



Whiskers on Kittens

A MAGICAL ROMANTIC COMEDY
(WITH A BODY COUNT)

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R. J. BLAIN

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Book 22

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22



The next time a friend dared her to steal something, Kelsie would say no. Should the friend also be a succubus, not only would she say no, she would run for the nearest border faster than a bat fleeing the dark depths of hell.

Under normal circumstances, she didn't even mind serving community service. It added spice to an otherwise boring day and gave her something productive to do.

Hoping to contain her prankster ways, the judge teams her up with a grouchy wolf of a cop with an attitude problem.

According to her virus, Kelsie needs to get the good officer out of his pants. According to her common sense, the last thing she needs or wants is a goody-goody hampering her style and getting in her way.

When they're assigned to help rescue kidnapped kittens, Kelsie knows one thing for certain: to create a Christmas miracle, she'll do a lot more than bend the law—she'll break it over her knee and unleash hell on Earth while she's at it.



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ONE



I HADN'T KNOWN THE MOUSE WAS THE SIZE OF A SMALL DOG AND WORE A DIAMOND-STUDDED COLLAR.

WHEN I BECAME BORED, trouble happened. The current flavor of trouble stood a little over five feet with light brown hair and dark eyes, putting him a solid inch taller than me. He wore his uniform well and glared at me as though he'd enjoy escorting me to the next life if given a reason.

The glare I understood.

Cats and dogs did not get along, and my nose informed me I dealt with a single male wolf of the lycanthrope variety. I doubted he'd ever met a clouded leopard lycanthrope in his life, resulting in the divine essence of female feline tormenting him. That I happened to reek of divine single female feline might do him in.

What I didn't understand was why Judge McMurphy, one of the nicer men I'd dealt with in the Chicago court system, had dragged some poor cop out for my sentencing. I especially didn't understand why the judge had requested I come along with the poor cop for a private discussion in his office along

with the attorneys. Community service was community service, and that I'd only been slapped with six months of community service astonished me.

In the judge's shoes, I would have gone for two years.

The judge made himself comfortable behind his desk, invited us all to take a seat, and promised we wouldn't have to wait long before he could get on with why we needed to have a private chat after everything had been said and done.

I pitied my attorney, who would need therapy after dealing with me. It wasn't that I had gone out of my way to give the man a hard time. I just accepted responsibility for my actions, confessed I'd broken into the home of a wealthy businessman to steal a toy mouse on a double-dog dare, and refused to rat out my succubus friend for being the one to dare me to do it.

When I'd broken into the home, I hadn't known the mouse was the size of a small dog and wore a diamond-studded collar.

The attorney especially hadn't appreciated when I'd made use of my legal rights to summon an angel to confirm I hadn't known about the collar, had done the heist as a prank, and would not be snitching on my friend in this life nor the next, not even if the Devil came calling to drag me into some dungeon to put me through hell. I'd amused the angel, who had assured me I wouldn't be doing any time in the dungeons unless I wanted to.

The innuendo had caught me so off guard I'd burst into laughter at the sheer thought of leaving the pool of divine single female felines.

The wise men ran the instant they realized I was on the prowl, the smart ones ran soon after, and the dumb ones pissed me off and often received a face full of claws if they didn't get the hint I didn't want a dumb man in my life.

Wise and smart men were few and far between. To find a single one?

I bet I could find and steal numerous priceless treasures before one of those crossed my path and stuck around.

With a pop and a flash of light, an angel appeared in the judge's office. "My apologies, Your Honor. I needed to gather some important information." The feminine tone to the angel's voice indicated she preferred to be portrayed as a female, and the red, gold, and blue barring on her feathers proved I'd somehow created a two-angel circus.

The other angel's wings were barred with blue.

With a snap of her fingers, she manifested a briefcase, which she offered to Judge McMurphy. "We have taken the liberty of discussing the situation with the owners of the toy and collar. You will not encounter any issues with the sentencing, as upon learning the details, they may have commented that cruel and unusual punishment is technically illegal."

The judge chuckled, set the briefcase down in front of him, and opened it. A puff of yellow smoke reeking of sulfur spread through the room. "I see Lucifer is involved. I should have known."

“He does prefer when mortals understand when it is futile to protest overly much. While the girl will not be protesting, as she is of the opinion she is deserving of two years of service, the boy will surely protest early and often. This will spare us from a great deal of whining.”

“Wolves are masters at whining, though. That’s part of their gig,” I informed the angel. “They smell awful when wet, they whine, and they sniff around begging for food. Some of them make themselves useful when they aren’t doing that.” I eyed the cop, who had picked the chair farthest from me. “He’s probably a hybrid if he’s working in law enforcement here. You know how Chicago gets. So, this one is probably a useful wolf, and there’s something to be said for useful wolves.”

“While he is a hybrid, he was brought in to quietly help with the trafficking woes plaguing the city. His status as a hybrid makes him sufficiently durable for the job.” The angel sat on the judge’s desk. If the angel had a head, I suspected she would be grinning. “Lycanthrope males are useful in the cases involving children. They’re more useful in cases where we want them to make children, but that is a discussion for another time. As the police force, until recently, had been complicit in the trafficking situation, using the revamped force to deal with this issue is ideal. It undoes some of the damage they have wrought in past years. There are those we do not want learning of our activities, and so we are hiding it in plain sight. I have already done the paperwork with the FBI and other bureaus in the United States to grant you access to the entirety of the country. We have only looked into the future far

enough to understand you two are our best choice for this work.”

“Miss Winfield is hardly a child,” the cop stated, and according to his tone, I disgusted him.

With a rap sheet the length of mine, which boiled down to me being a nuisance when permitted to become bored, it came as no surprise he disliked me. However, as having a brand new but sexy enemy introduced a great deal of spice to my life, I took a few moments to look him over.

According to my virus, he'd be at his most handsome naked and in my bed although she would settle with the removal of his pants for a chance to admire the goods. As I'd come out of my mother's womb with more than a few cat-like tendencies, and that had been before my infection had matured, I understood my virus's approach.

If now wasn't an option, later would be fine, but only if she could toy with him first.

Great. My virus had lost her mind. The thought of six months of community service must have done her in. I *liked* community service. Sure, I wasn't paid for the work, but it gave me something useful to do when I wasn't legitimately earning money elsewhere.

Community service did an excellent job of curtailing my rogue ways as I lacked the time or the energy to create additional trouble after working and doing my time. When unable to become bored, I behaved.

Boredom led me into trouble, always—and I created the trouble to put an end to the boredom.

To keep me out of trouble, the judge had pulled me aside at my first appearance in court and hired me to cool my heels in prison as a plant in the local slammer, grading and rating the prison system and checking for abuses of prisoners. As I liked the judge and had nothing on my schedule, I'd agreed.

I'd never gotten to do actual time in prison before. I always kept my mischief to misdemeanors that wouldn't influence my ability to work.

I'd driven half the prison staff insane by the time I'd been released a few hours before the trial and sentencing, testing the limits of their patience and rules to evaluate how they treated prisoners. I'd also gotten into three different fights with idiotic male lycanthropes who thought it was a good idea to visit the women's section of the prison.

One had gone back to his cell with his tail between his legs. The other two had gone to intensive care.

I'd emerged with bruised knuckles, a broken toe, and a healthy helping of praise from the prison security for defending myself and the other women in my section of the prison.

Judge McMurphy really should have given me at least two years of community service.

The angel chuckled. "No, she is not a child, but she loves children and would shave her fur off without hesitation or regret to save them. As this was her nature before her

lycanthropy virus matured, it is amplified in her. That is why she is here. Her punishment will be an act of service, rescuing a litter of kittens stolen from a lycanthrope couple. They have the cougar strain, and as they had some assistance from demons, the couple had a girl and four boys. These kittens are six years old and were taken from their home with the intent of trafficking them. This is where you come in, Officer Dannell. Your assignment is to, working with Kelsie, recover the kittens. The parents have requested a miracle for Christmas, and *He* has chosen you two as the vessels for *His* working. As *He* is a supporter of free will, however obnoxious free will can be, you may opt out of doing the work, but *He* is confident of your success in this matter.”

As it was mid-November, we would have a little over a month to track down the kidnappers and safely rescue the kittens. “I thought community service was supposed to be a punishment, ma’am.”

If some angel wanted me to steal kittens back from some thieving assholes, I wasn’t going to say no. That I would have to work with the disgruntled cop sent my virus for a loop. With everything right in her world, I foresaw a fulfilling few weeks that concluded with bloodshed and holiday cheer.

If work came calling, I would pass the assignments off to a few skilled people who could do almost as good of a job as me to earn some favor in my field. When possible, I’d find out about the job first, and if it helped put me in a position to bust the kidnappers, I’d mix work and pleasure in ways I hadn’t before.

If I found out any of the corporations knocking at my door were involved, I would burn their entire operations to the ground.

On second thought, it seemed only fair to warn my new partner of the reality he would soon endure. “No offense intended, Officer Dannell, but you’re going to have to arrest me for numerous acts of violence when we find these kidnappers and the kittens are safely recovered. I’m also accepting responsibility and will present myself for arrest for every damned crime I pull along the way, because if I need a car to get somewhere, and one isn’t provided, I will steal one to see these kittens home for the holidays.” On second thought, I’d just buy a car if I needed one as grand theft auto would create problems for my work life. To make it clear what I thought of him, I stared into his eyes and said, “Keep up, Mr. Goody-Goody, or be left behind. No kittens are getting trafficked on my watch.”

The cop raised a brow although he said nothing.

The angel’s laughter reminded me of winter bells tinkling in a light breeze. “And this is why *He* wishes for her to participate in their safe recovery. Officer, she has enough motivation for both of you, and while you will not approve of her methodology, you will be able to mostly keep her on the right side of the law. Mostly. I’m sure she’ll be back here for more community service hours as the law is merely something in the way of her doing what she wishes. Well, for this matter. I am sure she can navigate the legal waters with grace and skill, knowing which lines to toe during this mission.”

Judge McMurphy rummaged through the briefcase, nodded, and pulled out a stack of papers, handing them to me. “Here is the information on the kittens. You’ll need that. It includes the transcription of the interviews with their parents. Officer, welcome to the big leagues. You’ve always been by the book, which is an excellent trait in law enforcement, but it’s time you learn about the other side of how this world works. Our attorneys are both aware of how this works, and they were specifically chosen to make certain Miss Winfield’s latest caper resulted only in community service. Good work to both of you, by the way. Miss Winfield helped, as her honesty and sincerity allowed me to go for the minimum community service time the crime permits. Had the value of the mouse been less than several million dollars, I wouldn’t have even given her service time, although it is useful in this specific case. Kelsie, I was asked to speak with you regarding your wicked ways.”

I raised my brows at the judge’s commentary. “I mean, I didn’t know the mouse had been worth that much when I’d gone in. And I really believed it was rhinestones for a toy. But knowing what I know about who dared me to do it, I fully realize I deserve the six months for being stupid. And really, that mouse should be confiscated. That quality of nip and dust *cannot* be legal.”

Judge McMurphy snickered. “It was a newer strain of catnip, and it’s particularly potent on lycanthropes and shapeshifters. The pixie dust is a low grade, and it was legal for their personal use. Officer Dannell, if you require your new

partner to behave, simply give her a toy with the catnip and dust. I will make certain you have a supply.”

“Partner?” the cop growled.

The angel joined the judge in snickering, the only warning I needed that my day was about to take a sharp left turn.

“I don’t know about you, Mr. Goody-Goody, but that is the sound of you finding out something awful the next time either speak. You have made a mistake. If you hadn’t asked, you wouldn’t be getting an answer right now. I promise you, you are *not* going to like the answer to that question.” To help him understand his situation better, I dug out my phone, returned to me after having done my time in prison, pulled up the PDF of my various educational accomplishments, and handed it to him. “My problem is boredom. I’ve already paid off the debt for that education, because when I *am* working, I’m good at my job.”

The cop accepted the phone although he stared at me rather than investigate my qualifications. “What, exactly, is your job?”

“I’m a negotiator for corporations. When two companies want to make a deal and need a third party to help them with the negotiations, I’m called in. I go over the legalities of their deal, check for potential monopoly snags, and otherwise bring common sense to the table in a corporate landscape completely lacking in common sense. As I charge a rather horrific amount per hour, corporations prefer if they finish their negotiations quickly. I also work as an arbitrator for legal disputes between corporations and customers. I put in significant pro bono hours

helping certain class action lawsuits get a good start on spanking corporations as well.”

Then, as I did have a wicked side, I smiled. “Illinois, New York, California, New Jersey, and Delaware do not debar attorneys for misdemeanors and criminal mischief. These are the states I’m currently licensed to work in. As I don’t typically make any appearances in court, and I do not advertise my status as an esquire, I get called Miss Winfield rather than Dr. Winfield, Esquire, or one of my other titles.” I eyed my phone, which the officer still held. “I’m sure I have more titles from those various degrees and pieces of paper.”

The judge snickered. “When I’d gotten your file, along with a note to kindly keep your status as an attorney under wraps, as it had no relevance to your criminal mischief, I’d gotten a good laugh out of it. Your rap sheet is a work of art. I did the research while you handled that business in the prison for me. Thank you for that, by the way. Your information was quite useful. Some of your observations illustrated some issues, which are in progress of being resolved.”

“You planted her in prison?” the cop growled.

The lycanthrope male bristled, which intrigued my virus. However, as I had my fair share of street smarts, I recognized that he viewed me as a defenseless female. Of course, most lycanthrope males tended to forget a lycanthrope female did not need some man protecting her. “I had a great time. It was a new experience, and I think that all attorneys, law enforcement, and judicial employees should do at least three weeks in the slammer to have a better and fuller understanding

of the system. I learned a lot.” I leaned forward, took off my shoe, and showed off my wrapped toe. “I thought the lycanthropy virus would heal broken toes right away, but I’ve had the tape on for a week, and the swelling is just starting to go down.”

“How did you break your toe, anyway?” Judge McMurphy asked. “I saw in your file you had gotten into a dispute with several other prisoners, but there was no record on how you managed to break your toe. The bruised knuckles did not need explanation.”

“Well, when a boy likes a girl and the girl does not like the boy, things sometimes get violent. As I did not want that scum sucker’s blood anywhere near me, I decided to shove the entirety of my foot halfway down his throat. I used sufficient force that I happened to break a toe.”

“While wearing shoes?” the judge blurted.

To my amusement, both attorneys grinned.

I assumed they’d gotten access to the files and had already asked their questions about my injury, liking what they had learned.

“I sent that bastard to intensive care, Your Honor. I might not look like much, but when it’s time for a fight, I go in ready and able to do whatever it takes to win. There isn’t a need to give me a firearm. I can improvise.”

“I have every intention of making sure you’re appropriately armed, Miss Winfield,” the judge promised. “I’ve seen your qualifications. If you don’t use the gun, that is

your business, but you will be going in fully armed to make sure those kittens make it home in time for the holidays.”

I could work with that. I gestured at the cop stuck with me. “What do I need him for, anyway? Isn’t he just going to get in the way?”

The angel snickered, and she waved her hand. “He has his uses, I assure you. But his badge will gain you access to places you will want to go during your mission. He is going to temper your drive with just enough common sense to make all infractions ignorable in mortal courts. You are valuable in your current job, and you do a great deal of good for people although you specialize in corporations. You remember there are humans working for these corporations, and you help secure them better work conditions in a society that does not value workers sufficiently. I cannot help you erase his innate dislike for female felines with zero regard for trivial laws, but I can remind him that there are five young lives relying on him—and on you—to bring them home. I am confident in your ability to make the most of this situation.”

My virus could work with what the angel offered. Within a month, I’d learn enough about the wolf to determine if he was worth hunting in earnest. Our viruses would spend the entire time dancing around each other.

I wondered what his virus thought about being in the presence of a divine single female feline. Soon enough, I hoped to find out. Ready and eager to get to work, I focused my attention on the pages in my hand.

No matter what, I would bring those kittens home.



“YOU THINK I’M
BEAUTIFUL?”

TO CULTIVATE A BETTER understanding of the challenges I faced, I needed to brainstorm why traffickers would want to kidnap infected children. A few possibilities came to mind, all of which annoyed me. If caught at an early age, children could be groomed to fit certain roles. If a wealthy family wanted a dedicated wife for their son—or a dedicated man for their daughter—trafficking a young lycanthrope made sense. Over time, the virus would adapt, especially if the family groomed the chosen lycanthrope child.

The virus would eventually cooperate, as it desired a permanent mate, always.

After stealing a pad of paper and a pen from the judge, I jotted down my beginning notes, which boiled down to the various ways someone with more money than sense might take advantage of a child in the trafficking world. Once I pursued the wealthy family route, I delved into the darker world of criminal circles.

Chicago boasted numerous crime rings with various factions warring for dominance. The last I’d checked, the vampires ruled the roost with one brood setting the general

rules of conduct. From time to time, the vampires came out to play when I negotiated.

Sometimes, they wanted to join in and cut a deal—and sometimes, they wanted to make or break deals. I'd played the game long enough I had the names and numbers of several vampires in my phone. I picked the device up off the judge's desk and eyed it before turning my attention to the angel, who paced around the room, waiting for something. "Is this a good idea?"

Sometimes, asking cut out a great deal of red tape. Other times, it opened gateways to my personal version of hell.

I wouldn't know until I tried.

Something tickled the inside of my head, and a moment later, the angel giggled. "That would surely introduce some chaos, which is neither good nor bad. You would get results, but I cannot tell you if they are the results you want. Some things you will have to decide for yourself. However, you would test the patience of your wolf quite well with that scheme."

Excellent. My virus enjoyed the idea of toying with the cop, which would guarantee an absence of boredom from my life until Christmas. "Do I get some slip proving ownership?"

"Alas, according to mortal laws, you do not get to own the wolf without his consent. I recommend either a formal wedding ceremony or a courthouse session to secure his consent. He even has some value on your taxes, although not as much as you might like."

With my earnings, he'd have to be worth a fortune to make a dent in my yearly tax bill. I minimized my tax bill through taking on certain negotiations for the government, knocking down how much I owed from a little over forty percent to a little under twenty percent. "I can afford a freeloader."

The angel snickered. "You certainly can. He would be quite the pampered police officer by the time you finished with him, and he even might keep you out of community service part of the time."

"Why don't you try for all of the time," the cop muttered.

"I enjoy community service, and it works out better when it's forced community service. You see more of the problems on the streets and you're in a better position to do something about it. I could volunteer, but it's not the same. I get to have fun before I do my good deeds."

"Is she lying?" he asked.

"She is not. Laws are things she understands very well, but she challenges the system because it sharpens her mind and her skills. The consequences are rewards for her. She abides by her community service time because she wants to. She could easily pay her way out of the system."

The wealthy could—and often did. "He's going to go home in a state of true despair at this rate."

"He will not be going home," the angel replied. "But the state of despair will begin in earnest when he realizes he will be sharing a hotel room with a divinely beautiful, single female feline."

I stared at the angel with wide eyes. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“I have seen your soul and know its worth. You are beautiful in flesh and spirit. Perhaps if you engaged with more males you would hear those words more often. It is a good thing to practice.”

“I don’t like dumb men,” I complained. “And the smart ones always run.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Officer Dannell stated.

I raised a brow at his lack of hesitation and his willingness to speak in such a way everyone could hear him.

My virus accepted his challenge, leaving me to either give her what she wanted or get ready for a fight.

The feline in me demanded I put up a fight until giving her precisely what she wanted.

Two could play his game, but I’d play the game with the angel, who had sided with me thus far. “Is it the wealth, the power, or the copious amounts of divine beauty?”

“All three,” the angel replied. “Your wealth worries them, for they know you will never be dependent on them. This bothers weak men. The smart ones are often wise enough to understand they will never be able to control you. You claim the power that is yours and wield it with a refined sense of justice, which scares off the weak men. Not only will they never be able to control you, they will never be able to undermine your authority. You have made that for yourself, you have claimed it, and you use it as needed, wielding the

wisdom you have gathered over the years as a weapon. And as for the divine beauty portion, beauty *is* in the eye of the beholder, and the men who run from you understand your beauty is a sword sheathed in thorns. Should you not offer them the hilt, they will be left bleeding.”

I hadn't thought of the whole beauty with thorns part as a lesson of consent rather than merely being prickly. How interesting. “And here I thought I was just looking for love in all the wrong places.”

“Well, you have learned for yourself that prison is not a good place to look for love.”

I giggled because it was true. “But the look on that one guy's face when I relocated his balls into his throat. A pretty little thing like me? Able to work him over like that? He never saw it coming.”

The angel snickered. “That is one way to put it. Deserved, I assure you. You did the world a service, as you worked him over with such enthusiasm you have done significant damage to his ability to produce fruit. And by significant, I mean due to his decision to ignore the starting symptoms of infection, he will become like a barren field. You have done the world a great service with a rather violent act.”

The men in the room winced. I allowed myself a grim smile. “A suiting punishment in my opinion.”

“And due to the nature of the injury, no demon, devil, nor angel will offer him assistance should he ever wish to bear fruit.”

“How did that stay off her record?” the cop asked, and he regarded his folder of intel with a frown.

“Self-defense and cases of defense of another are not added to the record of inmates,” the angel replied. “As she acted in defense of another *and* in self-defense, her record was not modified while the incident was added to his permanent record. Had she not been in the prison system, she may have even received compensation.”

“That’s irritating, really. I did good work in that prison, and the best I got was a pat on the head and told I’d done a good job. I really couldn’t care less if that was added to my record. It’s better for the printers that it’s not. I’d have a rap sheet twenty miles long if every incident of self-defense or defense of another was dutifully recorded.”

In a dry voice, Officer Dannel replied, “That’s quite the exaggeration.”

I loved the sound of an angel’s laughter, so much like the tinkling of bells on a brisk winter day. “She is not exaggerating. If I were to gather a report for every such thing, put it on one sheet of paper per incident, the paper trail might readily exceed a few miles. None of these things ever make it to her record for she is never guilty of a crime. At most, she suggests that she pay community service because violence should not be her *first* response, but she enjoys community service. It keeps her busy and makes her happy. I recommend you seed out acceptable amounts of temptation so she might have her stints serving the people. It is not nearly as much fun if she just shows up and does it.”

According to the cop's expression, he verged on becoming rather ill over what he heard. "You have got to be kidding me."

Once again, the angel laughed. "You know I cannot lie. Kelsie, do tell him about your first foray into becoming a protector of those who cannot protect themselves. This will help him better understand the marvel that is you."

I held up four fingers. "I was this many years old, and a boy was hitting a kitten. I stopped the boy from hitting the kitten with my fists, rescued the kitten, and kept her until she passed from old age. I had named her Justice. My punishment was to keep and care for the kitten, which had been his until his momma found out he'd been beating his kitten. As I had come to the defense of the kitten, his momma talked to my momma, and that's how I got my first pet. That boy learned to walk the straight and narrow, and his momma was wise enough he never got another pet. And I may have quietly reported him to the authorities after I began seeking out my first degree and had him put on watch for animal abuse. He now cannot adopt any animal without verification from an angel that he will not abuse them." I considered the angel with interest. "I did that to practice the reporting tools available to civilians. Did it do any good?"

"You have saved many a dog and cat from a poor and short life. He attempted angelic verification once, and the judge was informed he should be put on close watch for abuses against humans as well. He does not like it, but he does walk the straight and narrow now."

I gave my new partner my undivided attention. “You don’t have to like my methods. You don’t even have to like me. But for as long as we’re partnered together, all that matters is making sure those kittens make it home to their family safe and sound.” After putting my resume on my phone with the hefty chunk of degrees and certifications I possessed visible, I waved the device in his face, holding it steady only long enough for him to comprehend what I discussed. “That is why I went through all that work. That’s why I tango with corporations bigger than they should be. That’s why I take on cases for the small dog and get into fights with the big dogs. If I don’t, who will? I’m not expecting an answer to that question. I am expecting you to tango with me on this, even if it means you have to toe lines you’d normally dodge because you want to be a knight in shining armor.” Flashing a grin, I gathered my notes and stuffed them into my briefcase. “Your place or mine, Dannell?”

“Yours. That way I can check to see what else you’ve stolen before we hit the road.”

I appreciated the subtle hint of humor in his tone. “In good news for you, it doesn’t take me long to pack. I keep a bag ready and wash the clothes I keep in it once a week so I’m fresh and ready to conquer at a moment’s notice.” I finished packing my things, double checked I had everything, and faced the judge. “Anything else, Your Honor?”

“If you can find time to submit your comprehensive report on your jail stay before you go overboard, that would be great. I’d like to act on it sooner than later.”

“You’ll have it by tomorrow morning,” I promised. “I’ll get the cop to drive while I work on the comprehensive. Was the basic acceptable?”

“The basic might give me an ulcer,” the judge complained.

“I should probably get checked for an ulcer,” I admitted. “That jail food ripped through my stomach like you wouldn’t believe. On the surface, it looks like food, but somehow, they found a way to make food itself the true punishment of imprisonment.”

“While your stomach endured hardship, you are not at risk of an ulcer at this point,” the angel stated. “However, those who are in for a longer period of time are certainly at risk, and the food situation at the prison should be addressed. She makes no exaggeration regarding the quality of food there. While prison is a punishment, it should not be an inhumane one. At current, it is. I would not feed that slop to a pig or a dog.”

“Can I get that on record?” The judge grabbed a piece of paper and jotted a note, which he taped to his monitor so he wouldn’t forget it later.

“You absolutely may. Once the children are on the road, we can talk more about her stay at the prison, which you can compare with her report. And Kelsie? You need not write an entire book on your stay. Simply leave a note where you wish for me to expand, and I will take on the burden for you. You should be using your time on more important things.” Before I could protest over the prison system’s importance, the angel raised her hand to stop me. “Yes, it is important, but the lives

of those kittens are more important. The prisoners have earned their punishments, and while inhumane comparatively, you have done the work needed to resolve that issue. You need not beat the dead horse nor the jail wardens over it. Allow me the honor of handling the extended edition on your behalf. You need not do your best on this case, for I will do my best on your behalf.”

I could work with that. “You’ll have the relatively sparse document requiring angelic elaboration by morning, Your Honor.”

“Excellent. Drive safely. Do your best to keep her out of trouble, Officer Dannell. Don’t beat yourself up over it if you can’t. Try to enjoy the ride.”



A BETTER WOMAN would have warned the cop I lived in the heart of Logan Square in one of the greystone homes most counted as a mansion. Like most of the greystones, it was in the townhome style, although mine was more than twice the size of most, took up a corner lot, and boasted a yard.

I had rewarded myself with the property upon my first successful high-end negotiation, choosing Chicago to be the home of my heart. I’d grown up in a townhome similar in a different part of the city, albeit on a far smaller scale. While my parents still loved the old place, it could barely fit two people let alone the three we’d crammed in during my youth.

I hired landscapers to keep the property immaculate, and once a month, they put up with me helping, as I enjoyed caring for living things. During planting season, I made a party of it, keeping my team busy for a week while we redid the main garden, which included a healthy stock of vegetables.

They'd even taught me how to harvest my bounty, and when my bounty proved plentiful, they helped me get it into the hands of the needy. My garden tended to shower me with an abundance of produce. I blamed the landscapers, sharing with them when I could get them to accept my offerings.

I almost pitied the cop when he parked in my garage. The neighboring greystone had perished, gutted by a fire and allowed to decay to the point it had become dangerous. The instant it had gone on sale, I had purchased the lot, salvaged the stone I could, shored the surviving sections of the building, and converted half of it into a garage for four cars while turning the rest into a guest home.

I'd rebuilt the damned thing using the old stones, maintaining the original look and feel of the second and third stories while installing the garage doors on the ground floor. I'd even paid a fortune for special garage doors hosting a thin veneer of the original stone to maintain as much of the classic look as possible.

He killed the engine of his cruiser, parked between my one vehicular indulgence and my everyday vehicle. Drawing a deep breath, he removed the keys, shook his head, and opened his door. "I've been down this street at least a thousand times, and I had no idea this was a garage."

I beamed at the comment, which had been my intent all along. “The original home had been destroyed in a fire, and the heritage folks had a *fit* because it was damaged beyond salvaging. Inside, the fire had gotten so intense some of the support stones inside literally *melted*. It was a mess. My house is actually next door, but when this came up for sale because the insurance company opted to pay out a set fund rather than rebuild, the owners bailed. I bought it, had a chat with the heritage folks, informed them I wanted a garage, and that I would use a veneering door system to preserve the general look and feel of greystones if they looked the other way while I dismantled, rebuilt it from scratch, and used the surviving exterior stones for the build. It’s not an exact match, but it’s close enough the heritage folks literally sobbed when they saw what I’d done to the place.”

I had ended up with a gross, wet shirt and the eternal gratitude of numerous heritage societies, which meant whenever I wanted to do work on one of my properties, they just gave me the permit after confirming I would do my best to maintain the exterior.

“Who owns the Acura?”

I got out of the cruiser, hopped over to my cranberry red beauty of an everyday car, and gave her a loving pat on the hood. “She’s mine. This is my regular car. She was cheap, she’s good on mileage, she’s a manual, and she’s a pretty fun drive. She gets full points for general comfort.” I then crossed around to my blue sporty beast, and I gave her a kiss on her roof. “This is my Lexus LC. I went dealership crawling wanting something fun, and I tested something from every

dealership in Chicago. Lexus took me seriously when I told them I was testing the best the city had to offer, gave me a salesperson who treated me like I knew something about cars, and said they could have the color I wanted shipped in the next day as they had had one in Detroit. They gave me a decent price for her, and sure enough, we closed the deal the next day. You have a choice to make. We can take that cruiser, which is not winning points for comfort, the Acura, or the Lexus. I will be adding you to my insurance should we be taking one of my babies, and I'll even let you modify her for the lights and sirens if necessary.”

“We do have portable lights and sirens.” The cop joined me and prowled around my Lexus. “My name’s Asher. You can call me Ash, or if you find my name to your general dislike, you can call me Easton. I usually go by Easton among those who actually like me and Asher among those who want to irritate me.”

“If you would like to change your name, I can help you with the paperwork, and I won’t even charge you for it. Your name was a gift, and as an adult, you have the right of refusal. You are under no obligation to keep the name that was gifted to you. If the expense of the name change is an obstacle, I’ll pay for it, but you’ll have to come give my babies a wash once a week for three months while I relax, sip a beer, and enjoy the scenery.”

Many had no idea they could change their name, how it was done, or how much it cost. I hadn’t minded the name I’d been gifted at birth, but I made a point of helping those who

hated their name and wanted to be free from it, no matter what their reason for their unhappiness was.

“My mother would cry.”

“You can buy her tissues.”

He raised a brow, made another pass around my Lexus, and eyed me with interest. “You’d actually let me drive this?”

“Sure. And if you break it, I won’t even make you buy it, but I’m going to smack you around if you cry over it for more than twenty minutes. She’s definitely worth twenty minutes worth of tears, but that’s it. You start getting smacked around at twenty-one minutes.”

He huffed, and then he laughed. “I’ll talk to the boss and see if using this can be legalized.”

“I’m confident of my abilities to get the car legalized for our job on this case. You leave that to me. You’re on the hook for the lights and sirens if you want them, however. Would you like to spend some time meeting her or do you want to come inside while I grab my bag and work stuff? The work stuff will take a few minutes; I’m sure all of my devices are dead since I left them off the chargers when I headed off to prison for my evaluation.”

He abandoned the Lexus. “I’ll come inside. If we’re going to be doing this, I need to know what you really bring to the table beyond a disconcerting number of degrees and certifications. To have the number you do, you must spend the vast majority of your time studying.”

He was about to get the shock of his life along with some education on the robust nature of my virus, which helped trim off a few hours of sleep a night. On average, I got six, and after six, I became excessively bouncy and prone to causing even more trouble. For the sake of the world, I could not afford to get more than six hours a night of sleep. “I started working on my first degree at sixteen, and I doubled up on them once I turned twenty. That helped. I took on a great deal of student debt, but I paid it all off in record time. I used all the smaller job earnings to pay off my debts, and then I bought the house with my first big job. Until the Acura, I drove junkers.” I left through the garage door, backed up enough to give the device space, and closed it once the cop was clear to show off the veneer. “This is my guest house because I really do not like having guests in my turf. There’s a nice walkway in the back that makes it easy to get back and forth. I usually check on the faucets and everything inside the guest house when I get home, so I use that more often than not. I’ll call my house sitter to keep an eye on everything while I’m gone.”

“I would say that’s sensible, but is there anything sensible about a property this large *here*?”

“This area hasn’t always been gentrified, and the owners had gotten the property on the cheap. I’m not sure why they built a mansion on the end lot, but they did, and when it went on the market, I wasted no time snapping it up. The guest house is also oversized for the area. Gentrification has raised the prices by a lot, but the neighborhood itself is pretty safe. There are a lot of powerhouses around here, including some

vampires, who prefer their streets nice, quiet, and safe. I'm the most normal thing living on my street."

Gesturing for him to follow me, I took him to the sidewalk and pointed at the home beside my guest house. "I actually paid for that family to live elsewhere during the renovation after the fire. They had some damage to their home, too, and I handled the repairs. They couldn't afford the restoration work, and I could. That one has been passed down from father to son since it was built. Polish family, quite nice people. Unbeknownst to them, once I had the keys, I took care of the interior renovations, too. I told them I was going to spruce up their paint and replace the wallpaper since it was trivial to add it in. Instead, I had everything redone. When they asked me why the floors no longer squeaked, let's just say I pretended like I had no idea what they were talking about."

"Let me get this straight. By day, you're altruistic. By night, you're a troublemaker to counter your altruistic ways."

I grinned. "That sounds about right." I pointed at the next greystone in the line, in the Romanesque Revival style much like mine. "My guest house is the weird one of the lot. All of them except this one are Romanesque. It's Baroque Revival, which is part of why the historic society pitched a fit."

To give him a better idea of the differences, I pointed up at the third story, which had the main Baroque features, including a statuette of a French chariot of horses with bronze, gold, and copper accenting. "The original owner was an architect who came over from France at the start of the Baroque Revival period. That damned chariot cost me a fortune to get brought

down safely and reinstalled during the renovations, and don't ask me about the other decorative pieces. I wiped my main account clean and had to beat up a greedy corporation to stay out of the poor house."

"You have vampires living down the street?"

"It's a very safe neighborhood. He's a member of the Saven brood. He's the one I call about house sitting, as they always have vampires who need a good job. When you pay them to take care of your place, they take that seriously. That vampire is pretty shy. I don't even know his name. I just knocked on his door one night, asked him if he knew of a good house sitter, and he hooked me up. His incubus partner is pretty nice, too. He helps make sure no trouble comes calling because idiot males smell a single female lycanthrope in the area."

"Dare I ask who else lives on this street?"

I laughed and pointed across the street, where the greystones were all on the smaller side. "Those were owned by immigrants, mostly European. I think my place was the attempt to start gentrification before its time. It is definitely the best built on the street, although I do restoration work to make sure everything stays in good shape."

With the basic tour over, I guided him to my house, made use of the alarm system fob on my keys, and showed him inside. While the outside screamed antiquity, I'd gone for a mix of comfortable rustic and sleek modern depending on the room. For the entry I'd gone with farm rustic, as I enjoyed the country life and found the simplicity of it to my liking. "I got

the inspiration for this from a plantation manor, although I made some changes to get more of the farmhouse country vibe. I also don't feel bad tracking mud into here since the floors can handle it."

I did have a mat to stomp off the dirt from the streets along with a shoe rack and a slipper rack. I eyed his feet, picked a set of slippers in his size, and handed them over. "Yes, I'm one of those people who has house slippers. I actually have house shoes that never go outside when I don't want to pitter patter in bare feet. You're good with bare feet if you prefer."

"Slippers work." Easton followed my lead, stomped his shoes somewhat clean, took them off, and placed them on the rack before stepping towards the hallway and sliding his feet into the slippers.

I put on my pair of purple kitty slippers and guided him down the hallway to the sitting room, which also contained a small portion of my library. I'd gone with chaos as my general style for the room, only buying antiques from flea markets and hole in the wall stores to give the place an ancient atmosphere. For the most part, I'd ended up with a great deal of frou-frou British Victorian with a smattering of Japanese imported in the aftermath of World War II. "If you don't want to prowl around the place to explore, feel free to take a load off and browse through the books. It won't take me long to get the stuff I need."

He took me up on the offer to take a load off, although he detoured to the nearest bookshelf to check out the offerings. I

left him to it and headed off, determined to keep my word I wouldn't take too long to get ready.

The first step in teaching the cop I could be reliable was to be reliable—and once I had him nice and comfortable, I'd introduce him personally to my troublesome side.

One of us would have a great time, and I was determined to mix pleasure with the serious business of rescuing a litter of kittens.

THREE



“BUSINESS, PLEASURE, OR A BIT OF BOTH?”

WHILE I TOOK pride in the work done to make my antique chairs comfortable, what was I supposed to do with a sleeping cop? Under normal circumstances, I would have taken delight in startling him awake, but he defined peaceful, and I couldn't bring myself to bother him.

As such, I got out my cell, took over the other chair, and thumbed through my contacts until I hit the plethora of Saven brood vampires dominating the S section. Which vampire would I call? Mystery Man down the street would be my best bet, as I needed to talk to him about house sitting, but I could go right to the top and see if the leader of the pack was willing to give me the time of day.

As go big or go home applied, I tapped Ernesto's name, held the phone to my ear, and waited to see if the vampire would indulge me.

“Business, pleasure, or a bit of both?” the ancient vampire answered.

I laughed, as the last time I'd called him, I'd been tipping him off on a corporation's move because they hadn't required

me to sign an NDA, thus making him owe me a favor. In the world of vampires, favors made the world go round, and I had one in my pocket ready to be cashed out. “A bit of both. The pleasure for you is to get that favor off your shoulders, and the business is why I’m calling.”

“Wrong type of pleasure,” Ernesto complained. “Corporate or something else?”

“Something else. I’ve been slapped with community service again, and they are punishing a cop for some reason through saddling him with me. I’m not sure what the cop did, but he’s clearly been over worked, underfed, and possibly not watered recently. I brought him home and my armchair ate him.”

“You asked a practitioner to enchant them to be particularly comfortable, my dear. You can tame even a bloodthirsty vampire with them, and you do sometimes. I’ve learned to be on guard—and to not accept invitations to sit down unless I’m ready for trickery.”

Giggling, I shrugged, aware he couldn’t see me doing it. “It doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

Well, it did work; within twenty minutes of sitting down, my virus rested, which allowed me to relax without worrying. I spent the time reading without my virus becoming rowdy over fact or fiction.

“You enjoy the peace without your virus being so active.”

Tricky vampire. “Guilty as charged. Here’s the deal. My community service is to recover a litter of cougar lycanthrope

kittens. One's a girl. The cop's supposed to be smoothing the way for me. I'm going to be taking the Lexus, and I could use some vampires helping me sniff out the location of these kittens. They *will* be returned home, safe and sound, for Christmas. We clear?" As the cop wasn't capable of protesting, I added, "My cop is a goody-goody, and he's a lycanthrope. Hybrid. He was brought in after the mess with the CPD, probably to help shake things up and keep them on the straight and narrow. My job is to get him a little closer to the line and adapt him to said approaches to the line. He may be a bit too goody-goody to be effective."

"Traffickers?"

"That's the suspicion. I have the basic information on the kittens, but I haven't had a chance to go through everything yet. I need to submit a prison evaluation to the judge by tomorrow morning, and I've the word of an angel we're the best bet for this succeeding, and she approved the work beginning tomorrow morning."

"Thus you are confident the delay won't be an issue."

"Right. Since the one baby is a girl, the underground should have whispers of it, which means your vampires might be able to get me a lead. I'm going to need to do this more on the up-and-up, as the cop is hot and I don't want to damage his sensibilities too much. I'm going to cause some trouble because I will do anything necessary to get those kittens home for Christmas, but I'm going to moderate it a *little*."

Ernesto snorted before letting out fully fledged laughter. "Have they told you your wedding date with your new male?"

“Not yet, but he’s going to be a tough nut to crack. I am, after all, a divine single female lycanthrope. That’s a lot for a male wolf to handle—and to come to terms with. A self-respecting wolf falling in with a *cat*? Heaven is definitely not forbidding it, and I think he’s going to need some time to accept his status as my new pet wolf.”

“I did not take you to be the type to pick a cat, although I am concerned for your wolf’s sanity. Your feline likes him?”

“He walked into the room and she wanted a piece of him. He’s hot, I’ll give him that. If you can ask the succubi to leave him alone, I’d appreciate it.”

“Consider it done. I can’t promise Amy won’t fawn all over him, though.”

I rolled my eyes at the mention of the succubus. “She’s really going to get me killed one of these days. The judge is going to be giving my cop a supply of that nip and dust to make sure I don’t add too much entertainment to the trip when I get bored during the hurry up and wait portions of the investigation. Right now, I have nothing. I don’t know who took these kittens. I have testimonies from the parents to go through, but that’s it. The man upstairs decided to become involved because *He’s* in the mood for Christmas miracles.”

“It’s always fun when *He* becomes involved. I will be over within an hour. Let your cop nap, and perhaps entertain yourself through making him lunch. What’s his name? I’ll send an incubus over to his home to fetch everything he’ll need for the trip.”

“Asher Easton Dannell. Asher for those who like irritating him, Easton for those who take pity on him. I’ll go with Easton unless he’s irritating me, in which case, I’m going to Asher him so hard his head spins. I already offered help with the name change, but he doesn’t want to make his momma cry. I suggested he offer tissues.”

Ernesto snickered. “Are you trying to make him love or hate you, Kelsie?”

“I think I’m going to make him love hating me. That seems like the best idea at this point. I’m not all that good at making people *love* me, Ernesto. According to an angel, I’m too confident, wealthy, and smart to wrangle men the usual way. I can’t even wrangle them despite having a virus with a steadfast dedication to monogamy and a strong desire for procreation. I should be grateful she hates the cowards almost as much as I do.” Getting up, I headed for my kitchen, which I’d gone the modern route with. The island could seat six, the neighboring dining room could fit eight comfortably, and my choice to include a fireplace in both rooms had driven the renovators half mad as they struggled to make the rest of the home accommodate the required chimneys. I’d rigged the flues and the chimney system to allow for a fireplace on every floor, although the one in my upstairs library saw the most use. “Want me to get the fireplace going?”

“If you have a three-hour log, that would be lovely.”

While I had a stash of regular firewood, I usually made use of the logs for general convenience. I retrieved one from my supply closet in the hall, opened the flue, set up the fire, and

ignited the paper wrapping so it would be burning merrily by the time the vampire arrived. “You got it. Maybe it’ll help the cop relax without relaxing him right into general unconsciousness.”

“I’ll give him a nip to startle him awake and report if he has any illnesses in his blood. That’ll keep him going for the rest of the day if he is fatigued, too.”

“Appreciated, especially since I don’t know if there are any vampires involved with the missing kittens.”

“Will you accept my nip as well?”

“Absolutely. I’m not an idiot. If you want to notify other vampires it wouldn’t be a good idea to test their luck, it’d save me a lot of work ripping their heads off their bodies if no doesn’t work the first time.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you soon. I’ll even be nice and leave the demons at home this time.”

“You’re a gem, Ernesto.”



MY HOUSE and the visiting vampire had a new hole, but to my delight, Officer Asher Easton Dannell didn’t play nice when woken up through a rather rude bite to the arm. As biting his throat or wrist might traumatize the cop more than Ernesto desired, the vampire had opted for the route of caution. Had Ernesto been human, I would have been concerned about him dying.

I was more concerned about my poor wall, which would never be the same again. Well, not unless I hired a practitioner to remove the damage. Staring at the hole, I heaved a sigh. “Come on, Ernesto. You could have at least stopped the bullet.”

“It was not due to a lack of effort,” the vampire replied, and he licked the cop’s blood off his lips. “You’re quite the tasty vintage. He’s healthy enough, Kelsie, so you can take him on your adventure without any worries. His virus is young and strong, and should you decide to keep him, I’m confident in his ability to do his duties.”

Grinning at the vampire’s analysis of the cop, I turned away from the damage. “Easton, this is Ernesto Saven. When you have kidnapped kids of any species, he’s the vamp you talk to for help. He’s almost always got someone available who can help with the search. While he won’t solve the case for us, if he can, he’ll point us in the right direction. As he doesn’t like when kids are trafficked, he’ll even check in on the rings in the Chicago area for us and make sure they stay out of town. We’re going to share our information with him, and he’s going to do digging in places you can’t go.”

“When you told me you had a Saven brood vampire helping with your house sitting, I did not think that meant you could invite the brood’s master over at your whim.” Easton wrinkled his nose, checked his firearm, and holstered the weapon. “I apologize for shooting before asking questions.”

“Oh, dear boy, you did precisely what you were supposed to do. You would have heavily inconvenienced a younger

vampire with your aim. You'll do. It's time to get up. That little love bite will warn the other vampires you have my favor."

"What does that mean?"

I grinned at the cop. "Other vampires will think twice before attacking you. I'll get my nip later. I'm a delicate little female, so I must eat lunch before I'm bitten. You know, to make sure I replenish my blood. You're just a male. You'll be fine."

The cop snorted a laugh. "Should I apologize for falling asleep on you?"

"Not at all. The chairs are enchanted to be as relaxing as it gets. You won't be the first nor the last to fall prey to those chairs." I waved my hand for the pair to follow me into the kitchen. "I've made a bite to eat while you were napping. Your apartment is currently being robbed by a demon, so we can leave as soon as your stuff arrives. Don't be surprised if your clothing is intended to appeal to me. You're being robbed by a demon, after all. But don't worry; you now have a house sitter."

"I have a cat. I need to take her in to be boarded while I'm gone."

I raised a brow before eyeing Ernesto.

"Your cat will enjoy staying home, and one of my demons will go over to your place to make sure she gets daily care and attention." Like me, the vampire raised a brow. "Why do you

have a cat? They are not overly fond of wolf lycanthropes typically.”

“I’m a sucker for punishment and found her alone on the street during a storm. I couldn’t bear the thought of taking her to a shelter, so now I have a cat.”

“And you made comments about *my* altruism, Easton. I help, but I don’t bring the helped home with me!”

As Ernesto had needed an hour and a half to get to me due traffic and checking in on a member of his brood, I’d had time to skip to the store and roast a chicken with vegetables, which made serving everybody at the island easy. I gave Ernesto small enough portions he would be able to manage, even with his severe case of undead. Once I served both men, I claimed the stool beside Easton, speared a piece of potato, and said, “One day, I might actually find a stray cat during a storm. I look, but I never find any.”

Easton thanked me for the meal before saying, “Try the slums. Logan Square is too clean for the alley cats, and there are too many dog owners out and about for the colonies to get established. That’s where I found mine. I was also working at the time, so I ended up carting around a sickly kitten in a box once the vet confirmed she would probably live, gave her the first round of kitten shots, and told me how to take care of her.”

While I sometimes went to the slums of the city, I did so looking for *people* to help rather than *cats*. Next time, I’d look for the cats, and I’d do so on a particularly miserable day.

“Thank you for the advice. I’m going to take you up on that. I think my place is big enough for at least two cats.”

Ernesto laughed at me. “Your home is plenty large enough for two cats, and we would be pleased to watch the new members of your family while you are off doing your important work. I’m sure, with enough work, you might even find two stray kittens you can catch and adopt while on your adventure. I would even send over a vampire deserving of reward to take your new family members to the vets and tend to them until you’re home and can care for them properly yourself.”

Not to be outdone by the handsome wolf, I nodded. “That’s an excellent idea. Should we happen upon stray kittens who do not happen to have a mother cat nearby, I shall claim them as mine and rescue them from the streets to live a life of luxury. I am going to need a practitioner to kitten-proof my furniture and protect them and my cables from harm.”

“Consider it done. I’ll give you the bill upon your return.”

For a cop with a reputation of being a goody-goody, he handled my conversation with the vampire crime lord with surprising grace. “When you had discussed the issue of talking to the vampires, I had thought the angel had been practicing her sarcasm.”

I appreciated that he understood angels were not versed on the art of sarcasm and needed to learn and practice it. However, I snickered over him having been fooled by such a small thing. “Oh, I never joke about my contacts, Easton. And trust me when I say you’re going to regret being on first name

basis with me soon enough. I *will* be using Asher on you when I want to annoy you, and the only way you're getting me to call you Officer Dannel is if you're cuffing me." To make it clear, he wouldn't be getting his title used unless he was scratching my feline's itches, I allowed myself a smug smile.

Then I targeted him with the leer that made the wise men run.

Ernesto tossed back his head and cackled. "She's won that one, my boy. You can either play the game, surrender, or run until she catches you, but once she decides she's on the hunt, she does *not* lose."

To the delight of my virus, Easton rose to the challenge through raising a brow at me. "Are lycanthrope males your usual fare?"

Snorting at the thought of a lycanthrope male actually handling me, I shook my head. "The instant they realize I cannot be controlled, they're running for the hills despite their virus. I'm a cat, Easton. I'm so much a cat even other cats are disgusted with me. The only cats that actually like me aren't even my same species of cat, and they only like me because once I found out about their clan, I offered free legal aid any time they needed help while visiting my turf. There are cats and then there are *cats*, and we're all *cats*."

"Has it occurred to you that being a cat is the primary source of your problems? If you were a wolf, you might actually be perfect."

"Except wolves absolutely hate when they can't control their partners." I rolled my eyes; every male wolf I'd

attempted to engage with for longer than ten minutes had realized they'd courted true trouble with me and run for the hills.

Of course, my virus had hated them all as they'd gone out of their way to try to bend or break me.

I refused to bend or break—and I would continue to refuse until I found someone worth bending for.

Breaking would not be happening; that was one thing me and virus agreed on without debate. No mere male would ever break me.

We hunted the breakers before they could hurt anyone else. I liked targeting corporations as they tended to break people in high quantity, but I took on the small fry when I could.

Easton's eyes narrowed. "Dare I ask what species of feline you are?"

"Where's the fun in me telling you? I will show you when you least expect it, as a divine feline gracing you with my presence. My beauty will ruin you for life. My coat is plush and soft, and I take immaculate care of my fur. I might even permit you to offer three strokes—but only three. You have to ask for permission for more than that. I accept scratches behind my ears in unlimited quantity, and you will gamble if you touch beneath my chin, my neck, or my chest."

"She doesn't usually warn people," Ernesto announced, and he sampled a piece of my chicken. "Excellent as always, my dear."

I beamed at the vampire's praise. "Thank you."

“I’ll admit, I’m confused. You’re a single female lycanthrope. You are *not* being bothered by single male lycanthropes because you’re too successful?”

The disbelief in the cop’s tone would amuse me for days. “That’s correct. I’m not a hybrid, but I’m divinity in the flesh in human and feline form. I just don’t actually happen to be a divine. I just got a particularly lucky roll of the dice upon conception.”

Ernesto snickered. “Let’s just say her self-esteem is *not* one of her problems. She’s pretty, she knows she’s pretty, she doesn’t really give a flying fuck that she’s pretty, and she’s happy to use her looks to lower your guard—or anyone’s guard who is fool enough to underestimate her. Her appearance is a weapon in her arsenal, one that she uses with devastating success, usually on corporations. I feel it’s wise you understand this before you undertake your job with her. She *will* have those kittens home for Christmas, and she will destroy anyone and anything that gets in her way. She’ll make use of every contact she can. I expect her next move, once she’s done her report and has that submitted to the judge, is to start calling every single one of her corporate contacts looking for leads on the missing kittens. The corporations will start searching, and no stone will be unturned. If the culprits are in one of the corporations, they will know their days are numbered.”

“Won’t that endanger the children?” Easton growled.

“No. They’re too valuable. Lycanthrope children are easily molded, especially before they mature enough to mate. The

girl will be auctioned off to the highest bidder to be a bride, likely a child bride around the age of twelve to fourteen. The boys will be auctioned off to brothels, given strict training on how to avoid the mating bond while giving a woman the best sex of her life, and used over and over again until they're retired—which only happens if an accidental mating bond takes hold.” Ernesto sighed, shaking his head. “My vampires are on the lookout for males at the brothels. I send my girls out hunting for them, and once we locate them, we rescue them as we can. The girl is the one who will be in real trouble, especially if she's not recovered quickly. We've found the boys are easier to put through therapy. In the brothels, they're taught to be rough but considerate lovers, and they treat their clients well. I partner them with a succubus to readjust their hormone levels to be what unmated lycanthrope males should have, have the ladies train them to go back into society, and find a single woman who can handle a man who has had emotional trauma.”

I allowed myself a grim smile. “Now you know why I called the vampires, Mr. Goody-Goody. They're the best people for the job—and if the kids *have* been traumatized in any fashion, I'll be armed with an entire brood of vampires and their partnering sex demons, all of who would be quite happy to dish out copious amounts of violence on my behalf.”

“I wasn't all that worried before,” the goody-goody cop stated before he joined Ernesto in sighing. “But now? Now I'm worried. What did I do to deserve this?”

“You did a good job helping to clean up the CPD,” Ernesto replied. “But now you need to learn the game, and Kelsie can

teach you—she is, after all, one of the more skilled players. Once you strip away her petty counts of criminal mischief, you'll find angels are challenged to beat her ethics and altruism. She just doesn't play by rules she feels are unnecessary.”

“Theft rules are not unnecessary.”

“Ah, but if my succubus had not tricked her into thinking she was just making off with a pet's toy, it would have been an amusingly small crime, one that would make the judge and attending attorneys laugh. I mean, they were still laughing, as she had no idea she had been trying to lift a multi-million dollar necklace. Next time, take the catnip toys with you before indulging yourself, Kelsie. You'll be more successful at your thefts that way.”

I smiled at the memory of the catnip and pixie dust high.
“But it was just *that* good, Ernesto.”

“Next time, just steal the catnip. That way you dodge the community service.”

“Where's the fun in that?”

FOUR



COULD A COP EVEN HANDLE MY TENDENCY TO CAUSE TROUBLE?

AFTER WE ATE LUNCH, Amy brought over a bag for Easton, and the cop stared at it—and the succubus—like he might get bitten. Rather than agitate the lycanthrope, who’d already been challenged enough for one day, I swooped in and claimed my hug. “You are such a bitch.”

Laughing, Amy returned my hug, picked me up, and spun me around because she could. “I am, I am. Did Ernesto behave himself while I was running his errands?”

“He even ate his supper and helped wash the dishes,” I confirmed.

“And your new pet wolf?”

I snickered over the whole idea that everyone I knew had slated the poor wolf as my property. My virus loved every moment of it, settling down to enjoy the ride.

She hoped for a long, drawn-out battle of wills resulting in a lively departure from being single.

For the most part, we were on the same page, but I needed to see more of the cop and his general personality before I

even thought about flinging myself onto a bed for an energetic and life-changing romp.

Could a cop even handle my tendency to cause trouble?

I'd find out soon enough.

