

CHAPTER FOUR

Carol found herself knocked to one side by something big, caught her head on the corner of the dresser and saw pretty lights for a second or two. Something was screaming, something besides Monica, and she thought Chris was fighting with something but it was hard to see. Then there was a rush of movement, a crash and a sudden draught of cold air, and the room was as empty as it had just a second ago been full. Monica was lying in a dead faint, the front window was smashed out into the street, and Chris was gone.

Carol lay there for several seconds, her mind trying to find some purchase on the suddenly slippery ground of reality. Something had happened, something had definitely happened, but she couldn't quite seem to get a firm grip on it. Maybe if she stayed lying down and didn't do anything things would settle into some kind of sensible order.

"Ms Varland?" said a voice from the window—no, from the hole where the window had been.

"Ms Varland? Carol? Are you all right?"

"Mr Fayne?" Carol struggled to her feet. The man at the hole was big and broadly built, with small, friendly eyes and a full, neatly pointed beard. He was wearing a burgundy towelling robe, with what looked like pyjamas underneath.

"My God, Carol, what happened?" said Mr Fayne, as she made her way unsteadily towards him.

"I don't really know," Carol said vaguely. "I, I, I--" The sound of her saying "I, I, I" suddenly seemed very funny to her, so she had to laugh, and then the laughing was even funnier, and the room started to tilt over and--

"Carol." Mr Fayne's voice was sharp, and his grip on her arms was almost painful. Carol stopped laughing with a huge effort. "Perhaps you'd better let me in."

"You could just use the window," Carol said.

"I regret I'm insufficiently trousered for that sort of thing," said Mr Fayne. "Please?"

Carol steadied herself, and went into the hall to open the front door. When she led Mr Fayne back into the living room, Monica was stirring and making small whimpering noises. Mr Fayne bent over her a moment and felt her pulse.

"I think she'll be fine, but we should probably get her to A & E just in case. The nearest one's Eltdown."

"What?" Carol said. Things were starting to tilt again, and she sat down on something. Mr Fayne looked up, and hurried over to her.

"Ah yes. That'll be an interesting lump in the morning. That's two for A & E, then. Can you remember anything about what happened?"

"I—it was Chris," Carol said. "Look, Mr Fayne, please, no hospitals. I mean--"

"You and your friend both need to be looked at by a doctor," Mr Fayne said firmly, "and sooner rather than later. And please call me Rob, we're not on duty now. As for this Chris—that would be your boyfriend, I presume—we can't do anything for him till he comes back."

Carol wished her head would stop aching. It made it so hard to think, and it was important to think very very clearly just now. Chris had told her, had told Monica. Maybe just one more person wouldn't hurt.

"Carol?" Monica said weakly from the floor. "Did whatever just happened happen?"

"No," Carol said, as firmly as she could manage.

"Oh, good," Monica said, and closed her eyes again.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Rob, in a considering tone of voice. "I'll send Doctor van Joost down from the college in the morning, along with Joe Pikestaff and a couple of the groundsmen to put a temporary fix in here. We'll keep this in the family, as it were. Only before I can do that," he went on, fixing her with a penetrating gaze, "I'll need to know exactly what's going on. Otherwise it'll be the hospital, and I imagine I'll have to call in the police as well to find this Chris of yours. Assault, criminal damage, who knows what else—"

"No," Carol said. "Please don't. All right. I'll tell you as much as I can."

"That's all I ask. I promise to laugh in all the right places. Can you show me what's where in the kitchen?"

Carol took a deep breath and began to recount what Chris had just been telling her and Monica. It seemed to take far longer than it had before, and she wasn't sure she had got everything in the

right order, but Rob asked no questions, and his attentive expression was something steady to hold on to in an increasingly vertiginous world.

“And then—and then Monica interrupted, and they started arguing, and Chris was getting more and more agitated, and...”

“I’m sorry about that, darling,” Monica said. She had groped her way to a chair and turned it upright, and was now sitting in it nursing a cup of hot sweet tea that Rob had insisted on making for them both. “I was angry, but I wasn’t really calling the police. I just wanted to call his bluff.”

