

VENGEANCE

A XANDER WALSH NOVELLA

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Vengeance
A Xander Walsh Novella
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“I liked my secrets where they were—buried deep
within time’s pit, soaking in a pool of madness.”

Xander Walsh

Chapter 1

AISLY PINES' SHADOWS haunted me. Spirits danced around, fluttering with the leaves, begging me to solve life's riddles. But I couldn't. All I could do was stand in the copse and stare at her lifeless body.

One eye greeted me—blue and speckled with red—while the other was sewn shut, surrounded by a sea of purple and black.

I focused on the Svefnthorn carved into both sides of her face. They were identical in length and depth.

Next, I studied the crescent moon engraved on her forehead before following the trail of blood that ran from her torn septum to her lips. My attention shifted to the symbol etched on her chin.

I stepped back and surveyed the scene. Her battered corpse hung before me, her shirt torn open, flesh carved through. Her arms were stretched out beside her, bound at the wrists with ropes. I followed the cords until I reached their end, tied to a tree branch.

The flash of a camera over my shoulder forced my eyes to journey down the rest of her body. Runes danced around her torso, running across her abdomen underneath her breasts. My eyebrows knitted as I stared at the bind rune etched above her belly button before shifting my attention to her blood and dirt stained pant legs. Her bent knees rested on a wooden altar.

Captain Jansen shuffled through the forest, parting the crowd of detectives gathered around the crime scene. "Please tell me you've found something."

"I haven't figured out the eyes—why one is open and the other sewn shut—but her cheeks bear the Svefnthorn, a Norse symbol meaning 'sleep thorn.' The two crossed arrows on her chin represent traveling."

Damon tapped his pen against his notepad. "Any particular place?"

"It depends on your beliefs."

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“Care to elaborate?” Captain Jansen inched closer to the body.

“For Christians, it’s heaven or hell. For everyone else, it varies based on their culture and views of the afterlife.”

“What do you believe?”

A gust of wind swept through, muffling the surrounding chatter. A few evidence unit technicians battled with loose sheets of paper fluttering in the breeze, but I remained entranced by the markings on the altar. Damon cleared his throat, breaking my concentration. I glanced at him and smiled. “I’m not a Christian.”

He chuckled and pointed to her abdomen. “What’s that?”

“A bind rune. It’s for protection.”

Captain Jansen peered over his shoulder. “From what?”

“From evil.”

“Jesus!” He hurried over to Coroner Watts and a group of evidence technicians huddled beneath a maple tree.

More detectives arrived on the scene, among them Smyth, smirking and glancing in my direction.

Damon stepped between us and sighed. “He’s not worth it.”

“I know.” I moved to the right side of the victim, focusing on the rope around her wrists before examining the ground. A piece of broom sedge lay beside the altar’s base. I knelt and signaled for an evidence technician, pointing at it. He retrieved a paper envelope and a pair of forceps from his case and collected the plant.

“Is that significant?” Damon asked.

“It’s used to make brooms and is connected to cleansing, purification, and protection.” My eyebrows knitted as I stepped back and surveyed the victim. “Like a witch’s broom.” I knelt in front of the altar, my eyes drifting from the etchings on the altar to the markings on her flesh. “Brooms symbolize feminine strength, freedom, and defiance.”

I circled around to the back of the body. Her shirt draped over her shoulders, revealing a bloody handprint in the middle of the fabric. “Sweeping is about getting rid of the old. A new beginning.” My eyes traveled down her back, past the altar, and toward the terrain. One set of footprints was embedded in the soil.

Damon stood on the other side, shadowing me. My cautious steps drew everyone’s attention as I turned my gaze to the trees. Broken limbs, leaves, and twigs covered the undergrowth, complicating

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my search.

Other officers and detectives joined us. Captain Jansen and Coroner Watts pushed past the technicians, positioning themselves at the front of the crowd while monitoring my movements.

I rushed to the second tree. There, at the base and nestled in the brush, was a basket containing three apples.

Captain Jansen hurried toward me. "Tell me that means something."

"Nehalennia."

Chapter 2

MY EYES SHOT open as the alarm blared against the sun's rays, forcing their way through the window. I reached for the clock, knocking over an empty glass before turning it off and sinking back into the mattress.

Daylight brought madness. I recited this like a mantra, trying to convince myself to drift back into dreamland, but it didn't work. Instead, my feet caressed the wooden floor, carrying me into the bathroom.

The warm water pelted my skin, awakening the birds chirping outside and the dogs barking beneath my window. A tormented symphony rang throughout the alley as I struggled to wash away death's desires.

Every morning, my father sang a song about the sun chasing the moon and an eagle pulling the darkness away as they flew across the sky. I longed for the lyrics to greet my lips. I mumbled a few lines, but they quickly evaporated in the running water.

