

WEAVER'S WEB

Bets Davies

CHAPTER ONE

Darkness had eaten away the day to a thick night, filled with the scent of the Bay Area's hot fall that always made Weaver homesick for the Ozarks for the simple reason it smelled nothing the same. Her ass ached from sitting on the concrete, but any closer to Gaylord's coffee shop and Mez and she wouldn't be allowed to smoke. And Weaver needed to smoke. She hadn't needed to smoke for four months, but there was no mistaking the fact that at exactly 11:07 a.m.—when the third hour bell rang—Weaver had needed to smoke.

Mez opened her mouth and held up a finger. Then she closed her full, drooping mouth. She set her fingers to her folded eyelids. Whenever someone asked what race the short, oak leaves-burnished Mez was, she answered, "indigenous." Now she sighed. "Which Jessica? Is she one of mine?"

Weaver stared at a splash of scarlet flowers cascading down a yellow house farther up the block. She put her arms around I See's familiar, warm bulk. The dog licked Weaver's nose. "White Jessica. The one that looks like she thinks she's Julia Stiles in *Save the Last Dance*." That felt like an unfair description, but she didn't want to use Jessica's last name. She didn't like that she confided White Jessica's secrets to Mez at all, but after the day Weaver had had, she'd had to tell someone. Besides, being White was Jessica's most salient quality at Mez and Weaver's high school. Weaver was one of the few White teachers.

"So." Mez lit another cigarette. "To recap, today you did a bathroom check and Julia Stiles Jessica was sitting on the bathroom floor—and I would have to be in dire shape to go into that bathroom, much less sit on the floor—sobbing hysterically."

Weaver nodded and held out her hand for another cigarette.

"Instead of writing her a note to the counselor—I know they are worthless—you sit beside her—again, dire—and listen to her life for the rest of the day, bumming cigarettes—"

"I did get her to stop crying." Weaver strove for the best of it. "I did call on my cell to let the front desk know I had a personal emergency and would need a sub. I did get her to call the detective in charge of her case."

Across the street, a Jack Russell yanked on a leash so hard his front feet were off the ground as he barked at I See. I See just perked his red ears that flopped around his white, smooth skull, which most people found to look too much like a wolf's. This man, for instance, dragged his dog for all he was worth.

"Well." Mez blew a smoke ring. "We've been teachers—what—virtually three years? A little more counting student teaching. I've handled gangs, murdered or o.d.ed students, drug problems, domestic abuse, rape—hit man is new."

"She's terrified." Weaver sucked smoke and wrenched into coughing as she smoked all the way into the filter. When she stopped hacking and streaming tears, she clutched I See tighter. "Her father is rich. He belongs to a big law firm. She used to go to private school in S.F. Her mother put up with being beaten. But when she found out he molested Jessica's little sister, mom went straight to the hospital, filed a police report, and slapped a restraining order and divorce papers on him. She's doing

everything right, but when he was on bail he violated the restraining order and beat the mom senseless. If Jessica hadn't called 911, she thinks her mother would be dead. He always threatened to kill them.

"Jessica isn't even her real name. Her mom moved over the bay and changed everything she could, but she won't leave the area until she's testified in court and gotten her divorce. Yesterday Jessica answered the phone to death threats from a male voice she didn't recognize." She gulped before she started to cry and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. "Sorry. I must have told you all that a hundred times by now. Why can't I be jaded like the rest of our staff? Why do I keep caring?"

Mez wrapped her arms around Weaver. "Because you are a good teacher. You are a good person. You can tell me a thousand times if you want to. That's why we are besties."

Weaver managed half a laugh. "I won't. I can't stand going over it again."

Mez petted Weaver's hair. "Then aren't your students excited your brother is starring in the blockbuster *Thicker Than Blood*?"

Weaver took a deep breath and yanked her attention to the new subject, even though her big brother as a subject had its own pitfalls. "I can't believe Sam is starring as noble vampire in a movie made from a video game. I didn't tell my students."

"Hey." Mez coughed into laughter, nearly choked, and finally got herself under control. "He's getting good reviews. In fact he's been lauded as the only thing that saves the movie."

