



SHARK

AQUATERRESTRIAL TASK FORCE

BAIT

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SHARK BAIT

THE AQUATERRESTRIAL TASK FORCE

BOOK TWO

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SHARK BAIT

This honey badger is no one's bait. Not even if the shark is cute as hell.

Delilah Lovett is considered a little...odd. She's used to it. Not everyone is comfortable around someone who takes care of the dead. Her skills are often in high demand, and she's just been recruited to consult on a job for the Aquaterrestrial Task Force. There's a possible traitor in their midst, and they need her genius to make sure the evidence hasn't been tampered with.

Aiden Reyes doesn't back down from a challenge, which is why he is given a special mission: be a bodyguard to a badass badger who insists she doesn't need one. He figures the difficulties he faces with her will be nothing compared to the threat coming from within his own ranks, the killer who could potentially know the exact locations and missions of every AILE agent.

Meeting Delilah and discovering she's his mate is all the more reason for Aiden to want to find the murderer quickly and take them down. Not only does he need to protect Delilah, but he also needs the case to be solved so he can be with his overly serious, beautiful mate.

CHAPTER
ONE

Poor bastard. Nasty way to go.

Delilah Lovett shook her head, unable to keep out the thoughts. She tried to keep them out before, during, and after finishing her job, but sometimes it was just too much.

She had everything she needed for the Aquaterrestrial Task Force's Scottish investigation and had pieced the victim back together. Whatever happened to him next was up to whichever funeral director the family hired to make him appear almost alive again, to give them a sense of closure.

Though Delilah knew it was going to be a hell of a challenge, with all the teeth marks, not to mention all the permanent discoloration from those suction cup spots.

This wasn't the only body recovered in this state. A number of others had been found, with the unknown killer picking off tourists and locals alike. Men and women, but mostly shifters.

Since the non-shifters were fewer, the working theory was that the non-shifter victims had only been picked off accidentally. Like the young man on her table. He was no shifter. Just a teenager, less than a month away from his twentieth birthday, barely old enough to drink in this country.

His cause of death was logged to be accidental drowning with an overly high blood alcohol level. The story was that he'd become a little *too* drunk and had fallen into the water and drowned. The bad state of his body was explained away by saying that his body had encountered sea creatures after the fact.

It was all half true. He'd been drunk, but he hadn't fallen in. He was dragged in. The marks on his hands and fingers indicated a struggle, a weak one, but they were all the same.

And there were plenty of actual animal marks that had occurred post-mortem. The octopus marks were real enough. But that was only because the killer apparently kept his trophies, where some animals could feast on them.

Originally, AILE speculated that a kraken shifter might have been responsible for the killings, in light of the markings on the victims. Then, the undercover team was attacked by a bunyip. A creature with tentacles, and even suction cups on the ends of its limbs, so they believed the case was closed. The trio who took down the creature was off on well-deserved decompression leave, having thought they solved the case.

They were wrong.

Bodies started showing up again, and based on the setup of the bunyip attack, AILE knew what they were really dealing with.

This was an inside job.

Someone within AILE was the real killer. They'd sent the bunyip to try to kill the undercover team and throw AILE off their scent.

Which was why AILE flew Delilah all the way to Scotland for a second opinion.

Delilah carefully removed her lab coat and surgical gown, to prepare to give her report to AILE team members who were less than patiently waiting for her just outside the viewing room.

They would have their questions, but Delilah was approaching them with caution, keeping a set number of steps back. As far as she was concerned, any one of them could be the killer, and if she got close to exposing them, she could become the next target.

She was out of her element, sent to assist the Aquaterrestrial Task Force, ATTF for short, because they could no longer trust the local agency's coroner. Delilah would have preferred to have one of her Honey Badger Squad members there with her—no one had your back better than a badass badger—but she was the only one Chip wanted to send.

A few agents stood down the hall, waiting for updates but allowing Delilah to brief the director first. Jack Williams, in charge of the specialized water shifter unit, had only one other agent next to him.

The rest of AILE's Scotland counterparts would be at their desks or in the field, doing anything and everything they could to find the killer.

Jack looked like he hadn't slept in a while. Even Delilah had been able to take a catnap on the flight over.

"What do you think?" Jack asked, rubbing his chin, his free hand resting on his hip.

"He was definitely murdered by the same person who got to the others. It's not a random mugging gone wrong or an accident."

Jack nodded. “Are you able to pinpoint anything new, anything the other coroner may not have noticed?”

She had that answer ready. “He has defensive wounds on his fingers, what was left of them, anyway. The killer either kept him alive longer than the rest, maybe playing with him, or the victim managed to hold him off. Either way, the kill wasn’t quick.”

“How could you tell?”

Delilah had tried to ignore the blond male standing behind Jack. Her body was reacting to him in an overly large way. She registered his high level of hotness but tried to focus on the task at hand. She assumed he was a low-tier badge, like the other agents guarding the hall. The fact that Jack was allowing him to speak indicated that he was more important than she’d first guessed.

But all the same, Delilah didn’t appreciate being interrupted.

He’s our mate. Her badger tried to distract her, but she shoved it out of her mind.

“Because there is a difference in the appearance of injuries pre- and post-mortem. While most of the injuries on the other victims occurred post-mortem, this victim had more evidence of hemorrhage and clotting, which means they occurred before death.”

Even saying it out loud brought a shiver to her, but if it needed to be spelled out, then so be it. “There was nothing to swab from what he had left of his fingernails. The young man nearly shredded them all in what I have to assume was an attempt to cling to rocks and get away from the attacker.”

“But it also could be that he landed some blows, scratches, whatever, on the killer,” the blond man mused.

“Exactly.”

They all knew that meant that any agent with unusual injuries would rise up the suspect list. However, shifters healed quickly, so it was unlikely any of the damage done by the young man would stick around very long.

“Were there any issues you found otherwise?”

Delilah shrugged. “There are always issues with a second autopsy. Organs have already been examined. Certain fluids aren’t available anymore. It’s good you sent for me as soon as you did.”

“Yeah, the body might’ve been a little more tender if we’d waited any longer,” said blondy, glancing behind her toward the door, as though he expected the body to stand up and shuffle out that door like some sort of zombie.

That annoyed her. “You work as an agent, and the idea of a dead body makes you squeamish?”

The blond man kept on grimacing and looking a little green around the gills, as though he wanted to be anywhere else.

“No, not really. I’ve seen bodies, but this is different.”

“How so?” Not that she cared.

“Because...you know, you cut them up on purpose.”

“Yes?” Delilah was pretty sure she knew where this was going, but it was...kind of fun making a Surfer Dude Bro uncomfortable.

Deciding better against what he was about to say, he shook his head. “Never mind. Nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

What a shame. He was cute, and her mate alarm was screaming, but even Delilah, who wasn't very particular in getting itches scratched when she needed it done, had no interest in men who couldn't keep their stomachs in a professional setting or who thought she was weird because of what she did.

Mate or not, she wouldn't give him the time of day if he couldn't handle all of her.

She'd spent enough time with fools like that in the past. It wasn't something she tolerated anymore. There were plenty of other willing fish in the sea who would love to wade in her waters while not judging her for her work.

The boss looked between her and blondy a few too many times with a smile before he finally introduced them.

“Now that I can see how well everything is going here, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to one of our top agents. We flew him in, same as you. This is Agent Aiden Reyes.”

Aiden held out his hand. “Guess we were on different flights. I would have remembered your face if I'd seen it before.”

Delilah didn't shake his hand.

Aiden's smile faltered before he closed his fingers and backed off. “Right, sorry. I guess because of what you do, you don't like shaking hands. Germs?”

Delilah shook her head. “No, not at all.”

The knowledge that she simply wouldn't shake his hand because he'd annoyed her flashed across his face. "Right," he said, still grinning, oddly enough, before he laughed a little. "I guess I deserve that."

At least he didn't look like he was about to be sick all over the floor. If he looked like he was about to puke, Delilah was resolved to immediately grab him by the ear and yank him to the nearest toilet.

"Will you forgive me?" The tone to his voice had her thinking the question was about more than just a bad first impression.

Like he might follow up the question with an ask for her phone number. If that were the case, he was going to be sorely disappointed.

It didn't matter how attractive they were, how much she might want them, or even how much of a good time they'd shown her... or if her badger was trying to claim him for her mate. For Delilah, her number was *never* on the menu.

But... just in case things got desperate while she was in ATTF territory, she might as well play a *little* nice.

"We'll see."

CHAPTER
TWO

“You must be good at what you do if they flew you in so fast.”

Delilah fought to not roll her eyes.

Jack had taken her report and was long gone, insisting that he had an important meeting to attend to, but Aiden had stuck around, tailing her to the vending machine and trying to make small talk as she was getting some coffee.

“I’m good at what I do. I’m sure others were higher on the priority list but just couldn’t be spared from their work.”

Aiden, leaning against the vending machine now, looked perplexed as her coffee finally began to pour from the machine, filling the Styrofoam cup with a dark sludgelike liquid.

“That’s not exactly boastful. I thought all you honey badgers were overly full of yourselves.”

Delilah was already beginning to regret being nice to him. “I wasn’t disparaging myself. I’m proud, but I’m also smart. And I know I’m not the tip-top best of AILE—yet, anyway. There aren’t many better than me, but they’re there.” She shrugged. It was what it was. She was good enough to be one

of the best, but not a high enough rank to be able to turn down assignments in lieu of projects she wanted to prioritize.

Aiden smiled at her, flashing white teeth that nearly blinded her. Why did it make her knees just a little bit weak?

Damn. Her weakness was strong jaws and killer smiles.

“Glad to hear it. We need someone in here with confidence, who can’t be shaken, and I was starting to worry that we’d gotten a defective honey badger.”

Defective, pfft. If only he knew how badass she really was. She just made it a practice to rein it in when she was around non-badgers. She didn’t want to add any to the rumor that the badgers didn’t work well with others.

Delilah turned away from the machine, bringing the Styrofoam cup to her lips and sipping on her terrible coffee. The bitter taste was horribly disappointing. What she wouldn’t give for a sweet, comforting cup of the good stuff after the job she just finished.

“I don’t know what your clearances are. We shouldn’t be talking.” She was still hyper-aware that *anyone* in this unit might have a hand in the killings, and Aiden might just be trying to pump her for information.

But then again, Jack had said that they’d flown Aiden in. Which meant he wasn’t on the list of regular agents, nor was he a potential suspect. The suspect pool was made up of agents who had regular access to the cases.

Delilah avoided the small table in the break room, opting instead to drink her swamp-water coffee standing. She didn’t want to give the impression that she was open to company or socialization.

Not that Aiden got the message.

“I’m cleared for all the information on this case, anything you have to report on that dead body, or any other body that happens to show up on your table for that matter.”

“I’ll need to see proof of that.”

Aiden actually whistled. “You’re a tough cookie to crack, aren’t you?”

Delilah pressed her lips together, forcing herself to not point out that he was thinking of a tough nut and not a cookie.

Back on the badger squad, they often told her that she was too literal and a bit on the perfectionist side. The term “pedantic” had started to become a bit of a trigger word for her, which her teammate Teddy had found out the hard way. Whatever. He’d needed a good wallop for a while.

In any case, she would let the cookie remark go. Accuracy and precision in speech wasn’t important when the only thing she might want from Aiden was an ability to get her off when she wanted him to.

She changed the subject to something different instead. “You seemed quite bothered by the thought of me cutting into the body back there.”

Shit. That probably wasn’t exactly how she should have said that. She wanted to make him uncomfortable, not insult him.

“If it’s for the job, then I can suck it up and handle it. I can be professional *and* not like something.”

That was what she liked to hear.

Then he had to go ahead and ruin it by speaking up again. “You, uh, are done with that man, though, right?”