“My pet wolf is coming to terms with his first impression, which was of a petty criminal trying to make off with a multi-million dollar collar... to me.”

“Beauty, grace, wealth, and power?”

“And feline.” I linked my arm with Amy and dragged her into the den, leaving Ernesto and Easton to follow. Of all the rooms on the first floor, I loved my den the most. It had a fireplace, a couch and two armchairs, following more modern trends with a focus on comfort, serving as a continuation of my library, with the room housing the majority of my romance and action-adventure collection. A bar let me serve guests a variety of alcoholic treats, and I was grateful I'd gotten one with room for four stools.

As I needed to write up a report, I wouldn't be drinking, but I gestured to my wall rack loaded up with spirits. “If you want wine, I'll have to go down into the cellar. The basement isn't all original; when I bought the property, I had the basement expanded so I could have a wine cellar, a storage room, an office, and a few bedrooms down there. The bedrooms rarely get used, but I like having them accessible. Mostly, they're places to store neat trinkets on display, fit in a few extra bookcases, and give guests a quiet place to retreat if they need space and don't want to go to the guest house. No

wine for the vampire because he owes me a bottle, and I'm not budging until I get my bottle."

"I haven't run a vineyard in centuries, my dear."

"Steal grapes from your friends and make me a bottle," I growled at him. And then because I was a cat and the vampire didn't scare me, I hissed at him. "I'll even buy an entire barrel worth of the wine, but you owe me a bottle of wine, and I want *that* wine. It's your fault for telling me about it. *Maybe* if you'd get me some vines from your friends, I could grow some in my garden."

"Those grapes are no longer available on the surface, my dear. You can't just grow them in your garden."

I wrinkled my nose at Ernesto's refusal. "I don't see why not. Are you really going to make me bust into the third layer to steal some fucking grape vines?"

Amy halted, which made dragging the succubus to the bar rather difficult. Even with my strength as a lycanthrope, I couldn't budge her more than an inch or two. "You want to do *what*?"

"He keeps telling me about these grapes and how it makes the best wine, and then he told me he couldn't make it because the grapes in question are in Chicago's third layer. Come on, Amy. I want to try that wine."

The succubus permitted me to haul her over to the bar, and she sat down, pointing at one of my bottles of Scotch. I snorted, as she'd gone for the throat, picking one of my more expensive offerings. I admired her taste, though—the Scotch

went down smooth and warm with subtle undertones that turned drinking it into an adventure. I plucked it down, rummaged through my collection of glasses, and picked the best one for getting the full value of the beverage, dug out a chilled stone as ice would overly bloom it, and dribbled in a drop or two of water to give her the full experience before handing it over.

She saluted me with her glass before taking a sip. “You could indulge her for a barrel. I’m sure your friends won’t mind the harvest.”

“You’re siding with her?” Ernesto complained.

“Of course. Where else am I going to get Scotch like this without having to work for it?”

I raised a brow at my friend. “You do have to work for it, bitch.”

“She’s the succubus who dared you to get the collar, isn’t she?” Heaving a patience-worn sigh, Easton sat at the bar beside Amy, took a long look at the offerings, and focused on my bourbon collection. “Is that really a 1984 Blanton’s Single?”

Ah. He’d spotted part of my Blanton’s collection. I grinned, plucked the bottle off the shelf, and put it in front of him. It had a few drinks left, as it was one of the more popular beverages guests invited to my bar wanted to try due to its scarcity. “Are you the brave type who wants to try it?”

With amusing reverence, he picked up the bottle, examining the old label that declared the year, bottle number,

and where it'd been stored. "There's not much left."

I went to the back of the bar, to the blank section of wall, wood-paneled to better match the den vibe, and found the one piece of wood that would pop open the door leading into my storage room for my spirits and liquors. I waved for the lot of them to follow me. "Corporations love giving gifts after the dust has settled. They know I'm working to balance things for everybody, and they're afraid of pissing me off. As such, I am gifted with a variety of things—usually alcoholic things. The Blanton's collection came to me in batches through several companies, one of which was an auction house for things like wines and spirits. Watch your step. While I have the racks bolted down, I don't want to hear any damned crying if something gets broken."

The cellar, larger than the den, housed hundreds upon hundreds of bottles, and I guided everyone through to the very back where my Blanton's collection resided. "I have six bottles from 1984 that are unopened, I have the one on the bar, and there's another opened one under the bar because I forgot I had one on the shelf. That's fine because the one on the shelf is about done. Whenever the corporations I work with often come across older bottles of Blanton's, they find their way to me as a gift. I report the gift to the government, too—and remind them I report the gift. If you wanted to do a yearly flight of Blanton's, we could, although you'd be exceptionally drunk by the time you finished."

"She doesn't even drink much." Ernesto headed to my rack of imported spirits, and he pointed up at my collection of sakes. "I lust for these."

“You may not have my Japanese collection.”

“You have duplicates.”

I snorted. “Become friends with Japanese companies working in the United States, then. Those are mine, and I earned them. *Maybe* if you made me an entire barrel of wine for my cellar, I’d consider giving you some of the extras—or putting in a good word with the makers in Japan.”

“Cruel,” Ernest complained.

I rolled my eyes at the vampire’s antics. “Curious about any other types, Easton?”

“Johnny Walker.”

The test amused me; in most stores, Johnny Walker capped out around six hundred, unless one made an adventure into their special offerings. I had several such offerings, and I guided the lycanthrope through the racks. “All right. So, you know those uptight British folks across the pond who get all ceremonial whenever their monarchs do something? Including age?”

“I’m aware.”

I pointed up to the top to the one bottle I doubted I’d ever open. “That beast is the Diamond Jubilee special. I had to tango with Johnny Walker once, and they opted to give me a complete collection including that bottle. I’m complete up to two years ago, and Johnny Walker has warned me if we cross paths again, I’ll be brought up to complete status again. I don’t know if they like or hate me. They gave me ten bottles of all their lower line stuff, five bottles of the rest except for the

Diamond Jubilee, of which I have three. They specified something about three bringing good luck.” Wrinkling my nose, I pointed at the other two bottles. “I’m of the opinion they felt they couldn’t let the first bottle become lonely. Do you know who is not drinking those bottles? Me. I *hate* Johnny Walker. They made me do a flight test with them, and I had to pretend like I liked it. My virus was crying after the first round, and my stomach was pleading for mercy after the third. Nobody walked out of that flight, Easton. And I mean *nobody*. They cracked one of their Diamond Jubilee bottles to finish that rodeo, and I blacked out about a quarter of the way in. I’m pretty sure I was vomiting alcohol in a five-star hotel bathroom.”

“I’m concerned.” The cop eyed the collection, and he whistled at one of the offerings on the lower shelf. “What do we have here?”

“Touch my Maker’s Mark and you lose a finger, wolf,” I growled. “You can have a cheap Maker’s Mark, but that’s *mine*.”

Easton raised a brow and held his hands up. “And this is me not touching the Maker’s Mark. What’s special about it?”

“That’s the bottle I’m cracking to say goodbye to single life,” I informed him. “And the only person I’m sharing that one with is my partner. My momma and papa gave me that bottle.” I crouched next to him, pulled the bottle off the shelf, and smiled at it. “It’s autographed by the distillery owners at the time, and there were only a hundred bottles made. My parents asked me if I had any contacts over at Maker’s Mark. I

do, so I gave my contact a ring, told them my parents had a question about their alcohol, and let them do their thing. That got them onto the buyer's list for the bottle." I turned the bottle so he could see my name written on it. Then, I turned it around, which had a note wishing me well when I finally escaped single life and to enjoy a round on them. "Out of all the things a company has ever done for me, this one actually means the most. My parents paid market price for the bottle, fair and square—which was way over what they could afford. But Maker's Mark went the extra mile and had it special delivered, by the owners, because they thought it was sweet my parents wanted to do something special just for me."

"That's fantastic." Easton kept his hands to himself, but he read the labels, smiling at the bottle. "I don't drink much, but I do drink. I view myself as someone who wishes I could become one of those people with a fancy room dedicated to interesting bottles of alcohol."

I laughed, put the bottle back in its spot, and gave it a loving pat. "I love my cellars. I could put the bottles on the walls, but I love coming in here and being able to just admire everything." While I wouldn't crack that specific bottle of Maker's Mark, I had a few others that the company had given me over the years, and I picked out one of their rarer offerings. "To make it up for you, we can crack this beauty. I'll only have a little as I have to work, but we can talk about our job over drinks. Once I get the vampire and succubus out of here, you can explore the house, relax, and do whatever it is cops need to do while getting ready to hit the road. I'll get the report finished, and we can roll out in the morning."

“Are you *sure* I can’t have just one?” Ernesto whined.

“Touch my sake and you’ll be short a hand, vampire!” I got up, went to Ernesto, and hissed at him, pointing at the cellar entry until he left my sake bottles alone. “You don’t even get to dream of having any of my duplicates until I have my entire bottled barrel of that wine. The only sake you’ll ever see is *basic liquor store offerings*. You hear me? Out of my cellar!”

“Cruel! Ruthless!”

“In possession of *my* sake. A deal’s a deal, Ernesto. You’ll get me an entire barrel’s worth of bottles of that wine, and then I’ll see about hooking you up with sake. But until then, you’ll deal with it and like it!”

Amy snickered, dragged Ernesto to the bar, and made him sit down. “She has sake on her shelf. See? It’s up there. She’ll give you a little of that to firm her status as the winner of that exchange.”

After returning the Blanton’s to its spot on the shelf, I retrieved the sake and poured Ernesto a small share, aware he couldn’t have too much. “I want that barrel, vampire.”

“How did it go from me owing you a bottle to an entire barrel?”

“You made the mistake of giving me an opening. I have what you want, and it’s worth an entire barrel to me. Learn from this, Easton. This is how I got to where I am. I don’t let anyone step on me, and when they try, I up the ante and corner them. I *will* contact all my Japanese friends and blacklist

Ernesto from buying any decent sake until I tell them otherwise. And they'll humor me because I'm a pitiful little single female feline who has no other amusements. He will be stuck begging me for my visible shelf sake or getting inferior drinks from common liquor stores. His pride demands he gets one of *my* bottles. I might be generous and give him several—maybe. An item is only worth as much as the buyer is willing to pay for it. In this case, it may very well be that a single bottle of sake, that cost me nothing, might be worth an entire barrel of wine. That's three hundred bottles of wine. I've room in my wine cellar for all three hundred."

Accepting his sake, Ernesto saluted me with the cup, and took a sip. "She wins because she plays the game, she plays it well, and outside of hours, she's a good sport about it. If you find out what she wants, hold it against her ruthlessly. She'll appreciate you cornering her. It shows you're putting in effort and care about the game as much as the reward."

Well, if he wanted to back me into a corner and hold his body against me, I certainly wouldn't mind. My virus chuffed in my head, her equivalent of a purr, as clouded leopards couldn't purr, nor could we roar.

Apparently, when *He* had designed the perfect cat, *He* had forgotten the little bones allowing other cat species to purr. We made up for it in other ways, though, so I forgave *Him* for the oversight.

In my opinion, we'd been the first species of cat to rule over the world. Our roaring and purring brethren had needed a little extra help to bring them closer to the clouded leopard's

level of perfection. If we could purr and roar, the other felines of the world would fall into a state of depression over their inferiority.

Amused over having conquered the vampire, I poured Easton a glass of Maker's Mark and served it with one of my perfect cubes of clear ice. I did the same for myself, although I only took a little. I saluted the wolf with my glass. "May you survive the next month or so of your life with your sanity intact."

Shaking his head, he tapped his glass to mine. "And may you make it even a day without another item on your permanent record."

"It's just a little criminal mischief!" I sipped my Maker's Mark, sat on the last free stool, and placed my glass on the polished wood surface. "All right, Ernesto. Rescuing kittens is up my alley, but it's an alley I've never been down before. What can I expect from the type of person who would kidnap kittens? What steps do we need to take to prevent the kidnappers from hurting them?"

"Lycanthrope girls are exceptionally valuable, especially when young, so at the minimum, the girl will be treated like she's worth more than her weight in gold. The boys are also worth their weight in gold. On the market, you're looking at an easy six figures once the boys have been groomed for brothel work. The girl will be easily worth twice as much as the boys. She's a one and done sale. The brothels can reuse the boys. The girls are harder to train for brothel work, and they're harder to train not to bite or otherwise transfer the virus."

Ernesto wrinkled his nose, stared into his sake, and heaved a sigh. “If it’s a small group, the kidnapper will sell them to a larger market for a much smaller fee. In that case, they might go for ten or twenty grand each. The kidnapper would get a decent pay, and the buyer would get a good bargain. Young and untrained isn’t a problem when integrating them into the illegal markets like that. The high-ticket buyers want them young, pliable, and infected.”

I hissed, took another sip of my drink, and regretted I’d only given myself a little. “So, unless we really screw something up, the kids should be safe.”

“Generally, the kids are treated well initially. It’s easier to keep happy kids calm and cooperating. The kidnappers, especially if they moved fast and got across state lines, will coerce the children through doing fun activities they like. Amusement parks, sporting events, and so on. They’ll be groomed to trust their captor through fun activities. It might start with little things, like movie nights, treats, and so on. As the children adapt to being separated from their parents, they’ll become more at ease with their kidnappers. In our experience, this process can start working in as little as a week or two. Within a month, the children adapt; they begin to accept they won’t be seeing their mothers and fathers again. Their kidnappers start taking on the role of being their family. That’s when the grooming really begins.” Ernesto knocked back his drink and slid the glass Amy’s way. She got up, went around my bar, and rinsed it in the sink before locating where I kept the sake set. “Because Christmas is coming, you might have some better luck; it’s harder to adapt them with the holiday

reminding them they have parents. They'll probably make an allowance for that, working to target two months to begin the process of grooming them for brothel work. Well, the boys. The girl will be groomed to be a sophisticated wife, possible business partner, and right-hand woman of someone rich and powerful. Of the children, the girl is the safest. She'll be taught the sex trade and what is expected of her, but she'll be kept a virgin until she's sold. She's more valuable that way."

I knocked my drink back, bonked myself on the nose with the oversized ice cube, and contemplated throwing the glass across my den. Before I could act, Amy plucked it from my hand, scolded me with a shake of her finger, and put it in the general safety of the sink.

"Are you going to have a temper, too, Mr. Goody-Goody Copper Man?"

Goody-Goody Copper Man? Rather than reach for my glass and implement my plan to make a mess, I grinned at the upstanding, handsome officer of the law and waited for his move.

"I'm thinking about it. But, as it's too good of a drink to waste and I'd rather not spend half the night hunting down glass shards today, I'll behave. I might be convinced that a little excessive violence might be permissible in this case." Easton glanced my way. "Just this once, I'll look the other way, but you're going to have to curtail your other forms of mischief while we're on this job."

"Be glad I provided a good car so I wouldn't feel any urges to steal one. But if something happens to my Lexus, I will be

contemplating acts of vehicular theft to get back on the road in a hurry.”

“If something happens to your Lexus, we will have more problems to worry about than our next ride. I saw your driving record, and it’s pristine. Why do you even have a car like that when you don’t even speed?”

I grinned at him. “I do my speeding on a racetrack, of course. Why accept anything but the fastest my car can give me? And when I’m not playing around on a racetrack, I take stunt driving lessons. If you need a getaway driver, I’m your woman.”

“Heaven help me,” the cop groaned.

“Sorry, heaven can’t come to the phone right now,” I quipped. “How can I help you?”

Easton slammed back the rest of his drink and slid the glass my way. “I think I need another drink.”

Laughing, I got up to serve him another round of Maker’s Mark. “In good news, if you survive through me, you can survive through anything.”



“DO YOU HAVE THAT IN
WRITING?”

AFTER EVICTING ERNESTO AND AMY, I gave Easton the choice to roam around my house or flee to the comforts of the guest house. To my amusement, the cop opted to stay. The alcohol likely helped murder his common sense, and I left him checking out the book collection in the den. As I wanted to keep an eye on my guest, I made use of the main floor office, which had the sophisticated antique look expected of an attorney, bookshelves loaded with legal reference materials, history books, and other titles designed to trick people.

Some overestimated. Some underestimated. In either case, I won, as I could maneuver around those who misjudged my intellect and drive through the presentation of my public office. After booting up the computer, I went to work detailing life in the prison, marking where I felt an angel might want to elaborate on my experiences, and otherwise grading the prison complex on a variety of categories ranging from enrichment activities, forced labor, exercise, food quality, security, and layout.

I tempered my criticisms with where I felt the prison did a decent job; I couldn't fault them on the medical front, and I

made a recommendation that some hospitals should take note of how the prison system managed emergencies, of which I had created several during my stay.

However, I slammed the prison system for its feminine care, inability to keep the genders from mingling in inappropriate fashions, and the various ways I'd noticed the inmates bypassing prison rules.

I even went as far as to point out how I might have been able to bust out of the joint had I been given a few more weeks.

Thanks to the angel's recommendation I be brief, I finished the report before dinner, spent twenty minutes proofreading it and checking it for accuracy, and sent it off to the judge. Then I went to the kitchen, cracking my knuckles and determining how best to feed a hybrid lycanthrope.

A normal lycanthrope could eat a lot, and I'd barely given us a snack for lunch. After poking my head into the den to discover the cop reading a book, I skipped over to the garage, hopped into my Acura, and hit the grocery store, opting for a roast, steaks, every package of bacon the store had, and enough eggs to fuel two lycanthropes in the morning. I picked up some token vegetables in an effort to convince myself I could be civilized before heading home.

To my amusement, the cop waited by the garage, leaning against the wall. Once I parked, he patted the trunk until I opened it. Without a word, he gathered most of the bags, leaving me with some steak and bacon to drag inside.

I wondered if I should inform the man that he flirted with me through the demonstration he understood how some chores worked and when to make himself useful without prompting. My virus appreciated the view, and I indulged her rather than hurrying to catch up.

Once in the kitchen, I began sorting my haul by what would get consumed tonight versus in the morning, putting everything away as needed. “Normally, I would have started this several hours ago, but the report is finished and sent off, and I’m accepting we’ll be eating a late dinner. We’ll have breakfast here. I made guesses on what to feed a hybrid, so if I got the quantity wrong, now is the time to speak up. I can go to another store.”

Easton checked my offerings before saying, “This looks fine for at least two lycanthropes. I don’t usually eat that much.”

I read between the lines: he had budget issues.

“I’m in charge of feeding us during this trip, and I’m expecting you to eat the appropriate amount for a hybrid expecting a fight. And if you shift and I determine you are underweight, you are being put into protective custody—and I will tango with the CPD about their pay rates.”

For a long moment, he stared at the steaks, and he picked up the container, reading the label. “This package of steak cost how much?”

Right. I lived in a completely different world than he did. “Do you know why I entered this line of work, Mr. Goody-Goody?”

“No. Why did you?”

“I wanted to change the world. I wanted people on lower income to be able to put food on the table. I wanted them to be able to get a phone if they wanted one. A car shouldn’t be an unobtainable—not just a junker like what I used to drive, but something like my Acura, a nice and good vehicle. I’ve learned equality isn’t giving everyone the same exact opportunities, but it’s giving little stepping blocks so that those who are behind can catch up and get a piece of the basic pie. We all deserve to be able to look over the fence, even if we start out short and unable to see even if we’re standing on our toes. I quickly learned that if I wanted to change the world, I had to join the world I wanted to change.”

Taking the package out of his hand, I lined up all the steaks I’d purchased, which totaled to almost three hundred dollars. I also plunked the roast, a prime rib I’d commit sins against because I didn’t have four hours to properly marinate it. I’d winced at the price of the prime rib, but I’d paid for it anyway.

“Before you freak out, this is not what I normally buy. You’re a guest, and I always become excessive when I have guests. When I have warning I have guests, I buy this sort of thing, put them in vac bags, label them with the date of purchase and package expiration, seal them, and stock the refrigerator. I sneak over every day, check what’s been used, grab the stuff that needs to be frozen, date the freezer use date, and repeat the process until I’ve figured out what my guests like to eat.” I went into my pantry, pulled out the vacuum sealer, and showed him the device. “If I were buying for just

me, I could get this quantity of food for half the price. But you can't afford half the price, can you?"

"No, I can't."

I appreciated his honesty and admired his courage in admitting it to me. "By tangoing with the big corporations, I pave ways for everyone underneath the big corporations to get better treatment and earnings. This eventually ripples out from there. Other people see what the corporate fish have won through my efforts and the efforts of unions, and they start making demands. When they can point at the corporations I've worked on, they have something to show as an example. It makes it harder for the other corporations to fight the changes. It doesn't help everybody, but it helps." I allowed myself a grin. "I haven't tried taking on something like law enforcement before. I bet I could shakedown the CPD and get you some good results."

"Our changes usually have to go through the court system."

"You'll be my prime example. And while I'm betting you have a great record, I'll use the prejudices in the Chicago area against them to win cops better pay. A hungry lycanthrope might eat you, didn't you know?"

Easton snorted. "We've used that line. They told us money doesn't grow on trees and we should, perhaps, try going on a diet."

"Do you have that in writing?"

"Actually, yes. I do."

I went to my junk drawer, fished out one of the business cards I kept around just in case I needed it, and I handed it over. Then I pointed in the general direction of my public office. “There is a guest login in the top notepad in the upper right drawer of the desk. Forward the relevant information to that address. When we aren’t chasing leads on the kittens, I’ll start building a case. Too much information is better than not enough information. You can work on that while I get dinner ready. If you’re worried about pulling your weight, you can help with the dishes after I’m done making a mess.”

Taking the business card, he nodded and headed off. I leaned over for a better view, deciding I would have to send him off on errands often to give my virus a show.

Then I went to work cooking a feast. I needed a few good steaks in my life, as did he.



I SUSPECTED the angel had understood I would pursue the cop’s financial affairs. After I finished feeding him and sent him off to bed, I worked halfway through the night on the foundations of his case. In an effort to give me the entire picture of his career, he’d sent me his entire employment record, including pay rates, cost of living, and his general inability to do much more than survive as a hybrid lycanthrope.

Moving to Chicago had been a downgrade in terms of position and salary, and I would be able to take on the CPD

and the CDC at the same time over it.

The CDC had been the driving force behind the CPD hiring him.

Rather than wake up some CDC paper pusher at three in the morning, I thumbed through my contacts in search of an angel, demon, or devil I might convince to do my bidding. As I'd gotten an angel at the courthouse and worked on *His* behalf, I figured I could wheel and deal with those upstairs without having to dance around it. That left me the choice of which angel to call at an offensive hour of the morning.

Angel or archangel? I had three archangels in my contacts who might dance to my tune. Michael might be the easiest, but he had a wicked sense of humor and might bring his brother, Gabriel, into the mess. While a two-for-one special might help, especially on the rescuing kittens front of things, both liked to drive hard bargains.

I'd wheel and deal, but my nerves couldn't handle wheeling and dealing when the archangels in question liked toying with mortals because they could, not with a litter of kittens needing my best work.

That left me with Hamaliel as my next option, a rather obscure archangel who rarely showed his face on the mortal coil. However, his domain included everything to do with the foundations of life, harvests, and the continuation of households, making him the ideal candidate.

Any other day, I would have gone straight for Hamaliel's number, but I could also reach out to Jegudiel. His portfolio

dealt with responsibility and the kind of love everyone needed in their lives, the merciful kind that healed rather than hurt.

Selfless rather than selfish.

I drummed my fingers on my desk, and as *He* wanted me to work miracles on *His* behalf, I'd impose on the entire lot of them. I began with shooting a group text to all three of them, asking if I could snag them all for a chat—and if Gabriel could grace me with his presence as well, it would be appreciated.

Within three minutes, the archangels had confirmed they could come, including Gabriel.

As wings took up a great deal of space, I headed to my den, which would be able to handle the lot of them without worry. I texted them my den was ready for them.

They popped into existence as I crossed the threshold. I recognized Michael by the blue bands on his feathers. Gabriel's were banded in scarlet. Jegudiel's bands changed colors, shifting from yellow to orange to red depending on his mood.

Hamaliel kept his feathers the purest white tipped with the faintest hint of silver, representing the blank slate of a soul at the moment the universe breathed it to life.

I pressed a finger to my lips before glancing upstairs where my guest slept. "I'm hosting a very tired hybrid wolf of a cop today. Mr. Goody-Goody had a large feeding, and he's been short on calories. His employer, the CPD, is the cause of it. He sent me his budget, living arrangements, and salaries from the day he became a cop. I offered to take on the CPD. While he's

pretty tame for a hybrid, I give it six months before his diet creates a situation.”

I expected, if I could get him out of his clothes, he’d be uncomfortably thin and showing off more bone and less muscle than a healthy lycanthrope should. Worse, I worried about his virus levels. Mine couldn’t be healthier if I tried.

One good meal had sent the wolf to bed for a nap.

“Do you plan on keeping the wolf?” Hamaliel asked, and I got the feeling if I could see the archangels’ heads, every one of them would have raised a brow my way.

Me? Keep a *wolf*?

“It depends on how good he is when helping me rescue the kittens. On *His* behalf.”

“We are aware of the situation,” Gabriel stated, and he sank down on one of the armchairs and made himself comfortable, stretching his legs out along with his wings. “You caught onto the game quickly. *He* did not peek into this specific matter, but *He* understood once you saw your cop in action—and around food—you would identify the issue. *He* has already given us blessing to assist you with this matter. The kittens come first, but this is another of *His* goals. *He* does not feel *His* work is quite yet done here. It began with the shapeshifter a few years back, but it will end with you.”

Great. Just what Chicago needed. “Doesn’t the CPD ever learn?” I complained, and I went to the bar, grabbed my peach schnapps, and splashed some into a glass before grabbing my orange juice out of the bar’s refrigerator. “I’ll pay the fee, but

please sober me up so I can drive tomorrow. A boost wouldn't hurt, either."

"Your cop will drive, but I will handle sobering you up as needed," Gabriel replied. "Your nerves are shot, so a little liquid fortitude is not a bad idea—and it will calm your virus. She's quite upset over this issue, is she not?"

"She *hates* watching people starve."

We'd starved as children, through no fault of my parents, who had been in a similar boat to Easton before I'd made my way up in the world. I hadn't abused my connections to improve their situation, but I *had* paid for the education they had missed, which had given them enough of a leg up they'd been able to do the rest of the work on their own.

Michael took a seat on the couch, Jegudiel took over the other armchair, and Hamaliel joined me at the bar, perching on a stool. The archangel in charge of the matters of home life gestured at the bottle of Maker's Mark I'd pulled out of the cellar. "You told him of your wish for the other bottle."

"You know me, Hamaliel. I'm a certified asshole. If I can cause trouble, I will. It was fun pulling his chain in the courthouse, but while I cause trouble, I pay attention. I've knocked him off balance, and he seems to like spirits."

"You will be pleased to know he is not an alcoholic, and much like you, enjoys seeing and having the bottles far more than drinking them, though he will drink to enjoy now and then. His father loves Maker's Mark, and the bottles bring back good memories of his father telling him stories when he was but a young puppy at his father's feet. Those were good

days for him. And before you are overcome with sentiment, his father and mother are both fine, but your Mr. Goody-Goody has more pride than he should. Everyone in the family has made mistakes. He knows he is not as successful at being a cop as he should be, and he is ashamed to the point he avoids going home. Jegudiel?”

“His love is such he does not want to inflict any disappointment upon his parents. He feels he has disappointed them enough,” the archangel confirmed. “You will find this case will wake the beast, as he feels if he can help these kittens make it home, he will have done something worthy of their praise—and their love. Their love is a default, but he does not understand that. The family has issues.”

Men. Heaving a sigh, I eyed the bottle of Maker’s Mark, took a sip of my drink before setting my glass on the bar and heading to the entry to my cellar. I popped it open, went inside, and checked through my collection of Maker’s Mark. “What am I getting out for his old man?”

“Original and Cask Strength are what he would drink, but he always wanted to try the more expensive bottles.”

That explained Easton’s interest in my special bottle. “Think you can get me a flight of his papa’s bourbon and a special bottle to go with it? If you handle the bourbon, I’ll hunt his parents and pick a fight.”

I had a ton of generic Maker’s Mark, and I plucked three Originals and one Cask Strength off my shelf, all duplicates I wouldn’t miss. I brought them out to my bar before closing the cellar, rooting under my bar for a folded box, and setting it up

to put away for Easton as a consolation prize for putting up with me.

“You mean invite them over for dinner,” Hamaliel corrected.

“Why would I invite his family over for dinner?”

“Because their home is fated for something you cannot prevent, and if they are here rather than there, only *things* are lost.”

Damn it. House fires happened every year around the holidays. “Electrical? Candle? Stray lightning bolts?”

The archangels were silent for a long moment, but then Michael rose from his seat, came to me, and patted my shoulder. “It will be the fault of a neighbor, and the fire will jump from house to house. It is a necessary, unavoidable event—a consequence years in the making. The loss of their home will be accidental, but *He* cannot prevent the fire or the consequences of that fire. The fire needs to happen for more reasons than there are stars in the sky. The compassion in your heart wishes it to be otherwise, but you can prevent the justice from becoming a tragedy.”

Ah. While I held no faith in organized religions, I borrowed from them from time to time, and I stole from the Catholics to draw a cross over my heart. “Let me guess. An abuser goes to the Devil’s gates that night.”

“You would be correct. The abuser is the reason for the fire, and his victims will be set free by his own hand. Our brother has a special place for that one.”

“And Mr. Goody-Goody’s family lives next door?”

“Mr. Goody-Goody’s family is why the abuser will be home alone that night rather than tormenting his victims.”

“Do you mean I’m hosting the victims? If I’m hosting the victims, I need to know how many bodies I’ll have, of the living variety, in my guest house. A duration would also be helpful. I can’t prep the guest house *and* rescue kittens *and* host Christmas dinner, Michael!”

Michael’s laughter chimed, and he patted my shoulder again. “No, no. Mr. Goody-Goody’s family gave the victims an early present of a cruise over Christmas. They won it in a contest, but they could not afford to go. So, they gave it to their neighbors, who could afford to go. The abuser had been invited, but unbeknownst to Mr. Goody-Goody’s family, his record bars him from boarding the ship—or taking a flight. As such, the victims were given the greatest present they could have hoped for: freedom from their living nightmare. They will return home to a charred husk of a home and a body, but freedom will be theirs. Had the abuser walked the straight and narrow, he would have been able to take the flight and board the ship. He claimed he needed to work but gave blessing for his family to go. To hide the truth.”

“If that fire doesn’t happen, I will intervene myself,” I warned.

Somehow, I got the feeling the archangel smiled.

Hamaliel got up, helped assemble the box, placed the Maker’s Mark inside, and waved his hand. Holy fire washed over the box, and when it faded away, each bottle was safely

nestled within. “That is why we will help your cause. But you need to know that truth. The family next door wishes to move elsewhere, by the way. A good offer on their home would let you accomplish a great deal. You can add to your collection of greystones and give your cop’s family a place to live—a place that is not directly on your property. You could play at being the seller and offer it to them for below its market value. Or you could rent it to them—or you could just invite them in and find yourself with neighbors who try to pay rent but are forced to attempt to climb an unclimbable mountain. We could handle the sale while you rescue the kittens, and these bottles could be their housewarming gift.”

Gabriel let out a low chuckle. “We could bring our brother into it, have him send a minion over to the home, and photograph their belongings—and rob the property in the hours before it is to burn.”

“Hey, I could rob the property just as well as some minion,” I complained.

“You will be busy, especially as you will be needed when they receive the call that their property has burned.”

As he made a good point, I wrinkled my nose, picked up the box of bourbon, and placed it off to the corner in the cellar to worry about later. I retrieved my drink and toasted the archangels with it. “I appreciate that tipoff, though.” I knocked back my drink and went about cleaning the glass. “If the home can be robbed of their truly valuable things, that would be ideal. Nothing materialistic unless it can’t be replaced—but

photographs of everything before the fire would be excellent. We can't show that to their home insurance company.”

“They do not have insurance. They cannot afford it,” Hamaliel informed me. “Their home is paid off, but the insurance premiums had become rather excessive in past years, and they are retired.”

“The abuser’s family is going to need a home, too.”

“That garden is being tended. You need to only concern yourself with your cop’s family,” Gabriel assured me.

“All right. Find out how much the Polish family needs to handle where they want to move, give me a sale number, and I’ll move the money into an appropriate account.”

Hamaliel held out his hands and a briefcase appeared, which he set on the bar in front of him. “The home they wish to purchase is five hundred thousand, and they have financed and refinanced their home numerous times, resulting in them owing a million and a half to the bank. They would get a little over their mortgage value for the home, leaving them unable to make the purchase they need.”

Two million would be insufficient to cover closing fees and the other associated expenses, including the move. “Offer four million for the property, and I will cross my fingers that the renovation work I did has withstood the test of time.”

“They have treated the home with great care, so do not fear. Your improvements are intact and very little has been worn. Four million is, perhaps, a little too much for their needs?”

“They’ve been good neighbors, and let’s face it, I’m not going to miss the money. They need the money to move, buy that house they want, and do better than just getting by. The mortgage rate got to be too much for them to handle?”

I had a bank account that covered my basic expenses for a period of twenty years, even if I never earned another penny.

“That is correct,” Michael confirmed. “Offering such a number would prevent them from enduring further hardship.”

“Losing a home that has been in their family for over a hundred years is punishment enough, Michael. Where are they going?”

“They return to their homeland. They have family there, and they wish to see what their ancestors had once left behind. With your offer, they will do well for themselves and the next generation.” The archangel made a soft, huffing sound. “I suppose you are correct. Losing something that has been part of their heritage for so long is punishment enough. They do hold regrets that they must leave the house behind, although the house ultimately became the source of their woes.”

Hamaliel pulled out a stack of papers, and I recognized an offer form for a real estate acquisition. “I foresaw this moment, and I took the liberty of filling in everything except the offer amount.”

As I worked with real estate often enough, I yanked a pen from the archangel’s briefcase, clicked it, and began checking over all the relevant information. As everything appeared to be correct, I filled in the amount of the offer, giggled at the lack of commission the archangel would take for handling the sale,

and signed in the appropriate places. “All right. You can go make a Christmas miracle happen for my neighbors. Vet their moving company and peek enough to make sure they get their things intact. Some of their furniture is as old as that house, and *that* is more their heritage than even the building itself.”

I’d paid a hefty price to make sure everything in the home had been restored through magic when doing my renovations, all without them being aware.

“It shall be so. I will discuss the offer with them after you depart. Now there is the issue of the kittens.”

“Let’s talk business. What do you have for me?”

Hamaliel took out a thick binder, which he gave to me. “Our brother has been assigning minions to this task, as he is aware our father works to see those kittens returned home. Our brother is very fond of his kitten, and this kidnapping has riled him up more than is safe for anybody. This is the information he has gathered on the kidnapping, and I recommend you use this as the starting point for your investigation. I will say this much: the family is innocent of all wrongdoing.”

I winced, as more than a few cases of child trafficking had occurred due to one of the parents selling out a troublesome but pretty child, accepting a paycheck to offload someone they had tired of caring for. “I mean, they’re lycanthropes. Most lycanthropes aren’t going to be ditching their kid for being troublesome.”

“Right you are, but it is a thing you have seen often enough, and the worry of it would eat away at you and your virus.”

That it would. I gave the binder a pat. “Give me the brief version. Where are we headed in the morning?”

“You are going to Toledo, Ohio. You will want to stay at one of the nicer hotels. You will be there a day or two investigating, and you need to feed your cop. The airport there is currently being used for trafficking. There is a troubled barista at the coffee shop within who thought she may have seen suspicious behavior. You do not need a boarding pass to access where she works, and by talking to her, you will be able to bring the matter up to the military, who uses the airport as well. You will close doors for their trafficking operations. More importantly, you will learn the face and name of one of the traffickers, which will lead you to the kittens eventually. Make use of the FBI. They will be your friend in this endeavor.”

“How can I repay you for the help?”

“You do *His* work. This is the least—and most—we can do. You are on your own from here. Should you need additional help, I recommend you reach out to our brother. He can do what we cannot.”

Without another word, the archangels departed in a flash of silvery light.



“IS PRISON FOOD HALF
AS BAD AS THEY SAY?”

WHILE THE ARCHANGELS hadn't truly done anything to me as far as I could tell, I dodged a hangover. I supposed I held responsibility; I hadn't poured much of a drink and I'd taken care to have a glass of water before crashing out.

However, making breakfast after only four hours of sleep sucked, and I regretted having done the equivalent of pulling an all nighter. My virus hissed and yowled her complaints in my head.

Easton, about five seconds from being addressed as Asher, kept smirking at me.

I ignored him, concentrating on scrambling every last egg in my house so I could fill his bottomless pit. Fortunately for my sanity, I baked the bacon, and I used all three of my ovens to help speed the process along. Once I had an edible serving of eggs, I filled a plate, gave it to him, and started the next batch.

“How did your work go last night?”

“You're driving us to Toledo in the Lexus. There's a lead at some express airport there, which we need to pursue. If we

get on the road early enough, we can get to the airport, question the woman, and then go to a hotel, where we can start discussing what to do about the information we get out of her.” I eyed the timer on the ovens, hissing over the remaining five minutes until bacon magic happened. “According to my contact, we will learn the identity of one of the traffickers, which will give us everything we need to recover the kittens.”

“Knowing who is doing the trafficking is a damned good start to the investigation, yes. How did you do that in one night?”

I grabbed my phone, went through my contacts, and opened the group chat with the archangels before sliding it over. “I figured since we’re doing heavenly work, I would make use of my heavenly contacts.”

He eyed the screen. “At three in the morning?”

“That’s how long it took for me to get the basics of your case for the CPD put together. I have enough to work with, but I’m going to have you undergo angelic verification regarding a few key facts. You will not like this process, but it’ll be a foundation point for the case. The CDC will get a light slap on the wrist because they *should* have known better than to trust the CPD. The CPD is going to get slammed, and your cop buddies are going to love me by the time I’m done with your case. If you have any other lycanthrope buddies on the force, give them my number, tell them to send me the same information you sent me, and request angelic verification of their health, their diet, and their virus’s status. I will fund their meals in the meantime because I have sufficient evidence that

the CPD is deliberately attempting to starve lycanthropes to create an incident ‘proving’ lycanthropes should not be members of the force.”

All evidence of Easton’s smirking vanished, and he winced. “I can do that. There aren’t many of us, and we have a group chat. I can tell them I’m giving you my phone and have you pass on the request.”

“Watch the eggs, and I’ll do just that.”

Within five minutes, I’d given the group chat an introduction, what I would be doing on their behalf, and a demand for a method I could pay them money to get their diet on the correct track. I requested they track the receipts and give them to me so I could use them in the court case against the CPD. I gave them my phone number and email address, and then I dumped the case onto Hamaliel’s lap, as I figured he would be the gentlest about restoring their home life to something healthy and happy.

The ovens beeped, informing me my time to shine had come, and I rescued the bacon so it wouldn’t burn, finished off the eggs, and provided Mr. Goody-Goody with a healthy amount of calories for a hybrid.

I also ate, although I took in less than half of what he did.

“Explain why you aren’t eating as much, please.”

“I’m not a hybrid, my virus is so healthy she doesn’t know what to do with herself half the time, and I’ll be feeding us again in less than two hours. I’ve been told to get you fed and get you fed now, and when an archangel tells me to get your

calories up, I'm obeying. I usually cook something more along the lines of dinner for breakfast, but you need a lot of protein, and bacon and eggs are a fabulous way to give you the protein you need. As I won't be here for a month, I didn't bother with properly restocking after my date in prison."

"Are you going to keep the receipts for my feeding bill?"

"Absolutely, although yesterday was on the house. After prison food, I *needed* those frou-frou steaks and roast."

Between the two of us, we hadn't left a scrap of leftovers.

"Is prison food half as bad as they say?"

"It's even worse. I thought about sparing myself from eating, but I realized I needed to keep my virus fed. What's worse? I had to eat so much more of that awful slop than the uninfected prisoners. I put some serious thought into crying in my cell, Easton. Me? Cry? Hah! But that food was so bad I thought about crying. What had I done to deserve *that*?"

"You mean beyond trying to steal a multi-million dollar collar?"

"I really thought it was a fake, too! That's the best part. I could have pulled off such a good heist, but no. I thought it was a fake and got distracted by the catnip and pixie dust. I don't know if I'm actually getting a supply of that, but I sure hope so. I'll save it to celebrate getting those kittens home for the holidays."

"Or you can have it in the evenings so you don't get any burning urges to participate in criminal mischief."

Ah, the goody-goody made his reappearance. “It’s just a little criminal mischief. If I didn’t find forced community service to be to my liking, I might be a little less inclined to cause trouble.” Shrugging, I added, “It would help if society wasn’t so damned *boring*.”

“You could always buy yourself some toys. You have plenty of house space to bat a ball around. You’d have a blast.”

“I’d destroy my entire house running into things.” When I shifted, I tended to cause ten times the trouble in half the time. “I don’t think you appreciate the glory that is me when displaying my feline perfection.”

“I’ve met most cat lycanthropes. Unless you’re a lynx, you’re hardly going to be much in the way of trouble. Sure, the Barbary lions can cause a great deal of property damage, as can the tigers, but they can be calmed with a belly rub, a steak, and ear scratches.”

“How dare those lions and tigers bring such disgrace to the feline race! They should have held out for chin scratches, too.”

“Most are too wise to put their hand so close to a predator’s mouth, Kelsie.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Then again, I weighed in at a big, bad thirty-five pounds when shifted, which put me at ten whole pounds over the average weight of a mundane clouded leopard. I polished off my plate and went to work cleaning the dishes while the cop inhaled his food. “How much do you weigh in as a wolf and as a hybrid?”

“One-fifty as a wolf, eight-ninety as a hybrid.”

I stopped, blinked, and considered just how much manly lycanthrope I could handle if he weighed in at almost nine hundred pounds. It took me a solid minute to recover, and I placed all the dishes in my sink before turning to face him. “Excuse me, but did you say eight-ninety? On that diet?”

He grinned at me. “I’m a little taller than average but rather muscular. During my last evaluation, it was determined that I have a higher bone density than normal with a heightened resilience against suffering through breaks while in my hybrid form. I also have more muscle than normal to go with my particularly thick double coat.”

Ugh. My feline wanted to demand he shift for us as she wanted to get a good feel for his fur—and the rest of him. At thirty-five pounds, he’d dwarf me, although I’d likely pack on weight and size if we were to take leave of our senses and form a permanent relationship. Then again, I might not.

My virus liked the idea of rough handling as long as it was the goody-goody cop doing the handling. With eight hundred and ninety pounds of raw hybrid to work with, I expected a great deal of rough handling should we get our hands on each other.

“I was not anticipating having to feed eight-ninety worth of hybrid. You must shift and scare the piss out of most around here.”

“For some reason, the criminals I’m engaging tend to change their mind and come quietly should I have to shift.”

The idiots in charge of the CPD would drive me crazy before I closed the cop’s case, I was certain of it. Rather than

let my irritation fester, I took out my frustrations on the dishes, finishing the job while Easton ate his plate of bacon. Before he could help, I stole his dishes, vanquished them, dried them, and put them away. “All right. Let’s get this show on the road. While you drive, I’ll be doing some basic research into child trafficking on the internet and in the CDC’s databases to see what I can scrounge up that might help us. Do you have any direct experience with the rings?”

“No, I don’t. I’m usually on patrol with the CPD, and I helped handle theft and arson prior to my transfer.”

Well, that explained the judge’s general confidence in the cop’s ability to handle me. While I hadn’t participated in any arsons, he probably had a good idea how people with sticky fingers operated. “For the record, I specialize in petty but humorous counts of theft. If the judge isn’t laughing by the time my trial is over, just from the absurdity of what I was getting into, I didn’t do my job.”

“A multi-million dollar collar is hardly a laughing matter.”

I snickered. “But the catnip and pixie dust certainly was—as was my absolute cluelessness that the collar was *real*. I really thought I was lifting some fake bling as a dare. Admit it, Mr. Goody-Goody, that’s hilarious.”

He snorted in an attempt to hide his laughter, shaking his head. “Keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better, Miss Winfield.”

Yep. The wolf wanted to play. If he wanted to play, I’d teach him the error of his ways. “It sure does, Asher.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re going to bite off more than you can chew, kitty.”

No kidding. As I was feline perfection, I’d enjoy the ride. “Honestly, you won’t even have to chew if you’re taking me out, not at eight hundred and ninety pounds. I’d vanish into your stomach with a single gulp.”

“As a human or a cat?”

“I’m figuring it would take two gulps while human,” I replied, and I hurried off to grab my evening bag, my laptop, my other tech, and my briefcase. “Try not to take all day making yourself pretty. And skip the uniform, just don’t forget your badge.”

“What should I wear?”

“Nothing would be fine, but as indecent exposure would cause you trouble at work, aim for casual. If I want you in a suit, we’ll go to the store.”

“I do own a suit,” he growled.

I halted, turned, and graced him with a wide grin. “If it isn’t the perfect suit, I will shred it with my claws and drag you to the store. I recommend you just accept I’m buying you a new suit, one that’s appropriate for the wicked places I intend on taking you.”

His eyes narrowed. “What sort of wicked are we talking about here?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”



WHILE HE TRIED to hide it, Easton loved everything about my Lexus. Within five minutes of leaving my garage, which I spent working on my laptop with my phone providing an internet connection, he'd gone from quietly surly over my taunts to reeking of glee. Until that moment, I hadn't known someone could crank up the joy to such an intensity it bothered my nose. My virus delighted in having pleased him, and I bet the furry traitor would eat out of his hand at the first invitation.

At the next stop light, I reached over and pressed the sport button. "She's going to get a little touchy on you now, Easton. Be wary of the gas, and she's going to handle a little differently."

"What button did you hit?"

"I engaged my car's ridiculous mode."

"Ridiculous mode? Is that even a thing?"

I allowed myself a smile, braced for the inevitable acceleration followed by panicked braking, and waited for the light to turn green.

As he was first in the line, he opted to test his luck as expected, and while he was gentle enough on the gas, he got to experience the Lexus's full acceleration. He squeaked, managed to keep the car below the speed limit, and once he had complete control of my baby, he spewed curses.

I laughed at him. “One of the things I like about this specific model is that they implemented an eco mode. Don’t ask me how, but it saves a great deal of gas and still lets me play on the track when I want to. It’s a new thing in the sportier models, although cars like my Acura have had it for a while. I’m guessing they decided to test if there’s a market for it. Well, there is: me. I use eco mode most of the time, and I put her in sport mode when I’m at the track. That eco mode is why I maintain my pristine driving record.”

“At the next light, show me how to turn it off and on, please. Do I have to be stopped to switch it?”

“Nope, you can be driving along and decide to switch modes. I will sometimes switch modes when doing evasive maneuvers. I value my life, and my car is very good at getting out of the way of idiots.” As he requested, at the next light, I showed him where the button was, grinning when he pressed it to return to my car’s sane setting. “If you’re a good wolf, I’ll take you to the track and give you some lessons.”

“Do I want to know what happens if I’m a really good wolf?”

“I’ll take you to every fancy dealership in town and have you help me pick a new baby for my garage. I’ll even let you drive her.”

If the scent of his glee intensified any further, I’d be tempted to roll down the window and stick my head outside to get some relief. My virus adored his delight, which meant we’d be engaged in an ongoing feud over him and his scent.

Normal Mr. Goody-Goody scent appealed. I could only hope I'd go somewhat nose-blind to his joy before I went insane.

"I feel like I should ticket you for owning this car, Kelsie."

I laughed. Half the time, I agreed with him. "We're going to end up in a rental minivan on the way home because I can tell you one thing about this car. It does not fit a litter of kittens. I'm lucky it has a backseat and decent trunk space."

"Well, it's disguised to look mostly like a luxury sedan but a lot sleeker. It's what luxury sedans could be if only more people hated their backseat passengers."

Snickering, I twisted around to regard the backseats, which were barely large enough to accommodate an adult. "Let's just say I don't take this out of my garage if I'm anticipating more than two people in it. It skirts cruel and unusual punishment territory."

"That it does. So. What have you learned about our missing kittens?"

"Not much," I admitted. "I was too busy working on your case, and then I got what sleep I could. I'll be going through what the archangels gave me and trying to make sense of the timeline. The kidnapppers must have been watching the family for a while, though." I tapped on my laptop, grateful that the archangels had sent me digital copies of everything, including the data from the courthouse. "According to this, the parents are pretty diligent. The children were in their fenced backyard at the time of the kidnapping, and the parents had been distracted by a knock on the door. Very probably planned by

the kidnapers. The knock was a salesman trying to hook them up with solar. The father went to check on the kittens to discover they had been taken. There was evidence of a scuffle, so the kittens did not go out without a fight. I'm guessing a practitioner blocked the sound of them screaming, as neither parent heard anything."

"Bastards," Easton growled.

"I mean, they're trying to traffic kittens. That puts them in the irredeemable bastard category automatically." I skimmed through the interviews with the parents to see if there was any interesting information. "Ah. This also explains why we're getting some help from the man upstairs. There's at least one triad in their family line *somewhere*, and angels don't care how many times removed part of their family is. The triad is intact, so it's personal for the angel."

"The traffickers did not pick their targets well it seems. The fastest way to get a pantheon on the move lately is to screw around with the family of a member of said pantheon."

"That leads me to believe the traffickers had no idea there's an angel in the family. So, the kids are your average kids. They're attending a preschool for lycanthropes in the area and are part of various outreach groups trying to normalize lycanthropes in Chicago." At their age, I would have already expected them to be in kindergarten. Frowning, I checked the laws in Chicago for infected children in school, discovering that after I had graduated, the school system had determined that the infected needed three years of preschool

before being eligible for standard education—and those years didn't count towards their progression.

I added the school board in the area as my next target.

“And that's how you got the cooperation of the vampires so easily. They're neck deep in those activities.”

“I got their cooperation because I am a beautiful feline lycanthrope who treats them like they're people.”

“That would help your cause, yes.”

“This case is going to give me *so* many targets.” I allowed myself a long hiss, which I followed up with a growl. “After I'm done spanking the CPD, I'm going after Chicago's school board.”

“Why?”

“They passed discrimination rulings forcing the kids, most of whom aren't even contagious at this stage, to go through three years of preschool training before allowing them to receive public education. According to this, the schooling is *not* free, but it is required for them to get an education.”

“Okay, now you have my attention.”

“I'm going to have the school board's attention once I get my paws on them, and I'll give them a real reason to fear lycanthropes—of the *adult* variety. I'm going to be leveling accusations of trafficking their way because this system makes it exceptionally easy for traffickers to monitor lycanthrope children—and puts them in a situation where it's easy to grab them.”

“Like what happened with the kittens we’re trying to rescue.”

“Precisely.”

“Considering that the CPD was directly involved with trafficking—of the adult variety—I can readily buy into the school board being involved with child trafficking. But how do you prove it?”

“I don’t. I’m going to make the vampires snoop around and see who comes looking at the kids.” Grabbing my phone, I shot Ernesto a text, told him where to read up on the lycanthropy rules for public education, and suggested that if his brood start doing the foundation work on clearing out the school board of potential traffickers, I might let him sip some of my nicer sake.

A moment later, my phone pinged, and the ancient vampire informed me I was the true ruler of Chicago and that he would do my bidding.

“There. Ernesto is going to start looking into it, and he’ll have his brood feed me information. At the very least, the preschools will be monitored. We might be able to prevent additional kidnappings.”

If the school board was involved with the trafficking of lycanthrope children, we’d find out sooner than later—and those involved would likely disappear under mysterious circumstances or be invited to a trial that would make national news and warn the traffickers that the vampires were coming for them.

“Do you know what would have to happen for such progress in the CPD?”

“I’m guessing at least one dead kid, more than one kidnapping incident, and a riot by the people, as they don’t view lycanthropes as people.”

“I was going to say at least one dead kid, but you’re right about the rest, too.”

“Sometimes, being right sucks. This is one of those times. You drive, I’ll research, and hopefully by the time we reach this express airport, I’ll know which questions to ask.”

SEVEN



“CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT SEEMED WEIRD ABOUT THEM?”

THE EXPRESS AIRPORT blended civilian and military use, and to my disgust, it proved simple enough to walk on in and go to the cafe, which was located near the baggage claim. To my relief, while there were a few people in the area, nobody was at the shop. A single woman handled the place, which made my job easy.

Armed with pictures of the missing kittens, all of them bright eyed and grinning for the camera, I headed over with Mr. Goody-Goody following close behind me. I ordered a coffee and eyed the cop until he also ordered. While she worked, I considered how best to approach talking to the woman.

I hoped asking if she had seen the kids would open the door and get her talking. If not, I'd have to press—or hope the cop came to the rescue. Once I paid for our coffees, I gave her a twenty dollar tip before turning the photograph so she could see it. “Have you seen these little kids? They were kidnapped, and I'm checking the local airports to see if anyone has seen them.”

The woman's eyes widened, but then she leaned closer for a closer look of the kittens. "No, I can't say I have seen *those* kids, but I have seen some kids coming through here recently that seemed a bit weird."

Bingo. I put the photo away, pulled out my phone, and asked, "Do you mind if I record this conversation? We're trying to make sure a bunch of kids get home for the holidays." I gestured to Easton. "He's a cop, and he's been assigned to help with this."

While Easton raised a brow at me, he took his badge out of his pocket and showed it to her. "I'm out of Chicago, but I've been given clearance through the FBI to assist with the case." Sure enough, he also pulled out a little, laminated card supporting his claim that he kept with his badge.

I wondered when he'd gotten that, although I suspected someone with no head and a bunch of feathers had helped our cause.

"Absolutely. I don't mind at all." The barista checked around, and once she determined nobody was nearby, she pulled out her phone. "I took pictures of the people with the kids. They didn't really look like a family, and I'm not even sure they actually went through security."

I eyed the security gate and the baggage claim, which had more holes than the average colander. I gave her my phone number and email address, and she sent the pictures to me. "Can you tell me what seemed weird about them?"

"The kids were behaved—too behaved. Airports, even small ones like this one, stimulate kids, and they usually act up

somehow, especially at that age. The legit kids are often either curious or terrified because the airport is new and scary. These kids seemed resigned, like they had the life sucked out of them.” After using her phone for a while, the barista turned it so I could see the screen, showing me a picture of three men accompanying four kids, all girls. “This is what first caught my attention.”

The girls were not American, although I had no idea what their ethnicity was based on the photograph. The men were Americans, and while they wore suits, they seemed like the kind to be using their fancy clothes to hide a lot of scars. I frowned. “Easton?”

He joined me in staring at the pictures. “They weren’t even trying to hide it this go around.” He pointed at one of the men. “I know this guy because he’s wanted in Chicago for a myriad of crimes, so he’s on our board at the station. Italian-American mobster, and he’s not working with any of the large Italian mafias. From what we understand of his outfit, it’s a bunch of people who *want* to be Italian mobsters and have decided to play out the role. They’ve earned the ire of the various mafia groups in Chicago and New York.”