"At least he doesn't sparkle in sunlight." Weaver kept her disgust with the movie so that she didn't have to think about why her older brother had only called her about the role the day the publicity hit the streets. She bit her tongue so hard it bled to keep the words back, but they emerged anyway. "He didn't call Alice and Cobweb."

"Weaver, honey," Mez set a hand to Weaver's back, but then removed it, "I know I have said this before, so don't jump down my throat, but I don't think those years, growing up on the Land—a bunch of lesbian homesteads—could be as idyllic for him as they were for you. You know he loves you and your mothers but—"

"I know, I know—and that the years after he left couldn't have been easy for him, either, wherever he was. So my therapist tells me, thank you very much." The current Weaver, sitting on the ground after a day of teaching kids who had a lost look in their eyes she sometimes was afraid Sam might have had—this Weaver understood. But the deserted twelve-year-old Weaver still felt betrayed. Weaver punched Mez. "But you are my friend and should be threatening to beat him up." She punched Mez again, gentler this time. "I already bought us tickets to Thursday's midnight showing. Want to show up in costume?"

Mez laughed. Weaver was about to laugh when her scalp and the nape of her neck crawled over in vulnerability. I See's head whipped about. For the first time in her life, Weaver felt I See's hackles rise. Mez made a series of bizarre gurgling noises like a mating toad that Weaver eventually figured out were laughs. Weaver followed both their gazes.

A fine boned Chinese kid sat on his skateboard, smoking a cigarette. His hair had been tortured into rock hard pyramids. He wore a beat up Bella Lugosi hoodie. His skin, a porcelain shade of cream, shifted a fraction, and he turned. Eyeliner emphasized rather than understated his folded lids. He wore black contacts, the supposed iris threaded through with gold flecks. He smiled to reveal thick, short fangs. He waved. Mez waved.

Weaver poked Mez in the ribs. "Quit flirting with the poser jail bait. Is he in one of your classes? Honestly, what the hell were his parents thinking, letting him get porcelain fangs?"

“No, I’ve never seen him.” Mez stretched and stood. “I think he is older than he looks. And vamp culture is big, Weaver. You should know that.” She held a hand down to Weaver. “I proclaim the drinking way too much coffee and eating weird pastries portion of this evening to be finished.”

“Oh?” Weaver let Mez give her a hand up. Mez might be near a foot shorter than Weaver, but Mez cage fought for fun. Weaver stretched as well, and scratched the now placid I See’s ears to keep him from bumping her breasts with his nose for attention. “What portion of the evening are we at now?”

“Tequila.”

“So, the puking part.”

“Fine. If you want to be a baby you can have wine.”

“Those are our only options?”

“Absolutely.”

“Great.” Weaver scrubbed her liquid wax styled hair. It stuck. “I so love looking hung over in front of my students. I’m in the lot.” Weaver hooked her thumb.

“I’m up by Fenton’s Creamery.” Mez walked backwards in the other direction. “See you at home.”

Despite the fact she stood in the bright light of Gaylord’s windows. Despite the fact she just had a well-lit block to walk to her car and she was pretty sure I See could handle a Saber-toothed Tiger by himself, Weaver just watched as the night swallowed her friend. It was a darkness capable of picking Mez up and shaking her by the back of the neck at any moment. Weaver looked over at the Edward-want-to-be, but he and his skateboard were gone.

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Jamie skated his board along the side of the bench, lost contact with it long enough to flip it mid air, and landed to coast across the small expanse of concrete behind the large white house on Mills College campus. The kids he’d seen doing this had made it look harder, but Jamie had better reflexes. He’d already eaten, so he just had to wait for Jiao to get back—she’d gone off to explore the scent of some dogs. By now Mez must have convinced Weaver to go back to their small home, not far from here. Then the circus could begin. His anticipation and curiosity surprised him.

He flipped the board up on one end and then put his foot up on the other. He’d taken several spinning steps that way when he felt Jiao nearing. He wrinkled his brows. Something followed her. The follower smelled the way silver tasted, with a liberal application of Happy by Clinique overlying everything else. Recognition hit.

Jiao loped into the light. Jamie knelt to cup her muzzle while he figured out how to play this. For now, as just another wannabe. He looked up and smiled a few moments before Weaver entered the light.