Unbelievable.

She sighed. “Yeah. I’m about to head back to my desk and finish up a bit of paperwork before I’m done for the day. Should I expect you’ll keep following me there?”

Aiden stopped and looked at her as though she had lost her mind. Then he smiled, as though figuring out a funny little secret. “You weren’t paying attention.”

A rush of heat immediately filled her chest, and Delilah found herself stiffening, her shoulders bunching up. “What’s that supposed to mean? Of course I paid attention. I pay attention to everything.”

Why did he have to look so fucking pleased with himself? “Now that I think about it, the boss man didn’t properly introduce us back there, but I know they said they were going to send you an email about it. Which means you weren’t paying attention somewhere.”

He said it as though he knew perfectly well how much something like that would annoy her, how much Delilah had to keep on top of things. Emails didn’t sit unread; paperwork wasn’t turned in late.

To the other badgers, she seemed stuffy. She preferred to think that she was just savagely efficient.

So being told that she might have missed something as simple as a briefing over email annoyed the hell out of her.

“All right, fine. So what was it? What did I miss?”

Again with that stupid, bright, handsome smile. “I’m your bodyguard.”

CHAPTER
THREE

Since bursting in on the boss was out of the question, she had to resort to calling him and hoping he would pick up.

Meanwhile, Aiden kept acting as though things were as calm and cool as they could possibly be. Since she had strictly forbidden him to enter her cubicle, he leaned in the entryway, arms crossed, watching her with interest as she dialed Jack, intending to yell at his stupid ass.

Now she knew why Jack had been so quick to run away from her when he finished with his briefing.

Important meeting. Her ass.

Badgers had a reputation for not dealing well with news they didn't like. Jack didn't want to deal with her reaction to a bodyguard.

And she damn sure knew no one had mentioned it over email. That would *not* have been something she overlooked. They'd intentionally not told her.

The call went to his voice mail. Delilah immediately hung up and started the call over again.

“Are all badgers as grumpy as you are?”

“Shut up.” Delilah wanted to remain calm and cool throughout this whole thing, but eventually, she cracked as she

found herself pacing her borrowed workspace, the area that was on loan to her, like she was to the ATTF. Nothing in there belonged to her. Nothing personal. She hadn't even brought her little aloe plant that she liked to have on hand.

She felt utterly alone there. Entirely out of her element, with no badgers to have her back, and now this was being dumped on her.

"It's really not that big of a deal," Aiden said. "I assure you I'm one of the best. I'm here so you don't have to worry about anything. I'll keep you safe while you do your job and help us nail the sucker."

Delilah ignored the strange, warm feeling that spread inside her at his insistence that he would keep her safe. Instead, she fantasized about biting his head off. "Of course it's a big deal. If they felt I was going to be in that much danger, why couldn't I bring along one of my badger squadmates to guard me? Why a stranger? And why don't they trust me to handle myself? There's something they're not telling me, and that's unacceptable."

If there were other risks to being in the Scotland office, she would have expected them to be revealed to her immediately. How was she expected to make a rational decision about taking on a job like this if she didn't know everything?

Aiden stopped smiling. She hoped it was getting through his thick head that this wasn't a game and she had no interest in playing around about it.

Voice mail again. That. Fucking. Asshole.

If she were back at badger headquarters, she'd have no problem busting down Chip Normandy III's door and giving him an earful. It took all she had to restrain herself from

tracking Jack Williams down and giving him the same treatment.

There was a reason the badger squad went through directors as fast as they did.

She gave up. Clearly, Jack wasn't going to give her the time of day. He was choosing to let her stew in her anger in hope that she'd get over it.

“Look, I'm sorry this is how they made you find out,” Aiden said, still smiling a little and proving how not sorry he really was. “But this is what the boss wants, so I just want to make sure we do everything right. By the book.”

Shit.

That was her weakness. She had to do it by the book. She had to ensure everything was done nice and proper.

Suck it up. She had a job to do, and she was going to do it to the best of her ability. If accepting a stranger as her bodyguard was part of the expectations put on her for this mission, then so be it.

“Fine, tell me exactly what you've been tasked with.”

Aiden shrugged a little, standing straight. “I'm to keep a distance and watch over you, looking out for any people who seem a bit too interested in what you're doing. Of course, if there is any hint that you're in trouble, I'll step in.”

“And why would I be in trouble? I'm not planning on going out in the field. That's not my job. Do you really think someone would attack me inside? Here?”

“It's highly unlikely that there would be an overt attempt on you. Which is why I'm also watching out for any potential accidents.”

Delilah shivered.

Aiden's expression turned a little less cocky and a little more sympathetic. It wasn't a look she preferred. "Did you really not have any idea this would be happening? You knew they were looking at an inside suspect." He kept his voice low, even though there were no other employees in the other nearby cubicles.

"Everything moved quickly. I didn't exactly stop to think about it."

Aiden's brows lifted up almost all the way into his blond hairline. "Really?"

She rolled her eyes. "I swear I'd rather be with the Honey Badgers right about now."

"Do they often agree to missions without knowing the full extent of them?"

She glared at him. "We know we can handle whatever comes our way. I just wasn't expecting you, some oversized tuna." She didn't know his exact shifter, but she knew it was something aquatic, and likely fishy.

"Whale shark," he said, not looking the least bit insulted. "I was picturing you as the sort of person who had to follow all the rules to the letter. Meanwhile, here you are, ready to jump on planes and rush into missions when you don't even assess the level of risk involved first."

Her head was starting to ache. The time flying followed by immediately going into the lab and then getting into this conversation had started to take a toll on her. "I need some sleep. I'm guessing if you're in charge of watching me, you also know where I'm supposed to be staying?"

Delilah expected Agent Reyes to make a face at her for treating him like a proverbial cab driver.

Nope. Not the case. He clapped his hands together once with a loud, booming sound that punctuated her headache.

“Great. Where’s your bags? We’ll head out now.”

So enthusiastic.

Then she realized why that might be, and her defenses were immediately on the rise. “You’re not coming into my room with me.”

The power of that grin turned up all the way to a solid nine thousand. “Oh, but I will. I have to give it a clean sweep to make sure there’s nothing untoward inside.”

Her inside boiled at his phrasing. “And what exactly will you be looking for in *my* room that would be untoward?”

“Someone who might want to strangle you in your sleep,” he said, the most innocent of expressions on his face. “What else would I be looking for? It’s a room you haven’t even been to yet.”

She shook her head at him but refused to crack a smile. It took every ounce of her will power to keep from looking away from him.

Breaking eye contact now would just be a sign of weakness.

“You ready to go?”

Only then did she break eye contact, but she kept her spine straight, her shoulders poised as she walked by him. She might not exactly look like a queen in white sneakers and jeans, but that wasn’t the point.

Time to grab her bags and head to her hotel room, unpack, and maybe let herself soak in a nice hot tub.

And enjoy one of the many untoward items she had packed in her suitcase. After all, it would be a little awkward to have a good old-fashioned, one-night stand with Aiden if he was going to be hanging around outside her door for the entire rest of the mission.

And with him hovering, she wasn't sure how she'd find someone else to do the deed for her.

Depending on the level of stress relief she was going to need over the next week or so, she would figure that out in due time.

CHAPTER
FOUR

The hotel wasn't exactly anything fancy.

She'd naively hoped that the small Scottish town, conveniently situated on the ocean, would look picture-perfect, like any of the tourist postcards she'd seen back at the airport.

It wasn't.

But the run-down accommodations were better than nothing, and when she climbed the stairs and unlocked the door, revealing a surprisingly nice, clean room with the crisp smell from a freshly vacuumed and sprayed room, Delilah had to admit she was a little relieved.

Agent Reyes, because she was trying to keep him slotted professionally in her head and refusing to think of him as Aiden anymore, huffed and puffed while dragging her luggage into the room. He noticeably sighed when setting it down on the floor. "What the fuck is in here?"

"Notebooks and clothes," she said, not telling him about the number of thick scientific journals that she'd brought in case she had time for extra reading...and definitely not telling him about her personal items.

That answer didn't please Agent Reyes. "Bullshit. There are not just some notebooks in there. This weighs more than

what you're supposed to have on a plane. How many overweight fees did you have to pay to get this onboard?"

It was about five and a half pounds heavier than what was standard, but a little lipstick and a smile usually was enough to let her sneak on a little extra weight in her bag.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

She wasn't going to admit to him that she didn't follow the rules at all times.

Agent Reyes still didn't look pleased by this, but that was fine; he could get over it.

"Are you sure you're going to be protecting me if you have trouble with one little bag of luggage?"

"First of all, that's not little. That's massive, and secondly, yes, I absolutely can protect you. Just make sure I'm not carrying around a hundred-pound bag of rocks with me, and I should be good."

Against her better judgment, Delilah smiled.

She got the impression he was just complaining and that he could have carried the bag up the stairs and into her room without a fuss. He wasn't breathing heavily, and she detected no sweat anywhere on him. Yeah, he huffed and puffed just to put on a show up the stairs.

Why, she couldn't figure out.

People were weird. Probably why she got along with the dead ones better. It was easier to figure out what was going on with them as opposed to the odd quirks of the living.

Fortunately, whatever odd game Agent Reyes was playing with her ended quickly, as he immediately went about his business checking every possible hiding spot in the room.

And there weren't many.

He checked behind the heavy curtains, beneath both beds, then began looking in the bathroom.

Delilah was curious as to what exactly he was doing when he began checking the windows, opening and closing them before peeking his head out, but she didn't ask.

She hoisted her bag up onto the second bed with a mild grunt before unzipping it.

Maybe it was a little heavier than she remembered. There were wheels on it, so paying attention to the weight wasn't too much of a problem in an airport with smooth flooring.

She started unpacking, putting everything in neat and organized piles.

At some point, she realized Agent Reyes came to stand behind her, and he was looking at her books. "Anatomy, the autopsy process, decomposition...do you really need to read all that?"

She ignored the disgust in his voice. "It's always good to keep refreshed on certain materials. I'm not going to fall behind on current information just because I'm on an overseas mission."

Looking back at him, she was shocked at how her body reacted to his close proximity. His chest, a solid mass, exuded a strength that she wanted to reach out and touch. Were the muscles really that firm through his jacket and clothes? And would his skin underneath be smooth against her tongue?

Down, girl. Delilah glanced away quickly.

She needed that stress relief a little more than she first thought.

“Can you please back up a little? It’s uncomfortable having you so close.”

“Oh, sure thing, sorry about that.” He sounded like he really *hadn’t* noticed how close he’d come to her.

But that didn’t mean he wasn’t playing a whole new kind of game.

“So, did you find what you were looking for?” she asked, grabbing her pens and notebooks next.

She needed a whole case of black gel pens, as well as a few red ones just to keep focused, not to mention the highlighters. Most of her notebooks were new as well. Fresh supplies for a fresh case.

It took her a moment to notice that Agent Reyes wasn’t answering her. He was looking at her, lost in thought.

She lifted an eyebrow at him. “Well?”

He blinked and came out of his trance. “Obviously. No bugs or cameras, no one hiding in here either.”

As cool as she was trying to play it, she felt relieved when he confirmed it. If the killer—or killers—were involved with AILE, then they would have access to plenty of surveillance items that would keep them apprised of what she was doing. And she didn’t like the idea of being watched.

“Thank you for everything. I can take care of myself from here.”

“You don’t need any help with anything?”

There was one area he could be very useful for, and despite the circumstances, Delilah buzzed with the interest and lust that pooled within her as he pretended to not know the innuendo his question contained.

But that would have to wait. Which was a shame.

“No. I want to review all the files again, make sure there isn’t something I missed.”