As I attempted to get dressed, I glanced at myself in the mirror, wondering how I had survived this long. Nightmares clawed at my flesh nightly, pleading with my soul to reveal its true character.

A sip of orange juice and a bite of yesterday's bagel sent me flying out of my loft, down three flights of stairs, and into the parking lot. I always parked close to the complex; a quick exit was necessary for survival, a lesson my mother instilled in me.

I jumped into my car, revved the engine, and sped out of the lot into ongoing traffic. A couple of horns blasted through the crisp air, but I had no desire to indulge them. We were all in a hurry—a hurry to get to nowhere.

I fiddled with the radio for a few minutes before landing on a station that caught my interest. The morning discussion was heavy; it's not every day you hear about a mass murder. Twenty-two bodies were found beneath a bridge in Paducah—no witnesses, no suspects, just bodies.

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I shook my head in disbelief, but the place I currently called home wasn't any different. Bodies piled up every few days. While I resigned myself to believing I lived in the crime capital of Kentucky, it was oddly comforting to know that other areas of the state were just as fucked up as Birchwood.

Trapped between a school bus and an ambulance, I sat on Maple Drive, clutching my pendant and reciting a prayer. "Baduhenna, cradle me within your womb. Protect me from the enemies standing between your sacred brow and my soul."

The slow crawl of traffic cleared as I turned onto Turner Road, past the fire department and toward the police station. I pulled up next to Damon, who was lingering in front of his car, rummaging through his duffle bag.

He raked his fingers through his hair and smiled as I placed my bag on the hood of his car. "Good morning."

"I see you slept well."

"Jackie and I talked about our issues and decided it's time to get some help. A friend of hers knows a counselor."

"You had a change of heart."

"After the attack, we decided it was better to work through our shit instead of denying that we

have problems.”

“That’s quite mature of you.”

“It is. Now it’s your turn.”

I studied his demeanor as he rocked back and forth on his heels, a crooked smirk dancing across his face. His beady eyes pierced my soul as his lips parted.

“Her name is—”

“No.” I grabbed my bag off the hood of his car and rushed through the front door.

“Are you kidding me? You never go out.”

“Because I’m smart.” People pried. They wrapped their hands around your throat, strangling every secret, every nightmare, every broken promise out of you. I liked my secrets where they were—buried deep within time’s pit, soaking in a pool of madness.

“So I’m stupid?”

“I didn’t say that.” I stepped onto the elevator, squeezing between a delivery guy and an elderly woman with a walker.

Damon followed, cozying up beside me. His eyes stalked me, waiting for me to finish.

“I’m not good with relationships. It’s just not for me.”

“You don’t think you deserve to be happy?”

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“Who said I’m not happy?”

Damon sighed and leaned his head against the elevator wall. “One day, you’re going to have to let someone in.”

The ride to the second floor was long and agonizing. Somewhere between his decision to get counseling and the peace I found in being single, he had earned a degree in psychology.

“The important thing is balance.”

His unsolicited therapy session continued as the door opened. I pushed through the crowd, begging the gods to slam the cold steel door behind me so I could have a moment of peace, but they refused to hear my cries. His hot breath trailed behind me, scalding my flesh as we hurried up the hall and into the office.

Captain Jansen sat at my desk, his dark eyes piercing a sheet of paper as if trying to solve a puzzle. He shook his head before placing it inside the folder and flipping to another page.

Damon placed his bag on his desk, removed his jacket, draped it over the back of his chair, and sat down. “Xander, you look different this morning. Did you do something new with your hair?”

Captain Jansen peered up from the folder. “Funny.” He closed the file and handed it to Damon.

"The victim's name was Christina Winston."

"Why does that name sound familiar?"

"She's the great-granddaughter of Preston Winston, one of the founders of the Winston Winery. He and his family built the first library in Birchwood."

"I was thinking of Winston Estates," I said, setting my duffle bag on the floor. "Isn't that where the first victim of the last case lived?"

"Yes. They own that too. I spoke with her parents this morning. She had a date last night. Clearly, it wasn't a good one."

"Did they say with whom?"

"No." Captain Jansen stood up and looked around the room. "It never ends, does it?"

"Depends on what it is."

His dead eyes fell on me as he pressed his lips together and stormed out of the room.

Damon chuckled. "You're gonna have to stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"It depends...it depends." Damon handed me the file folder.

I flipped through a few pages before landing on her photograph. She had daunting eyes yet an innocent smile spread across her face. Her brown

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hair cascaded over her shoulders. My eyes drifted toward the gold initial necklace hanging from her neck.

“Why her?”

“It was a ritual. She was the offering.” I tossed the file on my desk and reclined in my chair.

“Why her? I don’t know.”

“Do you think it has something to do with her family?”

“Depends.” I laughed as Damon threw his pen at me.

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