

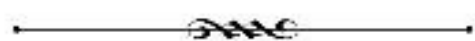
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LAUREN DAWES**

Revenge always looks  
better in a ballgown...



— *one* —  
A CAT MCKENZIE NOVEL

# BAD FAE



A CAT MCKENZIE NOVEL.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
LAUREN DAWES

***Bad Fae: A Snarky Paranormal Detective Story***

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*This one is for my wicked awesome ARC team. I couldn't do this without you,  
ladies!*

# ONE

“AND THAT’S how I decapitated the vampire trying to kill me.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to cram them back in there. My date’s eyes bugged out of his skull, and his face drained of color. Silly me for sharing what my work days were like, although decapitation wasn’t the half of it. Rogue vampires, zombie cyclops, gremlins with a penchant for Dodge Rams, I’ve seen it all. I’ve also experienced it all.

It was called a Tuesday in the life of Cat McKenzie.

Stabbing the straw into my glass, I watched the ice bump into the sides of the twenty-ounce plastic tumbler before leaning down to take a sip. Normally, I’d be all over a cup of coffee right about now, but I’d overdone it during the day and decided on a soda instead.

We were in a railroad car that was moonlighting as a twenty-four-hour diner. It was the kind of place where your ass was re-introduced to sparkly polyurethane bench seats and you ate at Formica tables. It was dated—its heyday been about a quarter of a century earlier—but they still served some awesome pie.

Mason Crane pushed his John-Lennon-esque glasses up his nose. “And this is *normal* for you?”

I shrugged. “What’s *normal* mean, anyway? I just go to work, and this stuff happens.” I gestured to my new truck parked outside. I went with a Ram again because why fix a thing of beauty. “That’s a brand-new truck. I got it a week ago to replace my other brand-new truck which was crushed, then eaten by a six-story gremlin. And the one before that? A vampire drove a semi-truck into it a few minutes before dawn... with me in the front seat. The other vampire we’d arrested was in the back and got ashed the instant the sun hit

it.”

Mason’s already pallid face went a weird off-greenish color. Reaching for his drink, he brought his coffee cup up to his mouth and took a draw. His brown eyes were wide behind his round glasses.

He was what people liked to call a ‘hipster.’ He was an educated, sensitive, well-groomed man with a manicured beard, glasses, and hair that could be scooped into a man-bun if he so desired.

And he so desired.

It was sitting at the top of his head right now like a little radio tower.

A radio tower of brown locks, projecting the message that he was a metrosexual hipster who enjoyed his cushy publishing gig and the use of hair—and let’s face it, probably also beard—products.

“Have you ever thought about getting some beardaments?”

He lowered his coffee cup like a knight lowering his shield in front of someone he couldn’t decide was a threat or not. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Beardaments. Beard ornaments. You know, to decorate your beard. Christmas is next week. You should put some string lights or something in there. Maybe some baubles? I saw a website that makes them just for beards.”

The look of abject horror on his face would’ve been funny if it weren’t for the fact that I was being serious.

“Ah... well...” he stammered.

“I’ll get you some,” I replied, pushing my cup away when I saw our pie coming.

This was our first date.

Probably our last one too, given how badly I was scaring him with my... Cat-ness.

Add on all the first date jitters I was suffering from, and I was a mess.

Because I didn’t date.

When would I have time to devote to a man outside of work? I’d met Mason in the coffee shop in town. We’d both been refueling for the day. He asked me to pass him a stirring stick. I did. Then he asked me for a lid. I handed that over too. Then he asked me for my number and a date.

Although I wasn’t looking for someone to date, I said yes.

You want to know why?

Because Mason was human. H-U-M-A-N. As human as a human could get.

Just like me.

He didn't have the ability to stir lust within me in a single look. He didn't need to suck my blood to survive. I didn't need to be careful about what I said around him for fear of indebting myself to him.

He was safe.

And I needed safe.

Sawyer hadn't liked the idea, but Sawyer could suck a dick for all I cared.

"I've got a slice of cherry and a slice of apple," the waitress announced, arriving at our table. Being the pro she was, she remembered exactly who had ordered what, placing my cherry pie down in front of me, the apple in front of Mason, then asking in that same peppy voice, "Anything else I can get you?"

"We're fine. Thanks," I replied, unwrapping my fork from the napkin and cutting off a bite of my pie.

Mason shuffled his glasses further up his nose and said, "Thank you, but no."

The woman walked away, and I smiled at Mason. "I hear this pie is the best."

He nodded. As he ducked his head down to take a mouthful, my gaze snagged on someone sitting in the booth behind us. There was only one occupant, and she was facing me—*staring* at me, in fact. I flashed her a scowl then got busy with the pie.

"So, Catherine," Mason began.

"Cat, please. Call me Cat."

Only the fae and the vampires used my full name, and it freaked me the fuck out.

He smiled. "Cat. Why did you become a cop?"

I faltered. There were two ways to answer this—the truth or a bald-faced lie. Since I'd already divulged a lot about my crazy life, I decided on the truth.

"It wasn't what I wanted to do. I started on an arts degree, but after my father's death, I switched courses. I wanted to stop other people from getting hurt, and this seemed like the most logical way to do it."

"I think it's very noble."

I smiled a little at the comment. Nobody had ever told me I'd done something noble before. "And how did you get into publishing?"

Mason placed his fork down on the side of his plate and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Oh, I wanted to be a writer, but I could never finish a

manuscript. I always seemed to get stuck in the middle of my story and not know the way out. I went into publishing because at least that way, I'd still be involved in the industry even if I wasn't a part of the industry."

"Makes sense," I said. "What kind of books would you like to write?"

A faint blush crept up his cheeks. "Oh, umm, reverse harem?" He phrased it as a question. "Have you heard of it?"

"Well, I know what a harem is," I started. "So reverse would be one girl with lots of guys?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Mason, that's kind of kinky."

His blush grew deeper. "I'd write under a nom de plume and write reverse harem. Contemporary stuff, you know."

"Cowboys and the nanny. Billionaire tech-company teams and the secretary, college hockey team and an aspiring journalist reporting on their illicit sex tally?"

He blinked. "Those are amazing ideas for stories."

I buffed my knuckles against my chest. "I *am* pretty great, right?"

My gaze flickered across his shoulder to the woman sitting in the next booth. Her blue eyes were still fixed on me, a sneer pulling up the corner of her mouth. Huh. Maybe she wasn't a big RH fan.

"Will you excuse me, Mason? I just have to go to the bathroom for a sec."

"Oh, sure," he replied.

Getting up from the booth, I walked down to the far side of the car-length counter in the middle of the diner and into a small hallway that serviced the kitchen and bathrooms. The ladies' room was the first door on the left, and I stepped inside.

There were only two stalls, so I took the one farthest away from the door and locked myself in. A moment later, the bathroom door opened again, and someone walked into the other stall.

I couldn't pee while someone else was within earshot, so I waited for them to flush and wash their hands before I even started. Once I was done, I opened the door and paused when I saw the same woman from the next booth over facing the mirrors, her palms on the sink in front of her, and her eyes fixed on my reflection.

Thinking I was crazy, that this woman couldn't possibly have been waiting for me, I stepped over to the other sink, pumped some soap...

"You're a dead girl walking," she said softly.



“I’m sorry?”

She turned her head with creepy slowness, pinning me with eyes the color of aquamarines. They were as cold as those stones too. “I said, you’re a dead girl walking. This is for Kailon,” she said with a smile.

Fuck.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

I hadn’t heard hide nor hair from Kailon Perry—the fae assassin who was now trying to kill me because I took away his opportunity for revenge two weeks ago—but I guessed my reprieve was over.

“So, you’re Kailon’s bitch, huh?” I said, rubbing my hands together and lathering them up. “Trust him not to get his hands dirty in public.” I waited for her to reply, but when she wasn’t so forthcoming, I washed away the suds. The small space filled with the scent of lemon. “Got nothing to say to that?”

She hissed at me, her human face sliding off to reveal bubblegum pink skin and bright blue hair. Her eyes stayed the same. She could’ve passed for human if not for the skin or the three-inch fangs filling her mouth. “I’m going to make sure you suffer... for Kailon’s sake.”

“He’s considerate like that,” I replied with a shrug, shaking the water from my hands. “So, are we going to do this in here, or do you need more room?”

With a low growl, she lunged for me, grabbing my head and slamming it down onto the edge of the basin. Bells rang in my head as my vision flickered to black. Lemons. Lemons edged with the metallic hum of blood. The smell was everywhere.

Pervasive.

Pervading.

With my hair still firmly grasped in her hand, the fae wrenched my head up and back, then yanked forward until my skull met glass. The mirror spiderwebbed with cracks, then shattered when my forehead made its second introduction.

Blood streamed down my face from the gash along my head. “That’s the last cheap shot you get at me,” I told her, breathing heavily through my mouth.

The fae laughed, and the sound of it was like heaven in my ears. My anger melted away from me, leaving me only with a sense of calmness. As

soon as she stopped, though, all the fog that filled my head drifted away.

*Damn, that was some kind of power.*

Too bad she couldn't laugh while I was kicking her ass.

Elbowing her in the ribs, she let go of my hair with an *oomph*, then backed away a step.

The fae's brows slammed down over her eyes as she stared at me. "What the hell are you?" she demanded.

I tried not to get offended by that. If I had a nickel for every time a supe questioned what I was...

"My name's Cat McKenzie, and I'm going to kick your ass," I told her with a grunt.

"You're not supposed to be able to break free of my power so easily."

*Power?* "The laughing thing you just did?" I asked, then scoffed. "It's a pretty lame power if you ask me."

She growled like a wolf at me.

O-kay, so that was the wrong thing to say to her.

"That *lame* power has brought down countless leaders, leaving them open for takeovers and wars."

"Yawn. Look, I guess it was okay, but it wasn't as badass as Kailon's ability to suck all the air from the room. If you want a show-stopper ability, that's it."

The fae shook her head, irritated. "Stop talking."

"And die?" I supplied. "Is that all you got?" I was stalling so hard. I wasn't prepared to be attacked tonight. I thought I was simply going on a date with Mason Crane—human publisher and overt metrosexual. I wasn't expecting to be fighting in the women's bathroom with a fae who could literally drain all the anger and aggression out of a person with a single well-timed chuckle.

"Stop talking!" she shrieked again.

"You know, people say that to me a lot," I muttered, trying not to let it bother me. Something in my peripheral vision caught my attention, and I tilted my head to the side a little. Reaver had just shimmered into existence inside the stall I'd used.

Reaver was a magical angel sword that had taken a liking to me. It came with all the awesome accessories—showing up whenever it damn well wanted, its unpredictability and a bloodlust for revenge that was downright creepy.

I edged closer toward the stall, wiping blood out of my eyes as I did.

The fae watched me like a wolf watched its prey. “Where are you going?”

“Toilet?” I replied. “Murder attempts give me a spastic colon.”

“Stay where you are,” she growled.

I tutted. “No can do. I have a date out there, and he’ll be wanting to know where I went.” Before she could move, I dove to the floor, sliding across the tiles until Reaver’s pommel was within my hand. The fae had followed me into the stall. I twisted over onto my back, holding the sword out in front of me, and the fae’s eyes widened. There was no way she could stop from slamming into me. Reaver punched straight through her chest and out the other side. Blood poured from the wound, covering my shirt, chest, and neck with liquid that smelled faintly of cotton candy.

I’d just have to chalk all this up to another day in the life of Cat McKenzie.

“Kai... lon,” she gasped. “Will... avenge...”

Her face was mere inches from mine as she died, her last breath feathering over my cheek.

Being as gentle as I could, I rolled her off to one side and stood. Reaver was sticking straight out of her at a forty-five-degree angle. Gingerly, I wrapped my hands around the hilt and pulled. The steel slid out easily, coated in bubblegum pink blood. It looked more like transmission fluid than something that was necessary for life, but a doctor for the fae I was not.

Glancing around, I wondered how to deal with the mess. Shutting the door seemed like the first step, so as I stepped from the stall, I eased the door shut behind me. Next step was calling my partner, Sawyer.

“Hello, Cat,” he answered in his low drawl.

“Hey.” I watched the pink blood creep toward the drain in the center of the floor. “So, funny story, but I just killed a fae in the ladies’ room.”

“That doesn’t sound like a particularly funny story,” he replied.

“I guess it depends on who’s telling it,” I quipped. I toed the edge of the creeping sea of pink. “Anyway, she’s dead, so I guess... send in the cavalry?”

His chuckle elicited a reaction from all the parts of my body he’d touched. Sawyer was an incubus—a sex demon that fed on lust. We’d had sex once—more out of necessity than want—when he’d gone between feedings for too long and left himself weakened.

It should’ve been a one-and-done thing—the sex... the fantastic,

amazing, at-least-a-dozen-Os sex—was never supposed to happen again. He shouldn't have been unable to rise to the occasion, so to speak, but something had gone awry. Although he could somehow get a hard-on for me, I decided that banging my partner wasn't the most professional thing to do.

“Where are you?” After I told him, he added, “I'll be down there in ten. Don't touch anything and don't let anyone mess up the scene.”

“Roger that.” I hung up and pushed out of the ladies' room. There was a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and wearing double-denim with her hand outstretched, about to open the door.

“Sorry, closed for a murder investigation,” I told her with a shrug, flashing my badge.

Her gaze swung down to my hand before she nodded and scurried away, throwing one last look over her shoulder as she disappeared out of the hallway.

## TWO

“EVERYTHING OKAY, MISS?” someone asked behind me. I turned. It was one of the waitresses. Her gaze darted to my forehead then back to my eyes.

I wiped away some blood I felt creeping down my face. “Do you have a key for this?” I gestured to the bathroom. “It’s now a crime scene, and I need to keep people out.”

More of those bulging eyes. “Are you a cop?”

Pulling my badge from my back pocket, I flashed it at her. “Officer McKenzie with PIG, the Paranormal Investigative Group.” After the woman studied it for a long minute, I prodded, “That key?”

“Of course. Let me grab it from the office.”

Turning on her scuff-free-soles, she hurried off in the opposite direction. She was only gone for a few minutes before returning, handing me the key to lock things up. “Do you have an out-of-order sign or something we can hang on the door? And can you lock the front door? We’ll need to interview all the witnesses here.”

*Including my date.*

Well, if there was one thing I could assume, it was this would be my last date with Mason, too.

“Sure,” the woman replied softly. “I’ll just go grab the sign then lock the front door.”

When the scene was secure, I wandered back into the restaurant. Mason flashed a quick smile that turned into a frown.

“Your head,” he stammered. “Blood.”

I touched my forehead and winced. My fingers were coated with blood—sticky and wet. “I’m all right,” I told him, sitting down on the edge of the

bench seat. “Just had a little issue in the bathroom.”

“My God... are you all right?”

I threw him one of my best devil-may-care smiles. “Sure. This is the least serious injury I’ve received while on the job.”

“You’re not on the job though, are you?”

Well, he had a point there. “It’s the most serious injury I’ve received out on a date.”

Mason paled, and he lifted his glasses up off his face to rub at his eyes. “I’m sorry, but is this normal?”

I heaved a heavy sigh. This was the second time he’d asked me that. “For me? Unfortunately, yes.” I glanced around the restaurant to see everyone staring at me. Not let’s-try-to-catch-a-look-while-she’s-not-looking kind of thing. They were all flat-out staring at me, and for the first time, I felt self-conscious. Snapping some napkins from the holder, I dunked the corner of one into Mason’s glass of water and dabbed at the cut. I had to grit my teeth to stop myself from cursing with each swipe of the wound. Judging by the sharp stabbing pain, I probably had some glass still embedded in there.

I turned when there was a knock on the door behind me.

“Officer?” the waitress called with a little waver in her voice.

Dumping the bloody napkin onto the table, I stood and went to see who it was. I grinned when I saw Sawyer standing on the other side of the glass. “Let him in,” I replied. “He’s my partner.”

The waitress unlocked the door and let the incubus in, sucking in an appreciative breath as he walked past. Yeah, I got it. Sawyer was smoking hot with his dark hair, clear gray eyes, and six-foot-plus height. Add dark slacks and a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows to show off his amazing muscular forearms, and he was a walking wet dream for women... some men, too.

He took one look at the gash on my forehead and muttered, “Do I want to know?”

“You should see the other guy.”

He touched the edges of the wound, making me hiss.

I batted his hand away. “What was that for?”

“Just seeing if you needed stitches.”

“I think the answer is yes.”

“Yes.” He dropped his hand. “I have Ben and Hayliel on their way too, to question the people in the restaurant. Dr. Lee is coming. I’ve also had to call

in the human CSI, as usual.” He blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “We need to hire more staff. PIG’s numbers are dwindling.”

I nodded in agreement. “Please tell me Hayliel will be wearing normal clothes,” I whined. “I don’t think people will be able to handle her in her undercover duds as well as find out that a fae was killed in the ladies’ room tonight.”

“She’ll be on her best behavior.”

The first time I’d met Hayliel was when I’d strolled into PIG, ready to get my punishment over with. She’d been dressed in something that looked like a fetish suit, all thin straps of leather covering her fun bits. It was instant distrust on her end. I didn’t have a lot of love for her either.

I still didn’t know what flavor of supe she was.

Ben, on the other hand, also didn’t like me. I was beginning to sense a theme.

He growled—a lot.

Was possessive of desks.

I found out a couple of weeks ago, he was a Wendigo—a native American supernatural creature with antlers and a head like a deer, teeth like a wolf, and the body of an emaciated human.

Oh, and bonus! They were cannibals too.

Ben kept his real body hidden from human eyes, looking completely normal at work. I shuddered to think how the guy let loose on his days off. Maybe he turned into his real form and hunted through the forest looking for a tasty camper-snack.

*Shudder.*

“Now, where’s the body?”

I led him down the short hall and stopped at the ladies’ room, getting the waitress to unlock the door for us. I stepped inside, the scent of cotton candy overwhelming me for a moment. More transmission-fluid pink blood was on the floor, gurgling softly down the center drain.

“What happened?” Sawyer’s voice had gone from teasing to professional. Just one more reason to love working with the guy.

“I was on a date, I went to the bathroom, and this fae followed me in.” I gestured to the woman with the pink skin and bright blue hair. “She said she was here because Kailon sent her, then she attacked.”

“Her glamor disappeared when she died?”

“No. She lost it when she was threatening me before the fighting started.”

Pulling on a pair of gloves, Sawyer crouched down beside the body and looked at the wound in the center of her chest. “I take it Reaver joined the party.”

“Can’t keep a sentient magical sword away.”

He shook his head. “Also, you were on a *date*?”

Slightly affronted, I folded my arms across my chest. “Yes. Why is that so hard to believe?”

He glanced at me then back at the body. “What’s his name?”

“Mason.”

“Human?”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” he mimicked, then stood. “Why are you attracted to Mason?”

I frowned. “Is this an appropriate conversation to have right now?”

“Why not?” He gestured to the corpse. “She’s not going to tell anyone.”

*Touché.* Sighing, I leaned against the wall and folded my arms. “He’s nice.”

“Nice?”

“And safe.”

Sawyer frowned. “Safe from whom? You?”

“Apparently not,” I muttered. “Look, he’s human. He has a steady job. He’s not associated with supes like I am, and right now, I need some normal in my life.”

He narrowed his eyes and stood, stalking toward me. “Why?”

“I just explained why.”

“No, why do you need normal?”

I gave him an incredulous look. “Why do you think? Look at me. I can’t even go out for a meal without killing something. If I weren’t a cop, I’d be called a mass murderer and be on death row right now.”

He smiled, the gesture making him look wicked rather than angelic. “Good thing you’re a cop then.” He looked over at the mirror my head had been smashed into, then at the shards of glass in the sink. “So, what happened. Run me through it.”

“I noticed her staring at me in the restaurant. Honestly, I didn’t think too much of it since people always stare at my awesomeness. I excused myself to the bathroom, and she followed me. I only knew it was her after I stepped from the stall. She was waiting for me.”



“And what did she say to you exactly?”

I dug through the memory. “She said, ‘you’re a dead girl walking. This is for Kailon.’”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm? Is that all you got?”

“What happened then?”

“She slammed my head into the mirror twice.” I pointed at the bloody mess on my head. “Then I saw Reaver appear in the stall. I dove for it, and by the time I turned around and brought the sword up, she was falling on me. The sword went straight through and killed her. I rolled her off, took out Reaver, got squiggled out by the pink blood, called you...”

“Got it,” he replied, shutting me up. “Did she identify herself?”

“No, but she did try to use her powers on me.”

He looked at me through the last shard of glass hanging in the frame. “What was her power?”

“When she laughed, it felt as if all my anger melted away, leaving me only with a sense of calm. The funny thing was my opal didn’t react to her—no pulse of heat or light. Nothing to warn me she was going to attack.”

He grunted, frowned, then said, “She was a demi-fae then. That sort of power is a weak one.”

“Ooo, *burn*, Sawyer. You’re lucky she’s dead. When I said that, she went into Rantville and started telling me how powerful her ability is.”

“Why would Kailon send a demi-fae to attack you?” he wondered out loud.

“I don’t know, but it was a pretty shifty move on his behalf.”

Through the ladies’ room door, a booming voice said, “Taylor, we’re here.”

Sawyer let Ben inside. He stared at me with dead eyes, then turned his attention to the scene. “What do we need to know?”

“Whether anyone noticed her in the restaurant, what time she came in, whether she ordered anything... that kind of thing. Tell Hayliel to keep everyone calm and compliant. The ME will be here to collect the body soon, and CSI has been called in, too.”

“Yes, boss,” Ben replied. He gave me one last scathing look, then left.

“I don’t think the big bad wendigo likes me.”

“Do you care if he doesn’t?” Sawyer asked.

“Well, considering what he actually looks like and his very nature...”

yeah. I mean, who wants to be on the bad side of a guy like *that*?”

“Ben tolerates you, which is more than he does any other human. You’re actually one of the few humans he likes.”

“Well, he has a funny way of showing it.”

“Detective Taylor, are we clear to come in?” someone called from the doorway. It had to be the CSI team and photographer.

“Yeah, come on in. We were just leaving.”

The door swung open, and the same team as usual stepped into the room. Three people in total, one of them propped open the door while another unpacked their little yellow markers with big black numbers on them. The photographer hung back, but her eyes traveled over the scene, probably already cataloging everything.

I followed Sawyer out into the restaurant, stunned to see Hayliel—dressed in normal street clothes—and Ben calmly talking to the customers. Hayliel was with Mason, whose eyes kept darting around wildly. When they landed on me, I saw the palpable relief on his face.

“So, that’s *Mason*, is it?” Sawyer growled into my ear.

“Yeah. Jealous?”

He scoffed. “No, Cat. I don’t need to compete with a man like that because *you* already know how good we are together. You’re just being stubborn.”

“No. I’m being smart. Having a sexual relationship with my partner has *bad* written all over it.” I straightened as Mason stood and walked toward me.

He pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Cat, they said I could go. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“She’s fine,” Sawyer replied, and I shot him a glare. “You can go.”

Mason swallowed hard, then looked back at me. “Can I call you later?”

My eyes widened. “You *want* to call me later?”

“Sure. Why not?”

I scanned the diner, taking in the terrified stares of the other patrons. “Because there was a murder? A murder I committed in self-defense?” I phrased them all as questions so he could see how confused I was. Surely, he wanted to run for the hills at this point.

He pushed his glasses up his nose. “As you said, it was self-defense, and I enjoy talking to you, Cat.”

I blinked. “Then sure. You can call me later.”

He nodded then, giving Sawyer a nervous glance. Mason leaned in and

kissed me on the cheek. Beside me, Sawyer growled, the sound jerking Mason away like a physical hand wrenching the back of his shirt.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he said.

“Have a good evening,” I replied.

As soon as he was gone, I said to Sawyer, “Was that really necessary?”

“Yes. Oh, look, Lee is here.”

He stalked off before I could chew him out anymore. He was either incredibly smart or incredibly cocky—safe in the knowledge that there was no way I could get irritated at him. Because he was right. I didn’t feel right dating someone while Sawyer still invaded my dreams.

## THREE

AS SOON AS Lee and his van were gone, the CSI team had packed up, and the witnesses to a fae murder had been interviewed and cleared to return to their homes. Sawyer made sure my head got the requisite stitches from the paramedics still loitering around on a just-in-case basis. It was Jones and his partner, Berman, again.

“What was it this time?” Berman asked wryly, gesturing for me to sit down on the bench seat inside the ambulance.

“Demi-fae,” I told her with a grin.

She slipped on some gloves and opened up one of the little drawers inside the rig. “Oh yeah. How was that on a scale of one to zombie cyclops?”

I knew she meant it as a joke, but still, I answered, “A solid one. Not really as fun as it was to bring that cyclops down.”

Berman simply shook her head and snipped the top off some saline and handed me a pale green plastic kidney-shaped container. “Hold this just above your eye while I flush the wound out.”

I did as she asked and positioned the—bedpan?—against my forehead. “So, how have you two been?” Ah, small talk. There was nothing like it during a medical procedure.

There was a soft puff of air then something cold hit my hairline. “Jimmy and I have been good.”

“Do you always work together?”

“Seems like it.”

“Is he a good partner?”

“Absolutely.” She took the bedpan from my hands and placed it down with one hand while holding gauze against the wound. Dabbing, she said,

“Honestly, I feel like we’re married sometimes.”

My gaze flickered over to Sawyer, who was standing just outside the rig, his arms folded and his eyes hooded. Yeah, didn’t I know that feeling. “That must be nice, though, right? Having someone you trust at your back all the time?”

She shrugged. “I guess it depends on who you ask. I’m okay with it, but my cat isn’t going to start chewing me out for spending so much time with a guy at work. His *wife* on the other hand? She has some serious issues.”

“Oh.”

Berman sighed. “Yeah. I mean, it’s not like Jimmy and I are screwing around together. He’s at least a decade older than me.”

“Age isn’t everything,” I murmured, my eyes still on Sawyer. He was stock-still, his gray eyes watchful. Clearing my throat, I asked, “When does your shift finish?”

“After I stitch you up, so don’t move.”