Agent Reyes nodded, agreeing a little too quickly for her liking. “Right, well, if you need anything, I’m in the room next door to yours. If you want to order food, let me know so I can collect it at the door.”

“Food, right. I should eat some real food. Let me figure out where in case you want some food from the same place.” She found the local restaurant guide on the desk and waved it in his direction.

What was wrong with her? First, she was disappointed that he wasn’t going to make an attempt to stick around after she dismissed him, and now she was bringing up meal options as though they were going to have a date or something.

She quickly settled on a restaurant and wrote down her request for a chicken Caesar salad and soda. Agent Reyes informed her that he’d share his extra large meat lovers pizza if she decided she wanted a slice. “I’ll have them come to my room to make the drop-off.”

Agent Reyes made his exit with a stiff nod and a reminder that she call for him the moment anything felt off. He also told her he would stay outside her door until he heard the deadbolt and the chain lock after he left.

When he was gone, Delilah felt...cold.

She pressed her hand to the door.

When they met that morning, she’d almost reached out to shake his hand, but then she stopped herself.

She'd grown accustomed to keeping a physical barrier between herself and others who knew what she did for a living. People tried to be professional, but the moment they shook hands with her, she could see the disgust cross their faces. She could only tell herself so many times that the revulsion was for where her hands had recently been, not for who she was personally.

But why was it bothering her now? She didn't care if someone didn't want to touch her when they were disgusted with what she did. She liked being helpful to the authorities and families and being a voice for someone who had their voice taken away from them.

Why did Agent Reyes seem more important than the others? Usually, she didn't care if she had the approval of others.

Delilah stepped away from the door, trying to get her mind to return to the job. She had photos to pore over, specimens she wouldn't get to autopsy because the families had already cremated them.

Sitting on the bed, Delilah clenched and unclenched her right hand to a fist, feeling the phantom touch of Agent Reyes.

She should have at least tried. Was she regretting this now because she wanted to bang him? Or because it made her look uncertain and small to not have taken the initiative?

Or maybe she just wanted to touch him once, and she'd lost the opportunity?

As though there was something more important to getting off that came with that simple handshake?

Delilah shook her head.

This was a stupid thing to be thinking about. Just because she wanted to get him out of his clothes and in her spare bed for a few minutes didn't mean he was down with the idea.

She had the photos of the case in front of her, and the tragic images were enough to force her to get her mind back on her priorities, and taking care of these dead souls was, at the moment, more important than getting laid.

So Delilah got to work.

CHAPTER
FIVE

So far, the night was uneventful.

Aiden paid for the food, giving the delivery boy a very close once-over that made him shrink just a bit, then took dinner over to Delilah's.

Hearing all the locks coming undone after he gave the three-knock signal pleased him. It proved she was keeping to her promise of staying safe and secure as she went over her books on the dead.

She invited him in to eat with her, but they had little conversation to go with it. She seemed to have forgotten that she said she was tired and had become reenergized while looking over the files and cross-referencing her books.

He refrained from trying to get her attention as she worked.

And fuck him was that ever torture. He wanted nothing more than to pull her close, tear her clothes off, and hear his mate moan his name.

His mate. He'd met his mate today, and she was a coroner brought in for the same case he was working on. The AILE agent he was tasked with guarding.

What were the odds of that?

Luckily, it seemed like he was doing a good job of hiding how afraid he was of physical contact with her. At least, if she guessed at him having an aversion to her, she probably thought it had something to do with the fact that she played around in dead bodies for a living.

The smallest touch between them would ignite his passion. He wouldn't be able to stop himself, in a time when he needed to keep his wits about him.

It was simple enough to keep his dick in check by looking at the photos on her bed. That definitely made it easier for him to keep some amount of self-control.

That night, back in his room, he went over his own files, forcing himself not to think about Delilah. He occasionally did a walk-around, looking for anyone out of place or potential spies around the hotel. He'd knock three times on her door and listen for her reply from the other side that assured him she was perfectly fine.

Between those bouts, Aiden read his own notes.

A bunyip shifter was a new concept. It had been killed by agents Mike Stone and Chase Belair, who had also been on the case while a kraken shifter, Olivia Grey, volunteered as bait to draw the killer out.

He still couldn't believe it. A civilian volunteer. In a dangerous undercover operation.

They'd put her to work, swimming around trying to draw the killer out. And they'd succeeded...

Until the bodies started showing up again.

There was another bunyip out there based on the way the last team had been targeted, even losing one of their own, an ATTF tech agent named Carol.

Looking at the photos of the ugly fucker, the long snout, claws, fur, and scales, he almost wished they'd been right about it being a kraken.

A squid with teeth seemed much more preferable to... whatever the fuck this was.



THE NEXT MORNING, after a fitful sleep and a quick shower, Aiden was banging on Delilah's door.

He expected her to answer as fresh and clean as she had been the day before. The picture of perfection and readiness.

“Uh...” Seeing her eyes puffed up, nearly shut from sleep, had him falling back a step.

“It's six in the morning. This had better be good.” She leaned her head against the doorframe, adding to his shock.

“We'd planned on getting an early start on the day. Your file says you're normally up by six.”

Delilah rubbed at her eyes. She must have fallen asleep reading those files in bed because, per what his sisters told him, no women with any sense was ever supposed to sleep with their eyeliner still on.

“That's when I'm not jet-lagged or sleeping ten minutes away from the office with zero traffic. Fuck me, I could be knocked out for another hour.”

He was pretty sure she didn't realize she'd just said the words *fuck* and *me* in front of him.

Suddenly, she stopped rubbing her eyes, pushing her long, messy dark hair out of her face and behind her head, and

glared at him. “What exactly do you mean, my file? You have a file on me?”

“Of course we do.”

She eyed him, dark eyes suspicious and penetrating. “You look chipper this morning. I would’ve thought you would be the sort of guy to be sleeping in.”

He grinned, enjoying rubbing it in. “I know. I do well at pulling off the slacking surfer dude who hangs out at the bar or the beach all the time, don’t I?”

She didn’t say anything to that, but he felt certain she was barely holding it back. That was fine. She looked extra pretty, somehow, when he shocked her.

He liked that he could stun her so much. She had an air about her, like nothing ever bothered her, and Aiden had worried he wouldn’t be able to pierce this armor shield she had going on.

“I didn’t mean anything by that. I wasn’t trying to say—”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry about it.” Aiden waved his hand to dismiss her worries. He enjoyed the fact that she had become so flustered over the idea that she might have insulted him when, just the day before, he had the impression that she was a real ball-breaker. That she was the type of person who didn’t care if she insulted him or hurt his feelings.

Delilah still seemed unsure of herself. “All the same, I am sorry. I was out of sorts yesterday. I didn’t sleep well on the flight over, and I was also a bit out of sorts being in a new place looking at a new case.”

Sympathy welled up inside of him for her. “Yeah, I imagine it wasn’t great to have to land in Scotland just to rush right to base and get to work.”

This might actually explain her exhaustion a little better. Dealing with the time changes, jet lag, and the workload that had been dumped on her would take its toll.

Aiden immediately felt like a dickhead for not thinking of it sooner.

“How about this...we hit the snooze button, and I’ll come back for you in an hour. Go dream about how we’ll stop by that coffee shop we passed last night. Does that sound good?”

Delilah scratched the back of her neck, hesitating, though he could see the look in her eyes that suggested a deep yearning for exactly what he described.

And if this was what she wanted, Aiden, as her mate, was determined to give it to her. So he was glad that she gave in and accepted it without a fight.

“That sounds amazing. Thank you.”

He winked at her. “No problem. I’m at your service. We’re going to need you at your best if we’re going to catch this guy. Or girl.”

Delilah blinked at him, shaking her head as though she thought he was ridiculous. “God, you’re such a flirt.”

“Really? I wasn’t trying to.”

But that might have been a little lie. This was the woman that he needed standing in front of him. The one person he would want and desire more than any other in his entire life.

Maybe he was being a little flirty.

Shit. He was going to have to do something about that, and soon.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to just go back to bed? There’s so much to do.”

Despite the sound of guilt in her voice, Aiden knew that this was absolutely the best thing she needed.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Someone like you needs to be in tiptop shape and everything, right? At any rate, I should do a quick sweep of the perimeter and make sure nothing was going on while we were sleeping. But you don’t have to worry. I’m a very light sleeper.”

“You are?”

He nodded. “Yeah, the slightest noise has me up and ready to go. It’s kind of a pain in the ass at times, but great to have if I need to keep aware of my surroundings at all times.”

Like he did with her, because there was no way in hell he was going to leave her unguarded just so he could take a catnap.

While he left Delilah to enjoy her extra hour of sleep, Aiden set off to check on the dozen spy cameras he’d set up around the property the night before. If anyone had driven onto the parking lot, or a stray dog happened to get too close, an alarm would have woken him. The alarms had stayed quiet, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have to worry about malfunctions.

He had it on good authority that this sleepy motel didn’t get much business this time of year. At the moment, they had only one other family checked in. Aiden observed the husband, wife, and young daughter and determined that they weren’t anyone to be concerned about.

Time to check it out and see if the night was really as uneventful as the tech suggested.

The marks in the grass a bit away from the parking lot told a different story. They were outside the frame of the cameras and scanners, which worried him a little.

The grass was pressed down flat, in a pattern that made it look like a giant snake had slithered along there.

But snakes didn't leave claw marks like that behind.

Or the smell of burning garbage.

Aiden sighed.

“This just got way more complicated.”

He was going to need to call in some help on this.

CHAPTER
SIX

Delilah had to admit that extra hour of sleep really did help.

Not that she didn't wish she could crawl back into bed and stay there anyway, but it was better than nothing, and her eyes didn't feel quite so puffy when she opened them.

She was not a morning person, but that was normal for a honey badger.

If she didn't get her eight hours minimum, curled up in a nice, warm ball, she was a grumpy badger.

And despite the name, there was nothing sweet about how a honey badger could kill their prey if they were pissed off.

With a satisfying stretch, Delilah pulled herself out of bed, but her feet had barely touched the scratchy carpet when she realized something was very wrong.

She could hear the voices outside her window. Enough to make it suspicious even if you didn't pick up the anxious tone of their voices.

She could hear the sort of official mutters that came when someone was going over a crime scene.

Heart lurching, Delilah threw on fresh clothes and stuffed her feet into her shoes, running outside to the multiple AILE

vans and agents milling around.

Agent Reyes was pointing out the scene while yellow tape was placed and pictures were taken.

Any humans who passed by would think the police had been called over a disturbance. They wouldn't stick around long enough to figure out these weren't local law enforcement.

Of course, Delilah could see what this was, and her senses were immediately rushing into overdrive. Her mind raced. Was there a body? Did something happen? Was new evidence found?

If so, what could it be doing there? It wouldn't be just some coincidence.

As she got closer to the group, she noticed a few things. The first was the number of the agents who took note of her but stepped aside for her to enter the scene.

The second was the smell.

She caught the scent of death but not in the way that suggested a nearby body.

Actually, the closer to the center of the scene she got, the more she realized this wasn't the smell of death.

It stank like shit, though.

Agent Reyes spotted her and stepped away from Jack, attempting to head her off. She pushed past him. She wasn't going to put up with whatever bullshit reason he might use to keep her from doing her job.

“Get out of my way.”

“Delilah...”

Whatever he was about to say, she didn't hear it. Not when Delilah stepped up to the yellow tape. The local forensics team stopped taking their photos as they saw her approach, as though they worried she would get in the way of their jobs and would have to tell her to back off.

“AILE Special Agent Delilah Lovett, coroner.”

They shrugged and got back to their investigation. That startled her. Usually, in a situation like this, people thanked her for showing up and took her over to the body. But no one did that, and she saw no sign of a body.

All she saw was a bunch of flat grass.

