

A ROYAL APOCALYPSE

Chapter One I Just Hit A *What?*

“Hey Judith, can I call you back? I think I just hit something.”

Lady Chelsea Georgiana Spence, first heir to the 11th Earl Spence of Darham in the County of Kent, stopped her pink Bentley with a loud tire screech and ran out of the car. Tentacles of a low-hanging mist, which had come out soon after sundown, curled around her spiky Manolo Blahnik pumps as she ran onto the middle of the deserted highway.

What is it this time? Since she finally got her driver’s license a year ago—seventh time was the charm—she’d managed to hit one trashcan, two mailboxes, three fire hydrants, and even an ex-boyfriend. Despite what they claimed in the press, she’d felt bad about every single incident. Well, maybe not about the whole knocking-her-ex’s-cheating-ass-to-the-ground thing, but the rest of it, yes.

Whatever she’d hit tonight went flying a good ten meters from the hood of her car.

Please, please, please let it be just a spare tire.

It wasn’t a spare tire. It was a human body—a male, spread-eagle on the pavement.

Fear slammed into her. *Dear God, what have I done?*

She was on her way to see her friend, Judith, when she saw a dark shape appearing in the middle of the road without warning. It had happened too quickly for her to stop the car in time. Now it looked like she might have killed someone. She should’ve never gotten her license—they were right to deny her the first six times.

The man, who looked to be in his mid-thirties, stirred. His hair, caked with dirt, had flopped over his forehead as he began to move his limbs feebly.

Thank heavens, he’s not dead! I need to get him to a hospital right away.

“Sir, are you alright?” The poor guy was dressed in a sweatshirt that was a little on the light side for an evening stroll in mid-October, and jeans that had seen far better days. It must be cold lying on the pavement, on top of whatever damages she had inflicted on him.

She leaned down and tentatively put a hand on the man’s shoulder. The guy responded to her touch with a twitch and a moan. Then he sat up so fast that Chelsea took an involuntary step back.

“Be careful,” she cautioned, “You don’t want to pull something by moving too quickly.”

The guy looked around him with a jerky neck movement, then turned toward her direction and sniffed hard. There was something feral about the way his nostrils flared, like a hound scenting blood or something.

Then the man stopped sniffing, and just looked at her body.

Since she was standing up and he was still sitting on the ground, it was rather creepy the way he just stared at the hip of her designer jeans, then slowly licked his lips. In the headlight beams from the Bentley, Chelsea could've sworn that his eyes shone like that of a cat's. She was suddenly aware that she was alone with him, on an isolated stretch of highway between her home and the outskirts of the suburbs surrounding Bloomington, Minnesota, and it was after dark.

"Pretty, pretty watch," he breathed.

Chelsea glanced down and realized that the man was focusing on her Cartier watch, not her bottom. It had an 18K white gold case set, with over four carats' worth of diamonds embedded in it. Hurt or not, the guy knew quality when he saw it.

She let out a sigh of relief. Maybe the guy was looking for a bribe, not a grope. *That* she had experience with. It was how she had managed to keep the picture of her hitting a second ex-boyfriend out of the press. Yes, it looked a little too suspicious when the same thing happened to two exes in a row. But she wasn't vengeful. Really. Just a clumsy driver with a penchant for questionable beaus who happened to be at the wrong place as she drove off in a huff after their relationships imploded.

She took off her watch and dangled it in front of her would-be blackmailer. His reaction was immediate. He tried to lunge toward her. She jumped back. Way back. Dazedly, she realized that one of his ankles was sticking out at a weird angle, making his movement awkward. Bile rose into her throat, and she wanted to kick herself. The idea that she had done this to another human being made her feel ill and disgusted with herself.

"Pretty watch. I want. I want." He only had eyes for her watch, his entire attention riveted around the diamond-encrusted jewelry, totally ignoring his own injuries.

"Sir, you could have the watch if you like, but we need to get you looked at by a doctor." He just kept staring at her watch.

The guy must be delirious with pain, if he was giving priority to material goods over his own well-being. She cleared her throat and nodded toward her Bentley. "My car is right over there, let me help you get in."

She pushed down her misgivings about his intensity over her personal possession, and prepared to approach him again. With his ankle either dislocated or broken, it wasn't like he could really hurt her, right? She just wished that telling him to take a ride with her, rather than having him stay put while she called for help, was the right decision and it wasn't going to exacerbate his injuries.

To her amazement, he bounced right up with his one functioning leg, and hopped toward her with a purposeful glint in his eyes, quickly eating up the distance she had put between them.

