice Hawbaker's decree.

He got a Coke out of the minifridge he kept stocked with them and wondered what the hell he was going to do when Mrs. Hawbaker deserted him for Minneapolis and he had to deal with the lovely Layla not only as part of the defeat-the-damn-demon team, but five days a week in his office.

"Fox?"

"Huh?" He spun around from his window, and there she was again. "What? Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, other than Big Evil, no. You don't have any appointments for a couple of hours, and since Alice isn't here, I thought we could talk about that. I know you've got other work, but—"

"It's okay." Big Evil would give him focus on something other than gorgeous green eyes and soft, glossy pink lips. "Do you want a Coke?"

"No, thanks. Do you know how many calories are in that can?"

"It's worth it. Sit down."

"I'm too jumpy." As if to prove it, Layla rubbed her hands together as she wandered the office. "I get jumpier every day that nothing happens, which is stupid, because it should be a relief. But nothing's happened, nothing at all since we were all at the Pagan Stone."

"Throwing sticks and stones and really harsh words at a demon from hell."

“That, and Gage shooting at it. Or Cal . . .” She stopped, faced Fox now. “I still get shaky when I remember how Cal stepped right up to that writhing mass of black and shoved a knife into it. And now nothing, in almost two weeks. Before, it was nearly every day we saw it, felt it, dreamed of it.”

“We hurt it,” Fox reminded her. “It’s off wherever demons go to lick their wounds.”

“Cybil calls it a lull, and she thinks it’s going to come back harder the next time. She’s researching for hours every day, and Quinn, well, she’s writing. That’s what they do, and they’ve done this before—this kind of thing if not this precise thing. First-timer here, and what I’m noticing is they’re not getting anywhere.” She pushed a hand through her dark hair, then shook her head so the sexy, jagged ends of it swung. “What I mean is . . . A couple of weeks ago, Cybil had what she thought were really strong leads toward where Ann Hawkins might have gone to have her babies.”

His ancestors, Fox thought. Giles Dent, Ann Hawkins, and the sons they’d made together. “And they haven’t panned out, I know. We’ve all talked about this.”

“But I think—I feel—it’s one of the keys. They’re your ancestors, yours, Cal’s, Gage’s. Where they were born may matter, and more since we have some of Ann’s journals, we’re all agreed there must be others. And the others may explain more about her sons’ father. About Giles Dent. What was he, Fox? A man, a witch, a good demon, if there are such things? How did he trap what called itself Lazarus Twisse from that night in sixteen fifty-two until the night the three of you—”

“Let it out,” Fox finished, and Layla shook her head again.

“You were meant to—that much we agree on, too. It was part of Dent’s plan or his spell. But we don’t seem to know any more than we did two weeks ago. We’re stalled.”

“Maybe Twisse isn’t the only one who needs to recharge.

We hurt it,” he repeated. “We’ve never been able to do that before. We scared it.” And the memory of that was enough to turn his gilded brown eyes cool with satisfaction. “Every seven years all we’ve been able to do is try to get people out of the way, to mop up the mess afterward. Now we know we can hurt it.”

“Hurting it isn’t enough.”

“No, it’s not.” If they were stalled, he admitted, part of the reason was his fault. He’d pulled back. He’d made excuses not to push Layla on honing the skill—the one that matched his own—that had been passed down to her.

“What am I thinking now?”

She blinked at him. “Sorry?”

“What am I thinking?” he repeated, and deliberately recited the alphabet in his head.

“I told you before I can’t read minds, and I don’t want—”

“And I told you it’s not exactly like that, but close enough.” He eased a hip onto the corner of his sturdy old desk, and brought their gazes more level. His conservative oxford-cloth shirt was open at the throat, and his bark brown hair waved around his sharp-featured face and brushed the back of his collar. “You can and do get impressions, get a sense, even an image in your head. Try again.”

“Having good instincts isn’t the same as—”

“That’s bullshit. You’re letting yourself be afraid of what’s inside you because of where it came from, and because it makes you other than—”

“Human?”

“No. Makes you ‘other.’” He understood the complexity of her feelings on this issue. There was something in him that was other as well. At times it was more difficult to wear than a suit and tie. But to Fox’s mind, doing the difficult was just part of living. “It doesn’t matter where it came from, Layla. You have what you have and are what you are for a reason.”

“Easy to say when you can put your ancestry back to some bright, shining light, and mine goes back to a demon who raped some poor sixteen-year-old girl.”

“Thinking that’s only letting him score points off you. Try again,” Fox insisted, and this time grabbed her hand before she could evade him.

“I don’t—stop pushing it at me,” she snapped. Her free hand pressed against her temple.

It was a jolt, he knew, to have something pop in there when you weren’t prepared. But it couldn’t be helped. “What am I thinking?”

“I don’t know. I just see a bunch of letters in my head.”