How lovely. My cop was going to be an asset on our mission to rescue the kittens. My virus did her equivalent of purr, which was more of a rumbly growl with chuffs mixed in. “Do you have any other photographs that might be of men like these?”

With a sheepish look on her face, she nodded. “It’s boring working here; we don’t have a lot of customers unless there’s a

flight coming or going, and even then, most people bolt for freedom once they have their luggage. Nobody comes in too early because security usually only takes a few minutes at most. The cafe stays open because the military folks drink coffee by the gallon, but we don't keep a lot of other things in stock because of their shelf life." She began using her phone, likely sending more images my way. "I started taking pictures six months ago so there are a lot of them. I wasn't sure what to make of it or what to do."

In major airports, the airport authorities had taken to putting up flyers about how to help trafficking victims, and it didn't surprise me such a small place lacked any such signs—and why it made such a convenient place for the masterminds to export their victims to their next destination.

Worse, I feared airport personnel were involved, as three men escorting four foreign children *should* have been a red flag.

"When did the children pass through here?"

"Three days ago." With slumped shoulders, she added, "I don't know where they were going."

Those poor kids—and the poor barista, who had no idea how to handle the situation. I refused to blame her.

The first opportunity she had been given to help, she had. I pulled out one of my business cards, snagged the pen off her counter, and wrote a contact number for the CDC down on it. "Call this number the next time you see any suspicious activities involving kids. Tell them to put you through to the

anti-trafficking unit and that you work in an airport and you have a live lead. You should be put through to their dispatch.”

Easton’s brow raised at that. “You have the CDC dispatch number memorized?”

I flashed him a grin. “I use it for other issues, but it’s the same number for trafficking. If you have to be put on hold, they actually have information on their wait line. I use that number if I uncover a felony through my regular work.”

The woman took the card and put it into her wallet. “Thank you. I really appreciate it. I wasn’t just making things up?”

“No. You had good reason to be concerned. Next time, you know what to do—and nobody pays attention to the baristas, so you might be able to help those kids get rescued. With luck, they’ll assign a task force to the airport and block this as an easy way for them to do their dirty work.”

“I hope so.”

“Can you give me your name and number? Someone will very probably come by to officially question you about what you’ve seen.” I opened a new contact, turned the phone her way, and offered a smile.

She went to work, and I discovered her name was Monica, and that according to her area code, she had lived in New York City at some point. “I’m happy to answer any questions, especially if it means I can help save some kids.”

“Adults, too. But those are a little harder to ferret out, I’m guessing.”

After exchanging pleasantries and giving her another tip of twenty dollars for the help, I headed out of the airport.

My virus wanted blood, she wanted it immediately, and only the blood of child traffickers would do.

“According to your scent, you cut that short because you’re about ready to indulge in violence,” the cop commented when we reached my Lexus.

“I cut it short because we had the info we needed,” I replied. Then I drew a deep breath and gave myself a shake. “I am angry enough to start hissing in public, and she didn’t need that nonsense added to her day. Please tell me you know how to get facial recognition stuff done?”

“I sure do, although I have plenty of intel on the one mobster. The others are probably fellow mobsters, but we’ll find out soon enough. Send me the photographs.”

After the dance to get his contact into my phone, I went through the plethora of messages Monica had sent me, plucked out the most suspicious ones involving adults with children possibly being trafficked, and sent them his way. “This explains why the archangels suggested that we camp here for the night in a hotel room while I feed all eight hundred and ninety pounds of you properly. These pictures will take all day to go through, and we’ll need time to put up a report of everyone we have. Then we have the issue of an active child trafficking ring in Toledo to worry about.”

“Because if you know there’s child trafficking going on right under your nose, you aren’t going to leave that alone.”

Ah, was there anything more lovely than a wolf who understood his place in life? In a way, I pitied Mr. Goody-Goody; he was about to get a good view of me at my worst.

He was also about to get a good view of me at my best.

“For some reason, I think we’re being used by the Christian pantheon, and we’re not just going to be rescuing a litter of kittens. If these photographs are any indication, we’re going to be busting a big party of traffickers—and we might even get a chance to recover the kids before they’re distributed to the various rings.” I pocketed my phone and rubbed my hands together. “I hope you’re ready for some counts of criminal mischief, Easton, because the instant I get some addresses of participants, I’m going on a heist bender. You can stay home and sulk if you want—or you can come along for the ride. I don’t care, but I’m going to be busting into places I shouldn’t be and gathering evidence any way possible.”

“If you’re targeting mobsters, I honestly don’t care what you do.”

Excellent. “We might make a good bad boy out of you yet, Mr. Goody-Goody.”

“I doubt that, Miss Winfield. Do not make me arrest you for crossing the line.”

My virus adored the idea of him getting rough and pulling out the cuffs. I scowled; if I played the game, he won—and my virus wanted to toss him a few scraps to indicate she had him in her sights. “If you can catch me. Can some goody-goody cop actually keep up with feline perfection? Sure, you

might be big, fluffy, and packing muscle, but I am beauty and grace and willing to kick kidnappers in the face.”

“Your rhythm is off.”

“Give me a break! At least I limited it to the kidnappers this time.”

“While you make a good point, let’s limit the violence to only when it’s absolutely necessary.”

I hissed at him and got into my car, buckling my seatbelt and questioning why I had decided to be nice to the cop, letting him drive.

He got behind the wheel and shot a wolfish grin my way. “Is that a no?”

“It’s a clear warning I need lunch before I decide you count as food.”

“If you say so. Where am I taking us?”

I gave him the address of the hotel I’d picked in Toledo, hoping the place could handle a hungry pair of lycanthropes. If not, I could always order pizza.



I HAD some regrets over the hotel in Toledo, although my virus delighted in the small room with a queen bed. The bed would pose a problem. We’d have to get nice and cozy when it was time to get some sleep. Once he was inside, I closed the door and set the deadbolt. “In my defense, this was the only room left at this hotel. While I’m evil, I would normally pick a

double or connecting rooms in a situation like this. However, this chain has a good reputation for keeping bedbugs at bay, and nothing pisses me off more than bedbugs. I'm allergic, and my fur gets patchy."

"You're allergic to bedbugs?"

"Yep. When you travel as much as I do, bedbugs are an inevitability. Once I learned I'm allergic, I check for them and have a practitioner trick up my sleeve to help protect me from them. The problem with my trick is simple: I'm not a strong practitioner, so I can only handle a small area before I'm tapped out for a while. I can eradicate the bedbugs from this bed and around it, but that doesn't stop the bastards from attacking from other vantage points. I will be using my trick because the last thing you need is me dealing with an allergic reaction. And once my fur gets patchy? It's game over. I become one angry kitty."

"As someone who has suffered through patchy fur, I understand your complaint and hope we do not have to deal with that."

"My house is properly warded against bedbugs. If they come into my home, they have approximately five minutes to live before there's a pulse and all bedbugs are slain. I pay a thousand a month for that. Some people call that a huge waste of money, but I call it common sense. It also kills fleas, lice, termites, and other nasty pests that might damage me or my home."

Easton chuckled, hooked his head, and placed his bag at the foot of the bed. "Fleas are awful, and if I had a thousand

dollars a month I could spend on making sure there are no infestations, I'd pay it without hesitation. Fleas are a constant battle in my apartment building. I've gotten it contained in *my* unit, but the neighbors aren't diligent with their cats and dogs, and those little shits spread like wildfire. I do take my cat to the vet every other month for a flea treatment just to be sure she's okay. I spend probably forty a month on flea sprays to make sure they don't come back as often."

I shuddered at the thought of him living in a flea-infested apartment complex. "On one hand, I should warn the vampires, but on the other hand, I want to see what happens when one of them gets bitten by a rival blood sucker. Of course, I can't promise you won't find your apartment emptied of all your belongings and a succubus ready and waiting to drag you off to her lair to remove you from any flea infestations. Vampires do *not* like anyone or anything encroaching on their turf, especially fleas."

He laughed, checked out the bathroom, and prowled around the hotel room, stopping at the window to peek out the curtain. "On the surface, it looks like a nice city."

"And then you realize there might be a large-scale trafficking ring operating the local airports?"

"Yep."

Bracing for a dispute, I said, "We'll help everyone we can, but in reality, we have one job. That is to see that litter of kittens home for Christmas. If we can get a bunch more kids heading home for the holidays, I'm willing to toss the extra hours into it. But it's important we concentrate our efforts on

the kids we *know* we should be able to save as long as we don't fuck this up." I winced, hating myself for the brutality of my edict. "Don't get me wrong. I want to see as many children home as we can, but we have a solid chance of getting the entire litter home if we play the game right. I won't sacrifice their safety and security, not when I know if we stay on our course we can get them home. I'll take as many detours as we dare along the way, but every detour needs to, in some fashion or another, lead to those kittens."

"Generally, I agree with you. We deal with this at the station often. Do we catch the crook we know we can nab or do we gamble on a bigger fish? Most of the time, we go for the easy catch—and we ignore the bigger fish, aware if we detour, we might miss the one conviction. A conviction in hand is worth more than a chance at someone else. I don't always agree with it—especially not with how the CPD operates. But I'm starting to suspect the CDC specifically put me on your case knowing what type of work you do and wanting you to take aim at the CPD."

That I could believe without hesitation. "All right. You're probably going to have to give me some insights on how investigations should work."

"I wish I could help you with that, but I can't. In the force, I'm a grunt worker. I do patrols, I respond to active cases of theft or anything that involves someone physically fit. I haven't been bumped up to detective status nor do I get to work with the detectives. I'm passed over because they want my hybrid form readily accessible for when brawn is required."

I scowled. “Are you saying neither one of us has any idea how to run an investigation?”

“That’s precisely what I’m telling you.”

I yowled my fury, grabbed the pillow off the bed, and flung it in the general direction of the window. I grabbed the second one, tossed it as well, and stomped over to retrieve them before placing them on the bed. “I’m getting overtime for Christmas! I’m going to have to take on the CPD, and I’m going to be laughed right out of court when all the cops that have busted me for criminal mischief over the years realize I’m going to have to be some damned goody-goody and get them better rights, working conditions, and pay. And then they’re going to laugh at me when they bust me in the future for my criminal mischief. Watch the bastards try to get me out of my earned community service time, too.”

“I’m sure your community service time will be safe.” Easton flopped down on the room’s sole armchair and stretched out. “I’m guessing overtime limits your chances for criminal mischief?”

“It absolutely does. And during the entirety of the case, I can’t afford any criminal mischief. I’m going to be all work and no play for *months*. It’s going to be the worst. Absolutely awful. I’m going to be going to my friends’ homes to move stuff around on them just to get a hit of mischief.”

He dared to laugh at me. “Did you know there are legalized ways to indulge in your type of mischief?”

I rolled my eyes. “If such a perfect job existed, I would have found it by now.”

“Security specialists and security testers are real, and their job is to try to bypass and break through security systems. Museums and banks hire them, as do other high-security complexes. The government has their own specialists on staff. Sometimes, the force is asked to assist with these scenarios. If the alarm system is tripped by the specialist, we’re to respond as normal, although we’re told it’s a scenario run. I never get to participate in those scenarios, but I’ve seen them being run before.”

“You just keep getting the short end of the stick, don’t you?”

“I’m lucky I was able to be in the force at all. When I joined, the hybrid form was required, and they had very strict rules on the hybrid form. The bigger, the better—because we’re only there to be brute force.”

I thought about flinging the pillows again, but instead, I picked up the room service menu, hissed, and headed for the room’s phone. “I am going to order us a feast, and your job is to eat every scrap you can. If you eat everything and you’re still hungry, I will order more until you’re no longer hungry. I suspect I’m just a tool to finish cleaning up the CPD. The case with that shapeshifter started the show, but I expect you’re going to be the finale. But in order to process the case, there needs to be a case on file where you’re clearly a quality officer and caliber to be a detective. Busting a child trafficking ring and safely recovering the kittens would be the ultimate slap to the face. That shapeshifter’s case was related to trafficking, too. That’ll put the CPD in a bad position.”

“It’s not going to count for much. They’ll just say you’re doing most of the work.”

“Me? With a criminal mischief record ten miles long? They’re going to view me as an obvious obstruction, Easton. My record will tell them all the lies we need for the case. They’ll probably view me as in league with the rings, thus making you shine even more. I won’t tell them I’m doing any of the thinking. I mean, I’ll dress up and look really nice. They’ll see my chest and forget I have a brain.”

Easton grimaced. “I hate how true that is.”

“You’re seeing me dressed down, too. I clean up pretty, Mr. Goody-Goody. And I will ruthlessly use my looks to win. I’m beauty, I’m brains, and I’m a swift kick to the balls of any idiot too stupid to stop staring at my chest.”

“Noted.”

“You’re safe, Mr. Goody-Goody. At least as long as you stare when my breasts are put on offer for your enjoyment.” To appease my rowdy virus, I leered at him. “As long as you look up when I clear my throat, you’re probably good. If I have to start growling because you can’t seem to remember my eyes are located a little higher, then we might have a problem. But generally, if you steal peeks because I decided to wear a shirt that shows off my feline perfection, all is well. Just don’t be a bastard about it.”

“Generally, I do try to look women in the eyes.”

“Smart and bold choice, Mr. Goody-Goody. I’m sure with a little training, we can get you sneaking the appropriate

number of peeks.”

“You are such a cat,” the wolf growled.

I shot him my best grin and replied. “I know. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“No.”

Laughing, I picked up the phone and went about the important business of ordering us a hearty lunch.

EIGHT



“I’M NOT ACCEPTING
JUDGMENT FOR MY
POOR CHOICES AT THIS
TIME.”

EASTON DEVoured every bite of food to enter the hotel room, licked the dishes clean, and passed out so hard I would need to put my lycanthrope strength to good use if I wanted a spot on the bed. His behavior worried me, and I dug out my phone, thumbed through my contacts, and decided I would bother Gabriel about my concerns.

“Humans are delightful creatures, unable to follow even the most basic of instructions.”

I hissed at the archangel. “And angels are assholes. We all know this to be a universal truth. It may as well be a law because I’ve never met an angel *without* assholish tendencies. Now that we’ve gotten those pleasantries out of the way, what’s wrong with my wolf?”

The archangel’s laughter tinkled. “Your wolf was insufficiently eating due to his income and position within the CPD. You are already working on resolving the issue. Why are you alarmed?”

“He ate almost a thousand dollars in room service, we’re at a fairly cheap place for room service, and he would have kept eating if I had more to feed him. He licked the plates clean. I couldn’t even laugh at him. Once I realized how starved he was, I only took a quarter of what I normally would.”

“Calm your nerves, Kelsie. Your wolf will be fine. This is why you were advised to stay the night. He will sleep calmly until morning outside of a groggy trip to the bathroom. Order yourself a proper meal, do the work you do best, and let him rest. He will be more active tomorrow, and while he will eat the same for dinner, he will only need a normal ration for breakfast and lunch. He will pass out again after dinner, and his virus will be fully recovered and ready to rumble the next morning.”

“Is there a reason I can’t skip down to the restaurant?”

“You may head down to the restaurant to unwind. Your wolf will not notice you have left, and he will not awaken until deep in the night.”

I could work with that. “All right. Thank you for the lead on the woman. Can you help me get information from photographs? My cop is passed out, and I really don’t think he’s going to be budging. I’m just hoping I can move him without waking him when I go to bed.”

“You will be able to move him, but I do not promise he will stay on his side of the bed. His poor diet results in a low body temperature, and you will be quite warm for him. Expect to be used as his personal furnace for the next few nights. His body temperature will regulate better in a few days.”

Damn it. “He’s that underweight?”

“He will recover quickly. His virus is healthy and knows you are an eligible partner, thus is working to make sure he is in good health, including the required body fat. I recommend you include more dessert foods with his dinner tomorrow. That will process into the appropriate body fats better.” Gabriel made a thoughtful noise. “Yes, I can assist you with your identification problem. Send me the collection of photos—the entire lot you were given. I will make certain the CDC receives it, flags it as critical, and sends you the data on everyone pictured.”

“Please make certain they run the children against all missing person records and have them reference the orphanages, shelters, and schools for matches. Anywhere we might have kids slip through the cracks. I know you said you can’t interfere, but if you could recommend a devil or demon I can bargain with, that would be helpful.”

“Belial.”

I grimaced. I’d met the devil in question once, and I’d been unfortunate enough to see him in his natural form. “What is his portfolio?”

“Ruin.”

Hm. I could work with ruin, especially if it meant ruining the child trafficking ring. “Think he’d be interested in having dinner with me tonight, albeit in a more humanoid shape?”

“I will take on the burden of inquiring for you. I expect he would be pleased to meet with you on this matter. I’ll message

you when he will be available, and I will pick the restaurant. Belial can teleport you, so it will be no different in time but more private and better suited for your discussion.”

“I owe you a favor, Gabriel.”

“No favor is owed. You do *His* work on this matter. I make no promise regarding you owing Belial, but I am confident you can handle any bargains you may wish to strike with him.”

“I’ll be waiting for your text.”



AT PRECISELY NINE, I stepped out of the elevator at the hotel. As requested, Belial showed up as a human wearing a black suit and a red shirt with black tie, and beyond his face being as I remembered from his devilish form, he could trick any mortal into believing he was just another human. Without the crushed tomato vibe mixed with nightmare dog, his face counted as handsome enough to create jealousy among women.

“You’re looking much better than the last time I saw you,” I greeted with a grin. “Thank you for meeting me on such short notice. I would have dressed up for you, but I only brought casual clothes this time.”

“Where we are going will not care about your attire.” Belial held out his arm. “Gabriel filled me in on the situation.”

I linked my arm with his, expecting a jealous wolf in the morning. The instant I touched him, the devil teleported us.

My head spun, and I tightened my hold so I wouldn't melt to the sidewalk. I gave myself a shake, blinked, and realized he'd dragged us all the way to New York City to one of my favorite steakhouses. "Nice." Normally, the restaurant did care about their dress code, but they had a private salon meant for small parties. "Are we taking over the salon or making the other diners uncomfortable?"

"Lucifer arranged to take over the salon. I have information for you, and we will need time to go over everything. I am aware of the situation, and I understand you wish to take on the CPD."

Gabriel must have picked my brains for the information—or I was playing right into the hands of the wicked angels, demons, and devils currently plaguing my life. "Had I known the wolf was as starved as he is, I wouldn't have left home without feeding him more. I figure I'll do the groundwork through gathering information that he might not have been able to accurately get through his work before giving him a chance to shine. He's been treated like he's the muscles of the operation, and while he has a great deal of muscle, he seems smart."

"He is intellectually inclined enough to please you and provide you with good sport, although you'll find he may require some therapy over having been the muscles of the operation for so long."

I could deal with making sure the cop made it to therapy. "He's a Mr. Goody-Goody because he's terrified of losing his job, isn't he?"

“You’re correct. You’ll find he can be corrupted, but only a little. His goody-goody tendencies are quite natural. For the most part, you will find he will stick to the spirit of the law in the future but will bend it for others as needed. I foresee him being the arresting officer more than a few times in your future. That is what happens when you invite a police officer to your home to stay permanently.”

“I’m not accepting judgment for my poor choices at this time.”

Laughing, Belial led the way into the restaurant. “I am using you to irritate my wife, by the way. She is a great deal of fun when irritated, and instead of listening to her rant over how she does not have grandchildren yet, I’m out having dinner with you. She won’t even mind that I’ve offered my arm, which is amusing. The photographs, which were taken by that damned angel I keep around, will entertain you a great deal.”

“I get to tell the wolf I consort with devils when he takes his eyes off me for even a minute.”

With an evil chuckle, the devil nodded.

Inside, the hostess welcomed us, grabbed a pair of menus, and guided us to the private parlor, promising our waiter would be with us shortly.

Under normal circumstances, the parlor had three tables for two and one for four, but all but one of the tables for two had been pushed together with the chairs removed, offering space for the piles of documents taking everything over.

“Well planned, Belial.” I freed my arm, rubbed my hands together, and went to discover what sort of intel he’d brought for me. “Should we start negotiating now?”

“Not this time. Lucifer is aware of what *He* wishes to accomplish and ordered me to assist you. There are rules we must abide by, which is why we aren’t just doing the work ourselves. We are leveling the playing field.” Belial joined me at the group of tables, and he patted a rather tall stack of documentation. “These are the pertinent records of the trafficking ring your contact photographed. You will find interesting bits of information in here, including home addresses, for those individuals. Wear gloves, contain your hair, and make your hits masked. You won’t be hiding your gender, not with your breasts as lovely as they are, but those precautions will prevent the mobsters in question from figuring out you are the one robbing them blind.”

I loved when devils talked dirty to me. “What am I robbing them of?”

“Cash, untracked gemstones, and information. The cash has been laundered, so you can do with it as you please. I will be providing a vehicle for you to use for your robberies, which will be escorted directly to some layer of hell, never to be seen again. The license plate on the vehicle will belong to one of the female mobsters, one who has done enough evil that being framed will only put an end to the many more tragedies she otherwise would commit.”

I drew a cross over my heart and rather insincerely stated, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

Belial chuckled at my irreverence. “You haven’t sinned quite yet, but you will.”

“I mean, I sinned the instant I agreed with the idea of driving off in a getaway vehicle with some bitch’s plates specifically to frame her. If you say she’s evil enough to deserve a quick trip to hell, just hand me the keys.”

“Your act of evil will bring many acts of good—and your intentions do matter. But only a little.”

I smiled. “Can you get me some dirt on this woman? To be properly motivated for framing her, of course.”

“She is an old practitioner who masterminded their child trafficking ring, and their first victim was her youngest daughter, who insisted on rebelling against the family trade.”

I clenched my teeth, and it took me a few minutes to relax enough I could ask, “And the daughter?”

“She will be rescued as a result of your acts of evil. I will take care of tipping off the police after you have made off with your newfound wealth, the copies of the information you need, and other things of important value.”

“I’m not sure that just putting on the plates is going to be good enough to make sure she’s dealt with. Is there a reason I can’t handle her myself?”

“Yes. She will fall. If the mobsters do not take the bait, Lucifer has other plans—but he thinks the loss of the money and the woman’s natural greed will be sufficient to bring about her end.” Belial’s smile chilled me. “It is a great deal of money, and Lucifer has provided a method for you to gather it

all.” Reaching into his inner suit pocket, he pulled out a slender black bag. “Anything you put inside will go into a special room in Lucifer’s home, sufficiently sized for your new acquisitions. Fragile things will land safely, and a demon or devil will move it until you are done with your heist. You may even put living things within the bag, and they will be cared for appropriately.”

I stiffened. “Living things?”

“Yes. Lucifer will have his gentlest succubi and incubi on hand to handle your rescues. They will not be your kittens, but they will be saved from more damage than they have already faced. Some will be animals. Some will not be animals.”

I curled my fingers into claws and hissed, fighting the urge to take a swipe at the papers on the table. “Will my cop be coming along for the ride?”

“Yes. He will be uncomfortable until he realizes there are victims you plan to rescue. Once he sees the first victim, you will have the partner you truly need. Until then, he will disapprove rather severely, although he will cooperate. Your reminder you do it for the kittens will get him through that.”

The waiter picked that moment to come in, and between the tiny horns peeking out of his dark hair and the hints of flame flicking off his suit, Lucifer had come to pay a visit while pretending to be a member of the wait staff. “I need something strong, Lucifer. Why are you playing at being a waiter?”

Thanks to my dirty work with corporations, I’d run into him a time or two before. Every time, he’d always shown me

some form of affection, which my virus appreciated while unnerving any witnesses.

“Because I can.” The Devil came over, kissed my cheek, and gave Belial a hearty pat on his shoulder. “Good work. It took you less than five minutes to rile her nicely.”

“I merely told her about the young things she would be stuffing into a bag.”

“I’ll be giving you the equivalent of an ether-soaked rag for the work,” the Devil announced. “I took the liberty of ordering your dinner, as I know what you like and you aren’t in the mood for any nonsense. I’ll bring you something strong to drink to take the edge off but do try to nurse it. Having a headache tomorrow would not help your cause. You’ll shock your cop nicely with your general ruthlessness as it is.”

“He seems to be taking everything in stride,” I admitted. “I’m not sure how challenged he’s really going to be over it.”

“He’s good at hiding it, and he’s trying his best to give you the benefit of the doubt, as his virus is invested—and his virus had lost hope of finding a suitable woman. He shies away from infecting someone because he’s worked hard to keep his badge. That reaction is not going to ease. His vigilance is good but perhaps a little too good.” Lucifer eyed the table, and he pointed at one of the smaller stacks. “Those are the victims who have been forced to work within the ring. You’ll want to memorize these individuals, make good use of the magical rag I will be giving you, and give them a ride to my home through the bag. You can just set it on the floor and shove them in, too—and if you need a quick escape, you can do that, grab the

corner, and drag the bag in with you. You and the bag will end up in my many hells for a visit, but you will be safe. A precaution, just in case.”

I accepted the bag from Belial, discovering it to be made of thin, black silk. It had a draw string, but I discovered when I loosened it, it became the equivalent of a circular rug, easily large enough to shove a person into. “I should owe you *something* for this, Lucifer.”

“You are putting your energy and soul into this. Now that you know, you will not change your course, not until you see those kittens home—and yes, to rescue all you can on the way. You’ll have quite the kidnapping count once you’re finished, but you won’t face any charges, not when your victims realize they have been set free. I will handle that. It is important to remember that your life is a prayer, and my father has heard the prayer of your heart—and knows how much damage it would do to your soul to walk away from those in need. And so *He* has found a way for you to satisfy your soul’s need while still rescuing the kittens. Some things you will need to do on your own, such as stalk the homes of those you wish to rob, wait for them to leave, and bust into their properties. I recommend that you enter through their windows. They do not have alarm systems, and most of their neighbors are part of their outfit and will not be home, for they will all be busy sinning elsewhere.” Lucifer grinned at me. “You can even set up cute little traps to inconvenience them, like stoppering their sinks and turning on the water.”

“I think I’ll skip the acts of vandalism and settle with premeditated murder and kidnapping.”

“That’s a girl. Belial, walk her through everything, and do teach her the finer points of running an investigation so she can drop hints to her wolf. Once he understands what their quarry does, he will wish to hunt, but he lacks the knowledge. Before now, he had the will drained from him. The will part will resolve itself soon enough. Do make sure *you* eat enough, Kelsie. I know your little kitty wants to make sure your big, bad wolf is healthy, but you will be shifting a lot in the upcoming days, so eat like you mean it.”

I saluted him, turned my attention to the documents, stuffed my new bag into my pocket, and said, “Let’s get this show on the road, Belial.”



AS BELIAL COULDN'T TEACH me everything about police investigations over the course of dinner, he produced five different textbooks on crime scene investigations, general procedures, and everything else that hadn't been covered during my stint through college and university. For the most part, it consisted of pay attention, ask people questions, make certain we had jurisdiction before asking questions, and heading over to the nearest CDC office to get an appropriate badge so we wouldn't have to wrangle jurisdiction issues until we finished our assignment.

The FBI would help with that although the CDC would handle the pertinent details.

Once I gorged and stole a six inch stack of documents I felt would help us the most, and begged the Devil and Belial to make the rest accessible should it be needed, I accepted another teleportation back to the hotel. Rather than the lobby, the Devil took me straight to my room.

While Belial's teleportation packed a bit of a punch, the Devil's knocked my virus for a loop, and stars danced around in my vision.

"Off to bed you go," Lucifer said with laughter in his voice, gave me a pat on the shoulder, and disappeared.

While I managed to escape my clothes, I failed to change into pajamas. As my virus supported the idea of naked cuddling, and the thought of it restored her to functionality, I opted to go with her flow.

If Easton decided to use me as a living furnace and woke up with his arms full of naked woman, *I* wasn't going to complain about the situation.

Had I been thinking clearly, I would have tried to beat him awake. Instead, he startled me with his yelp, which heralded a rather loud thump. Blinking, I stretched, clued in I'd gone to bed in the nude, and that the cop had launched himself halfway across the room before hitting the ground.

If I could purr, I would have, but I settled with a throaty, rumbly chuff. "What's wrong, Easton?"

"You're naked!"

I double-checked my status as free of any clothing before nodding. "I have brought you a gift of information, courtesy of

those downstairs. I paid for it through dealing with a dinner date while you were sleeping.” I pointed at the table, which had my new pile of books and papers. “I even got you some reference material so you can start your career as a detective on the right foot. I have *some* forensics training so I can help with some things, but my contacts provided those, which should cover your base information. If you’re tired of driving, you can read while I take us to our next destination.”

Easton’s gaze fixed on my chest, and at my virus’s insistence, I posed for him. Smiling, I added, “If I didn’t want you admiring the goods, I wouldn’t have put the goods on display or gone to bed in the nude. In reality, I managed to get undressed but was too tired to put my pajamas on, so I skipped them.”

The wolf let out a gusty breath. “Should I be thanking you or apologizing?”

“You’re welcome.” I hopped out of bed, went to my bag, and dug out my jeans and blouse. I thought about leaving off the bra to drive him to the brink of madness, but I picked the lacier of the two I’d brought with me. “If you’re body shy, you don’t have to show off your goods. If you’re not, I don’t care if you prance around in the hotel room naked, but should you, I’m interpreting that to mean you want me to take a good look at you.” After a moment of thought, I determined I’d convinced him I was quite promiscuous. “I was born infected, but my mother contracted lycanthropy after conception, which is why I’m a girl rather than a boy. My mother then passed the virus onto my father. She became infectious a lot sooner than expected. She didn’t undergo any testing because they won’t

test pregnant women, especially with a pregnancy as touchy as mine was. I'm lucky to be alive, and they think the virus is why I made it to term in the first place. Let's just say my parents were poor then. They aren't poor now because I pulled a lot of strings to make it that way. They're half the reason I bust my ass so hard. The only reason I haven't bought them a new house is because they love the house they're in now even though it's small. I won't take that from them."

Instead, I'd wrangle his parents, move them next door to the guest house, and then work on making him move into my house. I allowed myself a sly smile, wondering how long it would take him to figure out he'd been selected as a viable suitor.

Ideally, he wouldn't clue in until I stole his belongings from his apartment, moved them into what would be our house, and used my charms to keep him from leaving. Then I'd wait for him to realize he no longer needed to return to his apartment because everything except his furniture had been removed.

And, if I could get away with it, I'd pilfer his furniture and move it into one of the empty rooms in my basement so he could visit his old things anytime he wanted.

I bet Amy would help me if I asked her.

"I'm not sure I like that expression on your face," he confessed.

I grinned at his worry. "I am contemplating how best to bring ruin to these traffickers, and I'm appreciating where my thoughts lead."

Of course, I wasn't going to tell him I thought beyond bringing the kittens home for Christmas. I wasn't sure how I'd plan on getting his parents to my place on schedule.

Easton relaxed, and he picked himself up off the floor, dusted himself off, and gave himself a shake. "I mean, I've been thinking about that, too. My virus is not happy about the trafficking situation."

I nodded. "Mine is ready for some violence. Hey, I have a question for you."

"What?"

"How do you feel about breaking and entering if we're procuring evidence that could lead to the safe recovery of the kittens?"

While Easton scowled, he considered my question, which was better than I'd initially expected from him. "That depends. Who is your informant?"

"The Devil."

The cop blinked. "Excuse me, but did you just say the Devil?"

"Well, it began with my contacts last night." Once I finished dressing, I went to my phone, grabbed it, and showed him my contact list. "I got Belial's contact a while back. It happens with major corporate hustles; devils, demons, and angels all get in on that action. I gave him a call, asked him if he could go out for dinner last night, and he brought the Devil along for the ride. The Devil took the place of the waiter, and I got yelled at for feeding you but not feeding me. So, I have to

feed me more and feed you more, and it's a damned good thing I have a good savings account, else we'd eat my wallet to ribbons in the next few days. Anyway, Belial is in charge of general ruin. He really wants to see these traffickers destroyed. I got information on where to strike. I'll have to stalk them for when they leave, but I've been informed that we can make off with all their laundered money, which they're leaving around as cash and other easily sold objects that are difficult at best to trace." I giggled, set my phone down, and rubbed my hands together. "I'm going to turn the laundered money into a trust for the trafficking victims to get them back on their feet."

After staring at me for a disconcertingly long time, Easton erupted into curses, the kind my mother would have grounded me over for life.

With wide eyes, I asked, "Was there something wrong with the idea?"

"That's the one circumstance I simply can't argue with. You want to be a modern-day Robin Hood, and you're targeting the worst of the worst our society has to offer."

Ah. I understood his frustration. How so very dare me for doing something utterly evil in such a good way? "You can help."

"I'm going to lose my job over this, aren't I?"

I shook my head. "I highly doubt it. Angels don't put people in that position when they are working their acts of good—and we're being tasked with helping *them*. If you *do* get fired, it's only because you have a better job on the horizon. You might get bumped to the CDC or FBI.

Remember what the judge said? You're being asked to walk the line, and that's not the talk of someone intending to get you fired. I think they want to move you up in the world, and they can't with all those excessive goody-goody tendencies kicking around. But don't worry. Exposure to me should at least dull the edges and numb you to the reality of being a little naughty for the sake of doing good."

"You consider robbing houses just a little naughty?"

"A lot naughty would be doing it while naked. I mean, I'm going to be a lot naughty, but I won't be naked while doing it. I'm going to pretend I'm a mobster with a bad reputation and make it so she's my fall woman. Normally, I fess up to my crimes quite willingly, but when the devil in charge of ruin suggests I bring this bitch down, I'm bringing her down. She sold her own child into trafficking. She goes down—and then I'm hunting for her daughter, making sure she gets out of the system, and into loving hands capable of helping her. That's my project for next year. Rescuing the kittens is my task for this year. Fixing as much of the damage this ring has done is next year's work. Also, we're going to be guilty of numerous counts of kidnapping."

"We're *what*?" Easton growled.

I grinned at the fury in his tone. "We're going to be guilty of numerous counts of kidnapping."

"No."

"They're trafficking victims in dire need of rescue, but they're not going to cooperate, so I'm going to kidnap them."

Easton's eyes narrowed, and he regarded me with open suspicion. After a few minutes, he growled, "Fine."

Excellent. The wolf had some sense and a willingness to use his brain more than his goody-goody heart. Given a full month with me, I might even have him joining me for some harmless pranks that wouldn't show up on his record. "We won't get charged. Apparently, it's not kidnapping if we're rescuing them from being trafficked. We just won't be in a position to ask for their permission. I'll be using the magical equivalent of an ether-soaked rag to make sure everyone comes along quietly."

"Where are you getting *that*?"

"The Devil."

Heaving a sigh, Easton raised his hand and rubbed at his left temple. "I went to bed and you did *what*?"

"I had dinner with the Devil and Belial, acquired useful information, and earned us a target to get more information. Apparently, I would be stricken with guilt if I couldn't rescue as many as possible on this trip, so I have been gifted a bag where I will send anything I want straight to hell. I'll keep the money, the people will get taken care of, and I might just clean these bastards out of everything they own so they come back to a spotless home with nothing in it. I'll steal their fucking *dust*."

If Easton's eyes widened any further, I worried they might pop out of his head. "You can't really do that, can you?"

"Watch me."



“YOU’RE SOME FORM OF
SPOTTED MENACE, I SEE.”

ONCE I GOT an idea in my head, I had a terrible tendency of following through. As we couldn’t act until we learned more, I ordered enough food to feed both of us, careful to make sure I got an appropriate amount for myself and extra desserts to sustain the big, bad wolf.

Well, he might become a big, bad wolf with sufficient training, but I determined I had a soft, fluffy puppy who lived for praise and positive attention. I could only assume I had been a very naughty kitty to deserve a soft, fluffy puppy, but I’d work on an exhaustive training regime to bring him out of his shell.

Or out of his clothes. I’d conquer the clothes problem first, which my virus heartily approved of.

I devoured my lunch in record time, washed my hands, and went to work reviewing the profiles of the bastards I would be clearing out. As I’d gotten the Devil’s number out of him, I shot him a text inquiring if I could just steal all the contents out of their homes for examination on our terms.

His confirmation my plan would work amused me so much I giggled through the address acquisition portion of my day, which involved confirming at least eight of my targets lived on the same street. Some additional research indicated my kidnapping targets lived in the properties next door and that the traffickers used the properties to train their latest victims.

Why else would there be entire houses loaded with women between houses filled with mobsters out to profit from them?

All in all, I would have to rob fifteen homes, and judging from the surveillance photos Lucifer provided, I would have thirty-seven young girls and women ranging between the ages of six and twenty to kidnap, relocate to hell, and release following rehabilitation.

The number angered me so much my virus took over, I shifted, and attacked the stack of papers, sending the whole lot to the floor. I hissed, slapped the offensive sheets with my paws, and lashed my tail.

Easton, who conquered the last of his desserts with enough haste I'd need to order him even more food, stopped and stared. "What the hell?"

I spat feline curses, eyed the room for something to take my temper out on, and eyed my phone. As though sensing I was about to send it on a flight, Easton scooped it up, held it out of my reach, and wagged his finger at me.

Prowling his way, I yowled at him as I couldn't roar even if I wanted to.

“With how you talk, I was convinced you were a lion, tiger, or lynx,” he stated, looking me over. “You’re some form of spotted menace, I see, although you seem to be rather diminutive in nature.” He graced me with a wolfish grin. “Big talk, teeny tiny little body. I could knock you across the street with a single swipe of my paw while a wolf—and I don’t mean while in my hybrid form.”

The wolf would pay for his commentary, and I swiped my paw at his leg, although I kept my claws retracted to prevent having to pay a bloodshed bill.

Neutralizer cost a fortune, and I would rather spend the money on more interesting pursuits, including securing the troublesome wolf as my territory. To show him I might be tiny but scored at the top for ferocity, I showed him my sharp, pointy teeth and hissed at him.

“I can pick you up without breaking a sweat. I will scruff you, little kitty.”

I flattened my ears at his threat and growled.

Easton prowled around me, looking me over from the tip of my perfect nose down to my tail. “I have no idea what you are, but you’re gorgeous. I can’t argue with your claims of feline perfection. You are some form of wild cat species, but outside of guessing you’re a leopard of some sort, I have no idea what you are.”

A flash of light startled me, and I spun, spitting curses. A rather amused Lucifer, dressed in a suit and sporting his horns, leathery wings, and forked tail, took his time eyeing the wolf. “She’s a clouded leopard. Once she forms a mating bond,

she'll increase in size a little, although she'll always be on the diminutive side. I come bearing a gift of badges and authorization to do naughty things without it showing up on your record as long as the naughty things are to all the people on the list your little kitty got out of me yesterday. Dealing with ridiculous bouts of self-esteem problems will not get this job done in a timely fashion, and this matter needs to be handled before Christmas. We cannot have a Christmas reunion unless everything is tied off with a neat little bow on Christmas Eve. We all have places to be on Christmas, so I'm here to make sure this show gets on the road with the appropriate amount of haste. We do not have all week for you two to posture about the legalities of clearing out the properties of traffickers."

As Lucifer could handle a few scratches and bites, I snarled and went for him, claws out. Before I could reach him, Easton snagged me around the middle, hauled me up, and struggled to contain me.

I hissed, and as I had sworn not to cost myself a fortune in neutralizer, I resisted the urge to rip the wolf the shreds.

"Don't mind her. Her virus is quite active and ready to cause trouble." Ignoring my antics, Lucifer snapped his fingers, and all evidence of our lunch-time slaughter vanished. He snapped his fingers again, and a brown cardboard box appeared. "I made an oversight while wining and dining your little kitty last night. If I sent you two to the CDC to get badged, you would be there for a week arguing with the paper pushers. As your little kitty does *not* have patience for paper

pushers right now, I thought I'd cut through all the red tape so you two can get on the road tomorrow morning."

"My little kitty?"

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, and you have possession of the little kitty, so she is your little kitty. Personally, I wouldn't put her down until she's had a chance to calm herself. She is quite riled up. This issue has tested her limits and will continue to do so until Christmas. I do have an idea that will help calm her a little."

Easton carried me to the bed, dumped me on it, and pressed his hand between my shoulders, pressing down until I cooperated and made myself comfortable on the bedding. He sat beside me, and once he determined I wasn't going anywhere, he went to work petting my back.

My virus swooned, and I worried he'd take us both out if he went for the sweet spot behind my ears.

I regretted my inability to purr.

"Can we start with the badges?"

"Of course." Lucifer went to the box, rummaged through it, and pulled out two leather badges. He displayed them, showing the FBI's badge on the front with badge numbers. He opened one to reveal an information card displaying Easton's information. "I recommended that education, past experience, and records be evaluated for both of you, indicated my father had recruited you for the work, and suggested that an entire trafficking ring might be closed down in a hurry if you two were badged. You have undercover operating rights. Kelsie, I

took the liberty of having your latest range records pulled, which was sufficient qualification to be issued a firearm. After Christmas, you will be expected to go in for appropriate testing, but you will pass with flying colors—something one of my irritating brothers confirmed.”

Easton sucked in a breath but said nothing.

“While I’m the Lord of Lies, you’ll find me an honest enough fellow. If it keeps my father from whining, I’ll do more than wrangle some idiots over at the FBI. Leave your little kitty there and come meet your badge. Right now, you’re badged with both the CPD and the FBI. This can add additional complexity to your life, but I expect the FBI will come knocking to make you a permanent employee in due time. I took the liberty of negotiating your compensation for your work. While your little kitty won’t care about getting paid, you will, and the CPD will refuse to pay you because you aren’t in their jurisdiction. This will prove to be their final mistake, as it will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Your little kitty will have a great deal of fun tearing them down, resulting in a complete reorganization of the CPD. Should you opt to return to the CPD, you will enjoy proper treatment.” Lucifer smiled, and his expression disconcerted me. “I recommend you function as a CPD-FBI-CDC liaison. There aren’t many triple liaisons, and that would crank your value through the roof. It’ll make you quite comparable to your little kitty down the road. That’s far more important to you than it is to her.”

“I wonder why,” Easton grumbled.

“Don’t be surly. She couldn’t hold your income against you even if she tried. She reserves her fury for the greedy bastards who abuse the little worker bees. That’ll annoy you, too, although you’ll be more annoyed because of her fits of temper when she’s forced to negotiate compromises when she wants to beat the ever-living shit out of the greedy bastards.”

As Lucifer spoke nothing but the truth, I went about the serious business of grooming, starting with my front paws, as I figured that might keep the grouchy wolf from overreacting.

“Is it safe to let her go?”

“It should be, but I’ll remind you she is a cat. She really doesn’t want to pay a neutralizer bill, so she’ll just take swipes and posture. She *hates* paying neutralizer bills. That’s money she could have spent elsewhere.” Lucifer came over, reached down, and scratched under my chin. “Having a little kitty of my own, the chin scratches and the behind the ear scratches will get you out of most trouble. The butt rubs are a good way to earn her ire, especially as the little kitties really enjoy it, become embarrassed they enjoy it, get other ideas they’d really like to pursue, and become rather frustrated because you’re just trying to be nice. But if you want a good time, a vigorous butt rub will do the trick, especially if you scratch right where the tail meets her back. That drives my little kitty right up the nearest wall.”

I turned back an ear, as I had a tendency of swatting anyone who even thought about giving my butt a rub while in my divine feline form.

According to Easton's expression, he'd clued in the Devil was short a few cans of a six pack. I waited for the moment the poor wolf realized the Lord of Lies was the kind of man I'd invite home for holiday meals.

Lucifer winked at me before saying, "So, I'd like to bargain with you. It's nothing much. View it as a repayment for paving the way on this venture and saving you a week of red tape."

I covered my eyes with my paws, aware I would need to apologize to Easton for failing to teach him about how to best negotiate with the divine.

"What do you want?"

"Your little kitty loves big family dinners. She always goes to her parents' because she is always worried they won't feel comfortable in her home. She's wrong about that, by the way. I would like you to force her to extend the invitation to her parents to come to her domain rather than theirs, as their home is not sufficiently sized for her family and yours. I know you have not had contact with your siblings in quite a while, but it would also please your parents to see the entire family together. I know you do not have contact information for two of your three brothers, but I can handle that on your behalf." Lucifer raised a brow and engaged the wolf in a staring contest. "You are not a plague bearer in their eyes, but they also have more shame over their behavior than they know how to handle. So, I'm asking you to deal with an entire day of an awkward family gathering, as you will struggle to handle them as well. I can promise that you will be able to mend fences

with your family and that your parents will appreciate reconciliation.”

Interesting. There hadn't been any mention of other family when the issue of his parents' home had come under discussion.

The scent of dismay polluted the air and made me sneeze.

“Kelsie, they are his older brothers, and after his infection with lycanthropy, they opted to isolate themselves. His parents accepted his status as infected, but they struggled. An unfortunately religious upbringing created prejudice.”

More pieces clicked into place.

The archangels would have wanted to resolve rifts that had been created in *His* name but without *His* support—and they would not intervene in a mere house burning down if it meant a family might be healed from long years of separation and conflict.

“Their religious beliefs do not allow for lycanthropy,” Easton stated.

I marveled he somehow kept his tone neutral.

“People change, and my father does not believe in such hatred splitting apart families. It is an equitable exchange. Simply tell your parents that a lady friend has invited you to her home for the holidays and that you want them to join you. I will cover their travel expenses, and I am quite certain she will have no problem opening her guest home for the entirety of your family over the holidays.”

No kidding. As I wanted to contribute to the discussion, I hopped off the bed, went to retrieve my fallen clothes, and gathered them in my mouth before dragging them into the bathroom. Lucifer waited for me to finish getting inside before closing the door.

Understanding the Devil would fill Easton's head with nonsense if I gave him a chance, I transformed in record time, threw my clothes back on, and emerged before more trouble than I could contain occurred. "He is not lying about my enjoyment of loud family affairs. I'm a negotiator by trade, so I am confident I can handle any disputes among your family with grace and professionalism. I might handle it with my fur coat on and some clawless swiping, but I'm no angel."

"You really aren't," Lucifer agreed.

Easton took Lucifer's bait, and he examined the FBI badge with his name on it. "I could really become an FBI agent?"

My heart broke for the wolf as his tone conveyed his astonishment that it might even be a possibility.

So many lycanthropes walked in his shoes, and I'd been one of the lucky ones, able to make use of my beauty and smarts to beat the odds. My smarts had opened more doors than my beauty, but when partnered together, I'd been able to go places few other lycanthropes could.

"You can remain a cop, working as a detective on high profile cases while also working for the FBI and the CDC. You would end up working with your little kitty often, as both the FBI and the CDC have wanted access to her skills for a while. She usually negotiates with corporations, but she's quick on

her feet, smart, and compassionate. People like her save lives when badged. If you need someone to talk someone else off a literal ledge, she's the kind you go to first. Of course, if she really wants, she can talk you right out of your clothes."

That got the cop raising a brow, and he examined the card. "But this says I'm a special agent?"

"All special agent means is that you are able to carry and use a firearm in the line of duty. It's your basic operative rank within the FBI. Your experience and skills exceed what the FBI requires to join as a special agent. You'll need to be trained, as will your kitty, but there's little your kitty loves more than training, especially when someone else is paying for it."

"And her badge?"

"She's on equal grounds with you for this, although her experience is due to her negotiation skills. You'll have to coach her on the practicalities, but she has sufficient schooling to do the work. She even knows how to record evidence to make it admissible in court, although she will be utilizing angels due to the nature of the case you're working on. That's how she'll get away with completely clearing out those homes of every piece of furniture and even the dust in them."

"I'm going to need a second bag, Lucifer."

With a wicked smile, he reached into his suit and pulled out another silken bag the match of the first one he'd given me. "I foresaw that need, as two bags and two people using them will make clearing out the homes quite quick."

“And perhaps two of those magical ether-soaked rags.”

Once again, he reached into his suit and pulled out a pair of little plastic baggies, each with a folded piece of pale cloth inside. “It isn’t actual ether, as that would be dangerous, but these will induce an unconscious state on whomever breathes the magic in. They have a hundred uses each, and the dose lasts for six hours. We are prepared to handle any volume of materials, pets, and people you send our way when you begin your task. Try to limit how many strays you rescue, please.”

I pouted. “You mean all of them?”

“I do mean all of them. You cannot rescue every single street cat and dog to cross your path, but there will be one or two you won’t be able to resist. Just try to be sensible.”

“I’ll try,” I promised, accepting the baggies. After making a show of thinking about it, I handed the new bag and one of the baggies to Easton. “The black sack becomes a portal to his many hells. Some of the victims won’t cooperate when we go to set them free, so we’re going to scuffle with them, knock them out, and punt them straight to the Devil, who will take care of making sure they understand they’re being rescued. And well, the ones that aren’t in need of rescue *better* disappear off into your dungeons somewhere, never to be seen again.”

Lucifer chuckled. “Are you sure you are not going to regret that?”

“If I mistake a trafficker for a victim, I want that trafficker rotting in your many hells. Fuck their day in court if they’re willfully selling other women to the market. If they are doing

it because they want to, they can enjoy their punishment. Look, I wasn't brought into this because I'm a nice person. I was brought in because I'll get the job done."

"Do you wish for punishment or rehabilitation?"

I glared at the Devil. "If redemption and rehabilitation is an option, of course I want redemption and rehabilitation. But if they're enjoying what they're doing? Hell no. Fuck them to your many hells."

Lucifer laughed at me. "Smooth your fur, little kitty. I'll see to it that justice is served in the most appropriate fashion possible. Some of them are borderline."

"Then deal with the borderline ones as best you see fit." I picked up my badge, opened it, and checked over the information, which accurately listed my age, some identification number within the FBI, my rank, and badge number along with some random bits of information from my eye color and height to my status as infected and contagious. "Just holding this makes me feel dirty. Have they not looked at my criminal record?"

"Your 'criminal record' is a comical collection of petty criminal mischief counts all resulting in community service. As not a single one of your victims came away feeling victimized, all of them put on record that they had a laugh over their incident, and that you're disgustingly on the up-and-up professionally, the FBI has opted to ignore your record. There is talk of expunging everything."

I gasped. "No. Not my record!"

Lucifer stared at me with a rather unimpressed expression on his face. “If you don’t get him to do what I want, I’m having your record expunged. *Everything.*”

As I viewed my criminal mischief record as a work of art, I flung myself at the wolf, wrapped around his legs, and wailed, “Don’t let him do it.”

Easton stared down at me, joining the Devil in sporting a rather unimpressed expression. “Are you being serious right now?”

If crying got me what I wanted, I would do so without remorse, and I stared at him with wide eyes, refusing to blink until my eyes began to water.

“Seriously?” the wolf sighed. “Fine. I’ll invite my family to your house for Christmas.”

“They should come on Christmas Eve and spend the night so we can sneak presents and do all the Christmas Eve celebration things.” I kept on staring, ready to unleash a few tears if it meant I could have a proper holiday at my house.

“All right. I’ll do it, just don’t start crying. Please don’t start crying.”

Satisfied with my conquest, I bounced to my feet, grabbed my phone, and twirled around the hotel room, swiping through my contacts until I found my father’s number.

“Is something wrong?” my father answered.

“Come to my house for Christmas and Christmas Eve,” I sang out, and I twirled around again. “I have captured a defenseless male wolf, and I have coerced him into coming to

dinner along with his family. I request the appearance of both of my parents for this most prestigious event.”

“What did that poor wolf do to deserve *that*?” my father asked, his tone more curious than anything else. “I thought you were contemplating visiting and capturing a lynx.”

I huffed and waved my free hand to dismiss such a thought. “He rings in at almost nine hundred pounds as a hybrid, he’s got the goods in the looks department, and he’s got a badge.”

“Seriously? You hunted a *cop*? With your record?”

“Dad!”

“Don’t you ‘Dad’ me, young lady. What did you do to that poor police officer?”

“You mean beyond crawl into bed with him naked to test his sanity?” I shot the wolf a rather evil grin, and because I had every intention of teaching Lucifer how to be properly evil, I blew Easton a kiss.

The wolf slapped his hand against his forehead. “What is wrong with you?”

I scowled at him, and as blowing a kiss hadn’t worked, I stuck my tongue out at him.

“Are you tormenting him or dating him?”

“Can it be both? But honestly, I’m tormenting him. He has some family drama that needs to be resolved, so I’m going to resolve it.”

My father sighed. “We’ll be there, if only to rescue that poor wolf from your clutches. Thank you for helping him with his family woes, but please remember that climbing into bed with a man while naked does send a rather specific message.”

Yes, it did, and my virus was thrilled I cooperated with her wicked ways for a change. “His family will be staying in the guest house so you’ll get to invade my personal domain. I’ll put you in one of the cellar suites. I’ll be holding the wolf hostage upstairs. The state of my clothing at the time of holding him hostage is up for debate.” Pinning the phone between my shoulder and ear so I could free up a hand, I rummaged through the box to discover Lucifer had brought two firearms, FBI-labeled bulletproof vests, a pair of stun guns, two pairs of regular handcuffs and two pair of fuzzy cuffs meant for a good time rather than the apprehension of crooks. “Thank you for agreeing to come to dinner. I’m going to be out of town for a little while, so don’t be surprised if nobody is home. I got the vampires watching my place again. My house will be fine. If you spot some angels or devils loitering about, don’t worry about it. They’re supposed to be there. If you want to check on the house and guest house, just give the vampires a call. They’ll let you in and give you the alarm fob you keep refusing to accept.”

My father heaved a deeper and longer sigh. “Are you in trouble again?”

“I’m not. I’ve been informed it is time to use my powers of evil for good, and the FBI wants me for a case. It’s up my alley, and I agreed to play their game. They want to move the poor cop up in the world, so he’s been assigned to keep me

somewhat out of trouble. I must limit my trouble to petty criminal mischief as usual. Those are just flavor marks on my record and everyone knows it.”

“You were thrown into prison for a month!” my father bellowed at me.

I held the phone away from my ear until he finished yowling, hissing, and growling at me. Once the sound subsided, I replied, “I was actually doing a job for the judge who wanted someone to investigate the prison system. I was paid for my good work, and that specific incident was expunged from my record with a note that I was hired to do it and counted as community service time.”

My father heaved a sigh. “You’re serious.”

“I’m always serious about doing good deeds even from prison, Dad. But it was a valuable experience. I have learned that I will keep all my criminal mischief to things that exclusively earn me community service time.”

As the Devil could read minds and I knew it, I held out my hand and waggled my fingers, waiting for him to unlock and hand me his phone so I could keep talking and check local real estate. He did as I wanted, and I brought up a real estate site to browse the offerings, discovering there was a greystone not far from where I lived in a perfect place for my parents to get into trouble. “There’s a house on sale three blocks away from me that’s up against the park. Historic landmark, up for renovation, and two doors down from the good grocery store, a bunch of restaurants, and the police station. I will buy it for you for Christmas and handle the renovations, and I will then

have your current home repaired and renovated as needed so you can live the high life of closer to me and able to return to your old haunts *or* give it to the next kid in line. You're also receiving my permission and approval for another kid, and I will not-so-secretly pay for their education, but you must raise the brat like you're horribly poor and can barely get by in your greystone."