"Watch. Now!" he growled.

"What are you do—" Chelsea's voice trailed off as the guy dove toward her and snatched the watch from her hand. The momentum caused him to lose his balance on his good leg, and he dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. That couldn't have been good for his body, even if he hadn't just been knocked over by a car. But he didn't seem to care. With an animalistic war cry, he tore into the watch with his teeth, chewing it apart. The crunching sound of sharp teeth meeting even sharper diamonds ensued. An assortment of watch parts went flying as he chewed.

"I really think you should go to the hospital," Chelsea said weakly. Her words fell on deaf ears—she seemed to have ceased to exist in the guy's universe once he had her watch. A shiver went up her spine. Was he crazy? No sane person would hurt their own teeth that way, even if they had just had a car accident. Once again, she was painfully aware of how alone they

were. And she didn't even have any pepper spray on her.

Then suddenly, two people came out of nowhere, as if attracted by the sound of the watch-chewing. They were a middle-aged woman and a teenage boy. The boy leapt onto the first guy's back, trying to pry the watch, or what was left of it, out of his mouth. The woman was perfectly happy with the parts already lying on the ground, and got busy stuffing her face with them. All three had teeth that were badly cracked or missing. Blood was gushing from their gums, but no one was crying out in pain. They seemed far more interested in getting a piece of the watch in any way they could.

The scene was so strange and creepy, Chelsea's brain didn't know how to process it. Dazedly, she thought of a nature documentary she'd watched with her father once, with a pride of lions dividing up an antelope. Except instead of an animal carcass, it was a mechanical invention everybody wanted a piece of.

One person acting in this manner was strange enough, but three?

Chelsea didn't even remember quietly backing away from those weirdos, but suddenly there was a *thud* and her back hit her car door. That was when the first guy glanced up and their eyes met. Then his gaze shifted to her car and he grinned like he had just hit the jackpot.

His two new friends looked up as well, and together they did a gleeful singsong. "Pretty, pretty, pink car. Pretty, pretty, pink—"

Chelsea didn't wait to hear the rest of the chorus. She yanked open the car door and jumped in. The sounds outside became muffled right away. She had no idea how anyone could move so fast, but the three strangers were standing next to the car mere seconds after she closed the door.

Luckily, her overprotective dad had set her car door to lock automatically once the sensor registered her presence inside the vehicle. His lack of trust in her ability to remember to do so was saving her now.

"I want car. So pretty." Middle-Aged Woman ran her hand all over the car door, her fingernails scratching at the metal with a screeching sound that made Chelsea feel like there was something clawing under her skin.

"So pretty. So pink!" Original Creepy Guy agreed, salivating all over the window.

"Pretty, pretty pink." Teenage Boy started gnawing on the side view mirror.

Chelsea knew that she had to get out of there, and since the ignition was never turned off—she'd been in too much of a hurry to get out of the car earlier—her freedom was only a step on the gas pedal away. But for a long moment, like a deer caught in headlights, she simply stared at the creatures looming just centimeters away from her, only the car's protective glass between them.

Yes, she had used the word *creatures*, and felt it was appropriate.

Being only this short distance away, she could see that what she had, in her shock and confusion, mistaken as dirt and grime on Original Creepy Guy was in fact dried blood all over his body and clothes. It was the same thing with the other two, to varying degrees. Their fingernails were either missing or, in Middle-Aged Woman's case, hung onto her skin for dear life. It was as if the creatures had been trying to pry open something hard and metallic with their bare hands, and their nails had paid for it.

Something hard and metallic, such as the roof of a car or the hubcap that Middle-Aged Woman and Teenage Boy were trying to remove right now.

Chelsea stomped on the gas pedal with only one thought in her mind.

She was *not* going to get stuck on this misty road in the middle of nowhere with these

freaks. She was *not* going to stay frozen in shock like some blonde bimbo who died in the first scene of a B-rated movie. The blonde part she could live with—it was her natural hair color, after all. The bimbo part she didn't mind—she'd been called worse in the press. The dying part, though, she had a huge problem with.

At her press on the gas pedal, the Bentley's engine purred like a dream.

In the past, the paparazzi had used many cruel words to describe her driving skills: *The Royal's Worst Driver*, *Chelsea the Menace*. She pretended that they didn't bother her, but they did.

Yet, ironically, all the things that had made her fail her driver's exam repeatedly were aiding her escape now.