I did as she asked, keeping my head still as she numbed the area with Lidocaine, then put some stitches into the wound at my hairline.

“I hope you’re not planning on getting any photos with Santa before Christmas because a surgeon, I am not. These sutures aren’t pretty, but they’ll stop you from bleeding out.”

“And that’s all a girl can ask for.”

There was a gentle tugging sensation with each loop of the thread, and all I could say was thank fuck I couldn’t feel any of it. When I heard the snip of scissors, Berman leaned back and placed her instruments of torture beside her.

“As good as new. Keep the area clean. They’re dissolving stitches from my personal stash since I didn’t figure you’d want to get them taken out on Christmas Day.”

“Good call.” I ran my fingers up to the small bandage. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

I stood, swaying a little. Sawyer was there to catch me, though, hooking his hand under my arm and keeping me steady. I stepped from the back of the ambulance, and Berman followed me out.

“Stay out of trouble, Cat. I’d hate to have to stitch up that face of yours again.”

“You say the sweetest things, Berman. Have a good Christmas if I don’t see you before.”

“I hope I don’t see you again before Christmas,” she shot back with a smile, already cleaning away the supplies she’d used.

Sawyer escorted me to my truck, which he looked over with interest. “I can’t believe you got another one of these.”

I patted the front quarter panel lovingly. “Why wouldn’t I? They’re the greatest truck ever.”

A faint smile graced his lips, and my heart leaped.

No. Stupid organ. Don’t react to Sawyer’s sexiness.

“I just figured since you’ve already had two of them trashed by supernatural creatures, why would you tempt fate and get another?”

“Because I’m a glutton for punishment.” Clearly, since I kept dancing with the idea of doing away with trying to stay away from Sawyer. I wanted what he could give me, but dammit, I couldn’t at the same time. Relationships with partners was bad. “Anyway, follow you home?”

“I’ll follow you. I want to make sure nothing else comes out and attacks you.”

He strode off before I could make a comment, pulling the helmet from the back of his bike and putting it on. I unlocked my truck and hauled myself into the driver’s seat. I was glad he hadn’t figured out the other reason I liked Rams. The cabs were so far off the ground that I felt like I wasn’t five foot four. I was used to the cracks about my height, but in a truck this size, I felt like a fucking giant.

Turning the key, I expected to hear the engine roar to life.

Except it didn’t.

All I heard was a *tick, tick, tick*.

“Shit.”

Throwing open the door, I leaped out and hauled ass across the parking lot. Breathing hard, I stared at my truck, waiting...

Waiting.

“Cat, what is it?” Sawyer demanded, looking between me and the truck.

Gasping, I threw my hand over my chest and just breathed for a minute. “I heard a ticking sound when I turned the key.”

His expression turned dark in an instant. “Stay there,” he barked, then yanked out his phone and called someone. I couldn’t hear who he was talking to—only that his words were clipped, his anger bubbling away in the background. Keeping a safe distance from the truck, he bent down to look underneath then cursed loudly.

As soon as he hung up, he stalked back to me.

“I’ve called in the bomb squad.”

“The *bomb squad*?” I looked back at my truck, then at him again. “There’s a bomb under my truck?”

“Yes. Clearly, it didn’t detonate, but yes.”

“Holy shit.” I shook my head, my heart pounding. “Someone is trying to kill me. Not a new occurrence, obviously, but at least do it to my face. Damn.”

“It must be Kailon who’s done this. Maybe he sent the demi-fae in as bait, then tampered with your truck while you were... we *all* were... distracted.”

“I just don’t understand it. Why wouldn’t he just go the easy route and choke the air out of my body instead?”

“Kailon takes pleasure in psychological warfare. Hey, it’s okay.”

I jerked my head around. “I’m fine,” I ground out.

Sawyer wrapped his heavy, warm arms around me, pulling me close. “Are you sure about that? You’re shaking.”

And he was right. My whole body was vibrating violently. I guess I wasn’t as badass as I thought I was when it came to surviving murder attempts. I buried my face into his neck, breathing in his chocolate and whisky scent like it could save me.

“Why don’t you go back into the restaurant and sit down while I wait out here?” he suggested, talking into the top of my head. “Go on.” Unwrapping his arms, he gave me a little shove, and top points to Sawyer for not escorting me there himself. He knew I needed to keep some dignity in all this.

In a daze, I walked back to the diner and pushed inside. The place was empty now, and I grimaced at their loss of business, all thanks to me. One of the waitresses glanced over at me as I stopped at the counter.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied, swallowing. “Just needed to sit down for a little while.” I gestured to my stitched-up face.

“Of course. Would you like something to drink? Some water perhaps?”

“Sure. That’d be great.”

She hurried off to get me some H<sub>2</sub>O, and I slumped into one of the booths that looked out over the parking lot. Sawyer was pacing near his bike, his head bent as if he was glowering at the asphalt for simply being there. The lights of the lot bathed him in a sort of yellow light, a warm buttercup yellow

that gilt his cheekbones and strong nose, his square jaw and brow. He was a gorgeous male, and because I knew what he could do with his body—how he could make me *feel* with his body—it was all the more reason to stay away.

He made me feel too good.

Like an addiction.

So distance was good.

That was the real reason I went out on a date with Mason. Mason didn't have all the entanglements attached to him. He didn't have any pussy-soaking whammy powers. He didn't have the ability to tear down my sexual self-control with a single molten look.

He simply wasn't Sawyer...

... and that was the crux of the issue.

"Argh." I kicked my legs out under the table and crossed my arms. Of course, Mason wasn't Sawyer, but I didn't *want* Sawyer—not really—not in the ways that counted. Yes, okay, the sex was ah-mazing, but sex a relationship does not make. I needed someone who would be there all the time, not ducking out to feed on the lust of some woman down the hall—or worse, fucking the woman down the hall.

I needed stability.

I needed someone normal.

I needed human.

My head jerked around when someone touched me on the shoulder. It was the waitress. I looked at her name tag. Phyllis.

"Some water," she said, putting the cup down onto the table.

"Thank you."

She pursed her lips as she looked me over. "Are you sure you're all right? You're awfully pale."

"Someone just tried to blow up my truck," I told her in a hollow voice. "That was after someone tried to kill me in the bathroom."

I wasn't going for the shock and awe effect, but it seemed my whole life was a battlefield of ducking knives in the back and dodging bullets. I sighed. "Thanks for the water."

Phyllis bobbed her head. "Give me a yell if you need anything else."

*A life where I wasn't on everyone's favorite hitman's radar!* I wanted to scream, but I kept that to myself.

I'd done enough to ruin Phyllis's night.

I highly doubted that Kailon would be the last supernatural to try and kill



me, and didn't that thought just fill me with delight. Maybe I needed to be a little more proactive in trying to figure out the *why* of it. Clearly, I attracted the notice of supes—and maybe not for the reasons I thought. Maybe they were drawn to me for another reason.

I'd been told that my father and mother were from two of the strongest bloodlines in the fanatical supernatural killing group, Rogue Faction. Which made *me* a culmination of those bloodlines, but what I wanted to know was *how* I played into all that. I barely knew a thing about the organization since my parents lied to me and said they were only archeologists. The only thing they had provided me with was the black opal necklace dangling between my collarbones.

I had to figure out who and what Rogue Faction were and what my opal had to do with it all. The stone had remained cold while the demi-fae was in my presence. Why? Why was it play-acting at being a piece of jewelry when any other time it would heat up, pulse or glow like a freaking Christmas tree if there was magic being used, or I was in danger? Maybe Kseniya—the witch who'd stolen it from me—had tampered with it in some way.

I clutched at the stone.

Someone had to know the answers to all these questions, and there was only one person I could think to ask—Mrs. Brown.

But the woman who had practically raised me, the woman who I'd found out was a Brownie, was missing. I'd gone to the Palatial where she worked as the night-shift manager and been told she was on vacation. When I asked for how long, they'd said she didn't say. I found it odd that she'd take off not long after we were reunited. She said she'd answer all my questions. She said she'd help.

Now, I had no idea where to go to get that information.

I sat up a little straighter in the booth when I saw a white van roll into the parking lot. The chassis was a Ford E-450 Cutaway with a dry van body. On the side were the words 'Buxton Bomb Squad,' just in case someone didn't know. The vehicle pulled to a stop about twenty feet from my truck-turned-murder-machine, and a man got out.

Taking a sip of water, I swallowed like it could give me courage, then got up too. When I pushed my way outside, the cold air slapped me in the face, helping to drag away some of the stupor still squatting in my body.

Sawyer clapped palms with the guy like they knew each other, but their expressions were pinched.

“How are you, Taylor?” the bomb squad guy asked.

“I’m all right, Lecky. How are you?”

Lecky shrugged. “Can’t complain.” Gesturing to my truck with his chin, he asked, “What happened?”

“It’s my partner’s brand new truck. She got in, turned the ignition and heard a clicking sound.”

Lecky whistled. “Damn. She’s lucky it didn’t detonate if it is a bomb like you said.”

Sawyer noticed me standing there and waved me forward. Stumbling toward them, I eyed my truck like it was going to explode on me anyway, just to spite me. Breathing shallowly through my mouth, I clutched my opal and refocused on Sawyer.

“Is this your vehicle, ma’am?” Lecky asked in a business-like tone, although I did notice his eyes darting up to the bandage on my hairline, then away again.

“Yes.”

“Are the keys still in the ignition?”

I nodded, startling when I felt Sawyer’s fingers brush the base of my spine, his hand settling there.

“Why don’t you and Sawyer stand over near my van while I assess what we’re dealing with here.”

“How can he be so calm?” I hissed quietly as we walked away.

“It’s his job, pussy cat. Let him do it, then we can get you home.”

## FOUR

SAWYER and I arrived back at the apartment a little after midnight. My truck hadn't exploded. The bomb had been removed and disposed of, and Sawyer hadn't stopped running a critical eye over me since then.

"I guess this'll teach me to go out on a school night," I said with a yawn.

"Can I get you anything? Some tea?"

I made a face and he laughed. "All right, no tea, but also no coffee for you at this time of night." His chastisement was gentle, and I knew he was right. If I added caffeine to my bloodstream right now, things would go south, but I was already planning on not sleeping, so it wasn't like it mattered.

"Why don't you take a hot shower, then come back out when you're ready. I can't imagine you're in any mood to sleep right now."

"Yeah, two assassination attempts in one night *is* a little above average for me." Turning, I trudged into my room, shutting the door with my foot behind me. Shucking my shoes and socks, my feet sunk into the plush carpet. Next to come off was my jeans and jacket, then my shirt. In the bathroom, I flipped the lock just in case Sawyer decided he needed to be in here with me too, then started the shower.

Before I stepped foot inside, I leaned over and peered down the drain in the center of the stall. Two weeks ago—I was starting to sense a theme—a Grindylow had crawled up out of the drain with a warning. Ever since then, I checked the damn thing because here's what I've learned about the supernatural world.

It's scary AF.

Like, every conceivable monster you can think of, exists. I'd already met

some of them, and I wasn't foolish enough to think that working for PIG was going to make me immune to their horrors.

When I was sure nothing green and tentacle-y was going to crawl out of the drain, I got under the spray, letting the water slick over my hair and sluice off the general ickiness of the day. Forgetting about my stitches, I ran my fingers over my hair and yelped when I got a stab of pain.

"Cat, is everything okay?" Sawyer called through the door.

"Yeah," I yelled back frantically, covering my breasts with my arm. "Everything is fine."

I waited for some sort of retort that never came. When I was sure he was gone, I finished my shower and stepped out, wrapping one big fluffy towel around my body and rubbing another through my hair. With my forearm, I wiped the steam from the mirror and blinked at my reflection. Bruising was already starting around the perimeter of the bandage, dark blues and purples creeping up to my hairline on either side of the stitches.

Jesus, I was a mess. It seemed like I couldn't go a week without getting attacked by something. Last week, it had been pixies. Now, I know what you're thinking. Pixies are cute little things. WRONG! They're vicious creatures with razor-sharp teeth and an appetite for toes.

Sawyer and I had gone to investigate a report made by a bowling alley owner. She said she'd called the police to report that her customers were complaining of bites on their toes after their shoe hire, but they hadn't believed her. Then, she'd called PIG, and we swooped to the rescue.

After trying to flush the little bastards out of the shoe racks and behind the machinery for the lanes, I was lucky to walk away with all my toes still attached. The same couldn't be said for the owner, who lost her little toe in one last-ditch effort by the gang of pixies.

Making sure I was completely dry, I brushed out my hair, tied it into a knot at the top of my head, then got changed into my pajamas. Tonight's selection was a flannelette number with unicorns carrying trick-or-treating buckets in their mouths because candy collection from strangers was always a winner in my book.

When I pulled open the bedroom door, the scent of popcorn wafted in the air, and my stomach rumbled. Clutching my hand over my abdomen, I tried to remember if I got to finish my pie at the diner and realized I probably hadn't. Following that delicious smell of butter and salt, I found Sawyer on the couch, blankets piled high around him. His Netflix home screen was on

the TV with his selection of...

“Historical romance? What the eff, Sawyer?” I plopped down onto the couch beside him and gestured to the screen. “Since when do you like historical romance?”

“Since I lived it,” he replied dryly.

Sawyer was born in the 1860s, so that was a legitimate claim. “Okay, so what are we going to watch?”

He selected a series that featured a fresh-face young woman who was the eldest daughter of her family, learning to navigate the London marriage market all the while looking for true love along the way. The guy she would totally marry in the end—called it!—was a fine specimen of a man with short, dark, curly hair, chocolate skin, and dreamy dark eyes.

“Feel free to wear those breeches anytime you like, Sawyer,” I told him, snuggling under one of the blankets. It had unicorns on it, naturally.

He chuckled, the sound of his delight working through me like a balm. I doubted many people got to see this side of Sawyer—this playful side. He was known for his intensity, but once you made it into his inner circle, he showed all the different facets of himself.

For example, the blanket currently draped over me? He surprised me with it a few days ago. He said I needed to be surrounded by what made me happy, and unicorns were what made me happy.

“I think I might still have a pair somewhere.”

I sat up, the blanket falling off me. “Please tell me you do.”

He arched a brow. “I didn’t think that would do it for you, McKenzie.”

I figured anything to do with Sawyer, would do it for me, but I didn’t say that to him. Settling back into the couch cushion, I draped my kick-ass unicorn blanket back over myself and watched the young Victorian-esque woman on the screen fumble her way through love.

I reached for my opal on impulse, running the pad of my thumb over the smooth surface of the rare black stone. Unlike with Kseniya Chernov and her band of merry monsters, it hadn’t reacted to the demi-fae at all. I’d become used to the stone giving me a warning of impending death—I just hadn’t realized how much I’d come to rely on it.

“What are you thinking about, pussy cat?”

I glanced at Sawyer. His intense gaze was fixed on me, not the screen. Releasing the opal, I sat a little straighter and told him.

“Nothing?” he asked. “Not even *while* you were being attacked?”

I shook my head. “Or before it. I got nothing. No warning whatsoever.”

He furrowed his brow. “Has it ever done that before? What about with Kailon?”

Twisting, I turned my body toward him. Fuck, he was a gorgeous man. Shaking my head to clear my lusty thoughts, I said, “Nothing. No heat. No glow. It’s the first time it’s *not* reacted to a supernatural being or a power being used... whether I’m the target or not.”

“Interesting,” he murmured. “I wonder...”

I never found out what he was wondering as my phone started to ring.

I looked at the device balanced on the arm of the chair.

Then I looked at Sawyer, who shrugged and made a motion for me to pick it up.

It was edging into way-past-midnight territory now and nothing good ever came from picking up a phone this late.

“Hello?” I answered.

Static filled the line, a buzz of white noise that peaked every so often.

“Hello?” I asked again. Pulling the phone from my ear, I hit the loud speaker button and let Sawyer listen in too. “Hello?”

“Hello?” came the soft reply. “Is this Catherine McKenzie?”

I shivered. “Yes?”

“My name is...” more of that static, so loud this time that I missed the first few words, “... speak with you.”

“I’m sorry, you cut out. What did you say your name was?”

“My name is... Queen of the... Court.”

I flashed a look at Sawyer, whose brows were drawn tight.

“Can you repeat that? There’s a lot of static on the line.”

“Astri—” the woman said. “... Seelie Queen.”

The phone fell from my hand, landing face down in my lap. I looked at Sawyer, hoping to God he knew what to do because I’d heard this name before. I’d heard this title—from Kailon.

Flipping the phone over, I asked in a shaky voice, “You’re the actual queen of Wonderland?”

“Not currently...” static, “... is reigning at the moment.”

“Avi? It’s Avi’s turn?” I asked loudly because somehow talking more loudly will cut through static. *Jesus.*

“Ye—” Again, her words were cut off.

I let out a breath. “Look, I don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“I need your...” static, “... help.”

Automatically, like a Pavlovian response, I began to shake my head. There was no way I was helping the fae. “Sorry, your majesty, but I have no interest in getting tangled up in fae politics.” I hung up before she could speak again and tossed my phone gently across the other side of the room.

Sawyer raised his brows questioningly. “Was that necessary?”

“Look, it was either that or stuffing it into the freezer, and I’m too lazy to get up right now. I don’t want to be getting involved in fae business.”

“I think that might be the first smart thing you’ve said,” he replied.

Digging my hand into the bowl of popcorn, I tossed some kernels into my mouth and chewed. “I did the right thing, right?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied in a measured tone. “Receiving a phone call from the Seelie Queen of Spring and Summer isn’t something I know how to navigate.”

“Oh, so you’ve never had the privilege?” I deadpanned. “Why did she call me, though? Surely there are other people who can help her better than me.”

His eyes darted down to my opal. “Perhaps not.”

## FIVE

IT HAD BEEN an hour since Sawyer had bid me goodnight and gone to bed. Me? I still couldn't sleep, and figured I wouldn't any time soon. The phone call from Astrid had rattled me. Sawyer's comment about my opal rattled me even more. Before he went to the land of ZZZs, Sawyer told me about his library, which was tucked away in his office. I hadn't ever realized he'd had an office, and considering I'd been living with him for almost a month, that was pretty sad.

My snooping skills were losing their edge.

I was curled up in a round chair, one that had a deep seat, a high back, and loads of cushions. I didn't think it was Sawyer's style, but I was learning that he could keep surprising me. Sprawled in my lap was a large leather-bound book that was about magical artifacts. I was kind of hoping something would be in there about my opal, but after reading it from cover to cover, I learned that magical cauldrons, weapons, and jewelry existed, but there was no mention of magic-repelling, fatal-shot-warning black opals that were given by fathers.

It was hopeless. I needed Mrs. Brown to tell me what she knew. She'd said we'd have plenty of time to talk, but two weeks later, and nothing. Not that I could blame her for wanting to take a vacation.

Heaving a sigh, I closed the current book and slid it on to the ottoman with the other tomes I'd read already. I probably had another hour in me. Despite thinking that I couldn't sleep, I was discovering that my head was growing loggy.

Hauling myself upright, I walked along the wall-length shelves, trying to see if anything jumped out at me—hopefully not literally. I needed to know



about Rogue Faction too, and since the opal search was turning into a dead-end, I changed tactics.

I ran my fingers along the spines of the books as I inched my way down, stopping at a book that was titled *Enemies of the Fae: A History*.

“Well, color me intrigued,” I said to myself.

Pulling it out, I traced the image of a beautiful fae woman on the front cover with my fingertip. Given the size of the spine, the fae had *a lot* of enemies, it seemed. Mind you, they had been around as long as human civilization so they had to have accrued a few in that time.

Opening the book to the table of contents, I skimmed the entries, stopping when I reached *vampires*. *Vampires were enemies of the fae?* Given that vampires were aloof and ruthless by nature—just as the fae were—it made sense, but I didn’t realize there was anything more to it than that.

Another entry that caught my attention was called *Ancient Rome’s Solution*. Intrigued, I flipped to that page and took a little look. I read a few entries about how the fae had been blamed for the madness of the Caesars from Tiberius to Caligula to Nero. They thought that the fae influenced these men and their actions, but it sounded to me like they were looking for a scapegoat.

Then my gaze snagged on something else. It looked like an ax, but not in the modern sense. It was made of bundled wooden rods and an ax head bound together with strips of leather. It was called a *fasces*, and it was a symbol of power and authority, strength and justice.

It said that many people suspected of being one of the fae race were killed with one of these *fasces*. And because they successfully killed would-be-fae with them, they were long thought to be one of the only safe ways to destroy them.

Ancient civilizations sure had a way about things.

I kept searching, grinding to a halt when I saw *Humans* as a heading. I scanned the words on the page below.

*Humans are the most problematic to the fae. This is not due to any powers the humans possess, as they possess none, but it has to do with their physical number. The human population outnumbers the fae one thousand to one, and with that larger number, they control them.*

*Three centuries ago, the two ruling queens decided to create a world just*

*for the fae. Parallel to the human world, The Mound reflected the human one surrounding it.*

“The Mound.” I traced the letters with the tip of my finger. That must’ve been what the fae called it before we started calling it Wonderland.

I kept reading.

*The Mound was designed to be a place where the fae didn’t need to use their glamor to hide their true identity. Its creation was also two-fold. The humans had started to become distrustful of the fae. Because it appeared they never aged, or had strange diets, they began to think that maybe they were not human at all. They formed organizations to hunt the fae. These groups of humans called themselves Rogues, which, as their numbers grew, became Rogue Faction, or simply Faction.*

I looked up, rubbing my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. Rogue Faction had been around for three centuries? And my parents had been a part of this group—a group that willingly hunted down fae at first, then supernatural creatures on the whole.

“Fuck.”

Still, I kept reading, this time flicking over to a section called ‘aos sí.’

*It is often said the biggest enemy of the fae are the fae itself. The two queens of the Fae Court—the Seelie and Unseelie—are always related by blood. As with magic, there must be balance—light and dark.*

*The Seelie Court seeks help from trusted humans when they feel it’s necessary and is often called the ‘Golden Court.’ The queen’s quarters are filled with golden light and have a living ceiling of white ash boughs.*

*On the opposite spectrum is the Unseelie Court, which has gained the name of the 'Shadow Court.' Here, the Unseelie Queen is covered in blackthorn thicket and is perpetually cold and gloomy. The Unseelie fae are dark in complexion and enjoy torturing humans for the smallest slight.*

I slammed the book shut and breathed deeply for a little while. The fae were a complex civilization, and as I stared down at the beautiful—clearly Seelie fae—on the front, I wondered who had written this book. A lot of the information in here could be used against them, and it'd be a cold day in hell before I had a fae for an enemy, well, *another* fae.

Kailon was plenty enough for me to handle right now.

Placing the book onto the top of the pile, I stood and stretched my arms above my head. Tomorrow was a new day, and if it involved the fae, I had to be on my guard.

## SIX

THE NEXT MORNING, I was on coffee duty. Since nobody in the office liked the filtered shit in the break room, I was sent out to retrieve some of the real stuff from the local coffee shop, along with some orders for breakfast muffins and a raw steak.

I wished I was joking about that last one.

But I wasn't.

Ben was hungry, apparently, and I'd take throwing a steak at him rather than him taking a bite out of me any day of the week.

I was walking through the main reception area when I spotted a woman with pale, shimmering blue skin peeking out from behind the collar of her high-necked blouse. She was also wearing a long skirt that went down to her ankles, and a large-brimmed hat that covered everything but the tip of her nose, mouth, and chin. I automatically drew to a stop, while my heart kept on climbing—trying to get out of my throat. The fae talking to the receptionist turned and stared straight at me. I was a heartbeat away from dumping the drinks and pulling out my Glock when she smiled at me...

... in relief.

"Can you help me?" she asked.

I glanced around then looked back at her. "Me?"

"Yes. You're the only one who can help me."

"Am I?" I asked.

"You're with PIG, right? I've seen the photographs in the papers."

My galloping pulse slammed on the breaks and dropped back into my chest with a relieved sigh. "Y-Yes, I'm with PIG. What seems to be the problem?"

The blue-skinned woman glanced around the busy lobby. “Can we talk in private?”

“Of course.” I led her through the department, passing through the pit of beat cops and detectives. It was like running the gauntlet, and we’d almost made it to the other side when Smith stepped into our path.

“Civilians aren’t allowed through here,” he told me with a satisfied smirk on his face. His gaze skimmed the fae I was with, scanning her from head to toe. “Although, pretty ones are certainly allowed to stop by my desk any time, even if they are friends with a freak like McKenzie.”

The fae woman turned in my direction. I shook my head a little, wondering why Smith couldn’t see that her skin was tinted blue—that she wasn’t human as he preferred his... everyone.

Gleefully, I mentally rubbed my hands together. “She’s here to report a crime, Smith. She’s not a friend, and she’s certainly not human.”

Smith stepped back half a step, his now wide-eyed gaze traveling over the fae’s body with a new light—aggression and hate. “She’s one of *them*?” he demanded angrily in a hard tone.

“Yes.” I looked around the office to find a couple of people staring. Could they see she was clearly one of the fae? “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I have to take her statement.”

I steered the female away and hurried her into the PIG offices.

“... Christmas party is at The Palatial this year,” Brax was saying to Ben, the name of the hotel snagging my attention.

“Is it?” I asked him, my brows raised.

“Yeah, Wolfe just sent out an intraoffice email about it.”

I pumped a fist. Even the thought of spending a night with Smith couldn’t dim my excitement for Christmas or Christmas parties.

I turned to the fae and gestured to my desk. “Take a seat there, and I’ll be with you in just a sec.”

She nodded, and I dropped the brown-paper-wrapped steak onto Ben’s desk. “Bon appetite,” I told him. He grinned at me like he was imagining I’d just dropped my own arm in front of him. Shudder.

I deposited a coffee cup onto Hayliel and Brax’s desks, then carried mine and Sawyer’s over to my desk. The fae was sitting quietly on the other side of my work space, her spine straight, her hands folded in her lap.

I sat and jiggled my mouse to wake up the screen. “Now, Mrs....”

“Smith,” she replied quietly.

Mrs. Smith was totally a false name, but the fae never gave their real names out to anyone. It was too dangerous because with a name, there was a power.