She had hiked her skirt and carried her yellow shoes as she skidded to a halt. Her rose embroidered tights were more runs than anything else. Her words flung from her mouth before she stopped moving. “What the hell do you think you are doing, letting your dog run loose like that—” She shook a shoe at him as she hopped to get the other one on. He stood and opened his mouth. She knelt. “He could have been—” she checked under Jiao “—she—”

Her face went slack as she got a better look at Jiao. She took a deep breath.

“Please?” He knelt again to look her in the face. He’d only had anything like the conversation he needed to sit her down for once, and he had been on the other side that time. “This isn’t how we were supposed to meet but—”

“Wolf!” Weaver sprang to her feet.

He grabbed her calf before she ran. She didn’t run. She clenched her fists in Jiao’s thick fur. Jamie was stuck holding her calf. Rather pleasant calf, really. He let go with a speed that he hoped left her wondering if he had touched her in the first place.

“That’s it.” Weaver’s melodic alto imbued with eldritch power while becoming softer. “Look, this is a wolf, vamp boy. Not even a hybrid. She is not domesticated. She is a wild animal. I don’t know what pretend games you like to play, boy, but—”

“You misunderstand.” He got out a whole sentence before her voice struck again.

“What I understand is that you are trying to keep a being that will be hurt—and could possibly hurt you—as a fashion accessory.” The last words crooned from her lips. A slip of silver flashed through her eyes. She stood toe to toe with him—and with three inch heels that was an inch shy from half a foot above him.

He grinned. His body suffused with her energy challenging his. When she pulled an iPhone from her person, as an experiment, he put a touch of a command into his voice. “What are you doing with that phone?”

She glanced into her hand. “I am going—” she lit the phone up “—to call—” tap, tap “ —the poli—”

Jamie had the remains of the iPhone in his hand. It was now iBits. Her answer had surprised him, and he didn’t like any attention from the human world that he hadn’t already planned. Staring at metaphors of apps drizzling between his fingers, she was silent, and so still the universe must revolve around her. He had no idea what she saw. The hand holding her key ring levitated almost to touch his face. He forgot, and breathed into her hand.

Then she pepper sprayed him. He could make a last ditch effort of looking human, and cough and wipe his eyes. Too late. She stiffened muscle by muscle, as all he could manage was a shrug for her. He found himself feeling sorry for her.

Now her eyes stuck behind him. He didn’t have to turn to know what she saw. A dark glass window, and her holding her pepper spray in front of thin air. She took a step backwards. Then she tried the old turn-the-forearms-into-a-cross shtick. He didn’t mean to, but he busted out laughing. He couldn’t stop. Her rapid changes in fighting him, rather than running or pleading, were endearing. However, he shook his head. The old arm-cross would be pushing it even if she was a Christian, or had belief in that symbol, but she had neither.

What she did have was good aim and very pointed shoes. Pain rammed into his groin. He retched blood over himself as he crashed to the cement. From his horizontal level, he could see she’d kicked off both shoes in order to run. Jiao leapt to cut her off, but Jamie managed to wave Jiao to stay. He doubted Jiao could catch Weaver, anyway.

He’d wanted to know how meeting Weaver would go, and it had gone badly. He should have kept to the plan and gone to Mez and Weaver’s house. He should have laid it out slowly in a controlled environment. Right. He would change clothes while Mez calmed Weaver down. Then, he would begin this contract the proper way.

As soon as he could stand.

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Weaver gunned her Jeep, dodged a parked car, and ran over the lawn to scrape as close to the cement front porch as possible. Crawling over I See to open the passenger door, she landed them in a tangle that slammed her head into the cement. Still swallowing flowering sparks through her vision, she half fell through the front door. I See stepped delicately over her.

She clawed upwards and locked all three locks, and then staggered for the back door when Mez caught her. “Honey, what’s wrong?” Mez set her on the couch.

Weaver opened her mouth, but her whole being raved with fear. She struggled against Mez’s arms. “Back.” She managed. “Back door.”

“Is locked. The windows are barred. You are perfectly safe.” Mez shook her. “You are in shock. Sit. Can I count on you to sit?”

Weaver stuttered a nod, but as soon as Mez walked into the kitchen, Weaver wavered to her dizzy feet. She was digging through her closet when Mez found her.