Sudden acceleration from zero to sixty in under four seconds? It was a great way to ensure that Teenage Boy, currently in the middle of a victory dance with her hubcap in hand, didn't have a chance to drop his trophy and grab onto her car as she sped away.

Mistaking the brakes for the gas pedal every so often? Better to shake Middle-Aged Woman and Original Creepy Guy off the car with.

Tunnel vision? With a dozen or so would-be attackers popping up all along the highway, chasing after her car like it was a siren's call, it was great to not get distracted, or she might have just totally freaked out and hit a tree.

Lack of turn signals? Whoever said the stuff of nightmares deserved prior warning before she knocked them aside?

The inability to drive in a straight line? Her natural tendency to zigzag had driven her driving instructor to the bottle, but now, it was making sure that no new monsters were able to cling onto her car.

Take that, multiple auto insurance hikes.

Chapter Two

The Mall of Britannia

Chelsea drove until nothing had crossed her path for three kilometers. And then she drove some more.

Her original plan for the evening, before the whole crazy incident, was to meet up with Judith, her friend, at the Mall of Britannia for a girl's night out. After finishing yet another short-term contract that had rendered her nothing but a glorified coffee girl, with everyone assuming she only got the work through connections, Chelsea was looking forward to some retail therapy and a late dinner at a new Italian restaurant nearby. She wouldn't have been able to afford these luxuries had she not come from money, so maybe she did deserve to be treated like a spoiled little rich girl, never mind that she worked her buns off at every single job.

Judith, who also came from a well-to-do family, but with no desire to seek employment after graduation, was already at the Mall. She was the only friend Chelsea had been able to make since her arrival on this continent. That was what happened when she decided to go to a college in North America, rather than the one in London where all the other minor nobility went. People who had already heard about her through the media tended not to warm up to her in person. Not to mention, over two hundred years after an Independence that almost happened, there had been renewed chatter about whether or not the AC, or the American Commonwealth, should still be a part of the British Empire. Chelsea, with her title and all the tabloid attention that came with it,

had become an easy person to hate amongst all that sentiment, not to mention being the poster child of why the peer system was so passé.

After graduation two years ago, she had stayed in the AC in hopes of carving out a place of her own in this world. Since Minnesota was still within the Commonwealth and she was legally an adult, it wasn't like her father could protest about her decision to stay. So that was how Chelsea had managed to continue enjoying her freedom without a single bodyguard tagging along. She was something like one-hundred-and-fifteenth in the line of succession to the British throne—not exactly a top security concern.

After what happened tonight, though, having a few guards around would have been quite welcome.

Forcing herself to relax her death grip on the steering wheel, Chelsea realized that she had subconsciously pointed her car toward her original destination. Might as well keep going, then. Being surrounded by other human beings sounded divine right about now. Anything at the Mall couldn't be worse than what she'd left behind in the *other* direction.

She glanced at the clock, and was surprised to find that it was only around seven. The encounter with whatever the heck those creatures were felt like it had lasted an eternity.

"Dial Judith," she instructed her Bluetooth.

Three rings later, it went to voicemail.

Judith did mention noticing the season's latest shoes being out at Macy's right before Chelsea had to hang up, so that was probably why she wasn't answering. Oh well. She wasn't sure what to say to her friend anyway, even if she *were* available.

"Hey, guess what. I just met a bunch of savages that may or may not be human. Are we still good for Italian?"

Chelsea had no idea what those creatures were. Well, that was not true. She had an inkling, but it was so absurd that she dismissed it every time the idea even half-formed in her head. And yet, what could possibly explain that single-minded intensity and ferocious hunger in the quest for luxury items, except the urban legends about the Obsessed?

For years now, there had been rumors about monstrous beings that were drawn to all things expensive and brand-named. Called the Obsessed, they were said to be willing to attack for a pair of Prada shoes or a Hermes bag. Chelsea always thought that it sounded so ridiculous that it had to be a joke, probably stories men invented to dissuade their girlfriends from nagging them to buy yet another Tiffany necklace, or parents to scare off their kids who were begging for the latest iPhone.

But now Chelsea wondered if there was some truth to those urban myths, after all.

"Dial Dad," she instructed her Bluetooth next, praying that her father would be available. She wanted to hear his voice. She felt like she was ten again, needing her daddy to tell her that everything was going to be okay.

Her father's number went straight to voicemail.