"You will owe us at least five hours a week of community service in the form of homeschooling any children we have. You can pick the subjects, but I am concerned with the state of the public education system."

"Schooling is decent in the area, and there are a few good private schools that might be an option. I would pay those education costs, but I require my loving parents to live three blocks away from me for my convenience."

"Tell me about the greystone."

I reviewed the listing, wincing at the damage inside the building. "I'll get it for a pittance. It needs heavy renovations. The historic landmark societies will *love* me when I'm done. You'll have to deal with street parking."

"We already do."

"You'll be able to have a music room, craft room, and workshop easy as pie, and you'll have two guest bedrooms. I'll even toss in some nice bathrooms for you as an incentive."

"We do like our house, Kelsie."

"I need an excuse to rescue this greystone before it ends up like my guest house. It's on the brink."

“I’m only going to go with this on the grounds that your mother and I have been discussing having children. She wants another daughter, however, and we can’t afford the bill.”

I could, and I had access to the Devil. “Putting you on mute for one second.” After muting the call, I engaged the Devil in a staring contest, holding out his phone. “Using my funds, buy this greystone and begin renovations on it. I’ll go with your general plan for this gig in exchange for you cursing my parents with twin girls. My mother has always wanted twin girls, and since they’re infected with lycanthropy now, they’re going to just have a bunch of boys.”

“Two girls and a boy, and I will make certain that all hormonal issues associated with pregnancies of mixed genders are addressed,” Lucifer countered.

“Babysitters will be required, and the greystone renovation must be done to the historic landmark societies’ standards. There are like five of them in the area, and they get bitchy.” Once Lucifer took his phone back, I unmuted the call with my father and said, “Sorry about that. I have a minion here, and I was giving him marching orders. I have a greystone habit, Dad. I need this poor one in my possession, and I require a loving pair of caretakers for it. I *can* make the arrangements for you to have a girl, but that’s going to cost me a favor with some naughty being from the Devil’s many hells, so you’re going to have to accept the greystone.”

“I guess we could sell the house to help pay for the greystone.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can sell the house to me, and I will keep it for the daughter you will have, as she will want a place to live that’s not in her parents’ basement.”

“Market value and not a penny more.”

“Deal. Tell Mom I love her, that I have finally conquered the house situation, and that I am expecting a lot of hugs at Christmas. We’re starting the celebration on Christmas Eve. Call it noon. We’re going to be doing the open a present at midnight tradition, and we’ll appropriate from some religions for some fun celebratory activities. Except the Krampus ones. I’d be dismembered and tossed in the sack for certain.”

“You have earned a great deal of coal this year, that’s for certain.” My father huffed a laugh. “All right, little kitten. If you really want to move ahead with the greystone, I’ll convince your mother it’s a good idea. I don’t know if we can afford the property taxes on it, though.”

“You can afford the property taxes, I promise.” Of course, I’d be paying the property tax myself, but why start a fight when I’d already won the war? “I’ll handle the school taxes, as that falls under the education umbrella.”

“Well played, Kelsie. Well played.”

I smiled. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too. Expect your mother to call and yell at you in a few hours.”

I looked forward to it, and after exchanging farewells with my father, I hung up the phone. I smiled at Easton. “Your turn, Mr. Goody-Goody.”

“You’re buying a greystone for your parents for Christmas?”

“Absolutely. It’s on the market for pennies, it’s in horrible shape, and I’ll renovate it to be a gem in the area. They deserve me at my best because they deal with me at my worst. I’m also grateful for my existence. And the twin girls and a boy thing? They deserve that, too.”

“You will have your hands full attempting to rein her in, Easton,” the Devil warned. “She becomes overwhelmed and simply must engage in acts of altruism. It’s quite disturbing, really. I recommend you withhold any physical affections until she agrees to at least discuss huge fiscal adventures in the future. That way, she might have money left when she’s done.”

“I always reserve enough money for at least ten years of the property taxes, school taxes, and basic living expenses.”

According to the Devil’s expression, I disgusted him.

“Good luck, Easton.” The Devil vanished in a flash of golden light, leaving a faint hint of brimstone in his wake.

I raised a brow and turned my stare to the big, bad wolf. “Your turn, Mr. Goody-Goody.”

“You’re going to drive me crazy,” he predicted, but he retrieved his phone and glared at it.

Accepting his actions as the first step towards doing what I wanted, I went back to work, determined to make a game plan for clearing the crooks out of everything they owned, getting leads on the missing kittens, and giving as many people as possible around me the happy holidays they deserved.



“THE CPD HASN’T FIRED
YOU YET?”

IT TOOK Easton three hours to work up the nerve to call his parents, which tipped me off there was far more to the family dispute than I understood. He put the phone on speaker, set it on the table in front of him, and eyed it like it might rise up and bite him.

“It’s unlike you to call us, Asher,” a man answered.

The big, bad wolf grimaced as though he’d been slapped. “I’m sorry about that. Things have been busy at work.”

“The CPD hasn’t fired you yet?”

My virus snapped to attention, and she began a low, deep growl in my head. Rather than steal Easton’s thunder, I waited, although I abandoned the documents I searched through, leaned back in my chair, and crossed my arms.

“No. I’ve been badged with the FBI for a joint case, and there’s a possibility the position might become permanent.”

According to the startled laugh on the other end of the line, Easton’s father had gotten sideswiped with the announcement. “Well, I’ll be damned. You don’t call unless you need something, so spit it out.”

“We’ve been invited to attend Christmas dinner.”

Silence.

My virus’s growling graduated to snarls punctuated with infuriated yowls.

“We?”

“You, Mom, and my brothers. A friend will reach out to my brothers. Uhm, housing and travel will be covered. The host has a guest house, and you’re welcome to use it. She—”

“*She?*” My virus hit the brakes on her fury, and while she rolled head over heels in confusion over the man’s change in tone, Easton’s father added, “What sort of she are we talking about here? The kind you bring home to your momma?”

“More like the kind where I bring you to her home to meet. Her place is bigger than yours, and she offered to host. By offer, she danced around the hotel room.”

“Hotel room?”

Was Easton trying to make the call as awkward as possible or did he really have no idea how to handle life with a woman? While my virus did the equivalent of run confused circles in my head, I relaxed enough to crack a grin, wondering how deep a hole the big, bad wolf would dig for himself before the call ended.

“We’re working a job together. She’s some fancy negotiator type for corporations, and the case needs a negotiator, so the FBI issued her a badge. She needs a babysitter with experience. As she’s a lycanthrope, and they don’t partner lycanthropes in situations like this with the

uninfected generally, I was nominated to keep her out of trouble and watch over her while she handles the negotiations. I'm mostly around to advise and protect her. She's even smaller than I am."

"I'd say it's not my fault you're a runt, but I suspect it is my fault you're a runt. I'm just grateful your brothers have six inches on you and didn't inherit the short gene. From your great-grandfather on my mother's side. We checked, because how else could two perfectly sized people produce a runt?"

"Thanks, Dad," Easton said in a wry tone.

"Is there actually a woman or are you trying to lure us to a secondary location?"

The question caught me so off guard I leaned back too far in my seat and toppled backwards, cracking my knees into the edge of the table along with smacking my head onto the floor. A guffaw escaped at the thought of Mr. Goody-Goody luring anyone to a secondary location, which made my virus pout.

She wanted to find out what the big, bad wolf might do to a divine feline in a secondary location.

Her sulking after whiplashing between fury and general confusion did me in, and I snort-giggled over the absurdity of the situation.

Easton leaned over, eyed me, and asked, "Are you okay, Kelsie?"

Unable to talk due to laughter, I waved my hand at him and hoped he received the message that only my dignity and pride had been injured.

“What just happened?”

“Kelsie, the woman in question, apparently found the thought of me luring anyone to a secondary location so ridiculously absurd she fell out of her chair. I’m sure she’s fine. She’s a shifting lycanthrope, and it would take a lot more than falling out of a chair to do anything to her. She’s the one who extended the invitation. I present the sounds of uncontrollable laughter as evidence there is actually a woman and I’m not trying to lure you to a secondary location.”

He had no idea how wrong he was, and the idea I snookered him along with his family amused another snorted laugh out of me. After a few gulps of air, I calmed myself enough to right my chair and sit back down. As it was his show, I mouthed an apology and did my best to behave.

“I see. When would you want us at this woman’s home?”

“Christmas Eve around noon. She wants to do the full celebration, which includes a midnight single present exchange along with the big dinner. She has a nice place in Chicago. Since you’ll have to fly in, I’ll arrange for someone to meet you at the airport if I can’t escape from the general preparations.”

“We could get a cab.”

I shuddered at the thought of the bill for a cab, the terrors his family might experience should they make such a terrible mistake, and how much the therapy bill might cost.

“Are you still fascinated with vampires?” Easton asked, and he raised a brow at me.

“Of course.”

“Kelsie, can you arrange for one of your vampire associates to pick my parents up at the airport?”

“Sure. I’ll just need their flight number, and I can make certain a vampire does the pickup. And don’t stress if you don’t arrive right at noon, especially if you’ll be at the mercy of the airlines. If you need to come a few days before, that’s also fine. The guest house can handle you for as long as you’d like to visit Chicago. If you want a week to see the sights, I’m sure I can coerce a vampire to play tour guide for you. We might be out of town for a few days at your arrival, as we’re working a case right now, but I’m more than happy to have you come earlier. One of the vampires is a neighbor, and we try to be nice to each other on my street.”

“Oh! That... would be nice. I’m not sure if we can afford the time in Chicago, though.”

“The food and lodging are on me, as it’s my guest house, and I was raised to feed guests. You’ll have a stocked fridge, and if you need groceries, I can arrange for anything you need.” The thought of trying to manage the guest house for a couple closer to the poverty line would do me in; I’d have to remove all the price labels, mask as many brands as possible, and pretend like I discount shopped or made use of the more affordable farmer’s markets while sliding in luxury food they could love. “I haven’t gotten to host Christmas before. My parents usually steal my thunder, but this year, the celebration hosting is *mine*.”

Easton laughed at my outburst. “It’s true, Dad. She almost cried while dancing around the hotel room when she got her parents to agree to come to dinner. They’ll be staying in her guest bedroom, and you and my brothers can share the guest house, which is plenty big for all of you.”

“Must be quite the guest house to fit everybody.”

“It’s a townhouse she rescued after it caught fire. She repaired and restored it, and as it’s a historic building, she had the exterior rebuilt to be as close of a match with as many of the surviving stones as possible.”

“It’s historic?” The excitement in the man’s voice made me grin. “How historic are we talking about?”

“My house, which is next door to the guest house, was built in 1891 and was among the first of Chicago’s greystone houses. It’s more of a manor, but it needed a lot of work, so I bought it for a pittance and restored it. The house next to it was built a little later. I think the landowner of my house sold the lot to someone as the period style changed. The one next to the guest house has been owned by the same Polish family since it was built. The one next to that is owned by my vampire friend. My street is loaded up with greystones. If there’s time on Christmas Eve, we can take a stroll through the neighborhood, and I can show you the historic sites.”

“Where do you live?”

“Logan Square. It’s a historic neighborhood in Chicago. It is a weird one. At its start, it was predominantly inhabited by immigrants. However, some of these immigrants were rather wealthy, so they built some homes like mine. Others are much

smaller. Nowadays, the neighborhood is undergoing gentrification, and the greystones are in demand. Some have been hit hard by the ravages of time and neglect, though. I'd be quite happy to show you around town if you like historic landmarks."

"We do," Easton's father confirmed. "I'll talk with the wife and find out which date is best for us to come. You're sure it won't be a problem to stay in your guest house?"

"It's no problem at all. Once you know the dates you can go, I'll see about getting you a flight for you and your other children. I'll take care of wrangling the cop and making sure he shows up on time."

"That might take a miracle. He usually runs if he thinks his older brothers are going to show up."

"He won't run, but I can't promise we won't have to drag him out of the cellar kicking and screaming."

"Cellar?"

I'd have to investigate Asher Easton Dannell and learn more about why the word cellar had prompted confusion. "It's just a fancy word for basement. I have some wine down there, so I call it a cellar so I can feel special. I really like my little wine collection."

Mr. Goody-Goody raised a brow before shaking his head, making it clear he thought I was a shameless liar.

"Oh! You like wine? How about liquors?"

"I'll be quite pleased to show you around my home so you can admire my collection," I promised. "I have this tendency

to accidentally bring home bottles with me.”

“Any Maker’s Mark?”

Yep, my poor cop adored his father and had no way to show it other than a brand of liquor. With a little luck, I could resolve those issues. “I happen to have a bottle or two kicking around, and I’d be delighted to share it with you on Christmas. We do a toast, so I’ll pull one out then.”

Easton attempted to stare me into submission, and I waved him off.

“That sounds lovely. My wife enjoys Champagne, although we usually get sparkling wine.”

If I showed them the wine cellar, which had a plethora of everything, I might lose his parents to a state of shock. “I know I have a bottle of Champagne in my cellar that has been waiting for the right moment to crack. I’ll bring it upstairs, and we’ll have it with Christmas dinner. Please call Easton with when you can come, and I’ll take care of arranging the flight. I’ll need some information from you, and if you don’t have your passports or a valid card for air travel, you’ll need to submit the information into the expedited queue. Just make sure you include the right sized photos and your travel date. I’ll make a flight work for your travel date, so you let me worry about that.”

“Would two weeks be possible?”

Two weeks sounded like I could clean house and rob them blind and still make it home for Christmas. “Two weeks is totally feasible. I’ll talk to my house sitter and make sure

you're hooked up for the time you're there. Do you like shows?"

"You mean like Broadway?"

"Yes, although you'd be seeing them in Chicago."

"We do, but the tickets are expensive."

I smiled. "I'll take care of the tickets, you just worry about making sure your passports are ready to go for the trip. If in doubt, call your son, and he can relay any problems or issues to me, and I'll take care of them."

"How can we repay this?"

I fought the urge to laugh. "If you don't mind landscaping, you can help supervise my landscapers when they come over; it's almost time for them to start planning next year's garden, so they'll be cutting back dead things, checking through the snow for anything amiss, and so on."

"We garden! We do canning, too."

I bet they did, as gardening and canning would let them stretch every penny. "You can garden and can to your heart's content, although I warn you, I have an old school pressure cooker. If you break my ceiling, you won't have to repair it. It's a known hazard. I didn't get to do any canning this year, so I'll see what's available on the market. Normally I do some canning but this year was busy."

While I had done *some* canning, I'd given everything away to those in need. I wouldn't betray that secret, else I'd be accused, rightfully, of excessive altruism.

“You wouldn’t mind us doing some canning?”

“The guest house kitchen is yours to enjoy.” I would have to give my vampire friends a call and request the refrigerator be stocked with everything worth canning. “I’ve got to get back to work, so I’ll leave you to your son’s tender care.” I grinned at the cop, grabbed my recent stack of documents, and flung myself onto the bed to escape the table for a while.

The cop turned off speaker phone and held the device to his ear. “Hey, Dad. Yeah, that’s my cue to start doing my share, else she’ll educate me on the error of my ways. Call me when you know the dates, okay?” After exchanging a few pleasantries, which seemed to annoy Easton more than anything, he hung up.

The glare he shot my way promised I would pay for my Christmas celebration for years to come.

“What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, that’s why I’m mad.”

I blinked, twisted around on the bed to regard him, and blinked some more. “I don’t get it.”

“You’re really going to make me see my brothers!”

Right. I’d have to work over the holidays, but I viewed it as a small price to pay. “Easton, I’m going to shove their prejudices so far down their throats they start shitting ethics and morality. They best not put up a fight. I have archangels on my contact list, and I’m willing to use them.”



TO MAKE our hits and go on our first robbery and rescue mission, we would need to journey to New Jersey. My hatred of the smelly, humid state resulted in me attacking the dessert menu with such ferocity that Mr. Goody-Goody spent more time watching me eat than working on feeding his virus. Once I finished, I went to the bathroom, stripped, and transformed.

Having a feline temper tantrum might help my nerves. Dragging the cop to bed to work out my frustrations that way wasn't happening, at least not yet, leaving me with few other options. I rolled around, yowled, and vocalized my displeasure for the world to hear.

Easton continued to eat his dinner while observing me.

“I don't know what's wrong with New Jersey, but I have received the message that you harbor some form of epic dislike for the state.”

I got to my paws, shook off, and nodded. With the worst of my agitation vented out, I began the tedious process of smoothing my fur and confirming each and every last one of my spots remained perfect.

He polished off the rest of his dinner in record time, gathered all the dishes, and put the trays out in the hall for the hotel staff to contend with before calling the front desk and informing them we had finished demolishing their restaurant's food stocks. “I'm guessing it's my turn to do some work, as

you have rendered yourself rather uncommunicative for the moment.”

That was one way to put it. As I was the most superior of beings, I opted to ignore him and worked on my fur, taking my time to make sure my coat remained plush and glossy.

The wolf took my papers, waited until I met his gaze, and then dumped them onto the floor.

I turned my ears back at his blatant disregard for my organizational skills.

He dumped several more of my stacks on the floor, made sure to mix everything up, and then sat on the floor, picking up the upper sheet and reading it over before setting it aside. He grabbed a notebook, wrote something down, and then repeated the process with each sheet in my pile, creating many more little stacks than I had on my pass.

Unable to resist the urge to poke my nose in his business, I prowled over to take a look at what he felt was organizational skills.

Making use of my paws, I moved papers to see what lurked under the first sheets, determining his method of organization made zero sense to me. Leveling a reproachful glare his way, I waited for him to explain myself.

“Case numbers, little kitty. I’m organizing them by open case numbers.” Shooing me out of the way, he picked up one of the stacks, spreading out all the sheets so I could look at them all. One by one, he pointed at a reference number at the top of the page, which all matched. “These are FBI reference

numbers, which can be used to refer to any cases associated with this file. Their database has space for FBI, police, and CDC records. Whenever we would get a case that crossed over with the FBI, we would be required to file the case into their system under the assigned reference number. You just didn't know what you were looking at. I observed how you were organizing them, made some mental notes, and decided I needed to see how I could take your method and create links with the other references. So, you did good work because we would normally just go by reference number without necessarily looking for the connections between unrelated cases.”

Huh. I reviewed the list, and I used a claw to point at a different mystery number, which didn't match the reference number.

“That would be the agency case number. C is for the CDC, P is for police, and F is for the FBI. Other agencies also have identifiers. Interpol, for example, is an I. Global agencies all have a leading code to identify which database the case originates from.”

He pointed at another identifier, which had remained a mystery, thus resulting in me ignoring all the various codes and digging at the meat of the documentation. “This is the code for a specific agent or law enforcement officer in charge of the case. Cases with multiple codes mean that the case was handed over to someone else or it's a joint operation. The organizations usually use a liaison to keep the number of codes down to something tolerable. Otherwise, there would be seven or eight different codes when a bunch of agencies get

involved with one case. What I'm doing is grabbing out all the reference codes and seeing how many matches we have per pile. If we have any unusual crossover, I'll start looking to see if the fact the cases are unsolved might be due to an inside agent handling the investigative work. As we've seen in Chicago, that's not an impossibility."

I took care stepping around the piles, locating the one with the missing kittens, and chirped to catch his attention and placed my paw on the stack.

He came over, peered at the pile, and nodded. "So, there are some interesting things I have noticed about this case compared to the rest. There is one agent code that is associated with three of the mobsters on the list in here. They're the nasty jobs, too. That leads me to believe that the agent is involved and is making sure the FBI can't find the missing kittens. That plays into the trafficking issues, too. After I go through all the paperwork we have, sorted by original case number, I will then reorganize the piles based on agent numbers and anything I find to be suspicious. Then I'll scramble the pile and give it back to you to work with. This part goes by quickly because all I need to do is match reference numbers. Then I'll mark each sheet of paper with an identifier that's easy for us to work with so we can get the papers organized by case again once we're done making a mess."

To prove his point, he labeled all papers relating to the missing kittens with an A before moving onto the next stack and labeling those with a B. With the worst of my nerves worked out, I returned to the bathroom, closed the door as much as I could with my paw, and shifted back to human,

dressed in my pajamas, and kicked my clothes into the room.
“I’m easily provoked today, sorry.”

“If your version of working out your nerves is transforming and rolling around and hissing, you’re ahead of the curve. I go to a junkyard and rip vehicles apart when I need to work out my nerves.”

My virus wanted a nice, cold drink and a chance to watch the show. “Do you?”

“I do. It’s good exercise and the junkyard doesn’t mind. They usually want a specific part out of the engine and ask me to get to it. I do so. Violently. They get the part they need, I get to work out my temper. And, well, it’s easier to move dead cars into the crusher when they’re in smaller pieces. I just tear them apart and throw them in. I can dismantle three cars an hour when I’m in a mood.”

Meow. “Can I have a show of that for Christmas? Because that sounds quite stress relieving.”

“You’ll have to take a raincheck until after Christmas, but if you want to come with me to the junkyard for a demolition derby, sure. I’m sure you can find something to tear apart with gloved hands while I work on the cars. Also, keep an eye out for intact rugs. If you can be bothered to clean them, sometimes some gorgeous rugs show up in junkyards.”

I recoiled at the thought of dealing with a bug-infested rug.
“That sounds horrible.”

Easton snickered. “I might be a shit cop, but I’m good at cleaning things. I know somebody with all the tools to clean

rugs. I'll show you how it's done. It's a lot of fun, and it involves power tools."

"Wait, it involves power tools?"

He nodded, grabbed his phone, and pulled up a video, which he showed to me. "It's like that, except we tend to beat the rugs before we start the rinsing process. We beat them to see if they survive and to get any larger hitchhikers out, eradicate them, and then start the real cleaning. I've done it twice. The first one was loaded with maggots. It was an exercise to build fortitude."

"Did that work?"

"Well, I didn't throw up," he admitted. "I wanted to, though. Rugs should not wiggle, especially after having beaten it with a broom."

Shuddering, I pressed play on the video to discover a whole new world of fascination, one involving filth and bubbles. Tilting my head to the side, I continued to watch, fascinated, as the rug cleaner began transforming something caked in black to a rug featuring a mandala pattern. "What the fuck?"

"Rug cleaning. It's the ultimate form of turning trash into treasure."

The video ate twenty minutes, and enthralled, I watched until the final reveal, which involved a shocking amount of white. "This has to be sorcery!"

"Cleaning products, power tools, elbow grease, and determination. I guess that's close?" Easton reclaimed his

phone. “I’ll tell you what. We get through this case and get those kittens home by Christmas Eve, and I’ll help you find a rug, and we’ll clean one together. I’ll even let you use the rotary machine. That one is my favorite.”

“You’re on.”



“YOU’RE THE
WORRYWART TYPE,
AREN’T YOU?”

I ORDERED breakfast to be delivered to our suite, discussing the food situation with the hotel while Easton went out to stretch his legs and get some fresh air. To my relief, thanks to my foresight, they’d have no problems making sure I fueled my big, bad wolf although I tried not to think about how much the bill would be when I checked out in the morning.

As the hotel likely couldn’t afford another dinner feeding frenzy and still handle the rest of their clients, I hauled my cop out to a buffet, paid the ridiculous amount required for a true unlimited buffet experience, received white and red bracelets to identify us as hungry lycanthropes, and warned the staff my wolf had been malnourished until I’d gotten my hands on him.

To my astonishment, they had a protocol for half-starved lycanthropes, and I spoke with the hostess while one of the waiters took Easton to our table at my request. The hostess bent over and retrieved a tub of protein mix from her stand, which was formulated for lycanthropes. She showed me the instructions for it and offered to charge three of the massive tins to my bill to help get him back into shape. She even showed me the CDC’s website, which listed the product as

good for lycanthropes for the purpose of improving base nutrition.

Huh. Nobody had told me about the powder, and I'd never seen it in a store before. I accepted the offer and had her add it to my bill, and she promised I could pick up my bounty on the way out the door. A rather worried Easton waited for me, and he regarded me with wide eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. They just had protein mixes for strong, manly lycanthropes who need a little extra protein in their diet. I was getting it added to our bill. It's CDC approved, but I wanted to talk to her about it before eating."

"You're the worrywart type, aren't you?"

Was he kidding? I had transformed worrying over the details into an art. "It's in the job description. I worry about everything so others don't have to worry about anything. I am very slow at picking my prizes at a buffet, so I will guard the table while you get your first share. We're unlimited and have no time limit, so relax."

"How did you manage that?"

"I asked." I smiled. "Next time you're recovering from exertion or you haven't been eating properly, just tell the buffet your situation, and they'll offer you their unlimited package. Most lycanthropes just go for the double-priced offers because they don't need to eat *that* much. But you're underweight, so I got us both the unlimited."

"You're not eating nearly that much, though."

“It’s fine. It just means I will overindulge for a change. I’ll burn off the extra weight in no time flat.” I shooed him off with a wave of my hands. “Do not make me wait forever to start my leisurely attack on this buffet.”

Laughing and shaking his head, he got up and did as told.

To my amusement, he beelined straight for the baked potatoes. He conferred with the man at the station, after which he took six of the potatoes, loaded them up, and came back with a rather triumphant expression on his face.

Well, some things were easier in life than others, and I kept company with someone who would be easy to please. “I see you like potatoes.”

“I can have as many as I want. He asked if I liked baked potatoes, and he promised he’d get an entire batch made for me.”

I leaned over for a view of the restaurant’s worker, and sure enough, he headed off to the back, probably to give marching orders to feed the big, bad wolf. “Well, we can take our time, so enjoy every last one of the potatoes they give you.” I got up, and as warned, I took my time browsing through the offerings. Aware their potato stock would enter the danger zone, I avoided his prizes and went for every other comfort food I could get my paws on. To help put him at ease, I avoided the foods most typically viewed as overly fancy, including the sushi.

The sushi would fall prey to me in terrifying quantity but only after Easton relaxed.

To my delight, they had fried catfish, and rather than be dignified and work only one plate at a time, I indulged, piled the catfish high, and headed back to the table, ready to conquer the buffet's fishy offerings.

He stared at the mountain of food, laughed, and said, "You are such a cat."

"I am not only a cat, I'm feline perfection." I went for my catfish first, regretting my inability to purr. "I don't usually make fish at home. I'm no good at it. Steak? I'm feline perfection. Chicken? Also feline perfection. Fish? Fish makes my ability to cook flee the building. I keep wanting to eat it immediately, it never gets cooked thoroughly, and it's a real problem."

"I can fry fish."

Unbeknownst to Easton, he had signed over any hope of escape. As far as my virus was concerned, the wolf was ours and we'd settle with fish once a week. "I'm holding you to that. If I don't get fried fish, I might perish. I'll wither away to nothing, and there's no way we can have that happen."

"Perhaps you should eat before your mouth gets you into trouble."

I snorted, but as the fish was still hot and crispy, I went to work filling my belly, careful to remove any bones so I wouldn't choke on them or stab holes into my mouth. Once I'd conquered the first two pieces, I said, "Are you going to be all right with the job?"

“I’m going to have to be. I have sufficient evidence that it’s necessary, although I have questions about the complete cleaning you wish to do.”

“It’s hard to rebuild from nothing.” I stabbed a piece of my fish, checked it for bones, and gulped it down. “I should know. I started from nothing, and I refused to go the illegal route to earn any of it.”

“Yet you have how many counts of criminal mischief?”

“Enough that the judges *marvel* at my record, none of which bars me from doing my work. I *am* careful about that. The collar thing was my fault for not having vetted the collar before doing the hit. But that collar got me some really good mileage. That prison stay gets expunged, and I make sure conditions are better for the prisoners. And I get actual community service! This is quite possibly the ultimate community service gig. I’m going to have to remind someone that I’m not supposed to be paid for doing community service. I’m pretty sure somebody is going to try to pay me for my good work. Well, the CPD is *definitely* going to be paying for your feeding bill. If they had been paying you properly, my wallet wouldn’t be squealing every time I opened it to get you back to healthy. I’ll have to call the CDC and get your actual required caloric intake, and we’ll use a tracking app to make sure we’re in the right ballpark.” As I had problems with not eating enough if I didn’t track, I pulled out my phone, opened my tracking app, and showed him. “I make educated guesses on what I’m eating, and as long as I’m close enough, I don’t care. It’s easy to fail to eat enough as a lycanthrope, even when a dainty lady such as myself.”

“I feel I have somehow taken all your missing bulk and transferred it to my hybrid form. You’re absolutely *tiny* in your animal form. I break the bed unless it’s specially made.”

“My bed can handle up to fifteen hundred pounds of energetic lycanthropes,” I informed him with a pleased smile. “I even have a fairly bouncy mattress. You are welcome to indulge in some bouncing on my mattress while a hybrid.”

“I’m huge, Kelsie.”

I snickered at his statement. “I bet you are.”

“I didn’t mean like *that*.”

“If the shoe fits, wear it... and if you are huge, I demand evidence immediately.” My virus approved of my bold statement. On second thought, I added, “Perhaps when we return to my home, where the mattress and bed are rated to handle fifteen hundred pounds of energetic lycanthropes.”

“I’m sure you’ll see my hybrid form before this is over. If we’re cleaning, you’re going to need my strength.”

Nice. “Now that you mention it, that would be convenient.”

“Being honest, as it seems you are quite possibly the type to be fine even when you aren’t fine, how are you doing?”

Damn. The cop had eyes and knew how to use them. I considered his question seriously, nibbling at my meal while I debated how best to categorize and explain my feelings. “One of my strengths is being able to handle everything being on fire all at once. That’s part of my job. When companies come to me for negotiations, they have to put out an inferno of some

sort. They trust me to stay cool and calm throughout the entire process. I can't afford to be anything other than professional. That means you're right. I *am* the type to be doing great even though I'm not. If I'm great, and I go into the negotiations upbeat and ready to work, it's easier to get everyone at the table to relax."

"I will keep an eye out for that, then. We have people like you on the force, and when they burn out, they shock the hell out of everybody. Nobody expects *them* to have any issues."

Ah. He had practical experience with the problem. "Hopefully nothing lethal?"

"We've lost some in the line of duty because of it. They got tired and didn't even try to dodge or take certain precautions. Nobody noticed it had gotten to be too much."

Ouch. I would have to keep an eye on Mr. Goody-Goody, as he was already wearing himself out working the beat. The CPD held most of the responsibility, but I'd have to talk to him about it.

For the sake of his dream career, he had allowed it to happen.

"I'm sorry."

"We all are. Well, mostly."

"These deaths happened in the CPD?"

"Yes, they did."

"Please email me with their names and badge numbers. I'll bump that to the FBI and CDC. If the person was driven to

commit suicide, it may be classified as premeditated murder.”

Easton stilled, and he stared at me for a long time. “You don’t think it could come to that, do you?”

“I don’t know what I think, but someone who witnessed the situation would have to ask an angel. If you were directly involved with the cops who were killed, you have the right to inquire with an angel.” To make it clear I was serious, I unlocked my phone, opened the group chat with the archangels, and offered him the device. “They will be honest with you. Angels must be honest. But understand if you open Pandora’s Box, you will never be able to close it. But there are other options for you—or perhaps a new beginning.”

I marveled at the careful manipulation of the divine, and I wondered if our discussion of the situation fell into *someone’s* plans. I could see the Devil using archangels to bring ruin and downfall to the guilty—and I could easily believe the archangels would play the Devil’s game.

Easton accepted the phone, and his brows furrowed. “You really asked them for a chat at three in the morning.”

“I’m sure they saw it coming,” I quipped, allowing myself a smile. “If you want to talk to Gabriel, just ask Michael to loop him in. Just be aware that they are archangels, and they *will* give you the painful truth. In their eyes, if you’re ready to ask the question, you’re ready to hear the answer. They will answer only as far as they can. *He* plays a part in that. But it’s okay to ask.”

In his shoes, not knowing would have eaten away at me.

Once he knew, he would have to decide how hard he would fight for justice—and how much he would sacrifice for those who no longer had a voice.

To my dismay, I suspected this was the moment the judge had meant in his office, where Easton would have to decide how he approached the line. Would he stay on the goody-goody side? Would he walk the line, balancing good and evil for the sake of those he served and protected?

The other option worried me, but sometimes good cops turned bad. I would work to temper him so he could walk the tightrope of ethics with grace and poise, serving as the line that would keep him from falling. That much I could handle.

It took him a while, but he eventually tapped at the screen of my phone. Once he finished, he offered it back to me. “I’d rather hear you give me the news either way.”

Sometimes, courage was admitting a complete lack of courage and accepting help was needed to take another step. I admired that he knew when he needed to hand the reins over to somebody else. I braced for the worst, as it had taken him a long time to compose the message.

I had to scroll up to see the beginning. Easton had introduced himself formally, using his full name, his rank, and his badge number with the CPD, and then he asked if he could have a confirmation if the following men and women had died due to the machinations of others in such a way that could be legally pursued.

Smart wolf.

The number of people listed broke my heart, especially as Easton had taken the time to introduce them by name, offered up their badge numbers, the date they had joined the force, and the date they had died.

Every state had a different way of handling cases of bullying or causing a suicide intentionally. In Illinois, inducement to commit suicide counted as a Class 2 felony. Depending on the circumstances, the class might be bumped to either Class X or the top tier, which included murder charges. The fines typically capped out at twenty-five thousand per count, but murder charges carried extended terms of up to a hundred years per count.

A Class 2 felony would remove the guilty party's eligibility to serve in any public office in Illinois, including law enforcement.

I took the time to read through all fifteen names, marveling that he counted so many lives as merely *some*.

Then I remembered the CPD had done a good job of beating him down.

My phone indicated someone typed a reply, and judging from the extended time, the archangel replying had opted to take on the burden of every last soul. I spotted the employee bringing out a new tray of baked potatoes, and I offered a smile. "Go get more potatoes. Once I have an answer, I'll tell you."

He nodded, got up, and headed off to do as told. The waiter swept in and made the evidence of our indulgences

disappear, leaving me with my plate of tiny treats I still needed to consume as I'd rampaged on the catfish.

A text came in, but a moment later, my phone rang, informing me that Hamaliel had taken on the burden of Easton's request. I answered with, "Hey."

"As you are dining, you can just listen, so please do not worry about bothering the other guests."

In some cases, archangels failed to comprehend some things, but they were usually good at understanding the little things.

"There are a few consequences to the information your wolf has requested, that I feel you should understand before you tell him the answers. First, he loved one of the women on the list. The truth will deal him a blow, but from great pain can come greater justice. She did not know that he loved her. He respected her boundaries and would not engage in a relationship with a co-worker. She was also unfortunately prejudiced against lycanthropes, but she tried her best—and he loved her for that."

Triple ouch. I ran a higher risk of crying at the table than Easton likely did, but I expected a bleak evening for the both of us as we digested the painful reality of his situation.

"Second, those on this list were involved with helping end trafficking practices in Chicago. These answers will tie to the case of your missing kittens. Your current plan to clean them of house and home will render the evidence you need to prove those suicides were, as your wolf suspected, all murders. And no, not inducement to commit suicide—murders. You will be

challenged to bring justice, but justice is in your hands. You will not be able to rebuild those broken homes, but that prayer is not for you to answer.”

I spent a few moments containing my urge to begin cursing. Instead, I sighed, grabbed one of the hushpuppies I’d snagged from the buffet and popped it into my mouth.

“Third, without this, your wolf would have been targeted for similar treatment, and the futures involving him in this situation are not bright. Those futures change because my brother has decided to change them. The good your wolf does cannot be repaid with such evil—nor can the good you do be repaid with such evil. While my brother perhaps meddles more than he should, he handles this with the grace only the Lord of the Morning possesses, for he is ushering a new dawn for you and your wolf.” The archangel paused. “And for the kittens and others you will save. But your wolf is wise and has seen the truth. These cases were not suicide. They were murder. And they were murder after the guilty had verbally beaten the life out of them, a crime committed long before their last breath fled their bodies and left their souls to wander through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But fret not. *He* saw to their passage. They did not make the journey alone, linger long, or experience the cold hand of death beyond a fleeting moment. You may tell your wolf that while justice has not yet been served, they rest, all in peace. None of those souls went into my brother’s care.”

It wasn’t much, but it was something. Then, afraid of the answer but needing to ask the question, “How deep does the rabbit hole go?”

“It is a very deep hole. But you will see justice done by the time this is over. Your wolf will find his place in the world, a place where he can stand proudly at your side rather than overwhelmed by all you are and will be in the future. But all things come at a price, and this is one of those prices. The futures were clouded and uncertain before, but they become clearer with every step you take forward. You do well.”

Well, that was something.

“Anything else I should know?”

“Be patient with him. You are equal to the task. After all, you can make giants fall. What is one mere man compared to that? It just may take time. His heart has been bruised, but he will recover in time.”

When it came to matters of the heart, a mere man would be far more of a challenge than any corporate giant.

The archangel’s laughter chimed. “You need not torment him with an accounting of every name. One answer will cover them all, and he can begin the process of healing from there. Simply be. But I will remind you of this one truth: you will have everything you need to secure closure and justice. Make the giant that is the CPD fall. They teeter. With you working against them, they will topple, and great good can come from their ruin. Your choice of devils was a good one because that is what is needed. I am but a call away should you have need.”

The archangel hung up moments before Easton returned to the table armed with two plates of baked potatoes. “Well?”

Sometimes, mercy was taking the most direct route, even in the face of tragedy. “Your speculations were correct. I’ve the word of an archangel that the final charges are murder. The interference went beyond the scope of inducement of suicide. He also told me that they all rest in peace.”

While his expression remained mostly neutral, I spotted the grief in his eyes. “I see.”

I sighed, wondering how I could help him patch the holes in his soul, all made because of greed. “I will secure justice for each and every one of them, and you will help me do it.”

“But how?”

“Through cleaning house. I have been given the word of an archangel that we will find everything we need to make those behind those deaths fall. And we will be there to make certain they never rise from their knees.”

That much I could do.

TWELVE



“WELL, THAT WAS BLUNT.”

THE TRUTH CHANGED PEOPLE, and after I paid the bill for dinner, I drove back to the hotel so Easton could have the time to absorb what I had told him. Some broke. Some became motivated.

I worried about how the dominos would fall—and how I would help him.

He had to take his life back, and I needed to stay back and let him choose his own fate. Once he decided what he would do, I would support him any way I could.

He would either fall or fly. No matter how badly I wanted to spare him the pain of it, I would only weaken him if I intervened. Sometimes, silence was the only right answer.

We made it back to our hotel room before he asked, “The archangel confirmed all of them were murders?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Is there really anything we can do?”

I went to the table, picked up the piles of our paper, and neatly stacked them, alternating the stacks so we could easily

resume our work, and set them on the dresser. Once seated, I patted the table across from me to encourage him to sit. “I can promise you this much: I will use every bit of skill and experience bringing major corporations to their knees to make certain the CPD is cleared out of those who are behind those deaths. I can’t promise it will work out for you in terms of maintaining your old position. You may be promoted, moved elsewhere, or roped into the liaison position.” Before he could add anything, I held up a finger to make certain he stayed quiet for a few more moments. “The liaison position would put you in a place where you can make certain this sort of thing doesn’t happen to anyone else. Your job would involve evaluating the CPD for such things and involving the CDC or FBI as needed. I can’t promise you a happy ending. There’s no happy ending because we can’t bring back the dead. But I can promise that if we follow through with this, the deaths end with you. You will be able to get the other targets the help they need before they’re murdered, too. I also can’t promise there won’t be any more deaths before we’re done bringing the giant down, but they *will* fall.”

“Why are you so confident?”

“An archangel told me we could, so we will. We clean house. We will clean every last one of those buildings of *everything*. We’ll ride in on broomsticks and shovels, and we’ll literally throw *everything* into the pits of hell to be sorted by every demon and devil I can coerce into doing my dirty work. And I’ll frame the Devil for it if I’m accused. Do I look like someone capable of opening gateways to the Devil’s many hells? No. But all we need is the evidence, and we *will make*

them fall. All of them. And if I can get links to the CPD to these traffickers, we have a chance to make Chicago truly safe.”

Easton clenched his teeth together. “Wasn’t the CPD already purged?”

“Only of a sex trafficking ring. They did not hunt those who hunt children.”

The wolf exploded into curses, got up, and paced the room.

I understood his fury. The same emotions boiled within me. “Easton, sit down. I know this is hard. I know it’s infuriating. I know your virus loves children as much as mine does. But we do not secure justice for the living or dead raging around and breaking things in the hotel.”

While he snarled and continued to curse, he sat down on the chair.

I leaned back, snagged a sheet of paper from the stack, took a photo of it with my phone, and offered it to him. “Shred that to pieces. I can print out a new copy. And if you want to try to piece it back together after you shred it, I’ll find tape from somewhere.”

He did as told, and his systematic approach to his ripping amused me. Every rip, he folded it so the tear would be nice and neat. For the most part, he aimed for creating perfect little squares.

I sensed I dealt with a perfectionist, one used to a set schedule.

That would challenge my sanity over time, especially as I feared the behavior had been born from trauma rather than natural inclination.

“Better?”

He nodded.

“Our next stop is New Jersey. I will handle the stake out as a cat. I can blend in well with the trees, and the street view of the area showed it looks like a nice place with a lot of trees. Once I confirm the buildings are empty of traffickers, I will come fetch you, and we’ll clean them out one by one. We’ll make use of our rags, we’ll grab anyone left in the buildings, and let the Devil sort the mess out. Our job is simple: we steal every last thing we can get our dirty paws on. Pets, people—they all come. The pets we’ll find good homes for, especially if they’ve been abused. We’ll do the same for the people, once the Devil gets through their Stockholm syndrome symptoms. And the ones who can’t be reformed? Well, that’s the Devil’s problem, too. We’re after evidence on where to find the kittens, and we’ll do as much good in evil ways as we can along the way. I know this doesn’t help much, but we should find *something* in that mess to help secure justice for those cops.” I hesitated before adding, “And for those left behind.”

Easton tore the paper several more times before going to work stacking the pieces by size. “What does this cleaning house thing mean for us?”

“It means we get our hands a little dirty for the greater good. In reality, we’ll have to jump some loops. Well, we would normally. In this case, I’m going to recruit the Devil

and his brothers to get us out of any legal trouble. My job is fine as long as I limit myself to silly misdemeanors that earn me community service time. Generally, you should avoid those, but I'm sure you'll pick them up from time to time trying to stop me from getting another one added to my record."

"How is it you haven't lost your right to practice law?"

"I'm guilty of a lot of victimless crimes," I informed him while giggling. "Everything I lift or toy with is returned in the same condition. I do it for the *laughs*, Easton. The collar? The joke was on me. I didn't even get out of the house with it. I rolled around on some rich guy's carpet like some fool because of catnip and pixie dust. Do you know what that is? It's hilarious, that's what it is. Nobody *wants* to press charges. They only do it because I beg them to land me more community service time. The begging is in my sealed records. The judges think it's hilarious, too. And I cut the court a check to pay for the costs of my cases. I just call the CDC, get the amount taxpayers would have paid, and I cover it."

Easton's mouth dropped open. "You *pay* for your court appearance?"

"Taxpayers shouldn't pay for the shit I pull. So they don't. I pay for it, thus leaving resources available for the court to handle more important cases. It's all one big joke, Mr. Goody-Goody. I get my day in court, the judge gets a laugh, the jury, when there is one, walks out snickering over the insanity. The attorneys get paid for a good time, too. Hell, the attorneys don't even charge me their normal rates because it's only a

few hours of work. Nobody puts in any real effort on my cases. Everyone walks away happy.”

“Even you?”

“Especially me. I have fun getting into trouble, and I have fun getting out of trouble. I love community service. I make a difference.” I made a show of relaxing in my chair so he might follow my lead. “You can be a goody-goody cop if you want, Easton. Nobody is asking you to change that. But the judge isn’t wrong about drawing you a little closer to the line. Cleaning house will let you see what you can do if you decide to walk the line. Sure, there are victims with our crime, but those victims are literally child traffickers—and adult traffickers. I don’t give a fuck about that kind of ‘person’ anyway. They can and will rot in the Devil’s many hells.”

“Well, that was blunt.”

“It helps when you don’t view these bastards as people. They’re garbage we’re taking out to the dumpster. It’s time to get your game face on because we’re going to browse street views of our targets and get ready to break windows. The instant these bastards clear out, we’re going in. By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be thoroughly exercised.”

The wolf huffed at me. “This is not the kind of exercise I like.”

No kidding. “You’ll live. Probably. And if you don’t, expire in a convenient location for me. I’m not sure I can roll all nine hundred pounds of you into the sack, but I’m game to try.”

After shaking his head, Easton let out a bark of laughter.
“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I’m feline perfection. One day, you will get used to that.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure, if you say so.”



AFTER FEEDING Easton and supplementing with his new protein mix, I took over the job of driving so he could conserve his strength. Every other hour, I stopped to feed him, forcing him to guzzle more of the drink mix. With luck, I’d have a nine hundred plus pound hybrid to work with when the sun fell.

Nine hours after leaving, we met the Devil several blocks from the site, and he had a rusty white van with him. I pointed at the offensive vehicle and said, “Really?”

“It’s not my fault this is what they use.”

I stared at the van in dismay. “Really?”

“Really.” Lucifer opened the door of the van to reveal a bound older woman struggling. “Merry Christmas. What do you want me to do with her? She was about to make use of the van when I decided to apprehend it.”

I hated asking questions I didn’t want the answer to, but I asked anyway, “What is the age of her intended victim?”

“Three. A little girl.”

Yep. All the answer did was infuriate my virus. I glared down my nose at the woman. “If I were to tell you to let her loose in your many hells, how long would she survive before she came to a brutal end?”

“Quite a while, actually. However long I feel like it, really. She has a great deal of drive to survive.”

“Take her and the van. Unless there is a reason to leave the van here?”

“Leave the van. I’ll use an illusion to disguise your car while you’re doing my dirty work. The van will confuse her accomplices, especially if you seed it with an item or two you’ve pilfered.” Lucifer’s gaze fell on Easton. “Are you okay with this?”

“Was she involved?”

I winced at the question—and feared the answer.

Heaving a sigh, the Devil nodded. “She was. She has benefited from the loss of those you mourn.”

“I’d say she can go to hell for all I care, but I do care, and I do want her to go and get exactly what she deserves. But...”

“But?” Lucifer prompted, raising a brow.

“Only if the punishment truly fits the crime.”

Something about the Devil’s expression softened, and he reached over and gave Easton a clap on the shoulder. “She’s done far worse than what you know. I will make sure her soul is properly rehabilitated and that she experiences the hell that she has forced others to endure before her soul comes to pay

me an even closer visit. Welcome to the big leagues, boy. Kelsie, ignore everything I said about the blame game on this one. I'll handle any illusions you require for the night. It's just a little meddling. I'm sure my father will forgive me eventually."

With a rather skeptical expression, Easton replied, "If you say so."

"I do. I'll leave the van but remove this menace from the face of the Earth. I'm sure I can figure out something you can do to help me later."

I displayed my middle finger. "No. You're doing this because you want to. No bargains without both of us agreeing to all terms upfront."

"Why must you ruin my fun?"

"I value my soul and wish to keep it in my possession."

Lucifer grinned at me. "Your soul does me the most good where it currently is, in your possession. Your body, however, could be quite useful for other affairs."

Before I could indulge my virus and try to strangle the life out of the Lord of Lies, the bastard teleported away and took the woman with him. "I swear."

"Lucifer intervened to protect that little girl," Easton observed.

I nodded, eyed the van, and shook my head. "Let's just take a walk down the street with our shit, and if it looks clear, we'll start breaking windows and clearing houses out. According to the papers we have, every house down this street

is part of this group, and the ones that have people in them are occupied by victims. You have your rag and your bag?”

“I have everything.”

“Shift for me and show me what you’ve got.”

The lycanthrope shrugged, got into the van, and closed the door. Within five minutes, the entire van shook and leaned to one side, I presumed due to the sudden manifestation of a great deal of weight. I put on a pair of gloves and opened the door to discover I had a cinnamon-coated hybrid to work with, and his eyes gleamed golden in the early evening light.

Meow, meow, meow.

From head to toe, I could lose many an hour admiring him in his hybrid form. “I bet you’re a dream in the winter when it’s cold outside.” I spied his clothes, grabbed my bag, and chucked everything inside except for his bag and his rag. I took the time to shoot Belial a text requesting someone clothe my hybrid after I finished taking advantage of him. “I’ll get somebody to bring your clothes back later. Right now, it’ll get in the way. Are those claws of yours sharp enough to cut through glass?”

“They are,” Easton growled.

As I had zero fear of the hybrid, I reached out and scratched under his chin to discover he had thick, soft fur. Excellent. “I’m going to be abusing you fiercely to gain entrance into these properties. I’m short. You are not. You can toss me through the windows you slice open.”

“How about I pick you up and lift you carefully?”

“I’m a cat, Easton. I’ll land on my feet.” Well, I usually did.

Judging from his snort, he didn’t believe me. “The van will need to be cleared of evidence.”

Rolling my eyes, I sent another text to Belial requesting he abuse his devilish powers to clean the van, and held the door open as far as it would go so the hybrid could get out. “If I end up trapped in a bargain with some devil doing this, you’re going to pay for a long time.”

Easton graced me with a grin, showing off his sharp, pointy teeth. “If you say so.”

Yep. The wolf would pay even if I didn’t owe some devil a bargain cleaning up after us. As the street lacked lighting, I headed down the street, as there were no sidewalks. Two of the houses had lights on, and I decided we would start our evening with multiple counts of kidnapping. “We’re a lot less likely to get caught if we take out the witnesses first. The rag will work nicely, but you can just toss them into the bag. If you open it up on the floor, you can just shove them in.”

“That’s harsh.”

“We don’t have time to argue with them, so use the rag, toss them into the hole, and go find someone else to catch. I want these two houses cleared out in record time—and we’ll clean out the homes of their stuff after we’ve cleared the building of people and animals, taking care with their property. We don’t know what they’ll want to keep. I’m sure Lucifer can handle that job. We just have to sneak in and take out everyone quietly.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to clear out the other houses first?”

“I want to turn on the lights. If I turn on the lights while the residents are present, and they know our targets are out, we’re busted,” I pointed out.

“Right. You want me to just grab these people and shove them into the bag.”

“I guess you could just pull the bag over their head and force them through that way.” I shrugged, having no interest in questioning the Devil on how his magic worked. “I mean, we could knock and just announce we’re with the FBI.”

“Let’s not do that.”

“Why not?”

“We’ll terrify them,” the lycanthrope informed me.

“We’re sending them straight to hell, and you’re worried about *terrifying* them?” I attempted to stare the hybrid into submission, and he answered me with a shrug. “Let’s just go with the rag and worry about it later.”

“I guess a plan is better than no plan.”

THIRTEEN



“BEHAVE.”

SOMETIMES, the easiest way to enter someone’s home unannounced was to use the front door. With the entire street inhabited by crooks and traffickers, a locked door wouldn’t do their victims any good. They stayed because of fear and conditioning more than any physical barricades.

Sure enough, the knob twisted and the door opened.

Easton let out a low growl, and I jabbed him with my elbow to shut him up. “Would you rather wait outside?”

He shook his head.

“Behave.”

Had I not known better, I would have assumed the house belonged to some form of sorority with a plethora of feminine touches everywhere while lacking anything of substance. There was furniture, but I failed to spot the small knick-knacks and other items that identified the place as being someone’s *home*.

That tracked with what I understood of traffickers and how they broke people.

With my fury mounting and my rag readily accessible in my pocket, I stepped deeper into the place. Down a short hallway, sterile in every sense of the word, I came across a sitting room.

Three women shared a couch, and two sat nearby on armchairs. They had a deck of cards, and they played some form of game on the coffee table, although I couldn't tell which one at a glance. I'd seen the broken and bruised often enough to recognize the lifelessness in their expressions.

Their spirits had been beaten to the point the door could have been left open while salvation came calling and they would stay because they had lost all hope.

They glanced up at me, and despite my status as a stranger, they returned to minding their own business.

Well, then. Maybe I could go the route of negotiation after all—or pick a fight with all five of them and hope for the best. I'd have to be careful to prevent infecting them, although a hefty dose of my virus might help them get back onto their feet.

I'd offer the infection to them once the Devil got his hands on them and gave them a chance to recover.

But first, I needed to get them to go where I wanted with as little a fuss as possible—and I had the perfect way to test the waters. “Hey, girls,” I called out, and I gestured for Easton to come closer so they could get a good look at him. “I got a big, bad wolf here that needs some attention, and I don't think one's going to cut it tonight.”

From everything I'd read on traffickers, they made demands or the women under their thumb paid hefty prices.

That caught their attention, and they all scrambled to their feet and bowed. The whole lot began apologizing, and once they finished, they exchanged looks as though not sure who should take the lead.

All of them fit society's standards for beauty, with their hair dyed blonde and even their pajamas designed to show off their sexual appeal. According to my nose, the thought of being sacrificed to Easton terrified them.

Well, mostly. After the initial surge of fear, once the lycanthrope hybrid made no threatening gestures, they took a second look at him, and the fear was replaced with something that set my virus on edge.

I was going to need therapy after the job was done.

I gestured to the nearest woman, who also had the misfortune of appearing to be the youngest of the lot. "All right, sweetheart. Can you please make sure everyone is here? This much lycanthrope is going to need a lot of love. He's the gentle sort, but with so much of him, he's going to need a lot of care." To throw them off, I added, "If you have any large combs, those are good for his fur, and I'd rather he not emerge from tonight's activities matted."

"Yes, ma'am!" the woman said before she skittered out of the sitting room, eased by us, and bolted for deeper into the house.

Well, if I *were* a trafficker, I would have given her a good score for enthusiasm. I turned my attention to the other four. “I wasn’t given a roster for tonight’s activities. How many of you do I have to work with tonight?”

“Here or at the other house?”

“Both. In addition to this lug, I’ve got some thirsty sex demons who might need some gentle attention. We can’t work them too hard tonight, but I can’t have them running around starved right now, either. I have a whole lot of gentle attention on my docket, so if you could just get everyone gathered and brought over here, that’d be excellent. Don’t worry about getting prettied up; they’re definitely not picky, and as long as you’re ready to show them affection, it’ll be a job well done.”

According to the women’s expression, Christmas had come early, I was their best friend for life, and they’d been expecting a lot worse than some thirsty sex demons. I got out of their way, beckoned Easton to follow me, and while still in sight, I stood on my tiptoes and scratched under the hybrid’s chin to offer the illusion I was out to give them a good time without even a hint of violence.

Fortunately for me, Easton played along, lowered his head, and made contented huffs, his body relaxed and his ears pricked forward.

As I approved of the whole idea of not traumatizing the conditioned workers, I dug out my phone, shot Belial a text, and inquired if he might have a healthy variety of slightly thirsty sex demons with teleportation abilities who might be able to relocate my new herd of energetic trafficked women

who *really* seemed to like the idea of having to be gentle with sex demons who couldn't be worked too hard for the evening.