“Mrs. Smith, what can I help you with?”

“The others didn’t believe me,” she started, gesturing to the door they’d walked through.

She removed her hat, and I couldn’t hold back the gasp. She had dark blue hair that looked as if it was made out of water. With each movement, it shimmered silver, glistening like the surface of Buxton Lake in the middle of summer. I also got a good look at her face—cheek bones so high and sharp you could cut yourself on them, eyes the color of back-lit sapphires. She was an absolutely stunning woman.

“You can see past my glamor, *ie*?”

Afraid of what my voice might sound like, I simply bobbed my head.

She cocked her head to the side, her water-like hair flowing over her shoulder. “How?”

“I’m not sure.” I couldn’t see past Kailon’s glamor unless he showed it to me, so why was I seeing it now? I resisted the urge to clutch at my opal.

“It doesn’t matter what you look like, though, Mrs. Smith. I’m here to help you with whatever you need.”

She nodded slowly, a beatific smile appearing on her serene face. “For your generous nature, I would give you something,” she said, and I stiffened. Gifts from the fae were a bad, bad, *bad* idea.

“You don’t have to—”

“My name,” she interrupted. “You may call me Gwen.”

Also, probably not her real name, but it was better than the wholly ubiquitous Mrs. Smith.

“Thank you, Gwen. Now, what can I help you with?”

“My son has been taken by a gang of kappas.”

*Well, that’s a new one*, I thought wryly. Keeping my professional persona in place, I opened up an incident report. “Tell me what happened.”

“My son was ice skating on Buxton Lake with some friends when a section of ice broke and he fell in. His friends tried to pull him out, but they said it was like someone else was tugging on his foot, dragging him back under the water. They couldn’t hold him and he... he... disappeared under the ice.”

Grabbing the box of tissues on my desk, I offered one to her. “When did

this happen?”

“Yesterday,” she replied, dabbing at her face.

“And you reported it yesterday?”

She shook her head, a lock of her mesmerizing hair falling over her face. She shoved it back impatiently. “No. I thought I could reason with the kappas as I have done previously, but my negotiations failed.”

At that statement, my brows rose. “This has happened before?” When she nodded, I asked, “Excuse me if this is rude, but what kind of fae are you?”

The woman startled at my question, and I wondered how many rules I’d just broken. “I am *Gwageth Anoon*.”

I hadn’t heard of *Gwageth Anoon* before, but that didn’t really matter. According to Sawyer, I was as naive as a newborn water sprite when it came to the thousands of different fae and supernatural creatures out there—whatever that meant.

“So your son is half... *Gwageth*?”

She gave me a faint smile and swept her liquid-like hair off her shoulder once more. “He’s a fantastic swimmer, so even if a kappa did get him, he should’ve been able to break away from them. I’ve told him how.”

I tapped my chin with the tip of my finger in thought. “Unless there were a lot of them.”

Gwen’s sapphire eyes widened. “Of course. The kappas must’ve bred since the last time I encountered them.”

“When was that?”

“About a decade ago.”

I typed in that information, then glanced up when Sawyer strolled in. He’d just come back from the gym so was freshly showered and looking oh-so-fine in his black slacks and shirt, his sleeves rolled up, his dark hair wet.

His gray-eyes gaze flickered to me and stayed there. Heat immediately erupted through my body, my nerve endings firing with pleasure. My pelvis felt heavy with want, and I watched as his eyes darkened, and he started feeding off my lust.

So.

Damned.

Inappropriate.

But still so freaking hot.

I frowned and the pressure lifted, but my lust didn’t. It was simmering in the background, just like it always did.

Then his eyes flickered to the woman sitting at my desk with me, and he straightened. “Gwen? *Beth wyt ti'n gwneud yma?*”

Gwen visibly stiffened before turning to face him. “*Cythraul rhyw*,” she breathed, then shook her head. Swallowed. Switching back to English, she said, “The kappas at Buxton Lake have my son, and my negotiations have failed.”

Sawyer perched on the edge of his desk, folding his arms. “When did this happen?”

“Yesterday. He was ice skating with friends,” I said helpfully, totally feeling out of the loop since they clearly knew each other and were speaking in Welsh. “But why were you negotiating with them?” Then I slid a glare at Sawyer and asked, “And what the hell does *cythraul rhyw* mean?”

I caught the faint smell of fresh water coming off Gwen’s skin as her eyes darted around the office before returning to me. “We have a long history, the kappas and I.”

“We should go to the lake,” Sawyer said casually, picking up his coffee cup and taking a sip.

And completely ignoring my question.

I frowned at him.

“We probably only have another couple of hours before they drown your son.”

My head jerked to him, and my brows rose. How could he be so flippant about *drowning children*? “Seriously? You just throw that out there?”

He shrugged. “Kappas only keep their victims alive for twenty-four hours before they kill them.”

“You’re right,” Gwen said in a fretful tone, worrying the brim of her large hat in her hands. “We should go.”

“All right, well, I don’t think we’re all going to fit on Sawyer’s bike, so I’ll just hang here.”

“No, I’ll meet you there,” Gwen said, standing with that same fluid grace as before. “I... I... shall meet you there.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and left the office. I walked around to the other side of my desk, perching my hip on the corner. I hiked my thumb in the fae’s direction. “Was that weird? And for the love of God, what the hell does *cythraul rhyw* mean?” His eyes grew hooded—in the same way he did when he didn’t want to tell me something. “Come on, Sawyer.” I gestured to the look of disdain on his face. “This doesn’t work on me so just



spill it.”

He let out a sigh. “It’s Welsh for ‘sex demon.’”

I snorted, and he glared. “How do you... ah... know her?” I tried to ask nonchalantly.

“I knew her back in Wales.”

“Wait. So, you’re telling me she’s as old as you?”

“Older, I believe... by at least a century. You can tell the age of a water fairy by the length of their hair.” He picked up his motorcycle keys and jogged them in his palm. “Are you ready to go?”

“Argh, no.” But I had no other choice. I hadn’t wanted to drive my truck in to work today, so it was safely tucked in the garage at Sawyer’s and my apartment, which left me with Sawyer’s motorcycle.

We strolled from the office, walking through the pit of Buxton officers on the way to the door. Sawyer’s longer stride ate up the distance, putting his at least six feet ahead of me. Yeah, it sucked to be short. I’d almost made it all the way through when Smith stepped in front of me, folding his arms and blocking my way.

I peered up at him. “You mind getting out of my way?”

“You mind fucking off and dying?”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. “One day, Smith, you are going to need my help, and you’re going to regret every single bit of shade you’ve thrown my way.”

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before that happens.”

Stepping around him, I blew him a kiss and walked for the door. Sawyer would be so proud of me.

I met my partner outside. He was already astride his Ducati, my helmet in his hand. After handing it to me, I put it on, then slid onto the back of his bike. He dragged me in tighter to his broad back and squeezed my knee. Jesus, all these casual touches were killing me. The comms crackled to life in my ear.

“What did Smith have to say to you?” he asked, wry amusement in his voice.

“How’d you know he stopped me?”

“Just a hunch.”

“He told me to fuck off and die.”

He peered at me over his shoulder, his eyes smiling, then slid the visor down over his face. Starting the engine, I felt the vibrations roll through my

body.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded, wrapping my arms more tightly around his middle as he accelerated out of the parking lot.

“Just that Smith is running out of creativity when it comes to your insults.”

“Right? That’s what I thought.”

“I hope you ignored him.”

“I blew him a kiss.”

He chuckled, and the sound hit me between the legs. Not because he was using his pussy-soaking powers on me, but because the rich sounds just made me feel like being naughty. To clear my head—and my lady parts—of lusty thoughts, I asked, “What else can you tell me about Gwen?”

He blew out a breath. “She’s a water fairy.”

“And what’s the difference between a fairy and the fae?”

“Fairies are generally thought of as good, benevolent creatures. The fae are bad.”

“But what about the Seelie Court? I thought they were good.”

“They are on the whole, but darkness lurks in their minds too, influencing them. Fairies are completely without this darkness. They are one hundred percent good and kind.”

“So Gwen isn’t going to harm us?”

“I doubt it.” He drew his motorcycle to a stop at a set of lights and planted his feet. “All we should have to do today is find out why the kappas have stolen her son, then try to figure out how to get him back in one piece.”

“I don’t even know what a kappa is.”

“They’re not native to the United States. They’re a Japanese water spirit that was *introduced* into the environment.”

“Like the cane toad was introduced in Australia to eat cane beetles? Ha! Joke’s on them. Those bastards multiplied and have taken over.”

“Kind of like that. Some of the fae brought them here because kappas are very good at drowning humans.”

“I really have to stop hanging out with these *drownings-are-cool* supes,” I muttered.

He laughed again. “I think you’re right.”

The light turned green, and Sawyer accelerated hard, jumping ahead of all the cars.

“So tell me, how likely are we to get this kid out alive?”

Sawyer made a see-saw motion with his hand. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Gah, put your hand back on the handlebars!” I shrieked, gripping him even tighter. My pulse was pounding in my throat so hard I thought it would try to break through my skin.

He chuckled. “I’m an incredibly safe driver,” he said.

“Words won’t stop a flaming wreck and half my skin being torn off as I’m dragged across the asphalt.”

Sawyer patted my thigh in an annoyingly placating way. “I’ve got you, pussy cat. Don’t worry about it.”

We made it to the lake fifteen minutes later. Dirt-stained snowbanks lined the parking lot, and grit crunched under the tires of the Ducati as Sawyer eased the bike into a designated motorcycle spot.

The place wasn’t as busy as it normally would be in the summer, but winter sports brought people out too. I counted at least another six cars. As I got off the motorcycle, I saw an anxious Gwen standing to one side of the main path, worrying the brim of her wide hat in her hands. She looked even more stunning in the sun, the rays catching and holding the shimmers in her hair and on her skin.

“Just down here,” she said in an uneasy voice, pointing down a smaller, narrower, less-used path. We followed behind her, the plowed pathways edged with about a foot of snow on either side. It didn’t lead to the main rental shack or the mobile hot chocolate and coffee van, but around to the shorter edge of the oval lake. Here, the underbrush was denser. Holly bushes, witch-hazel, and red osier dogwood crowded together, their thin branches covered in fine lines of snow.

I shot Sawyer a glance over my shoulder, and he nodded. If this had been a fae leading us down a deserted path, I would’ve balked and run the other way, but since Sawyer vouched for fairies, I continued.

When we arrived at a small clearing, I looked around. We were on the far side of the lake, the vans and rental hut just barely visible as were the dozen or so skaters on the surface of the frozen-over lake.

“He was dragged under there.” Gwen pointed to a patch of ice that looked thinner than the rest. The fairy folded her arms over her chest protectively

and took a shuffling step back. “His friends didn’t see him again after he went under.”

Sawyer took off his over-the-shoulder holster, handed it to me, and uncoiled a length of rope.

I pointed at it. “Where the hell did that come from?”

“I pulled it out of one of the saddlebags.” He wrapped one end around his waist and formed a knot.

“Well, aren’t you the Boy Scout?” I muttered.

“Wait,” Gwen suddenly said, reaching out her hand like she could physically stop him. “You can’t go out there. The ice is very thin on this side of the lake. It won’t hold your weight.”

“She’s right, Sawyer. Let me go out there. I’m lighter,” I said.

“No,” he replied firmly, tightening the knot. “It’s too dangerous.”

I huffed. “So too dangerous for me, but not too dangerous for you?” I scoffed. “What a load of shit. Get out of the way.”

“No.”

“Sawyer,” I said, exasperated. “If you hadn’t noticed time is ticking here. How much longer does Gwen’s son have? We have one chance. Let me go out there.”

He watched me for a full minute, and I could practically see his indecision. I curled my fingers, indicating to pass me the rope. With jerking, angry movements, he untied the rope and stalked toward me. Feeding it around my waist, he secured the knot in the front.

“I hate putting you in danger,” he hissed.

“Yet, you insist on taking me on your motorcycle all the time.”

“That’s different. I can control what the motorcycle does.”

I didn’t want to point out that he had no control over the other motorists too. Instead, I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be... owww!” I swatted his hand away when he pulled too tightly on the knot. “*Fine.*”

“If I think you’re in *any* danger, I’m coming out there after you.” He even jabbed his finger at me, driving home his point.

“All right,” I replied indignantly, then turned and looked over the lake. The thinner spot was fifteen feet from where I was standing, looking all peaceful and quiet and serene.

With a grumble, he eased back farther onto the bank, and I slowly crept out onto the glass-thin finish. My boots—which were great for hiking and getting traction on roads—did nothing to help me on the slick surface. I

imitated a baby giraffe for a little bit, my legs sliding off in different directions until I could rein them back in again.

“Just a little farther,” Gwen said. “You’re almost at the spot where he disappeared,” she called from the shore.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that I was about twelve feet from the bank now. Sawyer’s expression was pinched with worry as he ran the length of rope attached to me through his fingers, giving me the slack I needed. Gwen looked defeated for some reason, her head lowering as I caught her gaze.

I had a brief moment to wonder why when I heard the ice crack...

## SEVEN

“CAT!” Sawyer called frantically, tightening his hold on the rope. “Just ease back slowly. You’ve gone too far out.”

My breath tumbled out of me, hovering in the air in front of my mouth. I looked down at the fragile surface I was standing on, tracing the lines of the cracks that were forming under my weight with my eyes.

“Slowly, *slowly*,” he stressed. “Move your right foot backward, then shift your weight with it.” Sawyer’s instructions were laced with worry, and I couldn’t blame him. He’d probably be the one to race in after me, and an ice bath certainly hadn’t been on the cards for me today.

I did as he asked, though, shuffling back slowly. I’d just lifted my remaining foot off the broken patch of ice when a pale blue hand appeared on the other side of the mirror-like surface. The palm was pressed against the ice, searching for a way through.

“I see him,” I called, frantic. “He’s stuck under the ice here.”

“Cat,” Sawyer warned. “Make sure you’re safe yourself first, *then* you can help others. You *know* this.”

I tuned Sawyer out because as far as I was concerned, going back only to come forward again made no sense.

I was here.

I could help him now.

But how?

I placed my hand down onto the ice and knocked something cold and metallic.

*Reaver!*

I could kiss that damn sword. Instead, I scooped it up and brought the tip

to the frozen surface of the lake.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I mumbled. “Make a hole for me, baby.”

Reaver began to glow faintly—a blue not dissimilar to the color of Gwen’s skin—and the ice sizzled. Steam rose steadily from the surface of the lake as Reaver worked its way through the ice, slowly—*slowly*—creating a hole.

“McKenzie!” Sawyer shouted, cursing me creatively while he was at it. When I glanced at him over my shoulder, I found that he’d come out onto the icy lake too, the length of rope tied to me in his hand. I followed it to where Gwen was standing on the shore. She was holding the end of our only safety anchor in a white-knuckle grip, her expression tense and scared.

He eased up behind me, the ice groaning and creaking under our combined weights.

“Sawyer,” I croaked, raising the tip of Reaver from the surface. “Stop.”

He stilled when the ice creaked again.

He growled in my ear, “You’re going to get yourself killed doing this.”

“Now isn’t the time to make threats,” I shot back snidely. “Besides, you’ll be dying right alongside me since you came out here, too.”

He snarled, low and steady. “I’m a lot stronger than you. I can survive an ice bath. You, on the other hand, will die of hypothermia within minutes.”

“I’ll be fine,” I replied. “Now get back so you don’t send us both down into the water.”

With a growl of frustration I was becoming accustomed to hearing, he backed away a few steps. I wouldn’t say it out loud, but I was glad for the rope around my middle. It was just the safety net I needed. The ice still whined in protest of the weight, and I waved him back even farther. If he plunged through the surface, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself.

Lowering Reaver once more, I watched the water bubble and steam. It had finally made a hole, but I needed it to be bigger. A few more minutes was all it should take. Eventually, I’d made a hole big enough for Gwen’s son’s hand to reach through. I took that cold limb in mine, curling my warm fingers around frigid ones and murmured, “We’ll get you out of there. Just hang on.”

Calling over my shoulder to Sawyer, I said, “I’ve got him, but I need to make the hole bigger.”

“Cat, it’s not safe.”

“*He’s* not safe,” I hissed, gesturing to the boy trapped under the ice. “I’m not going to leave him to die at the hands of the kappas.”

I twisted my head around, staring down into the dark lake to see if I could see his face yet. The grip on my hand was still tight—strong—and really, that should've been my first indication that things weren't right.

If her son had disappeared into a freezing lake yesterday, how could he possibly still be alive almost eighteen hours later? How could he possibly still be alive *trapped* under the ice for that long?

Around my neck and under my jacket, my necklace pulsed with heat.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

A pair of orange-red eyes were staring back at me, blinking slowly. My gaze shifted down, and where I expected to see a mouth and nose, I saw a beak like a snapping turtle might have and tiny little round nostrils spaced closely together. On its head was a thatch of black hair, which floated like river weed around its head. The blue-green skin covering his arms and face was a combination of dark and olive greens, with a spattering of pale blue spots.

“Sawyer!” I yanked back, trying to pull away from the hand, but the creature wouldn't let me go. “Sawyer!”

“I'm so sorry,” I heard Gwen say, shaking her head, before she vaporized in front of my eyes. The tension on the rope disappeared, leaving us without anything to anchor us.

What the ever-loving-*fuck* was going on?

“*Sawyer!* Help me! Whatever it is has me.”

He ran out onto the ice, going into a belly slide to distribute more of his weight. This time the ice didn't groan as much as he skidded closer to me.

“I've got you,” he said in a tight voice, grabbing hold of my waist.

Pointing with my free hand, I asked, “What the hell is that?”

He looked. His jaw tightened. “It's a kappa.”

“It won't let go of me.”

I screamed when claws sprouted from the fingers holding tight—razor-sharp talons that were at least an inch long. Blood flowed from the wounds, dripping onto the ice. It was almost offensive to see the bright scarlet drops against the virgin snow.

“I'll be back in a minute,” he said and pushed away from me, retreating back to shore. The kappa yanked at my arm, plunging my hand into the ice-cold water of the lake. Then another set of hands was on me. And another. They all clawed at me, pulling, shredding the skin from my forearm and hand. I screamed, my blood tinting the water red until the color diluted away



into pink.

My shoulder was jammed into the hole while the kappas pulled, attempting to drag me down. I screamed as they tried to pull the socket from my shoulder, and I was kind of grateful it was my left arm they had rather than my right. I'd hate to have to relearn doing everything with just my left arm.

I shook my head. What an odd thought to have.

Beneath me, there was a sudden pounding that grew louder and more violent with every strike. The ice buckled then broke apart, plunging me into the black, sluggish water. I managed to suck in a gasp before I was fully submerged, but the shock of the cold made me open my mouth and scream.

Three more kappas grabbed my other arm, another three on each leg as they dragged me down to the bottom of the lake. Even through the murky light, I could see each creature had a shell on its back like a turtle, its hind legs like a frog. On top of their heads, however, I noticed a small silver dish, making them look like they'd all had Friar Tuck haircuts at the same barber.

My lungs began to burn as the need for oxygen increased. I kicked out frantically, dislodging all but two of the kappas then did the same with my arms, shaking off a couple, but not nearly enough. I'd just managed to pull my opal free from the neck of my jacket when the ones that I'd flicked off reattached with a lot more gusto this time, digging in their clawed fingers and drawing more blood.

My feet touched the bottom of the lake, and the light emanating from my opal flared suddenly, revealing about a hundred skeletons on the silty lake floor. Jesus, how many people had these kappas drowned, and why had they never been reported as missing?

The kappas released me when there was a flare of light, shielding their eyes as if they were in pain. Using their distraction, I bent my knees, kicked off the bottom of the lake and propelled myself upward. Bubbles streamed from my nose as I ascended, although as I tried to breach the surface, I realized I had no idea where that hole was. I bobbed along under the sheet of ice, slamming my fists against it again and again and again.

Frantically, I turned around, my lungs burning with the need for air, my eyes stinging, my arms and legs aching.

There was no way out.

*No way out.*

Suddenly, there was a thunderous *crack* and a tree limb careened through

the ice, barely missing me. Out it went before it was plunged back in again. And again. Ice broke away in large pieces, creating an opening for me. Sawyer's hand was suddenly there, and I reached for it, clutching at my lifeline. He pulled me up, and my head breached the surface. I sucked in a large gulp of air before I was tugged back down into the black water.

My opal flared to life again, heat accompanying the light show. Then a ripple emanated from it, like a shockwave or electrical impulse moving through the water. All the kappas froze in position, their eyes the only thing still moving. They'd been stunned. I didn't have time to nut over that one. Instead, I kicked my legs and fought my way back up to the surface.

Sawyer hooked his arms underneath mine as soon as I did, pulling me out and onto the ice. My whole body was shaking, my core temperature dangerously low. Dragging my limp body to the edge of the bank, he hauled me out then propped me—standing—against a tree, stripping me out of my wet clothes. When I was naked except for my bra and panties, he shucked his jacket and wrapped it around me.

“I have a Mylar blanket in one of my saddlebags.”

“A-a-aren't y-y-y-you—”

“Don't try and talk,” he chastised gently.

“B-B-Boy Scout,” I forced out, my teeth chattering painfully.

Before I could move, he scooped me into his arms and walked us back the way we'd come. The red osier brushed against our legs as he moved quickly but carefully through the woods. I tucked my head into Sawyer's hot neck, trying to take the warmth into my own body. I'd never known cold like this—not even after the witch tried to drown us in the subway station a few weeks ago. I felt it all the way in my blood and bones—like I'd never be warm again.

“How are you doing?” Sawyer asked softly.

“O-O-O-Okay,” I managed to stammer out. “C-C-C-C—”

“Cold. I know, pussy cat.” He dropped a kiss to my forehead, then picked up the pace.

When we emerged from the path into the parking lot, many of the other cars that had been there previously were gone. Sawyer set my feet to the ground but kept one arm wrapped around my waist as he pulled open one of the saddlebags and took out a folded Mylar blanket.

“Hold on to me,” he murmured, unwrapping his arm to shake out the light, silver plastic-composite covering. When it was fully unfurled, he

wrapped it around my shoulders.

I snuggled into the plastic wrapping, trying to conserve as much heat as I could. I had no intention of visiting the hospital today or any other day in the near future. I'd seen enough of the inside of one in the last month and a half.

Sawyer guided me to sit astride his bike, getting me settled before sliding on in front of me and kicking the engine into life. I wrapped my arms weakly around his waist and buried my face into his back. He didn't badger me about the helmet this time though, and for that, I was grateful. He was treating me like I was made of glass.

Slowly, he drove us back to his apartment where I got the cash-and-carry service again.

"Can I take a shower?" I asked softly when he deposited me on the couch, urging me to lie down fully. I was still cold, but at least my teeth had stopped chattering.

"Sorry, pussy cat. Not yet. We need to bring your core temperature up more slowly than that. Just sit here a little longer, and I'll make you some hot cocoa." Pulling the unicorn blanket off the back of the couch, he draped that over me too before disappearing into the kitchen.

I listened to him making the hot drink, the sound of the fridge opening, a canister popping, and a spoon diving in. I must've fallen asleep because when Sawyer nudged me awake, he was holding a hot cup of cocoa, steam curling from the top.

"Can you sit up for me? That's a good girl," he crooned softly. Placing a dryer-warmed towel around my neck, he handed me the mug and tucked the blankets more tightly around my body.

As I took a sip, he perched on the edge of the coffee table and looked at me.

"What the hell were you thinking, Cat?" he asked in a harsh whisper that was a complete juxtaposition to his gentle handling of me. "Running out onto the ice like that? Not being aware of your surroundings? You could've been killed."

"I saw a hand. I thought it was Gwen's son. As soon as those fingers wrapped around mine, though, I knew it was wrong. How in the world could Gwen's son survive a night in a frozen-over lake?"

"I don't think she has a son. I think it was all a ruse to get you down there so the kappas could take you."

I heaved a tired-sounding sigh. "You know, I'm getting really sick of

murder attempts. That's three in the past two days."

"Your reckless desire to help everyone *will* get you killed one of these days." His words were strong, but he tempered them by stroking my still damp teal hair off my forehead. "I could've lost you, and the thought terrifies me, Cat."

"I'm sorry. I can't say it won't happen again, but I'll try to be more careful."

He huffed a laugh, then slid to his knees, getting closer to me. His gaze became focused on my mouth, and I tilted my face up to his, giving him the permission he was seeking.

"I just have to know... to remind myself you're still here," he reasoned, even as he leaned down and brushed his lips to mine. The kiss—even as tame as it was—created a spark in my body. I felt it rush through my blood, but that always seemed to be the way with Sawyer and his touch. He was like an electrical storm, and I was the lightning rod attracting his pull.

He slanted his mouth over mine, deepening a kiss that had purely started as a confirmation kiss—a kiss that was meant to show him I was alive and breathing but not necessarily warm yet. This kiss, however, was filled with more. It was almost possessive, as if he was prying me out of Death's cold fingers and claiming me as his own.

Although I was enjoying the fuck out of it, I pulled back, breaking the seal of our lips.

He frowned down at me, his eyes swirling with black. "I'm sorry," he whispered brokenly.

"It's okay." I touched his face, jerking his gaze to my eyes. "It's okay."

He pressed his forehead to mine, and we stayed like that for a little while. "I don't know how to do this, pussy cat. I don't know how to let you go when I *know* you're the one for me."

I snorted softly. "How do you know that?" But I also knew the answer. I knew it in the way his black slacks were tented with an unashamed erection. I knew it in the way his chocolate and whisky scent calmed me and amped me up simultaneously. I knew it in the way he looked at me—with frustration, yes—but also with such gentle... love?

"Let's get you into bed while I go back to the office and file the report."

I walked on my own this time, Sawyer taking the mug of cocoa from me so I didn't spill it on my unicorn blanket. I shuffled into my bedroom and propped up the pillows while Sawyer pulled back the quilt. I got in and was

covered in a mountain of downy goodness.

“Here. Be a good girl and finish this.”

He turned to leave, but I stopped him. “What are we going to do about Gwen?”