"Hey, Dad, this is Georgie." She swallowed. Her father had always called her by the short form of Georgiana, her middle name. The English earl was due to arrive from London tomorrow morning for a semi-official engagement, and had planned to see his daughter during that time. "Listen, you're probably already in transit, but I have to talk to you. You're not going to believe this, but remember those funny stories about the brand-name-loving monsters you always told me to ignore? Well, guess what? I think I just met some, and they're real. Can you call me back as soon as you can? I'm scared. Love you."

Now that she had left the message, she felt silly. With every kilometer she put behind her,

the more and more convinced she was that she'd hallucinated the whole thing, or that maybe what she had encountered was just people goofing around, or high on drugs. And now she had gone and told her dad about it.

What if he thinks I'm the one who's on drugs and decides not to believe me?

She supposed if she was an average citizen she would've dialed 911 already, but she had to talk to her father's aides and lawyers first. She couldn't afford to have a recording of the emergency call leaked to the press—of her babbling about mythical creatures, no less. Way down in the line of succession or not, the point was she was still *in* the line.

The Mall of Britannia was located in Bloomington, nestled between the city's airport, the Minnesota River, Interstate 494, and Highway 77. Chelsea felt a lot better once she got onto Interstate 494, which was a loop route that circled through the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area. Metropolitan meant civilization, and civilization meant safety.

Though she had to admit the usually-crowded highway was strangely deserted, especially for a Friday night.

But the first true sign that something was very wrong was the enormous cloud of smoke hanging above the general direction of the Mall, visible from where she was even half a kilometer away.

Judith!

Alarmed, Chelsea turned on the radio checking for any local news update. She got nothing but static.

A part of her yearned to turn back, but she thought about Judith and forced herself to step on the gas. She needed to make sure that Judith was alright, and it looked like the Mall might have had some kind of accident. Judith was her only friend on this continent, and she had taken a cab to the Mall with Chelsea's promise to give her a ride home tonight. Chelsea wasn't sure what help she could be to her friend, given how freaked out she was herself, but at least she had a car.

The Mall of Britannia was a rectangular-shaped building containing a vast number of stores spreading almost a hundred acres. Four department stores anchored its corners, with two of them, Macy's and Nordstrom, adjacent to each other. As Chelsea got closer she could tell that the smoke was actually coming from fire at multiple locations of the Mall. There was one coming from the direction of Nordstrom, which was a little farther north, and the other two were from—dear heavens above—Macy's. Even with the air outside passing through a strong filter before reaching the car interior, Chelsea could smell a mix of burnt plastic, concrete dust, and something caustic that made her want to cough.

What lay before her wasn't the result of a fire, but an explosion.

A good section of Macy's exterior walls was gone, with debris littering the ground. What on earth had happened here? Did a gas pipe erupt or something? Did Judith get caught in it? All her friend had wanted was some nice shoes. She didn't deserve to lose her life over it.

Chelsea got as close to Macy's as she could without risking her tires being pierced, then stopped the car and got out. Yes, she parked rather haphazardly, but she doubted anyone cared about that now.

The smoke and dust were much stronger outside, and they stung her nostrils and made her eyes water. There was the distant sound of a siren, but the thick air made everything muffled and quiet. She was glad that it was past sandal season, because she wouldn't have wanted her

bare toes to be in contact with the smoldering debris on the ground. It was made up of everything from two-thirds of a giant bath bomb, to a shred of clothing with the price tag still attached to it, to a ripped leather belt with an Armani buckle.

Chunks of concrete, some as big as suitcases and some as small as handbags, with sharp and rusty metal rods exposed, were waiting to trip any unsuspecting passerby and do damage to skin and tendons alike. With the air filled with smoke and dust, the only lights penetrating the early evening were from the blazing fire and the few parking lot lamps that hadn't been blown out. The low visibility added to the numb feeling that all was but a distant bad dream.

But it wasn't a dream. With Chelsea's next step, a piece of glass managed to embed itself into the sole of her shoe, cutting into her toe, the sharp pain attesting to the fact that everything was real.

Chelsea bit down the pain and kept going forward. It was like a war zone here. What if it was really a gas explosion? Would there be more? How was she going to find Judith when she couldn't even see more than a few feet in front of her?

There were only two fire trucks parked by the side of the mall, and not a single firefighter in sight, never mind any visible efforts to douse the fires. Where did all the other first responders go? One would think that the Mall, based on its sheer size and landmark status, would command way more attention in the face of such a disaster.

Carefully, Chelsea tiptoed around the debris, getting closer to a fallen corner of Macy's. Maybe a part of her was hoping that anytime now, she would see Judith emerging from the gaping hole of the building without a scratch on her body. Or maybe a part of her was simply drawn to the ruin, as if it was a car wreck she couldn't tear her eyes from.