A moment later, my phone rang. Grinning, I answered, "So good of you to call, my dear."

"You are a bad, bad woman. What are you doing? This is not the plan."

"You have what I need, and I require it in about ten minutes. *Surely* you can provide the goods."

"I can, but why?"

"Sugar, spice, and everything nice," I replied, hoping the devil read between the lines and understood the women had faced enough harm. "I'll text you."

Hanging up, I spent the necessary moments explaining that the houses were filled with the women already broken beyond the point of escaping on their own and that the front door had been unlocked. I'd let myself in and played at being a trafficker.

Their instant cooperation had quelled any desire for me to rag and bag them.

A moment later, Belial made an appearance, and he came armed with six incubi and three succubi. "You test my patience."

I made a show of looking Belial over, as he'd opted to show up in his best black suit, red shirt, and black tie. "Excellent. I think you're worth at least two of the women." I gestured for the lot of them to go into the sitting room. "Can you handle taking more than one at a time if necessary?"

The incubi looked me over, and in their demonic forms, they all resembled Greek sex gods ready for a romp with some variations in their general appearance. The tallest of them, who had gone for the ebony over bronzed look, offered me a sly, sexy smile. “I can take three on with no problems, as can my brothers. In all ways.”

“A most excellent time for my ladies, no children unless you are specifically requested for one, and you best be talking with your boss about that should you be requested.”

Belial tossed his head back and laughed. “You’re an absolute jewel.” Snapping his fingers, he produced a gem-encrusted collar and leash. “Put this on your lycanthrope. It will help the look.”

Having made the mistake once, I eyed the collar, determining a high probability of it being real stones. Aware I had to play the game, I took the collar, cleared my throat until Easton lowered his head, and went to work buckling the leather into place.

The first of the women, seven in total including the one I’d recruited to fetch, arrived from downstairs as I was adjusting the collar to my liking.

Flushed cheeks and wide eyes and more than a few hints of arousal beat terror, so I placed my hand against Easton’s chest and pushed until he backed up, treating him more like livestock than a living, breathing human. “All right, my beauties. Come into the sitting room so you can meet tonight’s offerings.”

Apparently, my behavior matched their expectations. They did as told.

The chorus of delighted gasps broke my heart.

I bet they'd been told to expect sex demons and had gotten beatings more than a few times. Once they were all inside and admiring the demons, I followed them into the room, tugging on Easton's leash so he kept close. I eyed one of the succubi, and I'd have self-esteem problems regarding their perfect chests for at least a week—chests they showed off with understandable pride. I gestured to the nearest one, who'd gone for the dark beauty and sin look. As I didn't know her name but needed to act like I had a handle on the entire situation, I said, "Joy, baby, why don't you pick the one you feel needs the most work being a gentle lover. That's the game we're playing tonight."

"You got it, love," the succubus purred, and she prowled closer, and she took her time evaluating them, as though examining the wares. One of the women, who was closer to a teenage girl in my mind, recoiled before catching herself. The succubus smiled, gave the girl a kiss on her forehead, and lifted her chin up. "You'll be coming with me tonight, little love. Do you have a favorite friend you'd like to keep you company?"

I admired the succubus's technique as it made use of human instinct. The girl's instinctive reaction, to cast a beseeching look at one of the older women, betrayed her. I stepped forward, gave the chosen woman a tap on the

shoulder, and nodded towards the succubus. “You can make sure everybody stays nice and gentle tonight.”

The woman straightened, nodded, and joined the succubus.

“Off you go. Do make sure they’re tucked nicely into bed by the appropriate hour.”

The beds would be in the Devil’s many hells, the appropriate hour would be whenever the Devil decided it would be, and I expected the women would be shown true affection and proper attention before the night was over. According to my nose, they’d been so acclimated to the idea that they would be used for sex that it would take a sex demon to help undo the conditioning done.

Bastard traffickers.

In total, thirty-seven women converged on the sitting room, and Belial ultimately summoned three more incubi and the Devil himself, who came armed with a snow leopard wearing a collar and leash similar to Easton’s.

“Quite the party,” the Devil stated, and like Belial, he wore a black suit, red shirt, and black tie. He tossed the snow leopard’s leash to me, and the feline, far larger than me when shifted, prowled over, rubbed against my legs, and purred.

The divine feline in me demanded I make friends with the other cat, who had spots almost as glorious as mine. I crouched, gave her a kiss on her nose, and began the important work of petting her while the Devil did his work.

“What a lovely assortment of jewels,” the Devil murmured. Something about his presence drew the eye of

every woman in the room with the exception of myself and the succubi. Much like the pied piper, he drew them closer, cooed to them, and somehow charmed them all.

Then, with the exception of the two women I'd isolated with the succubus, he made assignments. Before anyone could think twice over it, the various sex demons teleported off, taking the women with them, leaving me and Easton alone with Belial, Lucifer, and the snow leopard.

"That's my wife," Lucifer announced with pride in his voice. "I told her you're a cat, too, and she wanted to meet you. Well done, Kelsie."

"I didn't use the rag *or* the bag, though."

"No, you used your compassion, which is far more valuable and kinder. It was a test. I do that. You passed, in case you're curious." The Devil came over, chuckled, and unbuckled the collar from Easton's throat. "Thank you for letting Belial loan that to them for this, my darling."

The snow leopard's purring intensified.

"What would have happened had we used the rag and bag method?"

"A little more trauma and guilt than you'd like enduring but the outcome would have been the same. It would have resulted in you being suggested for harsher jobs. You accomplished your key goal, which was to put the women in a better place. You used your wits to do your work, taking what you thought you knew about their operations and blending in. And yes, your speculations on how the women behave is

correct. My demons will cater to the orders you have given the women, because that is all they know to do now. Once they have done their jobs and the fear of retribution is over, we'll start integrating them back into human society. Some will be ready sooner than others. May I ask your motivation for isolating the two women?"

Right. While the Devil could read my mind, I assumed he wanted Easton to be aware of my motivations for behaving as I had.

I had experience with abuse victims—and I had no idea how much exposure he had on a curtailed duty within the force. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I held it until the count of ten before exhaling, careful to keep from sounding huffy-puffy over the situation. “Succubi have a reputation of being able to read women better, and I wanted her to take the most vulnerable and most likely to be damaged under her wing. By tricking the girl into revealing who she trusted among the women, I could keep them together. The other women will be, at least for a bit, separated with their various demons until you can help sort them out. I couldn't do that with all of them, but involving the succubus let me have some assurance I could control *some* of the damage. For the rest of it, I gambled.”

“You played the game without knowing the rules and rolled with it, just like you do in corporate negotiations. Well, Easton? What have you learned?” the Devil asked.

“Did they really bring all of the trafficking victims here because she acted like she belonged and had me, some unknown male hybrid, along?”

“Yes. The place is cleared out of all human residents. You’ll have to worry about the various pets, but outside of the fish, you can handle that on your own. Belial and I will handle the finned residents. The traffickers here are smart; they give the women just enough joy to deal with their evening work. These women have been so broken that the traffickers can leave the door unlocked and they will stay.”

I had no idea how many more times my heart could handle breaking for the women. “Thank you, Lucifer.”

“I do enjoy doing *His* work in absolutely evil ways. It makes my dark heart happy.”

I snorted at the absolute lies regarding his heart. “You’re about as dark as a flood lamp at midnight—one that’s been turned on at maximum along with ten others just like it, all pointed directly onto you.”

The snow leopard rewarded me with a purr and a cuddle before taking her leash in her mouth and teleporting away.

“That is rude!” the Devil exclaimed.

As I had zero desire to deal with the whining and a lot of work to do, I opted to put the bag to the test, jumped at Lucifer, and shoved it over his head. As theorized, I managed to send the bastard straight to hell in a hurry. “That was *so* satisfying.”

Belial laughed, shook his head, and said, “Have a good night working. I’ll make sure the evidence of your presence has been erased. This is a crime no mortal has a chance of solving—and the divine will work to make certain no one asks

the right questions. Today, evil for the sake of good will persevere.”

The devil vanished, and I pocketed the bag and took a good look around the home. “Let’s start upstairs and see if we can find any of these pets. Once the living things are gone, we’ll go the brute force route and get everything cleared out. We start with the women’s stuff, and then we clean the rest of the bastards completely out of house and home.”



TO KEEP the women under their thumbs, the traffickers had opted to give them an odd assortment of pets, all of which were required to be kept in cages. I stopped counting after seventeen cats and sixteen dogs, all smaller breeds, and I took care with the beloved birds, the kind who knew how to talk and regaled us with questions punctuated with random cursing.

One bird mimicked a woman’s crying, and I hurt for the owner. I took a photo of the cage and texted Belial if he could handle the reunion personally. As requested, the devil showed up, and with reverent care, he picked up the cage. “For this child, you shall have your way. Good insight.”

“The bird was crying, Belial.”

“That is all the girl knows how to do anymore when she is alone in the safety of this room. We will take care to replicate this room exactly as it is, for she will need a gentler hand than most. I will have the team working on the removals focus on restoring this one precisely as it was. I recommend you use the

bag as you did on Lucifer for as much as you can in here. The rest are fine to toss in, but she knows every scratch of her furniture by heart.”

Before I could suffer through a breakdown over the thought of the woman’s suffering, the devil left.

“It’ll be all right,” Easton rumbled, and he plunked one of his massive paws on top of my head and ruffled my hair. “The bird is safe, alive, and well. The women will get the help they need. We just have to finish robbing the street first.” The lycanthrope gave himself a shake and went to work easing the bag over everything he could while I observed, helping with the larger objects as needed.

The room didn’t have room for the both of us.

The bed proved to be a challenge, but we discovered if we put the bags side by side, they worked together, allowing us to ease the whole thing, bedding and all, into their dark depths. Within twenty minutes, we had the room emptied of everything, even dust.

As promised, Lucifer handled the fish, of which there were at least twenty tanks between the two properties.

We only knew the tanks had been there because of the discoloration where they’d once been.

It took several hours for us to bag everything, but once done, we had the harder job ahead of us: finding the evidence we needed to rescue the kittens. I walked the street, hissing over the decisions I needed to make, and I ultimately decided

we'd work from farthest away from my car to closest, so when we left, we wouldn't have far to go to make our escape.

I opened the door, and the stench of rotting food and sex assaulted my nose. I gagged, waved my hand in front of my face, and put some serious thought into crying at the thought of having to go inside. Like me, Easton expressed his disdain for the foul odor, although he coughed before baring his teeth and growling.

“We will clear out as we go and be out of here in record time. And we're going to send this shit straight to hell so the Devil can fucking suffer while sorting this mess out!”

“Good call.”

We spared only enough time to review any handwritten materials before adopting the shoveling approach to our work. Easton fetched the broom and shovel I'd brought along for the ride, and we cleared the entry out in a record five minutes once starting work. I sweated, and Easton's fur showed signs of needing to be washed and groomed else he'd be a matted mess before the night was over.

The source of the rot proved to be a body stashed in a closet, fresh enough she was in rigor mortis and had begun the true process of putrefaction. As I refused to treat her body with the disdain required to shove her in a bag as though her life and death had no value, I went for my phone.

Instead of abusing Belial even more, I went for Gabriel, tapped to connect the call, and held the phone to my ear.

“I knew you would call,” the archangel said rather than greeting me.

“Can you treat her well and with kindness? I’m sure your brother would help, but I can’t bear the thought of just throwing her in a bag and sending her to hell.”

“Your very soul shies away from sending someone to hell undeserving. Her body is but an empty shell. You would not be condemning her soul. But yes, I will come do as you ask. She deserves better than, as you say, being thrown into a bag and sent off to hell. Do you care to know the fate of her soul?”

“As long as she escaped this hell for somewhere better, I’m satisfied.”

“She no longer lives in any hell, that much I can promise you.” A moment later, Gabriel appeared, and he patted my shoulder, snapping his fingers to make his phone vanish, and began the tedious process of removing her stiffened body from the closet. “As hers is not the only body you will find, after I take care of transporting her, I will return and assist with your efforts. *He* understands I will pitch a fit should I not be permitted to.”

“I’ll ask Belial if he has anymore bags.” I texted Belial, and sure enough, the devil appeared with a stack of the bags, which he handed over. “Thank you.”

“Gabriel,” the devil greeted.

“Belial. How is Lucifer handling the work tonight?”

“The more damaged of the girls are in his wife’s loving paws along with some of the gentler succubi, and outside of

giving her time with an incubus to assist with her other needs, things are progressing nicely. The angelic host will handle the deceased, I presume?”

“We have opted to take this burden up of our own volition, and *He* has opted to look the other way. These mortals could have done the work, but the bodies deserve mercy as much as they deserve justice.”

“We will take care of delaying the mortals from returning so there is more time. If *He* permits, we’ll use aversions.”

“*He* permits it,” the archangel confirmed. “Bring Lucifer’s heir into it, tomorrow, once these homes are barren and there is prey for her to hunt. This street would make a good project for her. This is the only home these women now know, and many will be too fearful to return to the families waiting for them. We shall purge these buildings of the filth so that they may become homes for them.”

“They’ll be easy to find,” Belial pointed out.

“*He* offers his blessings for the aversion for those who would do them harm be a permanent feature here. The universe herself weeps at what has fouled the soil here. This would help restore the balance.”

After considering the archangel with burning eyes, the devil nodded. “Perhaps it might be wise to involve Hibil.”

Gabriel heaved a sigh, and I wondered at his expression—assuming he had a head tucked away somewhere. “It shall be so. They will require the light to step forth into the world once

more. *He* is prepared to unleash the entire host to resolve this matter.”

“Ah.” Letting out a gusty breath, Belial turned his attention to me. “*He* is infuriated. This is the state in which the floods that had once purged this world of sin and sinner alike had begun—not because *He* sought to punish humanity for being human, but that *His* temper flared beyond control. But this time, rather than attempt to bottle *His* wrath and fail, *He* bleeds *His* fury through *His* host. Gabriel, I will send Lucifer’s little kitty upstairs soon to help calm him along with her guardians. That should tame *Him* for a time.”

“A good plan. She can withstand all that *He* is and all that *He* was, just as she can withstand all that my brother is and was. That is her purpose, after all.”

“How long to clean everything out?”

“We will not use our powers for this. No, this must be a deed done with our hands. We should finish by sunrise. Please be prepared to teleport our mortal friends to their hotel in the morning and arrange for someone to drive their car to the appropriate place. Perhaps Lucifer’s residence over Manhattan might suffice?”

“It shall be done.” Belial vanished.

Gabriel picked up one of the bags from the pile. “And so it begins, an era of salvation and sacrifice of life without death.”

“A sacrifice of life without death?” I asked, puzzled at the phrasing.

“You throw all that you are into providing a better future for those who may have been targeted by this ring. You sacrifice your life and energy—without condemning yourself to death to do so. You give a far greater gift than merely the end of your life. You dedicate the prayer that is your life to those who cannot help themselves. This is what it means for an era of salvation and sacrifice to be born. This is the new way.”

“I’m confused,” Easton confessed.

“This time, there will be no crosses, no child who exists solely to die for the sake of others. When she comes, she will do so as a salvation for all and a sacrifice of life without death. The circle closes, and we dawn on a new age, one of mystery, life, and light. May the balance forever be held so that the End of Days becomes a memory limited to darker times and history.”

I considered the archangel’s words, considered what I knew of the Christian faith, and asked, “But what of the Antichrist?”

“Not all fables of religion are true, Kelsie. All the Antichrist was and ever will be is a scapegoat to cover human sin. *He* would never create such a being, and my brother would never need to. There are always dark-souled humans eager and willing to wear those shoes solely because they fit.”

What a sobering thought. “Will we find what we need tonight? To rescue the kittens?”

“Yes, that much I can promise you. No stone will go unturned, and these pieces of filth cannot hope to hide

anything, not from us. You will have a long journey ahead of you, but you are pointed in the right direction and walk the path you need. Fear not. You do not sacrifice them for the sake of others.”

I nodded. “I can work with that. Who is Hibil?”

“Hibil is one of my brothers. You won’t see him; he is an echo of Lucifer’s origin, and he is rather shy. But you will know he is here. Where he goes, the light shines brighter. Belial requested Hibil because Hibil can also do the aversions they wish to place in a roundabout way. The hosts of the many hells will create the aversion to block those with ill intention from setting foot here. Hibil will turn this place into a sanctuary, a place of light and peace for those who have suffered. Gardens will grow well here, and those who live beneath his light will thrive.”

“Is Hibil Lucifer’s replacement?” I asked, my brows furrowing at the thought of somebody taking the Devil’s place in the heavens.

“No. No one can replace Lucifer. Lucifer is and always will be the Lord of the Morning. Think of Hibil as a protector of the light that Lucifer brings forth. Hibil is the one who would be bold and brave enough to descend into the utter depths of my brother’s many hells and become a guiding light for the redeemed souls to once again be born back into the world. He is a beacon and custodian, but he can never be what our brother Lucifer is and was. And before you fret, do not worry. Hibil is content with his place, and of my brothers, Hibil’s love for Lucifer is unmatched. For Lucifer, Hibil would

live through any torment, for Hibil has seen Lucifer's heart and understands its beauty far better than the rest of us do. The light is as much figurative as it is literal."

"I grew up being told how going to hell is a bad thing, but I'm failing to understand how it's bad," I complained.

Gabriel's laughter tinkled. "That is because your soul is secure; you have no fear of Lucifer for you understand that you will not be one of the fucking assholes in residence within his domain. Your soul is destined for other, better things. And as such, you sense him as the Lord of the Morning rather than the Lord of Lies. My brother does evil often, and he enjoys his dark works, but for those undeserving of his harsh hand, his presence can be a comfort. All souls handle Lucifer's presence differently, but yours has, from the instant you stepped into his light, rejoiced. But you are a feline, and Lucifer has a way with the felines. Now, we have work to do, and we will not get it done talking."

I took that as a hint to get back to shoveling as much as I could into the bag so the minions of hell could help us sort everything and find out what had happened to the missing kittens and where we needed to go to rescue them.



“WELL, I DID BARK AT AN
ARCHANGEL TODAY.”

WE UNCOVERED six bodies in the homes on the street, most of them within a day or two old. The archangels took on the burden of taking them away to be laid to proper rest, and I expected their bruised and battered faces to haunt my nightmares for a long time.

The understanding of how I pulled the caper sank in, and as we finished our work, I sat on one of the steps and failed to contain my tears. I rubbed at my eyes, angry the emotions refused to be contained. Easton crouched beside me, pressed his muzzle to my throat, and offered comforting nuzzles.

“She is as angry and frustrated as much as she grieves for those she could not help enough,” Gabriel explained, and he sat at my feet, folding the bag he’d used to send even every hint of dust in the properties to Lucifer for evaluation. “Our work here is finished. You will have a great deal of reading and learning to do. I will take care of teleporting you to Lucifer’s Manhattan residence. He will make certain you are both adequately fed before you rest. He will also make certain you do not damage your sleep schedule too terribly much.”

“We’re going to sleep all the way till tomorrow morning, aren’t we?” I asked between snuffles.

“A wise guess, but no. You will be given much coffee and kept awake until it is an acceptable time for you to rest. Your car will be driven with much care, I’m sure—unless Lucifer takes offense to it, in which case it will have a tragic accident and be replaced with something he likes.”

“But I *like* my Lexus,” I complained.

The archangel laughed. “All will be well, one way or another.”

Compared to Belial, Gabriel’s teleportation reminded me of a fist to the gut, hard enough to knock the breath out of me. In good news, the shock did an excellent job of bringing my tears to a halt, and I spent a few minutes cursing. Easton roared his general discontent, and then to my amusement, he barked at the archangel.

By the time we both recovered, the archangel had departed, leaving our bags nearby along with several piles of folded clothes and a dress hanging from the back of a barstool. Shaking my head, I took in my surroundings, determining that Lucifer owned one of the ridiculous mansions on the upper floor of a skyscraper. Below us, Central Park stretched through the city and the dawn made way for proper morning. On the streets below, the cars resembled ants more than anything else. I straightened, brushed myself off, and went to the window, whistling at our ridiculous height. “I should have expected something like this.” I regarded my filthy state, hissed, and grabbed my bag. “I’m exploring until I find a bath or a shower,

and then I'm getting this filth off me. Make sure you wash all that shit out of your fur. If you need help, follow me around like some puppy or something."

Easton opted to follow me around, and he insisted on taking sniffs at the back of my neck and throat.

"I smell like distressed feline," I informed him. "We have a bunch of scent glands that help us mark our territory, and we also use them to secure our mates. Right now, though, you're indulging in the fury of feline. This level of scent is a rare vintage. You won't enjoy too much of it later, so get your hits in while you can. I don't like being this angry."

"It is a spicy scent," Easton rumbled.

"I'd be spicy if I had anyone to beat."

"We can spar if you would like to work out your nerves. I am confident in my ability to defend myself from you." He seized me by the hips and picked me up. "You may weigh up to a hundred and thirty pounds, but that is being generous. I would guess a little less. Your diminutive stature has something to do with that guess."

I tested his strength through ineffective struggling, giggling at how little force he used while still managing to keep me contained. "You're going to end up sitting on the shower floor while I crawl all over you to get that crap out of your fur. Maybe we'll get lucky and clog the Devil's pipes."

Easton set me back on my feet. "You wish to work out your anger through grooming?"

"Yep."

“Then we shall do this. I am angry, but I got to lift heavy furniture, and knowing I stole their shit truly helped. However, what is going to happen with all that cash we found?”

“Finders keepers,” I informed him. “I found it, I get to keep it. I will be funneling it into trusts for the victims and anti-trafficking organizations if anything is left over. I’m not going to appreciate the administrative work involved with managing the trust, but I’ll deal with it.”

While it took a few minutes and a venture to Lucifer’s indoor pool, an entire ballroom, a salon with a liquor collection rivaling mine, and several sitting rooms, we located the bedrooms and their adjacent bathrooms. As we deserved the best, we checked each one until finding the largest, which happened to be stocked with an excessive amount of shampoos and conditioners. I checked the labels to determine they had been left on purpose, which ones were best suited to dogs, and which ones were best suited for divine felines. That Lucifer called Easton a dog while addressing me as a divine feline amused me enough I showed the hybrid the labels.

“Well, I did bark at an archangel today. I deserve to be called a dog.”

I giggled, stepped into the shower, which was plenty spacious enough to handle even a hybrid, and found the operation panel for the shower, which allowed me to pre-set the water so we wouldn’t get any cold or hot surprises. I set the temperature, hit the button to heat the water, and stepped out before shucking out of my clothes and kicking them in the

direction of the trashcan. “I’ll buy replacements, but those are getting burned in his fireplace tonight.”

“There was a fireplace in the salon.” Easton scooped up the clothes, shook his head over the loss of the lacy bra, and bounded off, returning a short time later without my clothes. “There might be fleas.”

Gross. “You’re probably right.” I stepped into the shower, turned on the water, and grinned as the entire ceiling became a deluge. “Come on in and bring the dog shampoo with you. This is going to take a while, but at least we’ll be able to get you good and wet.”

Huffing, Easton hesitated at the threshold, tested the water, and stepped in, careful not to destroy the tiles with his claws. As I had no hope in hell of reaching his head and he knew it, he sat on the floor, which put his head at my eye level.

Ah, self-inflicted torture. Was there anything better? I worked my fingers into his cinnamon fur, growl-chuffing my pleasure over the soft texture, which became slick and silky when wet. Once I worked out the worst of the surface grime, I grabbed the first bottle, dumped a bunch into my palm, and lathered him up, taking care to avoid his eyes although I did clean his muzzle as he’d turned a rather dusty gray. I killed every bottle of the dog labeled shampoo before turning off the shower and working the first bottle of conditioner into his fur. “I’ll give Lucifer credit on this one. He understands the importance of fur care—and he’s willing to pay the ridiculous price to make sure your fur emerges without mats. Let the conditioner set so you reach peak fluffiness.”

He rose and stared down the length of his muzzle at me. “I was unaware peak fluffiness was a consideration.”

“I’m a cat, Easton. Peak fluffiness is *always* a consideration. And after I get rinsed, it’s your turn to shampoo and condition my fur. At least my hair is easy. I’ll shampoo and condition it while your conditioner sets. That much fur needs extra soaking time especially as you’re rocking two coats.” I kicked all the empty shampoo bottles out of the shower, grabbed the next bottle of conditioner, and started with his legs and worked my way up. I handed over the bottle so he could handle his private matters on his own while I addressed his lower back, admiring the general scenery. “There is so much fur to love and snuggle with here. You’re getting top points, Easton.”

“Should you be admitting that while you’re in the shower with me?”

“If I didn’t want you looking, I would have stayed clothed. Anyway, I’m not all that body shy. I’m a lycanthrope, and my clothes fall off when I transform if I don’t somehow shred them with my claws. I destroy a shameful number of outfits transforming without stripping first. I try to strip first. It’s cheaper that way.” Once I could no longer reach, I had him sit down and dumped an entire bottle of conditioner on his head and worked it into his fur. “Unlike other cats, I like the water when wearing my fur coat. I think it comes from being a tree cat species that lives in a place where it rains often. Some clouded leopards live in dryer climates, but I suspect I am one of the rainforest varieties.”

“Is that what you are? A clouded leopard?”

“I am, indeed, feline perfection.” Once done, I grabbed the shampoo meant for humans, made use of the handheld faucet, soaked my hair, and soaped up, doing a brisk cleaning before rinsing off and conditioning my hair. “After our shower, we’re going to end up sorting through paperwork. The angels will have purified the paperwork for us; I caught them using holy fire on some things while we were clearing the places out. I expect we’re going to be angry all day. Rage is a good way to keep us awake until it’s the right time to go to bed.”

“And this place is large enough to handle us running around to vent off some steam.”

“His floors won’t be the same, but that’s his problem.”

“Are you aware that you are very callously disregarding the Devil?”

“I’m quite aware. If he didn’t want me doing it, he’d send me to his many hells or tell me to stop. As such, he probably likes that I’m bold enough to do what I want, when I want, and how I want.” Satisfied the conditioner had enough time to soak into his double coat, I turned the shower back on and went to work getting it all out. “You’re going to take forever to dry off, though.”

“That would be an understatement.”

“I’ll abuse the Devil and see if he can give you a magical blow dry. There will be no moldy fur when I can stop it, and you needed that bath. We both did. Those houses were *filthy*.”

“On the outside, it seemed like such a pleasant street. On the inside? It was worse than what I imagined possible.” Easton helped as much as he could, but even with both of us, it took an exhausting amount of time to get all the residue out. “I should apologize for this.”

“I volunteered. In fact, I’m pretty sure I sauntered right on into the shower and did a come hither to get you in here with me. If the Devil hadn’t wanted to pay for your bath, he wouldn’t have provided the bottles—the exact amount needed for your fur.”

“Ten of each for me, and one of each for you. The size differential here is disturbing. Is the conditioner out of your hair? If so, shift, and I’ll return the favor. It’s not as much work, but you probably don’t get anyone working your coat often.”

“More like never. I could ask my parents, but I am far too independent to go ask my mommy and daddy for help with my coat.” I took care retrieving the bottle of shampoo and conditioner, handed them over, and went about the important work of shifting into my feline form. To prove I had zero problems with the water, I bounced under the stream and went to the important work of batting around an abandoned cap we’d missed in the initial cleaning.

After making certain I was soaked from the tip of my nose to my tail, he turned off the shower, soaped me up, and had me lathered within minutes, although he took his time massaging the bubbles deep into my coat.

I growl-chuffed the entire time, dutifully changing position and even rolling onto my back so he could properly attend to my belly. As I was the most superior of cats, I did not flay the flesh from his bones for indulging in a brisk rubbing of my furry perfection.

Once he finished and turned on the shower, he backed away to give me space to play with the bubbles, which I did with wild abandon, rolling around on the shower floor and batting at his feet, which had plenty of long fur for me to play with. Laughing, he caught me, picked me up, and held me under the shower to get the soap out of my coat. “If I let you do that for much longer, you’ll get out of the shower panting and unable to do anything for the rest of the day.”

I hissed at him despite acknowledging he made a good point.

Once my coat was clean of bubbles, he turned the shower off and gave my coat the conditioning treatment. Once he let it set, for two minutes he counted in Mississippis, he used the handheld faucet to clean my coat, a wise move all things considered.

I would have played in the shower and made it ten times harder on him to make sure I wouldn’t be licking chemicals when I groomed myself. He picked me up, tucked me under his arm, and with zero care someone would be mopping the floors, he hauled me to the vanity where I’d left my phone. He tapped the screen with a finger to activate it and held it up. “Unlock it, please.”

As he asked nicely, I did as he wanted, grateful my paw pads could tap the numbers in the correct order to unlock it. Once he had the phone open, he went to my contacts, scrolled through, went to the section dedicated to devils, and located Belial's number. After initiating the call, he held the device to his ear. "Sorry to bother you, but unless the plan is for us to become moldy and miserable, we could use some assistance getting our coats dried off. We have purged the filth off. Okay. Thank you."

Instead of Belial, Lucifer popped into the bathroom, but instead of a snow leopard, he came armed with a succubus dressed in a leather corset and jeans with feathered wings and a snow leopard's iconic spots, ears, and tail. The woman giggled and rubbed her hands together. "She's *adorable*."

"Well, she is a clouded leopard, a being almost as superior as the snow leopard," the Devil replied.

"Her face is cuter than mine. It's the eyes. They're more expressive." Snagging a towel, the succubus bounced over, snagged me from Easton, and wrapped me up. "He'll handle your hybrid first. It would not do for your bed warmer to become ill. I'll show you the best dryers for the big fluffs like him as you'd hate having to bargain to prevent mold."

As I couldn't purr, I growl-chuffed to indicate my enjoyment of the attention, wiggled in the towel, and turned my head enough to lick her hand to show her my approval.

Lucifer prowled around Easton, poking and prodding at his arms and abs. "You've done a good job feeding him, Kelsie. He's still a little underweight but he's improving. Excellent."

Double the dosage of the protein mixture you bought and keep him on it for a month. When you run out, text Belial, and we'll handle getting you the next batch. I'll make sure you get the appropriate documentation to add to your CPD case. He should have been provided the mixture as part of his work, especially as they take advantage of his form." After a few more pokes and prods, the Devil snapped his finger.

Steam burst from Easton's coat, a light breeze blew, and when the white cloud faded away, the hybrid resembled a rather fluffy poodle in dire need of a brushing. Easton growled, pawing at his face in an effort to get his fur out of his eyes.

"It will give Kelsie some amusement for a few hours as she loves brushing any furry beast willing to sit still for her. You'll get to brush her coat out, but it'll be easier. Her fur coat is much shorter although she's far more plush than the average leopard of any spot." Lucifer eyed his wife. "Sorry, my darling."

"It's the truth. I'm not going to get mad at you for telling the truth. There're no gene abnormalities causing her thicker coat, is there?"

"She has adapted to Chicago's winters, and she *hates* getting too cold. I suspect latent practitioner magic as she doesn't practice much. Some, but not much. Her coat probably benefits when she isn't doing any spells." The Devil held out his arms, and the succubus handed me over. Rather than do the snapping the fingers route, he set me on the vanity, freed me from the towel, and took his time checking me over as well.

“Easton, you’ll want to keep an eye on her. She’s not getting sufficient protein, and it looks like she’s dealing with a few vitamin deficiencies. I’ll bring over the supplements, and you can help evaluate what she’s eating and not getting sufficient of. My darling, do you want to bring Diana and the scanner over?”

“Let them rescue those poor kittens first. It could be stress. She’s been hovering over her underfed hybrid. At least her fur hasn’t gotten patchy.”

“At least not yet.” Lucifer put his hand under my chin, lifted my head up, and peered into my eyes. “Her eye health is fine, her coat is healthy enough, so it’s likely just stress. We’ll keep an eye on it. Easton, I’ll give you my number. If she starts losing spots, give me a call, and I’ll see about getting her scanned. We *cannot* allow our kitties to lose even a single spot.”

“Lucy,” the succubus warned.

“What? It’s true. Spots are precious, and we cannot permit such an atrocity from happening on our watch. I simply will not allow it.” The Devil removed the towel, used a hand under my belly to get me to stand on the vanity for him, and snapped his finger. Warmth spilled over my coat, seeping down to my skin, and I relaxed at the sensation. After a few minutes, it faded, leaving me toasty and dry. “All right. Both of you go get shifted. We’ll meet you in the dining room so we can get to work. We have information for you and an update on the women you’ve plucked from the gates of a living hell.”



“I’M THE DEVIL, MY
DARLING, NOT A FLUFFY
ANGEL WITH A
MORALITY COMPLEX.”

ONCE WE WERE both shifted back to human and properly dressed, Lucifer fed us like we’d never seen food before in our lives while his wife stood guard, lashing her tail if she thought we weren’t eating like we should be. I inhaled several plates of steak, eggs, and chicken before my stomach declared its satisfaction, and then I ate two more plates to avoid the succubus’s wrath.

I gave up trying to calculate how much Easton devoured, suspecting he had extra stomachs somewhere to consume as much as he did without showing any sign of overeating. He ate while I worried about how I’d keep him fed while we searched for the kittens and brought them home.

It took almost an hour for him to tame his appetite.

“All right. Now that the hungry beasts have been contained with food, it’s time to get to work,” the Devil announced. A snap of his fingers removed all evidence of our feeding frenzy. A second snap decorated the massive table, suitable for seating twenty, in a layer of papers. Some still cracked with the blue-

white light I associated with holy fire. “My brothers and sisters helped organize this. According to Gabriel, everything you need to rescue the kittens can be found here, although you may need to clean some more houses. I suspect my brother wants to abuse his holy fire and use my bags again.”

I grinned, as I could believe that without any effort. “For an archangel, he does have a troublesome side. So does Michael.”

“Our daughter has corrupted both of them nicely. She’s done excellent work.” Lucifer shot his wife a glare. “I don’t see why we have to share possession.”

“Because I said so.”

“Why must you insist on using those foul words? They’re hard to argue with.”

“That’s why I’m using them. Just be glad I still permit you to use some of her pet names to drive her crazy, but she is *our* daughter, and you only get to use my when I am not present.”

Lucifer muttered something under his breath, grabbed a stack of papers, and thumped them down in front of me. “This stack contains information on the reasoning behind kidnapping those specific kittens, a list of potential buyers, and things like that. I’m sure you can make good use of it.” Grabbing a different stack, he dropped it in front of Easton with a bang. “I’m sure you can figure out how to turn this into evidence against the CPD, which you’ll organize, write case notes for, and present to your lovely little kitty to work on after the kittens are rescued. This should calm your nerves somewhat, then you can work on the next pile, which creates leads for the

FBI and CDC to pursue. I have taken the liberty of having everything authenticated with my brothers and sisters so it's all admissible evidence. These are the copies. The originals, with fingerprints still intact, will be processed appropriately.”

If all cases could be run with such efficiency, I had no doubt the world would be a much different place. “How do you want me to express my gratitude, Lucifer? This goes far beyond even my base hopes. Thank you.”

“You're doing my dirty work, so you're already expressing your gratitude. I'm sure you'll end up doing my dirty work again in the future.” The Devil went to a different stack. “I have no idea what this one is for, but my brother said it was best left in your hands, so I suspect it's something about corporations and their wheelings and dealings.”

As intel made the corporate world go round and round, I had no doubt I'd find useful things in the papers. Still, that left us with eight more looming stacks consisting of at least five hundred pages each. “And the rest?”

“Leads on recovering trafficking victims. I have been told to tell you that you cannot save any of these people immediately. The kittens must come first, but you can work on this after the kittens are home safe and sound. You will also have to wait until after the holidays. He said mid-January would be an excellent time to start pursuing these leads, with the majority of the filth being cleaned out of Chicago by late March. While you won't completely remove the rabble, Chicago will be cleansed enough for my needs by then. The traffickers that escape you will move elsewhere—and they will

be dealt with accordingly. I have already tended to that garden. While you will dislike the edict, that is not something for you to pursue. I already have plans to make certain that chapter—and book—are forever closed.”

I waved my hand in a dismissive gesture. “I don’t care as long as it’s being addressed.”

“It is being addressed.”

“What can you tell us about the kittens at this point?” I asked, scanning the first page to determine I held a compilation of receipts taken from the house—receipts that indicated someone had made purchases for clothing for children. “I need a journal, and I might need a tablet and laptop for this.”

With a snap of his fingers, the requested items appeared on the table near me. “Conveniently, I already anticipated your special needs. I also have sufficient supplies for your wolf, although you’ll find his methods to be a bit dated compared to yours.”

“Laptops exist, Easton. Use them.”

“I keep paper records.”

“You can keep paper records as long as you’re also keeping digital records. If you don’t know how to use a camera on a tablet, I’ll teach you.”

“I can handle it.” Easton paused. “Hopefully.”

I’d teach him, although I worried over damaging his already battered pride. “I have a couple of extra rooms we can convert to storage for your papers. Right now, they’re offices,

but I can shuffle things around and make it so you can hoard papers if hoarding papers makes you happy. There will be limits on paper hoarding, however. If the papers go back further than legal liability, they will be purged to digital only records.”

“That seems reasonable.” The wolf eyed me. “Maybe.”

“Digital records can be duplicated and stored in multiple locations. A house fire would irrevocably remove your evidence.” I foresaw a battle over the paper issue, but as long as he also kept digital records, I’d keep quiet about it. “How long are we going to be imposing on you, Lucifer?”

“At least a week. You’ll find Manhattan to be an excellent hunting ground for your efforts. Please don’t involve the NYPD unless absolutely unavoidable. I’ve two cindercones here, and if they find out there is child trafficking going on under their noses, they will destroy half the city before someone can rein them in. The idea is to quietly destroy the active rings here without them being aware of our activities. I will have an appropriate distraction for them in a few months, so when I go to finalize the removal of unwanted elements, they won’t be around to catch us.”

The succubus grinned, and she hopped to sit on the table beside me, giving my stack of documents a pat. “We’re playing a very delicate game of juggling resources. We need certain people doing certain things at certain times. We tend those gardens so the flowers bloom at the most opportune moment. But these traffickers are bold, and they become bolder as they make use of the power vacuums created when

we busted out other rings using said blooming gardens. Realistically, you're cleaning up our mess. But we can't afford to lose the gardens we've planted because of these rogue traffickers—and we certainly can't abide by leaving these children to suffer. Without our actions, these specific rings would not have formed, so to maintain the balance, it falls on us to deal with them. We've chosen you to be our latest blooming garden.”

“I have an actual garden. You could help it bloom when spring comes. Confuse my landscapers!”

Lucifer laughed, and he shrugged. “Sure. If you want confused landscapers, I'm sure I can create something rather glorious. How does the world's sole true blue rose plant sound to you? And not a lilac, although I will provide some of those as well. I'll even ask my father nicely to assist with your rose garden. You've always wanted a rose garden surrounding your patio chairs, haven't you? We will make them best suited for Chicago and its weather wonders. Perhaps a rainbow garden, my darling?”

“I do love a challenge. I'll take care of your father, as *He* wants me to go have tea with *Him* tomorrow. *He* is still rather... miffed.”

The Devil heaved a sigh. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“Will you play nice, wear your best suit, and hold your pinky out? You'll have to wear your feathered wings, but you can keep them black. You know he loves your feathers when

you show them off. You just go with the bat look because you feel it's more menacing.”

“I'm the Devil, my darling, not a fluffy angel with a morality complex.”

“It's just for tea. Play pretend and give your father a hug. *He* could use one right now. Then we can discuss the roses, and *He* will delight in the idea of her rainbow garden, because it fulfills the promise of *His* portfolio, to never again lose *His* temper in such a way mortals as a whole pay for it. Even the universe weeps at what they do, but our people work hard to fix it.” The succubus slid off the table, circled, and stood on her tiptoes to give Lucifer a kiss on his cheek. “We can celebrate the holidays with *Him*, and I'm sure we can coerce someone into inviting *Him* to join in and spread the cheer. *He* will rejoice, for the kittens will be home safe and sound by then.” The succubus's expression lit up, and she flashed a grin my way. “You might end up having to haul the little ones to your home on Christmas Eve to make all your important deadlines. Invite their parents for your Christmas Eve and Christmas celebration. I can go prepare the downstairs guest suites to be suitable for the kittens and their parents. We'll install a connecting door between two of the suites. That should suffice. Oh, Lucy. We could install a basement extension for them. We have time.”

“They would encroach on the third layer, my darling.”

“Get permission from the denizens and use their acts to gain their approval. It won't be a problem. It's not like we'll install a direct connection. They'll just be sharing property

lines. They don't have any direct claim on the land beneath her home. We can get the land rights for the neighboring properties, too. The third layer is below all the sewer lines so we could install quite the nice little niche for them. It would balance the scales."

The Devil narrowed his eyes, considering his wife. After a few moments, he huffed and he puffed. "Maybe she doesn't want to have a basement lair."

I pointed at Easton. "He's going to crest a thousand pounds once fed properly. Do you know what I need to keep a thousand pound hybrid healthy? A basement lair. I'm going to have to install a gym for him to work out his nerves, too."

"You could use some time in a personal gym yourself," the Devil replied.

"Then I guess you'll just have to install a basement lair for me at your dime since you are expecting me to do your dirty work."

"You're ruthless."

"When I have to be, yes. I'm also fine with connecting two of the suites in the current basement. Is their housing arrangement suitable for their kittens?"

"Their current home is plenty spacious for the litter. They aren't wealthy but they aren't poor. They'll be fine on that front. But it would be convenient to simply have everyone over at your place on Christmas Eve."

I could work with convenient. "I'll leave you with making the arrangements to have them arrive shortly before we bring

their kittens home.”

“Not after?”

“They can watch out the window in stunned astonishment while we herd them in, which will give them a few minutes to get over the initial shock.” I gave the papers in front of me a loving pat. “It seems you have a lot of work to do, so you should just get on that while we start handling these papers.”

“We’ll be back in time for lunch,” the succubus promised before she grabbed hold of Lucifer and they both disappeared. Several pops announced the arrival of more supplies in the form of filing boxes, another laptop, a tablet, and a stylus.

With that out of the way, I took the time to rub my hands together while taking in the work we needed to get done. “Now we’re talking business. Let’s learn what these naughty traffickers have been up to, shall we?”



THE TRAFFICKERS WERE complete and utter morons. According to neatly written notes at the top of each page, almost every property on the street had somehow been involved with the kidnapping of the kittens. One of the properties, marked as A2, had taken care of buying clothing for the kittens. A3 had taken care of buying the false identifications needed to get them onto the first of four flights. The documentation for the false identifications came with the name and contact information of the agents required for

inputting the records into the system to give the identifications weight.

I made use of my contact list, called the FBI, and relayed all the information on the moles in the system, and due to the nature of the investigation, I requested angelic verification. The call ate two hours of my life as there were six agents involved with the scam—and every last one of the trafficked women had undergone a similar falsification process.

As the women needed their names and identities back, I spent a hefty chunk of time going through their papers to get their falsified passport numbers matched to their legitimate social security numbers, which I assumed the traffickers held hostage to keep them under their thumb.

The call ultimately involved five different people across four different government agencies, and I took notes in my journal to make certain I kept everything straight until I could get my notes imported into my new Devil-issued laptop. Once I hung up, I hissed, thought about swiping at the stack of papers involving the trafficked women, and held my temper.

“I have a whole new level of respect for the amount of bullshit you must put up with in your day-to-day life along with a better understanding why you have a criminal mischief hobby. How did you not lose your temper repeating the same shit over and over again?”

“They kept bringing new people into the call so I had to fill them in and relay the information again. By dealing with that then, we prevented even more bullshit later. What I just did should close off a keyhole for the traffickers—and

possibly get more moles revealed as the corrupted agents will plea bargain for reduced sentences. If we play our end just right, the government will be cleaned out of those illegally accessing the social security and passport systems. That will make identifying traffickers much easier—or force them to use the legitimate passports of their victims. That can help catch the traffickers and set the victims free. You probably haven't seen the signs in the airports, but they give decent guidelines on how to spot traditional traffickers right in the bathrooms nowadays. What these traffickers were doing? Smart and far more difficult to catch. If they rebuild, it will take them a great deal of time to do so. I'm also hoping the government will tighten down the social security and passport systems to better log when an employee creates an illegal record. The groundwork for that is now in place.”

I returned to the pile dedicated to the kittens, recording the locations items were purchased, when, and who had handled it, profiling each of the traffickers by their corresponding identification. “A6 seems to be the bastard generally in charge of the kittens, I think. He's handling the immediate food purchases, giving us a nice paper trail of where he's been going and how much he's been feeding them. What I don't understand is why he's sending the receipts back to himself.” I pulled out one of the envelopes left in the pile, which had postmarks matching the newest of the receipts in the envelope. “Perhaps he's getting compensation from the buyer of the kittens for all expenses? If we can find any fiscal records of compensation from the future buyer or a sponsor for the trafficking, this would be a damned good way to close out a

buyer from the system. Closing the rings doesn't eliminate those taking advantage of them, after all."

"How do I handle if I have a list of people complicit in the murders of my fellow officers?" Easton asked, and he gestured to a small pile of documentation he'd pulled aside. "Some were paid to make certain the officers either died or left the force."

"Do you want to handle it yourself?"

"I would."

I reached over, snagged one of his papers, flipped it over, and wrote down the contact information for the appropriate departments within the FBI and CDC along with the names of some of my new contacts and my case identifier. "Inform the person who answers your call that you have information regarding the case I've listed here. Go to the salon if you need some privacy and come back here if you need additional information. I doubt you'll have documents in other piles; I'm used to this sort of work, where the Devil would put some training wheels on your section so you can learn the ropes. He wants the job done right, so he's going to give you the information in such a way you can handle. I'd take your entire stack with you because you may not realize you've been looking at good intel."

Easton nodded, gathered his papers and notes, and headed to the salon for some privacy.

My heart hurt for him as I understood he would have to face the life and death of a woman he'd cherished.

My work took a toll, but it fell within my range of comfort.

His would change him, possibly completely.

Only time would tell.

I continued my search, pulled up a map of the United States, and charted where the kittens had gone prior to our cleaning the street of everything they had, including at least three hundred thousand dollars in cash. The kidnapping had started in Chicago, and the falsified passports indicated the kidnapers had planned to take the kittens several months prior to staging the hit. The name and address of the person who'd knocked at their door, along with a fifty thousand dollar payment to distract the parents while the kidnapers worked, would become a cornerstone of the case.

From Chicago, the traffickers had taken the kittens to Atlanta. After a short stay in Atlanta, likely pretending to go to the aquarium, the kittens had been relocated to Boston. The receipts for food ended in Boston, which had been sent by courier overnight, arriving at the property in the hours before our arrival and cleaning of the place.

According to the plane tickets, all had been purchased two days prior to the kidnapping on one itinerary, thus disguising it as a family trip.

Checking the flight number, I confirmed the flight into LaGuardia had safely landed while we had been busy cleaning house, which illuminated the Devil's reasoning for not involving the NYPD.

Lucifer understood the kittens were somewhere in New York City, likely close to Manhattan.

He would have put us somewhere closer to our target.

Narrowing my eyes, I rummaged through the receipts, attempting to locate some form of clue about where in the New York City area a trafficking ring might set up shop. If I believed the food options, they were treating the kids to middle-ranged fare, including popular chain restaurants with a few luxury places allowing children in them. That led me to wonder how they were keeping the kittens from creating a fuss. What threats were they using?

Or worse, what sort of drug?

I went through the receipts, drumming my nails in search of anything that might be associated with pixie dust or one of the other controlled substances that might circumvent someone's will. Growling and hissing over it, I grabbed my phone, dialed Belial, and resisted the urge to transform and rip the Devil's fancy dining room table to shreds.

"How can I be of assistance?" Belial answered.

"Can you check the records I don't have for anything that might be associated with an order of pixie dust or other controlling substance? Even tranquilizers—anything that would keep a litter of distressed kittens calm, quiet, and well-behaved in airport and restaurant settings *without* tripping the triggers of any observers. I have to figure out how they got the litter through these airports without tipping anyone off they were being trafficked." I hissed, grabbed the receipts for the ticket purchases, and relayed the flight dates and times the

kittens had been transported. “Is there any chance you can get the airport footage?”

“It might be possible although it would be questionable on the legal front.”

“The cop is in the other room dealing with the murder cases so he can have some privacy. Engage in some criminal mischief, just don’t get caught doing it. You’d get more than community service for such a stunt. We’ll make the copies of the airport footage disappear afterwards. Just make sure you leave the actual footage intact; it’ll potentially be evidence. Actually, preserve a copy of the footage and hide it in the storage room for such things. I’m assuming there’s a storage room for footage. Mislabel it or just put it in the wrong box or something. They might try to erase the evidence.”

“I shall do as you ask. Anything else?”

“Can you ask that bastard if we’re going to be in the New York City area for the duration? Also, can you get a confirmation of if we’re going to be transporting these kittens in a ‘flee from the scene of the crime’ fashion to get home? If so, we’re going to need a van. A nice one that makes us look like a family rather than fugitives trying to get back to Chicago in time for Christmas.”

“I would count on fleeing across the country to get back to Chicago on time as you do not have sufficient will to take them on a plane, teleportation might traumatize them, and you love the idea of playing at being a fugitive and camping out in hotel rooms with your young charges. I expect you will bring the kittens to Lucifer’s residence to get them properly fed.”

I eyed the receipts, which had been lower than I thought it should be for anyone infected with lycanthropy. “Are they keeping them starved so they’re low on energy?”

“Yes.”

The direct, plain answer riled my virus up so much I fought to control her. To give her a little satisfaction, I hissed my discontent. With over three weeks until Christmas, a set of starved kittens to find, and an entire city to scour, I expected by the time I did get my hands on them, they’d be too weak to think about protesting. “Will that protein mixture be safe for kittens?”

“We will make sure you can provide for their needs,” Belial replied. “We’re working a miracle on *His* behalf, and as such, we have some leeway in how we operate. We can’t just snap our fingers and teleport the kittens to safety, but we can help smooth the way as much as possible for you—and for them. We have stolen their ability to book future flights. Anywhere they go will be on foot or by car.”

“Vehicle records,” I blurted. “Do any of these bastards have New York vehicles? Or New Jersey. I’ll take Delaware, too. I’ll take a complete list of their license plate numbers and vehicle identifiers.”

The devil gave a low chuckle. “Good girl. I’ll acquire those for you. Anything else?”

“Credit card statements showing hotel visits?”

“I am sure we can find some way to procure those for you.”

That would help. “A list of New York mafia and mobsters that would help our cause?”

The burst of laughter on the other end of the line startled a hiss out of me. “Now you’re talking business. How violent are you willing to have this go for the sake of those little kittens?”

“Ask your boss if it counts as involving the NYPD if we leave a bunch of bloody corpses in our wake. Our payment for exposing an encroaching mafia group would be for the safe return and recovery of the kittens.”

“Give me a moment, please.”

While I waited, I returned to my pile of trafficked women, skimming through the sheets for anything that might forge a connection with the New York area compared to their haunt in New Jersey. Sure enough, I found a reference to a SoHo warehouse being converted into a low-end apartment complex as a contact address for a handler.

Mobsters liked putting like with like, and the SoHo warehouse would be our next target.

“Bloody corpses are permissible under these terms. That would tip the NYPD off there is heightened mafia activity in their turf but it would not reveal that it was due to trafficking. We have some contacts who would be willing to play this game for the price you offer.”

“Get some cash rolling as compensation for their hours, and if they have jewels and other valuables that can’t be linked back to us, that might work to get those wheels greased.”

“Some of those jewels were stolen from the mafia in New York.”

“Return those as a gesture of goodwill for their assistance with this matter. I want justice, but I’ll take bodies if it means there won’t be any more victims.”

“Are you willing to meet with one of the contacts? The contact is clean and will not harm your upstanding reputation, and she might be a good way for the group to be ignored by the FBI and other groups—or possibly reform to assist the FBI.”

Was he joking? I talked to corporate sharks most days of the week. A mafia contact seemed mild comparatively. “I’m game. We’ll leave the cop behind. I’m going to need a babysitter for him while I’m handling business. Let’s not push his lines too much. Should the FBI lead angle pan out, I’ll loop him in then. If not, I’ll find a gentler way to welcome him to the dark side. I’m going to need some cookies. We should have cookies with our explorations into the dark side. And milk. Milk should always be served with cookies.”

“I’ll bring some brownies as well along with some good catnip and a light dosing of pixie dust,” Belial promised. “Anything else?”

“Candles and a romantic dinner near that big window? Some relaxation before bed sounds good tonight.”

“You are too tired to stage a seduction attempt, Kelsie.”

“I want to wine and dine the wolf,” I whined.

“You can wine and dine him, but you will not be engaging in any seduction attempts tonight.”

My virus joined me in whining, and we indulged in a pity party for two. “When is the earliest I’ll be able to talk with this contact?”

“Tomorrow morning. I will have Lucifer lure your wolf to his private gym and show him the appropriate exercises he needs to be doing while educating him on the powder you got him. You can meet with the woman in the salon. It should only take an hour.”

An hour in the morning sounded good to me. “Do you think there are any houses we can clean in this area?”

“As a matter of fact, yes—and I’m sure your new friends in the local mafia would love to help you handle the work. And unlike with the devils and demons and angels you know, they won’t even bargain with you to do it. Be aware, however. You will start a turf war, and that does have repercussions.”

“As long as one of those repercussions is the safe return of those kittens, let them burn each other to the ground for all I care. Well, and as long as the trafficking rings are broken down in such a way a worse foe does not replace them. I’ll make sure my new friend understands that I am going to be haunting their doorstep if trafficking occurs on their turf. They can do their shady business deals but humans and other sentients are not to be trafficked.”

“That would accomplish your goals nicely and turn the war with the NYPD to something far more cordial—a game of wits rather than blood and life.”

“I don’t know if the Devil does Christmas presents, but I think I deserve a nice present this year.”

“How about a gift of a hybrid?”

I laughed at the thought of the Devil wrapping Easton up and giving him to me as a gift, especially with his parents and family in attendance. “He does get a choice in the matter, no matter how whiny my virus becomes.”

“I’m sure he would not mind becoming your present, but I will let Lucifer know he actually has to put some thought into an appropriate gift for you.”

“Get me a date with the mafia for tomorrow morning, Belial. We have some ruin to spread, and if there happen to be a few guilty bodies that hit the floor as a result, too bad, so sad.”

“I do love some good ruin for some reason. This shall be a most excellent hunt. Expect us at ten in the morning. That will give you time to feed your hybrid and prepare him for his training with Lucifer.”



I DREAMED OF RIPPING
APART TRAFFICKERS
WITH MY BARE HANDS.

I GOT my romantic candlelit dinner by the window overlooking the city, and the Devil served as our waiter. My virus swooned over my efforts to convince the wolf to stick around. Unfortunately for me and my virus, the wolf was so charmed by Manhattan's sparkling lights I held no hope of holding his attention for more than a few minutes. I accepted my loss.