A few gouges in the ground here and there prickled her nerves. She'd read about the bunyip in the files.

The smell she got right now came from that creature.

Like old blood and sour milk.

This definitely wasn't the sort of creature that would be low on the food chain. If anything, it was fairly high up there.

“At least we know what it smells like.”

Agent Reyes stepped up behind her. She jumped a little when he placed his jacket on her shoulders.

“Here, wear this.”

“It's not that chilly out.”

In fact, she felt a desperate need to pull away from him. The minor touch of his fingers on her shoulders was enough to make her shiver with delight.

Relax.

There were people around. She couldn't be lusting after him, letting her body react to him in public.

“Just do me a favor and wear it.”

She rolled her eyes. Had he touched her last night, however innocently, she might have been all over him. Might have jumped his bones before getting the door to her room shut.

Why did she have to have the worst luck with timing on absolutely everything?

His scent was all over the jacket. She didn't want to wear it. She couldn't deal with the emotions that were being dredged up from feeling surrounded by him.

She may have snapped a little. “Why? Why is it so damned important that I wear your stupid jacket?”

Aiden snapped back at her. “For God's sake. We can see your nipples.”

Her brain didn't immediately turn the sounds coming out of his mouth into words. Maybe it was because she didn't want to believe them.

Didn't take her long before she had to come to terms with what he said and connect it to the fact that in throwing on a T-shirt—a thin, white one—she'd failed to put on a bra underneath.

She was mortified. The rising heat that flew up her neck and into her cheeks let everyone know. Agent Reyes pressed his lips together as though he were completely miserable with the entire bit.

There was a possessiveness that came with wearing a man's jacket. Gave off the impression she belonged to him. That he had a stake in keeping her honor together.

Accepting the jacket felt as though she was admitting to something.

But she was willing to take that it meant keeping her boobs from being seen by everyone in AILE.

Teddy would be laughing his ass off at her if he could.

“Right. Now, can we get to work?” Pretending things didn’t happen or didn’t bother her was her preferred method of putting a few tricky situations behind her.

Jack cleared his throat while Agent Reyes continued to glare at any male team member who happened to look at her a little too long.

“You can see here that our suspect decided to pay you a visit last night.”

“So I see. Where did the tracks come from, and where do they go?”

She wasn’t the lightest sleeper in the world, but the fact that they had time to get set up and were searching around had meant they’d been here for some time.

And she wanted to know what they’d found.

Delilah wasn’t going to start yelling at Jack for not giving her the full rundown on their suspect just yet.

“Tracks came from over there.” Jack pointed. “Go back that way, too. Agents are still scoping things out, but if I’m right, it came from out of the ocean, way the hell down there, and went back the same way.”

Delilah nodded. “That’s smart. Travel in and out of the ocean like that, and it becomes impossible to track.”

“I won’t let it near you,” Agent Reyes said.

“You already did.”

That might have been a little harsh, but she didn't care. Not too much, anyway.

This was her life, and she was putting it on the line while some dickhead killer picked off other shifters.

“Whatever else there is for me to look at, I want to see it. I also want the honey badgers here.” She issued the demand that she would have given Jack the day before, had he answered her calls.

“You want us to fly down a whole other team?” Jack asked, not revealing what he thought about the idea.

“With the size of this thing?” she said, still looking down at the imprint in the grass. “Absolutely.”

“I can keep you safe,” Agent Reyes insisted. “But if you want the extra security, I won't fight you.”

She didn't expect him to say that. Her stomach clenched at those words.

Delilah thought she would have hurt his pride and challenge him to prove himself. That he'd want to fight her on her decision and keep the badgers away so he could puff up his chest.

“You don't care if I bring in other shifters to look into this?”

Jack was the one who answered that. “If you want them for the added security, you can absolutely do that, but until I have the credentials of every single person you invite into Scotland, no one will be touching this case.”

“They're more than qualified.”

“And I will be the one to confirm that.”

Now Delilah was the one who had to back down. Much as she wanted to defend her team, he was right.

This wasn't her turf.

Though she did want to insist that the honey badgers would be nothing but helpful in the matters of this case. If this creature could crawl around on land, it meant the ocean wasn't the only place this creature could hunt, so the ATTF was no longer at a specialized advantage.

He was staring back down at the tracks, grass, and dirt as though he could find the cure for cancer in there if he just looked hard enough.

She was only here for the second autopsies, to give her opinion on what was going on, and that was it. This monster shouldn't have known she was there. The *only* way they'd be informed was if they had an inside connection.

Or were themselves on the inside.

Someone was using their knowledge and training as an Aquaterrestrial Task Force member to get away with their killings.

As the new girl in town, literally, she was of interest to the perpetrator.

“Jack, is there anything else Delilah needs to be here for?” Aiden's words snapped her out of her thoughts.

“I thought you just agreed to not fight me on bringing in the honey badgers?”

“If that's our only option, I'll agree to it, but maybe you don't need to be here anymore. You confirmed the autopsies and cleared the initial coroner. Nothing in your review of the

photos of the other victims flagged foul play in reporting. If you've done all the physical work, you shouldn't just wait around for the next body. We should put you on a plane and send you home as soon as possible."

Right, okay, so all thoughts of him being a logical thinker went right out of Delilah's mind.

And her illogical anger took over as well. "Excuse me?"

Jack seemed to mull it over, but then he looked at Delilah.

"It's up to you."

"I want to stay."

Agent Reyes seemed confused. Pained, even. "Why not? This is the best way to keep you out of harm's way."

"I thought you were such a great protector."

He winced.

Delilah felt like a bitch.

"If there's another murder victim found, then I want to stick around and be the first to autopsy the body. I don't want any more fuck-ups than can be avoided."

There. That was a reasonable enough response. The fact that she pulled it right out of her ass, and it was true, was a bonus.

Meanwhile, she was doing everything in her power to not look at Agent Reyes and to breathe through her mouth so she didn't have to take in too much of his scent off the jacket.

Yeah, she was so screwed right now.

An active case where the killer had been less than a dozen yards away from her was not the time to be getting emotionally tied up in someone.

No matter how good they happened to smell.

Jack shrugged. “All right, but until there’s another body, I want you on lockdown. Aiden, good work setting up those cameras. We’ll review the footage and see if we got a better look at our suspect.”

“Cameras?”

She frowned.

Aiden stuffed his hands into his pockets, but even doing that, he somehow managed to make himself look like the most calm, cool, and collected person on the planet.

“You didn’t think I would just go to bed and not set something up in case, well, this happened?”

His initiative spoke volumes.

It also made her feel way too guilty about lumping him in with the airheaded surfer-dude stereotype.

His jacket around her shoulders felt a little warmer at that moment. As though he were physically touching her.

Protecting her.

“Right, I should have known. Thank you for that.”

Things were silent for a moment, other than the hustle and bustle of the team around them.

“Uh-huh,” Jack said, looking at them as though they had done something amusing. “I’ll put together the details. Chase Belair and Mike Stone will touch base with you, but stay close to your room. Don’t go anywhere alone. We’ll be in contact.”

His voice was enough to make Delilah blink back from the haze she’d fallen into. “Great.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Delilah wasn't going to lie. Having a creature the size of a bunyip crawling around so close to where she slept made her a little nervous.

It took longer than she expected for the team to pack up and leave, and even then, a few agents straggled behind.

They were backup, in case Agent Reyes needed the extra fish power.

But while they searched for any evidence of DNA, something that could identify who the fucker was, Delilah and Agent Reyes were back in her motel room.

She found herself combing through the files she'd been given on agents involved in the case, wanting to know exactly who everyone was, what they shifted into, and how long they'd been with the task force.

If she wanted information, she was damn well going to get it.

“We're sure Chase Belair and Mike Stone had nothing to do with this? I know you said their mate was that squid shifter —”

“Kraken.”

Delilah shrugged. “Either way, you said Chase was with another agent who got mauled to death by it? How do we know they’re not covering for the kraken? Using the carcass of the bunyip to try to deflect attention?”

Reyes stood by the door, occasionally pulling the curtains to the window back to have a peak, while Delilah sat cross-legged on the still messy bed. And now he was giving her an odd look. “Chase isn’t even ATTF. He was on loan. He’s a type of bird shifter. A harpy.”

“I guess we could rule him out,” Delilah said, still looking over the files on her iPad.

A male harpy. That was fairly rare.

As rare as a bunyip?

Did that make him more or less suspect? Hard to say, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have some involvement.

“You really think he might have been involved?”

“He survived, and, what was her name, Carol? She didn’t. I’m just pointing that out.”

“Well, yeah, but come on. You can see in there that he was already questioned, and he nearly died, too.”

He had. His injuries had been bad.

Delilah was pretty sure he was innocent. His mate was the kraken woman, and the injuries Chase had weren’t done deliberately in places that would guarantee survival.

No one would ever put a mate at risk like that with such sloppy wounds. She could see that in the photos of Chase after the attack.

Delilah’s shoulders sagged. “What about you?” she asked.

He straightened a little. “What about me?”

“It could have been you out there last night. You set up the security cameras; you’re the one who found the track marks. Plenty of time to make them and get cleaned up before calling for backup.”

“I’m a whale shark.”

“I’ve never seen you in that form.”

Even now, a voice deep inside her head screamed at her that this was not the case. She was barking up the wrong tree. But that didn’t mean she could stop herself.

No. People did irrational things all the time when they were scared. It was human nature. Animal nature. Humans and shifters alike got caught up in those instincts.

Even as she looked at him, a piece of her not wanting to believe it, refusing to believe it, she had to keep her options open.

She could be alone with the killer right now. She still looked at him, waiting for his reaction.

“I came in from out of the country, same as you.”

“I know.”

“Which means I wasn’t here when the other attacks occurred.”

“If we’re to believe you.”

“Next time we have the chance, we’ll go to the beach, and you can see it for yourself.”

“I’d like to see right now if I can.”

“Right now?”

She nodded. “The bunyip has a distinct look. Even if you only bring out your scales, let me see that you don’t have claws, it should be enough.”

For now.

Aiden Reyes sighed, but like before, he didn’t fight her on it.

He changed. Right in front of her.

His skin showed the biggest difference.

Blue. Not one shade of blue either. Multiple shades, as though his scales were trying to form right on his skin. His eyes changed as well, becoming larger, a little wider, and definitely darker.

Delilah left her bed and padded her way toward him in the sneakers she hadn’t taken off since being outside.

Her tablet with her, she looked over his markings, the new color to his skin, and compared it to what they knew of the bunyip shifters and what evidence they’d found outside.

Definitely nothing alike.

Delilah had never been more relieved of anything in her entire life.

“Did you really think it might be me?”

No. Deep down, no.

But she’d been wrong about men before. “Any good detective would want to explore every avenue.”

Turning away from him, Delilah quickly put her nose as close to the screen of her tablet as she could, proving how much more important the notes were she read.

“Yeah.” He sounded unsure. “You’re not a field agent, though. It’s different.”

“How so?” She looked back at him. The scales had melted back into his skin, leaving only his human coloring and puppy-dog stare. “If the perpetrator wants to show an interest in me, then it doesn’t matter what my training is. I’d want to know every detail about everyone. Wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“There you have it.” She said it dismissively, trying to ward off any further complaints.

It seemed to work. For the moment.

Delilah almost went back to sit on the bed but then decided at the last second that it might be a mistake to venture over there.

There was too much tension in the air. Too much attraction overwhelming her senses from wearing his jacket to having him around acting all protective.

Delilah was quickly learning nothing beat danger for wanting to get laid.

And badly.

But now was the time for thinking. For acting.

The honey badgers would be here soon to help go over the case. Chip would get Jack all the credentials he liked, to prove that the badger squad was more than qualified to offer assistance.

