

BOOK 1 IN THE GLOWER CHRONICLES

Caught
IN THE
Flow

EVA CHASE

1

I saw my first Glower when I was seven years old.

I should have been in school, but late that morning Mom picked me up in the silver Mustang after a quick word with the attendance secretary. “We’re going to give your dad a little surprise, Avery,” she told me with a swish of her chestnut hair. “Bring him lunch and our love.”

Even if I didn’t have the life experience to put the pieces completely together, I knew she was hoping for more than that. I knew Dad had been home less and less the last few months, and that when he was around, he moved through the house as if underwater, weighed down by an ocean of gloom. No hugs, no low rumble of a laugh, no stealthy tickle attacks. I knew Mom was worried about him and that she looked more tense than playful as her slender hand gripped the gearshift. I think I knew, without being able to put words to it, that this wasn’t so much about giving as asking. Asking Dad to remember us. To remember that we loved him. To remember that he loved us back.

I sat next to Mom in the front seat—where I was only allowed to sit under special circumstances, which I guessed this qualified as—as we cruised past palm trees and white stucco walls toward the building that held Dad’s current studio space. It was summer, and as hot as L.A. gets, but she left the top down. Scorching wind charged with the smell of baked asphalt and mesquite smoke whipped through our hair and licked away my sweat. I felt relieved when Mom turned the wheel to take us into the little parking lot around back of the reclaimed warehouse. Dad and air conditioning waited on the other side of the dun brick walls.

I think for a moment I believed Mom might have found some magic trick to turn what was happening to our family around. Stepping out onto the concrete in that teal sheath dress with her chin held high, she looked as if she could conquer kings.

The warehouse building had great acoustics and crappy security. Someone had propped open the back door with a cinder block. Mom clutched the bag of take-out Vietnamese subs with one hand and my fingers with the other, and we strode down the long gray hall, cool air washing over us with a distant hum and a whiff of mildew. The heels of Mom’s pumps tapped out a determined beat.

Grigory, the guy Dad called his “personal bouncer,” was stationed at the far end, outside the biggest studio room. He looked characteristically grim. The left corner of his mouth twitched slightly upward when he saw us. That was the closest I ever saw to a smile when he was on duty. Off... He could throw back a six-pack and whoop so loud it shook the next-door neighbor’s windows.

“So he’s here,” Mom said, sounding reassured, as if she’d been afraid he might not be.

“Just him, Mrs. Harmen,” Grigory said, giving her a respectful dip of his head. Mom had told him to call her Cath about a hundred times, but he never did when he was on the job. “He told the guys not to come in today, said he wanted to work through some riffs on his own.”

“Well, let’s see if he’s ready for a break and a bit of company,” Mom said with a strained grin.

Grigory stepped aside so we could go in. The entry way led through the control room with its consoles and monitors—dark, empty, with such a feeling of abandonment it sent a prickle down my spine—and into the big live room that had several isolation booths sectioned off along the side walls. I spotted the band’s drum kit past the open door of the closest booth and couldn’t resist stepping inside to run my fingers over the acrylic glass shells. I liked the feel of the lacquered mahogany kit Dad kept at home better, but my hands still itched to grasp the sticks and rap out a quick beat.

“Avery,” Mom said, drawing my attention back. She was craning her neck. The same question crossed my mind that must have been running through hers: where was Dad?

I rejoined her, and we walked a circuit of the room, Mom peering through the little windows above my head on the doors. I counted them, as if the number of the booth would tell me something.

It was at the fourth, near the back of the room, when a strangled, alien noise wrenched from Mom’s throat. The bag of subs fell from her hand as she jerked at the door handle.

The door swung open. When I remember that moment now, it glides in slow motion, gradually revealing a pair of booted feet, sprawled legs in rumpled jeans, untucked tee, jawline grizzly with a three-day-old shadow. But probably it happened much faster

than that.

My dad was slumped in the corner. Rubber band around his bicep. Syringe on the floor an inch from his limp fingers. My voice caught in my throat, squeezed into a ball, and burst out in a shriek.

“Daddy!”