“Exactly.” Approval spread in his smile, and reached his eyes. “Because I was thinking of a bunch of letters. You can’t go back.” He spoke gently now. “And you wouldn’t if you could. You wouldn’t just pack up, go back to New York, and beg your boss at the boutique to give you your job back.”

Layla snatched her hand away as color flooded her cheeks. “I don’t want you prying into my thoughts and feelings.”

“No, you’re right. And I don’t make a habit of it. But, Layla, if you can’t or won’t trust me with what’s barely under the surface, you and I are going to be next to useless. Cal and Quinn, they flash back to things that happened before, and Gage and Cybil get images, or even just possibilities of what’s coming next. We’re the now, you and me. And the now is pretty damn important. You said we’re stalled. Okay then, let’s get moving.”

“It’s easier for you, easier for you to accept because you’ve had this thing . . .” She waved a finger beside her temple. “You’ve had this for twenty years.”

“Haven’t you?” he countered. “It’s more likely you’ve had it since you were born.”

“Because of the demon hanging on my family tree?”

“That’s right. That’s an established fact. What you do

about it's up to you. You used what you have a couple of weeks ago when we were on our way to the Pagan Stone. You made that choice. I told you once before, Layla, you've got to commit."

"I have. I lost my job over this. I've sublet my apartment because I'm not going back to New York until this is over. I'm working here to pay the rent, and spending most of the time I'm *not* working here working with Cybil and Quinn on background, research, theories, solutions."

"And you're frustrated because you haven't found the solution. Commitment's more than putting the time in. And I don't have to be a mind reader to know hearing that pisses you off."

"I was in that clearing, too, Fox. I faced that thing, too."

"That's right. Why is that easier for you than facing what you've got inside you? It's a tool, Layla. If you let tools get dull or rusty, they don't work. If you don't pick them up and use them, you forget how."

"And if that tool's sharp and shiny and you don't know what the hell to do with it, you can do a lot of damage."

"I'll help you." He held out his hand.

She hesitated. When the phone in the outer office began to ring, she stepped back.

"Let it go," he told her. "They'll call back."

But she shook her head and hurried out. "Don't forget to call Shelley."

That went well, he thought in disgust. Opening his briefcase, he pulled out the file on the personal injury case he'd just won. Win some, lose some, Fox decided.

As he figured it was the way she wanted it, he stayed out of her way for the rest of the afternoon. It was simple enough to instruct her through interoffice e-mail to generate the standard power-of-attorney document with the specific names his client required. Or to ask her to prepare and send out a bill or pay one. He made what calls he needed to make himself rather than asking Layla to place them first.

That kind of thing had always struck him as stupid in any case.

He knew how to use the damn phone.

He managed to calm Shelley down, catch up on paperwork, and win a game of online chess. But when he considered sending Layla another e-mail to tell her to go ahead and knock off for the day, he realized that came under the heading of avoidance, not just keeping the peace.

When he walked out to reception, Mrs. Hawbaker was manning the desk. "I didn't know you were back," he began.

"I've been back awhile. I've just finished proofing the papers Layla took care of for you. Need your signature on these letters."

"Okay." He took the pen she handed him, signed. "Where is she? Layla?"

"Gone for the day. She did fine on her own."

Understanding it was a question as much as an opinion, Fox nodded. "Yeah, she did fine."

In her brisk way, Mrs. Hawbaker folded the letters Fox had signed. "You don't need both of us here full-time and can't afford to be paying double either."

"Mrs. H—"

"I'm going to come in half days the rest of the week." She spoke quickly now, tucking letters into envelopes, sealing them. "Just to make sure everything runs smoothly for you, and for her. Any problems, I can come in, help handle them. But I don't expect there to be. If there aren't problems, I won't be coming in after Friday next. We've got a lot of packing and sorting to do. Shipping things up to Minneapolis, showing the house."

"Goddamn it."

She merely pointed her finger at him, narrowed her eyes. "When I'm gone you can turn the air blue around here, but until I am, you'll watch your language."

“Yes, ma’am. Mrs. H—”

“And don’t give me those puppy dog eyes, Fox O’Dell. We’ve been through all this.”

They had, and he could feel her sorrow, and her fear. Dumping his own on her wouldn’t help. “I’ll keep the F-word jar in my office, in memory of you.”

That made her smile. “The way you toss it around, you’ll be able to retire a rich man on the proceeds of that jar. Even so, you’re a good boy. You’re a good lawyer, Fox. Now, you go on. You’re clear for the rest of the day—what’s left of it. I’m just going to finish up a couple things, then I’ll lock up.”

“Okay.” But he stopped at the door, looked back at her. Her snowy hair was perfectly groomed; her blue suit dignified. “Mrs. H? I miss you already.”

