Keri Arthur. Moon Sworn - part 2

“You wanted me, boss?”

“Yeah, I did.” He hesitated. “Are you okay? You still sound tired.”

“I’m fine.” But I rubbed a hand across my eyes and half wished that I’d lied. He’d given me the perfect out, and we both knew it. But I really did have to get on with my life—even the bits of it I was no longer so sure about. “What’s happening?”

“We’ve got what looks like a ritual killing. If you’re feeling up to it, I’d like you to go over there and see if there’s a soul hanging about.”

“Sure. Send me the address and I’ll head straight there.” I hesitated. “It’ll take me at least an hour, though. I’m up at the Grampians.”

He didn’t ask me why. He knew it was Kade’s final resting place, and he also knew I’d missed his funeral. “That’s fine. Cole and his men are only just heading to the scene themselves. I’ll send the report and the address to your onboard.”

“Thanks, boss.”

He grunted and hung up. I threw the phone on the passenger seat, then started the car and swung out of the parking lot. The computer beeped as I turned onto the Grampians Road and headed for the Western Highway. I pressed the screen, getting the address and transferring it across to the nav computer. I didn’t bother looking at the report—I preferred getting my impressions from Cole and my own observations. I’d read it later, once I’d seen the crime scene for myself.

The body had been discovered in Melton, a suburb on the very outskirts of Melbourne. It had a reputation for being a rough area, but as I drove through the streets heading for Navan Park, it looked no worse than any other suburb. But maybe this section of Melton was the so-called better area. Every suburb had them.

I drove along Coburns Road until I saw the Directorate van parked at the side. I stopped behind it but didn’t immediately get out.

Because my hands were shaking.

I can do this, I thought. I just didn’t want to.

There was a difference. A big difference.

So why did it still feel like fear?

I took a deep, calming breath, shoved aside the insane desire to drive away, and opened the door, climbing out. Dawn had given way to a crisp, cool morning, but the sky was almost cloudless and the promise of warmth rode the air, caressing my skin.

The scent of blood was also rich in the air.

I locked the car and made my way through the park gates, following the path up the slight incline until the blood smell pulled me onto the grass and toward the group of gum trees that dominated the skyline. The grass crunched under my feet, evidence of how little rain we’d had of late, and the sound carried across the silence.

A figure appeared on the hilltop above and gave me a brief wave before disappearing again. The sharp glint of silvery hair told me it was Cole, and while I might not have missed coming to bloody crime scenes, I had missed Cole and his men.

I crested the hill and paused to survey the scene below. The body lay to the left of the trees, half ringed by scrubby-looking bushes that would have offered the killer little in the way of protection. Several yards beyond the trees was a lake in which ducks and toy boats floated. Kids ran around the edges of the water, oblivious to the cops stationed nearby.

I watched one little girl laugh as she chased a red ball that was rolling along the ground. With her blond pigtails and pale skin, she reminded me of Risa, Dia’s daughter and the little girl who’d saved my life. She’d begun calling me Aunt Riley, and in my worst nightmares, I sometimes thought that this was as close as I was ever going to get to having a child of my own.

Because of my own inability to carry children, and because my soul mate was dead. The picket fence dream was dead. At least, the version of it that had carried me through childhood was.

I blinked back the sting of tears and forced my gaze back to the body, trying to concentrate on the business of catching a killer. The victim was naked, his flesh sallow and sagging—the body of an old man, not a young one. There were no obvious wounds from what I could see, but Cole was kneeling beside him and obstructing my view of his upper body.

I drew in the air, tasting death and blood and something else I couldn’t quite name. I frowned as I moved down the hill. Strong emotions could stain the air, and hate was one of one of the strongest, but this didn’t quite taste like that. It was edgier, darker. Harsher.

If I had to guess, I’d say it tasted more like vengeance than hate. And the killer had to be feeling it in spades for it to linger in the air like this.

Cole glanced up as I approached, a smile crinkling the corners of his bright blue eyes. “Nice to see you back on the job, Riley.”

“I’d love to say it’s nice to be back,” I said, shoving my hands into my pockets so he couldn’t see them shaking, “but that would be a lie.” I pointed with my chin to the body. “What have we got?”

My gaze went past him as I asked the question, and the method of our victim’s demise became starkly obvious. Someone had strangled him—with barbed wire. His neck was a raw and bloody mess, the wire so deeply embedded that in places it simply couldn’t be seen. That took strength—more than most humans had.

But why would a nonhuman want to strangle a human with wire? Hell, most nonhumans could achieve the same result one-handed.

Unless, of course, our killer didn’t only want death, but pain as well.

Which would certainly account for the bitter taste of vengeance in the air.

I knew about vengeance. Kye’s death had been an act of vengeance as much as it had been a requirement of my job. He’d been a killer—a ruthless, cold-blooded murderer. And yet he’d made my wolf soul sing, and she still ached for him.

Would probably always ache for him.

Cole offered me a box of gloves, forcing me to take a hand out of my pocket. If he noticed the shaking, he didn’t say anything.

“As you can see, he’s been strangled,” he said. “He’s probably been dead for about five hours, and there’s no sign of a struggle.”

“Meaning he was probably drugged beforehand.” I couldn’t imagine anyone not fighting such a death. Which didn’t mean he wasn’t conscious or feeling every brutal bit of it.

“Or,” Cole said grimly, “that he was killed somewhere else and dumped here. There’s very little blood on the ground.”