There was a rumbling rocking the ground, then a blast of hot air and dust hit Chelsea. It must've been another explosion. It seemed to have come from the direction of a corner of the Mall that was adjacent to Macy's, but opposite to Nordstrom. While it happened relatively far away, given the enormous size of the Mall, the heat from the blast was still enough to knock Chelsea off her feet.

An icy fist clutched Chelsea's stomach as she coughed, her mouth filled with the bitter taste of metal, concrete, and plastic; her face and hair were caked with the dust of destruction. Something sharp on the ground had cut a gash on her cheek, and blood poured down her face. Her designer jeans and shirt were ruined, covered with blood and dirt.

With a groan, Chelsea picked herself up off the ground. She gingerly touched the gash on her face and winced. It was a shallow cut, but it stung like crazy; the blood mixed with the grime and hair plastered on her face, forming a sticky mess. She dared not touch the wound further, lest it become infected.

As the dust settled around her, she became aware of the fact that she wasn't alone in the semi-darkness. People, some of them still clutching their shopping bags, climbed out of their hiding places. They milled around listlessly, their eyes dazed, their jaws hanging loose.

These people had most likely already been there when Chelsea arrived, but she had been too focused on the sight of Macy's in ruin to make out their shapes in the dust-filled surroundings. They, too, were all covered in soot, but it was the lost looks on their faces that disturbed Chelsea the most. They looked like they'd seen things that couldn't be unseen, and would always be scarred for it.

Chelsea craned her neck, but couldn't find Judith among the crowd. She refused to give up hope. There were many entrances to get in and out of the Mall. Judith could've escaped unscathed through any one of them. Chelsea just had to stay positive and keep searching, that

was all.

The crowd totally ignored Chelsea.

And why shouldn't they? With her tattered clothes and blood-smearred face, she didn't resemble the beautiful, privileged, royal brat in the tabloids.

All through her life Chelsea had been recognized, judged, and deemed a waste of oxygen before people even exchanged a single word with her. This was the very first time in her life she felt completely invisible. If it hadn't been under these circumstances, she would have said it was rather refreshing.

Then Chelsea saw *her*.

A little girl, no more than six or seven, squatted behind a particularly large block of concrete. Her arms wrapped around the front of her legs, she rocked herself back and forth, sending her curly chestnut hair bouncing with her motions. She had on one of those pink, full-ruffle dresses that would've been a nightmare for a bridesmaid to pull off, but looked adorable for a girl her age. There was something about the way she rolled herself into a tight ball that tugged at Chelsea's heartstrings, maybe due to the fact that she, too, was once a lost child caught in things beyond her maturity level. For Chelsea, it was her parents' nasty divorce and being thrust into the spotlight at a young age. For the little girl in the pink dress, it was the disaster unfolding in front of them.

"Hey." She approached the little girl cautiously, and crouched down to her level.

The child stopped rocking and looked up, her eyes wide as she took in Chelsea's bloodied face. Chelsea mumbled, "Sorry."

She had no idea why she was apologizing, but it seemed like the thing to do.

"Does it hurt?" the little girl asked.

"No." Chelsea thought about it. "It stung in the beginning, but now it's not so bad. I'd almost forgotten about it."

"Okay," the little girl said, and went back to her rocking.

"Err," Chelsea cleared her throat. "What about you? How are you doing?"

"I'm waiting for Mama." The little girl stopped rocking again, "Have you seen her? We have the same hair."

Chelsea looked around. There were a few women in the proximity, but none of them appeared to be searching for a child, or even had the same curly hair, for that matter. Who knew if the mother had been caught in whatever had happened?

Chelsea was a germaphobe by nature. But the present moment didn't seem to be the time to care about being dirty. She made herself sit down on what looked to be a large "For Sale" cardboard sign so that she could be right next to the little girl. "I'm afraid not. What's your name, sweetie?"

"Emma."

"I'm Chelsea." She offered Emma her hand, and the girl unwrapped an arm from her legs long enough to shake it, her tiny palm surprisingly warm and damp. Shaking hands was such an unnecessarily civilized gesture among such chaos, but Chelsea found it comforting.

"You think my Mama made it out?" Emma's gaze was solemn and wise beyond her years.

"I don't know." Chelsea decided to be honest with Emma. People were always lying to kids, but they were smarter than any adult would give them credit for. "I just got here."