“I think you did,” Carol said.

“And then what happened, Carol?” Rob prompted gently.

“That’s just it, I don’t know. I hit my head, and Monica was screaming, and then something blew the window in, and—“

“Out. The glass is all on the outside. I think that was Chris making his getaway. You didn’t see anything?”

Carol tried to make sense of her memories, through the pounding ache in her head. Finally she shook her head. “I can’t remember,” she said hopelessly.

“Well, don’t look at me, darling,” Monica said. “I was out of it. I don’t even remember screaming, though I admit my throat feels like two miles of extremely poor quality road.”

Rob sat back. “Well, never mind. Luckily for you the college is responsible for maintaining these cottages, so you shouldn’t have to worry about the cost of repairs. The Bursar will sort something out as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the best thing you two can do is go to bed and get some sleep. Doctor van Joost will be here about nine-thirty. And if you remember anything at all, you’ve got my number.”

“But what about Chris?” Carol said.

“What about him?” Rob countered. “He could be anywhere, and neither of you are in any fit state to go looking. Since you don’t want the police involved...”

They say he went mad...raped a girl in the village...killed five men ran through Carol’s mind. She thought of Chris, somewhere out there in the dark, in God knew what kind of trouble.

"No, we've got to find him," she said. "Mr Fayne—I mean Rob—will you help us?"

"Us?" Monica echoed. "You speak for yourself, darling. Me, I'm going to take the nice man's advice and try to forget this whole day ever happened."

"All right, me then," Carol said, though every fibre in her ached to do the same.

"I'll have to get dressed," Rob said.

"Hurry, please."

"Oh, I will." Rob bent down and looked at a particular spot on the carpet. "I'm particularly intrigued by the possibilities suggested by this."

Carol looked where he was looking, at the dark patch where a vase of flowers had spilled, and the large and unmistakable print of a horse's hoof on the carpet next to it.

"What do you think it means, Rob?" she said, fifteen minutes later.

They were going, as slowly as possible, back along the road leading out of Avevale, as being the most likely path for Chris to have followed. Rob's ancient Cavalier was roomy enough, but the engine tended to make alarming noises on corners and going up hills.

"Well, I don't think he was hiding a horse in his back pocket, for one thing," said Rob.

"Maybe it was just the ball of his foot, and it just looked like a hoof." Carol was clutching at straws and knew it.

"One moment there were just the three of you in the room. Next minute there was something in there with you, something like a horse. What does that suggest?"

"I don't know," Carol said.

"Well, it suggests to me that there may be something in that story he told you about the tetrad. What was it supposed to confer again?"

"Er...power in war, healing in peace, fleetness of foot and wisdom in the heart." She didn't feel comfortable mentioning the other thing.

"The perfect gift for the man who has everything," Rob said. "I admire his ancestors' self-restraint. I wonder how it--"

"Look out!" Carol screamed.

Rob stamped on the brake, and the Cavalier pulled up, with a scream almost as loud as Carol's, less than a foot from the humped, huddled shape in the road.

"It's him!" Carol fumbled with the unfamiliar door and finally, after what seemed like hours, wrenched herself free of the car and stumbled into the road. Rob was already standing in the headlights' beam, looking down.

"Oh my God," Carol moaned. "Don't just stand there, help him—"

"I'm not sure I can," Rob said in an odd voice.

"The—the horse must have fallen on him..."

"Then where's its head?"

The words pushed Carol right through horror and out the other side. For the first time she saw clearly what she was looking at.

It was Chris, though his facial features were subtly exaggerated and coarsened. At least, it was Chris from just below the navel up. The rest of him appeared to be a medium-sized chestnut stallion—well, she was assuming stallion, to be fair, but horse, certainly. She suddenly realised that the big, rough something that had pushed her into the dresser must have been his suddenly appearing hindquarters. There was no sign of injury, and as she watched he frowned, opened his eyes and blinked in the light.

"Caz?" he said, and his voice was deeper, with overtones that sent sweet shivers through her. He smiled, though it looked more like a leer.