Then I saw, as if I’d need to blink to clear my vision before the figure would come into focus, that Grigory had been wrong. Dad wasn’t alone. A woman was crouched beside him. Long pale hair, slim pale limbs, all shimmering as if lit from within. Her mouth was pressed to Dad’s chest, lips parted, with a rasp like the drawing in of a deep breath. That spot on his chest was shimmering too, and as it flared brighter, the woman flared with it. The angles of her face, of her body, flickered and blurred. For an instant she looked like a he. Then her features seemed to smooth until she had no sex at all. Until she was nothing more than a skeleton of light.

My legs had frozen with panic, but Mom moved. She threw herself at the glowing woman-man-thing with a howl and swinging fists. The thing looked up at her, searing irises in a glowing oval of a face. I don’t remember it having a mouth, but I swear I could tell it was smiling. That smile haunted me in my nightmares for years afterward.

The glowing thing disappeared a second before Mom fell on it, crackling away into the air like an electric shock. Mom threw herself down beside Dad. “Roy,” she said, over and over. “Roy.” Gripping the sides of his face, sobbing between each repetition of his name.

His head lolled in her grasp. His eyes didn’t gleam. There was no light in them at all, only filmy blue irises and vacant pupils that burned into my memory as my own eyes spilled over with

tears.

That was the day I learned that artistic passion could consume a person, literally.

2

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I said.

My Tether Society supervisor glanced over at me as we waited for the elevator he’d just summoned. He was probably thinking it was a little late to be bringing up doubts. He couldn’t have known this one had been circling through my head ever since he’d handed me my new client file: Colin Ryder, singer-songwriter-rocker, on the verge of international stardom at the tender age of 19.

It *was* a little late to suggest turning back. We were already standing in the lobby of one of L.A.’s most exclusive condo buildings, cool air with a hint of jasmine wafting around us. Two security guys were eyeing us from across the marble floor even though we’d shown our IDs and confirmed we were on the approved visitor list. But Sterling obviously knew this was an especially dicey situation, or he wouldn’t have been here. Normally I’d have come to meet a new client on my own.

“Why are you concerned?” he asked, tilting his head to the left the way he always did when contemplating a problem. His

dark brown eyes, nearly the same shade as his acne-scarred skin, considered me calmly. Thoughtfully. “Because you knew each other?”

I shook my bangs from my eyes, wishing I’d kept the doubt inside me the way I’d managed to up until now. I didn’t want to be a problem. The fact was, though, that Ryder was only my second official client since completing training, and all evidence suggested he was going to be a tough one.

“No,” I said. “There’s no way he’ll even remember me. But if he wouldn’t play nice with the last two people you assigned to him, why would he listen to me?”

The door slid open and we stepped into the elevator. Sterling hit the button for the upper penthouse. I wriggled my toes in my ballet flats, looking at the little indents the wheels of my suitcase had made in the pile. Real velvet, if I wasn’t mistaken. Very posh indeed.

“It took those two trial runs to narrow down Mr. Ryder’s particular... issue,” Sterling said, with one of the famous meaningful pauses my best friend and fellow Society member Fee had been known to imitate behind his back. “He seems to have a particular allergy to authority figures. Placing him with someone his own age, someone he can see more as a... supporter, rather than a superior, we think will allow us to maintain the necessary presence in his life. At least until you can arrange a more permanent solution.”

Herbal “supplements”? An earring or watch embedded with malachite? A tattoo that included just the right construction of lines and shapes? The end goal of every Tether Society assignment was to introduce a personalized method of warding off Glowers that would allow the client more independence, which benefited both them and us since it freed us to help more

of those who needed it. There were a variety of ways to accomplish that independent warding. But given Ryder's resistance to the idea that he might need any sort of help at all, I had trouble believing I was going to talk him into a permanent lifestyle change or regular fashion statement any time soon. Especially when one of the Society's other most unshakeable guidelines was that we didn't try to explain to the client *why* that change was necessary. Which, fair enough—I wouldn't have believed in demons slipping into our plane of existence to suck the life energy out of creative talents if I hadn't been able to see it happening with my own eyes. A client who thought you were *crazy definitely* wasn't going to listen to you.

Sterling was studying me again. I dragged in a breath and realized I'd balled my hands in the skirt of my purple-and-green striped sundress. I let go, smoothing it down.

"You've done well with your past placements," Sterling added. "I'm sure you can handle Mr. Ryder."

He didn't sound sure. He sounded resigned. My stomach twisted with the sinking feeling I'd had since I read about the two Tethers who had already failed with Ryder in the last six months.