"I've been holding onto this for her." Emma uncurled herself to reveal what she had been pressing against her chest, something hidden by the bunched-up ruffles in her dress—a single

adult-sized shoe. Jimmy Choo, from the look of it. “Mama told me to find it in size six, and I did.”

Now that was an experience with which Chelsea could identify. Her own mother was a well-known spendthrift, and Chelsea had spent her childhood either being abandoned in a corner of a shop among the shopping bags, or, as she got older, being charged with helping her mom hunt for specific goodies.

Her mother’s behavior was also the reason the press had had it out for Chelsea from a young age. It was like being the daughter of the village prostitute, with everyone assuming that she would grow up to take her mother’s place.

“I got the pair. I did,” Emma said softly, pulling Chelsea back to the present. “But I turned around and... and I saw them come into the store and start hurting people. I lost the other shoe when I ran.”

“Who are they?” Chelsea swallowed, heart pounding.

“Monsters,” Emma whispered. Her eyes moist, she rubbed her cheek on the soft cream-colored leather of the shoe for comfort, as one would a beloved stuffed animal.

Chelsea took a quick look around, checking for monsters before her conscious mind even registered the word. No one around them fit the description, though—they looked more like the victims of the said monsters than anything else. There were various signs of struggle on their bodies—from bruised fingers where wedding rings would have been, to bloody wrists with raw wounds as if some bracelets or bangles had been yanked off of them, tearing skin in the process.

Wait, could these monsters be the same as those who had attacked her earlier?

“Are they still around?” She asked Emma.

“I don’t know.” The poor girl squeezed the shoe as if it was a lifeline.

Chelsea bit her lower lip. Hard. She had to get both of them out of here. Or at the very least take shelter in the relative safety of her car. From there they could figure out where Judith and Emma’s mom might have been. They could cover more ground being on wheels anyway.

Chelsea had zero experience with children. She didn’t have any nieces and nephews of that age, and her allowance had always been pretty generous, leaving her with no incentive to become a babysitter like those characters in the books and movies. She had no idea how to get Emma moving without alarming her, so she blurted out the only thing she could think of, “Um, you want to go check out my car? It’s pink.”

Pink? Oh, that was smooth, Chelsea. Real smooth.

Her words earned her a withering look that should never have come from a kid who was barely older than a preschooler. “Not leaving without Mama.”

“No, of course not,” Chelsea hastily assured Emma. “We’ll just get into the car and circle around, see if we can find her. Maybe she came out of the building on the other side. It’s a big mall, you know.”

Emma’s head lifted up, her eyes filled with hope. “You’ll do that?”

Chelsea nodded. “Of course.”

“But Mama told me to never get into a stranger’s car.” Emma chewed on her lips. She was clearly looking for an excuse to do what she had always been taught not to.

“But it’s *pink*.” Chelsea kept her tone light and causal. “So it doesn’t count. No bad guy ever drives a pink car. Come on.”

Chapter Three

The Getaway Car

Once they got to her car, Chelsea realized there was a problem with her plan—her car key was missing.

Chelsea fished around in her jacket pockets and realized she must've left her keys in the ignition in her haste to get out of the car.

There was the sound of keys jingling from behind, and Chelsea turned toward its source. Judith stood against a backdrop of fire and smoke.

“Judith!” Chelsea exclaimed, recognizing her friend as she came closer and the parking lot light hit her face at just the right angle. Judith had short, brown hair and a diminutive stature. She wore a white shirt and jeans that were blackened and frayed at the hem, which might've been intentionally fashionable, or not, given the current disaster.

Judith wasn't even wearing her jacket, but the cold didn't seem to bother her.

Chelsea's first instinct was to run toward Judith and hug her. But even the relief of seeing her friend alive and well wasn't able to quiet the sense of dread that threatened to overwhelm her as Judith stalked closer, her movements eerily stealthy and quiet. Judith might've had a pixie build, but she had never been very dainty on her feet.

Until now.

Chelsea stayed rooted to the ground and put a protective hand on Emma's shoulder. Out of her peripheral vision, she could see the little girl looking up at her, no doubt sensing her tension.

Chelsea kept her eyes trained on Judith. She took note of the Chanel earrings on Judith's earlobes. They belonged to Chelsea, having been stashed in her glove compartment after a party weeks ago and forgotten until now.

And those shoes Judith had on? That was the extra pair of Michael Kors Chelsea kept on the passenger side of her car as spares.

“Judith?” Chelsea repeated her friend's name, this time with a heck of a lot more hesitation and anxiety. Judith smiled and came ever closer.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Chelsea could've sworn that in the brief moment when Judith's teeth flashed there was a bit of blood visible on them.