He closed the door behind him, and stuck his hands in his pockets as he walked down to the brick sidewalk. At the toot of a horn, he glanced over and waved as Denny Moser drove by. Denny Moser, whose family owned the local hardware store. Denny, who’d been a balletic third baseman for the Hawkins Hollow Bucks in high school.

Denny Moser, who during the last Seven had come after Fox with a pipe wrench and murder on his mind.

It would happen again, Fox thought. It would happen again in a matter of months if they didn’t stop it. Denny had a wife and a kid now—and maybe this time during that week in July, he’d go after his wife or his little girl with a pipe wrench. Or his wife, former cheerleader and current licensed day-care provider, might slit her husband’s throat in his sleep.

It had happened before, the mass insanity of ordinary and decent people. And it would happen again. Unless.

He walked along the wide brick sidewalk on a windy March evening, and knew he couldn’t let it happen again.

Cal was probably still at the bowling alley, Fox thought.

He'd go there, have a beer, maybe an early dinner. And maybe the two of them could figure out which direction to try next.

As he approached the Square, he saw Layla come out of Ma's Pantry across the street, carrying a plastic bag. She hesitated when she spotted him, and that planted a sharp seed of irritation in his gut. After she sent him a casual wave, they walked to the light at the Square on opposite sides of the street.

It might have been that irritation, or the frustration of trying to decide to do what would be natural for him—to wait on his side of the corner for her to cross and speak to her. Or to do what he felt, even with the distance, she'd prefer. For him to simply keep going up Main so they didn't intersect. Either way, he was nearly at the corner when he felt the fear—sudden and bright. It stopped him in his tracks, had his head jerking up.

There, on the wires crossing above Main and Locust, were the crows.

Dozens of them crowded together in absolute stillness along the thin wire. Hulking there, wings tucked and—he knew—watching. When he glanced across the street, he saw that Layla had seen them, too, either sensing them herself or following the direction of his stare.

He didn't run, though there was an urgent need to do just that. Instead he walked in long, brisk strides across the street to where she stood gripping her white plastic bag.

"They're real." She only whispered it. "I thought, at first, they were just another . . . but they're real."

"Yeah." He took her arm. "We're going inside. We're going to turn around, and get inside. Then—"

He broke off as he heard the first stir behind him, just a flutter on the air. And in her eyes, wide now, huge now, he saw it was too late.

The rush of wings was a tornado of sound and speed. Fox shoved her back against the building, and down. Push-

ing her face against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her and used his body to shield hers.

Glass shattered beside him, behind him. Brakes squealed through the crash and thuds of metal. He heard screams, rushing feet, felt the jarring force as birds thumped into his back, the quick sting as beaks stabbed and tore. He knew the rough, wet sounds were those flying bodies smashing into walls and windows, falling lifeless to street and sidewalk.

It was over quickly, in no more than a minute. A child shrieked, over and over—one long, sharp note after another. “Stay here.” A little out of breath, he leaned back so that Layla could see his face. “Stay right here.”

“You’re bleeding. Fox—”

“Just stay here.”

He shoved to his feet. In the intersection three cars were slammed together. Spiderwebs cracked the safety glass of windshields where the birds had flown into them. Crunched bumpers, he noted as he rushed toward the accident, shaken nerves, dented fenders.

It could have been much worse.

“Everybody all right?”

He didn’t listen to the words: *Did you see that? They flew right into my car!* Instead he listened with his senses. Bumps and bruises, frayed nerves, minor cuts, but no serious injuries. He left others to sort things out, turned back to Layla.

She stood with a group of people who’d poured out of Ma’s Pantry and the businesses on either side. “The damnedest thing,” Meg, the counter cook at Ma’s, said as she stared at the shattered glass of the little restaurant. “The damnedest thing.”

Because he’d seen it all before, and much, much worse, Fox grabbed Layla’s hand. “Let’s go.”

“Shouldn’t we do something?”

“There’s nothing to do. I’m getting you home, then we’ll call Cal and Gage.”

“Your hand.” Her voice was awe and nerves. “The back of your hand’s already healing.”

“Part of the perks,” he said grimly, and pulled her back across Main.

“I don’t have that perk.” She spoke quietly and jogged to keep up with his long, fast stride. “If you hadn’t blocked me, I’d be bleeding.” She lifted a hand to the cut on his face that was slowly closing. “It hurts though. When it happens, then when it heals, it hurts you.” Layla glanced down at their clasped hands. “I can feel it.”

But when he started to let her go, she tightened her grip. “No, I want to feel it. You were right before.” She glanced back at the corpses of crows scattered over the Square, at the little girl who wept wildly now in the arms of her shocked mother. “I hate that you were right and I’ll have to work on that. But you were. I’m not any real help if I don’t accept what I’ve got in me, and learn how to use it.”

She looked back at him, took a bracing breath. “The lull’s over.”