“What can we do? I doubt she’ll show up again.”

“Why do you think she did what she did, then?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. She did say she was sorry, though, so maybe she had no choice in the matter? Maybe someone was forcing her hand.”

“I can probably take a wild guess as to *who* that someone was,” I grumbled.

“We can deal with her later.” He pointed at the mug I had rested on my thigh. “Drink. Rest. I’ll see you tonight.”

I gave him a mock salute. “Yes, sir.”

## EIGHT

I WOKE up to my phone ringing from beside me on the bed. I groped around blindly for it, answering the call and running a tired hand over my face.

“Hello?”

“Cat?” a man asked.

His voice was familiar. I pulled the device away to look at the screen. “Mason.” I breathed out his name but held back the groan.

“Yeah, it’s me. I said I’d give you a call.”

“You did say that,” I murmured. But I didn’t think he’d actually do it. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. How are you?”

“Eh.” I waved my hand around in front of my face. “You don’t want to know.”

“Oh? Has something happened?”

I sat up because telling the guy you *might* be dating that you had another two attempts on your life within the space of a couple of days was something that required a fair amount of brainpower. “You could say that. I’ve just had a little bit of trouble with the fae.”

“Oh.” That one word was fearful, and honestly, I couldn’t blame the guy. “Look—”

Annnd here it came. The brush off. The let’s-stay-friends line that I thought would’ve come a lot later. Although, given my *proclivity* for getting into trouble, maybe not.

“You don’t have to say it,” I told him on a sigh. “I get that my life is too insane for you, so let’s just leave it at that and be friends.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked in reply. “Because that wasn’t what I

was going to say.”

*He wasn't?* “Ahhh, what were you going to say?” I played with the unicorn blanket over my legs, brushing the pile one way, then the other.

“I was going to ask if I could see you again. Maybe we could try getting dinner this time? I did enjoy our time together the other night.”

*He had?* Well, color me surprised.

“Dinner sounds great, but I kind of can't leave my apartment right now. I'm recovering from...” How to phrase this one...

*Nearly dying* was too hysterical, although the most accurate.

*A little under the weather* wasn't quite serious enough.

*Peachy* was a flat-out lie, and as soon as Mason got one look at me, he'd know.

“Recovering from?” he prompted.

I shook my head, clearing it. “Recovering from a cold. I'm laid up in bed right now, actually.”

“I can make you dinner then. I'll bring everything over and feed you.”

“You don't have to do that,” I started.

“I know. I want to. What's your address?”

*What the hell would Sawyer think of this?* I wondered. Then shrugged. I'd just let him know someone was coming over, and he'd simply have to deal with it. I gave Mason my address.

“Great. I'll see you around six, then?”

“Six sounds great.”

“Great!” he said brightly again. “I'll see you then.”

I hung up the phone, watching the screen fade to black. Pressing the button on the bottom, I unlocked the device and sent a text to Sawyer, letting him know Mason was coming over tonight. With any luck, he'd read it and go somewhere else if he didn't want to see the guy.

My gaze drifted to the time, and I was startled to find I'd been asleep for a few hours. I had better get up, though. The good news was I was feeling a lot better, so I shoved off the quilt and blankets and slid out of bed. Thanks to Nervous-Nelly-Sawyer, who'd set the heating in the apartment to *inferno*, I was sweating, so I pulled on a pair of silky unicorn boxers and a tank top with a silhouette of a unicorn with the words FUCKING MAGICAL written in an arc above and below it, and I padded through to the kitchen. I stood there for a moment—thinking—before wandering into Sawyer's library once more.

He had so many books—more than I could probably read in my lifetime—but it made me wonder whether Sawyer *had* read them all. As I walked along the shelves, I ran my fingers over the spines, the soft *thump, thump, thump* filling my ears. I wasn't reading the titles. I was simply soaking up the feel of the room, knowing that this was where Sawyer would sequester himself away sometimes.

I stopped abruptly when I saw the title of a book that intrigued me. It intrigued me more that Sawyer even had it in his collection.

“*Sexual Demons*,” I muttered, reading the title. “*A Compendium*.”

Flipping open the cover, I was greeted by an incredibly detailed sketch of a man and a woman in the middle of the sexual act. She was on top of the man, straddling his hips, grinding on his cock. The man's expression was rapturous. The woman's face was sultry, a peek of fangs from under her top lip. I read the description below the picture.

*A succubus feeding during coitus.*

Yeah, that was self-explanatory. I skipped a few more pages until I hit the table of contents and ran my finger down the text. I stopped when I got to the section on incubi and flipped to that page. There was another detailed sketch of a man taking a woman from behind this time, his eyes dark as he gripped her hair in his fist. A tingle spread down my body as I looked at the naughty picture.

I read the introduction, then kept on going, learning about the history of the species, how they were thought to have evolved, why they fed, and how they could be killed. Judging from the information, this was written by humans. Were there books written about supes *by* supes?

I turned the last page and stopped when I saw the word *consort*? written in swirling script in the margin. It was next to a paragraph about how they fed and what happened if they were to stop. Scanning the section, I learned only what Sawyer had told me. If he didn't feed, he would weaken and eventually die. My gaze darted to the word *consort* again.

Did he think this was how to stop it all? Faline—a succubus who had



betrayed me to her vampire lover—had said she would do anything to stop feeding off a new man every day. She'd been convinced that feeding from a vampire would stop that. I had no idea whether or not that was true, and it wasn't like I could ask. Both of them were long dead now.

Maybe having a consort was the answer, but where would he find his and what would be the sign that she belonged to him?

I jerked my head up when I heard the buzzer shrill through the apartment. I frowned, stood, and walked into the living room, staring at the little intercom by the door. Who could that be? A quick look at the clock confirmed that I'd been sucked into a time warp in the library—it was six o'clock, on the dot.

I pushed the button on the intercom. "Hello?"

"Cat? It's Mason," came the tinny reply.

I buzzed him in and looked down at what I was wearing. Nothing appropriate for company. I was about to run and get changed when there was a knock on the door. Damn, the man was fast getting up here.

For half a beat, I stood there until the knocking came again.

"Ah, fuck it," I mumbled. I was recovering from hypothermia. Give me a break. I pulled open the door, opened my mouth to greet Mason, then shut it.

It was not Mason.

"Who are you?" I asked, folding my arms over my chest.

The male on the other side of the door bent at the waist, dropping into a low bow, but kept his eyes on my face. "Madam, my name is Blaze."

"I'm going to need a little more information there, *Blaze*. What do you want?"

"My mistress sent me."

I cringed. Grindylow had said the same thing not two weeks ago, and within an hour, I was almost drowned. Although, it seemed like I'd gotten the almost-drowning piece out of the way with the kappas.

Still, I narrowed my eyes. Blaze was still stooped low. "You can... I don't know... *unbow* now."

The man straightened to his full height, which—given the way I had to crane my neck—was somewhere in the vicinity of over six feet. I looked him over. No bulges under his clothing. No visible weapons. In fact, he appeared to be wearing something that looked scarily like the male characters in the historical romance Sawyer and I had watched the other night, or early morning. I guess it depended on how you wanted to look at it.

Golden blond hair flopped over his forehead, tempering his vivid violet irises.

“Madam, I am here at the behest of Her Royal Highness, Astrid Woodbryre S’Quainforrest, Queen of Spring and Summer and of the Seelie Court.”

“Quite a mouthful there, Blaze.” He shot me a strange look and waved away his confusion. “I use humor when I’m in a situation that scares the pants off me. The funnier I get, the more scared I am. Just sit back and enjoy the laughs.” I hiked my hands up onto my hips and gave him my best bad-cop stare. “What does Her Royal Highness need from me?”

“She tried to telephone you, but the connection was a bad one. She sent me to reiterate her request for help.”

“Help,” I murmured the word. People asking for help was my kryptonite, dammit. I heaved a heavy, resigned sigh. “Why don’t you go ahead and tell me what she needs help with, then.”

He bowed low again, his face almost buffing the wood floor. “She wishes for aid against her sister, Avi.”

From the phone call, I’d gleaned it was about dear old sis. “What’s going on between them? Did she borrow something without asking? Steal her boyfriend?”

Blaze shook his head. “The details I am not privy to, but my mistress has asked for you to come and speak to her. She is not currently ruling, therefore cannot leave Wonderland.”

I slithered my hand up to my opal. Like before, the stone was only warm from my body heat. No glow. No warning. Blaze’s eyes remained on my face—the perfect servant waiting for his orders.

“How does she know I can come into Wonderland?”

“She knows everything that happens in Wonderland. They are connected.” Then he made a strange motion with his hand like a Catholic would when stepping into a church. With his fore and middle fingers, he touched the side of his neck, then his forehead as he bowed it.

“Err, what was that?” At his confused look, I said, “That *thing* you just did.”

“Oh! It’s a ritual blessing to Wonderland.”

A *blessing*? Like humans asked for God’s protection? *Did that mean—*  
Nope. Not going to think about that.

I shook my head. “Look, I’m sorry, but I can’t just walk into—” I

stopped, staring as Blaze made the signs again. When he was done, I said, “Wonderland.”

He made the blessing again.

I covered my mouth with the back of my hand to hide my smile. Bad Cat. I shouldn’t mess with the fae.

“Sorry, but I can’t just walk in *there*. I’m human you see.”

“My queen knows of your ability.” His gaze darted to my necklace. “She knows the origins of that stone you wear. If you were to come to her, she would tell you in exchange for your help.”

My heart began to pound louder in my ears. What a carrot to dangle in front of my nose. My need to know about not only the opal but also Rogue Faction, which was a constant gnawing at my mind. Licking my lips, I practically tasted finally knowing about the stone that protected me. Was it madness to accept this deal, or was it madness to decline?

“I need to think about it,” I croaked out.

“Of course. My queen said you would say that because you are smart and wise. She has asked for you to give her an answer within twenty-four of your human hours. I shall return then for it.”

Blaze sank into one last low bow, then turned and walked down the hallway. I watched him leave, all the while wondering how he’d gotten into the secure building in the first place. I was about to close the door when I heard someone call my name.

Pushing it back open again, I saw Mason standing there with two grocery sacks balanced in his arms. He came toward me, smiling, his hair hanging loose this time. The ends brushed the top of his shoulders, curling a little around his ears.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.” I eyed the groceries again. “Feeding an army?”

He grinned. “I wanted to make you something special.”

Stepping back from the door, I motioned for him to come in. “You can put the groceries on the kitchen counter.”

I closed us in and went to the fridge, unprepared to play host after the visit from Blaze. “Something to drink?” I asked, scanning the contents of the shelves. Sawyer had his shelf neatly lined and organized at the top. It was filled with health food and stuff that didn’t contain nearly enough sugar. Mine was the next one down. Opened bags of candy and chocolate bars sprawled out on the wire shelves, and I popped an M&M into my mouth,

chewing as I tried to figure out what to serve.

At the bottom were some bottles of water and one bottle of white wine. I grabbed both and put them onto the counter. When I turned around, Mason had made himself at home, unpacking the groceries and laying everything out.

“Wine?” I asked, holding up the bottle.

“Sure.”

I hunted around for the glasses, needing to ask Mason to get them down because Sawyer had put them onto the highest shelf in the tallest cupboard.

Because he was a bastard.

While Mason chopped and prepped, I poured the wine and drank it.

“You have a roommate?” Mason asked, expertly slicing up a red pepper, then sliding it off to one side and grabbing a handful of mushrooms.

“Why do you think that?”

He pushed his glasses up his nose and motioned to the glass in my hand. “They were put away by someone tall.”

“Got me. Yeah, I do, although technically, *I’m* the roommate.” At his quizzical look, I said, “About three weeks ago, my apartment building was condemned when two witches had a magic-off in the apartment below mine. The damage they caused interfered with the structural integrity of the building. Hence, now I’m someone’s roommate.”

He blew out a whistled breath. “Wow. I remember reading about that in the paper.” Slowly, he began chopping again. “And this is... *normal* for you?”

Taking another sip of wine, I contemplated how to answer that. Was it my new normal? Could I expect supernatural attacks around every corner? The past six weeks were certainly a good indicator of that. “It’s my normal, yeah.”

“What does your roommate think of the injuries.” He scooped up the mushrooms and put them into a bowl at his elbow, then grabbed a bunch of broccolini. Stripping the rubber band from around the middle, he trimmed the ends.

“My roommate is my partner at work, so he’s used to all the crazy shit that happens to me.” I tilted my head when I heard keys in the door. “Speak of the devil.”

Sawyer opened the door and paused when he took us in. Coming all the way inside, he flipped the lock and dumped his keys.

“Hello?”

“Sawyer, did you get my text about Mason coming over?”

His gray gaze flickered to the other man in annoyance. “No, I didn’t get it.”

“Well, it said Mason was coming over and making dinner.”

“Have you eaten?” Mason asked, pushing the glasses up his nose again. “I’ve got enough to feed everyone.”

“No. Thank you.” His words were clipped, his expression like a dagger through the heart. Sawyer stepped down the hallway, throwing, “Cat, can I speak to you?” over his shoulder.

He disappeared, and I glanced over at Mason with a shrug. “I’ll be back in a minute.” Trailing after Sawyer, I felt like a naughty puppy. I found him in his bedroom and as he shut the door, I let out a whistle.

“Damn, this is nice.” His room was about double the size of mine—more of a suite than just a room. The king-sized bed was on one side of room, and a set of two armchairs and a couch were on the other, complete with a TV hanging on the wall.

“What’s he doing here?” he demanded in a low growly voice.

I tore my gaze off the one-hundred-inch screen. “Man, you could watch some good porn on there.”

“Focus!” he barked.

“Are you trying to tell me you *don’t* watch porn on there?” I shrugged. “Look, he invited himself over. Said he’d make dinner. I was hungry... feeling better by the way... so I said okay.”

“This is *my* apartment.”

My hands came to rest on my hips as I stared at him. “Don’t be an asshole about this.”

His gray eyes darkened as they traveled down my body in an invisible caress. “And what the hell are you wearing?”

I looked down. Blushed. Then cleared my throat. “It’s a long story.”

Sawyer stalked toward me, making me step back. I slammed into the door, which rattled from the impact. He crowded me against the wood, placing his palms on either side of my head and leaned in. This close, I could smell him—chocolate and whisky—and I was dying to have another lick.

*Stay strong, McKenzie!*

He arched his hips into my stomach, letting me feel the hard, hot length of him. All thoughts of staying strong evaporated. He anchored his hands

around my waist, pulling my lower body into his while my shoulders and upper back remained flat against the door.

“I don’t like seeing you with other men,” he said in a low growl into my ear. He nipped at my earlobe, then licked away the sting. I quivered from the contact. “I don’t like the idea of you with another man. I feel murderous when another man is allowed to touch you.”

I gasped and hooked my leg around his waist, grinding myself on him. Tilting my head back, I let him lick a hot trail up the column of my throat.

“So why do you want him here?” he demanded sensually.

“I told you—”

“No. Why do *you*...” a hiss, “... want...” a bite, “... him...” a lick, “... here.” A suck.

My brain fritzed out as lust pooled heavily in my core. Hooking my other leg around his waist, he held me effortlessly against the door. His fingers were bruising, clutching at me like he was afraid I’d run.

“Because he can be faithful.”

Sawyer pulled away suddenly, staring at me in disbelief. He unhooked my legs, and I trembled as he stepped back, his expression vacant. “Then you’d best get back to your safe human boyfriend.”

I wanted to argue that he wasn’t my boyfriend—that he was just a guy I was thinking about dating—but Sawyer’s expression was so dark, so full of self-loathing that I was afraid to open my mouth. Instead, I pulled down my shorts where they’d bunched around my waist and straightened my shirt.

I should probably get changed. With a shaking hand, I opened up the door and left, stealing away into my room. When I emerged with jeans and a chunky sweater on, I felt one hundred times better and more in control of the situation.

Sawyer’s bedroom door was still shut, and I figured he was staying in there all night. Wandering out into the kitchen, I found Mason just starting up one of the burners on the stove.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said, holding up a stainless-steel spoon. “I had to open every cupboard and drawer to find what I needed.”

“You probably have a better idea about what’s in this kitchen than I do,” I quipped, not feeling like having him here anymore. Still, he’d made an effort to come, and I *was* hungry. I took a seat at the counter and watched him toss the vegetables into a wok, moving them around the pan effortlessly with that big spoon.

We chatted as he cooked, then some more while we ate. In this environment, with nobody else around, I found him charming, but he lacked *something*. I couldn't put my finger on what it was. He even cleared our plates and shooed me into the living room to finish my wine while he tidied up the kitchen.

Yep, Mason was a keeper, but would I be the one keeping him?

## NINE

THE NEXT MORNING, I rode to work in my truck even though the thought of starting the engine terrified me. Sawyer had taken off earlier in the morning, claiming something about needing to work out first and didn't want to drag me into work that early.

It wasn't that.

The man was hurt, and I was the one to have hurt him. Did I feel bad about that? Yeah, of course. I'm not a complete bitch. Did I think he had the right to be so angry? No, because we were both adults and just because I didn't choose him, shouldn't mean he gets to treat me this way. Besides, we'd discussed this. We'd *agreed* to this.

But hurt feelings were hurt feelings and nothing that could be truly reasoned with.

I stopped at the coffee shop close to the station—the same one I saw Sawyer in for the first time only six weeks ago. Man, had it only been six weeks? I felt like my life hadn't just been turned upside down but had been thrown into a paint shaker for good measure.

I'd just placed my order and stepped aside to wait when I bumped into someone, biting back a scream when hot liquid splashed down the leg of my jeans. Oh, God, like I needed this too. Although, if this were another attempt at murder by Kailon, the fucker was getting sloppy. Somehow, death-by-scalding just didn't seem like a fitting way to go.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," a man said behind me in a deep, rasping voice.

I turned and looked down at the freshly-brewed black coffee soaking into the fabric of my jeans along with my skin. "My fault," I said, breathing through the blistering pain before glancing up.



A man with dark skin and dark, cropped hair was staring at me like he couldn't quite believe he'd dropped his entire coffee on me. He looked to be in his early forties from what I could gather, his face not exactly craggy, but he'd seen some things. There was just something in his eyes—they looked haunted.

"I'll get some napkins," he announced.

"Thanks," was my reply, but the flimsy two-inch-by-two-inch squares of paper those coffee shops disguised as napkins weren't going to do jack-shit for the first-degree burns on my calf. He hustled back, brandishing a thick wad of mini napkins before sinking onto one knee and mopping things up.

I bent down to stop him. This was too weird. "I got it," I said, taking over clean-up duty. Undeterred, he began soaking up what little coffee had made it onto the floor, instead of my jeans. He finished before I could and hovered anxiously above me.

"Don't worry," I mumbled. "I'm not going to sue you or anything." I was only half-joking.

"I'm really sorry," he said again. "Truly. I didn't see you there."

I braced myself for the short joke that was no doubt tacked onto the end of that statement...

... but none came.

He looked genuinely apologetic.

"It's fine." I'd hoped my words would put him at ease, even if just a little bit.

Nope.

He still looked anxious as hell.

"Really. It's fine. What's a first-degree burn between complete strangers?"

I'd meant it as a joke, but the guy wasn't laughing. I shrugged. A lack of sense of humor was not my problem to deal with.

"Look, I'm just going to go," I said, turning my attention to the barista to see how far along my order was.

"I'm sorry, but—"

"I already told you. It's fine. No harm done."

I dumped the used napkins into the tiny little bin on the barista's counter and folded my arms, hating that my hands were also covered in coffee. At least the guy didn't use a boatload of creamer and sugar.

"No. I was going to ask if you were Michael McKenzie's daughter?" he

asked in a low voice.

I stopped breathing at the sound of my father's name. Looking back at the man, I studied his face, wondering if my adolescent brain would pick up the slack. But my memories of this man were non-existent. I had never seen him before.

"Who are you?" My question was forced from my body in a barely-there whisper.

"My name is Willis Cameron, and I was a friend of your father's."

My heart leaped into my throat. If he was a friend of my father's, then maybe he could help me answer some questions about Rogue Faction—if he actually knew anything about the organization at all. Licking my lips, I asked, "And my mother?"

"I knew of Alyce, but she'd already passed when I joined... their organization."

*Bingo!* "What do you mean by *their* organization?"

His eyes darted to something behind me, and I turned. The barista was holding my takeout cup and smiling. It looked like she'd been calling my name for a while.

"Thank you, Jen." I grabbed my drink and took a sip, then turned back to Willis.

"Would you like to sit down for a minute? You've gone sheet-white."

"Sitting," I mumbled. Yeah, sitting would be good right about now. I moved robotically over to a table that had just freed up, sliding my cup onto the table, then wriggling into the high bar stool. Willis did the same—without the wiggling—and he simply stared at me in wonder.

"You look so much like your father. Same colored eyes and the shape of your face..."

"We have the same hair color, too." I waved at my head. "You know, under the teal." I took a sip of coffee and let the caffeine settle into my blood. "Tell me about my father and about Rogue Faction? What do you know?"

He pursed his lips in thought. For a minute, I didn't think he'd answer my question, but then he said, "I joined Rogue Faction a decade ago after I was discharged from the Marines. I didn't know what to do with my life. All I'd ever done was serve my country, and when I returned, I felt lost... like what I did didn't matter anymore. That was when I met your dad."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At the airport, actually. He was heading to Bulgaria on business, but he

said he recognized the soldier in me. Offered me a job right then and there.”

I frowned at that. My father was a meticulous yet cautious man. Granted, I never really knew what his particular skillset was, I’d always been told he and my mother were archeologists.

“Anyway, I took a couple of days to think about it,” Willis continued, “before I agreed to meet him at his office when he returned to the States. The rest, as they say, is history.”

Despite the uncertainty lurking in the back of my mind, I clung to Willis’s words. If he knew my father, he might’ve known where he got the opal necklace from. He might have known what kind of headspace he was in because as a kid, I’d had no idea.

My phone bleated with a message, and I peered at the screen. “Look, I have to get to work, but can I call you some time to discuss this further? I have so many questions and nobody to ask.”

His smile was slow but gentle. “Of course.”

Digging into my pocket, my fingers brushed past the kiss protection card Alistair had given me. On our first case, Sawyer and I had helped rid the local vampire kiss of an interloper and as thanks, they put me under temporary protection. I was still holding onto the card just in case I needed it at some random time.

Because this was me and crazy shit just happened.

I felt another card in there—thinner and glossier—and I pulled it out. Placing it onto the table, I said, “Here’s my cell.”

Willis did the same, offering me a business card, which I read immediately. Under his name was a logo—a Roman *fascis*. I recognized it from my spin through *Enemies of the Fae: A History*.

I ran my thumb over the icon.

“It’s called a *fascis*,” he told me. “It’s the symbol for Rogue Faction. ‘Strength through Unity,’” he said proudly, turning his head so I could see a tattoo representation on that ancient ax peeking out of the top of his shirt. “All members get one.”

“The tattoo?”

He nodded. I couldn’t remember my parents having a tattoo like that, but maybe they kept it hidden somewhere clothes could cover it.

“Well,” he said with a smile and standing. “I’m sorry again for dropping my coffee on you, but I hope you reach out and get in contact soon. I’d be happy to answer any questions you might have.”

“Thanks.”

I watched him walk away. Then, with my coffee clutched in my hand, I stood on shaking legs, my mind whirring at the possibilities. When I hopped back into my truck, I stowed my drink in the holder and started the engine, breathing out a sigh of relief when there wasn't any strange ticking noises or bombs exploding.

Man, I was jumpy.

I had a feeling today was going to be a loong day.

## TEN

I'D BEEN RIGHT about the long day.

Sawyer had been cool toward me ever since I set foot in the office. Wordlessly, we went from investigation to investigation, barely saying a thing outside of anything work-related.

At our last incident for the day, at the scene of a mauling, I got tired of all the silence.

“Are we going to be adults and talk about this?” I snapped, pulling on some gloves so I could open up a billfold that had been discarded in the snowy bough of a tree. Zachary Hayes was a twenty-four-year-old college kid who was supposed to be spending Christmas with his family at the Buxton Forest Lodge. Instead, he was dead on the forest floor with his throat and stomach torn open and his blood melting the snow.

*Tis' the season...*

His parents had reported him missing late last night after failing to return from an after-dinner stroll. The regular PD had found the body dragged off the main path, and we'd been called in because the ME who'd initially come to process the body thought the claw and bite marks looked nothing like a regular animal's, so we were dealing with a supe—a shifter of some sort most likely.

“About what?” Sawyer replied, looking at the killing wound to Zachary's throat. It had been slashed open with ragged claws. The much bigger wound—the one to his stomach—was surrounded by a lot of blood, which indicated he'd been alive when the animal had started to feast on his insides.

Poor bastard.

I averted my gaze so I didn't look down at the intestines spilling out of

his abdomen like fat, flesh-colored sausages. “You know what, Sawyer,” I retorted, pissed off I even had to elaborate on this. “About Mason coming over last night.”

His shoulders tightened, yet he still didn’t look at my face. No, he kept his gaze on Zachary’s frozen expression of terror. “I don’t want to talk about that. Who you *date*...” he hissed the word, “... or don’t date isn’t my concern.”

Exasperated, I threw my hands into the air. “Argh! I’ve already told you, we aren’t dating. Mason is just a guy I’ve gone out with once. You know, you’re being a total bitch right now.”

He seethed silently for a moment before bursting into action. “And how would you like me to act?” he snarled, standing up in one swift movement. He came toward me with fire in his eyes. “I told you I can’t stand the thought of you being with someone else.”

“*After* the fact, Sawyer. You told me that *after* Mason was in the apartment... not before. If you want to use that as an excuse, you are *shit* out of luck.”

“Why do you have to defy me all the time?”

“Why do you always rise to the occasion?” I bit back.

Someone cleared their throat, and we both glanced over to see Dr. Lee. He gave us a little wave. “Sorry to interrupt—”

“It’s fine, Lee,” Sawyer said sharply, stepping away from me. His hands were balled into fists as his sides. “We’re ready for you.”

Dr. Lee shot me a sympathetic smile and got down onto his haunches beside Zachary’s body.