I wasn't a shiny new strategy. I was a last ditch effort.

Well, I was here now. I had to see this through. Fee and Mateo were the only other Tethers under twenty-five, and they were enmeshed with other clients. The Society needed me to make this work.

The elevator bumped to a halt. When we stepped out, there was only one door in front of us: a thick cherry wood slab at the other end of an entry hall. Sterling rapped his knuckles against it. A slim, forty-ish woman jerked it open before his hand had dropped back to his side.

Ryder's manager, Marissa Fitch. Her photo had been in the

file.

“Good,” she say by way of greeting, the faint crows feet at the corners of her blue eyes—way too vibrant, had to be contacts—crinkling when her gaze fell on me. I’d spent enough time in Tinseltown to read the signs of cosmetic work left on her skin: Botox stiffness in the cheeks, red tint of dermabrasion around her mouth, not quite hidden under the foundation powdered all over her face. I wouldn’t be surprised to find those crows feet gone if I saw her again a month from now. In an industry that sold image as its bread and butter, even the people behind the scenes competed to set a certain standard.

“So this is the replacement?” Fitch said as she motioned us in. Her skeptical tone and her wording directed the comment solely at Sterling, as if I were nothing more than a new fridge or faucet. I decided not to be offended. Checking out the sights held more appeal anyway.

Beyond the stainless steel and ebony shine of the kitchen and the semi-circle of white leather sofas beside it, floor to ceiling windows offered a view of the city toward the glittering water of the ocean. The sliding doors past the eight-seater dining table stood open, letting in a tickle of the warm autumn breeze laced with a tang of salt. The doors led out onto a terrace where padded loungers circled a small private pool.

Nice. Extravagant, but extravagances I could appreciate. My previous two live-in assignments—one in training, and my first official one—hadn’t been with clients this flamboyant.

My gaze drifted from the windows to the electric guitar leaning against one of the sofas. A Fender Stratocaster, also *nice*. An acoustic I couldn’t determine the make of sat half-hidden on one of the dining room chairs. A couple amps were stacked near one of the inner doors. I wondered if Ryder had a studio set up

right here.

A shiver of excitement raced through me at the thought, and then my stomach clenched all over again. There was another reason I'd been hesitant to take this job. Ryder would be the first musician I'd worked with. And not only that, he was a rocker like Dad. Like I'd once imagined for myself. I was going to be surrounded by reminders of that every day for who knew how long, living here.

"...just didn't realize quite how *young*," Fitch was saying to Sterling when I tuned back in to their conversation.

I caught her eyes before her gaze could dart away from me. "I'm nineteen," I said. "Old enough to do everything but drink, which I wouldn't be doing on the job anyway. The last guy in here was thirty-five. How well did that work out?"

Fitch's lips pursed. We both knew it had "worked out" with Ryder upping his antics until he'd ended up in the hospital getting his scalp stitched up after a drunken brawl in a prime Hollywood nightclub two weeks ago. I'd bet she'd rather not have to go through the song and dance of trying to downplay another incident like that to the tabloids.

"Miss Harmen is fully trained and very capable, I assure you," Sterling said. "I think you'll find she provides more of a... moderating influence, rather than aggravating."

"I should hope so," Fitch said. "That's what you were hired for. If Colin doesn't get his act together soon and get on with recording that album, the label's going to cancel his contract and none of us will get paid."

As if the biggest thing at stake here was a paycheck. Fitch had no idea the Tether Society offered any service beyond keeping troublesome or sensitive clients on track and steering them away from non-demonic dangers, but she still could have placed a few

items ahead of her commission on her list of priorities. Ryder's future career? His health? His life?

A giggle carried out of the hallway that branched off from the living room. Fitch stiffened, her head jerking around. A young woman with sun-bleached hair and nothing but a short silk robe covering her hourglass figure ambled into view. She was grinning at someone behind her, so she didn't see us until that someone caught up, catching her by the waist. Then she glanced up and yelped in surprise.

"Colin," Fitch said dryly. "I did mention we had a meeting at noon."

Colin Ryder eyed her over the blonde's shoulder, and then shifted his heavy-lidded gaze to Sterling and me. He had been smiling before, but now his full lips tensed into a flat line. The shaggy black hair that had fallen into his amber eyes did nothing to hide the resentment in that stare, like a knife on my skin.