“I have a question,” she said, looking over a file of one of the agents who had been standing in the background the day she first met Jack and Reyes.

“Yeah?”

She looked at him. “If you’re a whale shark and this is a bunyip, then how could you expect to do anything if he attacked on land? I’m not trying to be insulting, but last time I checked, whale sharks stuck strictly to land.”

“They do, but believe it or not, us fishy types can still handle some of the bigger land dwellers. A gun typically evens the odds against even the biggest animal.”

Sometimes even making it unfair, but she supposed that was as good a reason as any.

“As long as you meet it while you’re armed, and it doesn’t get away from your shark if you faced it in water first.”

He didn’t need to shift to protect her. Humans protected each other all the time from various threats with the weapons they had, and they were even capable of besting shifters at the best of times when technology was available to them.

Which was why most shifters wanted to keep the humans out of their affairs.

All the old stories—Dracula, The Wolf Man, Swamp Creature, stories of shifters being bested by the humans—were warnings.

Delilah glanced back down at her screen, pulling up a photo of what was left of Agent Carol Stewart.

Sometimes, the humans might have a good reason to be worried about the things that went bump in the night.

“Let me ask you something now.” Agent Reyes hadn’t moved from his spot next to the door, but it felt more and more like a thousand different things were happening at the same time around them.

“All right.” Delilah pressed her lips together.

“When the honey badgers land, are they going to fight this creature in their badger forms, or are they more likely to draw their guns and take out anyone who attacks?”

There was the answer she wanted to give and the one she knew was most likely to happen. “If they’re in their human forms when they find it, they’ll draw their weapons and fire. I would.”

Agent Reyes nodded as though it proved a point. Maybe it did. “It’s the same for me.”

“But the badgers can hunt. They’ll change into their animals and roam inconspicuously to look for and sniff out this bunyip if it is what’s stalking us now.”

At that, Reyes shrugged. “I won’t be jumping into the water to fight this thing unless I have to. The others can take care of that. It doesn’t matter, because I’m not here to track and hunt the thing. My responsibility is you.”

Delilah stilled. She didn’t want to be his responsibility.

But she wouldn’t mind being his pleasure.

That was cheesy. God, she was so glad she hadn’t said that out loud.

What the hell was wrong with her?

“You all right?”

Delilah nodded, clearing her throat and getting back into her notes.

“Yeah, fine. I’m just wondering, how would a whale shark be used in combat against other shifters in the water? I always thought they were kind of...big and slow.”

A quick search and the words *docile* and *filter feeder* didn't give her the impression of a bloodthirsty or dangerous protector.

He grinned at her, his teeth somehow looking a little sharper than before. "Not unless you're half a great white."

"*What?*"

"Yup. Mom was a great white, and dad was a whale shark. They fell in love, and then I came into the world. Now we're here."

"I know how reproduction works."

"Uh-huh."

She willed the heat in her cheeks to go away. To settle down to something that didn't make her body feel like it was on fire.

Why did it feel as though he'd set up a trap and she'd walked right into it?

She should not be talking about or thinking about reproduction when he was around.

Then he had to ruin it with an attempt at a joke. "You should see me when I'm eating. It's great. At least in the water. I just open my mouth and suck in all the little, unsuspecting fishies before chomping down with my much larger teeth."

Delilah blinked at him. She wasn't going to laugh. Her mouth wasn't quirking because she wanted to smile. It was only due to an itch that she felt this way at all.

"You're an idiot."

Aiden brought his hands to his heart, as though she'd wounded him. "That hurts me, deep inside, it really does."

“I’ll give you something to hurt about,” she muttered, but all in all, she was in a good mood.

Back to work. She couldn’t be flirting when there was so much to do.

Focusing on the profiles of the agents helped clear her head somewhat, and soon she managed to find something.

“This agent right here, Gary Kirk.”

Agent Reyes approached her immediately to have a look. “What about him?”

“His shifted form is a crocodile, right?”

She pushed the tablet a little closer, allowing him to view the file.

Mr. Kirk was one of the few agents in the hall when she first debriefed Jack. Kirk kept mainly to security work, as opposed to field agent tasks to go out and hunt down the bad guys.

But the note in his file, of an early career reprimand regarding his personal hygiene, was what triggered her suspicions. The bunyip had a strong smell, and maybe Kirk hadn’t learned how to mask it early on. “It doesn’t necessarily mean guilt, but I think we should look into it, right?”

He smiled at her, and Delilah’s stomach became liquid. “Good catch. Great catch, actually.”

Then he said the words that went to every woman’s heart. “One hundred percent, you’ve found something. Let’s get Jack on this right now.”

Again with that strange feeling, as though his praise meant more than it actually did to her when it was just...praise.

Except, this was definitely getting to her head.

“Right, well, it comes with the job to be observant.”

“No kidding, that was amazing.” Reyes already had his phone pulled out and pressed to his ear as he called their boss.

The first order of business, seeing if anyone could vouch for Gary Kirk’s whereabouts for the night before.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

With Jack's authority, Delilah got her hands on the more in-depth file of Agent Kirk. Turned out, Kirk was a bit of a loner. He'd wanted to be a field agent but hadn't quite managed to pass all the extra training to take that step. He was kept as a low-level agent, carrying a badge and a gun, while tasked with the lighter security work. This could bother a man who had planned and prepared his whole life to be a field agent.

Then there was the smell.

A shifter in their full form always smelled different than when they were presenting as a human, but other shifters could identify specific odors. If it was bad enough that he'd gotten dressed-down for it, that would mean it was a *lot* worse when in the full shifter form.

None of this was proof of misbehavior, let alone of being a murderer. The guy could have just had poor hygiene.

But that didn't stop her from ticking boxes off inside her head.

"It makes sense for him to make the most of his kills in the water," Delilah said. "Any land-dwelling shifter might catch the scent before the attack, but the water would mask a creature that was lurking below."

One big setback in the investigation was the lack of photo proof of the agents in their animal shapes. The photo Gary *did* have on file for his animal shape looked too well lit and positioned. A quick image search proved that it was a stock photo from the Internet.

She was shocked it had made it through.

So, unless this guy had an amazingly good reason for not sending in an actual photo of himself in his reptile form and a good alibi, then it was looking more and more as though she might have stumbled across the juiciest suspect ever.

She turned to social media for help. Most shifters managed to sneak in a few photos of themselves in their animal forms on social media.

Wolf shifter? No problem: *Went hiking today, look at this beautiful wolf who showed up on my trail!*

Hawk shifter? Snapping a timed photo of yourself perched on a tree branch made you a bird watcher.

Panda? Well, that was a little rarer, but anyone could make up visiting a zoo somewhere or a trip to China.

For this guy? Nothing.

He wasn't a born Scot either, despite his name. He came from the southern United States. A New Orleans boy.

Why the hell wouldn't he have any photos of a couple of crocodiles? A photo of himself in his gator form with mom and Aunt June standing next to him, pretending to be taking a trip and making memories?

That got to her.

It made sense that a rare shifter wouldn't have pictures of themselves.

Something itched at her memory, and she pulled up the files of the deceased bunyip.

Some bunyips were said to have the head of a large feline. Others thought they had a face closer resembling a hippo, like this one did.

And then there were the ones who were described as having the head of a crocodile.

She flipped back to Chase's testimony. He described it as having a crocodile's head, with the flippers of a seal, and slimy, smelly fur all over its body.

There was confirmation right there that there had been *two* of them. The one captured and killed, and this other one still out there.

She couldn't lie to herself. It felt damned good to be the one to figure it out, and she wasn't even the agent assigned to be doing that kind of work.

The fact that Reyes was outside her motel room, talking on the phone with Jack as they worked to find out where the hell Gary Kirk was, made her way more pleased than she ought to be under the circumstances.

If it was Gary Kirk, and he had followed her back here to see if she was a valid target, that was nothing to smile about.

At the same time, knowing things were getting done so quickly made her feel useful.

It made her feel good.

Cases didn't often move this fast, so on the rare occasion when they did, she was going to take that and feel really damned good about it.

Reyes came back into her room.

“What did he say?”

“They can’t find him. It looks like it’s the guy’s day off, but he’s not answering any messages, and Jack’s sending someone to his apartment now to do a check. He wasn’t working last night when the cameras caught the bunyip’s movements either, so that doesn’t look good for him.”

Reyes came to sit on the other side of the tiny motel table. It was the most relaxed she had seen him probably since meeting him.

“I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but just so you know, we’re not going to be in separate rooms anymore.”

Delilah nodded. Inside she was delighted. On the outside, she kept up her normal visage. “I suppose I can handle that.”

Having him so close, would she be able to keep him at a distance? Would having him in the second bed be far enough away that she wouldn’t jump him at night? Reyes glanced down at her clenching fists. Delilah had done it without realizing it, and now it was way too late for her to loosen her fingers.

“Are you sure you’re okay with it?”

“Yes... kind of.”

He looked at her as though he could see right through her. Only then did Delilah get the impression that he knew what she was thinking, what she wanted, and he was purposely teasing her.

“I mean, do you really have to be so fucking professional all the time?” she asked.

He jerked back. Finally. A reaction out of him.

Then he smiled. “I was wondering when you would notice.”

Delilah rolled her eyes, and if she clenched her teeth any more, she was going to break them. “How can I not notice? I’ve been trying to...Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I don’t know why I am getting embarrassed by this. When this is over, I want to know if you want to have sex.”

There. She said it. Why the hell had it been so hard for her to get that out into the open?

It wasn’t as though she was planning on having an emotional relationship with this man when everything was said and done.

No. That was not happening.

Aiden—and it was Aiden now, she could no longer try to think of him in professional terms only—looked as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

That made Delilah even more embarrassed and angrier. “What? You just said that you knew what was going on and you were waiting for me to notice.”

“Well, yeah. I just didn’t expect you to ask me like that.”

“Would you like me to get down on one knee for you?”

She was acting bitchy. Which was exactly when they tended to run away.

He wasn’t running away. Aiden was looking at her as though she was something interesting. “I don’t want to get you on your knees just yet. You can do that for me all you want in a bit.”

“What?”

Aiden ignored her, leaning closer, his elbows on the table now. “I’ve been trying so hard not to touch you. To not smell you. Ever since the first moment I saw you, all I wanted was to rip your clothes off and make you scream my name.”

Delilah’s pulse quickened. She swallowed hard but was able to speak quite clearly.

“Did you now?”

Aiden’s eyes flashed. “Yeah. I did. You’re so fucking hard to read through. I didn’t want to touch you, for now, because I’m supposed to be protecting you. It’s not exactly professional, as I’m sure you’re well aware.”

“No kidding.” But even as she said it, a pool of warmth spread at the bottom of her belly and toward her sex.

He was speaking very unprofessionally toward her. And it was totally getting her off. Even now, her thighs squirmed together as her toes clenched within her socks.

“But if you’re suffering from this, then I don’t really want to make you go through that unnecessarily.”

Was it getting hotter in here? Delilah found herself glancing toward the thermostat.

Nope. Unless there was some glitch somewhere, it was the same temperature.

Maybe it was Aiden who was radiating that heat.

“We are perfectly safe here. The bunyip’s trail is cold, and it’s not around. At least not in that form.”

Now her heart was really slamming.

Too much. This was too much, and she almost couldn’t take it.

He was talking her into having sex with him.

Not that he had to do much convincing. Delilah was very much on board with this.

“If we keep the doors locked and stay marginally aware of what’s going on outside, then we should be perfectly safe.”

She was talking herself into it now. That was brilliant. How badly did she need to get laid that she was doing this?

Whatever. She might as well commit to the bit.

Delilah stood up. Fuck it. She didn’t need any more convincing. She grabbed at the hem of her sweater and pulled it above her head.