“Can you give us an estimated time of death?” I asked.

Taking out a pen, he opened up Zachary’s mouth and took a look at his tongue. I recoiled when I realized he’d bitten it off during the attack. Lee, however, seemed unfazed by that juicy development.

“I’d say between eight and fourteen hours... at a guess.”

I was still surveying the scene when the photographer came in and took her shots. Sawyer directed her, even though the scene was littered with little flags noting evidence. I guess he *really* didn’t want to talk to me. When the photographer was done, Lee loaded up the body and said he’d have more information for us in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.

Sawyer and I were the last to go, leaving behind the blood-soaked snow and the forest that was the only witness to Zachary’s gruesome death.

Together, we walked down the main path that led to the parking lot attached to the expensive log cabin resort where the victim's family would celebrate a somber Christmas this year.

Grit crunched under my boots as I made my way to my truck. When I got there, I leaned against the front quarter panel and folded my arms. "I had a visitor last night," I said.

Sawyer drew to a stop beside his motorcycle. When he spoke, his voice was hard. "I know."

"Not Mason. Someone else. Someone called Blaze."

He spun around to face me, his eyes narrowed. "You have two guys at the same time?"

I rolled my eyes. "Like you can talk."

He blanched.

Hey, I shamed an incubus. Awesome!

"No," I said, continuing to celebrate my win mentally. "This guy was fae, and he said he was here at his queen's request—Astrid's request."

Sawyer placed the helmet he was holding down slowly and turned to fully face me. "What else did he say?"

"He said Astrid needs my help with Avi, and she wants to see me in Wonderland. I tried to fob him off with an excuse that I couldn't travel into Wonderland, but he told me that Astrid knew what I was capable of. He also said Astrid had information about my necklace and that she would tell me in exchange for helping her."

"Don't agree to anything, Cat."

I unfolded my arms and let them dangle at my sides. "I haven't. Blaze said he'd be back tonight for my answer."

Sawyer stared at me, his eyes flickered back and forth on my face. What was he searching for?

"And look," I began, pushing off the truck and approaching him. "I'm sorry if having Mason in the apartment last night wasn't cool with you. I honestly thought you wouldn't mind, and I had sent you that text to let you know."

Without warning, Sawyer reached out and dragged me closer, tipping me off balance. I practically fell into his embrace. I tried to pull back because we weren't exactly in a private place. It was a parking lot, and a lot of cars were still coming and going.

"I'm sorry I overreacted. The only thing I can blame it on is my

protective instincts, which aren't exactly reasonable when it comes to you."

"Why not?" I asked on a sigh, snuggling against his chest and drawing in his scent. I felt him shake his head, and he dropped his mouth to my ear. When he spoke, I shivered, then gasped when he nipped at the lobe. My whole body went liquid, and I was glad he was holding onto me, otherwise I would've fallen.

"Because you're all I want, but I'm not what you want."

I clutched at his shirt, wanting to blurt out that he was what I wanted but fear of ruining our working relationship and our friendship was not worth the risk.

"You know that's not true," I whispered.

"No? Why won't you take a chance on us, then? If it's an issue of monogamy, you don't have to worry about that. I haven't been able to get hard for another woman since we had sex a couple of weeks ago."

I blinked. Stunned. Speechless, even, and that was a big feat for me to achieve. "But you've been feeding on other women for two weeks now. I've seen you go out. I've seen you come back with their lipstick on your mouth and the side of your neck."

*And didn't all those times hurt like hell.*

He shook his head, brushing his mouth against the shell of my ear. "All I could do was give them oral and a great orgasm, which I fed off, but that was it. I haven't fed fully since you."

I jerked away from him, hating that his mouth had been on another woman's pussy. The outrage I felt was unjustified, though. His mouth had been on countless women before me—countless.

"They weren't you, Cat," he murmured, pressing his forehead to mine.

I may have melted a little at that. My resolve and outrage weakened. "I am pretty great, right?"

He pulled away and smiled, brushing the hair from my face. "Nobody is like you."

Weakened. "Damn straight they aren't." I rubbed at my arms. We'd been out here long enough that the cold was starting to seep past my jacket.

"Let's go file this report, then we can go home," he said.

I kinda liked how that sounded.

*Home.*



“Can we get takeout tonight?” I asked Sawyer as I emerged from my bedroom, rubbing a towel through my damp hair.

He arched a brow. “It’s your turn to cook. Also, what about therapy this week?”

“Joanna’s on vacation with her family for two weeks, and I suck at cooking. You know this. If I had my way, I’d just serve coffee for dinner and be done with it.”

“Now, why doesn’t that surprise me,” he murmured with real affection in his voice.

Leaning up against the counter, I asked, “Have you seriously not been able to get hard for another woman?”

In an instant, all the humor trickled from his expression, and he glanced away, pulling open the fridge.

“Sawyer?”

“Yes.” He shut the fridge door. “But I didn’t tell you that to guilt you into anything. I’ve never heard of this happening to another incubus. I even started doing some research online to see if I could find anything about this, but the net is filled with wild conspiracy theories from crackpot humans. I was forced to look in my own records, which aren’t much better given they were written by crackpot humans *before* the invention of the Internet.”

*Consort.*

The word came to me.

“Can incubi have consorts?” At his raised brows, I pushed on. “I mean, Faline said she’d figured out a way to only feed off one person, but Faline was also a lying, backstabbing bitch.”

Sawyer eased up to the other side of the counter, staring down at me. I shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable with the scrutiny.

“I’ve found some mention of consorts before, yes.” His eyes blazed.

With heat.

With hunger.

“And how would all that work?”

“From what I’ve read, an incubi’s consort *calms* the desire to feed off every single female they see. They calm it so much that the incubus can no longer feed off anyone *but* that consort.”

“What if the consort isn’t interested in being with an incubus?”

I asked the question not because it was true of me, but because I needed to know the details. When it came to the supernatural world, I was so in the

dark. I was living under a boulder at the end of a cave.

“I read of one such instance where the incubus and consort were sworn enemies. Suffice it to say, things didn’t end well for that incubus.”

“Why?”

“He was forced to feed off lust only. On a nutritional level, it’s like supplementing a candy bar for a head of broccoli. There’s no way sustained consumption of lust will keep an incubus well-fed and strong. Eventually, he died.”

“His consort was also supernatural?”

“Yes, as they always are.”

I didn’t realize I was shaking my head until the ends of my damp hair flicked me on the face. “You think I’m your consort?”

“What other explanation is there, Cat? I fed from you and now I don’t desire anyone else. My body only wants yours, to sink into your heat every day.”

A flush of warmth went through me—an ache formed between my legs. Sucking in a breath, I said, “But I’m not supernatural. I’m just me. I have the lifespan of a human so even if I was your consort... and I’m not saying I am... I’ll be dead in another sixty years, and then where would you be?”

“That, I don’t know. All I know is that after you, I haven’t wanted anyone else. With everything I’ve read, I’ve managed to piece together this... you’re my consort. And I have to tell you that seeing you with another man makes me savage with jealousy.”

“Noted,” I replied absently, staring down at the black marble slab between us. The material was so glossy, I could see both our reflections in it.

“How do you feel about that?”

*How did I feel?* I felt like I wanted to high-five everyone in this building. I felt like I wanted to crawl into bed, pull my unicorn comforter over my head and cry. I felt like stripping off all my clothes and letting Sawyer do what he wanted to do to me because the thought of him with someone else drove *me* to savage jealousy.

“It could ruin everything,” I whispered. “We have an amazing working relationship. I actually *like* you, but having more than that... having sex daily... would change it all. Right?”

I needed his agreement on this one. I had to know he saw the flaw in the consort plan.

“Yes, it could,” he conceded. “But I’m not going to let that happen.”

Here's the thing with relationships... the only way it could get fucked up is if the two people involved in it choose to fuck it up. If our jobs and partnership are so important to you, you will make sure nothing changes there."

"What if it does, though?" I asked in a cautious whisper. Sawyer was telling me things I wanted to hear, but my trust in the supernatural had never been that great.

"I guess we won't know until we try." He shrugged his broad shoulders and gave me a soft smile. "So, what do you feel like for dinner?"

I opened my mouth to reply when there was a knock on the door. Glancing over at the clock, I saw that it was six o'clock on the dot. My gaze flickered to Sawyer, and he was instantly on alert.

"Don't open the door yet," he warned.

"It's just Blaze," I tried to reason, but Sawyer had already darted into his bedroom, emerging with our Glocks he kept locked up in his gun safe. He gave me mine then held his own sidearm against his thigh, his finger outside the trigger guard.

"This is a bit of overkill, right?" I asked, gesturing to my gun. "It's just Blaze."

Sawyer's jaw bulged. "And you should know better than anyone to assume anything about the fae. He could have been sent back with orders to take you by force. Ever thought of that?"

I folded my arms awkwardly. "No," I replied mulishly. But I should have. I should've thought about that because Sawyer was right. The fae weren't exactly known for being fair. Sure, they could tell their truth until the cows came home, but whether that was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth was another story. The fae loved a loophole—any way to twist it to suit themselves.

Nodding at the door, he commanded, "Open it."

Letting out a breath, I did open the door, recoiling a little when I saw Blaze standing there once more. I knew he was going to be the one standing there, but nightmares had a way of shocking you still.

He bowed low and long until I had to tell the guy to straighten.

"My mistress sends you fond and warm greetings," he began.

"Super. Look, Blaze, let's not do this out in the hallway, 'kay?" I waved him in and closed the door behind him. Blaze looked up to find Sawyer with his Glock trained on his chest.

"Blaze, Sawyer. Sawyer, this is Blaze... Astrid's right hand... UPS guy?"

The fae frowned. “Herold,” Blaze corrected.

“That,” I shot back. Blaze was wearing a dark blue double-breasted frock coat over a buff waistcoat. Light gray breeches and shiny dress boots completed his snappy ensemble. “Is the queen looking for her answer?” I asked.

“Yes, she desires to know what you will say. She also told me to tell you that Avi has made an attempt on her life already in the time she has waited. She fears what else her sister would do.”

“Wow, these sisters don’t mess around with soricide. Have you fae ever heard of just talking it out instead of resorting to murder? No, don’t answer that.” I heaved a sigh, wondering whether I’d ever get a case that didn’t involve murderous plots to usurp a throne.

But then I thought about my run-in with Willis. *He* could give me the information I needed about the opal and Rogue Faction, so I didn’t need Astrid’s dangling carrot anymore. Thank you very much.

“Look, I’m sorry, but Astrid is just going to have to sort this out herself. I can’t be the person everyone runs to when they have a problem.”

Blaze’s face fell. “Astrid will be most disappointed to hear that.”

“Astrid will get over it,” I shot back. “I’m sorry, but this is my final answer.” I turned my back on the fae, intending to walk down the hallway to my room when something clutched at my ankle. I stiffened and spun around to find Blaze prostrate on the floor, his fingers wrapped tightly around my leg.

“Please,” he begged, tears streaming down his face. “Please, I beg of you. Do this for my queen. Do this so that our lands are once again filled with warmth and light.”

Desperately, I looked over at Sawyer, shooting him a glare that said, *what the hell should I do here?* He said nothing. He did nothing—simply stared at me and waited for my decision. And right now, I decided that Blaze needed to get up.

Bending down, I pried Blaze’s fingers from my ankle and helped him to his feet. “Stop embarrassing yourself,” I mumbled. “Please.” When his fingers still didn’t loosen, I relented. “I’ll speak with her, okay? That doesn’t mean I’ll necessarily be able to help her,” I said forcefully. “But I will speak with her and find out what she would like to do. When does she want to meet?”

The tears on Blaze’s face were glistening like snowflakes in the overhead

lights. “Oh, thank you. Thank you, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I groused, hating that I’d been guilted into something I’d rather not do.

“She will meet you tomorrow evening in your human time. Inside the entrance to Wonderland.”

“Great.”

And just like that, I was helping the fae.

## ELEVEN

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd say this, but I missed my therapy session with Joanna. When I woke up on Saturday morning, I felt restless and unsteady. Things with Blaze hadn't exactly worked out how I wanted them to, and things between Sawyer and I still weren't exactly resolved. I'd spent most of the night thinking about what he'd said, about the whole you-are-my-consort thing. Could I be that for him? Physiologically speaking, I guess that I could be.

I picked up my phone and dialed Sasha's number. My girl could give me the clarity I needed.

"Hey, babe," Sasha said by way of greeting when she picked up.

"Hey, you. How are you? How's Vermont treating you?"

Brad—the personal trainer and closet billionaire—had swept Sasha off to a pretentious ski resort to spend Christmas with him and his family last weekend.

The bitch.

"Oh, you know, skiing all day, hot sex on the rug by the fire, in the hot tub, and on any available surface we can find."

I could just picture her waving her hand in the air like it was NBD.

"I think he might be a keeper."

"I think so, too," Sasha replied softly, affection in her voice. "Man, what's wrong with me. I always said I wouldn't settle down with just one man, that I was a free spirit.

"You got hypnotized by the D. Dicks will always win your heart."

She laughed. "True and Brad's is p-e-r-f-e-c-t, *perfect*."

"I'm really happy for you." And I was. I was happy that she was happy.

After all the men she'd dated, she deserved some happiness.

"How are things with you? You working over Christmas?"

"Maybe. It depends if supes want to be dicks or not. I really hope nobody commits murder on Christmas Day. I'd be pissed."

"I hope for your sake, they don't. How's Sawyer?"

"Good." I nibbled on my bottom lip, wondering how much more to say. Sasha knew that we'd finally had sex in order for Sawyer to feed, but that was it. "Bad," I added. "I don't know."

"Okay, let's start from the top. Good because..." she fished.

"We're cool. After the sex, we've been cool. I mean, I want to gouge my own heart out every time he goes to feed on someone, but other than that..."

Sasha *hmm-mmm*ed. "And the bad?"

"The bad is that he dropped some truth on me last night... some truth I probably wasn't ready to hear."

"Uh-oh."

"He said he hasn't fed properly or fully for the last two weeks. He's only been feeding on lust and that he hasn't been able to get hard for anyone else."

"Why not? That guy is a walking bottle of Viagra."

I shifted on the bed, squirming. "He said he can only get hard for me now."

Silence descended on our call.

"Sash? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here." She blew out a breath. "He can only get hard for you?"

"Apparently."

"Well, this is great, right?"

"How do you figure?"

"Well, you were worried about monogamy. Sawyer can't get it up for anyone else. Ergo, your problem is solved."

"Did you just use *ergo* in a sentence? Also, what about the whole thing about our relationship? I don't want to lose that and see it burst into flames in front of my eyes."

"Oh, my God, you're so dramatic," she said, snorting. "It won't. You guys are solid as you are right now. All you're doing is adding sex to the mix. If anything, your relationship will be stronger because you have a solid base to work off."

"I don't know..." I hedged.

"You want to know what I think?"

I huffed out a laugh. “I have a feeling you’d tell me whether I wanted to know or not.”

“Why else would you call me to chat. I don’t think it’s your fear of ruining the relationship that’s the problem.”

I smoothed my finger over the unicorn blanket on my legs. “Oh?”

“I think you’re hesitant because of *what* he is.”

I said, “Well, duh. He’s an incubus.”

“He’s also a supe. You were so afraid of them before, you know, with the death of your first partner and your parents.”

“What, are you my therapist?” I shot back with a small, scared laugh.

“No, but I am your best friend. I know what makes you tick, and what’s stopping you from pursuing Sawyer is *you*. Do you think that if you got involved, you’d be... I don’t know... betraying humanity or some shit?”

I paused at her question, noodling over it for a moment. Was that my real issue? Was I terrified of supes to the point that I didn’t want to get involved with one? I thought back to the night Sawyer and I had finally had sex. It wasn’t out of a mutual desire that it happened, although that had helped. He had been starving—weakened from not feeding properly—and I had been helping him through that.

Helping him.

I was helping him, and that made it okay.

But what I wanted—a relationship with him—that was a purely selfish thing. I wanted to be with him because I was insanely attracted to him. I wanted to get in his pants at every available second, and the scarier thing was, he wanted that too. When I’d lusted over him from afar, it had been okay. It was one-sided. Now? Sawyer had messed things up because he wanted me back.

“Cat? You still there?” Sasha asked.

Shaking myself, I gripped the phone harder. “I’m still here.”

“Look, I have to go. Brad just walked into the room with nothing but a Santa hat on his dick, and I need to open my present.”

“Go get that dick, Sash.”

She laughed. “You, too, Cat. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I hung up the phone and dropped it onto the blanket. Running a hand through my hair, I let my friend’s words swirl around my head. I could admit I wanted Sawyer—to myself, to the world—and that was okay.



But before I could tackle the Sawyer situation, I needed to figure out the truth behind my hesitation. I needed to figure out who I really was and how Rogue Faction and my opal necklace played into all of it.

I needed answers, and there was only one place I could think to get them.

Leaning over to my side table, I picked up Willis's business card and ran my thumb over the embossed number.

I dialed, then put the call on speaker.

## TWELVE

I ORGANIZED to meet Willis Cameron in the park. I waited for him on the bench overlooking the almost completely frozen river, bundled up in a new down jacket since that psycho bitch, Kseniya, had shredded the other one with her nails. It was a peaceful winter afternoon. The sun was just starting to set, leaving the cold, crisp wind to sweep in for the late shift.

I heaved out a sigh and looked out over the river. The banks were loaded with snow, the surface on the other side frozen over. In the middle, though, the water was sluggish but still moving. Tree limbs dangled over the water, swaying their skeletal limbs gently in the breeze.

I turned when I heard the soft crunch of feet on snow, and gave Willis Cameron a smile.

“How are you, Cat?” he asked, blowing into his ungloved hands and rubbing them together. “It’s cold, huh?”

“Yeah. Thanks for meeting me.” I gestured to the seat beside me. “I appreciate you coming out.”

“Your dad was a good guy. I truly liked him.” He blew into his hands once more. “Anyway, you said you had some questions for me?”

I guessed my super vague and jumbled voicemail message hadn’t made a lot of sense. “Yes, I do. So many. I don’t know a thing about what he did. I thought my parents were archaeologists. Clearly, that wasn’t true.”

“No, it wasn’t. Members of Rogue Faction are told to use a fake profession or job in order to fly under the radar, but it has to be related to something in our pasts.”

“What’s your cover story?”

“Private security.”

Well, that made sense. I looked down at my clasped hands. “Look, I guess I need you to start from the beginning. Tell me everything you know. I feel as if I have a huge blank space in my memories, although that’s not exactly true because my parents *never* told me what they did.”

“All right.” He sat back on the bench and stared out at the river. Bending down, he scooped up a handful of rocks, then slowly started throwing them into the center of the water. As soon as the first stone hit the surface and the water rippled, he threw the next and the next and the next.

Six stones in total and then he sat and watched the water for a moment.

Then he started to talk in a rich baritone. “Rogue Faction was created in 1451, a year after the European Witch Hunts began. The group had started small—just a handful of people who suspected there was more in this world than what they were told. The most zealous of these members was a man called Elias Booth and a woman called Prudence Wright. They married and had children, who, when they were old enough, were indoctrinated into the Faction as well. This is how it went for hundreds of years. As the group’s members grew and multiplied in Europe, the same happened in America. The US association reached its peak number in mid-1693 at the conclusion of the Salem Witch Trials.

“After your mother died, there was a period where there was a spate of attacks by supernaturals on Rogue groups as they worked to simultaneously clear vampire kisses across Europe. Your father was the sole survivor of a particularly bloody attack that destroyed his team. He became the most zealous member after that. He was tenacious in his need to kill the supes, to the point where it eventually got him killed in Turkey.”

My fingers played with the little fabric tag on the zipper of my jacket. “I was once told that *I* was the culmination of two of the strongest bloodlines in Rogue Faction history.”

Willis turned to look at me slowly, and I saw the truth of it in his eyes. “Your father’s line can trace back to Elias Booth and Prudence Wright. Your mother’s to Thomas Danforth, who was a major player in the Salem Witch Trials. So, yes, you *are* from two of the strongest bloodlines our organization has.” He glanced away, and when he looked back, there was a strange look in his dark eyes. “They say that *you* are the future of Rogue Faction.”

I blinked. “I can’t be. I’m not a member.” *Nor do I want to be*, I tacked on in my head.

A small smile flexed his lips. “It doesn’t really matter, anyway. After

your father's death, Rogue Faction kind of dissolved. It doesn't exist anymore, unless you count the few inactive members of us who are left behind."

"That's it?" I don't know why I sounded so shocked. "So what do you do now?"

He shrugged. "This and that."

"And the other remaining members?"

He turned his attention back to the river. "They survive how they can, but like soldiers, switching off that part of their brains that fought and hated supernaturals is difficult. Some killed themselves. Some became paid mercenaries because the desire to kill was still there. Some became vigilantes and are still trying to clean up the problem alone."

"Do you know anything else that might be important?" I clung to the idea that maybe my father had told someone where he got the necklace from, but I wasn't stupid enough to just blurt out the question. If a witch had wanted it, if it was a conduit for power, then a group like Rogue Faction—even if it were defunct—would still want it too. Right?

He looked over at me and smiled. "I know he loved you very much. You were always on his mind, Cat."

Warmth suffused my chest at his words. Deep down, I knew my father loved me, but after my mom's death, he'd withdrawn so much that I hardly saw him around the apartment anymore.

"I'm glad."

With a soft smile, he stood and brushed off his hands. "Well, I'd better get going. My wife is expecting me home."

"You're married?"

He nodded. Grinned. "For the past few years, yes. I finally found a woman who loves me for me... scars and all."

And with that, he walked away. I sat there for a few more minutes, turning his words over and over in my head. My father loved me, missed me, talked about me. Draco had been right—I *was* the culmination of two of the strongest bloodlines in Rogue Faction history, but what did that mean for me? Clearly, the remaining members had no idea who I was, otherwise they would've found me by now and demanded I take over the mantel.

I burrowed my hands into the neck of my jacket and felt for my opal. It was warm against my palm, but only from the heat of my body. I let out a sigh. Willis hadn't mentioned the stone at all, and I didn't know why he

would. It wasn't as if he could see it to make a comment, and I was certainly leery about bringing it up in conversation. My ownership of it had caused so much trouble for me already.

That still didn't change the fact that I *needed* to know about it, needed to understand it. It was the missing link in this chain. If I wanted my questions answered, I had no choice but to speak to Astrid, and speaking to the fae didn't come without its dangers.

I would have to bargain for something in order to get out of this alive.

But what would that be?

My body ached in protest as I stood. Stretching out my arms above my head, I yawned and took a step toward the river to check out how long before the river froze over completely when the sensation of spiders crawling over my skin assaulted me.

"Oh, *hell* no," I muttered, drawing back a step. The sensation didn't stop. If anything, it got worse, and I brushed frantically at the invisible creatures crawling all over me.

I inched back another step...

... then ice cracked.

My head jerked around in the direction of the sound, my breath slowed to a barely-there stream. What the hell was going to crawl up through the ice this time? More kappas? Maybe a pissed-off water sprite. I almost laughed at that one. Water sprites were harmless, or at least I thought they were.

*Idiot*, I chastised myself mentally. Kappas and water sprites couldn't manipulate Wonderland—only the fae could, and maybe also a mass-murdering witch in possession of my necklace, but as far as I knew, Kseniya was still locked up and serving multiple life sentences.

I wanted to take another step back—maybe even a couple of thousand so I wasn't here right now, to get away from whatever fae had managed to manipulate Wonderland and let them through—but I couldn't move. Looking down, I saw my boots and ankles were frozen in ice that was creeping up my calves right before my eyes.

My heart ratcheted up to greyhound speed.

Out on the river, a slender hand reached through the sluggish water at the edge of the ice sheet. The other joined it, and fear skittered through me. A woman—a beautiful, dark-skinned woman—pulled herself up onto the ice, completely dry. Her feral onyx eyes studied me, traveling lazily across my body like she was inspecting me for weaknesses.

“Are you Catherine Ellen McKenzie?” the woman asked in a Kathleen Turner-style smoky voice.

An involuntary shiver moved through me. “Who are you?”

The woman moved without moving—seeming to float across the surface of the ice. Her slender hips swaying beneath her black satin slip. Lifting her hand, she made a flicking motion near her head, and a black crown appeared, the surface of which was glittering with rubies so dark that they looked black too.

“I am Avi Woodbryre S’Quainforrest, Queen of Fall and Winter, and current ruler of the Unseelie Court.” She studied me with shrewd eyes. “And you may bow before me.” Another flick of her wrist, and my knees and back bent without me directing them too. With a hiss, I fell into an awkward bow. I kept my eyes on her until more pressure was directed at my head, and I lowered that too.

She kept me in that position of supplication and came closer, her feet not quite reaching the bank. I could feel her gaze on my skin, though, and my opal warmed under my jacket. I was stunned by this, considering the stone had laid quiet for so long.

“I can feel it,” she said on a low, drawn-out purr. “I can feel it calling to me like a lover.” The pressure lifted, and I looked up. The queen was willowy, her dark skin dewy with health. Her black hair fell past her shoulders, and I guessed to her lower back. She was the epitome of beauty, but I could feel the darkness lurking behind her eyes.

“What?” I bit out.

“What was stolen from me. What *I* want back.”

“Look, lady, I have no idea what you’re talking about—” I started.

“The stone,” she hissed, inching forward another step but not leaving the ice. “I know you have it. Kailon told me. I want it back.” Avi stared hungrily at where my opal laid beneath my clothes, her hands curling into fists repeatedly like she could feel it in her palm already.

I fought not to roll my eyes. When would all these thieving, kleptomaniac supes just leave me alone? But then I wondered why in the hell she didn’t take it right now. She was far more powerful than I was, and so far, it looked like the fae didn’t trigger my opal’s killer instincts.

“Sorry. I’m kind of attached to it,” I replied with a shrug.

“It’s *mine*.”

I arched a brow. “Were you raised with this sense of entitlement, or are

you a narcissist?”

“I want it back!” she screeched, stamping her foot like a petulant toddler. The ice sheet she stood on cracked.