Manhattan deserved another charmed lover, although I hoped the city might share with me.

While my attempt to wine and dine the wolf failed, I did lure him into sharing the same bed with me. As warned, seductions were not on the menu, as Easton passed out shortly after crawling under the covers. I ignored any rules about staying on my side of the bed, cuddled close to appease my virus, and enjoyed my sleep.

I dreamed of ripping apart traffickers with my bare hands and feeding the land with their blood.

The next morning, the Devil's wife dressed me up in a cocktail dress with heels while Lucifer dragged Easton off for

breakfast and some exercise. I assumed I would be occupied longer than expected although I questioned why I was going for the sexy-formal look.

Staring at the succubus, I raised a brow and gestured to the dress.

“She’s the kind who judges with her eyes, so you need to exude feminine power.” After snapping her fingers and conjuring a jeweled necklace, she secured it around my throat. The matching earrings came next. “You’re dressed to take her seriously, but the diamonds are sending the message you have the resources needed to take out these groups if you want to—and you do.”

“I can handle that.”

“I know you can. There. I’ll bring the woman up. Her name is Carrie. She prefers to not go by her last name. You’ll go by Kelsie. She doesn’t need to learn your last name. She knows who I am, so she’s going to be particularly wary—and she knows this is one of my abodes. The mafia group will behave accordingly. You’re representing us by hosting the meeting here, and this group is smart enough to not fuck around with us. This is the sole mafia group Lucifer tolerates in this area. The rest are heavily involved with trafficking and he works to bring their empires crumbling down. Oh, and once one of those empires crumbles, one of the skyscraper penthouses will be up for sale. We’ll be buying it, and it’ll be your New York residence. That will be an appropriate payment for your additional work. And we’ll cover the HOA and

property taxes so your precious savings account will not be hampered.”

I regarded Darlene through narrowed eyes. “The penthouses range between a hundred million to two hundred million dollars.”

“This one is closer to the two hundred million mark—or would be if it wasn’t going up on auction as a part of the mafia’s breakdown. We’ll snag it for closer to fifty million as my husband will be attending the auction dressed up like the naughty evildoer he is.”

Right. If the Devil showed up at an auction, I’d only test my luck a little before deciding maybe the Devil should buy the property. “Fifty million is a little steep.”

“The lives you are saving are worth far more than fifty million, and the view is on par with this. It will become your wolf’s favorite space, especially when you turn it into his salon with his own collection of liquor bottles he may never open because they bear the weight of happy memories.”

Just like that, she won the battle and the war. “Maybe one of the trafficking victims can be a live-in maid or something.”

“We will be buying the condominiums directly beneath your unit, and we will make it the home of the victims who will not do well if separated. They would clean their savior’s home for free but you will pay them because the thought of anyone working for you without fair compensation would leave you rather ill.”

“How are they going to afford the places?”

“They will become Lucifer’s minions so don’t worry about that. One or two will work for me. I usually take the ones who want to help in the dungeons as their souls need vengeance even more than justice. I’ll probably convert them to succubi once *He* has need of a few angels. Then they’ll get all the vengeance they need along with natural inclinations that match well with how they were nurtured *and* their general nature.”

A doorbell rang, and Darlene said, “I’ll bring her to the salon. That’s the best place for the meeting.”

I expected we’d both need a hard drink by the time we finished discussing business, and I went to the salon as told, headed to the bar, and eyed up the Devil’s assortment of alcoholic beverages.

If he hadn’t wanted me going after his fancy wine, he wouldn’t have left it out to be consumed, standing upright, as the vintage came with a hefty share of sediment, part of what made the red so desirable among many.

Darlene brought Carrie into the room, wished us well on our negotiations, and teleported away.

Showtime.

I made sure both glasses were poured to an equal level, picked both up, and offered her one. “Good morning, Carrie. Thank you for coming to see me. The subject is hefty, so we’re going to participate in some day drinking on the Devil’s dime. If you don’t like red, I’ll mix you up whatever you like. I’ve a bar at home, and it’s one of my hobbies.”

Carrie reminded me of a Hollywood beach star, blonde, tanned, and flawless, and she took the glass from me and lifted it up in a toast. “Kelsie, I presume?”

“I’m Kelsie.” I led her to one of the tables for two nearby, sat, and tried the wine, pleased the vintage matched the hype and price tag associated with it. “I’ll cut right to the chase. I’m after a group of ill-bred mobsters who stole a litter of lycanthrope kittens in order to traffic them. I’m working on *His* behalf to make a Christmas miracle. I want these kittens at my home by Christmas Eve, and I want your help making it happen.”

“We’ve already received your... gifts.”

“I cleaned house, and it happens that those ‘gifts’ were found during the process. I’m going to be particularly blunt as I’d rather not waste any time with unnecessary niceties. We want to clean up New York City. Any and all groups involved with the trafficking of humans and any sentients, gorgons included, are to be eradicated. Those who purchase humans or sentients will likewise find themselves facing the consequences for their actions. The trafficking in New York ends, and it ends now. As things stand, your group is not associated with any trafficking, which is why you’re being given the offer. I’ll be extra blunt with you: I am currently working with the FBI, and it’s entirely probable I’ll be the liaison for your group. My primary job is bringing ruin to corporations who step out of line with their employees and abuse the little fish. I’m not here to stop you from existing and participating in your general crime rings. I *am* here to change the nature of the conversation between the groups here and the

NYPD. The endgame is simple: everyone will be cordial with everybody else. If the NYPD busts your group, they played the game better. If you get away with crimes on their turf, you played the game better. No shootouts with cops. Stakeouts and busts will continue to happen, but the goal will be non-lethal interactions.”

Carrie arched a brow and took a sip of her wine. “That is not what I was expecting.”

“I trust you know who that succubus is.”

“She’s the Queen of Hell. We’ve met. That you’re hosting the meeting here means we’re going to have a Devil of a time if we don’t play the game. If we do play the game, we’ll quite possibly gain in power and wealth.”

“Just not through trafficking.”

“Correct. Our boss hates trafficking, and it’s a death sentence if he catches anyone participating, so this will please him—and his wife. His wife was trafficked, and he bought her from a ring. He set her free, but she ended up taking over so he wouldn’t keep trying to send her off. She now rules the roost as much as he does.”

That explained a great deal. “Good. Frankly, I don’t care what you do after the other groups are cleared out, but I have two general requests. If your group turns to trafficking, you’ll get the same exact treatment as the traffickers we’re taking out. It’s not happening on my watch.”

Carrie nodded. “That’s absolutely fair and reasonable. Your second request?”

“Play nice with the cops. Lucifer has family in the NYPD, and the fastest way you bring ruin to yourself is to ruin something Lucifer loves. You’ve been warned, so if you court the forces of hell against your group, that’s your problem. Consider that a present if you want, but if you behave with the cops, you’re more likely to survive to tell the tale. Lucifer doesn’t play around.”

As the woman’s expression turned rather troubled, I believed she would make certain the message was forwarded—and the group would play a nicer game with law enforcement in the future. “How do you want us to help?”

“I want to clean house. I know they have a warehouse. If there are any trafficking victims, we’ll rescue them through sending them off to the Devil for a while. He’ll take care of rehabilitation. It’s a catch and release program for trafficking victims. Last round, I played as one of the traffickers with marching orders for the women to entertain incubi and succubi. Lucifer handled it from there. Since that tactic worked once, I’ll call in the sex demons again to teleport them away that way. Alternatively, I have a pocket portal to hell, and if they don’t cooperate, I’ll shove them through after a scuffle. The traffickers are to come to bloody and miserable ends. Then we have to clean up after ourselves, which is where the cleaning house portion of the plan comes into play.”

“That’s going to leave a lot of evidence.”

I shook my head. “Not when we have angels and archangels willing to abuse their holy fire to erase the evidence. *He* has been asked for a Christmas miracle, and *He*

is using us to accomplish it. The angels and archangels are irritated enough with the situation they're offering a little more help than normal for something like this. As long as your people keep their mouths shut about the raids, all that will be found are pristinely empty buildings. You'll get your cut of the cleaning for the work. The rest goes to the victims."

"We can forgo our share of the loot if it's going to the victims. The bosses will like that. And anyway, Darlene said you're paying our hourly rate for the work."

I nodded. "Yes, you're being paid your rate."

"You're aware that's five thousand an hour, correct?"

"Per person?" I did the mental math, shrugged, and said, "That's no problem."

"Total," Carrie corrected.

"Per person, total... I genuinely couldn't care less either way right now."

"It's total. The return of our jewels is why it's total."

I nodded, as I could accept the jewels being counted as payment. "Our first target is going to be a SoHo warehouse. We acquired the address during our previous house cleaning efforts. Once you see their setup, you may guide us to other houses that require our special brand of cleaning. You'll be moving a lot of furniture. If they own it, it's getting cleaned up. In good news, you don't have to worry about being too gentle with things. They're taking care of safe landings of important goods on the other side, although I do request we be very careful with the property of any victims. We're trying to

be gentle with them. All animals we find will be relocated as well, and we will try to make sure any pets of the victims are immediately reunited.”

“That’s gentle for this business.”

“That’s because I’m not normally in this business,” I replied. “I am cleaning up part of the business, but I prefer to limit my trickery to counts of criminal mischief where everyone walks away laughing.”

Carrie considered me before she smiled. “I see. You’re willing to get your hands dirty for others. I’ll make sure the bosses know so there aren’t any unfortunate mistakes. And the offer to gain us access to the FBI?”

“That offer is genuine. Even if I don’t become an official liaison, I have contacts, and I’m willing to use them on your behalf, especially if it involves appropriate house cleaning.” I sipped my wine, leaned back in my seat, and waited for the woman to chew through the offer. “You’ll have to keep your record spotless, but as long as I’m talking to someone with a spotless record, then it’s fine. Unless it’s petty counts of criminal mischief, done while pranking someone you know. They ignore the criminal mischief counts that result in some laughs and no actual damage.”

For an active mafia group, a contact with the FBI, one that wouldn’t be trying to remove them from the scene, may as well be worth the world’s weight in gold. While the games between the group and law enforcement would continue, it would be done in a peaceful fashion—as long as the group kept the worst of the evils off the streets.

“I can work with that condition. What do you think the kittens will be used for?”

Through checking through the files, I had come to numerous conclusions, but I opted to go for the worst—and most probable—of the scenarios. “The girl will be cultivated to give her buyer the lycanthropy virus so he can live a long time, the heir of some family fortune, I suspect. She’ll end up trapped in an unwanted mating bond. Her brothers will be cultivated for use in brothels, although it would not surprise me if the girl was permitted to have limited contact with her brothers to make sure they all behave. They’ll threaten to kill the girl to keep the boys controlled, and they’ll threaten to kill the boys to keep the girl controlled. The girl will ultimately be steadfast with her captor to protect her brothers, and her brothers will end up working the brothel houses, carefully controlled to make certain they don’t lose their star performers.”

“And how old are they now?”

“They’re six.”

“They’re old enough to require less care but they’re young enough to be pliable,” Carrie noted, her tone turning icy. “Their location now?”

“Somewhere in New York City, likely Manhattan. We’re cleaning house to try to hammer down their current location. We’ve closed their ability to leave the area by air. If they take the kittens to an airport, the passports will sink their ship. They could leave by car, but I’m getting a record of all their license plates.”

“We can deal with the vehicles once we know the plates. We will handle any payments to Lucifer for the trafficking victims.”

Vehicles turned to scrap or scraped and resold wouldn't be used to traffic more victims, so I nodded my approval of the tactic. “If I'm giving you a license plate number, it's associated with this mobster group, so don't feel like you have to be gentle with the traffickers. Do try to be gentle with anyone you feel may be a trafficking victim. Reformation is possible.”

“You got it. We'll kidnap the ones we feel were trafficked. Where would you like them taken?”

I got out my phone, informed Belial I needed a collection of bags for my new friends and waited for the devil in question to appear. He did so, and unlike his previous interactions, he showed up in his natural form. I questioned his appearance, but as he had a few of the bags clutched in his tail, I took them. “Thank you.”

Carrie turned an intriguing shade of green.

Belial vanished.

I counted bags, determining he felt that five should be sufficient for their work. I set them on the table in front of my new mafia contact. “Anything you shove through here will be sent directly to the Devil to be dealt with. Trafficking victims will be cared for appropriately.” I shot off another text to Belial, asking if we could use the bags to make bodies disappear.

The confirmation amused me.

“And yes, you may use the bags to make trafficker bodies disappear. Once we’re done the work, Belial will expect to have his bags back.”

I hadn’t thought it possible, but the woman paled further. “That was Belial?”

“He is Belial, the devil associated with ruin,” I commented, and as Belial did not act for good reason, I added, “Please don’t give me any reason to suggest he deal with your group because he will. This is one game I recommend you play by the rules—all the rules, in letter and in spirit.”



I SPOKE with Carrie for three hours, giving her a complete analysis of the group we sought to destroy, how they operated, and how we might best help their victims and rescue the kittens. She promised she would be on the lookout for other trafficking victims and get them into good hands, likely sending them off to New Jersey to keep the NYPD in the dark about their trafficking problem.

A few jewels returned to their rightful owners seemed like a small price to pay for them being on permanent lookout for trafficking victims.

We planned the SoHo warehouse hit to begin at eleven. Half of their group would create a distraction to lead the NYPD on a merry chase across town while I went in with Easton, Carrie, and a few of her friends to clear out the

warehouse, learn what we could, and send the evidence down to the Devil to be sorted by the damned souls and whichever demons and devils were unfortunate enough to be assigned the task.

Once Carrie left, I grabbed the rest of the bottle, discovered there was still a glass worth's left, and decided I would spend the rest of the afternoon drunk off my ass rather than just drunk. Careful to not get too many sediments, I poured, and I was well on my way to knocking it back when the Devil brought a panting Easton, in his hybrid form, into the salon.

I toasted the pair with my glass. "I'm going to our hit tonight drunker than sin. Gimme another bottle, Lucifer. Gimme two."

"No." The Devil approached, claimed the wine glass, and held it out of my reach. "Easton, have the rest of this. It's a rare wine, and she's had more than enough."

The lycanthrope took the glass, sniffed it, and took a cautious sip. "I can see why she'd get drunk on this and want another bottle." While I hissed at having been thwarted, Easton drank the rest of the wine, and he stared at the sediment left on the glass. "What's this stuff?"

"Think beer dregs but for wine," the Devil replied, claiming the empty glass and the bottle. "And you're drunk enough, Kelsie. Carrie tricked you into drinking most of that bottle by yourself, yet you still managed to goose her. She's fuming she did not walk away the victor and impressed you skunked her while skunked. Easton, toss her in the pool. I

turned the heater off last night, so the water should be nice and cold and knock some sense into her. And the view of her in that dress? You'll find it to be spectacular."

The wolf wasted no time wrapping his arm around me and lifting me off my feet. I squealed, and I beat at his arm, which may as well have been made of iron. "Hey, I'm not that bad!"

"You will be if you have any more wine, and yes, you're pretty bad." Lucifer laughed, patted my head, and led Easton to the pool. "Go ahead and jump on in, too. We have fur traps installed, and I'll keep an eye on things."

With a deep, rumbling laugh, Easton did the Devil's bidding and tossed me into the deep end. Then, he cannonballed into the pool, sending a wave cascading over my head.

My virus went on high alert, and she wanted a piece of the wolf. Kicking off my heels, I went for the hybrid, determined to at least dunk him—and if he got bitten, he only had himself to blame.



HOW SO VERY WOE WAS ME.

I FAILED to land a bite on Easton although not for a lack of effort. His superior reach and size played a large part in my inability to grab hold of him with my teeth. The few times I got close, I'd ended up with a mouthful of wet wolf fur. My virus whined over our defeat.

At the point I clung to the edge of the pool as I'd run out of energy to continue pursuit, Easton plucked me off from my perch, tossed me over his shoulder, and climbed out as though I weighed nothing. A rather amused Lucifer and Darlene observed from the pool chairs nearby.

The succubus had decided to show up in a human form with her snow leopard ears and tail. She grinned and said, "I'm impressed. It took you three hours to tire her out enough she isn't trying to pretend she's a vampire with you."

"I have questions about that wine, Lucifer," Easton rumbled.

I thought about biting his back, but I lacked the energy to do anything other than dangle off his shoulder and pant to catch my breath.

“All the wine did was relax her enough her virus wanted to come out and play. She needed to destress, and it seems she opted to go on a hunt for a wolf. You should be safe enough from her teeth while she recovers from that. She’ll be back to herself after lunch. My darling brought some appropriate apparel for both of you for tonight’s activities.”

“Is she even going to have the energy to participate?”

The Devil laughed. “She will. Lunch will revitalize her, and she’ll be ready to dish out some violence on the deserving. You’re invited to go with her, but due to the nature of this hit, we will be dyeing your fur. Your fur is too distinctive. Your size is also distinctive, but your fur and size combined are a problem. As such, we’ll be addressing the fur. Kelsie, which color would you like? And no, you can’t protest about liking his fur just as it is. You have to pick a different color. Ideally, you’ll pick natural wolf tones. Black mottled with gray would be a good choice, as he’ll blend in at night.”

“That works,” I replied. Then, as Easton’s tail was in my reach, I grabbed him, pulled the tip of his tail up, and examined the fur. “Can we give him a white tip on his tail? I feel he should at least have some form of distinguishing marking.”

“I’m sure we can manage a white tip on his tail for you,” Lucifer replied. “Just don’t bite his tail. I know your virus wants to get nippy with him, but you’re going to have to wait until he decides to let you catch him.”

I examined the fur on his tail, determining I would have a difficult time biting the actual tail even if I tried. “Could I even

reach? There's so much plush fur. He's so fluffy."

"His tail is quite spectacular," Darlene admitted, and she got up and came over, freeing his tail from my grasp so she could examine it. "No, you wouldn't manage to land a bite. That's what thwarted you before, too. Even if you *did* actually get close enough to bite, his fur is thick enough you wouldn't draw blood. Alas, he was safe from your advances the entire time with the exception of his nose and ears. You didn't target his nose or ears."

I pouted. "That's not fair."

"Are you still drunk?" Easton asked, twisting around to regard me with his ears pricked forward.

"I don't think so. I might be hungover."

"You're not hungover but only because I purified your blood stream sufficiently to prevent it," Lucifer replied. "Remember when you got dunked and forgot you can't breathe underwater? I pulled you up by your hair."

Oh. Right. That had happened. "Vaguely."

"You were intoxication and hangover free at that point. Your virus is just riled and wants a taste of male wolf."

At least my virus wasn't insisting on a taste of all males, which had been a battle during puberty. "Should I just ask for the cuffs now, because that sounds like I've been busted."

Easton's laughter rumbled, and he set me down on my feet. "I might be a bit of a loner, but I've been around enough lycanthropes to know we like to play, especially when other

lycanthropes are involved. You don't know a lot of other lycanthropes, do you?"

"I mean, I do, but I certainly don't go jumping into a pool while wearing a cocktail dress with them!"

Easton took his time looking me over. I joined him, determining the cocktail dress clung in rather alluring fashions. "That's probably a good thing."

I tried to pluck at the material, which resisted my efforts. "I'm going to need help escaping this."

Darlene snickered, took hold of my arm, and waved Easton away. "We do not have time for you to discover your personal chemistry today, so you can go sulk and imagine just how lovely she is under the dress while I help her escape it. If we break it getting you out of it, I'll get you another one. I dressed you perfectly."

She really had. "Can I at least pay for one of the dresses? I mean, I didn't protest the destruction of this one."

"It was given to you with the knowledge it would not survive the day. I'll make sure you're appropriately dressed for this evening's outing. And if you do decide it's nap time, well, those louts can lament about how their women walked off without them for a while."

I went with the succubus, waited until we were safely out of hearing range, and muttered, "Clearly, I need to not indulge in alcohol while he's around. I was out for his blood!"

Darlene patted my back. "It's okay, Kelsie. Your virus likes him so she wants to get her claim in on him before some

other female does. Let the big, bad wolf enjoy the attention. He knows you're out for him, his virus knows, and he's enjoying the positive attention. He's been in Chicago long enough he's learned most of the local women feel he's, well, diseased."

Fucking prejudices. "Why is it I got away without even worrying about that? It happens to me, too—I just don't care."

"Your virus is unusually patient, you're used to dealing with corporations, and if you won't let some corporate rat beat you down, you're certainly not letting some prejudiced idiot win. That's the only difference. He cares about how others view him. You don't. You're confident of your value, and you do not need anyone telling you what you're worth. He lives to serve the public, and the public is afraid of him."

I sighed. "That poor wolf."

"It'll get better for him. You two are going to bring a great deal of change to Chicago. You're going to finish what that cute little otter started."

"Otter?"

"The one-eyed shapeshifter cop."

Right. I'd followed the case rather closely, but I hadn't known his species. "He's an otter?"

"Yep. He's an adorable little otter, an Asian small-clawed to be specific. His mate is an American badger. Much like you and your wolf, they're very well balanced. He's the heart of their pairing, and she's the sword with a temper problem. Easton is all heart who likes acting like he's brawn. I mean,

with that much mass? He's definitely brawny. He's brainy, too. You're well balanced. You both bring more heart than you know what to do with to the table but he's definitely the sword of the relationship. You're the brains, and if you weighed more than thirty-five pounds when shifted, you'd *like* to be the brawn. You are not at all brawny."

I sighed as it was true. "A little brawn would be nice."

"You will have to suffer through watching that wolf be brawny. Just let him enjoy being hunted for a while. It's good for his ego. His virus will tire of enjoying the show soon enough, then you'll engage in the stereotypical lycanthrope brawls before one of you successfully lands a bite. Or you'll skip the biting and drag each other to bed. I'm sure you'll figure it out. I'm even going to do something my idiot in there will dislike, which involves providing birth control until you're ready to add kittens and puppies to the mix. Since you're doing great work, you can even tell me how many puppies and kittens you want, and you can request some girls."

"The first litter should be all boys, then the second one can be all girls so that the big brothers of the pack can protect their little sisters," I informed her in a solemn tone.

Darlene laughed. "And since Easton will be tremendously excited to even have *one* puppy or kitten, he won't suspect meddling until it's too late and he's drowning in kittens and puppies. There are worse ways to go. The kittens will do an excellent job of convincing your wolf he needs an entire pack. However, I make no promises he isn't going to bring work home with him."

“Our house is large enough to handle a few strays of any species except horses. My house and yard are unsuitable for horses. It’s also unsuitable for goats and anything with hooves, however adorable those things are. And four-footed creatures, like llamas, also do not fit.”

“I like that you know llamas and alpacas technically do not have hooves.”

“They look like hooves, which is generally close enough, although they are technically feet.” I shrugged. “If he wants a horse, a cow, or a llama, he will have to find a farm that will rent him a stall or whatever they need to be happy and healthy.”

“That is how you end up with an operating cattle ranch, Kelsie. If you start going he can have cows and horses if he wants, he’s going to start looking for a ranch where he can have cows and horses,” Darlene warned me. “Your cop is a closet cowboy.”

Goodness. I might get to watch him in a hat, tight jeans, a button-up, and boots wrangling horses and cows?

How so very woe was me.

Darlene led me to one of the smaller bedrooms, flexed her hand, and transformed it into a snow leopard’s paw armed with sharp, pointy claws, which she used to shred the dress right off me. “Hop in the shower and get your hair clean. I’ll get you dressed. And however much I teased the louts about taking a nap, you need lunch and your virus is going to be quite active, so you won’t be able to nap even if you wanted to. Lucy

comes with a gift of blueprints and a good idea of our targets for tonight's operation."

"Wait. *Our* targets?"

"Lucy has decided he's going to attend to certain matters personally. I keep telling him to quit peeking, but he saw something he really dislikes, so he's going to pay a personal visit. There is definitely going to be some bloodshed tonight. That one is going to experience a little hell on Earth before going straight to hell, where our daughter is going to be waiting with her stallion. When her stallion wants a turn in the dungeon, you know the fucking asshole's sins are bad. We're going to raffle off dungeon time for this one, I'm sure."

I raised my hand. "How do I get a ticket?"

She laughed and shooed me into the bathroom. "Shower first. Then we'll discuss the dungeon issue where the men can give their input. It's time for Easton to get some steel in that spine so he can be a sword for you."



DRESSED IN TIGHT JEANS, a black blouse that offered the slightest hint of cleavage, and low-heeled boots that almost went to my knees, I prepared for war. Darlene put a new jeweled collar on my throat featuring rubies and diamonds, designed to draw attention to my chest. I found the succubus's choice of attire amusing, but as I could move in it well, I went along with her flow.

She led me through the penthouse, stopping at the pool long enough to confirm the heels were still at the bottom. At a snap of her fingers, a devil appeared, and she pointed at the abandoned footwear, asked for it to be retrieved, and to be prepared for an evening of action, excitement, and bloodshed.

The shoes disappeared along with her summoned minion, and she led me off to join the hunting party.

To my amusement, the Devil had transformed his formal dining room into a war room, and he even had a scale model of the warehouse we needed to hit along with blueprints. To my amusement, there were miniature figurines of us, our new mafia friends, and our targets. In terms of raw numbers, I worried.

We were outnumbered approximately three to one. “That warehouse is packed.” I eyed the different levels, which became a series of one bed and bath apartments with communal rooms littered throughout. After checking the scale, I determined the apartments were roughly a thousand square feet each on the third level, six hundred on the second level, and five hundred on the first level. The warehouse, according to the blueprints, seemed to be a superblock merging what should have been four standard blocks together. As an avenue would have cut through the warehouse space, the warehouse had an extra hundred feet to work with.

“The lot is nineteen hundred feet in length, six hundred and twenty-eight feet in width, and most of it is *what?*” I asked, checking over the blueprints. The warehouse’s builders had gone as close to the street as they could, trimming off only

five feet from the sidewalk. I began counting apartments, flabbergasted over how many might be living in the building. “Is this legally zoned to be apartments?”

“No, it isn’t. It’s zoned to be a warehouse, and a team of practitioners keeps illusions running around the clock to prevent inspectors from checking into their activities. I have a team currently disabling the practitioners permanently. They will be unsolvable missing persons as they were escorted directly to my dungeons for our daughter to attend to. She’s quite miffed right now.”

“Miffed is one way to put it,” Darlene muttered. “If we brought her and Malcolm out right now, half the city would end up cursed. He’s in no mood to rein her in, and he’d feed her all the power she needed for that stunt. It’s much better off for everyone that she’s tending to the house and the incoming fucking assholes.”

Lucifer sighed and shook his head. “That girl. We’re working on that. She has quite the temper, especially when there are little ones involved. There are six stories total, but the apartments on those floors aren’t occupied yet. They’re finished, but that’s a new development. There are over three hundred apartments in that complex, and half of them are occupied. If this group were permitted to continue their efforts, this would be for the single men of the group. There is a second superbloc up for sale they’re trying to acquire for the women and children.”

“Trafficked?” I asked.

“Indeed. And the women would be expected to share the apartments with a minimum of two women per unit. Children would be sharing with one woman, with four children per apartment. They care nothing of the comfort of the women and children,” the Devil stated. He huffed, and he eyed the scale replica of the apartment. “Everyone in this complex is guilty, so don’t feel like you need to worry about verifying anything. You’re after the paper trail, and my daughter will handle peeling out any relevant information from them during her entry interviews.”

I feared the answer, but I said, “Just spit it out, Lucifer. What has you so riled up you’re handling this personally?”

Lucifer picked up five different miniatures and set them in front of me. “These assholes train children in the art of the sex trade.”

Right. All right. I didn’t need to know anything else. I turned to Easton and asked, “Want to fight over the bodies?”

“Normally, I would say no, but today, I feel it would be rude to refuse such a gracious offer.”

Excellent. The news had motivated the cop. “I don’t want to know the details, I don’t need to know the details, and I feel I’m sufficiently motivated at this point in time. Have the kittens been treated well up until this point?”

“They’re scared, they’re hungry, and they’re tired, but they have not been abused. They are safe enough for the moment.”

The ‘for the moment’ part worried me. I checked the date. “We have just under a month before Christmas Eve. How long

until we can get these kittens into custody?”

“In theory, you could have them in custody by tomorrow morning, but you would have to go on quite the romp across the country to keep them in your custody. If you were to wait a week, you would still have a romp across the country, but you’d be doing so with a few more pursuers than you appreciate.” Lucifer retrieved his phone from his pocket and checked the screen. “If you were to gain the kittens at the end of the raid, a possibility thanks to your mafia contacts, you can have them settled here for a day or two and explain the situation to them, get them fed, and bond with them. This needs to be a *Christmas* miracle, so we’d have to use the mobsters’ tricks to delay your triumphant return home until Christmas Eve. I recommend you tour the various amusement parks with the kittens. That will more than make up for the scares they have had lately—and resolve a few parenting issues that will not be made again with a slightly longer wait. *He* yelled at me. We can’t return the kittens early. It has to be a *Christmas* miracle. Christmas Eve, apparently, counts.”

According to Lucifer’s expression, his father had dealt him a cruel blow or three.

“It’s true. *He* has a reason, and whatever that reason is, it needs to be Christmas Eve or Christmas. You could hole up here and blitz back to Chicago for Christmas Eve, but I think it would be more fun to go on an adventure. We’ll put on *The Sound of Music* in our theatre to start the party. The kittens haven’t seen it, and they’ll love it. But we’ll make sure they understand why the delay on getting home.”

“They’re starving. We retrieve them tonight,” I growled.

“You heard her, Lucy. We will bust the warehouse, and then we’ll make that mafia group earn their stay in New York.” Darlene grabbed her phone, dialed a number, and said, “Carrie, darling. I need you to talk with your bosses and get your best men and women on watch for the kittens. Lucifer and I will be attending the warehouse raid so your men and women there will be safe and attended to. Make sure you send over the ones with a kinder nature. There are five pedophiles up for execution, and Lucifer is willing to let you mortals have a chance for the kills. You’ll have to fight the lycanthropes over it, but my husband has made his opinion clear: we are escorting everybody in that place straight to our dungeons. The lycanthropes are quite upset the kittens are starving, so make sure your men and women know. Chocolate protein shakes would be a good start for them. A six pack for each group will work. There are five kittens, and they’re so underfed at this point one shake is all they can handle. And yes, let them know the kittens will be weak and they’ll need to be carried. They can walk, but it’s heartbreaking to watch them. They’ll be in good paws once they’re in our residence. The doormen downstairs will be keeping a watch out for you and the kittens. Good. We’ll see you tonight.”

I growled, and a moment later, Easton drowned me out.

“I’ll need you two to be ready for reception when the kittens arrive,” Darlene stated. “You’ll be in your animal form, Easton. The layabouts will redecorate the penthouse while you’re gone, and we have little antlers and hats for you along with harnesses with lights. Easton, you’ll give them cart rides

until they have a chance to recover. Their viruses are active and the poor little darlings will be shifting soon because of this incident. Lucy will take care of that, and when they're ready to shift, he'll teach them."

As I hadn't shifted for the first time until my twenties, I hissed at the idea the kittens had been so stressed and mistreated. "Their viruses spiked that badly?"

"They were born with robust viruses. Don't worry. The kittens will be fine. If I thought they wouldn't be fine, I would be breaking the rules and handling the matter personally," Darlene replied. She smiled, and she came over to give me a kiss on my cheek. "You're so sweet."

"Can we talk about the plan now?" Lucifer asked, and he pointed at his model. "I even made this so we can discuss the plan better."

"We don't need a plan," Darlene announced.

"We need a plan."

"We do not need a plan. We will have at least thirty armed mafia men and women who want to clean this house just as badly as we do. We have a lycanthrope who can carve a hole in the steel door leading into the place. We'll be providing complete body gear for everyone involved so even if the fucking assholes have weapons, they'll be useless against us. We're prepared. They're not. We're just going to assassinate anyone in the joint in a systematic fashion."

"You could just send your incubi and succubi in armed with knives," I suggested. "They can take the upper floors

while we handle the ground floor. If everyone in this building has earned their trip straight to hell, we may as well just go for brutal efficiency. Why get more exercise than necessary?"

Easton stared at me with wide eyes. "You want to ambush them."

"I'm sure the demons can handle something like that. Right, Lucifer?"

"They *would* love it. The vampires might be willing to help, too."

I went for my phone, dug out Ernesto's contact, and dialed.

"How can I help?" Ernesto answered.

"We're taking out a SoHo warehouse loaded with pedophiles and traffickers. Want to come out and play with us? Lucifer thinks you might be game for a trip to New York for tonight's activities."

"I would be honored to join you. Ask Lucifer if I should invite the denizens of the third level."

"Lucifer, Ernesto wants to know if the denizens of the third level should be invited to the party." Rather than deal with relaying messages, I put the phone on speaker. "It's on speaker," I warned the vampire.

Lucifer's smile chilled me. "Hello, Ernesto. It would be my honor if they would come out. I will extend an invitation to the New York hive as well."

"Good. Issue my regards and thanks for their support. Are you really sure you want them all?"

“This filth is a scourge upon this Earth, and their crimes end tonight. You’ll have to play nice with the new New York mafia group, but you’ll find them similarly aligned. Competitors, yes, but cordial competitors. Young Kelsie can be your contact with their Carrie.”

“Ah. I know of Carrie. This is acceptable. They are cleaning house in New York, then?”

“It simply wouldn’t do to bring my cinderorns into this matter. I need them for something else, and this would shred their sanity—and they would focus solely on New York City and surrounding areas, which would interfere with my plans. So, we work without bringing the NYPD specifically into this mess. This mafia group will be distracting the police tonight with criminal mischief exclusively punished with community service, which will be served with a startling amount of enthusiasm for a bunch of crooks.”

“I want to do community service,” Ernesto complained.

“Alas, we are partaking of felonies tonight, but I am sure Kelsie would *love* to take you out with her on one of her escapades.”

I giggled, as I really would enjoy the whole idea of pulling pranks on people we knew and getting a criminal mischief slap on the wrist for doing it. “I’m game, Ernesto.”

“Please, no,” Easton whispered.

We laughed, and I laughed the hardest. “I’m sorry, Easton. I can’t help it. It’s going to happen. And I *like* community service. I’m going to bring a crime lord down to my level.”

“Don’t you mean up?” the cop replied, tilting his head.

I hissed at the hybrid male, not sure how to handle his commentary. My virus swooned at the compliment.

Lucifer grinned, strolled over, and patted the hybrid’s shoulder. “Strong, independent women like her struggle to accept positive forms of attention at first. I’m sure you can crack through her shell. Eventually, she’ll stop hissing. Unfortunately, she can’t purr.”

“Well, that’s sad,” Darlene said, and she gave me a hug. “I’m sorry. Purring is magical. But at least you can roar?”

“She can’t roar,” the Devil informed his wife.

The succubus gasped, flung herself away, threw an arm across her brow, and collapsed to her knees. “No! No! It can’t be. She can’t purr? She can’t roar? Where is the joy in life?”

“It’s in her criminal mischief record, apparently,” Easton growled.

I burst into laughter at the hybrid’s disgruntled tone. “Back to business, everyone. How many do you think will come for this?”

“We’ll bring a strong force. If you want us there earlier, we can pass through your hells.”

“You’ve my blessing should you have the guides. And if not, I can send some devils to teleport you although the others may not appreciate such things.”

“For this, they will deal with the burden of transporting us through your many hells. We should be there within two

hours.”

“Two hours sounds good. Please bring things suitable for little kittens to eat. You are my best resource for that right now. Kelsie is anxious they are hungry so we will arrange for them to be in our hands by morning. Do you have any vampires willing to work as an escort? I shall be sending them on an adventure until their arrival on Christmas Eve.”

“Vampires? No. Babylonians? Yes. I trust an invisible guard will suffice?”

“One per kitten, and you should probably make an entire team for Kelsie and her cop. They’re dancing around each other,” Lucifer requested.

“It shall be as you ask. We shall be there as soon as we can.”



THE PALE HORSE OF
DEATH WANTED
NUZZLES AND LOVE,
AND I WAS POWERLESS
TO DEFY HIM.

DEATH ITSELF CAME CALLING in the form of an archangel, a dark-haired woman, and an equally dark man. I pegged the man and woman as a couple, as every time the woman thought nobody was looking, she stared at the man with ill-contained adoration. If she thought someone might catch her, she made a show of feigning interest in something.

The Four Horses of the Apocalypse coming along for the ride startled me, but the Pale Horse of Death wanted nuzzles and love, and I was powerless to defy him.

Rather than terrify, I found his affection to be somehow comforting.

Lucifer graced me with a smile, reached over, and rubbed the animal's neck. "My father created the horses to maintain the balance—and to keep me company in my many hells. Everything that is good and right in the world must always have a shadow. The horses are a part of that shadow. Without death, there cannot be life."

The Devil gestured to the woman, and she bounced over. “Kelsie, this is Anwen. She’s one of the facets of death, and her job is to make sure there is life after death. Her husband is a pain in my ass, and he makes sure all souls are shepherded, even the really irritating ones we wish would wander through the valley for a lengthy period of time. The archangel is Azrael. He shepherds those deserving of companionship through the valley on *His* behalf. Rumor spread as rumors do, and they wanted to make sure everything went to plan. There will be no accidents this night—nor unwanted undead sprouting up.”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of any unexpected undead joining the party. A pair of mummies loitered on the street, and one bounded around with the same energy of a child allowed to play. The other seemed to rue, lament, and regret his attendance.

“If I didn’t know better, I would say that’s King Tutankhamun.”

“That is Tutankhamun. The other one is Ginger. The Gilded Lady is also here, although she’s biding her time and scouting as is her way. Our daughter’s wrath stirred their ire, and upon learning of what we battle tonight, they decided to come along. I’ve decided they can take one of the pedophiles. Enduring the curses of three mummies imbued with our daughter’s favor? It will be a sight to behold. Don’t be surprised if you end up with a scarab or two coming along for the ride. That’s how they monitor their allies.”

Darlene giggled, and she joined me in observing Ginger. “Our daughter woke them by accident. She came into her power when somebody shot her beloved. He was fine. He had the air and sense knocked out of him, but she didn’t realize that. Her fury woke her true power and heritage. Once woken, such things do not return to sleep. Tutankhamun finds being our heir’s guardian to his liking, and the other two adore our daughter because of who she is. Of them, Ginger is among the most dangerous. He is ancient—far more ancient than Tutankhamun and the Gilded Lady. But Ginger’s heart is made of gold, and his ire is often the last to stir. But when it does stir? The wise are wary—and leave the area.”

The Devil snickered. “He also plays at being a few cans short of a six pack most of the time. He is anything but. Carrie and her little family were wise to play our game because the mummies appreciate the risks and sacrifices they make. If they stay on the right side of the line, I’ll be able to use them down the road. There will be scarabs watching, and they will never realize that there are spies within their walls. Such is the power of a mummy.”

Well, that would keep me awake at night, wondering if a vengeful mummy might be hiding scarabs in the walls to spy on me.

Anwen cleared her throat, glanced at her husband, and said, “This is important enough for him to deal with all that screaming. Why did you want us here? Is there a seed?”

“There are quite a few seeds inside. You can wait until the souls have all departed before coming in, but there were many

brutal and swift deaths which left the seeds behind. Some are children, some are adults—all girls and women. The boys were taken elsewhere or sent on to be trafficked at brothels. I would like them replanted into lives of peace, and you're the best custodians I have for that sort of thing right now. You'll comfort the seeds until it's time for them to return to the mortal coil. Most are at rest as they refused the heavens."

"That damaged?" Anwen asked, and her brows furrowed.

"That's why we come as a swift hand of justice. It's best we are a swift and merciful hand. They'll get what they deserve in my dungeons. The horses will help with your task. The seeds won't know their true nature. They'll be spiritual emotional support ponies tonight. And if you decide to keep and raise those seeds as your children, well, who am I to stop you? If my father didn't want them shepherded, he wouldn't have just left those seeds lying around."

"Eoghan?" Anwen called.

Both her husband and the archangel came at her call.

"What it is?" Eoghan asked.

"I need my weed whacker."

Azrael laughed, snapped his fingers, and a weed whacker appeared in his hand. Had he possessed a head, I bet a grin would've been plastered upon his visage. Blue fire crackled around the wire and engulfed the protective shield. "For you, I have imbued it with strength, so if using it properly does not reap the harvest you desire, you can bludgeon them to death."

With a terrifyingly delighted smile, she accepted the weed whacker. “Thank you, Azrael. Will you be joining me?”

“Of course. Eoghan, I can handle escorting her if you would like to be elsewhere for this. These souls *will* scream—and we will be working to make them scream with even more vigor than usual. Perhaps you should take War and join the group scouring the city for the lost kittens? Yours will be a comforting presence for them and convince their souls they will not walk through the valley quite yet. And that is a garden you can tend without it hurting your soul, whereas it would leave a mark on hers.”

While the man scowled, he nodded. “There would not be nearly enough weed whackers upon the face of this Earth for the violence she would dish out upon witnessing little ones in such distress. Very well. I will handle that matter and meet you back at the Devil’s manor when I am finished. War?”

The red horse whinnied, pranced in place, and bumped Eoghan with his nose before pivoting and presenting his back. With a single, graceful hop, he swung into the saddle, eased his feet into the stirrups, and gave the horse a nudge with his heels.

The pair vanished in a crimson glow.

“Are you going to be stealing my kills today, Lucifer?” Anwen asked.

“I’m sure you will have ample opportunity to make use of your weed whacker today. I’m sure Azrael can assist with ensuring you get your fair share of the work.”

I took a moment to count those gathered on the sidewalk and the streets. “It was originally three to one odds in their favor, Lucifer. It’s now five to one in ours. We’re going to be fighting over the bodies. Maybe we should let her go first. That way she’s basically guaranteed to send *someone* to your many hells before everyone becomes overexcited.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Lucifer dipped into a bow and made a sweeping gesture in the direction of the warehouse. “After you, Lady Death.”

“Just don’t tell Lord Death that he’s a lord or has a title. He’s bad enough as it is when he gets going,” Anwen quipped before hauling her weed whacker in the direction of the main warehouse entrance. “How much of the exterior is an illusion?”

On the outside, the place couldn’t have appeared to be more than a functional warehouse if it tried, complete with a few broken old windows someone had boarded over.

Lucifer chuckled, straightened, and snapped his fingers. “The practitioners should be dead by now anyway. The illusions just hadn’t worn off yet.”

The warehouse melted away, leaving behind a sterile concrete-fronted square of a building with steel framed windows. Dusty blinds prevented me from looking in.

The entrance remained mostly as it was, although instead of a large transport entrance, it was a steel-fronted lobby with huge, automated doors made of glass. Anwen approached, and the doors opened. She shrugged, got a solid hold on her weed whacker, and pulled the cord to start the engine.

It roared to life, and blue flame engulfed the weed whacker, crawled up the shaft, and engulfed her hands. “Anybody home?”

She strolled inside at the kind of pace I expected from a confident serial killer in a horror movie. That she used a sing-song voice to inquire where her first victim might be chilled me. A moment later, she revved the weed whacker and chirped, “Time to meet your maker, assholes!”

Under normal circumstances, a weed whacker could do some significant damage to someone. The sounds that came from deeper within the lobby, out of view behind a white wall, blended a wet tearing sound with the crackle of flame and a hint of electricity. Someone attempted to scream, although he didn’t make more of a loud inhale and the start of a high-pitched noise before Anwen silenced him.

Azrael crossed the threshold and leaned around the barrier blocking our view. A moment later, he returned. “I feel our plan, such as it was, did not account for Lady Death’s willingness to use her weed whacker. Perhaps I should not have inquired with our siblings to imbue it with power, Lucifer.”

The Devil snickered. “Nothing more than these assholes deserve. What is she doing?”

“Have you, perhaps, observed that film where there is a ship that has a line come loose, thus cutting an unfortunate human into pieces through his head?”

Ew. “*Ghost Ship* is vile.” I turned wide eyes to Easton. “We should watch it after the holidays, and we’ll do it with

low lighting to make it even worse. And we'll do it when there is no one else in the house. I *will* scream.”

The hybrid bowed his head, heaved a sigh, and said, “I will agree to this only if you ignore when *I* scream.”

“We can cling to each other in the throes of terror. Then we can console each other with ice cream afterwards.” Knowing me, I wouldn't be able to sleep for a night or two after. “Does it make me less of a woman to admit I'm afraid of going in there now?”

Something crunched, and I winced at the sound.

Lucifer joined his brother inside, and he chuckled. “I am grateful we sent Eoghan off now. This would disturb him.”

“She has grown fully into her portfolio. She is the promise of life as much as she is the promise of death—and the Universe rages over what these humans have done. Anwen is more than equal to the burden, not that it is a burden to her soul at all,” the archangel replied.

To my amazement, Azrael clapped Lucifer's shoulder in a rather friendly fashion, and the Devil basked in the show of affection.

Darlene came to my side and linked her arm with mine. “We'll just let them deal with the initial mess—or perhaps make use of your handsome hybrid to bypass that. Lucy?”

The Devil turned. “Yes?”

“Perhaps you should curtain off that area so the rest of us can pass without being scarred for life. Then we can do our fair share of the work.”

“Or we can stand here and let Lady Death take the worst of her nerves out on anyone foolish enough to get in her way.” Turning to his wife and making a show of widening his eyes, he announced, “I do not want to get hit with the weed whacker.”

I giggled and patted Darlene’s hand. “To be fair to him, I don’t want to get hit with it, either. That thing sounds *awful*.”

“If it looks anywhere near as bad as it sounds, we should let her loose in the dungeons for a while. We’d have pristine souls within an hour,” the succubus replied, and she shrugged.

Something crashed inside, and Lucifer turned, stared, and whistled. “Darlene, make her stop flirting with me.”

“She’s not flirting with you,” Darlene replied, unlinked her arm with mine, and crept up to her husband, peeking around him. The fur on her tail stood on end. “How did she do *that* with a weed whacker?”

“I don’t know, but that definitely counts as flirting.”

“The only man she flirts with is Eoghan, and I don’t think he’d be able to handle seeing his woman covered in blood, giggling, and reducing the fucking assholes to mulch before sending them our way. But I can understand how you would think she’s flirting with you. I think I’m going to have to take her to a spa in a few days. She’s going to need that long to get her victims out of her hair.”

“Maybe we should have told her not to wear her targets.”

Darlene shrugged. “How many has she taken out so far? She didn’t even leave the heads intact.”

“Ten. She’s about to go mow down their billiard’s room, where there are ten more. It seems they installed some form of magical soundproofing between the various rooms to keep their conversations private. The next batch has no idea Death has come calling.”

“Maybe we should warn them. That might give her some sport.”

I stared up at Easton, unable to stop my eyes from widening. “We’ve made mistakes.”

“Yes, we have,” he agreed. “Which mistakes are you referencing? There are many of them.”

“When I think of murdering people, I think of doing things like shoot them or bash their head into a wall until they no longer bother me. I don’t think we are sufficiently armed to join this party.”

“Would you like a weed whacker, too?” Azrael asked.

I considered the archangel’s offer, shivering at the thought of having to pick victims out of my hair for numerous days. “Can I have a hedge trimmer instead? One that automatically makes my plants look all nice and healthy without costing my landscapers their sanity?” I held my hands out in the general size and shape of the little clippers I saw the men and women use when tending to my property. “They make a satisfying snick-snick noise when you use them.”

“If you would like help with your landscaping, I would inquire with Michael or Gabriel. They do enjoy that sort of thing. But I see you do not wish to be completely covered with

blood, which is a sensible thing.” Azrael stretched his wings, held out his hand, and a golden light radiated from his skin, bright enough I turned my head to spare my eyes.

When I peeked, he held a small gardening trowel, the kind I liked to use when planting seeds or transplanting new seedlings with the help of my gardeners. It had a leopard spotted handle, and like Anwen’s weed whacker, the small shovel blade danced with blue fire.

“Here. This is more what you might appreciate. Consider it a gift for having to witness, even by sound, one of the more disconcerting facets of death.”

“I really thought she was the gentler and more sensible one of you lot,” Lucifer stated, shaking his head. “Clearly, I did not pay sufficient attention to her general tendencies. Of course, I was more concerned about her partnering with her antique at the time, but this is *fascinating*. She’s not holding back at all.”

The archangel chuckled, a rather dark sound lacking the chimes I usually associated with angelic amusement. “She is mercy, she is justice, and she is vengeance, all at the Universe’s request. I am sure she will settle down eventually. She is a little anxious about leaving her node, forgetting there is more than sufficient power to keep her antique happy and healthy. Come, little one. Accept your present, and I will show you one of its nicer powers. Do brace yourself, for she has left quite the mess.”

I did as the archangel bade, stepped forward, and accepted the trowel by the handle. Thanks to their commentary, I was prepared for the carnage. I grimaced, considered the

archangel's words, and realized Anwen had done what I could not.

She had killed swiftly and with mercy.

I would have drawn it out for a last hit or two.

Something about the realization brought with it a strange sense of peace.

Lucifer smiled, and he patted my shoulder. "You understand now. Well done, Azrael."

"Normally, I would shudder at even the thought of having to agree with you, my brother, but I saw what you wished for her and felt it wise." The archangel turned to Easton. "And it is your turn to learn the value of self and acceptance. I also have a gift for you."

"Please tell me it isn't a tool of mass murder," the hybrid replied, and he took his time stepping forward, attempting to hide behind the Devil while peering at the carnage. "Wow. It's even worse than I imagined."

The archangel produced a mop, the flat kind meant to have microfiber cloths attached to them. "As the sheer thought of leaving your fur on the floor will drive you close to madness, you are best armed with this. It will clean anything—including the mess Anwen made. You will have to put in some effort, but the cloth will never need to be cleaned as myself or one of my brothers will renew its holy fire." Azrael gestured to a spot of blood on the floor nearby. "Try it with that."

Easton took the mop, set the cloth to the floor, and rubbed it over the droplets of blood. Sure enough, it left the floor

spotless and polished in his wake.

“Oh, that’s fancy,” I said, peering down at the spot. “That’s amazing, Azrael.”

“Consider it a tool of anxiety control meant to give your wolf a useful task that will not destroy your sanity. He will appreciate having an outlet for cleaning as you are quite the tidy person. He will not have much to pick up after you.”

I eyed the hybrid. “Do I need to leave some messes for you to clean up? I can probably put some things in inappropriate spots if you’re one of those strange people who feels useful through tidying.”

Easton turned his ears back and growled at me.

Nice. I met him stare for stare and matched him growl for growl.

Darlene smacked the back of my head. “You can’t bite him right now. You can bite him later.”

“Well, she can try to bite me, but we’ve already seen how well that worked out for her.” His ears relaxed, and he showed off a wolfish grin. “Good luck, Kelsie.”

The wolf would suffer, and if I had my way, he would suffer for decades to come. My virus approved, and she settled, pleased with the future hunt ahead of us. “I’m not leaving here without making a body, Lucifer. Point me in the right direction.”

Lucifer gestured down one of the hallways branching from the lobby. “Third door on the right. That’s the men’s bathroom, and he should be finishing his business just as you step on in,

so you'll catch him unaware. He's one of the ones you want the most, so don't feel a need to show any mercy. Although really, finishing him off quickly would be a mercy, for he won't be receiving any in my many hells, that is for certain."



“I REALLY LIKE THIS
MOP,” HE INFORMED ME.

I KILLED SIX traffickers by the time our raid finished although my initial ambush in the bathroom proved to be the most satisfying of the lot. Sending someone who abused children to the darkest, deepest pits of the Devil’s many hells appealed. Easton killed one, and I suspected the wolf had only indulged as I had been occupied finishing off a bulky brute of a man with more muscle than sense.

I worried for the cop, but outside of disgust he wore his victim’s blood, he seemed to emerge from his first taste of a felony with dignity, grace, and composure.

As Easton disliked leaving messes for others to clear, he made use of his silk bag, sent the corpse on a trip, and mopped up after himself.

“I really like this mop,” he informed me.

I could tell. Rather than hurt his feelings and laugh at him, I patted his arm before giving the handle of his new mop a little rub to show my approval. “It will not bring shame to any home graced with its presence.”

Something crashed on the floor above us, and I wondered who had decided to get rough with a body-to-be. “Renovating this place is going to be a nightmare.”

Behind me, Darlene laughed. “But it’s not going to be *your* nightmare. I’m going to suggest that my daughter purchase it to turn into a good low-income housing complex. She can then negotiate with the state to operate it on their behalf. Her altruistic heart will sing from joy.”

In a nearby room, the Devil protested, and he stomped in. “Hey! If I can’t use my daughter, you can’t either. I’m right here.”

“You weren’t in the same room. If you hadn’t been playing with a corpse, you would have been able to hear me talk about our daughter.”

The Queen of Hell had no mercy, and I loved her for it.

The Devil sulked. “I was even being generous and tending to some of those stray seeds so Anwen doesn’t have to worry about them.” He held out his palm, and a box made of golden wood manifested. “The building next door is involved, and I found the seeds of six young boys. They are in the same state as the other seeds here.”

To my dismay, Lucifer held the box out to me.

“Why are you trying to give it to me? I thought taking care of any seeds was Anwen’s job.”

How was I supposed to take care of something as important as a soul’s seed? While I lacked understanding of

the true value and importance of the seeds, I'd heard enough to learn they were as precious as life itself.

“You're the best custodian for them. You have no idea how to show these seeds anything but love and care. Just keep the box, squabble with your male over ownership of it, and allow the seeds to bask in the glow of being wanted. When they have been balanced sufficiently, they'll find their way back into the world. A few of the seeds will balance faster than others. You'll be fine. There are limited criteria these seeds need, and you'll handle them just fine.”

I accepted the box, which fit in the palm of my hand, small enough to stuff into a pocket. After a moment of thought, I decided my front pocket would suffice as a place to hold them.

While I had no idea what I would do with the seeds, they'd be safe and checked on often.

“There.” The Devil tilted his head and considered the ceiling. “They're finishing up. You're hearing the Babylonians and the shedu. The shedu have been riled up for none of the souls are worthy of redemption. The qilin are shepherding souls to spare the facets of death from doing the work, so all is well on that front. They've taken their pounds of flesh from the other floors. The angels and archangels will handle the general cleanup. *He* isn't feeling like mortals deserve any clues to figure out what has become of these souls. These are mysteries nobody truly cares about solving. Those with family? The families have shunned them for good reason. Those who do want closure will receive a feathered menace paying them a visit.”

Darlene cleared her throat.

“What? My siblings most certainly are feathered menaces. They menace me often, and they have feathers.”

I grinned at the Devil’s exasperated complaint. “And the kittens?”