The slightly wide-eyed look on Aiden’s face as she undressed in front of him was so worth it. It was pleasing to note the change in Aiden’s face. The way his cheeks seemed to brighten.

He might be a giant fish, but there was no way he couldn’t also detect her own rising temperature.

Her own rising lust.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Aiden said.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

“It’s not funny. I’m supposed to be watching out for you. Protecting you. I can’t do that if we’re banging.”

He might say that, but she could hear it in his voice how much he wanted this. And she was done pretending, done lying to herself about what was going on here. There was only so much evidence she could ignore for so long before things got stupid.

“I know we’re mated, and this is impacting our work. I want to get off, and so do you, so stop talking and get over here.” She crooked her finger at him and watched him blink, realizing just how little he’d been in control.

At least of the situation between the two of them.

The shock on his face revealed that he hadn’t thought Delilah knew he was her mate. She’d done a good job of hiding it, of focusing on the attraction without thinking about the mating.

Worried he might continue to protest and back off, to keep asking her permission when she was so obviously giving it, he did something different.

He smiled.

Not a happy, good guy smile either. No. He showed off those sharp teeth to her one more time, and she could swear the temperature went up *again*.

“You didn’t say *please*.”

CHAPTER
NINE

So Aiden was bad at his job. Bad enough that he found himself being tempted by the woman in front of him, who knew they were mated and had somehow managed to keep him from knowing she knew the entire time they were together.

Less than a day, sure, but that was still an eternity for two newly discovered mates who had yet to roll around in bed together.

That was the only reason why he was allowing this to continue. That was what he told himself as Delilah, naked in front of him, shoulders back, softly said that one magic word.

“Please.”

And then he was on her. He couldn't have stayed away if he tried.

Trying was officially impossible.

His hands found the back of her neck and head and yanked her toward him, crushing her mouth to his as they both gave in.

The soft hairs that slid against his fingers, the sweet touch of her lips, and the gentle vibration of her moan against his lips nearly brought him to his knees.

This was going to be a lot to handle. It put the both of them in danger and was a betrayal of the principles he held dear, but he was damn well going to do it.

And fuck the consequences.

That being said, even while suckling on the nectar of her lips, he pulled her backward, slowly, gently, blindly reaching out with his hand for one of the chairs that went with the little table in her room.

The door was locked, but it didn't hurt to have that little sucker pressed beneath the door handle of the room.

If something tried to get in, it would buy him a few precious seconds to get his shark teeth out.

The great white shark teeth, not the nubby little whale shark teeth.

Delilah didn't comment on what he'd just done. She continued to pull him toward the bed. Even when their mouths parted so they could take in a breath, she barely said a word to him, just kept her hands on his shoulders as she yanked him right where she wanted him to go.

Aiden would be a liar if he didn't admit to liking that at least a little.

"This isn't going to be long and drawn out," he said, getting onto his knees on the bed between Delilah's legs. Her smooth, milky thighs parted for him even as she inched her back onto the bed, making space for him.

She nodded. "I'm up for a quickie. I understand. Bad guys are outside. You don't want to be distracted."

"That, too, but just don't go thinking I'm a two-pump chump and that's the end of it." He ran his hands up her hips

and circled his thumbs on her nipples. “Because, when this is over, and we have a more secure location, I can promise you, I’ll be making you scream for me for hours.”

She shivered.

He loved that her lust and want was so easy to read. It was all over her face.

“You just do what you need to do, and we’ll talk about how you’re going to be a champion in bed afterward.”

That sounded all right to him.

He didn’t take off his clothes. It didn’t seem like a good idea, all things considered.

So, with his gun holster still on, his shirt still in place, he lowered his pants just enough to get to the point.

So to speak.

“Wait, wait,” Delilah said suddenly.

Aiden froze.

This was it. She was going to tell him this was a mistake and they should wait until they were at least in another location before doing this.

And he was going to die of blue balls.

No. Her purse was sitting on the table next to the bed. She reached out for it, but Aiden, with his longer reach, got it for her, dragging the heavy thing to her outstretched hands.

“Thanks. Can’t forget this.”

He almost asked what, until she pulled out a condom packet and grinned up at him.

“Right, yeah, absolutely,” he said, pretending that he’d been thinking of having safe sex this whole time and hadn’t forgotten it like a moron.

If Delilah noticed his bluff—and he suspected she did with how astute she could be—she ignored it, saying nothing about it as she sheathed him with skillful hands.

He moaned at her touch, wanting so much more of her.

“I figured you would like that,” she said, giving his cock a gentle, teasing stroke that nearly had him imploding.

Fuck him sideways, that felt amazing.

She was determined to make him come undone, it seemed.

He was fine with that because once she lay back, ready and open for him, perfect breasts showcasing pink, budding nipples, Aiden swore he felt himself become a little more animalistic.

He leaned in and took what they both wanted.

The sweet heat, the rush of pleasure, and wet clench around his cock nearly brought him to orgasm right there.

He forced himself to relax. God, it was amazing, but he so wished they could take their time, hours, even days.

Some newly mated couples went into their rooms and didn’t come out for a couple of weeks.

That was definitely on his list of things to do after the case was solved.

“Hurry, hurry,” Delilah begged, her breath warm in his ear, her small arms surprisingly strong around his back.

Then he felt her claws.

Right. Honey badger.

He grinned and gave her what she wanted. What they both needed.

Delilah moaned for him, throwing her head back, exposing her throat to Aiden's lips and tongue.

He took what was offered to him.

Those claws of hers were soon not just pleasantly scratching at his back. They were doing a little digging.

Enough to be painful, and maybe she would get a touch of blood, but it wasn't enough to make him stop.

If anything, the pain helped to prevent his orgasm just that little bit longer.

Fuck. He'd wanted to be quick because of necessity, not because he was going to implode so fast it made his head spin.

Not that Delilah seemed to notice as she pushed her hips back against his. Their bodies cracking together again and again created a lewd noise in the air that he liked, and soon, Aiden found himself pressing his lips together, desperately trying to focus as he breathed through his nose.

The pain of her claws was no longer enough.

"Come with me," Delilah mewled. "I want to feel it. Right there."

She said many other amazing things in his ear short of telling him he had a Superman-style dick, but he got the point.

She was close, he was close. Time to stop fighting it.

He fucked her hard and fast, enjoying the short, high-pitched shouts she made, though another part of him was aware that any agents, even if they weren't right outside the door, would be able to hear them.

Her sex clenched and unclenched around his shaft as the tension in her body gave way to something more liquid.

Her body seemed to give out just as Aiden grunted, the pressure inside bursting free, and he gasped low in his throat, trying to make somewhat of an effort to keep quiet.

Though he doubted it mattered.

Everyone in AILE was going to know what was up, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Still, for a few precious seconds, none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was how warm Delilah was. How she breathed beneath him, the softness of her skin, and many other little things he wasn't going to get to enjoy just yet.

He wanted to taste her. He wanted to fuck her again. His dick was still hard, and he knew it wouldn't take much to get him back into the spirit of things. Her, too.

But they couldn't.

He tried to move, to move off of her, but shockingly, her arms tightened around his shoulders.

"No, wait."

He stopped. "What is it?"

"Stay there," she said.

Her voice was small, almost sleepy.

The vulnerability he heard there stunned him, and of course, it made him want to relax into her as well.

"I didn't take you for the cuddling type. Not that I'm complaining."

"Mmm, good," she said, those dark eyes still closed, a smile on her lips that were a shocking shade of pink.

They hadn't been that color a moment ago.

"We can't stay like this for long."

Even with all his clothes on, and even if she could turn herself into her badger form for self-defense, that didn't mean they would be on top of their game if someone were to break into here right now.

He didn't want to put her through that.

Delilah looked as though she wanted to say something to that, but she didn't get the chance when Aiden's phone rang.

No choice. He couldn't stay with her no matter how much he wanted to keep the connection going.

He had to answer it. He was on the job, after all.

He pulled himself away from Delilah, noting the look of disappointment on her face as he adjusted his clothes while sticking the cell to his ear.

"Reyes here." Aiden put it on speakerphone.

"Our friend just struck again. There's a body."

Aiden froze.

Delilah sat up, looking at him with wide, aware eyes as she heard Jack's voice.

Their brief moment was done. Now it was time to get back to the real world. "Where?"

CHAPTER
TEN

“He’s gone after Olivia Gray and her two mates, Chase Belair and Mike Stone.” The agents who’d survived his attack. Who brought in the carcass of another bunyip.

“The body, it’s one of them?” Delilah asked.

“No, it’s the housekeeper. Non-shifter. We’re guessing she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Saw something she shouldn’t have,” Jack answered.

She immediately dressed and barely gave Aiden the chance to end his conversation with Jack before announcing her plans. “We have to get to that body right away.”

He blinked at her. “Uh, no. That’s not happening. You can examine it when it comes in to the lab.”

“No one on the team trusts each other. We don’t know who’s working together on a cover-up, who might tamper with evidence or contaminate the body. I’m going.”

“There are enough eyes on it to make sure it doesn’t get contaminated before it gets to you.”

As much as she’d loved him a few minutes ago, at the moment, she wanted to strangle him.

Straightening her shoulders, Delilah put her foot down. “And I said I’m going to the scene. If we can find any

evidence of the creature's identity, then I want to be there to grab it before a bunch of humans show up and stomp all over an AILE crime scene. I don't care who is taking photos, I don't care who is gathering the information, but I'm going to gather the information I need to do my job, even if I have to steal a car to get there."

Aiden's lips thinned. She could see the wheels turning in his head. Was he actually thinking about keeping her in here?

"Just so you know"—she let her claws out—"being a honey badger doesn't make me very nice when I'm angry."

She didn't like threatening her love interests. It was pretty much the guaranteed way to lose them all, but if one happened to get in the way of her doing her job correctly, then drastic measures needed to be taken.

"So I see."

He was angry. She could feel it in the air, the heat and pressure that was suddenly between them, whereas, a few moments ago, it had only been softness and light.

Delilah didn't like this, but what could she do about it? She'd come this far, and there was no way she could turn back now.

Not when she'd already threatened him. To back down now would be...

It would be weak.

Slowly, Aiden lifted a finger, his arm practically trembling as he pointed it at her, his expression stern.

A silent warning.

"If we get there, and they tell us to fuck off, then I don't care how much you want to be there, or how dedicated to your

job you are, we will be leaving.”

“I understand.”

Aiden shook his head. “No, I don’t think you do. You were brought in for your expertise, but that doesn’t mean you get to strut around like you own the place. If Jack doesn’t want either of us there, we will go. If I get so much as a hint that the giant fucker is still lurking around, I am going to grab you, throw you over my shoulder, and run the fuck out of there with you.”

“Even if it means leaving everyone else to die? Not very professional of you.”

“Yes, even if it does mean leaving the others to die. You’re my mate. What the hell do you think this is?”

Delilah’s stomach tightened. She didn’t expect to hear that from him, and the intensity of his words gutted her.

Hard to not feel like total crap by his commitment to her when she’d threatened him with violence.

“Get your things. We’re going,” Aiden said, opening the motel room door.

“Oh, and one more thing.” He stopped in the doorway, glancing back at her with that toothy grin. “If you think you could do much damage to me, you’re out of your mind.”

He was out the door, laughing, before Delilah could find something to throw at the back of his head.

Bastard.

She fumbled a little more than she would have wanted to while following him out. Despite that awkward encounter, he didn’t stay very far away from her. Never more than twenty feet at least, because, when she finally got out of their motel room, instead of waiting impatiently in his truck, he was by

the stairs, watching the door, and only moving when she appeared in his line of sight.

During the drive to the scene, Delilah had a chance to think some more about the way she'd handled that.