“So, why can’t you just reach out and take it?” I asked curiously.

She hissed at me, her dark irises gobbling up all the white in her eyes. “Because I am powerless to leave this nexus between our realms,” she seethed. “At least, not without my stone.”

*Nexus?* “I sense this is an ongoing complaint,” I deadpanned. “Look, Avi, is it? It sounds like you are out of luck, Avi.” She remained where she was, but her disdain for me was growing. I could almost taste it in the air. “And since it looks like you can’t leave the surface of the river, I’d say you are also *shit* out of luck.”

She watched me like a cat watching an escaping mouse, and it was driving her insane. “For this insubordination, I’ll—”

I cut her off, earning me a glare. “Look, I don’t really care what threats you fling around right now. I have enough on my plate without adding your shit to it, too.”

“You know, I’m the only thing standing between you and your destruction,” she sing-songed, and I paused.

“How do you figure?”

She smiled like the cat that got the canary. “Why do you think you’re still breathing? Kailon wants you dead.”

“Not a news flash,” I retorted.

Her lips thinned into a hard line. “Maybe not, but *I’m* the only reason you’re still walking this earth. *I’m* the one stopping Kailon from ending your life.”

“You should get that on a t-shirt,” I replied. “And while you’re at it, add *I’m a fucking narcissist – just ask me* along with it. Also, you should probably know, Kailon is being a very bad fae and not listening to your orders. He’s already made three attempts on my life. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get the hell out of here.”

I tried to lift one of my feet, but the ice was solid. I tried again, cursing when the ice hardened even further.

Avi’s mouth flexed into a smug smile, and she raised her palm. Bracing myself, I waited for whatever she was conjuring, but as a minute ticked by, then another, my muscles released their grip on my bones.

*What the hell was she doing?*

That was when I heard it.

A scraping.

A metallic groan.

Then a woman screamed. Loudly.

I spun around and gaped as my truck was skidding sideways through the park, the tires collecting snow, dirt, and gravel. The woman who had screamed was a jogger who'd been brought up short in her afternoon run by an electric blue RAM careening through a midtown park. *Ah, what a story to tell the grandkids.*

After blasting through a couple of park benches and a trash can, the front quarter panel and passenger door was dented and scratched, and I had to bite my tongue. The insurance company had begrudgingly covered the replacement of my last truck. Somehow, I doubted a third 'supernatural mishap' was going to be all right with them.

When my truck was within one hundred feet of the river, its speed increased. It was like someone had slung an invisible lasso around the middle of the bed, dragging it like it was a toy rather than an almost five-thousand-pound piece of automotive perfection. It hit the edge of the sidewalk, the tires puncturing from the lateral force, and tipped—flipping over onto its roof and sending sparks flying.

"No, no, no," I muttered. Shoving the hair from my face, I watched in horror as it hit the ice, fracturing the semi-solid surface with a *crack!* Like a mythical river monster, it sank into the dark, sluggish water of the river, the bubbles breaking the surface, the only marker of the death of yet another one of my trucks.

I turned to glare at the fae queen. "What the hell did you do that for?" I yelled.

"You take something from me. I take something from you." She shrugged, retreated a step, then she fell into the water and disappeared back into its icy depths.



## THIRTEEN

WHEN I RETURNED to Sawyer's apartment—*my* apartment now too—I shrugged out of my jacket, then rifled through the cupboards until I found a bottle of whisky, pouring myself a glass. I felt jittery like I was about to jump out of my skin. Although, I wasn't sure how that was possible considering I was frozen solid after walking home from the park.

My truck had been totaled.

*Again.*

I must be getting desensitized to the repeated destruction of my property.

When Sawyer strolled out of his room, I was on my third drink. His hair was wet from the shower he'd just taken, and all I could think was that he'd been out to feed on someone.

He always showered after he fed.

And jealousy was a bitch.

He eyed the tumbler in my hand. "Rough... Saturday?" he asked.

"You could say that." I finished off what was in my glass, then lowered it back to the counter. "The fae queen dragged my truck into Buxton River."

"Run that by me again?"

I poured another drink and threw it back. "Avi came to see me and demanded I return her necklace. When I refused to play by her rules, she *controlled* my truck somehow, dragged it through the park *from the street* and sent it straight into the water."

His brows rose to his hairline. "Avi, the Unseelie Queen?"

"*That's* all you got out of everything I just said?" I shook my head and poured myself another inch of amber liquid. "She came out of the middle of a frozen Buxton River. Just popped out of there like a cork. *Then* she totaled

my truck! How in the hell could she do that?”

Sawyer motioned for the bottle of whisky, and I gave it to him. After he took a long pull, he set the bottle back down. “The ruling queen can leave Wonderland briefly, but they need to be tethered to their realm in some way. Since Avi is the Unseelie Queen, it would make sense that she used ice to be her conduit between the two realms.”

“So, Astrid wouldn’t be able to do the same?”

“She isn’t ruling right now,” he replied with a shrug.

“How do you know this? Did you read it in one of your books?”

He shook his head. “I’ve bedded some extra loose-lipped fae before.”

My face scrunched up in distaste. “Make you a deal. You stop talking about past lovers, and I’ll...”

What could I give up?

*Unicorn collection?* Not likely. I had a couple of statuettes and a new set of Christmas-themed pajamas coming next week.

*Coffee?* Nah, I didn’t like the idea of being un-caffeinated.

“Yes?”

I waved him off. “I’m still thinking.”

“Take your time,” he said, smirking.

Dick.

Eventually, I huffed. “Just stop talking about them.”

All his playfulness was gone as he rounded the counter, his gray eyes fixed on mine. “Why?”

“Why?” I snorted. “Because who likes to hear about ex-lovers?”

He came to a stop in front of me, the air crackling between us. “Why does it bother you so much, hearing about my lovers?”

I rolled my eyes. “Because nobody wants *that* rubbed in their faces. Past lovers, present lovers, it’s all a no-go. Want me to bring up Mason again?”

He growled at me, the possessive sound hitting me between my legs and making me let out a shuddering breath. Wrapping his hand around my waist, he jerked me closer until we were standing nose-to-nose. His warm breath feathered over my skin, the scent of his toothpaste minty and fresh mixing with the smokey peat of the whisky.

“I don’t want to hear that guy’s name on your pretty lips, pussy cat.”

Before I could give him my outraged reply, he dropped his head and nuzzled the side of my neck. Kissing me. Licking me. I knew I should stop this, but, my *God*, I didn’t want to. I tipped my head back, giving him better

access to my throat. He nipped gently with his teeth before licking away the sting. Against my stomach, I felt the push of his growing erection.

He could only feed on other's lust right now.

But he could only get hard for me.

*Heady.* That was such a heady feeling.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I murmured, "Are you starving?"

He groaned, flexing into me. "For you? Yes. Always."

His hands drifted lower, digging into the skin of my ass. He hauled me in closer, sliding his thigh in between my legs and lowering my hips onto it. Like a woman possessed, I started to grind on him, rubbing myself against him until my panties were soaked, and my whole body felt like it was electrified.

"Pussy cat," he whispered under his breath, kissing my neck, my jaw, my lips. I opened my mouth for him, letting him sweep his tongue inside and taste me completely. We both groaned. Sawyer tangled his hands into my hair, holding my lips hostage to his. I let go, let him consume me. Effortlessly, he lifted me onto the counter, pushing his big body between my legs and claiming back the space. The whole time, our mouths clashed in a desperate kiss—of teeth, of tongues, of lips.

I was drowning in lust, in need, in want for him. Squeezing his sides with my knees, I urged him closer until I wasn't sure where I finished and he began. I ran my fingers through his hair, tugging at it until he hissed in pleasure.

He felt so good. *This* felt so good, but...

... he was my partner. And although the little issue of monogamy had been straightened out, the issue of our working relationship hadn't.

His hips surged again, the friction pushing me closer to an orgasm that always seemed to be waiting in the wings whenever Sawyer was involved.

Okay, maybe I was looking at this way too hard, but I needed to know we were going to be all right. Sex ruined friendships. It was as simple as that, but maybe catching feelings didn't have to be a thing. Maybe we *could* do this and leave all the emotional baggage at the door. I mean, I'd be doing him a service, after all. This was Good Samaritan work here.

Before I could run my idea past him, the apartment buzzer sounded. Sawyer either hadn't heard it or didn't give a shit because his kiss was still frantic, his hands roving all over my body. With my hands on his shoulders, I pushed a little, forcing him to take a step back.

His eyes were black, streaking with lightning every few seconds. He'd been feeding, but I knew it hadn't been enough. I pulled away farther, my chest rising and falling rapidly. Lust was still spinning a web inside me, but I was beginning to feel more in control of myself.

"What is it?" he rasped, licking his lips. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's buzzing to get in," I replied in an even more hoarse voice. Just then, they buzzed again. "See?"

With a growl that sounded far more animalistic than what should've come from a male's voice, he glared at the door before returning his attention to me. He kissed my forehead, my nose, and the side of my mouth while he stroked and caressed my arms gently.

"Can we continue this later?" he asked.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

"I don't think we should've started this in the first place," I replied, and the look of desolation on his face almost killed me.

"I know you're uncomfortable with the idea of being my consort—"

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

"You're damn right I am," I snapped, then let out a breath, tempering my anger. "I just need to know that things won't go south with us. You're one of the most important people in my life besides Sasha and Mrs. Brown. If I mess up what we have going on, I'd never forgive myself."

"How could you mess it up?"

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Sawyer peered over his shoulder and growled again.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

"No. We aren't expecting anyone. They'll go away. Besides, I want to talk about this... about us... a little more. I want to know why you keep fighting. You're attracted to me without the need for my influence. You accept that this is my life, that I must feed in order to survive, but I can't keep feeding purely on lust."

He took my hand in his and placed it on his thick, hot erection. He arched into my hand as I wrapped my fingers around his shaft. With a groan, he bit his lip and looked at me.

"I'm dead without you. Please, Cat."

I chewed on my bottom lip. Could I do this? I didn't *like* seeing him in pain. It wasn't as if we were going to get married. He couldn't knock me up since the only way that was possible was from a coupling between an incubus

and a succubus. Besides, we'd already done this once, and nothing had changed.

What we'd have would be the perfect no-strings agreement. Letting out a long breath, I locked my gaze on his and said, "Just sex? No feelings? No expectations for more? No... couple stuff?"

His jaw tightened. "If that's what you want."

Was it? "It is." I nodded just to drive my point home. "What if I'm seriously interested in dating someone while we have this arrangement?"

His expression grew tight, and his top lip curled off his teeth. "You won't *need* anything else from anyone while you're with me. I'm going to leave you so satisfied, you'll be boneless."

I grinned. "So sure of yourself."

He cupped my face, and I let out an unbidden moan. Dammit. One touch. That's all it had taken. "No, I'm so sure of *us*, Cat."

My hand was still on his cock, so I rubbed him through his sweats, making him suck in another hissed breath. He bundled up my hair, fisted the lot of it and pulled, arching my neck and back, pushing out my chest. A thrill went through me.

As he licked a path up my neck, he whispered harshly, "I'll make every time good for you, pussy cat, I swear it. Being with me will not be a hardship."

"I know," I panted breathily, moaning when he tugged a little harder.

His mouth slammed into mine, claiming it in a hot kiss that made wild fire shoot through my veins. I realized that the first time we'd had sex, Sawyer had been severely weakened from not feeding on anything at all. Now, he was jacked up on lust. I shivered at the thought of what he'd be like the next time we did this—when he was replete from feeding fully and without reserve.

"I'll make you feel so good," he murmured into my ear, nipping at the lobe and soothing the sting away with his tongue. I gasped and clung to his shoulders, digging in my fingers—holding on tightly.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

With a curse, Sawyer wrenched himself away and stalked to the intercom by the door.

"What?" he snarled.

A tinny, electric voice said, "It's Blaze." There was a gasp, then he added in a desperate tone, "Please, may I come in? Someone is—" His words were

inaudible, then it sounded as if there was a scuffle. Blaze panted as if in pain before he cried desperately, “Stop... please, *sto*—” The intercom squealed with electrical interference and went dead.

Sawyer looked over at me, alarmed. “Did he buzz in before?”

I shook my head. “No, he didn’t. He just showed up on the doorstep. What the hell is going on?”

Grimly, he replied, “I don’t know,” before he stalked to his room. After a few moments, he emerged, carrying his Glock. His erection was still tenting his sweats, and I licked my lips as my gaze fell on it.

So sue me. He was magnificent.

“Eyes up here, pussy cat,” he murmured, not amused this time. I glanced up. “I’m going to go down there and see what happened.”

I pointed in the general direction of his groin. “I don’t think you’ll be needing the Glock. You’re already locked and loaded in the crotch area.”

I couldn’t help it. Humor was my go-to when things got scary.

I startled when there was a knock on the door. Sawyer’s expression hardened as he shoved me behind him and brought up his gun. He pulled open the door quickly, taking aim. I peered around his shoulder.

“Jesus.”

Blaze stood on the doorstep, his formal white shirt covered in blood. He had his hands clutched over his midsection, his mouth set in a firm grimace. The top of his tan breeches was soaking up more blood that appeared to be spilling from the stomach wound beneath his palms.

“Fuck.” I grabbed him by the frothy shirt and hauled him inside. His legs collapsed beneath him, dropping him like a stone to the floor only a few feet inside the apartment. “Sawyer, I need the first-aid kit.”

Gently moving Blaze’s hands out of the way, I got a better look at the injury. He’d been stabbed, it seemed. The puncture was straight through his stomach, and from what I could tell, the fae reacted just as badly to stomach wounds as humans did. I glanced over to find Sawyer still gone, so I shucked my shirt, bundled it up into a tight ball, and shoved it against his stomach. I wasn’t a doctor, but I knew I needed to stop the bleeding.

Sawyer’s chocolate and whisky scent was suddenly surrounding me, his hands warm as they covered mine and lifted the shirt to see what kind of damage the guy had sustained.

“Fuck.” That was all he said. His gaze flickered to the fae’s face. “Blaze, tell us what happened.”

Blaze's eyes cracked open, hazy with pain. "Attacked. Queen. He..." He drifted off, his eyes sliding shut.

"Blaze? *Blaze?*" I called, trying to rouse him.

Sawyer savagely dug his fingers into the wound, the pain snapping Blaze back into consciousness with a pained moan.

"Who attacked you?" Sawyer demanded fiercely.

The fae's mouth opened and closed slowly like a dying fish. "Haunted... house," he eventually whispered in a hoarse voice. With one final gasp, Blaze's chest stopped rising and falling. As his heart gave out, the blood stopped flowing as quickly until it sat in still pools on either side of his body.

I lifted my hand away from his stomach. "A haunted house attacked him?" I asked, puzzled.

Sawyer's jaw clenched, then he sat back on his heels. "It must be the new entrance to Wonderland." He stood and grabbed his phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Lee. We can't leave a body here like this. Lee? Yeah, sorry to bother you..."

I blocked out the rest of the conversation, studying Blaze's wound instead. He'd been stabbed in the stomach—the strike not necessarily unusual, but most people with knives go for the heart or the neck. The stomach was the place you hit when you wanted to inflict maximum pain. Plus, I thought the fae were pretty robust, but clearly, they had some weaknesses.

"Lee will be here in thirty," Sawyer announced, pulling me from my musings.

"Who do you think Blaze was talking about? He said 'queen,' but then he said 'he.'" I turned to look at him. "The fae queens aren't... you know, like hermaphroditic frogs, are they?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea, but clearly the threats to Astrid's life have some veracity if they've gone after her servant. I just wonder why Blaze was attacked in our realm and not in Wonderland."

"Maybe because he came to us for help?" I offered. "I mean, it's a pretty flimsy theory, but..." I shrugged, unable to think of a way to finish that thought. "Also, how could a stomach wound kill a fae? I thought they were pretty much impervious to injury."

"The fae aren't immortal," he started. "Just long-lived. And they have their weaknesses. If that blade had been made of cold iron, it would've killed

him.”

“I don’t want to go all cop on you, but since he’s currently dead, I’d hazard a guess and say the blade *was* cold iron. Also, what’s cold iron, and why would it have affected him like this?”

“It’s just regular iron as far as I know. There’s nothing special about it other than the purity of the material. Humans have known for a long time that iron weakens the fae. Whether they still believe the old stories is another issue altogether.”

“So you think a human did this?” I gestured to the body, and my own question had my mind whirring. What if this was someone from Rogue Faction? They saw a fae at my apartment and killed him?

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling under the fabric of his shirt. “I wouldn’t rule out the possibility, but I would also question the motives of a human.”

“Maybe it was a wrong-place-wrong-time kind of thing?” Or maybe I’d put the final nail in the coffin because of my association with the fae.

“Maybe. But why would a human be carrying around a one hundred percent pure iron dagger? Most modern daggers are made of steel, and although steel is an alloy comprised of iron, it’s not enough iron to kill a fae as quickly as it did Blaze.”

“You’re forgetting that a blade was stabbed into his stomach.”

“It still wouldn’t have been enough to kill him so quickly.” He looked down at the body. “I’ll go and get a sheet to cover him.”

I stood on shaking legs and looked down. My bra, chest, and stomach were covered in blood. My jeans and hands were covered too. I lifted them and stared at the slick red coating, twisting them one way and then the other. It seemed so strange that Blaze was alive one minute and gone the next.

“I need to shower,” I said to no one in particular. I mean, it wasn’t like Blaze was going to care that I was leaving him unattended and was being a bad host.

I padded off to my room, being careful to strip my clothes off once I got into the bathroom. Getting blood out of the carpet wasn’t something I needed to be doing on a Saturday night.

Then again, having a body lying in the doorway of our apartment wasn’t either.



## FOURTEEN

LEE WAS THERE to pick up the body when I stepped from my bedroom, rubbing a towel through my hair. He'd placed Blaze into a black body bag, which was lying on the gurney he'd also brought up with him.

"Oh, I forgot to mention..." Lee started, "... I have those results back from the attack on the boy at Buxton Forest Lodge. I can confirm he wasn't killed by an animal, at least not in the conventional sense." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "He was attacked by a werewolf."

Sawyer's brows dipped in concern. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely. The bite and claw marks are very clear."

My partner blew out a breath and glanced over at me as I stepped a little closer. I saw the conflict in his eyes before he turned his attention back to Lee. "All right. I'll talk to Brax to see what he knows or if he's heard anything."

"Of course." Lee looked down at the body. "Do you want the ashes again?"

Sawyer nodded tightly and folded his arms. "Yes. And thank you for coming out on a Saturday night."

The skin-walker shrugged and smiled. "You didn't interrupt any plans." Then, pushing his glasses up his nose once more for good measure, he rounded the gurney so he was at the feet end and rolled Blaze out the door.

"I've got to know," I said, rubbing the towel through my hair one last time. "Do you have a closet full of unclaimed ashes somewhere I should know about?"

He shut the door. "Are you ready to go?"

"Go? Go where?"

“It’s time to go into Wonderland and speak to Astrid.”

I heaved a sigh. “I’d forgotten about that. Why, why, *why* does everything end with me going to Wonderland?”

“Because you’re a magnet for trouble?” Sawyer mused, and I shot him the finger.

“This is already established.” I tried to think of another reason to stay, but ‘I need to wash my hair’ wasn’t going to work. “Well, I don’t want to deal with any more dead fae on the doorstep, so I guess you’re right.”

After securing my holster in place and checking over my Glock, I scooped my hair into a ponytail, then slid on my leather jacket. As I zipped up my motorcycle boots, Sawyer picked up the keys to his bike.

I was about to protest when I remembered that my truck was no more.

As we left, I grumped, “Just FYI, this wasn’t how I pictured spending my Saturday night.”

Twenty minutes later with a full moon guiding our way, we pulled into the overgrown parking lot of an abandoned amusement park on the outskirts of town. Back in the 1950s, it had been the place to take the family for a Saturday afternoon outing, but more than seventy years had passed, and now it just looked creepy.

And like a tetanus shot waiting to happen.

As I swung my leg off Sawyer’s motorcycle, my boots crunched on the broken glass that littered the ground.

“They couldn’t pick a better place?” I asked, shooting Sawyer a look. “First it was the dock and now it’s this?”

I gestured to the decaying entrance of the Buxton Amusement Park. Once upon a time, a grand mansion-like structure had marked the entrance into the park, but all the timbers had rotted away, leaving the roof sagging, the window lintels hanging at a cock-eyed angle, and the outer shell of siding—complete with popping nails and peeling yellow paint—warping under the seasons’ unrelenting changes. A huge pile of debris covered in a snowy cap crowded one side of the structure, looking like a ride had been torn down and forgotten about.

“Are you sure the entrance to Wonderland is here now?”

Sawyer nodded and moved toward the only way in or out, leaving me to scramble after him.

“How?”

He flicked his gaze in my direction before looking ahead once more. As he pulled out his Glock, he said, “There’s only one haunted house in Buxton, and it’s in here.”

I bit back my groan, wishing I didn’t have to do this. Venturing into Wonderland would guarantee me one of two things. The first is an injury—possibly of the fatal variety—which I had no intention of getting because it was Christmas in a few days, and it was my favorite time of the year. Secondly, every time I went into Wonderland, I was left to fight something big and scary.

And I was *not* in the mood for big and scary.

Something scuttled past us as we walked through the main entrance, darting under a pile of rotting wood. I took out my Glock and aimed, swinging the muzzle around in a one-eighty-degree arc—scanning—until Sawyer placed his warm hand onto my arm.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “Come on.”

Reluctantly, I re-holstered the Glock and continued walking, my head always turning, waiting for something to step out in front of us. Emerging on the other side and into the park, my gaze traveled up, up, up at the giant Ferris wheel. It was teetering dangerously to one side, the gondolas all suspended in midair with their doors open like the last time anyone had ridden it, they’d leaped for their lives.

Farther and farther we walked, passing the rocket ride, a carousel where the horses were all gone and only the tell-tale canopy remained, and side-show games of skill that were falling into ruin and covered in snow.

“Where are we going?”

“There.” Sawyer lifted his hand and pointed at a building with a huge, flaking sign above it.

“The Screamer?” I asked incredulously, narrowing my eyes at the ancient, haunted house.

“Come on.” He tugged me closer, then helped me climb up into the station of the ride. At the entrance, there were half a dozen converted bumper car carriages all lined up on a single track. I scrutinized the pile of rusty metal and bolts suspiciously.

“We have to get in there?” I asked, jabbing my finger at the six little

death traps waiting patiently to take us to our doom.

Sawyer shook his head, walking along the long side of the platform. When he reached the first car in line, he stepped off the creaking wooden platform and entered the haunted house, disappearing from view. I stood there, unwilling to move because what kind of sane person would volunteer to go into a dark, abandoned amusement park ride in the middle of the night?

“Cat?” Sawyer called. When I stayed put, he emerged. Holding out his hand to me, he said, “Come on. It’s safe. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you.”

I stared at him incredulously for a moment, then blew out a breath. I could do this. I just had to put on my big girl panties and do it. Pulling my opal out of the top of my shirt and jacket, I’d hoped to find the stone glowing, but it was curiously quiet again.

Reaching out, I took Sawyer’s hand and let him tug me down past the cars and into the cloying darkness. As I passed the first car in line, however, I paused.

Reaver was propped up against the seat.

“I didn’t see that when I passed just before,” Sawyer said.

I holstered my Glock. “That’s because it doesn’t like you.” I picked up the sword by the hilt and felt it shiver with heat. “You’re a happy little sword today,” I murmured, holding it down at my side since I had nowhere else to stash it. “Although, I have no idea why. I’m about ready to change my pants here.”

Sawyer led the way into the dark maw of the ride, and like a good little partner, I followed. Darkness consumed us, but Reaver’s faint glow helped us to keep our bearings.

“This way,” Sawyer said, his voice coming from my right.

“Why does this have to be extra creepy? Why couldn’t the entrance have been kept at the docks? Or better yet, at a pet store with all the fluffy puppies.”

He whispered, “Because the gate at the docks was compromised by Kseniya, and the fae would only eat the puppies.”

I tripped over something and cursed, rubbing at my knee. “Firstly, gross. Secondly, I hate that witch. And not just because she stole my necklace. I hate how she’s made everything so...” I waved my hand around, “... *inconvenient*.”

I stumbled forward another couple of steps but drew to a stop when the

sensation of spiders crawling over me made me shudder. “We’re here,” I murmured under my breath, too afraid to speak any louder. “Sawyer?”

His hand was suddenly on my lower back. “I’m here.”

“Is Astrid meeting us in here? I can’t see a damn thing.”

Reaver glowed a little brighter at my declaration, illuminating a six-foot radius. I swiveled on the spot, blinking against the glare of the light, then yelping when I found a white-haired woman standing just a few feet away. Her skin was the color of alabaster, but in the glow of Reaver, it turned pale blue. Her eyes were almond-shaped and milky white, her cheekbones and chin sharp.

“Hello, Catherine Ellen McKenzie,” Astrid, the Seelie Queen said in a slow, rhythmic beat.

I felt the tug of her influence just for a moment before muttering to myself, “I wish you fae would stop using my full name.”

“My apologies,” she replied without sounding even a little bit apologetic. She looked around. “Where is Blaze? He was supposed to escort you here.”

“Dead,” Sawyer said.

“Dead?” she murmured, eyeing Sawyer like he’d been the one to deliver the death blow.

“As a doornail,” I added.

Between one breath and the next, the queen’s serene expression warped into something terrifying. Her teeth turned to daggers, her angular cheekbones mimicking the shape and sharpness of her teeth. Her eyes became two black pits in her skull, and her pale hair writhed on top of her head like it was alive. I swallowed hard when I saw beneath the glamor she cloaked herself in and retreated back a step with an audible *schhhict* as my boots scraped against the wood.

I stepped behind Sawyer, reasoning I wasn’t going to him for protection—merely using him as a human... err... *supernatural* shield.

“I will peel the skin from your body,” the fae queen hissed, her whole body rigid as if she was about to attack.

“Wait. We didn’t kill him,” I hurried to say. “He just showed up that way.”