“Our allies have rounded them up, and while there is some crying and they’re frightened, they’re being escorted to the penthouse as we speak. We’ll arrive before them, although we will do so solely due to the wonders of teleportation. You’ll have time to change, put on your fur coat, and wear your Christmas hat. A hybrid will terrify them in their current condition, Easton, so you will have to put on your wolf coat. Once they smell that you’re lycanthropes, they’ll go right to you. Then you can tend to them, make certain they’re properly fed, and spend the next few days worrying about their recovery. Your security will be tight, not that the group will be able to locate where the kittens are at. Once they’re recovered, I’ll send you off to the various amusement parks until it’s time to take them to Chicago.”

“I’m questioning why we can’t just take them to Chicago,” I muttered.

“You would all go insane from boredom after two days.”

As that was a fair enough answer, I accepted it with a nod. “Can we start dumping this shit into our bags?”

“Give it five minutes for the angelic host to clean up the mess, but yes. Within an hour, all we will be leaving here is some dust. Hopefully, our daughter will be happy with us for a

change. We aren't leaving any bloodstains for her to clean out of her new project.”

“That’s highly unlikely,” Darlene replied, laughing at the Devil and shaking her head. “And anyway, would you even be happy if she wasn’t trying to murder you at least once a day?”

“It would be nice to do *something* right for a change.”

“Just remind her that you helped trick her into keeping Malcolm. She always gives you a hug because she forgets herself. But as for her approving of your actions? No. You’ll be waiting all eternity for that one.”

“That’s not fair,” the Devil whined.

“You’ll get over it.”



SOMEHOW, we cleared the entire warehouse of blood, bodies, and belongings in an hour flat. The angelic host handled the blood and bodies, and Lucifer summoned an entire congregation of devils and demons to help us toss everything into the pocket portals. With the kittens soon to be in our possession, I hoped we would find more ways to prevent the trafficking ring from rising again.

“Lucifer, will this really take care of this?”

“New York will have some minor issues well within the NYPD’s abilities to handle at a volume it won’t disrupt my plans. Chicago is set to be clear of this scourge by the end of next year. You have put the wheels in motion for that end.

Detroit is likewise poised to be clean of filth. While those kittens paid some prices, they will emerge far better for the trauma. You will help see to that as will their parents. Their futures are bright. In years to come, they will view the whole thing as one strange adventure, one with a rough start but a brilliant finish.”

“I feel like we haven’t done enough,” I admitted.

Lucifer stared at me as though I’d grown a second head. “Kelsie, what else do you need to do? You have passed by numerous opportunities for great wealth through an automated forward filter to some of your favored contacts. You put aside everything you might do to come across the country chasing after the kittens. You have toed every moral line I can think of making sure you put yourself in the best position possible to recover them. Yes, you didn’t crawl around on the streets and check every dumpster and alley. You did something better. You forced an entire mafia group to clean up their ways so they can be the criminal rulership of New York City in such a way that will bring prosperity and safety to everyone involved. Fewer cops will die each year. Fewer mafia members will die as well. The crimes they commit will be of the softer nature, hurting finances more than anything else—something that hurts but can be recovered from. You are putting a literal end to the sacrifice of women and children for the pleasures of the depraved. What more could you possibly need to accomplish?”

“All I did was con some women into getting help and stole some stuff. Otherwise, I fed the hybrid and acted like I have half a clue!”

“We have reasons we couldn’t snap our fingers and make everything happen. But let me point something out: it isn’t about the difficulty of what you needed to do but your willingness to do it. You have played a careful game of balancing the interests of those kittens and pursuing justice for everyone else involved. You didn’t necessarily have to hit this warehouse at all. You *could* have assigned the entirety of the mafia to the streets to retrieve the kittens. That would have succeeded. But you would have left many more victims in your wake. You have made the best decisions you could for *all* the victims involved. And that was a choice only you could make. You hadn’t been tasked with providing salvation for them all. You decided that on your own. You pushed every boundary you could to get the assistance you needed to accomplish your goals.”

As I couldn’t quite figure out a way to communicate my problem, I turned to Darlene for help.

“Oh, sweetheart.” The succubus kissed my cheek. “Lucy, she simply doesn’t understand that what she has done is *not* easy. Not everyone could do it. But for her, necessary means it doesn’t matter how difficult the task is. And she doesn’t see the challenges because it’s just another part of her life. All she did was apply what was familiar and comfortable to her in a different setting. That makes it feel insignificant.”

The Devil rolled his eyes. “Easton, could you have done half of what Kelsie has done on this venture? Let’s assume that you had to work alone. How far could you have gotten?”

“I would still be in Chicago trying to get clearance to take a cruiser or borrow a vehicle because mine wouldn’t make it to New York at all.” Easton eyed me, reached out, and flicked me, careful to keep from slicing me with one of his claws. “The only thing I might have been able to do was make sense of some of the information gathered, but I never would have been bold enough to call in the forces of the heavens and the hells to work together, all for the sake of the kittens. I mean, I could probably handle room service and booking a hotel room, but I’m certainly not practiced at either of those things. And I definitely would not have eaten sufficiently.”

“I still don’t feel like I’ve done enough,” I complained.

“You will be on the road with five kittens until Christmas, taking them to amusement parks. You have to keep five miniature beings alive for that long. You cannot go to your mother and father for assistance,” Lucifer reminded me. “Think about that very carefully.”

It dawned on me I had to keep track of five children in a setting where children tended to lose their minds and all sense, common or otherwise. The blood drained from my face, and I regarded Easton with wide eyes. “What have I done?”

“A good deed. You’ll get over it. In good news, I can probably handle a few lycanthrope kittens so it’s my turn to help you for a change. Consider it training wheels for any other time you might have tiny, helpless humans running around.”

“I’m going to be the one who needs a Christmas miracle,” I whined, bowing my head. “What have I done?”

“Good deeds, and you know what they say about good deeds,” the Devil replied, patting my head. “They never go unpunished. Your punishment is to go visit amusement parks with the kittens until Christmas Eve. But think about it this way. You *do* get to host the Christmas dinner you’ve always wanted.”

Crap. I would need to handle the shopping. “But where am I going to get the roast, the turkey, and the ham?”

Darlene gave me a hug, turned me around, and propelled me in the direction of the hallway. “I think we can help you with the grocery shopping. Right now? We have other things to worry about. Those kittens need a soft, fluffy kitty so they feel safe and loved. You’ll be all right. We have to get going. Lucy, grab the wolf. I’ll take the kitty.”



I WORE A RED CHRISTMAS HAT, and Lucifer had gotten the bright idea to bring out a small string of rainbow lights, wrapping one around my neck, chest, and back until I resembled a living Christmas tree rather than a self-respecting clouded leopard. Easton got similar treatment although his lights were also wrapped around his legs, likely to keep him from frightening the kittens. We sat in the skyscraper’s lobby while Lucifer’s amused neighbors observed the festivities.

To keep from terrifying anybody, the Devil had opted to mostly appear as a human with black, feathered wings and his tail to warn people a naughty being lurked among them.

“A naughty being?” Lucifer asked in exasperation. “Is that how you think of me?”

As I couldn't speak English while in my divine female feline form, I nodded.

“You are a naughty being. You're a naughty being who gets to go home with me tonight and prove just how naughty you are,” his wife said, and she raised a brow at him. Like Lucifer, she showed off her wings, which matched her tail and ears. “I do like the feathers, though. You don't bring those out often. It means you get to be extra naughty if I get a chance to play with them.”

“I suppose I can tolerate being referred to as a naughty being.”

“You can play the bad boy, and I'll play the good girl,” she offered.

“I do like when you let me be the bad boy,” Lucifer growled.

“Then I guess you'll just have to deal with being a naughty being for tonight. Be on your best behavior. We don't want to scare the kittens. They've been scared enough. The mafia will be bringing them soon. Carrie called. Right now, they're too tired to be scared, which is something. And Kelsie, before you become upset, you will be feeding them and caring for them in a few minutes so there's no need to waste energy. They'll be fine.”

I voiced a short, low growl before quieting, keeping an eye on the doors.

Sure enough, Carrie led the charge, and she carried a young girl in her arms, who wore dirty clothes. I couldn't tell if her hair was naturally dark or was soaked in grease. She clung to Carrie's shoulder, and the evidence of her tears streaked her cheeks. With a nod to Darlene and Lucifer, Carrie crouched beside me, gave the little girl's back a pat, and said, "Mollie, this is Kelsie. This is the nice lady who will be taking you home to your mommy and daddy."

Mollie sniffled, but she turned her head to look at me. Then, after blinking a few times, her eyes widened, and she released her hold on Carrie and leaned in my direction. Darlene swooped in, caught the girl before she could fall, and placed her on the floor beside me, not even attempting to have her stand.

The little girl wrapped her arms around my neck, ignored the Christmas lights, and buried her face against my fur. Mafia men carried the boys over, and following Carrie's lead, introduced us to the children one by one. Fortunately for my sanity, the boys weren't duplicates of each other, and the variances in their hair color and features would help me keep track of who was who. Chris had an inch on his brothers, Alan had the darkest hair of the lot, Matthew couldn't keep his fingers out of his mouth and had a scar between his eyes, and Jerod had paler eyes and hair than his siblings.

Otherwise, they were the sort of kids who could have come from anywhere in the United States, which made them perfect trafficking targets.

While Mollie sought out my attention, the boys favored the big, bad wolf, settling into the important work of petting Easton's fur, giggling over his reindeer antlers, and bombarding the Devil with questions about wolves.

Lucifer sat on the floor with the kids, and the instant his lap became available, Matthew took up residency, sniffled, and held his arms out for a hug. The Devil complied with the child's wishes, patting his back and making comforting noises before answering the plethora of questions flooding out of the children.

Their excitement only lasted ten to twenty minutes before the boys swarmed Lucifer, vying for space on his lap. Sometime in the midst of the questioning session, Matthew had opted for a nap, as had Mollie.

It didn't take long for the other kittens to succumb to sleep.

At a lift of Darlene's hand, three incubi made an appearance, and they took care with rescuing the Devil without waking the boys. Darlene came for Mollie, purring to comfort her in case she woke.

Lucifer kept possession of Matthew, rising to his feet. "They won't waken for a while. Please don't worry. It'll give us time to prepare for them, get them appropriate clothes, and provide them with toys and other things."

Ernesto swept into the lobby, and he came carting a basket filled with berries reminding me of grapes although they were a bright orange color. "The others are already heading home, but they offer this gift for the children."

Lucifer smiled. “I’ll find a way to thank them for their offering. That will go a long way to help.”

“I’ll pass the word along. Do you want me to check their blood for illnesses?”

While I had no doubt one of the angels under foot would assist if asked, Lucifer nodded. “It would be an honor. We should use a pin to prick them for a drop of blood while they sleep. If you can offer guidance on the nature of any illnesses, I’ll wrangle my brothers to handle the work. My holy fire comes with the price of pain, and I’d rather not expose them to any more discomfort than necessary.”

I would need a long time to contemplate how someone with such a heart of gold had fallen from the heavens in the first place. It likely had something to do with his naughty tendencies although I struggled with the idea he might commit any acts of true evil.

Lucifer scowled at me. “Stop that.”

“Is she thinking nice things about you?” Darlene asked, and she snickered. “If you didn’t want to be bombarded with people thinking nice things about you, you’d stop listening in on them.”

“How else am I supposed to monitor when I’m about to be bitten by a cantankerous cat?” The Devil shook his head and carried Matthew to the elevator. While work, both Easton and I managed to haul our Christmas lights across the lobby without tripping over them or breaking anything. Ernesto tapped the up button, and a few moments later, the doors chimed and opened.

While a tight fit, we crammed inside without waking the kittens, and Ernesto took care of tapping a card, which Lucifer had kept in his suit pocket, to the panel and pressing the button for the top floor. “Did your portion of the hunt go well?”

“Quite. I have accomplished all my goals including some acquisitions I hoped would come to fruition but couldn’t assure.” Lucifer adjusted how he held little Matthew. “This is a rather fun age. They’re grown enough to ask questions, developed enough to understand the questions they ask, and capable of unrestrained joy they’ll remember in the years to come. They will remember the trauma, but on the heels of the trauma will be a few weeks where they have lived in paradise. They’ll be able to skip to the front of the lines and endure minimal waits, you’ll let them eat all the unhealthy food they want while at the park although you will be compelled to feed them proper dinners. In good news, after two weeks of non-stop playing, the kittens will be quite tired and need to recharge their batteries, which is when you’ll head back to your home. Of course, you’ll have to juggle five sleepy kittens when you get in, but that’s a small matter. They’ll tame their parents through seeking out the comforts of love and naps.”

I foresaw the loss of my sanity but I would call in backup if needed. Surely *someone* could help me.

The Devil laughed at me.

Once in the penthouse, we put the kittens to bed in one of the guest rooms featuring an oversized king bed. Once freed from carrying Mollie, Darlene vanished to reappear a few

minutes later with five different blanket and pillow sets, each one labeled for which kitten it belonged to.

“Kittens in large litters like this rarely have things that are just theirs. They’re used to sharing blankets. These will become their comfort blankets, and while it will drive their parents more than a little crazy down the road, this is what is best for them right now.” The succubus smiled, and she took her time tucking each kitten in.

I made a mental note to follow her example, just in case the kittens woke while we were tucking them in. Once Darlene finished her work, I pawed at her leg to indicate I wanted to be freed of the lights and hat so I could shapeshift and begin attending to planning where I’d take the kittens, feeding them, and otherwise situating the next few weeks of my life to my liking.

Rather than free me, Darlene bent over, picked me up, and situated my front paws on her shoulder while supporting my hind paws against one of her forearms. “Lucy, attend to her male. I shall handle the kitty.”

“Handle does not mean teleport her to hell and indulge in a kidnapping,” Lucifer replied in a mild tone.

Darlene pouted.

“You may teleport her to hell for breakfast, a change of clothes, and some pampering in your jet tub. I can handle Ernesto, Easton, and the children for a while. Bring more of the powder. They’ll surely need it before the week is out.”

“Hungry, hungry lycanthropes,” Darlene replied with a laugh before she teleported away, taking me with her.



“MY DARLING LOVES
WHEN PEOPLE STAND UP
TO HER.”

LUCIFER’S MANSION took everything I thought about excess, multiplied it, and sprinkled in some extra extravagance. After I shifted and she dressed me up like one of Santa’s little helpers because she wanted to, she took me on a tour.

She had more pet fish than any sane sentient should, and she introduced each and every one by name. We lost four hours to her fish. Her clear favorite was a red one in her office named Ruby.

Ruby may as well have hung the stars in her sky.

Ruby had many sons and daughters, and I gave it a few years before the red fish took over Lucifer’s many hells. It ultimately took a fight, where I went for the succubus’s throat, to convince someone I needed to go back to the mortal coil. I viewed myself the winner of the dispute, as I had managed to pull out some of her fur along with destroying her clothes in the process.

Somehow, the skimpy little red and white dress had survived my attempt to murder the Queen of Hell for testing my patience.

A rather bemused Belial, in a more standard demonic form, kept me tucked under his arm, teleporting me to the penthouse's dining room. "Lucifer, do tend to your darling. She has had numerous chunks of fur ripped out for testing Kelsie's patience. Her attire was also destroyed during the dispute. I suspect Kelsie's virus became testy following separation from her wolf."

I twisted around and wiggled for a better view but saw no sign of Easton. "Where is he?"

"He is still a wolf, curled in bed with the kittens. One of them had a nightmare, and he climbed in with them to offer comfort. He is now serving as a pillow for three of them." Lucifer took me from Belial, set me on my feet, and pulled bits of his wife's fur out from beneath my nails. "What tested her patience?"

"Your wife decided Kelsie needed to meet every single one of her fish and hear their life stories. Three hours in, the wise devils gathered to watch the fireworks. I helped to separate them when the cat fight broke out. Kelsie had decided to sit on your wife's back and pull fur out of her tail after demonstrating it was possible for a lycanthrope to pretzel a succubus. She was not expecting to be twisted into a living pretzel. The other succubi are rearranging her limbs to be back in their regular positions and dealing with the dislocation or two she suffered from provoking a lycanthrope."

Rather than get upset, Lucifer patted my back and praised me. "My darling loves when people stand up to her. Expect hopeful texts for dates to the spa and to our house."

“What?” I blurted, blinking and trying to compute how violence had resulted in the victim of my short temper wanting to go on dates with me.

Belial snickered, smoothed my hair and adjusted my dress, and said, “Darlene is a unique being. She was testing your tolerance, and you did so well until she threatened to go visit every single one of Ruby’s children. Had she fed you before taking you on the tour, she may have escaped with her fur.”

Laughing and shaking his head, Lucifer said, “I’ll go tend to my wife. Belial, feed the lycanthropes and get them settled. Ernesto and his entourage have already left but there is quite the guard keeping an eye on the place. Do as you feel is best.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things.”

Lucifer vanished, leaving behind a faint hint of brimstone.

“Darlene, upon escaping the succubi keeping her occupied, would teleport over and start another fight. That’s one of her ways of showing affection, especially with the lycanthropes. She either attacks or cuddles her target into submission. You’ll get used to it. She doesn’t normally pick cat fights, especially not with other cats, unless she likes the cat she’s fighting with. It’s a rite of passage. You won the dispute, as evidenced by claiming her fur as your trophy. There’s also the benefit of not dealing with Lucifer for a while, as he’ll dote on her and make sure she’s fed properly.” Belial gestured in the direction of the bedrooms. “We can check on the wolf and the kittens, but I expect you’ll have several hours of peace and quiet. We’ll handle the cooking duties. We’ve more than a few fucking assholes who enjoy cooking in residence, and they’re almost

done their time, so we can make use of them with service they enjoy before they're put to rest until their souls return to the mortal coil."

"I'm going to forget how to cook by the time this trip is over."

"Hardly. Expect assistance with your Christmas feast. You'll be able to handle your turkey and roasts like you want but leave the sides to us. We'll prepare some extra, as you will surely underestimate the number of beings crammed into your home and guest home."

I nodded, as I already had lost count of the number of people invited to invade for Christmas Eve and Christmas. "That's sensible. Thank you."

In the guest bedroom, Easton was buried beneath children, as the number using him as a bed and pillow had increased from three to five. The wolf's sleeping state put me at ease, and rather than test if he'd wake up when disturbed, I eased out of the room. "Is there any way to monitor them while I handle other matters?"

"There will be some succubi around the penthouse, but they'll stay out of your way. Lucifer wants baby demons and devils running around, so he's using the kids to whet the appetites of some of his succubi. Everyone is happy, particularly the men those succubi will seduce."

No kidding. "Are you sure taking them to amusement parks is really the best idea?"

“It is. You’ll have a good time, you won’t need the escorts who will inevitably shadow you, and you’ll arrive back to your home right on schedule. The children will be tired but not tired to the point they are unmanageable, and this will keep their parents calmer. Happy, tired children keep the lycanthropes at bay.”

“Right. And if their children come home absolutely reeking of contentment, they won’t try to take my head off.”

“That is definitely a factor in our recommendation to take them to the amusement parks. I recommend purchasing gift certificates for the parks so their parents can take them again. They will love *all* the parks, and it will make an excellent gift. We can make the arrangements so the certificates do not expire.”

“Vouchers for travel will be important, too.”

Belial nodded. “Time off work will be more important to them than the travel expenses, but you can assist them on that front—or we can.”

“Breakfast, then I’ll see what sort of chaos I have in my email box from abandoning work for the holidays.”

“More than you’ll appreciate,” Belial warned before teleporting away.



ACCORDING TO MY EMAIL, I had sacrificed over twenty million dollars of work rescuing the kittens. I invited myself to the Devil’s salon, poured myself a stiff drink, sighed, and

accepted I'd lose even more money before the holidays rolled around. The incredulous emails from my colleagues, shocked I'd offered them such lucrative contracts, helped somewhat.

Most of them, while skilled, hadn't gotten any invitations to the big leagues. I'd managed to set up the filtering system to divide my contacts mostly equally, successfully dumping all the work on somebody else. I disabled the filters but kept them; I would likely need them while traversing the country in search of amusement parks. Of the emails I'd received, only one hadn't been filtered.

I'd never worked for the company before nor had the contact approached me through a regular channel, thus dodging being filtered.

There was no offer associated with the proposal to do the work, but the timeline worked for me, beginning a week after Christmas and expected to last six months, with the first three months consisting of information gathering between the six unions involved and the corporation the unions needed to work with. The unions ranged from skilled labor in the construction field, mining, and general labor. All had decent reputations in terms of working for their members.

That left me a few questions, including why so many unions were needing to negotiate with one company at the same time.

I emailed a reply that I was interested but would need to be given more details regarding the job, their proposed pay for the work, and a request that all parties directly contact me with an acknowledgment that they understood a mediator would be

used. I sent over a copy of my sample contract and informed the contact, one Dr. Lowdry, I was handling personal affairs until after Christmas and would be only available for a limited time each day in the evenings.

Then, as I was insane and would survive losing another gig, I gave Dr. Lowdry a list of contacts, their skills, their general information, and a recommendation to contact them if my current situation did not appeal.

I made certain to exclude any email addresses from the union and the corporation from my auto filters, finished off my drink, and paced around the penthouse, alternating between hissing and clicking my tongue over the consequences of having walked away from work.

“You’re testy,” Easton observed from somewhere behind me. “Who pulled your tail?”

I turned and unleashed my loudest, longest hiss. “I investigated why Lucifer claimed I had sacrificed while working on recovering the kittens. I did the basic math. If there weren’t children in the penthouse, I would have gotten exceptionally drunk.”

The cop winced. “That bad?”

“It was bad enough I got a drink, so yeah. My colleagues? They absolutely *love* me right now. My wallet does not love me and it may never love me again. And then because I refuse to quit before this job is done, I might be losing another contract to my favored competitors, who will have to suffer through being praised.” Stomping my foot, I thought about just flinging myself onto the floor and kicking my feet and

indulging in a true temper tantrum. Rather than indulge, I said, “I’m considering my good deeds fully punished. I’ll get over it.”

It might take a few months before lucrative work came my way if the latest job proved to be cheap, but I kept a rainy day account for a reason.

“Would researching amusement parks help with the sting of fiscal punishment? I can pay for the first park we go to.”

I recognized when the wolf needed his independence, and I nodded. “That might help. And yes, you can pay for the first park. But only the first one. After the first one, I’m taking the Devil for all he’s worth and demanding compensation for all expenditures. If the kids ask for something expensive from one of the gift shops, we will bill Lucifer.”

He relaxed, and he graced me with a smile. “I can work with that. Dare I ask how much you lost?”

“Over twenty million.”

The cop’s eyes widened. “I’d be doing more than grabbing a stiff drink. I would be in a corner crying.”

I nodded. “I put some serious thought into going into a corner and crying. I might be able to salvage a contract, and it’ll be a doozy.” As there had been no non-disclosure commentary in the email, I added, “It’s a showdown between six unions and a corporation, and it looks like everyone is coming to the table willingly. Those jobs tend to be the trickiest because everyone is ready to negotiate. It’s my job to make sense of every single request and build a package

everyone can be happy with. The faster I build a moderate package everyone can agree to, the more I'm paid. As a general rule, unions want things settled with corporations as quickly as possible."

"Still, twenty million is a lot to lose."

"The kittens are worth every penny. The good favor I showed to my colleagues will help in the future, too. The next time a lucrative contract comes their way that they can't handle, it'll get bounced to me. Sure, it might not be twenty million worth of contracts, but I won't be hurting for work for the next while. I might be hurting when I pay for the renovations on my new acquisitions, though. I'm a sucker for the heritage buildings."

Easton eyed me, and then he chuckled, shook his head, and said, "I'll go make us some coffee. Then we'll make a plan for amusement parks. With the number of kittens we need to keep an eye on, we need a plan."

I opted to go along with his flow, not bothering to mention that the kittens would ruthlessly eradicate any schedules we made due to their nature.



THE KNOWLEDGE the bastards behind the kidnappings had died and gone to hell kept me from losing my temper upon the realization the kittens hadn't emerged from their experience unscathed. They approached everything with a subdued demeanor, expecting the worst no matter what we did.

Even providing them with breakfast proved perilous.

The kittens hungered, but they'd already endured training on what to eat and how much to eat. It took coaxing to encourage them to finish their meal and ask for more. Mollie cried first, which cascaded into all the kittens sobbing over their plates. They flinched at first, and I contemplated asking Darlene to allow me into her dungeons long enough to teach the bastards behind their fear the true meaning of terror.

I packed away the emotions, wiped away their tears, and cooed at them, regretting my inability to purr. Easton followed my lead, and while it took over an hour to fully calm them, we navigated through the perilous waters without losing our sanity or our tempers.

Between the food and the meltdowns, the kittens passed from the tired category straight to exhausted, and we put them back to bed so they could rest and heal.

I understood, then, why Lucifer had insisted we take the children out on an adventure before returning them to their parents. If their parents witnessed the initial recovery, their viruses would go insane, resulting in a mess and more problems than I cared to think about.

A few weeks would begin undoing the damage done, and the parents, while waiting for their miracle, would see joy for Christmas rather than sorrow.

Instead of researching in the comfort of the salon or overlooking the city, we camped out on the floor and shared a laptop, reading about the various parks across the country. If we charted our course carefully, we could go down to Florida,

hitting every amusement park along the way, spend a week in Orlando, and make it back to Chicago right on time.

Making the list of places to go exhausted me, and I feared what the future might hold. Would we survive five kittens?

I hoped so. I wanted to host Christmas dinner, and I couldn't play hostess if the kittens managed to kill me off.

"My virus wants blood," Easton admitted during one of the lulls where we stared at a map without saying or doing anything.

Mine did, too.

Before I had a chance to reply, a succubus dressed in a maid's outfit with black hair, her wings and tail displayed, poked her head into the room. "You could just go bite each other already. The amount of tension in this penthouse is becoming ridiculous. You already had a chance with the blood of the filth responsible for their trauma. Just go bite each other already so we have some peace. Perhaps not quiet, but peace would be nice. We can keep an eye on the kittens while you indulge. They'll stay down until lunch, and you'll only have to play with them for an hour or two after lunch. Lunch won't be for at least six hours." The succubus's gaze focused on Easton. "For the record, her virus has already claimed you as her property, which is why she's not being aggressive. She's waiting for you to make your move. If you want to be bitten, you're going to have to use your teeth first. There are other ways you can handle securing her as your mate, but cats are cats. She'll love a good struggle. The instant you cuff her, you'll have won the war and a good time. I'll even be

generous and provide infallible birth control so you can indulge daily without worry. But please, one of you do *something* before we go mad.”

Without waiting for a response, she left.

As I had healthy interest in Easton, I held some responsibility, but I eyed the hybrid with interest. “Are you sexually repressed, Officer Dannell?”

“Apparently.” The cop snorted, failed to contain his laughter, and closed the laptop’s lid. “I don’t like rushing into things.”

No kidding. “No matter how whiny the succubi become, you don’t have to go any faster than you wish to go. My only expectation from any potential partner is honesty and dedication. If you want to go bang some other broad, take the time to tell me first.”

“I have no interest in banging some other broad. However, I’m quite interested in hearing about how your virus believes I’m your property.”

I raised a brow at him. “It’s simple. You haven’t told her no even when she got riled up and tried to bite you. You played hard to get, but no was not a part of the vocabulary you used. As such, she views you as her property. That works well for me because it means my virus isn’t whining every other second to bite you right now. Being patient is part of my job. I save the impatience for my acts of criminal mischief.”

“We’re going to have to work on that criminal mischief thing.”

“Which part? The getting caught?”

“No. Engaging in it at all.” The cop shot a glare my way. “Do not make me retrieve you from general holding every night.”

“How about every other night?”

The wolf growled, the only hint I needed to understand I played with fire. “Maybe once a month, and only if you’ve been good.”

After a brief moment of thought, I decided to play the succubus’s game, directing my most lecherous leer his way. “But what if I want to be really bad?”

Then, knowing it would snap something in his little cop brain, I bolted for the hallway, pausing long enough to blow him a kiss loaded with sass and temptation.



“NOT JUST A FAILURE,
BUT A GRAND FAILURE?”

WHILE EASTON FAILED to catch me, I recognized the moment he decided he wanted to play to win. The kittens waking up for lunch ended the pursuit, and as the victor, I strutted across the penthouse, pleased with my conquest. His determination to catch me contented my virus and gave me something to look forward to.

He needed to want me as much as I wanted him, and he needed to get a full picture of what he was getting into with me. I could—and would—run him around in circles. One question remained: would he like it?

Time would tell.

Lunch proved to be equally as perilous as breakfast for the kittens, but prepared for the reality of their fear and the conditioning they endured, I managed to coax them into eating everything and requesting extras without more than a sniffle and the threat of tears.

I determined Mollie led the emotional charge, and her brothers felt if she could cry, so could they. Sometime after seeing them home, I would need to praise their parents for

teaching their boys emotions were real and they were allowed to display them.

True to the succubus's word, the kittens wanted to play after lunch, and as Mollie tended to be the colony's little leader, I initiated a game of hide and seek with her, promising we'd give her to the count of a hundred before we hunted for her.

Her delighted squeal heralded in the pitter-patter of little feet fleeing the dining room overlooking the city.

Then, aware of how often little children couldn't count to a hundred without help, I settled in to coach the boys on making it all the way up to a hundred before sending them off to find their sister.

"I'll be surprised if Lucifer's penthouse is still standing after a flock of kittens gets done with it."

I giggled at the wolf's commentary. "Colony, clowder, destruction, clutter, glaring, nuisance, and kindle. There are others, too, but those are the predominant ones. We do not fly, so we do not go by flock."

"Chickens don't fly and they gather in flocks," the wolf replied.

"Well, technically, chickens can fly a short distance, but they're not going to fly far or high. Apparently, they can go about ten feet up for maybe forty feet? Something like that. I was trying to figure out if my yard might house a chicken or three. In retrospect, I decided I wouldn't try it. They could fly

over my wall. Add in the fact they're delicious and it would have been a grand failure."

"Not just a failure, but a grand failure?"

"There would have been feathers *everywhere*."

Easton laughed at me. "How long are you going to let them run around the place unsupervised?"

"Until something crashes, it becomes suspiciously quiet, or someone starts crying," I admitted, going to work gathering the dishes to ferry to the kitchen. "If they can't find her in half an hour, we'll put our noses to the test and see which one of us is better at locating hidden kittens."

"You're being lazy," he accused.

"Duh, Easton. I'm a cat. What were you expecting from me?"

"Criminal mischief comes to mind."

"That's only a problem when being lazy leads to boredom."

With Easton's help, we restored the dining room to rights within ten minutes, dodging the boys as they bolted around the penthouse calling for their sister. According to my nose, the children loved the game. I would continue to monitor them, as joy could easily morph into terror if the trauma of their kidnapping surfaced.

Twenty-five minutes after leaving, Jerod found his sister in the salon doing her best to merge with Belial, who sat on one of the cozier chairs. I laughed at their antics, plucked the girl

up and settled her on my hip, and praised her for having thwarted her brothers for so long. As the one to capture his sister, Jerod got sent off to hide.

Mollie hugged me and rested her head against me.

Like before, I helped the kittens count to a hundred, setting the little girl on her feet so she could join the hunt for her brother. Once they tore off, I attempted to stare Easton into submission.

“You can’t keep any of them.”

Bastard. “We could set up a visitation agreement where we steal the kittens for a weekend here and there.”

“That is probably acceptable, and I doubt their parents would mind. You may ask once but only once for such a thing, and you cannot do it on Christmas Eve or Christmas. You must let the family settle before inquiring if you can visit them. I’m sure you’ll get their number and can call like a civilized being.”

Wolves. I huffed. “How long do you think we should stay here before going off to amusement parks, Belial?”

“Tomorrow morning you can ask the kittens if they would like to go to a park, and show them the choices nearby. The next day, you’ll be able to take them. Warm them up to the idea of traveling with you by letting them decide. After two or three parks of this, you’ll be able to surprise them. They’re already learning to trust you, but they’ll be skittish for a while yet. Letting them play without you hovering was wise. They weren’t allowed to play at all, and it changes the tone for them.

If you're challenged about having the children, simply display your FBI badges."

Right. We had FBI badges. I hadn't put much thought into mine, as it had gotten tossed into my purse, unused for every element of our hunt for the kittens. "How are we going to dodge the news, anyway?"

"Simple," Belial replied, and the devil flashed me a grin. "The parents were asked to not talk about the kidnappings with anyone as nationwide coverage might impair law enforcement's ability to safely retrieve the kittens. Lucifer's brothers are taking care to make daily visits with the parents to comfort them and offer assurances the kittens are safe. On Christmas Eve, Gabriel will speak to them and fill them in on where they have been for the past while, as the kittens will surely ramble for all eternity over the nice kitty and puppy who took them to every amusement park possible."

We couldn't undo the harm the children had faced, but we could throw so many good memories at them the severity of their kidnapping might wilt in comparison. Therapy, I hoped, could handle the rest. "Do you think we can handle five children in a mall? I have to buy Christmas presents. Well, the presents I'm getting that I can't handle by reaching out to someone online or by phone."

"The internet is a real thing. You can order your presents online, and I'm sure Darlene wouldn't mind helping you wrap them. The children might enjoy helping to wrap the gifts as well."

Shit. The kittens might want to get presents for their friends and family. “Right. The kittens need to get presents for people, too. Easton, don’t let me forget that.”

“Sure. If we can get a few succubi to help keep an eye on them, we can brave a mall near Christmas. We can use one of the wrapping stands for the kittens if they aren’t up for helping to wrap.”

“No. We are raiding a dollar store for wrapping supplies, and we will have a party before we show up on Christmas Eve. Belial, we’re going to need a vehicle just for the gifts.”

“Teleportation is real. We can make certain the presents are put in the appropriate place in your home. We can also handle decorating. More specifically, I’ll inquire with the vampires and have them handle that element as they already have access to your home.” Belial shook his head. “You need not make things unnecessarily difficult. You have enough difficulties at current. You have five kittens to watch and only four hands between the two of you.”

We were doomed. “Maybe I should have taken lessons on how to babysit children before agreeing to this.”

“You’ll survive. Maybe.” Following a low laugh, Belial vanished.

I bowed my head. “We’ve made poor choices, Easton.”

“We really haven’t. We’ll be all right. I suspect the kittens will be eager to stay near us while in the park so we shouldn’t have too much trouble with them.”

“Those are famous last words, wolf. While you trust in a wish and a prayer, I’m going to invest in leashes.”



UPON LEARNING we intended to take them to an amusement park, the kittens lost their minds, running and screaming around the penthouse as though we’d fed them gallons of liquid sugar. Only the reality of their recent captivity spared us, as after an hour of hyperactivity, they ran out of batteries and passed out. I found Mollie on the Devil’s favorite chair, and to my amusement, he’d been trapped by the small child. Darlene had three of the brats on her lap, and one had fallen asleep on her feet.

“I’m going to need leashes, more coffee than I should ever drink in a day, and help,” I informed the pair, heaving a sigh and bending over to discover Jerod had been the unlucky kitten left on the floor. I picked him up and transferred him to Lucifer’s lap. “It seems they shared some of their excitement with you.”

“I like how you’ve accepted you can’t keep up with hyperactive kittens losing their minds over going to an amusement park,” Darlene said, and she smiled at the sleeping trio on her lap. “I’m genuinely impressed they found a way to fit.”

“They’re small for their age and they’re still underweight,” Lucifer replied, and he smoothed Mollie’s hair. “They’ll be fine, but we’ll go in a larger group for the first few parks.

We'll carry them for most of the day so they can enjoy the rides and see and do everything they want while they regain their strength. One devil or demon per kitten, and you two can help supervise.”

“Can we just make that the plan the whole time? Seven adults *might* be able to keep five kittens out of trouble at an amusement park.” I drew in a shaky breath. “Maybe.”

“It's not a bad idea, Lucy. And we don't want to stress our lycanthropes too much before their big day in Chicago.” Darlene grinned at me. “We wanted to stop by long enough to assure you that your house is ready for your guests. The renovations in your basement are completed and we've negotiated with the third level so your land is left alone—and we've purchased land rights for that level around your home to give you a buffer and ability to expand if you'd like. We've warded your home so nothing from the third level will pay you a visit. If anyone tries, we'll know about it. The other matters have also been addressed.”

“Thank you. How much do I owe you?”

Darlene waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Consider it paid in full. You're acting on our behalf, and we can't step away from what we're doing to stick around to care for the kittens until Christmas Eve. Compensating you for the renovations is the least we can do, especially after Lucifer snooped to determine how much you lost from upcoming contracts.”

I sighed. “I won't lie, Darlene. That hurt. My colleagues adore me now, however—and that has value down the road.

Well, I hope it does.”

“It does,” the succubus confirmed. “You’ll be fine in the future, but you know what they say.”

“No good deed goes unpunished?” I asked, although I could think of a few others, including how the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

“That’s the one.” She grinned. “You’ll be rewarded, too. I mean, your wolf is pretty handsome, especially when he’s playing at being a peacock.”

Lucifer sighed.

“I can look all I want, Lucy.” The woman’s spotted ears turned back. “I control the spots. She who controls the spots controls all, especially you.”

“You’ll make the lycanthrope jealous, my darling.”

I was jealous? I eyed Easton, and after a few moments, I shrugged. “He *is* a pretty handsome specimen for a wolf. I would be doing the world a major injustice if I prevented other women from enjoying the view. Anyway, he can posture for whomever he wants until the point he is mated, and even then, he can posture all he wants, but he can only touch his mate. Those are the rules.”

“Since when?” Lucifer asked in a curious tone.

“Since I said it.”

The Devil considered it, and then he joined me in shrugging. “That seems fair. What do you have to say about that, wolf?”

“It seems like a fair arrangement assuming it’s mutually shared by all single, adult parties in this penthouse of the lycanthrope bent.” Easton glanced in the direction of the sitting room, which had been taken over by an entire flock of succubi the last time I’d checked. “I doubt you could get some of the adults in this penthouse to abide by those rules even if you tried.”

“It’s true. I made those little demonesses and devils quite well.”

I took several deep breaths to calm my nerves. “How do their parents handle them?”

“They try their best, but at first, they were concerned they had bitten off more than they can chew. They got support from their families, which helped,” Lucifer replied. “By the time you’re headed back to Chicago, you’ll be an old hat at managing them, especially with the help of the other adults with you. You’re mostly overwhelmed because this is new territory for you. Should you decide to have an entire litter, you will have plenty of assistance from your neighbors, your vampire friends, and even the forces of hell. I wouldn’t trust that heavenly lot. They might teach your kittens good habits.”

“Heaven forbid,” Easton stated in a dry voice.



THE DEMONS AND
DEVILS ADORED THE
ATTENTION.

IN THE WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, we took the kittens to every big amusement park between New York and Florida with a herd of succubi and incubi in tow. On the days we didn't go to a park, we hit up a mall, aquarium, or museum instead. It took six shopping ventures, but we finished all the Christmas shopping necessary to appease everyone. As I would become bankrupt if I allowed the kittens to go unchecked, I'd limited each kitten to ten purchases each per mall.

They stuck to the limit for the most part.

We fell into a routine, one that left me exhausted but satisfied with my life. Each night, we camped out at a new hotel close to our next destination. I did as much work as I could in two hours while Easton entertained the children through reading stories and playing games, careful to insist they stay quiet so I could concentrate.

During the trip, I received offers for six more lucrative jobs, which I personally passed on to colleagues, keeping the one project for myself.

I would find out more about the work in January as all parties were willing to play nicely with each other until the start of the year.

I couldn't justify sitting on contracts needing immediate work.

At the parks, I kept Mollie company most of the time although sometimes her brothers wanted to stay as close to their sister as possible. I recognized the trauma response for what it was, and we worked around it, promising the boys they could all stay in a group if they wanted. It often resulted in a flock of nine adults escorting the five kittens to Mollie's favorite rides over and over and over, but we dealt with the repetition in silence. We saved our exasperated sighing for in private.

It was their moment to have fun.

Unfortunately for my wallet and sanity, the children wanted photographs at every single ride and exhibit they could get them at, and they wanted photos with everyone. The beleaguered staff handled the request with grace, but in order to make all the children happy, we had to experience the same damned ride up to ten times in a row to get the appropriate combinations of people with the kittens.

The demons and devils adored the attention.

I wanted to find a dark corner so I could cry for a while.

Easton glowed whenever any of the kittens graced him with even a scrap of attention.

As promised, I gathered gift certificates for every amusement park we went to, enough to pay for a visit for the entire family. I also spoke to the management of each hotel, making arrangements for all stays by the family to be charged to one of my credit cards.

Lucifer helped with that.

When the Devil came calling, hotel managers tended to make exceptions, especially when it brought business to their establishments.

At ten in the morning on Christmas Eve, as predicted by the Devil and his wicked wife, we arrived at my home in Chicago. One of Ernesto's vampires held a spot for us with a big pickup, moving out of our way so we could park the borrowed van. Easton's cruiser remained in its spot, but my Acura had gone missing sometime during the trip, likely stolen by the Devil or one of the vampires. I eyed my baby's spot, flexing my hands.

"Temper," Easton warned, getting out of the van. He eyed my garage as well. "I suspect Lucifer did not approve of your everyday car, Kelsie."

Someone would pay. The someone would be the Devil, and I'd dye his wife's fur so he couldn't glimpse a single one of her spots. Rather than hiss and teach the kittens bad habits, I got out and began the tedious process of herding them out of the vehicle and into the house.

"Aunt Kelsie? Is this your house?" Mollie asked, pointing at the guest house.

I smiled at the kitten, scooped her up, and settled her on my hip. “That’s the guest house, baby.” I pointed at my actual house. “That’s where I live. Once upon a time, the guest house had burned down, and I bought it and renovated it so it looked almost exactly like it did before the fire. I just use it to park my cars now.”

I would have to figure out how to park my cars in the future, as I doubted I would have sufficient spots. Then again, with the Devil helping my cause, I could rig a basement below the guest house with a garage.

I added it to my mental list of things to do next year.

“It’s pretty!” Mollie declared.

Laughing, I asked Easton to grab my purse, as the kittens swarmed me, resulting in my inability to use my hands for anything other than containing them. He opened the front door, where an entire herd of people loitered in my home.

Among them were the parents of the kittens. Before I had a chance to say a word, the boys spotted their father, shrieked, and led the charge. Mollie wiggled until I released her, and she beelined straight for her mother. After the initial shrieking and screaming subsided, the kittens lost their minds, bouncing around in their effort to greet both of their parents at the same time.

I heaved a relieved sigh.

My mother pointed and laughed at me. “Now you know how I felt raising you.”

I resisted the urge to display my middle finger at her. “I was a perfect kitten from birth. I knew how to use my indoor voice!”

“You did not use your indoor voice until you were eight, girl.” My father came over and kissed my cheeks. “Groceries were delivered an hour ago. Should we be having a discussion about being in cahoots with devils and demons again?”

“I cahoot with vampires and angels, too, Dad. If you try to discuss all the cahooting I’ve done, I’ll just end up with coal for all eternity. I don’t want coal.” At the current hour, if I got to work immediately, dinner would be ready on time. “Easton, hold down the fort. I have to cook.”

“I feel the people inhabiting your home are holding down the fort just fine. I’ll help in the kitchen.”

“Greet your parents first, say nice things to your brothers, and then come to the kitchen. I have to see what they bought.”

While he heaved a sigh, Easton did as told, heading to a couple. To my surprise, Easton had taken after his mother, and while she carried signs of aging, she remained beautiful. His father made an excellent silver fox, promising good things to come for his son.

I’d introduce myself after I had the chaos in the kitchen sorted, and I scampered off to do my work.

A presence in the kitchen made me pause, a force invisible to my sight. A moment later, Lucifer appeared with a faint hint of brimstone.

“It is as you wanted, Father,” the Devil stated in a quiet tone.

“So it is,” He replied. “And this is your latest kitten? She abandoned her wolf, leaving him with the sharks.”

“He’s man and wolf enough to handle a few sharks, and she’s not the type to overly protect her male. You are satisfied with your miracle?”

“I am satisfied. I wanted to thank you in person, Kelsie. You have done great good with minimal evil. I would apologize for the inconveniences you face because of your willingness to take on my work, but in the end, all will be as it should be. You should, if you would accept a little advice, indicate to your wolf that you would welcome his advances. He is uncertain on how he should proceed.”

Right. I hunted a shy wolf. “Lucifer, convince him.” I pointed in the direction of the entry where everyone had converged for our return. “And make sure the sharks don’t eat my wolf. I happen to like him and want to keep him around. He needs to understand he still has the freedom of choice but that he can be a little more aggressive. Also, where is my Acura? And can you create an underground parking garage below the guest house?”

“I foresaw that need already, and it’s mostly installed, we just have to build the ramp to access it,” the Devil admitted. “As for the Acura, that was not my doing.”

“It was mine. It offended me. I had a few of my other sons handle the work. They need more exposure to humanity, so I made them go to a car dealership or three on your behalf.

They learn about cars, and this fascinates them. They will bring something suitable for you in the next few days. Your Acura, while lovely, was becoming quite long in the tooth.”

“Are you calling my family car old?”

“I am calling it ancient. The kittens are younger than it is, and that will not do. I will tattle on you, as your wolf believes it to be a newer vehicle when it is not.”

Hmph. “It was plenty new.”

“It was not new enough. My sons are also taking care of procuring a suitable vehicle for your wolf.”

I realized I’d left my Lexus with the Devil, which meant it was likely doomed. “What did you do with my Lexus, Lucifer?”

“My son-in-law has stated your Lexus will not bring shame to your garage, so she’s having her maintenance done. She will be returned to you with a fresh coat of paint and rust treatments. The color will be the same, as you like the color.”

Phew. I could work with the Lexus getting some love. “Thank you. Please do try to convince Easton that he’s a welcome addition to my life. And guard him from the sharks.”

“I have a few minutes before I have to leave, so I will do that. I’ll make sure everyone behaves. The kittens being reunited with their parents will help. His family has gotten a wake-up call regarding lycanthropes, so all will be well.”

The Devil left me alone with his father, and as I had a full house of people to feed, I went to work organizing my

groceries and checking the stock in the refrigerator. “You’re welcome to stay if you’d like.”

“The gesture is appreciated, but your guests are not ready for my presence yet. You are resilient. I would make some of them more than a little uncomfortable. Their natures are not ideal.”

“Neither is mine,” I admitted.

“You are as you need to be to thrive in your bright future. You and your mate are gifts for my son. You will be able to do the good his heart yearns to do on his behalf without offending his delicate sensibilities. He is supposed to be evil you know.”

I snickered at the thought of Lucifer being actually evil. “He’s not doing a great job on that front. Still, we didn’t do things while wearing shining armor.”

“Shining armor would have become filthy, and it is such a pain to clean. No, what you did was better. My other children would have had temper tantrums, and that would have had consequences. You did what was necessary, with justice and mercy sharing space in your heart. When your time on the mortal coil comes to a close, you will find your journey through the valley to be a pleasant jaunt accompanied by old friends. And in your next life, you will find yourself gloriously burdened with the attention of an amorous wolf. Some debts cannot be repaid in a single lifetime, so we will repay it into the many futures you will enjoy with your soul’s companion. You have earned it. For this life, you will enjoy your work for my beloved son. The next is for you to decide, but I have found that my son does not let go easily, so you will find your way

back into his company again, I am sure. He would gift you with as eternal of a life as he could, but your soul is one that needs rest from time to time. And your soul's nature is as such you will walk a similar path as you do now. Some are like that."

Well, that would give me food for thought for a great many hours. "And the kittens?"

"They will grow to be strong and brave, and they will remember what you did to give them a good life. In time, they will ally with the forces of my heavens and my son's many hells. Only your touch could give a miracle now and forge many miracles in the future. My son does not peek as often as he should, so he will be pleasantly surprised by the futures you have created with your compassion and drive." He chuckled. "Do you want to know the true cost, in dollars, that you gave to your colleagues? Not knowing will drive you to the brink of your sanity."

"You may as well hit me with it. The answer will determine how much I drink before the end of the year."

"You sacrificed over fifty million dollars, and your choice of colleagues have improved their lives more than you will ever know. Unbeknownst to you, your filters have done good work, although you took great losses following my plan. But do not fret. The one contract you kept for yourself will lead you to even greater fortunes in the future, although the money you earn immediately will cover your new ventures and purchases with little left over. Do try to be kind to your organs. You need those."

Not only would I have more than a few drinks, I would share my drinks with Easton, and I would do my best to keep him around. “That’s a great deal of money.”

“It is. But you know as well as I do that the kittens are worth far more.”

That they were.



I DID NOT LEARN the true severity of Easton’s familial situation until I discovered that Easton used his great-grandmother’s maiden name as his last name. His infection with lycanthropy had separated him from those who should have loved him, creating a rift time had not healed.

His parents had handled the name change.

He had been below the age of eighteen when he’d been cut out of his family, although they had kept him under the same roof until he’d graduated high school and enrolled into the police academy.

His great-grandmother had, later in her life, been infected, but the virus had not taken root in time to give her longevity. She’d become a family legend, and Easton clung to the existence of the woman he’d never met.

Easton had played his part, allowing his lack of confidence to drive him away. I played referee, calming tempers before anyone said something they might regret. While everything cooked and a helpful incubus kept an eye on everything in the kitchen, I gave everyone a tour of my cellar, picking several

bottles of vintage Champagnes that would not last much longer before they needed to be consumed.

Only after I helped put the kittens to bed did I begin the real work of negotiating a Christmas miracle, choosing my den for the discussion. I went into the cellar, inviting Easton to come in with me, and dug out my common bottles of Maker's Mark, having him hold four while I carried three others. Once I ferried everything out, I hopped onto my bar to sit, reached to grab a few glasses, and poured myself and Easton a drink. "We have adult supervision so we can get as drunk as we want. I won't be having much, as I have to get up and cook for Christmas."

In true lycanthrope fashion, we'd cleared my home out of every scrap of food, but the next wave of groceries would come courtesy of Lucifer, his devils, and his demons.

Everyone stayed quiet, although I caught Easton fidgeting. I turned my stare to the wolf's family. "You lot are idiots, and I don't know what fanatical bullshit religion you worship, but it soured you on members of your own family, the flesh and blood you should have been fighting to love, cherish, and protect. I'm going to just air things out right here and now, because Easton deserves a Christmas with family and friends rather than... whatever you happen to be. Neither family nor friends, that's for certain. Family doesn't change their son's last name because he doesn't live up to some puritan bullshit."

Then, because I could be an asshole the match of Lucifer, I wielded my phone like the weapon it could be, sent a text to the group chat loaded with archangels, and asked if one of

them might come over and make use of one or two of *His* quotes to illustrate my point.

To my amusement, I got a baker's dozen.

"How did three or four become thirteen?" I asked, allowing myself a smile.

My den barely fit the bodies crammed into it, especially when wings entered the equation. Gabriel came over, and he took a few moments to smooth my hair before patting my shoulder. "Twisted beliefs are what breathed life into this tragedy, and it can only be healed through the correction of those beliefs. If they choose to continue to believe what men wish them to, that is something that will weigh upon their souls and guide them down a path they think they avoid by claiming they believe."

Well, that would leave some people in my home smarting—if they had even a scrap of sense or morality. "And my quote?"

"Big or small, *He* made them all," the archangel announced. "It is not something *He* said directly, but those are the words those present need to hear. You are a beloved creation. They are beloved creations. Your wolf is a beloved creation. That *His* beloved creations embrace hatred rather than love is something that shall forever pain *Him*. Love cannot conquer all, Kelsie. That you continue to do your best to forge miracles on these days of celebration speaks a great deal about your soul. The necessity of it speaks a great deal about theirs." The archangel turned, and he tucked his wings close so he wouldn't smack someone. "A loving god, no

matter what pantheon the god belongs to, is not a god who tolerates hatred among flesh and blood. A loving god loves. I would search your souls and open your eyes to what your so-called churches believe. Do they preach love? Do they preach tolerance? Or, perhaps, do they preach fear of our brother's many hells? You have met our brother. You have seen his wife. You have seen the works of their hands in the kittens who found their way home, asleep and waiting for presents, good food, and great cheer in the morning. Kelsie is the kind of soul who will try to do what she can for others. She does not have to like you. In fact, upon learning that you forced a different family name on him to erase the 'guilt' of his lycanthropy infection, she has not a scrap of love within her for you. But she cares for all, and because she does, she will show you nothing but kindness. You would do well to learn from her. Tonight, you sleep in her home. The miracle she wishes for is a family reunited. But for that to happen, you have to let go of your fear. But let me ask you this. Would you, who is of pure blood, have the courage to do as these lycanthropes have done? No. You are low and fearful beings. They are unafraid of doing difficult things. They work miracles. You do not. But know this: you are unworthy now, but you have been graced with a chance to undo the harm you have done. You took the first steps by accepting the invitation despite your fears and disgust and prejudices. The only gift he has ever wanted from you is your love."

Without another word or even a gesture, the host of archangels vanished.

My guests shifted in their seats or on their feet, their discomfort amusing me more than anything. Easton stared in the direction of my cellar door, likely hoping he could hide among the bottles.

“I think I could use a drink,” the kittens’ mother, who had introduced herself as Loretta Georgino and liked to be called Letta, admitted. “What do you have that’s a little bitter and a little sweet?”

“I make a mean Old Fashioned,” I informed her with a smile, and I went to work gathering the supplies I needed to make her one. “Gabriel was a little harsher than I hoped for but perhaps that was needed. Who am I to judge an archangel? But, tomorrow, I expect nothing but joy to enter this house. The kittens deserve that much—or that little, depending on how you think about it. I don’t expect you to kiss and make up.” As my house, my rules applied, I eyed up the entirety of Easton’s family, and I didn’t spare the cop from my scrutiny. “If you’re ignorant about lycanthropy, that is a curable offense.” I pointed at my parents, who observed with raised brows. “They’re qualified to tell you what life is like with an infected child.” I pointed at myself. “I can tell you what life is like as an infected child.” I engaged Easton in a staring contest and raised a brow.

“I am certainly qualified to tell you what it’s like to be a loner wolf as an adult.”

I allowed myself a rather smug smile, returning my attention to Easton’s family. “Easton wants a family, and it’s

time for you to decide if you're going to be a part of his family or if I get to keep the big, bad wolf all to myself.”



IT SEEMED LIKE
SOMETHING HE WOULD
DO IF GIVEN A CHANCE.

CHRISTMAS EVE DEPARTED and made way for Christmas. I escaped a hangover, as did Easton and my parents, but every other adult in my home paid penance for their alcoholic crimes. As the kittens would surely take over the world if left unsupervised, Easton and I fell into our travel habits, containing the lot of them while their parents drank the hangover remedy I provided.

The rest could—and did—suffer for their indulgences.

“You’re a harsh mistress,” Easton commented while we supervised the kittens devouring their breakfast. Lucifer had sent an entire entourage of demons and devils to help with feeding everybody, and the ovens in my kitchen were already hard at work making our first meal of the day.

I’d even agreed to allow side dishes to mystically appear, as it would give me more time to enjoy opening presents, which would take place after everyone was fed breakfast.