Had the situation been reversed, she would have seriously considered whether or not she could be in a relationship with him, mate or no mate.

But he was still here, and the more unbothered he looked about the whole thing, the more it got under her skin.

“I wouldn't have actually attacked you.”

“Yes, you would have. I saw it on your face.”

Oh God, she was going to implode from the rush of heat. “I wasn't trying to...that isn't how I normally—”

“Don't worry about it. Like I said, I can handle my own, and I don't think you're some loose cannon who's going to stab me with something when my back is turned any time I annoy you. I get it. You take your job seriously, and details were kept from you when you agreed to come here. I'd be on edge, too.”

She shouldn't be so easily willing to accept being absolved like this, but at the same time, she couldn't help herself. He was offering her a chance to forget that he'd seen something ugly in her, and she wanted to take it.

“Really?”

“Yes, of course. That being said, do me a favor and don't do that again, and we'll be great friends.”

Keeping his eyes on the road, Aiden reached his hand out to her.

Delilah completely forgot about how strange it was to be driving on the wrong side of the road and how she normally wouldn't have liked him taking any hand off the wheel as she grabbed it.

“Deal.”

“Good,” he said, grinning as he put both hands back on the wheel. “Because I wouldn't want to tie you up and toss you in a closet.”

“*What?*”

He laughed at her. “Don't forget, I'm driving!”

That was the only reason why he wasn't a dead man as far as she was concerned.

But with his laughter, Delilah was able to relax a bit.

With only the two of them in the vehicle, there was a sense of ease she felt that hadn't been there since yesterday.

She supposed it was easy enough to feel at peace when it was just her and her mate. No chance of an agent jumping out at them when they were the only ones on the road and in the truck.

As for her guess on who their killer might be...

She hoped she was wrong. It was never a good look for any department, especially in a position of authority meant to protect, to have let someone like that slip into their ranks.

It wasn't that long of a drive. Maybe thirty minutes on the road, if that, but the more they drove, the more Delilah came to grips with the fact that she had absolutely no idea where she was.

She was in a foreign country with no layout of the land, and even using a map might have been a struggle for her. It definitely would have been a stupid move to run out on her own when there was a shifter out there who was attacking other shifters and humans alike.

Especially one as huge as a bunyip.

The reminder of the tracks and imprints it had left behind made her shiver.

Even the honey badgers would have trouble taking that thing down if every single one of them put all their strength into it.

No. She was only going because Aiden was with her. He wouldn't have needed to tie her up and throw her into a closet. Refusing to take her would have been enough.

When they arrived, Delilah was stunned to see a small cottage. A home.

Someone's house.

The door had been busted open, the frame partially broken with it, and the neighboring window had definitely felt that impact, as it had a spiderweb of cracks in it.

A simple tap to the glass might be enough to shatter it.

She couldn't see any blood yet, but she could smell it.

Enough of it to know that someone was definitely dead.

Fresh blood and an actual crime scene made her...not squeamish.

But angry.

She was furious.

That Goddamn freak had come here and tried to kill everyone inside after spending the night before spying on Delilah like a creep.

There were already agents around, moving quickly, faster than any human unit. The fact that the people who were renting the place were agents made it extra personal.

The fact that this had been done recently meant this guy might still be nearby.

He might want to see what was going on, the reactions to his work.

Everyone was a suspect, but she still had her thoughts about who was responsible, and she didn't see him around.

She did see Jack by a van with other agents; some were taking notes.

She recognized Chase Belair and Mike Stone from their photos. Even with speedy shifter healing, it was clear Chase was still recovering from being attacked.

A woman with impossibly red hair was with them, and Chase was leaning on her just to stand, along with his cane, which could make for a useful weapon if he was ever attacked again.

They hadn't been there during the attack. Gone out to an early dinner, a chance to feel normal, just to come back to their rental home and find out the woman who cleaned for the owner had been torn to pieces.

"I don't think we should be speaking to them," Aiden said. "Let's let the others handle that."

Delilah couldn't agree more. "I just need to see the scene itself before the body gets taken away."

And before too many other smells interfered with her own senses.

“Okay, but just remember you’re not officially here.”

“I know. I just want to take a look.”

She put on protective shoe covers to make sure she didn’t track any dirt into the house.

The body was in pieces. There were multiple team members in full scrubs taking photos. Delilah and Aiden were warned to keep back, but they weren’t escorted out.

Delilah was shocked by how much trouble she had with this.

Of the thousands of cadavers she’d dealt with in her career, she would have thought this wouldn’t be an issue.

Apparently, there was a difference between a body on her table, in a clean environment, and blood-soaked walls and carpet.

Aiden, on the other hand, was taking it like a champion.

He looked around, observing the scene as though this was normal for him.

Completely different from the man she’d first met who was uncomfortable with the idea of her cutting open bodies in a sterile and professional environment.

When he looked at her, she had to look away from him, not wanting him to see how clearly out of her element she was.

Though he could probably already see it.

Christ, maybe she should have let him tie her up, and though she’d prefer the bed, even the closet would have been preferable to this.

“You good?”

Delilah nodded, gathering herself up like the big girl she was and putting her shit back together.

“I’m good, just taking it in.”

He didn’t ask her if she wanted to leave or tell her that she could take her time if she wanted, to breathe, or any other encouragement people gave when they didn’t know what to say.

He didn’t say anything, just went with the assumption she knew what she was doing and could get herself together.

Delilah appreciated that. Being treated like a professional.

Time to act like one.

She took in the scene. Not just with her eyes but her nose as well.

Sense of smell was so important for any shifter working a crime scene.

The body was fresh. Delilah thought she’d worked on fresh bodies before, but that was nothing compared to this.

The stink of the bunyip was there as well as the blood smell. It was much like back outside the motel.

“You think it was him?” Aiden asked.

So difficult. There was the scent of the lavender candles, which had been burning at some point, the cleaner that the poor woman had been using before she was caught off guard, all the blood that seemed to coat absolutely everything, and then the stink of the monster that turned what must have been a lovely cottage into a horror show.

The entire place would need to be burned down to get the smell out.

The victim must have fought like hell to get away, based on how much damage was done in the room. Maybe she was frozen in fear for a half-second when the creature burst in through the door.

That would have been a half a second too long, and then it was way too late for her.

But beneath all of that, Delilah's badger nose was able to pick up on something small and barely there. Something other shifters might not pick up on because they weren't looking for the same thing she was.

"He shifted back into his human form and walked back out the way he'd come in."

The back door was just fine. She could see it from her standing point because the cottage was that snug. She doubted anyone else on the team had shut the door or that the creature would have gently opened the door when it finished with its kill.

She immediately moved for what was left of the front door.

She couldn't believe it. She was right. She didn't need to look at the body or find a tooth or a bit of fur.

It was *him*.

And he wasn't far away.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Aiden recognized the look in her eyes as she went back out the front door.

She was like a bloodhound, and he was pretty sure he knew what she was looking for.

He wasn't the best for smelling things outside of the water.

Another reason it was good to have a mammal shifter here.

She could pick up on things they couldn't.

“Is it him?”

“Yes,” she said, and then nothing else.

That was all he needed. Aiden looked up and glanced back to where Jack was still standing with Mike, Chase, and Olivia.

They'd all clearly noticed him by now, and Aiden gestured for Jack to follow them.

Which he did.

And fast.

Mike with him.

That was fine. The more, the merrier, as far as he was concerned.

“What do you got?” Jack asked. “And I’ll get into what the hell you’re doing here later.”

Delilah was the one who answered that for both of them. “I’m here because you asked me to be here, and I’ve got the skills you want so badly. And because I can smell our suspect.”

“I figured as much. Do you have a grasp on where he might be?”

“Very close by,” Delilah said, still hardly looking at any of the men trailing after her, too focused on her mission.

“She’s connected the smell to someone she passed back at HQ. It’s him. Kirk is the one who did this.”

Mike Stone snarled. The man’s teeth came out, and his twisted face changed to something a little more unsightly than it already was. “You lead me right to the fucker, and I’ll tear him to pieces.”

“Not without me you’re not,” Aiden said, just to have that nasty mouth of teeth pointed right at him.

“He almost killed Chase. He tried to go after Olivia. You’d better not get in my fucking way with this.”

Mike’s file said he was a goblin shark. He was looking a little like a goblin at that moment, but Aiden had seen worse, and he wasn’t about to back down.

Not with this.

“And you better not get in mine. He went to the motel where Delilah and I were staying. He was spying on her investigation on the body. You better believe you’re getting an extra set of teeth on this one, so don’t even think about getting cute and stopping me.”

“Both of you, shut the fuck up.” Shockingly, the command came from Delilah, and not from Jack, as she stopped moving.

“He’s close.”

She didn’t have to say that twice, and Aiden didn’t need a mammal shifter’s sense of smell to catch onto what she’d gotten.

There was a distinctive trashy scent in the air. Of something sour.

He would have thought it was body odor from a guy who just needed to wash his clothes or use more body spray, but now that he had a better idea of what he was looking for, had already smelled the bunyip when it had been sitting outside his motel room, watching him pay for the pizza he and Delilah ate last night, Aiden knew what this was.

Just as he knew the guy was watching them.

It was a mistake to bring Delilah out here.

“Hey, Mike, you got your weapon on you?” Aiden asked, drawing his as he tried to see anything through the trees.

“Damn right I do,” Mike said, pulling his weapon.

Jack did the same.

With his free hand, Aiden grabbed onto Delilah’s arm, pulling her behind him.

“Baby, you might want to get behind me. Shift if you want to, but don’t engage.”

Delilah blinked, as though coming out of her huntress mode, realizing where she was, and immediately she jumped behind Aiden.

“Right,” she said, looking around with an expression that conveyed she really wasn’t sure how she’d gotten here.

Fuck. This wasn’t good.

“Agent Kirk! Show yourself. We know you’re there,” Jack said, his weapon pointed down at the ground, his eyes alert as he scanned the area.

Aiden might not be able to get into his full shark form, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t get his teeth out.

Mike seemed to have the same idea, as a full smile of jagged teeth appeared in his mouth.

The most fucked-up-looking shark teeth Aiden had ever seen in his life.

But then he grinned.

Those teeth would scare the piss out of any serial killer, and that was exactly what they needed right now.

“Don’t move.”

Delilah’s hands gripped his bicep a little tighter. Her nails—or were those her claws?—sunk a little deeper into his skin.

Jack hadn’t spoken. Mike sure as hell didn’t either.

Aiden had never heard that high-pitched voice before. It wasn’t feminine but almost like that of a teenager who hadn’t quite gotten the drop that the other kids did when going through puberty.

Which was definitely not in any of the files he’d read about the guy.

A rustle in the bushes nearby forced Aiden to move back around, putting himself between Delilah and the source of that noise.

His teeth were ready to bite the fuck out of anything that got too close to her, and his finger was on his trigger, ready to kill whoever was there if they made a move on anyone in their group.

“Step out where we can see you,” Jack commanded.

To their surprise, he did.

Greg Kirk, naked as the day he was born, and stinking of the blood around his mouth and on his body, stepped out.

He had his gun on him, pointed back at them.

Aiden wondered how he'd managed to bring the gun with him when he attacked in that ugly-ass bunyip shape of his.

Jack shook his head, looking the man over.

Aiden couldn't blame him. Fucker looked like a vampire. Just looking at him was enough to make Aiden ashamed that he hadn't been suspicious the first time he saw the guy.

“Kirk, what the fuck, man. It was you this whole time?” Jack asked. “If you needed any help with something, we would have been there for you. We've all seen some fucked-up shit, so whatever it was that brought you down this path, we could have helped.”

He was taking the sympathetic, we're-all-your-friends-here, bullshit route.

Aiden wasn't going to lie. If he wasn't a professional, he might have shot the fucker right then and there.