He straightened up, the lean muscles in his bare shoulders and chest flexing as he let go of his companion. *He* was wearing nothing but bright red boxers. And oh, the body he had on display was even more fine than his publicity shots had suggested. My skin warmed, and I yanked my attention up from the band of fabric just below his taut stomach to his face. Which was pretty fine too, I had to admit, even looking as pissed off as he did right now.

"Wait for me back there," Ryder said to the blonde, swatting her rear, and she darted out of view the way she'd come. He glanced around, picked a pair of rumpled jeans off the floor near the wall, and stepped into them, not seeming to mind that he had an audience. He stalked the rest of the way to the kitchen island on bare feet. He was looking only at me now. A puzzled line had formed on his brow.

The warmth tingling over my skin prickled up my neck. Maybe he did recognize me. I'd assumed he wouldn't, given that I'd only spent one semester at the Rushfield Academy for the Performing Arts and that had been more than five years ago. I'd hardly been a focus of attention while I *was* there. Mom had enrolled me under her maiden name to try to avoid any talk about Dad—mainly from the teachers, since no one in my generation thought much about Roy Harmen, twice platinum blues rocker, dead before they'd graduated from kiddie pop. The only thing remotely striking about my looks was my honey-brown hair, which I'd kept short and blunt cut back then, a style that made me wince when I looked at old photos.

Colin Ryder, on the other hand, had made a splash from the start. He'd smuggled a guitar into the cafeteria in the first week of classes to serenade some girl who'd caught his eye, and after that display of his wicked fingerpicking and his low rich voice with just the right hint of a rasp, everyone had wanted to team up with him for group work. His smooth tan skin and bright eyes hadn't hurt his popularity either. He hadn't been this muscular at fourteen, though, I found myself noting. He must be working out a lot.

Crap. I was checking him out again. Thankfully he wasn't eyeing me anymore.

"*This* is my new babysitter?" he said, leaning an arm on the polished granite countertop of the island and raising his eyebrows at his manager. "She looks like she'd do better sticking with elementary school kids."

This time it was annoyance that prickled up my neck, but Sterling chose to ignore the comment. "Mr. Ryder, this is Avery Harmen. Avery, Colin Ryder. She'll be the Tether Society advisor assigned to you for the remaining duration of our agreement."

I squared my shoulders and offered my hand across the countertop. Ryder refused to return the gesture, his gaze still fixed on Fitch. I drew my arm back. Well, if that was how he wanted to play this...

"I heard you found advisors older than you to be too... intimidating," I said, making use of a Sterling-esque pause with a smile and an eyebrow arch of my own. "I trust you won't have the same issue with me."

Provoking him was a gamble, but it seemed to work. At least I got a blink in my direction, as if he'd suddenly remembered I was an actual person and not a piece of gear he was discussing with the others.

"I didn't hire you," he said, and turned back to Fitch. "Why can't we just—"

"You signed the agreement too," Fitch said, cutting him off. "It's in your contract with Spright Records. You renege on that and all this"—she waved her hand to the expanse of the penthouse—"goes away in a flash. We've been over this, Colin."

"I don't need someone watching over my shoulder," Ryder said with a scowl. "I take care of myself. They knew what they were getting when they signed me."

"Well, I think they did expect they'd be getting an actual album out of you," Fitch remarked.

They stared each other down for a moment. Ryder sighed and looked away, his jaw tightening.

"Don't think of Avery as a chaperone," Sterling said in the quiet tone that was his most persuasive. "She's here to assist you—to make sure you're in the best possible position to make the best possible music."

"Fine. She stays in the same room as the others? The cleaner changed the sheets." Ryder snapped his fingers at me. "Assistant

Avery. There's beer in the fridge. Grab two bottles and bring them to me and my friend, last door down the hall. Pronto."

He sauntered off, passing the fridge as he went.

Fitch rolled her eyes heavenward. "Your room is the first down the hall," she said. "It's very nice. Is that all you brought?"

I prodded my single carry-on sized suitcase with my toe. "I've found it's easiest to start light and then grab anything else I need once I have the lay of the land," I said. "Why don't I get Mr. Ryder and his 'friend' their beverages first? Got to keep the client happy."

As I moved, Sterling touched my arm, leaning close. "You can do this," he murmured. "Tether him."

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