Even more demons and devils helped ferry the presents into the home, and the wrapped packages took up every inch of available space in my den and living room.

“I’m just establishing that I can be mean when the situation demands it,” I replied, spotting a naughty kitten attempting to steal bacon from his sister. I reached across the counter and prodded Jaden with the rubber spatula I’d selected to be my tool of kitten containment. “Don’t steal from your sister’s plate.”

Jaden whined, Mollie hissed, and the pair squabbled, resulting in a series of pokes and prods to catch their attention. “If you want more bacon, you may ask for it, but you may not steal from each other. I absolutely *will* delay opening presents by an hour for each instance of food theft.”

That won me their cooperation, and the kittens paid more attention to their breakfast than each other.

My mother snickered from her position on the other side of my island. “I see you are a quick study.”

“Kittens live for presents on Christmas.”

“I’m amazed you didn’t just set them loose on the presents.”

Any other time, I might have, but the chocolate milk I fed them was packed full of protein powder suitable for them, and I couldn’t afford to let them delay a meal, not when they’d just gotten their weight back up to something close to healthy. “Doctor’s orders.”

I spoke the truth, too. The kittens needed a lot of calories to recover from their kidnapping, although we’d done good work with them while enjoying the amusement parks. They had a few pounds to go each but were on the mend.

Easton stood beside me, leaning against the island with his elbows on the countertop. “How long until you decide to let people open presents?”

“Once the kittens finish eating, we’ll gather everyone and open presents,” I replied, shooting the wolf a grin. “Does someone want to know what is in the box?”

As I had a wicked sense of humor and a general desire to keep the wolf around, I’d gotten him a selection of gifts meant to send a few hints about what he should be doing and where he should be doing it. With a little luck, the kittens wouldn’t understand the innuendo, although I may have gone overboard buying lycanthrope statuettes.

“Yes, I want to know the contents of the box. Several boxes, as I spotted more than one with my name and your poor attempt at playing Santa. Had you put ‘Santa’ on the tag, I may not have guessed, but you wrote ‘Prettier than Satan’ on them, making it clear you are the culprit.”

I shrugged, and as he spoke the truth, I replied, “A woman has to do what a woman has to do.”

With him, assuming Lucifer hadn’t gotten the point across, I’d have to take extreme measures. When I thought about it, the statuettes were likely too subtle as far as hints went although I refused to regret my acquisitions.

Someone had made one of a clouded leopard, and I’d had an easy enough time finding one of a wolf close to his fur coloration. Using a tiny piece of ribbon to leash the wolf and put the lead line in the clouded leopard’s mouth served as the

cherry on top of the cake, although I'd also gotten a few other hints as well.

Some of the hints were kinkier than others, but I'd made certain to write 'for adult eyes only' on those boxes.

If the condoms didn't send a hint, I had hopes that one of the two different guidebooks on having a healthy and happy sex life sent the appropriate message. If those didn't work, the instant I evicted the various guests from my home, I would take a direct approach with him, instigating with verbal indications I wanted to get physical with him sooner than later.

While patient, my virus wanted some action, and she wanted it the instant all prying eyes left.

She wanted a Christmas miracle for us, and finding any man willing to put up with us and our wicked ways counted.

With presents on the line, the kittens inhaled their breakfast in record time, and I delayed long enough to prompt them into putting their dishes in the sink, hoping they hadn't learned too many bad habits while in our care. Once done, I herded them into the living room, snagging my Santa hat on the way, and hollered, "Presents!"

With amusing haste, everyone crammed into the area. It took about thirty seconds to determine we would have to spread over as much of the lower level of my house as possible to give everyone space to open their gifts. Once I had an audience, I clapped my hands. "Divide and conquer. Kittens, pick a place for your presents to be delivered. Once we have everyone set up with their pile of gifts, we'll start opening them. If there is a specific present you want to watch

be opened, put it aside in a master pile. We'll open those specific gifts last." I pointed at a spot near the kitchen. "We'll put those presents there."

It amused me that most people had at least one or two gifts they wanted to witness be opened, and everyone went for those gifts first. The pile spilled into the kitchen, and the helpful entourage of demonic and devilish chefs promised to organize everything in the dining room to help make things more efficient.

After an hour, with my sanity dribbling away, we got everything sorted. As I expected, the Georminos settled in to watch their kittens lose their minds over the plethora of presents. Some had come from me, some had come from the Devil and his many minions, and I suspected a few of the shimmering packages had been the work of angels and archangels.

Having met *Him*, I suspected a few unspoken gift requests had been brought to life.

It seemed like something *He* would do if given a chance.

The heavens and hells were all about balance, and it would take more than a few weeks going to amusement parks and having presents to ease the Georgino family's suffering.

To my amusement, I had a ridiculous number of gifts, and I abused an incubus to help me determine which ones had come from colleagues and businesses, shoving those away in my office to be investigated later. A few caught my attention, as they were from my contact from the new job along with a few from the unions.

Puzzled, I sent the Devil a text asking if he knew why they'd sent gifts.

Lucifer's reply, which informed me that the unions and corporation had been notified I'd abandoned most of my work to rescue trafficked children, would drive me insane for days to come.

I hadn't done the work to be shown any form of compensation or even gratitude.

The kittens giggling and laughing while tearing through pretty wrapping paper was all the compensation and gratitude I would ever need. The congregation of helpers made the paper disappear, and when Mollie protested over the loss of some of the shimmering, pretty paper, it was folded and added to her pile of presents. Upon realizing they could keep the paper, the boys mimicked the incubi and succubi helpers, folding the scraps they wanted to keep and neatly adding it to their gifts.

The adults waited until the kittens had been lulled into a state of bliss to begin exploring their gifts, and I encroached on Easton's space to observe him navigate his collection of presents. The ones from his family bothered him the most, and he regarded them with the same wariness of a mouse in the sights of a hunting snake.

"They're probably going to be generic gifts, the stereotypical type of things that you might inflict upon someone at one of those white elephant parties."

"I hate those damned things," he muttered. "I always get something I have to fake I enjoy."

“Like what?”

“A pair of toasters comes to mind.”

“A *pair* of toasters?” I could see how somebody might be less than thrilled about receiving a pair of toasters. A single toaster would require a great deal of fortitude to accept with grace. “I hate toasters. Do you know what’s bad for a cat? That unexpected pop. The last time I used a toaster, I forgot about it, shifted, and ran around the house for some exercise. When it went off, I lost at least half my fur.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“I was shedding.”

I had no idea if clouded leopards shed in the wild, but when summer rolled into fall, I lost my summer coat in favor of a plusher, thicker coat to help me get through the winter.

Easton snickered. “It must have been an explosion of fur, then.”

“It was not a good time.” I considered his presents, and I went for one that was vaguely toaster shaped. A quick check of the label revealed it to be from one of his brothers. “This is a good candidate for being a toaster.” Picking it up, I determined it to be far too heavy to be a toaster. “Belay that. This could be a box of coal? Rocks? Bricks?”

“Books,” Easton replied after checking the tag. “That brother is addicted to non-fiction. It is probably a bunch of religious texts to convert me into a proper...”

I blinked, wondering why he’d trailed off. Then I realized we shared my home with a bunch of demons and devils vying

for a chance to play with the kittens and otherwise celebrate Christmas with us. “You were about to say God-fearing Christian, weren’t you? I’ve met *Him*. Absolutely not worth fearing in the slightest. Nice guy, a little confused I think, but nice. I have him pegged as a doting father figure. Just don’t upset *Him*. My Acura upset *Him*. As such, *He* had his wicked feathered children steal it.”

“Why? It’s such a nice car.”

“It’s older,” I confessed. “I just took immaculate care of her, and while she had great features when new, she’s old. *He* did not appreciate her age. I don’t know why. She’s a good car. The Lexus is much newer. Fortunately, the Lexus was spared.”

“That Acura is older?”

“She was in perfectly good condition, scored excellent marks for reliability, and won awards for comfort. She got the Employee of the Month award for classy comfort every month. I gave her a wash to celebrate her achievement.”

“And what awards did you give your Lexus?”

“It depends on if I involved her in my petty mischief,” I confessed. After a moment, I gestured to the box. “Let’s see if your brother resisted the urge to preach at you.”

Easton huffed, but he tore off the wrapping paper to reveal a plain cardboard box. After a brief disagreement with the tape, he got it open. Sure enough, the box was packed to the brim with various books, including three different versions of the Bible.

Each version had a variety of marked pages, using the thin, translucent flags I bought in bulk for marking contracts. Puzzled, I picked out the first one, which was an old, battered copy. According to the front page, which listed the printing year, his brother had gone on a scavenger hunt for a pre-emergence Bible. "I may not approve of prejudice in any shape or size, but he went through a great deal of effort to find this." Out of curiosity, I went to the first of the flags to discover his brother had highlighted a passage on forgiveness. Flipping through, I quickly identified a trend. Nodding my satisfaction, I closed the Bible, set it aside, and picked up the next one, discovering it was also from before the emergence. While there was some overlap in verses, he'd gone with the theme of pride and the consequences of pride.

Interesting.

"This brother seems to be either asking for or requesting forgiveness and seems unable to communicate in a normal fashion. But I tip my hat to him; he has put in a lot of effort into this."

Easton frowned, picked up the first Bible I'd looked through, and flipped through the pages to examine the highlighted passages. With furrowed brows, he closed the book, set it to the side, and continued to dig through the box of books.

The nature magazines confused me, but then I realized they had a theme: evolution. Puzzled, I went through the titles as Easton set them aside. At the bottom of the box was a collection of children's fantasy novels, which earned a weary

laugh from the wolf. “I loved these books as a kid. He hated them because they were not appropriately themed for young men of good upbringing.”

“Which brother is this one?”

“The oldest of them. Salem.”

Well, Salem had done some thinking *before* I had brought a bunch of irritated archangels into the mix. “I’d almost feel badly about last night except I really don’t.”

“Don’t worry about it. Salem has always been among the first to think but last to act. This is his version of putting his toes in the water.”

“Right. Done in a fashion where you can make guesses without having to look you in the eyes while apologizing?”

“Precisely.”

I heaved my most dramatic sigh and attempted to use my saddest expression on him. “I’m going to have to cultivate these people into being tolerable in-laws?”

Easton considered me before raising a brow. “I feel like you’re getting the short end of this stick, Kelsie. I’ve met your parents. But since you asked, yes.”

“Am I playing at being patient and moving along at your speed?”

“It really depends on what the other options are.”

“Engaging in as many sins as we possibly can solely to upset the future in-laws comes to mind,” I admitted. “I can’t help it. It’s my petty criminal mischief ways. I’m sure I can

find some law *somewhere* in this country that covers pre-marital sex as a law. I'll turn myself in so I can have a new tally on my record. And since you're a goody-goody, I won't even tattle on you."

"Some laws are meant to be broken, and I feel those sorts of laws should be broken with pride. While I am a supreme example of a goody-goody, I think we can come to an agreement if we're defying idiotic laws in mutually beneficial fashions."

Ha! I grinned at the wolf while my virus waited for even a scrap of positive attention. "Maybe you should hide any presents I got you until later," I confessed.

"Did you give me a series of hints on what *you* would like for Christmas?" he asked, and the wolf smirked at me.

"That may have happened."

"I received the hint yesterday around the time Lucifer informed me you were going out of your mind because you were trying really hard to give *me* space because you are assertive normally and I am not. I question why my wolf is thoroughly invested in a cat of all things, but as far as cats go, you have superior spots, and I really cannot blame Lucifer for his enjoyment of his wife's spots. Spots are fascinating."

"Unfortunately for you, I do not have spots in any interesting locations."

"Ah, but you will soon enough. I have the hybrid form, which means you'll develop it eventually. It may take time and a rather exhaustive campaign on my part, but I will one day

have spots in fascinating locations to work with.” Packing the books back into the box, he went through the gifts, identified which ones had come from me, and put those in a pile. “I do believe I shall accept your advice about opening these in private. You should invite me into your bedroom for this purpose.”

Meow. “I really should because I know there are good things for me in those boxes. I’m selfish. I’m a cat. Everything about those boxes is really solely for my enjoyment.”

While Easton was untamed, his snort indicated he hadn’t been born yesterday and fully understood I wouldn’t be the only one enjoying our evening. At the confirmation I had the wolf in my sights and wouldn’t be letting him leave without a fight, my virus settled, waiting with admirable patience.

Easton picked up one of the other gifts, which was marked as coming from Satan rather than Santa. We exchanged looks, and without a word, he put the present in the pile with my stuff.

“When in doubt, expect perversion,” Easton stated.

“I have so many doubts, but I will admit I have a great deal of hope for many perversions once I get everyone out of the house.”

“Are you going to turn this into a lengthy hostage situation?” He gestured at my home. “This is an upscale place, and I feel it would definitely be comfortable during an extended hostage situation.”

“Would you like to be held hostage?” If so, I could accommodate his special needs. I’d enjoy every moment I spent leashing the wolf and training him that my home was our home. “I can promise feeding on a set schedule, and if work doesn’t pan out as you would like, I pay very well for positive attention and cleaning services.”

“I can cook, too, although I will need to learn some of your tricks, as you’re better than I am. For now.”

Challenge accepted. We’d be eating better than royalty if we engaged in a competition to see who might become the better cook, but I wasn’t about to let some wolf knock me down a few pegs, especially not in my kitchen. “I think we can make an appropriate arrangement. As my hostage, you won’t even be expected to handle your apartment matters. Clearly, you’ll be too busy here to go there, so I’ll have to engage in my petty criminal mischief ways to steal everything you own and bring it here at my leisure.” I shrugged. “I can’t be an angel, Easton. The thought of behaving makes my skin crawl. I also like having a head.”

“You would become quite an awkward creature without your head. Creepy, too.”

“On that, we’re agreed.” I stared at him, pondering my next move.

“You have no idea what to do next, do you?”

I gave it a minute before I confessed, “Not a clue.”

“Generally, you open presents, feed everyone dinner, kick everyone out except for me, run to your bedroom, throw off

your clothes on the way, and wait to be rewarded for being good,” he replied.

Well, I appreciated his blunt directions, which would be simple enough to follow. “Will I have to wait long?”

“No.”

How excellent. I rubbed my hands together. “Then it sounds like we have to attend to the presents portion of this plan immediately. Hurry up, Easton. The faster the presents are conquered, the faster I make dinner. The faster I make dinner, the faster I kick everyone out of our house.”

“You just want to run around naked, don’t you?”

Until Easton had come calling, running around the house hadn’t been something I’d done often, not without good reason. At most, I shifted and walked to wherever I’d abandoned my clothing. With the wolf around, I foresaw some of my habits changing for the better. “Maybe.”

“I’m sure I can accommodate your special needs and chase you around for a while if you must satisfy any urges to be as difficult as possible. I even have a special blend of catnip and pixie dust just for you.” With a rather wolfish grin, he went about shredding the paper off his gifts, not bothering to unwrap any of the cardboard boxes. In record time, he had all the paper discarded to the side, leaving the gifts from me still wrapped, including the prized bottle of Maker’s Mark I intended to drink with him and him alone. He took a few minutes to pile everything nice and neat to be dealt with later. “Okay, I’m ready to help you prepare dinner. The faster dinner is finished, the faster the rest of my plans come to fruition.”

I abandoned my gifts, tucking them close to Easton's to be dealt with later. "Any chance we can skip dinner?"

"No."

I heaved my most dramatic sigh. "All right, all right. We'll make dinner, but you're going to have to console me later."

"I think I can manage that."

"That's a good start," I replied, hopping to my feet and bouncing off in the general direction of the kitchen, more than ready to begin the next chapter in my life.

The best was yet to come, of that I was certain.



AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Whiskers on Kittens! I can already hear the questions. “Where does this novel fit into the series timeline?” “But what about the fire at the house??” “Seriously, how has she not lost her license to practice law?!”

I have answers for you!

Not every thread opened in a novel will be closed. They’re possibilities—and life does not neatly wrap everything up with a pretty bow. The house fire would have been happening in the very last chapter of the book, and let’s be realistic about the situation: Mr. Goody-Goody’s parents aren’t rich, they’re set in their ways, and they’re older.

They don’t have a cell phone.

As such, the news of the fire would not reach them until much later.

This was not a plot hole or something I forgot. I was just being realistic about the situation, the timing, and how slow red tape can be.

So, onto the legal complications of Kelsie's hobbies. Typically, when an attorney breaks a law, they face several punishments or reprimands. They can be suspended for a short period of time. They can be charged a fine. It can be marked on their record and they're let off with a warning. It is up to the *judge* and the *legal bar* to decide.

In Kelsie's case, the bars of the states she is in have essentially marked her status as "as long as she's paying her community service, and the accusers are happy, we're happy" — the bar and courts usually control this sort of things.

And, the states in question, typically do not debar unless there is a felony conviction. Kelsie has not committed any felonies.

This is also the magical romantic comedy (with a body count) world, so I made the executive decision to have practical applications of bar enforcements over attorneys.

To put it mildly, Kelsie is highly entertaining, she picks her targets well, and none of the people she has performed acts of criminal mischief against are angry she did it. They only pressed because she begged them to so she could get her community service hours.

The bar feels that the good she does through community service far outweighs her criminal mischief, and so she remains licensed.

In the real world, she would likely become debarred/lose her license from the sheer number of counts she has. Or be suspended into eternity.

But this isn't the real world, and liberties were taken... because let's face it. The court would rather have an attorney with a criminal mischief record and more community service hours than is sensible than a drunk driver.

In the real world, drunk driving attorneys tend to only face a suspension.

The real world sucks.

So, I hope that helps explain the why of Kelsie's record and her status as an attorney. The court (and bar) just feel that she does far more good than harm.

And unlike the real life drunk driving attorneys... she does.

I rest my case.

As for the timeline part of things, this heavily overlaps with the following novels: Plaidypus, Doggone Mess, and 101 Ways to Die.

Much like those stories, the overlaps are necessary; all the important characters are all doing something important *at the same time*. There is no way to neatly set these books into being in chronological order. Plaidypus takes place in the same time frame... so does Doggone Mess, so does 101 Ways to Die... and so does Whiskers on Kittens.

Sorry about that. But, in good news, you get some background information on *why* Doggone Mess played out as it did! And you can also see how the Devil doesn't *always* tell the truth. or at least the complete truth.

At the end of the day, these four stories all reached one goal: to keep the Quinns from becoming involved in certain events so that one specific future is reached—the future that ultimately leads to Heir of Hell (and the end of the series.)

As I'm being asked a great many questions on what is going to happen to the stories that *don't* directly lead to the end of the series... I have some answers for you.

Q: What about Serial Killer Princess 2 and Leashed I Could Do?

A: Patience, patience. They will be released in anthologies I will do that have side stories and such in the Magical Romantic Comedy (with a body count) world. This is my solution to the “but I want to write about these fun characters some more!” problem. I will do anthologies now and then, probably with a spinoff novel, a few novellas, and short stories.

One of the anthologies will be entitled “Dance with the Devil” and will be Lucifer themed, for example. (Spoiler alert: Serial Killer Princess 2 / Leashed I Could Do will probably not be in that one, as neither are Devil themed.)

Neither story has any influence on the end of the series, and the important work for establishing changes in the Mag Rom Com world have already been accomplished.

Q: Are you really ending the series with Heir of Hell?

A: Yes. I have zero interest in drawing out a series when it has a set conclusion. The only reason new books are added to

the series is when something that **must** happen before the end didn't fit in another novel. That's it, that's all.

All good things need to come to an end, and I have zero interest in beating the dead horse. The Client series and Otter series is as much dead horse beating as I'm willing to go, and the only reason I'm doing those is because they don't quite fit into the main series and were better off going into their own thing.

And the Otters series is very much *a story of consequences* rather than the *story creating the consequences*. (You'll get it by the time Heir of Hell rolls around.)

Q: What happens after the series ends?

A: The replacement is the Magic, Mayhem, and the Law in Precinct #153 series by G.P. Robbins. I've already released book 1, and book 2 should be coming out in 2024. (Late 2024.) This is up for negotiation, as I'm working on improving my health, and my health comes first right now. (I'm not even sorry. If I'm sick, I can't write.)

Q: What are your current pen names?

A: **R.J. Blain** (primary, urban fantasy, paranormal, anything goes in speculative fiction), **Susan Copperfield** (paranormal royalty themed), **Lilith Daniels** (semi-dark urban fantasy with romantic tendencies, heavily involves dragons), **Audrey Greene** (paranormal science fiction (slipstream) with generally sweet tones but serious underlying subject matter), **G.P. Robbins** (paranormal investigations with dragons, unicorns, the entire kitchen plus the sink full of weirdness, serious yet also relentlessly silly), **Bernadette Franklin** (think

mag rom coms but without the magic. Juliette is the series' equivalent of the Devil; easily loved, more than a little insane, and out to improve the world in questionable fashions).

Q: Why so many pen names?

A: People like different things. The tone, the style of book, etc, all play a part in why I use pen names. I want people to be **happy with the books**, and that means making sure like goes with like. If I am anticipating a larger series, I will set up a pen name. We already see how this works with stuff under the R.J. Blain pen name.

People who loved the darkness of Karma **hate** the fluffy of the Mag Rom Com series as often as not. By having the mixed grab bag, there are a lot of people who get pissy because I'm not working on the thing THEY want.

I'm still going to work on the thing they don't want, but by separating pen names, people can go with the things they like without having to deal with the things they don't like.

Alas, the vast majority of my readers are like this, and while I HUGELY appreciate those who read everything I write, most of them stay with the first series of mine they read, and they will refuse to read anything else.

This is just a reality of how readers tend to read/buy books.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the novel, and if you have the extended edition version of the book, that you enjoyed revisiting Bailey and Quinn a little later in life!



BONUS SHORT: BAILEY & QUINN SLICE OF LIFE

Dear Reader,

This is a a slice of life story taking place much, much later in the Magical Romantic Comedy (with a body count) timeline. How much later? I'm not telling you. Just know that it's much later than where we are at in the series.

There are typos, etc, etc, in here. Let's face it, I wrote this right under the wire, I had NO IDEA what I was writing until I started writing it, and I threw it at my editor without reading what I wrote first.

And then I copy-pasted it here after implementing her notes, once again without reading what I wrote.

This was written purely for fun. If you can't handle typos, grammatical mistakes, and pure creativity being bled onto the page, just turn away now. This is a bonus story, so please accept it in the spirit it is being offered.

Thank you, and I hope you love revisiting these two as they are living out their happily ever after.

~R.J.



For the first time in years, I had the entire house to myself. In an effort to keep up with the number of children underfoot, we'd moved four times. The fourth time, we'd accepted the truth: we needed to convert a warehouse into a residential property, much like a sizable gorgon hive did. Thanks to the plethora of pantheons willing to help us, we'd been able to afford the place. The buying and selling would have put me in the poor house three times over if it hadn't been for the investment things I did with Quinn's encouragement.

All in all, the place had a weird vibe, as though we'd built some demented prison complex rather than a home. Instead of the children being the inmates, the adults faced incarceration until all younglings turned eighteen. On a bad day, I lost count of the number of kids we had running around. At least four of them were my fault, using and abusing my gorgon-incubus doohickey. According to my husband, we held responsibility for six of them, as I insisted on throwing twins. While I held full responsibility for asking for twins, I suspected my demonic entity of a spouse had beaten me to the chase and had taken matters into his own hands for a change.

One day, I might not insist on twins and develop some common sense.

Maybe.

Between the fosters and adoptees, all gorgons thus far, there were sixteen small beings reliant on us to keep them alive from day to day. Absolutely puzzled over having nothing

to do, as the divines in our life had addressed every single chore I could think of doing, I wandered through the children's area of the warehouse-turned-home, aimed for the library, and discovered we still hadn't managed to unpack our books from the move. Towers upon towers of boxes formed corridors through the room. Somewhere in the maze were six armchairs, two sofas, and a few weird Japanese heated table things Quinn insisted would keep cindercones nice and cozy during winter months when the room's two fireplaces weren't earning their keep.

The heated table things did as advertised, although I often napped at them rather than read any books.

I eyed the nearest accessible box.

I had at *least* eight hours of peace and quiet. If the in-laws intervened around dinnertime, I might even get ten to twelve whole hours without anyone bothering me.

Had *He* intervened, creating a miracle? Had Lucifer been particularly naughty and changed the alignment of the stars? I could see my father and mother stealing away my husband for some nefarious purpose or another.

If asked, the commissioner would be more than pleased to cooperate with any scheming required to give me a day off.

We never asked for personal days to be lazy. We loved our job, we loved our kids, and we loved the chaotic mess that was our life.

The only time I liked being lazy involved when I had a roaring fireplace, my favorite rug, a handsome servant willing

to feed me grapes, and babysitters.

My current favorite fireplace hid somewhere within the library, hosting my favorite rug.

I missed my favorite rug.

As I couldn't read books when they were in the box, I decided my conquest would be to find a novel to read. I couldn't remember the last time I'd read a novel. Beauty strived to conquer our kitchen, which meant we spent an unholy amount of time going through cookbooks, learning new techniques, and teaching her and our other gorgon children how to do magic with food. Then there was the issue of actual science, which the gorgons adored with terrifying ferocity. I blamed Perkette for that.

She had come into our home and charmed our children with science tricks.

If I could make all the boxes disappear and put the books on the shelf, even in a chaotic fashion, Quinn would lose it. In his opinion, it would take us at least three years to unpack all the books and put them away.

If I could manage it in eight hours, I might make his brain explode. When his brain exploded, upon recovery, he tended to reward me for surprising him.

The books numbered in the thousands. Could it be done?

Rubbing my hands together, I decided there was only one way to find out.



As chaos would ruin my ability to win, I made a simple plan. First, I moved all boxes blocking my way to the bookcases into the hall. Once I located the bookcases, I went for the nearest box, unloaded all of its contents onto the bottom shelves, and rinsed and repeated the process. As flattened boxes took up less space, I made use of the pocketknife Quinn insisted I keep on me at all times, slicing through the tape with glee. The folded boxes went into the hallway with the mess still needing attention.

At an average of thirty books a box, I estimated we'd accumulated over ten thousand books since our marriage, most of which my gorgon-incubus doohickey held responsibility for. As Beauty and Sylvester would surely cry if they couldn't find their books, I took care to put theirs on dedicated bookcases.

For the rest, chaos reigned supreme.

Five hours into my shelving bender, I managed to get everything onto a shelf and the boxes flattened. With my rug found and my favorite fireplace in the complex revealed, I went to our stash of firewood, grabbed a few pieces, and prepared to enjoy my reward.

Ten minutes later, the fire roared, I was a unicorn, and I made friends with my rug, stretching out to enjoy the heat and a well-earned nap.

If someone wanted me for anything, they'd have to drag me out of my domain using force.

The scent of fresh bacon woke me, and without bothering to open my eyes, I snapped my teeth in the direction of the tantalizing smell. The first strip did an excellent job of convincing me consciousness beat napping, especially when 'open mouth, receive bacon' applied to my life. After five pieces, I decided to crack open an eye, determining Quinn had brought down our cast iron frying pan to make bacon for me in the fireplace. We'd have some regrets when it came time to clean the chimney, but some prices were worth making.

"Baaaaacon," I whinnied, rolling onto my back and pawing in my husband's direction with my front hooves.

He rewarded me with a brisk rub on my chest and grinned at me. "I was wondering when you'd snap something in that pretty little head of yours and conquer the library to get to your rug."

"Three years equal five hours in you time," I informed him before displaying my sharp, pointy teeth.

As my gorgon-incubus doohickey was as smart as he was handsome, he fed me another strip of bacon. "Followed with a nap on your rug, I see. I like your organization. You bothered to put the kids' books on a set of shelves while embracing chaos for the rest."

"Children who ignore parental decrees can fix books. Where children?"

“I regret to inform you that we will be bereft of children for a period of three days starting in the morning. We are also on paid time off, where we will enjoy doing something—anything—other than work. You have a choice to make, Mrs. Bailey Quinn. We can have a staycation, where we do whatever we wish in the comfort of our home. We can go on a road trip, where we will spend the night at hotels. Finally, we can board a plane or impose on a relative to go somewhere fancy. You have ten minutes to decide or I will decide for you.”

I snapped my teeth at him for daring to put me on a time limit to make such an important decision. Ten minutes to figure out what to do with *three whole days* of freedom? I lurched upright, and once stable on my hooves, I bucked my way to the hallway, careful not to hit anyone or anything.

My husband laughed at me. “Maybe I should give you a little more time. Are you even going to be able to think for the next ten minutes with how excited you are?”

“Sea bugs!”

“I see my wife would like to go on a road trip to acquire a feast of sea bugs. Now we just have to figure out which vehicle we’re taking.”

I settled, and I stomped on the floor, careful to keep my claws from digging into the hardwood. I lifted my hoof and showed him my claws. “No car. Get saddle. We run *free*. Put clothes in saddlebags. No parking fee. Much exercise.” I eyed him, admiring him in his uniform. “You pretty when stallion.”

“I’m pretty sure those sort of thoughts are why we had three sets of twins in a row.”

I whinnied because it was true. “Less stallion, more uniform. I weak.”

“You asked for twins, Bailey. Three times in a row. You *asked* for twins.”

I had, and I refused to be ashamed of it. “And they are all excellent cinderorns!”

“Maybe we could try having *one* incubus-gorgon dookie, Bailey? Just one?”

I eyed him. “We got *no* children for Christmas just once, now you want your twin?”

“Now that you mention it, a son as handsome as I am and with my abilities *would* be nice.”

“Not my fault we throw best cinderorn foals. Take it up with your uncle. Maybe he work miracle.”

Quinn huffed, and he puffed. “We are taking a car.”

Car? What car? We had put away the convertible, sending it off for a lengthy vacation in some hell until the oldest of our foals could inherit the headache. “What car? We no have car. We have mini busses. Several mini busses. We no longer all fit in one mini bus. May need real bus soon.”

“We have doting family willing to teleport us, and we have two ridiculous SUVs in case both of us need to take kids somewhere at the same time,” he reminded me. “We do not need a bus.”

“May as well be bus.”

He laughed, plucked another strip of bacon from the frying pan with a pair of tongs, and waved it at me. As doing what he wanted got me bacon, I trotted over, accepting his offering. While I chewed, he said, “My uncle has decreed that we need to have a car, one that isn’t about to die a terrible death due to old age. As such, there’s a car. I had a choice, Bailey. I could accept the car, or I could go to hell and be tossed in lava pools until I accepted the car.”

“Lava pools fun.”

“Not when you’re being blocked from shapeshifting. They *hurt*.”

Oh. That would change the nature of the ultimatum. “Good choice. Accept car good. Car go vroom vroom?”

“Considering that Malcolm helped pick it out, I expect to be ticketed the instant we leave home.”

I turned my head for a better look at the frying pan, determining there were two more strips of bacon needing my attention. Flicking an ear, I stared at the treats until my spouse decided to do the right thing and feed me the rest. “We be bad cops, get ticket!”

“Don’t you have enough speeding tickets, none of which you’ve actually paid because there are no laws on the books stating natural forms also count as motorized vehicles?”

“I all natural,” I informed him in a solemn tone. “Not my fault law favor me. They just like when I show up at court to state not a car. It good publicity. All say so, even you.”

“It is good publicity.” My husband heaved one of his patience-worn sighs. “As the car is motorized, we will not be getting tickets in it.”

“Maybe.” I continued to stare at the bacon, and as the sizzling treat of rendered goodness was not being presented for my enjoyment, I turned my ears back and displayed my sharp, pointy teeth.

“I could be talked into giving you those pieces of bacon for a price.”

As I couldn’t flatten my ears any farther, I snapped my teeth at him. “What price?”

“You have to wear a tank top with your leather coat.”

When I thought about it, I was only half the reason we kept having children. My gorgon-incubus doohickey held the other half of the responsibility. “Not my fault if you do not get gorgon-incubus doohickey male heir. Ask naughty uncle first, then pester assholes. We no talk to my daddy. You perish.”

My husband laughed, retrieved the two pieces of bacon from the pan, and fed them to me. “Go get changed. I’ll put out the fire, clean the pan, and help with the packing as soon as I’m done. We leave in the morning.”



A sky blue convertible had joined the SUVs and our cruiser in the garage, and had I been a patrol officer, I would begin writing tickets while parked. I considered the vehicle before

turning my gaze onto my spouse and narrowing my eyes. “Is this the start of our first midlife crisis?”

“Basically,” he replied, tossing the keys and catching them, skipping to the driver’s side. “While small, the trunk did fit everything for three days. If you decide to go on a shopping rampage for the children, we will have to ship our goods home.”

“I should be ticketing you for looking at it.” Rather than heading to our cruiser to get out a pad of blank tickets, I opened the door and slid into my seat. Upon being hugged by the comfy leather seats, I changed my mind. “Okay, we can begin our midlife crisis now. I approve.”

“The seats are heated and vented.”

“I already said I approve, Queeny.”

He laughed at me, got settled behind the wheel, and started the engine. “I’ve been told we have to start using our PTO appropriately.”

I eyed my husband. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, I’m aware you don’t understand how PTO works. That’s why we’re being kicked out of work for the next three days without a child in sight.”

“Or wolf,” I noted.

“Or any living beings reliant on us for any reason whatsoever. I have been told we are stressed, overworked, and in dire need of a vacation.”

As we hadn't left the warehouse-turned-home's garage, I stared at him in disbelief. "We're stressed?"

"Definitely."

That was new. "Overworked?"

"We have been found guilty of such a thing."

I couldn't fault the 'in dire need of a vacation' thing; outside of the ill-fated road trip with Perkette and the brief outing with Quinn, we hadn't gone many places or done many things because of the sheer number of children we held responsibility for. "But we've gone to the museum, the zoo, the butterfly gardens, more parks than I can count..."

"None of those count as a vacation."

"I don't get it! When are we supposed to go on a *vacation*?"

"Now. That's why we packed casual clothing and have buckled into this strangely shaped vehicle." With a delighted grin, Quinn pressed the button that turned it into a convertible. "With the old car, if I wanted the top down, I had to do it manually. The mechanism no longer works, and it's too expensive to repair."

Ah-ha! That explained a great deal. "Condemn it to hell. We'll get the children new cars. That's what we work for. We work to buy the children things. And when we can't afford it, *I rob your uncle.*"

My husband's eyes widened. "There's a gateway to his many hells not far from here. He uses it to transport Malcolm's car. We *could* sneak into hell and steal shit."

“I don’t want to steal shit, Queeny. That’s gross. We have enough shit to deal with. Do you know what young children do? They produce shit in vast quantity.”

“I meant gemstones.”

“Oh.” I joined him in widening my eyes. “What do you have in mind with the money?”

“Well, after we rob my uncle, I think we’ll go pester my grandfather for a blessing, and then we’ll sell the gemstones so we can finish the renovations on the house. The library’s shelves don’t go to the ceiling yet, we can fit in some extra shelves in those sad, empty spaces, and we can upgrade the flooring. We can also see about installing a basement. We’d need some hefty magic to waterproof it, and that’s expensive. Then we can raid an orphanage to find a child. The rules still do apply.”

Sometimes, I questioned my own rule about adopting every time we decided to add to the world’s population. “Centaur this time? How many do you realistically need for a male heir?”

“If I’m cheating, only one. If we want to keep the children happy, two girls and a boy would be wise. The boy will want to protect his sisters, and he will want to establish his own hive if he has gorgon temperament. Honestly, I expect he’ll be more like me and be monogamous; it’s something to do with my interplay of genetics. But if we have three, and the girls are monogamous, too, they can form a multi-family hive. My father doesn’t mind other males in his territory, and I’m the

same. The girls will keep their men contained once they're of age, I'm sure."

"The warehouse is definitely large enough for a large hive and a small hive to share the space." I rubbed my hands together and giggled. "We could come home with three adoptees at the end of this trip and foreshadow to the rest of the family what we are planning. But you will have to do all the meddling or ask helpful parties."

"I'll ask my grandfather; I think he's the best to help with the male heir problems. And since we have a decent-sized hive now, Dad's getting ready to pass the title off to me, so it would be a good idea to have the line of succession established. It's a gorgon thing."

"When isn't it a gorgon thing in our household?"

"When it's a cindercorn thing, which happens with alarming regularity."

Laughing, I settled in my seat and made shooing gestures at him. "Take us on this vacation. We must determine if this is to our liking. Will we get ticketed for driving fast in hell?"

"No."

"Take us to hell! And I get a turn to drive."

"It shall be as you wish, my most beautiful cindercorn."



The gateway to hell came in the form of an underground garage. On the surface, it appeared to be normal until we

reached the third basement level. Quinn parked, got out, and pressed his hand to the wall, which opened a gate descending deeper.

On the fourth level, I discovered where Malcolm kept a bunch of his cars, each one safely nestled in an oversized parking spot. Judging from the hoses and equipment on one of the walls, it was his favored spot for washing his vehicular babies.

“I really shouldn’t be surprised, yet I am,” I confessed.

“Kanika’s cars are on the level below, and they get similar treatment. Malcolm can’t help himself.”

That much I could agree with. When it came to his sphinx, the kelpie went to extremes to keep her happy. “But how do we get into hell?”

My husband pointed across the parking lot at a black section of wall. He drove towards it and turned on his headlights, which pierced through the darkness and revealed a road beyond. “As Malcolm loves driving, this gateway is three hours away from Lucifer’s primary residence. There are a bunch of roads specifically so Malcolm can zip around in his babies. We will be taking advantage of one of those roads. It goes by one of the crystal fields. Lucifer has a lodge out there, and I happen to have the keys.”

I snickered, and having learned my husband’s wicked ways, I determined he had stressed himself straight into his family forcing him to indulge in his sinful ways in a fashion that didn’t trip his angelic side’s trigger. “When did you get the keys?”

I had no problems with robbing the Devil of everything he owned if it meant I could work on the warehouse-turned-home, but my gorgon-incubus doohickey struggled with toeing any lines.

For our children, he'd indulge in a little theft from his uncle, but only if his uncle encouraged such behaviors.

My husband's sheepish expression pleased me. "I got them about the same time he told me to take the car or else. If he didn't want us stealing his gems, he wouldn't have given me instructions on how to break into the place, somewhere to stay, and a promise we'd be left alone for the entire time while food, drink, and entertainment appeared at the appropriate intervals."

I would never understand Lucifer, but I appreciated his love for his family. That I hadn't realized Quinn needed a break bothered me, but while I couldn't fix that, I could make certain his incubus had a good feeding and some time to unwind.

Demons and devils became quite testy when hungry and stressed.

"This car is an excellent start to our first midlife crisis. Stealing from the Devil, selling off the stones, and buying things for our kids is an even better continuation of our first midlife crisis. I think we should adopt some centaurs, though."

Our daycare had some young centaurs, and I bet they could keep up with a bunch of gorgons and cindercorns, especially the predatory cats.

Our foals *loved* the predatory cats more than life itself, which often created adorable mayhem.

The foals worked to escape to the wing with the centaurs, which meant the gorgons joined their siblings in working to escape. One of these days, I expected our children would force full integration throughout the daycare.

I looked forward to it, as there was nothing more adorable than a huge room full of mixed-species children playing to their hearts' content.

“Maybe we should have brought the dogs,” Quinn muttered.

I read between the lines: my husband missed his cat. “Our babies are on vacation right now, Quinn. And we can't separate Avalanche from Blizzard, so you can't have your ocelot for this venture.” It amused me that our pets ruled with iron paws. “And while the wolves would *love* coming to hell and taking over, if your uncle has them, they're in his conservatory for the next few days on a grand hunt.”

With our luck, we would end up with even more wolves to care for.

In good news for my sanity, our warehouse-turned-home had room for everybody. Taking over an entire massive block in Long Island City, a quick hop across the water from Manhattan, had done us a world of good. The shoreside property had been abandoned, as the charity that had been using the warehouse for food distribution had relocated to a cheaper location on the other side of the district.

Quinn's first project, upon moving in, had been to transform the concrete and stone shoreline into a children's paradise, one filled with flowering plants and shrubs, swing sets, and toys. We'd kept the retaining walls and barricades separating the place from our neighbors, but we'd spruced them up. On our side, we'd installed planters and ivy. On the public side facing the park, we'd hired graffiti artists to transform it into a breathtaking mural featuring the sea in its full glory.

We'd also, after talking with the park's owners, installed benches so that people could admire the artwork.

Fortunately for our sanity, Lucifer took care of making sure some nitwit didn't tag the mural trying to prove something when in possession of a can of spray paint.

If we stole enough gems, we could finish the playroom, upgrade the wolf's habitat, and work on the second level, which remained empty due to a lack of funds.

The second level would become a retreat for those wishing to indulge in quiet activities, arts and crafts, and so on. There would be a few bedrooms for guests, and there would eventually be a greenhouse meant to allow us to enjoy nature when winter came calling.

"Judging from your expression, you have realized what we could do if we rob my uncle."

"Does he have a name tag on the stones?" I asked, raising a brow.

"No, but it is his property."

“Just because he’s a goody-goody running the joint doesn’t mean it’s his. If he didn’t want us making off with it, he wouldn’t have left them unattended. We could finish the greenhouse, Quinn.”

“That thought had crossed my mind,” he admitted. “And Beauty wants to get into gardening.”

Her desire to be surrounded by all things green would drive me insane. She’d gone from a gangly child to a teenager in the blink of an eye, and I gave it one or two more years before her brother would have to begin the process of finding her a hive.

While Beauty broke the gorgon mold in many ways, she wanted a hive, and she wanted the dynamics only a traditional hive would provide her. We did our best for her, but Quinn acknowledged she would not be a chip off our blocks.

Given two or three years in a traditional hive, and we’d be rolling in grandchildren.

The thought terrified and thrilled us both.

Already preparing for the reality of Sylvester founding a hive of his own, we’d established which part of the warehouse complex would belong to him and his hive until he established his own building elsewhere.

Ultimately, we’d rob Lucifer blind so he could make the property acquisitions in a few years.

Quinn drove through the barrier in the parking garage and down the road, which to all appearances wound through a stone tunnel. Within five minutes, we emerged in one of the

many lava fields of hell, although the lava remained a safe distance from the road. “Maybe we should steal enough so Sylvester can start his own hive.”

“Start? Babe, I love you, but he’s already got three girlfriends wrapped around his finger. We have *three* permanent fosters because their parents understand our son has charmed them and they won’t be leaving the Quinn hive. Thomas is grateful that two of his girls were charmed, and I will *not* be surprised if Beauty goes to Florida.”

“Thomas’s boy might be acceptable,” I conceded.

The pair had kicked it off from the start, and the young male received an invitation every year to foster in our hive. We’d yet to send Beauty out, but Thomas understood our hesitation.

We’d rescued a few too many gorgons over the years to be willing to risk our daughter to the world.

“Are you ever going to use his name?”

“No.” I lifted my chin and sniffed. “If he wanted me to use his name, he’d grow a spine and ask it of me. When he grows a spine and asks me to, then he might be worthy of Beauty.”

“Ah. I see the protective cindercorn has come out to play. Are you going to bite me if I suggest that you might want to *tell* him that?”

I sniffed. “You’d like it.”

“I mean, I *would*, but can you blame me? When you bite, you get ideas, when you get ideas, I get to be particularly

naughty and rig the next pregnancy how *I* want it. I'm being purely selfish."

Snorting at the thought of Quinn managing to be selfish, I replied, "You might have gotten away with that if you hadn't told me the plan first."

"Well, we do have a rule about adding to the household for a good reason."

I held up three fingers. "Two girls, one boy, and you're the one who has to figure out how to make the gorgon-incubus doohickey genes work out in your favor. If I throw more foals, you'll just have to be stricken with utter joy you are surrounded by even more cindercorns."

"I can tell you're absolutely heartbroken at the thought of more foals running around giving us gray hairs."

"That might work if either one of us had a single gray hair. We don't." I allowed myself a smirk. "I know exactly what I'm getting out of this."

"Sore feet, kicking children, and a strange enjoyment of the cold?" my husband asked.

"A good time, but you're not wrong about the rest. I'm holding out some hope for bacon and sea bugs, too."

"I think I can handle some bacon and sea bugs."



Quinn parked our new car in the garage of a log cabin nestled on the side of an ash-strewn mountain. On the mortal coil, I

would have worried for my poor lungs, but Lucifer worked magic on his guests, blocking unwanted health consequences from occurring due to the unique terrain.

The mountain came with two features I loved: a sparkling creek and a lava-filled crater at its summit.

I meant to enjoy both to their fullest.

My husband stole a pair of buckets from the cabin along with a strange wooden frame with metal mesh within. Pointing at his tool, I asked, “What’s that?”

“It’s a sieve. We run gravel or dirt over it. The dirt falls through, the gems remain. Once we have cleaned the rocks, we pick out the gems, throw away the junk, and repeat the process.”

“We only have one. This is a problem.”

“You may have the sieve. I am planning on sorting my rocks individually, for I have no common sense. I find the process relaxing.”

“You want to hand wash every rock individually?”

“That is my plan.”

“But what if I want to compete for who finds the most sparkly rocks?”

“I would likely be setting myself up for failure,” my husband admitted.

“Game on. The person who finds the most sparklies gets to boss the other person around for an entire *week*.”

“We only have three days right now, babe.”

I pointed at my face. “Is this the face of a woman who cares?”

My husband sighed, tucked the screen under his arm, and pointed in the direction of the creek. “Carat weight and number of stones. Two categories, two weeks of bossing around are up to grabs. The person who finds the stone with the highest monetary value gets to pick a vacation spot for two, no children, for a week.”

Apparently, the commissioner must have taken Quinn to school about our general refusal to take time off work. “You’ve been told we have to take three weeks a year off minimum, haven’t you?”

“Five, but I figure we can start with three and see how badly it goes. Once upon a time, I overworked to escape my life. Now I overwork because I *like* my life. And my wife. And she works with me, so why *wouldn’t* I like working?”

“I foresee some intensive corrective therapy tonight,” I predicted.

“Yes, please.”



I knew absolutely nothing about finding gemstones, and upon being abandoned at the section of creek Quinn declared was mine, I realized my spouse had set me up to lose so he could be the ruler of the roost for three weeks.

What the hell did raw gemstones even look like?

I had the sieve, but I suspected I was about to receive a hefty dose of defeat at the wicked hands of my spouse. In good news for my pride, I wouldn't care when he got his hands on me and took what he wanted.

The incubus in him was always hungry.

Even when I lost, I won, so I splashed in the water, delighted at its warmth, sat in the current, and began dumping handfuls of rocks into the sieve so I could clean them. Unfortunately for my sanity, all the rocks were pretty in some fashion or another, from pale yellow to brown stones I could see through, dark green pillars, purple and red opaque stones, and a bunch of clear round ones.

The only rocks I identified as junk were volcanic in nature, obvious in their curious properties, texture, and deceptive weight. I tossed those to the side, and as I didn't want to give up anything that had any sparkle whatsoever, I dumped the entirety of my sieve into my collection bucket.

It took me less than an hour to completely fill my bucket, and soaking wet from head to toe, I went off in search of my spouse.

He had adopted his gorgon-incubus doohickey form, sat on the shore, and picked through the pebbles in search of shiny offerings to steal from the Devil.

The intensity of his expression amused me. "Do you know what you're looking for?" I asked.

"Diamonds. I keep finding sapphires, rubies, and other stuff."

I rolled my eyes. “Gemstones are gemstones. They sell. Steal them all.”

“But I want to find the *best* stone,” he informed me. Upon finishing his examination of the stone he held, he set it on his shirt beside him. “I am only putting the diamonds in the bucket.”

I peeked into his bucket to discover he had filled the bottom layer with tiny stones. “I removed the volcanic rock and threw everything in my bucket,” I admitted. “Everything is pretty, so why shouldn’t I keep it all?”

“Well, that’s one way to win a category.” Sighing, he leaned forward, dug his hand into the water, and grabbed a new rock, a clear stone with a pointy end. “And that would be quartz.”

I considered the clear rock, which had no flaws as far as I could tell. “But it’s a pretty rock. We can put it in the greenhouse.”

Quinn considered the stone, nodded, and added it to his bucket.

I pointed at the collection on his shirt, which would spill over. “If you put all those in your bucket, they count. We can guess what types of stones they are when we need a breather tonight.”

The sapphires, rubies, and whatever else he’d found joined his diamonds and quartz in the bucket. “I acknowledge I am being stupid. Did you find any nice stones?”

“My bucket is full because I know nothing about rocks,” I confessed. I sat down, and I dug through my collection in search of one of the brown translucent stones I’d found. I found one the size of an egg, rather round, and covered with many flat planes. “I like this one!”

“And that would probably be a diamond.” Quinn grabbed a little machine resembling a temperature gun, pressed it against my stone, and tapped a button. “Yep. That’s a diamond.”

I blinked, staring at the rock before turning my gaze to him. “Your uncle leaves diamonds the size of eggs just lying around?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he deserves to be robbed, then. When I get back to my phone, I’m calling your naughty grandfather and making him sell it for me for a share of the profits!”

“And that’s a good way to get a nice check for stealing from my uncle.”

I held up my pretty brown stone, admiring it in the area’s red-orange glow. “This is really a diamond?”

“This is one of Lucifer’s favorite gemstone producing streams. The volcano ejects the stones, and he comes here looking for treasures. This is where he gets a lot of his material for Malcolm’s cars and his projects. What he doesn’t take ultimately goes to some world or another on the mortal coil, waiting to be found.”

“I thought science made our diamonds.”

“Science makes *some* of our diamonds, but others are gifts from the heavens or hells.” Quinn reached into his bucket, and pulled out a stone the size of a small marble. “This is my largest diamond.”

I giggled at the difference in size. “Should I leave you alone for a while? You may need some time to come to terms with your defeat.”

“I haven’t lost yet, woman.”

“Where can I get another bucket? I may as well steal more shit from the Devil if I have to wait for you all day.”

Quinn pointed in the direction of the cabin. “There are five or six more in the entry, and there are a few canvas bags if you decide to go the robber route.”

When in doubt, take everything worked well for me, so I skipped in the direction of the cabin to continue my dirty work.



The glow of the volcano overhead did a good job of illuminating the area, which made digging for treasure into the night a joy. After filling all my buckets, I’d dumped as much of my loot into the canvas bags as possible, dragging them to the cabin one by one.

I estimated I had at least five hundred pounds of gemstones to play with, and I had plans for the wealth.

Amused my husband meticulously searched, still on his first bucket, I sat nearby and dug holes in the creek's gravel shore to see what I could find.

Lucifer popped into being, and he tapped his foot, crossed his arms, and lashed his tail from side to side. He'd gone for a flaming suit, and according to his expression, he thought about how he might best punish us.

I pointed at my husband. "He wants triplets, two girls and a boy, all of the gorgon-incubus doohickey variety. I have offered my approval. We are currently having our first midlife crisis, so please don't interrupt. Unless you're providing dinner. We could probably use dinner."

"Sam," Lucifer growled.

Uh oh. My gorgon-incubus doohickey had earned his uncle's wrath. "Someone's in trouble!" Something sparkly caught my attention, and I grabbed a fist-sized rock out of the hole, rolled to the creek, and went to work washing off my treasure. The dark red played nicely in the volcano's light, and I made a show of admiring my new best friend. "I'm keeping this one, Quinn. I'm going to put it on my nightstand." I thought of what I knew about rocks, turned my attention to the Devil, and held up my prize. "Ruby?"

"That would be a diamond," he replied.

Whatever. "It's red, it's like fire, and I like it, so I'm going to keep it on my dresser."

"What are you doing, Bailey?"

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m stealing your fancy rocks you left lying on the ground, cashing most of them out, and fixing the warehouse so it’s more like a house. And we’re going to go on vacations, apparently. Want to watch the kids?”

“Sure.”

I giggled, set my stone in my bucket, and clapped my hands. “I’m sure Sam will be fine with life after he has his gorgon-incubus doohickey son and his two gorgon-succubus doohickey daughters. I’ll be more than fine with whatever we get, but he’s sad, Lucy. Just indulge him so I’m appropriately rewarded.”

“Sam,” Lucifer complained. “Why didn’t you just ask?”

“Bailey’s always so happy with the foals,” my husband replied, and he flopped onto the ground. “The foals are severely outnumbered.”

“Triplets for your doohickey children is fine, but you can’t toss more than twins safely, Bailey. We’ve been over this before. When you’re a cindercorn, you only have two teats, and the foals need to be able to nurse at the same time. You’re designed for two at most. Three foals would drive you insane. But yes, triplets of the doohickey variety are easily arranged. However, are you two aware that it’s not Christmas?”

I giggled, as all of our children had Christmas conception dates—and they all shared the same birthday, precisely eight and a half months following conception. “Would it make you happy if we waited for Christmas?”

“Your herd would be overcome with sadness if the new arrivals didn’t show up on the appropriate date.” The Devil sat beside me, reached over, and ruffled my hair. “A few more months of freedom wouldn’t go amiss, either. So, what’s the real reason you’re trying to rob me blind?”

“Renovations.” I pointed in the direction of the cabin. “I don’t know how much those are worth, and I need enough to renovate the entire warehouse. We have the exterior looking less like a prison and more like a home, but the interior definitely has prison complex vibes to it still. And we need the greenhouse. And the expanded basement you talked about. All this stuff costs money. Plus if we have triplets, there’s going to be three new fosters we need. That costs money. Plus we could use some funds to do repairs and renovations on the daycare.”

“Sam, why didn’t you tell her the one stone she found would cover the cost of everything?”

“She was having too good of a time looking for treasures to stop.” My husband laughed, got up, and brought his bucket over to his uncle. “How’d I do?”

Taking the bucket, the Devil tilted his head to the side, made a thoughtful noise in his throat, and dipped his hand into my husband’s collection of stones, pulling out a green sphere the size and shape of a clementine. “This one could do a great deal of good in the world at a small cost of temporary evil.”

“Go for it.”

Lucifer pocketed the stone. “Expect a live birth and being bitten more times than you appreciate in the late stages of pregnancy. On the other hand, you won’t have any dietary

restrictions, as your doohickeys will have your general resilience in addition to their natural defensive abilities. As your little girls will be part demon and devil, they'll be able to function as a bride *and* mother in a gorgon pairing, which will make them highly desirable. Before you worry, they'll be happily polyamorous should they decide hive life is for them. If not, they'll be happily monogamous. And unlike their gorgon-incubus doohickey of a father, they won't have to be tempered before they go on to enjoy their happily ever after. But really, Sam? You could have stopped her after the first bucket."

"She was having fun."

"She's stealing several billion worth in rocks from my creek!"

"Hey, babe?" I bounced up to my feet, grabbing my red rock to show it to him again. "I'm a champion gold digger."

"You're not digging for gold, Bailey. But you're definitely a champion thief. I'm going to have to reward you for your cunning."

Whee! "Go away, Lucifer. I need to be rewarded for my cunning."

The Devil sighed. "Just don't flood the gemstone market. You have a lifetime supply of gemstones, okay? You don't have to sell them all at once."

"If you say so, Lucy."