"Mr Kyriakou, I presume," Rob said, with only a slight tremor in his voice. "My name's Robin Fayne. We haven't met--"

There was a complicated movement, and Chris was on his feet—his hooves, rather—and backing away. "Who's he?" he growled, and Carol was suddenly very aware of how much taller he was now.

"He's my boss," she said. "He doesn't work for anyone. Except the College, I mean."

"I give you my word I mean you no harm," said Rob. "Quite the contrary."

Chris relaxed a little.

"Has this happened before?" Rob went on.

Chris shook his head. The movement was disturbingly equine, and his hair—his mane?—flapped around his face. "Is—is Monica all right?" he asked.

"She's fine," Carol said, a little tartly. "I am too, thanks for asking."

"Actually, Carol might have concussion," Rob said. "She hit her head quite hard. She wouldn't let me take her to the hospital."

"Sorry, babes," Chris whispered, and he hung his head.

"Don't call me that," Carol said. "Oh, Chris, what are we going to do?"

"I dunno. I don't even know if I'm gonna stay this way."

"What happened? I mean, did you do it--"

"Deliberately? Nah, 'course not. Only Monica was pushing me, and I was getting madder and madder, and—and then there was like this bubble, inside me, getting bigger and bigger, and I couldn't hold it in, and then it sort of exploded out of me."

"Was it painful?"

Chris stared at her. "Painful?" he repeated. "No. No, it was--" He glanced uneasily at Rob. "I don't remember," he said. "But then I felt...I dunno...you ever done coke?"

Now it was Carol's turn to stare. "What do you think?" she said icily.

"Well I dunno, do I? Anyway, neither have I, but it felt a bit like I thought that would. I felt massive strong, and like nothing could stop me...and like nothing mattered, you know? But inside it was still me, still scared about all this. I had to get away."

"You did. Right through my front wall."

“Oh my God. Look, I'm sorry, all right? But the thing is...” Chris screwed up his face. “The thing is, it still feels like that. Like...I'm looking at you right now, and I want you so bad I can't stand it, and it's taking me all my time to remember--”

“Chris!” Carol protested. Rob cleared his throat.

“--that I'm not supposed to just grab you and like get on with it, you know?”

“That would follow, actually,” Rob said.

“What?”

“Well, in the stories about—er—well—people like you, they were portrayed as being far more, um—in touch with their animal passions than, er—”

“What d'you mean, people like me?” Chris literally bridled.

“Oh my God,” Carol said. “You don't know.”

“Have you not looked at yourself?” Rob said.

“Well, I haven't brushed my hair lately, if that's what you mean.” Chris looked down at his body for the first time, and there was a long pause.

“Hello? Is that you, John? This line is terrible. I dunno, you spend billions of dollars on satellite communications and fibre optic networks, and--

“Yes, John, it's me. I called because--

“No, it's not late where I am. You never could work out those time zones, could you, John?”

“Well, okay, it's the end of the day, but listen, John, I'm a little concerned about the body count.

“Yes, John, but you've killed six people already, and four of them were on our side.

“I don't care how incompetent they were, culling is not an appropriate procedure in the Secret Service. No, not even in the Agency. Well, okay, that one time, but it's generally regarded as a no-no.

“John, you haven't even located the artifact, and six people are dead, people with families, people--

“No. No. No, John, leave their families alone. Leave—I tell you, John, we'll take care of their families, okay? You have more important things to worry about. Find that artifact. The future security of the United States depends on it.

“Okay. And, ah, John, try to kill fewer people, all right? Maybe keep it down to one or two a day. There's a limit to what I can swing with the British Government, you know?

“I know they don't have a prison that can hold you, but see, John, if it gets to that stage it's just going to get messy. Now play nice, and I'll have another medal for you when you get home.

“Oh, god, the President's woken up. I'll have to go and increase his medication. Remember what I said, John. Play nice. They think we're their allies. Let's not jeopardise that, huh?

“Jeopardise. It means—ah, never mind. Call me when you have the artifact. 'Bye, John.”