Astrid blinked, then shook herself, her glamor sliding back into place like she’d never been the most terrifying thing I’d ever seen before. She cleared her throat. “How did he die?” she asked in that same calm, controlled cadence as before.

*Weird.* “Dagger to the stomach,” I replied, peering around Sawyer’s back.

“Who did it?” Although her voice was cool and calm, I could practically see the fire burning in her eyes.

“We don’t know. Could’ve been anyone. It happened on the street while he was trying to buzz into the building to speak to us.”

“Or perhaps it was the same person who attacked me.”

I stepped out from behind my partner. “Blaze said there had been an attempt on your life.”

She confirmed my statement with a nod. “My sister usurped my throne a month ago. She failed to kill me then, but I do not think she would give up so easily.” She walked over to one of the props in the haunted house—a vampire in a coffin that I assumed sprang out at one point or another. She traced her ivory finger over the waxy face and shivered a little.

“Wonderland...” she began, still staring down at the figure, “... is a cyclically controlled realm. Equal time must be held by each Court. The Shadow Court ruled for twenty-nine years last cycle. Therefore, The Golden Court must rule for the same amount of time in *this* cycle.”

“Is the cycle always twenty-nine years?”

“No, it changes according to what our seers tell us. They map the stars and read them to find out the correct number.” She moved away from the vampire and closer to the wall. “My Court had only been in power for the equivalent of a human year when she overthrew me. During that first year, she’d been picking off my guards one by one so I was left defenseless when she finally made her move, and now that the balance has been disturbed, Wonderland is suffering for it. It is already withering under her rule. The lands are filled with ice and snow when they should be filled with wildflowers. A bitter wind weaves through all who live here, when it should be a warm, caressing breeze. The nights are long and cold, when they should be shorter and filled with warmth.”

“What’s going to happen if she’s not removed from power?”

Astrid turned to face me, her expression pensive. “Then Wonderland will die, and the fae will be forced to relocate to your world, Ms. McKenzie.”

I shivered. The idea of *more* fae wandering around out there wasn’t a good one. “I thought Wonderland was created by the fae. Surely, you could do it all again?”

The queen stared at me for a full minute, unblinking, which was creepy AF. “Two centuries ago, we did create Wonderland, but our power has been

waning ever since. If Wonderland collapses on itself, there will be nothing any of us could do to restore it. We have grown too weak to wield that sort of power again.”

Fuck.

All right, so the stakes were high. “I don’t understand what *I* can do to help.”

The fae pointed a finger at my chest. I clutched at my opal protectively. I was getting really sick of people trying to take it from me.

“You want to know where it comes from? What power it possesses?” she mused softly.

I gripped Reaver more tightly.

“I could tell you what I know about its origins and its powers.”

“And what do I have to do in order to gain this information?”

I wasn’t fool enough to think she’d just give it to me for free. Nothing came for free with the fae. She’d emphasized the word *could*—she *could* tell me what she knew of its origins—but she never said she *would*. Also, what she did know could be the same as what I already knew. If that were the case, I’d be putting my neck out for information I already had.

Astrid smiled slightly. “Help me restore balance to Wonderland.”

I looked over at Sawyer, only to find his expression distant. Distant Sawyer was no substitute for Thoughtful Sawyer. Grabbing him by the arm, I pulled him away from the fae queen and said quietly, “What the hell are we going to do?”

“It’s not an issue of what *we’re* going to do. It’s an issue of what *you’re* going to do. The bargain she’s made is for you only. I’m just here for moral support.”

“I’m not feeling very supported,” I replied mulishly.

He touched my cheek—just a brush of his fingertips, but I felt it melt through my body. He jerked his chin in the fae queen’s direction. “You don’t need her help. Mrs. Brown will be back from vacation soon, and you can ask her then.”

I tucked Reaver under my arm. “I don’t even know when she’s coming back. What if she’s gone on a six-month cruise or something?”

Sawyer shook his head. “She wouldn’t have gone away for that long without telling you. You know that. You also know that making a deal with a fae is a bad idea.”

“Getting murdered by a fae is also a bad idea. Besides, I doubt Kailon

will be willing to wait for me to figure out my personal shit before he attacks me again.” I looked over at the queen, who was standing eerily still, watching me right back. I was either about to make the worst mistake of my life or... yeah, that was it. I was probably about to make the worst mistake of my life, but with Kailon breathing down my neck, what other choice did I have?

Resolute, I turned, but Sawyer stopped me. Whispering low and soft into my ear, he said, “I’ll support whatever decision you make, but just make sure you’re very specific with your demands. The fae don’t place time periods on when they will complete something.”

Nodding, I spun around to face Astrid once more. “If I help to restore you, you’ll tell me what I need to know about the opal right now. No tricks. No veiled speech. No half-truths. Everything. No telling me in a decade or keeping that shit to yourself until I hand over my first-born son,” I bitched. “Oh, and I can ask as many questions as I want.”

Astrid’s gaze flickered in Sawyer’s direction. When the queen spoke again, there was laughter in her voice. “I see you’ve been educated a little in the ways of the fae. Many humans have fallen for our deals in the past, never to collect their rewards because they didn’t ask about the fine print, as it were.”

I folded my arms awkwardly since I refused to lay Reaver down. “Do we have a deal?”

“I will place one caveat on your demands.”

*Fuck.* “Let’s hear it.”

“All your questions must be asked here, now. I will not divulge anything further once this little tête-à-tête is over. Do we have an accord?”

“Deal.”

She bowed her head ever so slightly. When she straightened, she looked me square in the eye. “That opal once belonged to my sister, Avi. She gave it to her lover over a human decade ago.”

I felt a ripple of unease shiver through me. A lover? If she gave it to her lover, how in the hell did my father get his hands on it? My thoughts came to a screeching halt, and I began to shake my head. No. Nope. It couldn’t be possible.

“Why?” I croaked.

“For protection out in the human realm.”

*In the human realm.* Avi’s lover had been human. Even though I didn’t want to consider the possibility, I let the question form in my head. *Was my*



father *Avi's lover*? As much as I hated to admit it, the timeline fit. My mother died fourteen years ago, and that was when my father gave it to me. But my parents were in love. There was no way my father could've been cheating on my mom...

... *could he?*

"What else?" I demanded, starting to pace. The glow coming off Reaver bounced across the old floorboards beneath our feet—agitated, just like I felt.

"From what my spies tell me, he was given the stone because he constantly endangered himself in his career. She wanted to prevent him from getting seriously injured or killed."

I squeezed my eyes shut as more and more of what Astrid was telling me fit into my father's story. I cleared my throat. "What else?"

"The stone is a conduit for power," Astrid murmured, and as I turned my head, I found her studying me curiously. "It cannot be taken forcefully or from a corpse... it can only be stolen or freely given by the current owner in order to work as it was intended."

I nodded. Kseniya already told me it was a conduit. Astrid confirming that only helped to cement the fact she was telling the truth.

"What else?"

"You are in danger every minute you have that stone. My sister wants it back. She overthrew me with help this time, but she needs her stone returned to her in order to keep her rule strong. Already, her grip on Wonderland is starting to wane."

I came to an abrupt stop, the boards beneath my feet creaking ever so slightly with my shifting weight. "I've had it for years and never had any issues with people trying to reclaim it."

"I don't know how, but the stone's essence was hidden all those years, too. It was only when the red-headed witch came into Wonderland to kill Baba Yaga that Avi was alerted to its presence once more."

I rolled my eyes. Kseniya Chernov's actions were like a gift that kept on giving.

"Do you have any more questions, Cat?" Astrid asked in a croon.

"Who did Avi give the stone to?"

"I told you, her lover."

I gritted my teeth. "Yes, but *who* was it?"

The fae shook her head. "That, I don't know. My sister and I have always had a strained relationship. Where most sisters loved, we found only hate.

Where most sisters trusted and were happy for one another, we found only distrust and jealousy. It is the way of the fae.”

“It sounds dysfunctional to me.”

Behind me, Sawyer hissed in warning. Right, insulting the fae was a bad idea. I guessed I needed to wrap this thing up.

Sucking a breath deep into my lungs, I let it out through my mouth and said, “They’re all the questions I can think of right now.”

Astrid inclined her head slightly. “And so I have fulfilled my end of the bargain. Now, it’s your turn to fulfill yours.”

## FIFTEEN

BY THE TIME we arrived home, I was exhausted. Not really a big surprise since I'd been running on adrenaline the entire time I'd been in Wonderland. But hey, at least I wasn't fighting a wicked episode of fatigue. Sawyer had insisted I eat a candy bar on the way home in any case.

"Bed?" Sawyer asked from behind me. He sounded tired, and I spun to look at him. His eyes had dark crescents beneath them, his skin a little paler than normal.

"You need to feed." It wasn't a question.

He nodded slowly. "Yes."

I let out a long breath. We'd spoken about this before Blaze had interrupted with his death. We'd agreed to just sex, no feelings. I could totally do that because it would help Sawyer since now he couldn't actually feed properly off anyone else. I wasn't a complete bitch. I wouldn't deny my friend when he needed me, and my friend needed me now. As if a mental dam had broken with my decision, lust flooded my body so quickly, I whimpered a little at the sensation.

He took me by the waist and led me into his bedroom. At my quizzical look, he said, "This will help to keep you detached, if that's what you want. Your bedroom is your sanctuary. You sleep there. It shouldn't be the place where you... where we..."

"Have sex?" I asked helpfully.

"Yes." He shut the door, even though nobody else would be coming in. He turned to face me, and his hot, hungry gaze stripped me bare.

"Just sex?" I asked.

"No feelings," he said, but he bit the word out like it pained him.

As if that were a signal to our bodies, we both rushed into each other's arms, our mouths colliding in a kiss that soon turned into something more. Sawyer ran his hands under my jacket, pushing it off my shoulders. I did the same for him, exposing the broad expanse of his chest.

Reaver had long ago disappeared, but we both had on our holsters with our Glocks still in place. I started to undo the Velcro straps across his chest, and he did the same to me.

When we'd both stripped each other's holsters off, he said, "Just give me a minute." Turning, he disappeared into his walk-in closet. I heard the tell-tale *clank* of the gun safe opening then a ruffling noise as he stowed our sidearms in there.

When he re-emerged, I joked, "Safety first."

"Always," he growled as he lunged for me, pressing me against the wall beside the door. His thick hard length prodded at my stomach, and I moaned as thoughts of what he'd feel like to be inside me again assaulted me. His mouth was on mine, claiming me in a kiss that made heat shoot through me. I clutched at his waist, dragging him closer—needing him closer.

"I need you so badly," he said softly after breaking the kiss. He brought his hands to the hem of my shirt, pulling the fabric up off my body and dropping it to the floor. "Feeding on lust isn't enough. Not being inside you is *killing* me."

I wasn't sure whether he was being facetious with that comment or not because from what he'd told me, he could literally die if he didn't get inside me every day. I lifted my face to his, expecting him to kiss me once more, but his hooded eyes were on my breasts.

He fingered the fabric of my bra, a small smile on his lips. "Unicorns?" he asked.

I huffed. "My obsession with unicorns isn't a news flash for you."

He touched one of the little bows on the strap, then brushed the back of his fingers down over the cup, sending electricity sparking off my skin. "I like the bows." Then he reached around and unhooked the clasp. I slid the straps down my arms but held the cups over my breasts.

"I need to see you, pussy cat."

"You've seen me naked before," I said.

He shook his head. "That was different. Now, I want to see you because you want me to see you." He tugged at my hands, and I let my arms drop. He sucked in a hissed breath, and his eyes turned a darker shade of gray. He

cupped one breast, then the other, running his thumb over my hardening nipples.

My God, *everything* about him electrified me.

I let my head fall back against the wall, and he took his invitation. Leaning down, he sucked one nipple into his mouth, then fondled the other with his free hand. I arched into his relentless, magic touch, telling him what I wanted.

His mouth.

My body.

All.

Night.

Long.

I ran my fingers through his dark hair, holding him in place as he suckled on me.

“I love the sounds you make, pussy cat.”

“Shh, no talking. Just...” I gasped when he bit down a little, then soothed away the sting with the swipe of his tongue. “Do that,” I finished on a moan.

And he did. He feasted on my breasts so long that by the time he lifted his head, I was a wet, panting mess. He purred in approval.

“Did you like that, pussy cat?” he asked in a slow, erotic drawl. “Did it make you wet?”

I nodded because I didn’t trust my voice. Finally, I said, “Why don’t you feel for yourself?”

His irises turned dark and stormy. I bit my bottom lip when he lowered himself to his knees in front of me, hooking his fingers into the waistband of my jeans. He slid them across my skin to the buttonhole, popping it free. Down went the zipper and I was so completely wrapped up in him, in what he was doing to me that I ached. I trembled. I wanted. Pulling the fabric down my legs, he helped me out of them, but stayed kneeling in front of me.

Slowly—torturously—he traced the tip of his finger over my pussy through the panel of my panties. I cried out at the pleasure of his touch, my whole body quivering.

“I can feel how wet you are. I can feel the heat coming from you.”

“Shut up and finger fuck me,” I commanded, wondering where in the hell that demand had come from. The only thing I could think to blame it on would be Sawyer’s influence, but my opal was quiet. Sooo, I guess that was on me.

With an impatient growl, he shoved my panties to the side and slid one finger, two fingers, into me and started to pump. A moan broke free of my throat as I gave in to the pleasure. Our eyes met, and I saw the look of concentration in his now-black eyes.

“I want to taste you,” he said in a low, guttural growl. “It’s been too long since I’ve had you on my tongue.”

“Do what you want with me.”

Reaching up, he ripped my panties in two, letting the scraps of material fall to the ground at my feet.

Before I could protest and tell him they were my favorite pair of unicorn underwear, he said, “I’ll get you some more.” Then he curled his fingers inside me, hitting my G-spot while he licked a path through my folds.

And holy-fucking-hell.

My back arched off the wall, thrusting my pussy into his mouth and making me gasp. He lapped while finger fucking me. Until I was boneless. Until I knew that the only reason I was still on my feet was because of the wall at my back.

“Oh, God, Sawyer...” I moaned, but the rest of my words were ripped from me when a groan of absolute pleasure surfaced, my orgasm stealing coherent thought, and who the fuck cared for words right now. I came hard on his lips, his mouth, his chin. I came hard and even the wall couldn’t hold me up anymore.

I slid to the hardwood floor, Sawyer staying with me the whole time, his tongue still lapping, his fingers still pumping. When I was finally able to look up, Sawyer was staring at me hungrily from his crouch in front of me.

“Lose the clothes,” I told him.

He stood, stripped, and grabbed me by the ankle, pulling me away from the wall but not off the floor. He was covering me a moment later. His thick, hard erection lay hot against my hip, and as much as I wanted to take it into my mouth, I could sense Sawyer’s urgency because it was like my own blood was vibrating with his need.

“Fuck me, Sawyer.”

Without preamble, he lifted my hips and entered me in one hard thrust. I clutched at his shoulders, holding onto him tightly as he withdrew, then slammed in again.

“More,” I panted. Loving this connection to him. Loving this feeling. Honestly, as far as obligations go, letting a sex god fuck me every day wasn’t

that much of a hardship. Sawyer and I were solid. He'd seen me at my worst. He'd seen me at my most vulnerable. He knew me like nobody else seemed to.

"Like that?" he asked on a panted breath, wrapping one of my legs around his waist then the other. I pressed my heels into his back, holding him in position.

"Harder, Sawyer. Fuck me until I see stars."

Because here was the truth. I loved it when we were together like this. I enjoyed the way he let himself go, how he gave me everything. His brand of raw and dirty sex was just what I wanted, what I craved.

"Like that, like that, like that," I began to chant as my second orgasm for the night crept up on me with all the finesse of a freight train. "Just like that, just like that, just like... that!" I came hard on one thrust, the orgasm like tripping a wire inside me because there was another one and another one. They barreled through me, pushing me to the edge of pleasure, balancing on the knife-edge of pain.

I knew Sawyer wouldn't be coming anytime soon, so all I could do was hold on tight as those orgasms ebbed away and wait for the others to come. And there would be others because sex with an incubus was like signing up to get a tattoo. I needed that pleasure. I needed that sting of pain, and when it was all said and done, I knew I'd be lining up to get another one. And another. And another.

I blinked when Sawyer scooped me up into his strong arms and carried me to one of the armchairs facing that monster TV screen.

"Turn around," he murmured, helping me get into position. I kneeled with my chest facing the back of the chair, my hands gripping the leather tightly. A small gasp escaped me when Sawyer dragged his fingers through my pussy, spreading around my arousal. I shivered at his touch, still sensitive from my previous releases.

"So wet for me," he murmured, swatting me playfully on the ass. I sucked in a surprised gasp, but as the bite of the sting waned, heat flooded me. He ran his finger up the inside of my thigh. "Like that, do you?" he asked.

I wiggled my ass at him, asking for another.

With a low, pumping growl, he delivered another swat to my rear, soothing the sting away with his palm. It was so good, the sensation so intense that I dropped my head and bit into the leather to stop myself from begging him to do it again.

“Lift that beautiful ass higher for me.”

At his command, I did just that, offering myself to him. I was expecting his cock, but was pleasantly surprised by his tongue. He lapped at me, swallowing down my taste, then stood and ran the head of his cock through my folds. I moaned and arched into him, trying to commit the feeling to memory.

With one final swat on my ass, he entered me, the position making him plunge deep inside me. I bit back the scream of pleasure but couldn't stop the feral moan. Sawyer was taking me, completely, and I loved every second of it. His pace before hadn't been hurried at all, but now I felt it. His hips pistoned faster and faster, dragging another release from me.

“Fuck!” Sawyer barked. “You're so slick. So hot. So fucking tight, Cat,” he breathed into my hair, running his free hand up to one of my breasts and cupping it before pinching my nipple. “I have to come inside you. Now.”

“Come inside me,” I replied, my face pressing into the couch. “Come inside me. Now.”

My words must've done the trick because suddenly his thrusts become more hurried, shorter, and then he was coming.

Filling me.

Claiming me.

Owning me.

One last orgasm rocketed through me, sending me into the stratosphere right along with him. He collapsed onto me, his heart pounding out a frantic rhythm against my back. His breathing was labored, but then again, so was mine, and when he finally pulled away, he planted a line of soft kisses down the vertebra of my spine.

“Thank you,” he murmured, sliding out of me and kissing me gently on the shoulder. “You don't know what it means to me that you're willing to do this.”

It took me a moment to collect myself before I could straighten too. His indifference was jarring, but this was what I wanted—no feelings. I unstuck myself from the leather, my body slick with sweat. Turning, I looked at him. The color was back in his cheeks, and his eyes were slowly turning back into that cool gray I liked so much.

“No problem. Glad to help.” I glanced down at my naked body, then wrapped my arm around my breasts, suddenly self-conscious. “Ahh, I think I'll just go and take a shower and get to bed,” I said. “We have the Christmas



party tonight, after all.”

“Cat?” Sawyer asked, standing there naked in all his delectable glory.  
“Are we still good?”

I smiled. “Absolutely.” I studied him for a beat, knowing I was going to throw my *no feelings* rule right out the window. Because when I was with him, I was all in.

And that terrified the pants off me.

## SIXTEEN

THAT EVENING, Sawyer and I stepped into The Palatial's grand ballroom for the Buxton Police Department Christmas party. The ballroom matched everything else about the hotel. It was an homage to the 1920s style, decorated in the classic art deco pairing of gold and black. From the thick, patterned carpet to the gold-leaf walls, it was like walking onto the set of *Great Gatsby*, minus the murder-in-the-pool scene.

In the center was a crystal chandelier that must've been at least five feet long and three feet wide. It sparkled and shimmered above everyone, casting rainbow prisms across the coffered ceiling. Round tables were spaced evenly around the floor, each topped with a black and dark blue foil spray to represent the Force.

An eighteen-foot-by-fifteen-foot dance floor took up the real estate in the middle.

By my guess, there had to be about a hundred people already there, but Buxton PD was big, so maybe only half of the department had arrived. I scanned the room, looking for a friendly face from FIG.

And there was a phrase I *never* thought I'd say.

"We're on table nine," Sawyer said from behind me. I turned to find him looking at a seating chart by the door that I'd completely missed.

"You're kidding, right? They always put the mutants on table nine."

He raised his brows in question.

"Never mind," I huffed.

Pop culture was wasted on supernaturals.

"Did I tell you, you look positively delectable tonight," he said, walking toward me slowly. He ran a finger down my arm, and I shivered. "You

should wear more dresses.”

“Shh,” I replied. “I’m already uncomfortable. Adding compliments will only make it worse.” I was wearing an art-deco-inspired little number on account of this Christmas party. I had no idea who had planned this little soiree, but would it have killed them to make it ugly Christmas sweater themed? I had plenty of them, especially since I spent almost my entire last paycheck on Christmas paraphernalia.

His hand came to rest on my lower back, so hot through the sheer fabric that it was like a brand. This was as close to me as he could get in a room surrounded by our peers. “Positively delectable,” he repeated, his eyes swimming with heated shadows.

My gaze darted around to see if anyone was watching. “We shouldn’t be this close,” I breathed. “Someone might see us.”

“I don’t care. I hope they do.”

Lust flooded my body. Desire just steam-rolled its way through me. It didn’t help that Sawyer was also looking amazing in a tux, but somehow, I managed to step away.

“I think if we were in a relationship... a serious, committed relationship... then it wouldn’t matter, but our arrangement is just about sex, right? I mean, that’s what we agreed to.” I hoped if I said the words enough that I would start believing them.

Sawyer’s eyes were still heated as he stared at me, burning with hunger and darkening by the second.

“Do you need to feed again?” I thought the sex we’d had early this morning would’ve been enough to keep him sated.

He nodded, inching a little closer to whisper in my ear, “Yes. I can’t wait to come inside you again.”

I blinked at his dirty words, wanting that too, wanting to get lost in him. “You’re insatiable,” I chided.

He gave me a grin. “Only for you, pussy cat.”

“There you guys are!” someone called, and I turned to see Brax with his arm wrapped around the waist of a petite, dark-haired woman. They approached us with easy smiles. “Sawyer, Cat, let me introduce my mate to you. This is Andrea.” Leaning forward, Brax pressed his lips to her cheek, making her blush.

I immediately liked her. Sticking out my hand, I said, “Andrea, it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

The other woman stretched out her hand and shook mine. “Nice to meet you, too,” she replied. “Brax told me all about you, how you joined PIG even though you’re human.”

I shot him a look, wondering just how much he’d told her. That I’d been forced to join as a punishment? That I’d watched my previous partner get killed without lifting a finger?

“He said you transferred in as human liaison when nobody else wanted to,” she finished. “I’m glad it was a woman who finally found the courage to join.”

I was stunned. My eyes darted to Brax again, and he smiled at me, mouthed, ‘welcome to the team’ and pulled his mate in closer.

“Ah, thank you.” Heat suffused my body, the kind of heat that felt a lot like pride to me. “Where are the kids tonight?”

“At home,” she replied with a smile. “Indi, Ivy, and Saskia offered to look after them.”

“More werewolves?” I asked.

Andrea shook her head. “A half-human-half-vampire, a werewolf, and a human.”

“That sounds like the beginning of a great joke.”

She laughed at that, the sound sweet and carefree. Andrea looked adoringly at her mate, then back at me. “I tell you, the best thing about living with a werewolf pack is the availability of babysitters.”

“And the worst thing...” Brax grumbled, “... is having nearly three dozen people living under the same roof. It makes getting a little horizontal time with my mate *really* difficult.”

Andrea’s cheeks flushed with color, and she elbowed Brax in his side. He let out an exaggerated *oomph*, then grinned at his mate.

“I can’t help it if I want my hands on you all the time.”

Andrea rolled her eyes, then flashed me a shy smile. “Men, huh?”

I glanced over at Sawyer. “They have one-track minds,” I agreed.

“Come and dance with me, Drea,” Brax said, already tugging her away. “Have a great night, you two,” he yelled over his shoulder as they disappeared through the throng of people.

“What do you think he meant by that?” I asked, suddenly defensive.

“I think he meant *have a great night*.”

“By the ‘you two’ bit? What did that mean? Do you think he knows we’re banging now?”

A soft, erotic growl from Sawyer sent a shiver down my spine. “You can’t say words like *banging* around me without getting a reaction, Cat.” His arm banded tightly around my waist, and he pressed his hard length against the side of my hip.

I looked down at the tent in his tux, then back at him. “Sawyer,” I hissed. “Put that thing away. We’re in public. Plus, I don’t want everyone to know we’re sleeping together. Surely, that’s against workplace policy.”

“Don’t worry about it, pussy cat.” He flexed into me again, and he lit the spark of my desire. Like a fuse, I knew I would be detonating soon because when it came to Sawyer, his desire was my own. *No feelings, though*, I reminded myself.

He tugged me toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

“Someplace quiet and secluded,” he murmured into my ear. “Where I can fuck you until you scream my name.”

*Hell to the yes.*

We brushed past countless people in the antechamber attached to the ballroom, a lot of them giving us dark looks, while some gave us a completely wide berth altogether. I looked at all their faces, spotting Smith among them. He didn’t have a date, but he was ogling the wife of another one of his colleagues. When he saw me, though, his eyes narrowed, filling with hate.

He didn’t say anything to me, but I flashed him a smile and gave him a finger-wave.

The muscle in his jaw jumped in irritation.

Out into the lobby proper, I scanned the space, looking for somewhere we could go. As I turned my head to the right, I caught sight of someone I wasn’t expecting to see. Willis Cameron was walking through the lobby and heading for the exit.

*What was he doing here?*

Sawyer asked, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. It’s...”

He tugged on my hand again. “Come on. There’s a restroom down here.”

I followed him into the disabled bathroom in the hotel’s lobby, locking the door behind us. As far as romantic went, it wasn’t, but seeing Sawyer in his tux with his erection practically banging against his zipper to get out, all thoughts of romance were gone.

No, not romance.

I couldn't think like that.

This was just fucking because that's what Sawyer needed. After feeding only on lust the last couple of days, I could understand his frantic desire now.