Kirk seemed to know that, too. He shook his head. “You wouldn't have helped me. You were all concerned with being a badass task force. You let me come along for the ride, but I was never really part of the team.”

That was enough for Mike to blow up on the guy. “You were with us on this! *We* never thought you were less of a teammate, you prick! You came after Chase and Olivia, and they had nothing to do with this!”

Delilah spoke up. “But the attacks were happening before the team got to Scotland.”

Aiden looked at her, realization dawning on him. He retracted his teeth. “The first bunyip was the real killer. Kirk just picked up where he left off, attacking Chase and Carol when Mike and Olivia were in the water. He’s just a copycat killer.”

“*There!* Right there!” he snapped, pointing his gun firmly at them. “Everyone dismissing me. I was told I couldn’t be a field agent because my scent would distract from any crime scenes, that I couldn’t question witnesses. I was left out. Imagine how it felt when *I* realized the killer was a bunyip, while you idiots were chasing down a *kraken*, even recruiting a civilian instead of using what I knew.”

“You never spoke up about your suspicions,” Jack said. “I would have listened.”

Aden figured he might as well try to be diplomatic, since that was what Jack was going for. “You made some mistakes, Kirk, but they can be amended.”

“No, they can’t.” He glanced to the side at Delilah, who was still trying to stay out of the gun’s aim. “One day. One fucking day was all it took? You fucking bitch.”

“Hey, hey, come on now,” Aiden said. “We get it. You’re in a bind, but we’re all here to help you.”

“Then why do you have your guns out?”

“Are you serious?” Mike snapped. “You want to know why we have our guns out when you’re covered in blood and pointing a weapon at us? You miserable sack of—”

“We’re protecting ourselves, just as much as you are,” Jack said. “We know you want to come in. You snapped, but you’re done with this. You didn’t want to hurt those people, not really.”

Kirk looked at Jack, something in his expression changing.

Was he right? Hard for Aiden to say. One two-minute chat wasn’t enough to determine what was going through Kirk’s brain.

But Aiden was going to go along with that.

Which was why he put his gun away, slowly, keeping his hands up otherwise.

“That’s right. You came to the motel so Delilah would catch your scent, didn’t you? Honey badgers have great senses, and smell is no different. You were there not to harm her but to try and get help so you could stop.”

Kirk narrowed his eyes. “You think I don’t know what you’re doing? I took the same training you did. You’re trying to make me feel guilty.”

“Don’t you?” Aiden asked.

Kirk said nothing, and that was telling enough.

“This guy right here, with the teeth?” Aiden tilted his head toward Mike. “Maybe I can understand you wanting a piece of him. He seems annoying enough. Maybe you were mad at Chase and Carol, two bird shifters who were brought on the team and used more than you were for the mission. You were mad at all of them for bringing Olivia, a civilian, into the mix

and making her more useful to the team than you were. So you thought you'd piggyback on the other bunyip's reign of terror, to see if you could do it, really do some damage to someone, but then it got to be too much."

"They chose to put a civilian at risk over me," Kirk said, looking at Mike as though *he* were the bad guy. "No real agent would do that."

Aiden wasn't going there, but if Kirk was, then he would play along.

The more he talked, the more it was looking as though there was a shadow of hesitation within the other man. His hand didn't exactly tremble, but it almost looked as though he wanted to lower his arm. The slight bend in his elbow gave Aiden a hope he absolutely should not have felt.

"Exactly. You would have done things differently. You had the training, and you were brave enough, strong enough, you could have caught the killer, if only they'd turned to you for help. I get it. Anyone would be pissed."

"Cocksucker," Mike muttered, and Aiden knew that was for him.

Whatever. He would get over it so long as they brought this asshole in.

Then Kirk's arm tightened, his face twisting into something grotesque, scales and fur pushing out through his pores.

Aiden's heart rate spiked, and he sensed that same reaction from the others.

"You're a liar," Kirk said. "You'll let them tear me apart. I was just going to attack them, to scare the birds and the civilian, but now it's too late. I killed Carol, and then I killed

more. There are deaths I'm responsible for, and we all know how this is going to end for me."

He angled his gun just enough to terrify the fuck out of Aiden, to make him put his whole body in front of Delilah when the gun went off.

He didn't care what anyone said. Things did not go in slow motion when he was about to die. He didn't see his life flash before his eyes either.

He did feel a sense of regret that he hadn't gotten the chance to know Delilah a little better.

He went down. Delilah screamed. More popping noises shot off.

Fuck, was she hit? He hoped not. Stupid knees got too weak and wobbly on him, but then she was kneeling over top of him, her cool hands touching his hot face.

Mike and Jack were shouting something. He couldn't see them, but he smelled the stink of blood as they shot at Kirk.

Whatever. If this was how he died...

Seeing Delilah above him, the weak light through the canopy above her head, highlighting her beautiful, dark hair... this was a pretty good view to die by.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Jack and Mike dealt with Kirk before he could shift into his bunyip form.

Which he tried to do as soon as Aiden went down. Jack and Mike started shooting, and Delilah focused on her fallen mate.

She administered first aid, and Aiden closed his eyes. “Stay with me. You’re going to be fine,” she said, trying to convince herself as much as him.

It was too late for Gary Kirk. Two guns pumping him full of lead was definitely too much for even a creature like him to handle, whether or not he shifted.

Delilah barely noticed when he stopped thrashing around. She didn’t care. Her job now was to put pressure on Aiden’s wound and keep him alive until help arrived.

A shot right to the chest. Close to the heart. She could still hear it beating, but she couldn’t stop the tears from falling. It took several precious seconds for her to collect her calm. *I’m a professional, damn it.*

His heart hadn’t been struck, and it was still beating. She could hear the softness of his breath, but that didn’t mean he had all the time in the world.

Jack soon came to stand over her and let her know he'd called for help. "Backup was just a bit behind us after we left the cottage. They'll be here very soon."

He was right. The entire team flooded the area just a moment later.

Delilah was relieved. If they'd had to wait for a proper ambulance, she would have lost her damned mind.

Still, things seemed to move in slow motion as she waited for the people who were trained to work on living bodies put their skills to work to save the man she loved.

She didn't leave his side when it came time to let go of his hand for him to be taken away.

She had to watch as Aiden was scooped up and taken to one of the team vans. Something inside her went with him.

If he died...

No. She was not going to think about that. This wasn't happening to her. Aiden wasn't going to die, and when he recovered, she swore she was never going to call him or think about him as Agent Reyes ever again, no matter how angry she got with him.



"HE'LL BE FINE. He'll be all right," Delilah said, pacing the hospital hallway. She nearly reached up to grab at her own hair in a fit of desperation but stopped herself when she realized her hand was still covered in his blood.

Delilah wanted to wash it off, but she didn't want to leave the hallway, in case someone came out with news.

The hospital was tiny since they only took care of shifters. It was quiet, and if she left, even for a minute, it felt as though Aiden wouldn't be alive when she got back to him.

So she stayed.

And stayed.

And stayed.

Jack eventually came in to see her, but she hadn't so much as sat down.

She still stared at the door where Aiden was being kept.

"He'll be all right," Jack said. "These people know what they're doing."

Delilah nodded, though she wouldn't be convinced until she saw it for herself.

"Is Kirk dead?" She had to know that much. Everything happened within seconds. She needed to know.

"Yes, he's dead."

"Oh." No satisfaction came to her for knowing that. She'd thought it would.

Jack seemed to stumble for something to say. "You did good work. We wouldn't have found his identity so quickly without your help. You really did the honey badgers proud."

Delilah nodded again. "Thanks, but I'm not really in the mood to talk right now."

She didn't want to hear any praise heaped on her for leading Aiden right to the bullet that ripped open his chest.

If he died, it would be entirely her fault.

“I understand,” Jack said. He put his hand to her shoulder and squeezed. “He will be all right, though. I’m sure of it.”

She wished she could have that confidence. Maybe she was only so worried because it was her mate in there? Was Delilah that much more invested in this that she couldn’t have that same confidence that Jack had?

Even thinking of it in terms like that didn’t make her stomach stop twisting around.

She didn’t even notice it when the sun went down.

After what seemed like an eternity, the doctor finally stood before her. “The high-velocity spear bullet caused a great deal of tissue damage, but we were able to patch him up and stabilize him.”

Delilah felt the tears welling up in her eyes again. “Thank you. Can I go see him now?”

He told her she could, though not until he gently suggested that she might want to wash her hands.



AIDEN FELT LIKE ABSOLUTE SHIT.

Like the first time he’d gotten hammered and woke up the next morning with his mouth tasting like everything he’d eaten the day before because he’d puked it all up.

In this case, even though he could tell he hadn’t been vomiting, his entire body still felt tight and achy.

The only good thing about waking up was the pressure he felt against his hand and the soft sigh of relief that came from Delilah as she squeezed it harder.

“Oh, thank God, you’re awake,” she said.

“Hi—” He didn’t get the chance to say anything other than that, as he found himself being kissed.

Again and again and again. In fast spurts, and then deeply, taking his breath away.

Literally. As much as he enjoyed it, the struggle to breathe was less than pleasant, and he found himself pushing back against that perfectly willing mouth.

“Not that I’m complaining, but I need to take a breath,” he said, smiling lazily up at her.

Only to stop smiling when she didn’t return it.

“What?”

“You were out for a day and a half,” she said. “How are you feeling? They had to patch your insides all back together. You’ve been healing, but still...”

“That explains why it feels like I’ve got an anvil sitting on me.” He glanced down at himself, noting the bandages. Fresh, too. Someone must have recently changed them.

Shifter or not, getting shot in the chest, or anywhere, could be fatal.

The idea that he’d almost died and left Delilah behind without the chance to see where their mating would take them did freak him out a little.

“But you’re all right, right?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“Were you shot? Did he get you?”

Her dark eyes swam. She shook her head. “No, idiot. Thanks to you. Please don’t ever do that again.”

He sighed, leaning back on his little hospital pillow. “If it keeps you alive, I’ll do it as much as I want, and you’re not going to stop me.”

He heard her laugh a little wetly. “So stupid,” she said. “That’s part of why the honey badgers like you so much.”

He opened his eyes. “What?”

She grinned, nodding. “Yeah, they’re here. They were pretty much on the plane by the time our friend was shot, so they came the rest of the way to make sure I was all right. Surprised to find out I’d found my mate.”

“Were they?”

“They’re calling me Shark Bait now.”

He laughed at that, which was a total mistake because then his chest really started to hurt.

“Fuck, *ow*.”

“Try not to do that. I don’t want you dying on me now that you’re in the clear,” she said. “I need you to be good and healthy for a long time.”

Aiden inhaled a breath. “Will do. But...Kirk is dead?”

“Yeah, Kirk’s dead. He only had to fire off one bullet before Jack and Mike let him have it.”

Aiden thought hard about that, about what it could mean.

Had Kirk done it on purpose? Suicide by officer?

Hard to tell, and they’d probably never know for sure.

Aiden didn’t want to think about that right now. He only wanted to focus on what was right in front of him.

“You were really worried about me, weren’t you?”

Delilah rolled her eyes. “Yes, dummy, I was. Don’t ever do that to me again.”

She grabbed his hand and kissed his knuckles.

It warmed Aiden in a way he’d never felt before. He wished he weren’t stuck in bed with his entire body feeling like cement, or he would have leaped up and kissed her.

“I need to get out of this bed. As fast as possible.”

“You’re staying *in* this bed for as long as it takes for you to get better,” Delilah said, that determined, bossy look back in her eyes.

“You promise to make it worth my while?”

She grinned back at him, dark eyes flashing with mischief, making him feel like prey for the first time in his life.

And he liked it.

“Of course.”

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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