Then she stopped, her attention riveted on Emma instead, her expression feral as she stared at the Jimmy Choo that the child was still clutching over her chest. “Pretty shoes. I want pretty shoes.”

“Shoe. Not shoes.” Chelsea corrected automatically, years of grammar and proper speech lessons kicking in. Dazedly, she wondered what had happened to Judith. She was on the phone with her friend less than an hour ago, and Judith had sounded completely coherent. Now she couldn't even get her basic grammar straight. Even worse, she actually talked like the monsters Chelsea had barely escaped from.

Judith couldn't have turned into an Obsessed, could she? Were the bad grammar and terse words the start of it all? Judith had stood by Chelsea while others had derided her. They might have had different goals in life, but they were friends nevertheless.

“Come on, Judith,” Chelsea implored, trying her best to keep the tremor out of her voice, “Talk to me in longer sentences and without the use of the word ‘pretty.’ You're starting to scare me.”

Judith tilted her head and frowned, as if really struggling to do as Chelsea suggested. Eventually she settled on a simple but firm, “No.”

“No?” Chelsea echoed.

“Don’t like you,” Judith explained.

“You don’t like me? Since when?” Chelsea demanded, “I’ve been your friend for years. I give you rides after girl’s nights because I know you like being driven around, even though you live forty minutes away from me. I even let you borrow my shoes. Well, except the pair you’re currently wearing.”

“Don’t like you,” Judith emphasized. “Too pretty. Too rich. Too famous.”

“That’s not exactly my fault.” It was true that Chelsea was wealthy, even among the rich. And she certainly had fame, however unwanted. Could it be that Judith had been harboring some kind of repressed jealousy toward her all this time? There had been no hint of it that Chelsea could think of. But if that was the case, and Judith had been the only friend she was able to make since arriving in North America, what did that say about Chelsea? Just how pathetic was she?

Maybe I really am as disliked as everyone keeps telling me. Maybe they were right and I was just as useless as Mom.

“Too stupid.” Judith kept up with the insults.

“Hey, I was a straight-A student and you know it,” Chelsea protested. What was it about people that no matter how often she hit the honor roll, all they could see was a dumb spoiled brat because that was what they wanted to see? Even knowing Judith’s criticism wasn’t fair, it still stung. Granted, she was still going from contract to contract at one design firm or another two years after graduation, and if she had had to rely on her minuscule wages she would’ve starved to death by now, but she was still working and still trying. More than what could be said about Judith.

“Too smart.” Judith was on a roll.

“Too smart or too stupid—which is it?” Chelsea asked, making her tone more curious than angry, trying to stall while she thought of a way to get out of the present situation. There was Emma to think about, and Judith had the key to their only means of getting away.

Mercifully, Emma was silent throughout the exchange between the grown-ups. A quick glance at the little girl showed Chelsea that Emma was staring at Judith with a petrified look on her face, the shoe in her hands being wrung and twisted beyond any hope of bouncing back into shape. Whatever it was that Emma had witnessed while she was inside the Mall, it had given her the good instinct to not attract further attention to herself.

Thank heaven for that.

“Well, am I too dumb, or too intelligent?” Chelsea asked again. “Come on, the insults can’t go both ways.”

Judith shook her head like a rabid dog, a low growl vibrating from her throat as if she was annoyed by Chelsea’s reasoning. Maybe the longer sentences confused her. Her vocabulary and comprehension skills weren’t as limited as the monsters Chelsea had encountered before, but maybe that just meant she wasn’t fully converted yet.

“Too pretty,” Judith mumbled her earlier words, her eyes looking hungry again as if she was reverting to form, whatever that form was. “Pretty, pretty.”

As Judith’s eyes raked over everything from Chelsea’s Tiffany necklace and Cartier rings to the single shoe still being clutched in Emma’s hands, Chelsea quickly weighed her options.

The old Judith was a delicate flower, but if this new version of her was really one of the Obsessed, then Chelsea would have to assume that her former friend now had the same level of

strength as the others she had encountered.

The kind who could tear out a hubcap with her bare hands.

Talking had run its course, while a physical fight seemed impossible to win. What could she do?

Judith smiled again, this time smugly and slowly, leaving no doubt that what Chelsea saw on her teeth was indeed blood. Then Judith hiccupped and spit out something long and toothpick-like, except much thicker. The object hit the ground with a metallic *clang*.

It was an Alexander McQueen Silver Sword Skull tie bar. Dented from chewing, Chelsea nevertheless recognized it because she'd gotten the exact same one for one of her exes as a birthday present.