“Christ, girl, am I going to have to tie you down?” She ripped Weaver away, but not before Weaver could grab her gun and bow cases.

Weaver thumped to the bed. Her breathing still jagged all over the place, but her muscles took on an odd, liquid calm. I See jumped on the bed and, with long, serious strokes, licked her face. Now that fear mixed with shock, Weaver’s reality crackled with fissures. “Vampire.” She near vomited the word.

She pushed I See away to see Mez’s unrelentingly still features.

“Vampire.” Weaver clogged her throat with the word again. “We need crosses. Stakes. Did you eat all the garlic? Goddess, I—”

“Calm down.” Mez held out a pill and a glass of wine. “Breathe.”

Weaver popped the pill in her mouth with a swig of wine. “What did I take?”

“Xanax.” Mez massaged Weaver’s shoulders. “I’m hoping it will make it a little easier when I explain.”

“Shave and a haircut / Two bits” rapped on the front door.

Mez stood.

Weaver stood as well, grabbing her bow. “Mez—no!”

“Weaver, trust me.” Mez turned on Weaver in the living room and shoved her so hard she toppled backwards in their defunct recliner.

Mez picked up the bow and walked to the front door. She took a brief glance out the window, undid all three locks, and opened the door. Weaver struggled to rise from the engulfing chair. The vampire stood at the door, one hand stuffed in a plain black hoodie, wolf beside him. He held her yellow shoes.

“Mez! That’s him! The vampire!”

As she leaned against the doorframe, Mez ignored Weaver’s shout. “We’re blown?”

Weaver struggled to pull all the parts of her brain together at Mez’s slick danger. With a quick smile, the vampire ducked his head and kicked the cement. “Yes. Both. My partner is headed for L.A.”

Mez punched the doorframe so hard it splintered. She paced in a circle and then turned back to the vampire.

Weaver finally got out of the chair and zipped to Mez's side. "He can't come in. Don't invite him in."

The vampire laughed. "You will want me in, babe. I'm contracted."

Mez's sigh shook her frame. She grabbed Weaver's hand in hers. "We're in trouble, sweetheart, and he's here to help." She turned back to the vampire. "Jamie, you are invited."

"Thanks." Jamie sidled by Mez. His wolf followed.

As he brushed by her, Weaver's lungs filled with a complicated scent of sandalwood, vanilla, citrus, and murky death. I See sniffed him and the wolf, but wagged his tail. That was enough for Weaver. If I See approved, she trusted them. Actually, it wasn't enough, but it was a start. She crashed onto the couch and stuck her head in her hands. The world felt distant and her brain numb. Either shock, Xanax, or both had taken their full effect. "All right. You are a vampire. Mez knows you. But you are going to have to bring me up to speed."

"Of course." Jamie turned around the small living room and then rooted to the spot. "Will someone please remove the evil eye hanging?"

"Of course." Mez grabbed the blue glass eye on its tapestry and stuffed it into the end table drawer.

With a weak laugh, Weaver raised her head. "You can't handle a souvenir my brother sent me from Lebanon, but crosses don't bug you?"

Jamie flashed her a soft smile. "For whatever reason, you believe that pendant can protect you. You don't believe in crosses, and even you knew the arm thing was weak." He held out her shoes to her. She didn't take them.

"Jamie is affected by any object a person has imbued with spiritual belief. How are you hanging in there, kid?" Mez grabbed the shoes and sat next to Weaver.

Weaver traced a smile. "Thinking I have to start believing in crosses—and a bunch of other things besides. And that you still haven't explained 'blown'."

The wolf put her front paws up on I See's tall shoulders and opened her mouth in a play bite. I See rolled over on his back and kicked his legs.

"Blown." Mez put her head on Weaver's shoulder. "I told you not to give blood."

"Gentle, Mez." Jamie sat on Weaver's other side. "We need to start somewhat earlier."

Weaver's first reaction was to recoil, but his careful voice—a swirl of accents and years maneuvered around teeth—soothed her. "Please, what is going on—from the beginning?"

Mez scrubbed her face. "We may not have time for the very beginning. You and your brother are in danger. I am your Guardian, so I knew Jamie had been contracted to protect you."