Judith crouched down suddenly, looking ready to lurch, focusing on Emma as her target. Chelsea knew that look. She had gone on a safari in the Congo with her dad once when she was a child. That was the look of a hungry predator right before it pounced.

Chelsea didn't remember pushing Emma away from the line of fire with one hand. She didn't remember leaning down in one smooth motion and picking up a piece of concrete on the ground with her other hand. And she certainly didn't remember aiming the concrete at Judith. It wasn't until the concrete left her hand—taking a good layer of skin off her palm in the process—that Chelsea realized what she'd done.

As if having a guidance system of its own, the piece of concrete hit Judith right at the center between her eyes, forcing her head back. A terrible sound of bone-snapping followed, and Judith went down like a puppet with its strings cut.

Chelsea crumpled to the ground in utter shock, accidentally knocking Emma down at the same time. *Oh dear God, did my one-in-a-million lucky shot actually snap my friend's neck?*

That thought ricocheted around the inside of Chelsea's head for a full ten seconds while Emma tugged at her hand, to no avail. Then Judith started moving again. With her neck twisted at an impossible angle, she tried to get back up. Whatever injury she had sustained from the impact, it didn't seem to have killed her.

Well, if Chelsea had had any doubts about her friend having been turned into a monster, she had none now.

She should've been terrified, but all she could do was spring into action. Some basic instinct told her to get going and keep going, or else reality would sink in and she would be shocked into immobility. She rolled over and picked up the key that had fallen out of Judith's hand during her fall, neatly avoiding her as she reached for them. Then Chelsea got up, pulled Emma to her feet, and thrust the little girl into the Bentley. Once in the driver's seat, Chelsea turned on the ignition and stepped on the gas.

She didn't even care which direction she was going, her only thought was to get the hell away from Judith and anyone like her.

"Mama!" Emma screamed just when they had cleared Macy's outdoor parking lot and started going along the road leading toward Nordstrom, passing the huge multi-level parking complex along the way.

Damn. In her frantic state, Chelsea had completely forgotten about her promise to help the little girl find her mom. But what if she, too, had turned?

Emma pressed the button that rolled down the window and called out again, waving at a stylishly-dressed woman in her early thirties who stood on the pedestrian crossing just ten meters ahead, under the bridge connecting the parking complex and the second floor of the mall. She was holding onto a shopping bag, and looked like an adult version of Emma with the exact same

curly chestnut hair. She jumped up and down, waving back at Emma frantically.

Chelsea stopped the car near the woman, but hesitated about unlocking the door. She looked normal enough, but she had her shopping bag in a death grip. Was she simply traumatized, or was she one of the monsters that was doing the traumatizing?

“Emma? Baby?” The woman stuck her head into the window opening at the little girl’s side. “Oh my God, you got us a ride!”

Chelsea made a decision to unlock the door. The woman had responded to Emma having access to a means of transportation, not the fact that it happened to be a *pretty pretty car*. Looked like she was indeed human.

The woman got into the back, but before she could close the door three more people jumped out of the dark corner under the bridge. There was one tall teenaged girl, one overweight middle-aged man, and one janitor, still in his uniform. Before Chelsea could even decide what to make of them, they shoved Emma’s mother further into the car and piled in after her.

“Hey, watch it!” Emma’s mother, having been pushed onto the interior carpet, squeezed herself onto the backseat again, her curly hair bouncing all around her face. There was grumbling and cursing abounded as the passengers jockeyed for space, and none of it was fit for a child’s ears.

The back was so crowded Chelsea couldn’t even see anything in the rearview mirror except dirty hair and bloodied faces. At least nobody had started attacking the car interior, or her, so Chelsea assumed they must all be regular humans. She breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Go!” Overweight Middle-Aged Man yelled at Chelsea as if he was a business tycoon and she was his hapless chauffeur.

“Hey, this is my car. The least you can do is to be a little grate—” Chelsea began.

“Go! Go! Go! Go!” The newcomers screamed at her in a desperate chorus.

Then Chelsea saw the reason behind their urgency.

Half a dozen figures approached the car with wide grins on their faces, literally drooling. The leader, a girl with a nose ring, was holding a gigantic perfume bottle, the ones displayed at the cosmetic counters of department stores that obviously didn’t hold any real perfume. Using the bottle as a club, she started smashing the Bentley’s taillights.

Chelsea didn’t bother to check what the other Obsessed were up to. She stepped on the gas.