Of all the things Weaver knew she should be feeling, betrayal slammed her heart. As she stood, she knocked Mez away. "You are my best friend. You were supposed to be my best friend. I love you. I tell you everything. A Guardian? I'm a job?" Weaver managed a wobbly stalk across the room. Tears stuffed her nose and clogged her mascara.

Mez came after her, arms out. "Yes. At first you were a job. A job I didn't even want. Then I met you, and you had a sense of whimsy I'd never seen, and—and then I only wanted to protect you because you were my best friend, and I love you."

It wasn't enough, but it was all Weaver had, so she let Mez fold her in a hug. "Promise you won't lie again." She hiccupped, even though she knew it was an impossible request.

Jamie cleared his throat. "Actually—"

“Why can’t you leave it alone?” Mez rounded on Jamie. “Fine. It may become—apparent that I am one of the People—like Jamie—meaning not human.”

Weaver waited. Once reality had been smashed, she didn’t have it in her to pitch a fit. They were trying to help her, after all. Plus—Xanax.

“I’m—to put it in English—a jaguar guardian spirit.” Mez reached out to Weaver. “Our history begins sometime around the Olmec civilization. I’m not thirty-one. I’m eighty-three.”

Weaver nodded. She sank cross-legged to the floor. She experimented with a sentence she could already answer. “So I’m the only human here.”

Mez just breathed. Jamie didn’t even do that.

Pulling her legs to her chest, Weaver sorted through alienation and validation. “I don’t have a rare genetic disorder. Sam doesn’t have a rare genetic disorder. We are sidhe.”

“What?” Jamie coughed.

“Sidhe. I’m sidhe. The Fair Folk. Those who live in mounds in Summerland. The Wild Hunt. Perhaps a form of elves. The children of Lilith, Adam’s first wife.” All the scattered pieces of her reality were finding each other, sticking together, reforming.

“Huh.” Jamie laughed. “That was easier than I thought.”

Mez smiled and, with one toe, poked Weaver. “The girl does love her mythology. Sidhe would not use the term elves. That stuff about Lilith was made up relatively recently.”

Weaver held out one pale hand to the light. A gossamer shimmer ran through it. “If I touch iron I get blisters. I don’t even like touching steel. I’m tall. Running water gives me the wiggins. This creepy lobeless thing I have going on with my ears does make them look pointy.” She fingered an ear she had pierced through the cartilage anyway. “This hair—” she ran her hand through the spiky mop—“must be true black. And my eyes—” she stuck a finger to her eye and pulled out a brown contact to expose stormy gray lashed with silver—“are not mutants. Plus—I See—he’s my age. That’s a twenty-five year old big dog with white fur, red ears, and green eyes. Sam—is he—” hours ago she had been hating him. Now she could feel him in L.A., happy and proud for perhaps the first time in his life. “He—”

“Has a Guardian and a dog of his own, and my partner is coming for him.” Jamie slid down and kned across the carpet to pick up her hand in his room temperature one. “That is our next step. We join them in L.A.—a stronger force together. Then—it is unclear.”

“Cobweb! Alice!” Weaver crushed his hand.

“Janet has been instructed to ask them to stay within the protective circle of stones.” Jamie shrugged. “Janet isn’t a New Age druid. She’s an actual druid.”

Weaver smiled. “Sam and I used to pretend that big circle of boulders was Stonehenge.” Then her smile dropped. “How much—”

“Cobweb and Alice know it all.” Mez glanced at the clock. “They have from the beginning. Jamie—are you good?”

“Huh.” Her mothers’ overprotection, their refusal to help Sam find their birth parents—“those sneaky little bitches.”

“Hm?” He tapped a finger on Weaver’s hand. “I’ll be fine for tonight. My truck is parked close. We pack up and head to the Sponsor for the Bay Area to gain safe passage.”

Weaver mouthed, “what do I pack? What do I say?”

“Whatever you like.” Jamie shrugged. “Pack as if you are dying tomorrow, because this life is over. I drive a semi, so there’s no space issue.”

Weaver took a deep breath. She asked no more questions. She couldn't stand the answers. This was it. This was her life. She'd better kick into gear and live it. Just first—she launched to her feet. “Mez, pack for me. I trust you.”

“What are you doing, baby?” Mez stood.

Weaver stalked towards the kitchen. “Assimilating.”