We came together abruptly in a rush of hands. I tugged down his zipper while he burrowed his hands under the skirt of my dress. When his fingers brushed against the wet panel of my panties, I bit my lip. I stroked his cock, matching his pace as he brought me closer to orgasm.

With a soft growl, he shoved aside the scrap of unicorn print fabric and plunged two fingers inside me. I cried out, my orgasm coming hard and fast. Clawing at his arm, I tried to keep my legs under me, but my knees went loose. Sawyer banded his free arm around my waist, then positioned me on the small countertop beside the sink.

Hiking up my dress, he bunched it in his fist and held it above my waist. My orgasm was only just waning when he slammed inside me. We both groaned, and I came again—this one creeping up on me without warning. Dropping my head to his shoulder, I bit him to stop my scream from coming out. Sawyer didn't seem to mind, especially given how he shivered from my teeth in his shoulder.

"This is going to be quick," he told me, slamming into me with a relentless drive of his hips.

"Okay," I whispered, keeping my head low, the scent of chocolate and whisky swirling around us. The first hint of my next orgasm surfaced, and I tightened my grip. "God, I'm close. I'm close. I'm close."

Sawyer's thrusts increased until he suddenly stilled, spilling inside me. His orgasm set mine off, and together we came until we were both sweating, panting, and spent from fucking each other when we should've been attending the work Christmas party.

Sawyer pulled back and pressed his forehead to mine. "Thank you," he said, his breathing still unsteady. He stepped away, tucked his dick back into his pants, and turned to the sink to run his handkerchief under the water. He cleaned me up gently, staring into my face the entire time. His eyes lingered on my mouth, and I could've sworn he wanted to say something else to me.

When I was clean, he rinsed the handkerchief and dumped it into the trash. "We should get back to the party."

I slid off the edge of the counter, repositioned my panties, and smoothed my dress back down over my hips. As I turned to unlock the door, Sawyer

took my wrist and pulled me to a stop. In my ear, he whispered, “I’m going to keep replaying this all night. I’ve never felt so complete from a feeding before.”

Plastering on a smile, I said, “Glad I can be of help.”

I’d just pulled open the door when I was thrown back as a huge explosion ripped through the hotel’s ballroom.

## SEVENTEEN

SMOKE FILLED the lobby of The Palatial. People were screaming in pain, others in panic. All I knew was that a lot of cops had just been targeted in an attack I hadn't seen coming. Sawyer and I rushed toward the ballroom to see if there were any serious injuries. Some people were already walking out of the anteroom covered in blood and smoke.

Weaving through the crowd, I covered my mouth, trying to keep the noxious smoke out of my lungs. On impulse, I moved toward the dance floor to where Brax and Andrea should've been. There were people laying everywhere—men in their tuxes and women in their gowns, except all the glamor and glitz was gone now.

Hanging by one stretch of electrical cables was the grand chandelier, dangling above the floor and threatening to fall.

"There," Sawyer said, pointing. Coughing, I followed the line of his arm until I saw Brax and Andrea. Andrea was limping as she helped prop up a bloody and severely injured Brax. When she saw us, the tears sitting in her eyes began to fall.

"He covered me with his body," she sobbed. Sawyer took Brax's weight from her, while I wrapped my arm around Andrea's shoulders. "He saved my life."

"It's all right. He's going to be all right." I glanced over at Sawyer to find him checking Brax. The guy had his eyes open, but they weren't his usual amused gray. Instead, they were bright yellow. Blood was streaming from a wound to his head, the red river running down the side of his face.

"You have to get him out of here," Andrea told me, clutching at my dress. "His wolf is too close to the surface. If he shifts, he'll go berserk."



Jerking my chin at Sawyer, I snapped, “Go. I have her.”

Sawyer’s gaze narrowed on me, but I saw his barely-veiled panic. “There could be another bomb.”

“I’ll be right behind you.” I made a point of looking at Brax, whose teeth had grown into fangs the size of my index finger. “We can’t have an angry werewolf loose in here right now. *Go!*”

Finally, he wrestled his need to protect me into submission and nodded, hustling Brax toward the exit.

“Are you hurt?” I asked Andrea, looking the woman over. She seemed to have a limp.

Tears were streaming down her face, but she shook her head. “Please, just get me out of here.”

I took Andrea into the lobby, but as I stopped to lower her down into a seat, she shook her head. “No. I have to go to Brax. He needs me.”

I glanced down at her leg. “You’re limping. You need to rest.”

“No. It’s not from the blast. Please, take me to my mate.”

I sucked in a breath when I saw her gray eyes flash blue, and danger crackled through the air. It seemed Brax wasn’t the only one on edge.

I looked around the lobby, spotting Sawyer on the other side of the door leading outside. Helping Andrea in the same direction, we caught up with the men. After the werewolf couple were reunited, Sawyer and I ran back inside. More people were moving now, all of them covered in smoke, coughing or bleeding from a wound.

Sawyer said, “We need to find Ben and Hayliel. They were both coming tonight.”

“Right. Let’s go toward our table then. They may have been seated at the time of the blast.”

As we weaved between the masses in the lobby limping from the ballroom, I couldn’t help but think that Kailon had finally succeeded—he’d finally managed to wound me, just not in the way I thought he would. I hadn’t realized how much PIG had grown to mean something to me and that fae was going to get an ass-kicking for hurting what was mine.

When we finally made it into the ballroom, I tried to remember where our table was positioned.

“Over there,” Sawyer said, pointing at an eleven-foot crater in the floor.

*A crater.*

No more table.

No more... anything.

“Jesus, the bomb must’ve been planted under our table.” I scanned the floor, gasping when I saw someone’s arm lying in the rubble. It had belonged to a woman. “Oh, my God.”

Sawyer crouched down beside the dismembered body part and cleared his throat. “Hayliel.”

There was a moan behind me, and I spun around, spotting a familiar face half-buried under a destroyed table and a piece of the fallen coffered ceiling. “Sawyer, it’s Ben.”

I covered the few steps quickly, dropping to my knees beside the wendigo. Ben’s real face—his skeletal deer face—was flickering in and out of sight as he lost his battle with consciousness. I took his hand in mine and squeezed his fingers.

“Ben? Ben, can you hear me?”

His eyes cracked open, glowing red. “McKenzie,” he said in a deep, rasping, dual-layered voice. “Hayliel?”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” I said softly, trying to brush some hair back off his head. “We’re going to get you to the hospital, all right? Help is coming.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, pain glazing them over. “Hayliel?” he repeated more desperately.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Sawyer moving through the rubble, crouching down every now and again. Sensing my eyes on him, he looked over and shook his head. Returning my gaze to Ben, I stared at him.

“Tell... me... McKenzie,” he panted, trying to rise from the floor.

“Stay down. Hayliel is...” I hesitated.

“You can... say it. She’s... dead.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “Yeah, Ben, she is.”

He squeezed his eyes shut once more, a single tear streaking down the side of his face. After one more pat on his shoulder, I stood when I saw Vaile approaching with a green-eyed, blonde-haired woman tucked securely under his arm. Neither of them looked hurt.

“McKenzie, Sawyer,” he said in a deep voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. We’re okay,” Sawyer said. “We were out in the lobby at the time of the blast.”

“Us, too,” Wolfe replied. “How many were injured? Was anyone killed?”

Sawyer stepped closer. “Only Hayliel. Ben has been injured. Brax is okay

too. We got him and his mate out before Brax could lose control. I don't know if anyone else in the regular department was seriously injured."

"As far as I know, they weren't, but I'm going to head to the hospital to make sure."

"Good idea, sir. McKenzie and I will take care of Ben. Make sure he's loaded into an ambulance and ride with him."

"All right. Take care of yourself."

Sinking back down on my haunches beside Ben, I tried to make sure he was comfortable, brushing the hair from his face. Blood was caked onto his skin, and I tried to rub it away. He moaned at my touch, but his eyes remained shut.

"Should we get this debris off him?" I asked Sawyer when he crouched down beside me.

"Yeah, but don't move him just yet. He may have sustained a serious injury we can't see."

Clutching Ben's hand, I whispered to him, telling him what was happening. Sawyer stood, got a hold on the ceiling plaster and flipped the weight off the wendigo's body. Next, he shoved aside the table, and I got a better look at Ben's injuries. Through his white tux shirt, there was a red stain blooming on his side, soaking the stiff cotton. Aside the wound to his belly, he appeared to be okay, but I was no doctor. Besides, wendigo physiology might be completely different to that of a human.

"It's all right, Ben. You're going to be all right."

He moaned a little, but there wasn't any feeling to it. His eyes were still firmly shut, his mouth a hard slash.

"Do you need a gurney over there?" someone called, and I glanced up to find my old paramedic pals, Berman and Jones, coming toward us.

"Yeah," I shouted back. "We have a man down." And a woman in pieces.

Berman crouched beside me, all-business, as she looked over Ben in assessment, then started taking his vitals.

"He's a wendigo," I told her. "I don't know if that's going to make a difference in how you treat him."

She glanced over at me, her eyes serious. Taking my hand, she squeezed it. "I'll treat him to the best of my ability, Cat. I'm just glad we're not treating you tonight, too."

And there was the guilt. I had no doubt that this blast had been meant for me.

My table.

My work Christmas party.

My fault.

Kailon had already made three attempts on my life—that I knew about—and this one was his success.

“Jones, bring me...”

As Berman and Jones got on with treating Ben’s injuries before moving him to the ambulance, I stood and retreated a few paces. Sawyer was suddenly there, wrapping a comforting arm around my waist.

“This is my fault,” I rasped.

“How do you figure that, pussy cat?”

“Kailon must’ve planted this bomb. Clearly, I was the target since it went under our table, except now...” I couldn’t hold back the sob as I cast my gaze over the scattered remains of Hayliel, “... now, my family has paid the price for *my* actions.”

We were down to three members of PIG—two if you didn’t include me on account of me being human and all. First Faline, now Hayliel.

What would be next?

*Who* would be next?

Turning around, I buried my face in Sawyer’s chest and wrapped my arms around his waist. Tears fell. I had no way of stopping them even if I wanted to. I cried for the death of Hayliel. Yes, I didn’t know her all that well, but she was part of PIG, and I’d grown to depend on her outrageously inappropriate BDSM attire at work. Ben might be excessively growly, but deep down, I knew he had my back.

I hadn’t even begun to realize how much these people meant to me.

They were the family I’d lost.

They were the family I’d gained.

They were the family that had been ripped from my fingers.

I clutched at my opal, knowing what I had to do.

Kailon was going to die tonight because nobody messed with me and mine and got away with it.

## EIGHTEEN

“I REALLY THINK we should’ve gotten changed,” Sawyer said.

“Revenge waits for no one, Sawyer,” I called. “And revenge in a ball gown and black tie always looks awesome.”

We were at the abandoned amusement park—the entrance to Wonderland. After going back to our apartment quickly to arm up, get coats, and change our shoes, Sawyer had his Glock along with about a dozen knives strapped to his body. I had my Glock too, the holster strapped over my torn and bloody dress. Reaver had shown up in the apartment’s elevator on the ride down to the underground parking garage.

Reaching up, I patted the top of my dress. Tucked inside was my trump card—something I wasn’t sure I needed but thought I better have just in case.

“I’ll take the lead,” Sawyer told me, his jaw tight and his expression fierce. We’d both agreed that killing off our team was not the best idea Kailon had ever had, and he’d be getting the spanking of a lifetime because of his actions.

Farther and farther we walked into the amusement park until arriving at the entrance to The Screamer. “Set your watch for forty-eight minutes, pussy cat,” Sawyer murmured. “We need to get out of there before the alarm goes off. Otherwise, we’ll be stuck in Wonderland, miss Christmas completely, and I know you don’t want to do that.”

I shuddered. “No, thank you.” Tucking Reaver under my arm, I set my watch then traversed the interior railings and tracks of the haunted house until the sensation of marching spiders and a change in pressure indicated we’d stepped between our realm and the realm of the fae.

Sawyer came to a stop in front of a wall—no, not a wall. The bottom

section of it was undulating in a breeze that shouldn't have been there. Snow drifted out from underneath, and I realized it was merely a curtain that must've originally hidden a maintenance door.

Sawyer fixed his eyes on me, silently asking whether I was ready. The answer? No, not really, but I had a hard-on to punish Kailon and nothing was going to stop me. I let out a breath and nodded. Lifting up his Glock, he pulled the fabric back, revealing a snowy landscape that seemed to go on for miles. My breath shivered in front of my mouth as I looked around. There was nothing but snow and a wind that teased and twisted the loose tendrils of hair around my face.

He stepped free of the doorway, and I did the same, then turned around to see the silhouette of The Screamer—checking that it was still there and we had a way out.

“Where are we?” I asked Sawyer.

“Close to the Unseelie Queen's palace. That's where I asked it to come out. If Kailon is anywhere, he'll be there.”

I didn't want to see the currently ruling fae queen any more than I wanted to see the horrors of that ballroom ever again, but revenge was a dirty business, and I was going to get mine.

Sawyer and I slogged through the ice and snow for what felt like hours—but was probably only five minutes—until a castle made of black granite emerged from the white landscape. Jagged spires reached high into the bleak, white sky, their edges sharp like a freshly honed blade.

As we got closer, I saw two unnaturally ugly fae guarding the entrance to a bridge—males dressed in crude black leather pants with swords hanging from their sides. Their barrel chests were bare and covered in thick, jagged scars. On their heads were red caps that seemed to be dripping with blood—blood that trickled down their necks and onto their shoulders.

Well, I'd give Avi points for theme and consistency.

But her uniform requirements for her minions sucked.

“What the hell are they?” I asked Sawyer in a stage whisper, using Reaver as a handy-dandy pointer. In unison, the guards bared their blood-stained teeth at me and pulled out their own swords.

“Put Reaver away, pussy cat,” he said under his breath in a harsh whisper. “These fae don't take too well to being threatened with a weapon.”

“Neither do I,” I sniped out of the corner of my mouth. “And you didn't answer my question!”

“Redcaps,” he said in that same low voice, holstering his Glock. “Blood-thirsty goblins who are loyal to their queen. Deadly to anyone else.”

“Super,” I deadpanned. “I love blood-thirsty supes. Definitely my favorite type.” I waggled my finger in the bloody goblins’ direction. “How do we, ah, diffuse *this* situation?”

“Lower Reaver and make it disappear.”

I glared at him, then whispered to Reaver, “All right, big boy, time to go bye-bye.” And just like that, Reaver disappeared with a small *pop*. I hadn’t had to touch the glyph to will the blade away for a while now. I didn’t know whether I should be impressed or scared that we were more in tune.

The redcaps lowered their own swords too, sliding them back into the sheathes at their waists, then returned their attention to the middle distance.

“Sooo, what now? Do we just walk up to them, and they’ll let us enter?”

“No, we need to make a blood payment.”

“Why does everything have to come with a blood payment?” I whined. “First it was Sharyn Wyatt when we were trying to get information about Draco, now this?” I jerked my thumb in the goblins’ direction. “Just once, I wish things were easy.”

“When have they ever been easy with you?” he asked, a mocking grin on his face.

“*For* me.”

“No. I meant *with* you.”

Jerk.

I huffed and folded my arms. “I suppose I’ll be the one giving the fluid donation?” *Like always*, I added bitterly.

He shrugged. “Maybe. It depends on what they feel like today.”

I followed behind him as he walked toward the two guards.

“We wish to speak to Avi,” Sawyer said, his voice authoritative.

“Our queen is unavailable,” one of the redcaps said in a grunting, snuffling voice.

“She’ll want to be available for us,” I said, stepping in front of Sawyer. “We have something she wants.” I gestured to the necklace that I’d pulled out from the top of my jacket.

The pair growled in unison when they saw the opal, then one of them said, “Come.”

Redcap One turned and walked over the great stone bridge, stopping at the raised drawbridge. It looked as if it were made of bones—human bones if

I wasn't mistaken. Okay, so I was officially grossed out now. The redcap emitted some unintelligible grunts, and a moment later, the drawbridge lowered.

As we walked across, I peered over the edge. The moat consisted of a black, viscous liquid that shimmered like an oil slick in the wintery light. I took a quick step closer to Sawyer when I saw motion under the surface. Something huge lurked in there, and I had no intention of finding out what it looked like.

I let out the breath I was holding when we passed through the gatehouse and into the bailey. There were hundreds upon hundreds of fae there, all going about their business selling food and the weirdest looking animal pelts I'd ever seen. I looked a little harder, recoiling when I realized they were *human* skins, rather than animal.

Swallowing hard, I tried to focus on why I was here.

Revenge.

My spine straightened, and I let my eyes drift around, fixing my gaze on the hundreds of pikes buried in the snowy ground, their sharp tips decorated with some sort of bloody body part. A hand here. A leg there. A... trachea?

I shuddered.

Sawyer moved behind me, placing his hand on the small of my back and urging me forward. "Come on, pussy cat."

As I walked through, I realized there were too few body parts to be from a lot of people, which meant it was just one person. I felt sorry for the unlucky bastard who'd been killed and put on display.

The fae in the courtyard stopped and stared at us as we passed. I could feel the tension radiating out of Sawyer with each step we took until he was glued to my back, an impenetrable source of heat and safety ghosting behind me.

Two more redcaps guarded the keep's gate. They moved out of the way immediately, letting us pass through the portal without interruption. Our guard remained behind, and I glanced at him over my shoulder. He bared his teeth in a feral grin, blood dripping from his red cap onto his face and bare shoulders.

I pointed. "You have a little something on your face," I said before taking a deep breath and going inside the keep.

With my opal quiet against my chest, I had no idea what kind of danger I was in. As close as I could figure, I was somewhere between *Run Now Street*



and *Holy Shit, We're Really Doing This Avenue*.

I stepped into what appeared to be a great hall with a ceiling made entirely out of tree branches. The arched canopy was filled with black boughs, the skeletal branches stretching for as far as the eye could see. I could've sworn I saw stars winking in between the slightly creaking mass of limbs. Was there no roof on this structure, or was it some kind of fae magic at play?

The walls were made of smooth black granite as was the floor. I glanced down. The surface was so smooth and unmarred that I could see my reflection, Sawyer's reflection, and the ceiling above us in it. It was almost as if there was no delineation between the floor and the walls, the optical illusion messing with my head...

... because I could've sworn I saw my truck in the reflection.

My head jerked up, my eyes narrowing. Over in the corner, covered in river weed and looking like it had rusted and aged for a decade out in the elements, there was no mistaking it as anyone's truck but mine. I'd had vanity plates made reading UNICORN with a heart icon in place of the O.

"It's made a nice addition to my throne room," a woman said in a throaty voice. "Don't you think?" Avi was seated on an elaborate throne made of more black wood boughs. She looked just as she did when she visited me on the river—black hair, black clothes, black skin, and a black look of malice in her eyes. Those dark orbs darted down to the necklace around my neck, and a smile slowly appeared on her face. The only thing that was different was I could feel her power vibrating through my bones.

"I see you've finally come to give me what I want." She stood, her dress falling like water from her hips. She moved like water too—fluid and graceful. "That was very wise of you, Catherine Ellen McKenzie."

My heart seized a little at the use of my full name as I watched the Unseelie Queen move down the dais and walk to a niche in the wall. She kept her back to me, and although she had no guards in the room with her, I knew she wasn't helpless. She was just cocky.

"I'm not here to give you my necklace," I replied. Because the bitch was *never* getting her hands on it.

"Why have you really come then, Catherine?" Avi asked in an icy tone. "I can sense your desire to hurt someone."

"Two words. Kailon. Perry."

She half-turned toward me, that smile still in place. Whatever she'd been

looking at was blocked from our view. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I have a few things I want to say to him.” With my sword. Through his temple.

“Why?” She turned back to the niche, studying whatever was there.

“Because he tried to kill me four times in the space of five days, and I’m getting kind of pissed off. He’s ruining Christmas for me.”

Avi turned around and crooked a finger at me. Although I was reluctant to get any closer to the queen, I moved forward. She stepped aside when I was a dozen feet away, and I stopped dead. She waved her hands in the direction of the niche, all Vanna White on *Wheel of Fortune*.

“Here’s Kailon,” she said, indicating to the dismembered head sitting on a red velvet cushion, the flesh was rotting away from the bone beneath, and the smell...

... Jesus, the smell.

“Err, where’s the rest of him?” I asked, unable to tear my gaze off the fae’s decapitated head, off his milky vertical pupils, at his scaled skin and fangs.

She waved her hand airily through the air. “I’m sure you passed all of him on your way in here.”

I covered my nose with the back of my hand. “That was him on the pikes?” At her nod, I asked, “How long have you had him on display like this?”

She shrugged gracefully. “About two of your human weeks, give or take.”

Two weeks? If he’d *been dead* for two weeks, who had been trying to kill me?

Avi continued, “He defied me. He went after that witch after I strictly forbade it.” Her onyx eyes hooked into me. “I think I have you to thank for returning him to me. You refused to give him the witch. You refused to let him get his revenge.” She turned back to Kailon and brought one sharp nail up to his eye socket. With one flick, the unblinking eyeball popped like an overripe watermelon, sending ocular fluid leaking down his rotting cheek.

“And his punishment was waiting for him when he returned. My sister and I might not agree on all things, but we do agree that bringing the attention of your human government our way is not what we want. Kailon, on the other hand, was impulsive and brash. He wanted to show humanity the might of the fae, but we have learned from our mistakes in the past, and I will

not subject my people to that again.”

I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Kailon was dead. “If he’s been here, minus his body, who’s been trying to kill me?”

Avi looked at me, then over my shoulder. I turned, expecting to see Sawyer. But Sawyer was collapsed on the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

And standing over him was Willis Cameron.

## NINETEEN

I BLINKED at the Rogue Faction member, wondering how in the hell he was standing in Wonderland right now. “Willis? What are you doing here? How did you—”

Putting a finger against his smiling lips, he began to shed the glamor from his body. Underneath his human shell, he revealed black-as-night skin veined with gold. His hair was longer and plaited into intricate braids finished with gold coils. His face became more drawn out—a little longer overall—but his dark eyes stayed the same.

“You’re one of the Unseelie,” I murmured, wanting to kick my own butt for not figuring it out earlier. Although, if my opal had been working like it was supposed to, it would’ve alerted me.

“Hello, Cat,” he said, his tone still a smoky voice. Seriously, he still gave James Earl Jones a run for his money in the vocal department? This would be far less scary if he spoke in a high-pitched squeak.

I clutched at my opal. “Why didn’t I sense that you were one of the fae?”

“The opal doesn’t react to Unseelie fae. No fae under Avi’s rule would dare try to harm her or her lover.”

I cast my mind back, trying to remember if it had ever reacted in Kailon’s presence. I couldn’t remember a time when it did. Then I tried to remember every time it had glowed or burned. With witches and magic, it reacted. With almost every other kind of supernatural creature, it glowed if I was in danger or under the influence of their powers. It allowed me to see past the glamor of fairies, and...

“I saw past Kailon’s glamor when I was wearing my necklace.”

Willis shook his head. “A Seelie or Unseelie fae chooses whether to

reveal their glamor. Nothing can force them.” He gestured to the opal. “I see you’ve come to return what rightfully belongs to my queen.”

He stepped away from Sawyer, and I tensed.

“It took me a long time to find you, you know. A long time. I didn’t know your father had given you the stone. If I had, I’d have come to collect it a lot sooner.”

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “What are you talking about? You... You...” But I had nothing to say. Clearly, he wasn’t who I thought he was.

“I’d lost the stone on a mission while wrestling with a bear-shifter. Your father clearly found it. Then, he gave it to you, and his heart’s desire was that you wouldn’t be found by Rogue Faction. The opal listened to him, although why, I still don’t know. Since I’m a member of Rogue Faction, that meant I was unable to find you, too. I only realized you were the one to have it when that Russian witch waltzed into Wonderland with it around her neck, crowing of her theft from you.”

“Kseniya...” I shook my head. “How could you be a member of Rogue Faction if you’re one of the fae?”

At my question, Avi chuckled—a cold, brittle sound. I turned to look at her. “I knew what the humans were doing. So, I sent my lover to spy on them, win them over, join their little organization of dogs sniffing around the supernatural world in a zealous drive to kill them. He infiltrated their ranks, dropping in and out of existence over the years to avoid arousing suspicion.”

I paced a few steps to the left and turned back to Willis. “So that story of how you met my father was bullshit, then? You were already a member. He didn’t recruit you.”

Perverse pleasure sparked in his dark eyes. “I had to gain your trust somehow. If you knew your *father* trusted me, I knew you would trust me, too.”

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* I was definitely kicking my own ass later. I’d been so caught up in the fact that somebody knew *something* about my parents that I hadn’t bothered to even think it all through.

“And the kappas? That was you, too?”

He nodded. “I forced Gwen to report them. I killed her son after she’d played her part.”

I clenched my jaw. “The car bomb at the diner.”

A smug smile. “Rogue Faction was able to teach me something useful it seemed before I destroyed them, too.”

I closed my eyes, pictured Hayliel's dismembered body, and Ben's injuries from the blast. The hundreds of off-duty police officers who had been enjoying a party with their wives and husbands until a blast ripped through the building and left them injured or in shock. "The Police Christmas Party. That's why I saw you there."

"I expected you to die with that blast."

"What about the girl in the diner? She said that her actions were for Kailon. Bubblegum girl?"

He cocked his head to the side. "I don't know who you're talking about. Maybe one of Kailon's lovers took offense to his demise and sought to blame you."

"I'm getting really sick of the being the catch-all-of-the-blame, you know." I hitched my hands onto my hips. Then a thought struck me. "Mrs. Brown?"

"Bravo. You've finally figured it out. I must say I didn't think you would."

I swallowed hard. "Where is she?"

*Please don't say dead. Please don't say dead. Please don't say dead...*

"Dead."

I stumbled back a step, trying to breathe through my shock, but it was hard considering the tightness in my chest. Tears welled instantly, and I forced them back, choking them down past the lump in my throat. "You killed Mrs. Brown to locate me."

He nodded. "Go on. I do so love hearing my plans dissected."

"She would've told you I was here, but the opal was hiding me, right?"

"That day I ran into you in the coffee shop was a complete coincidence. I'd been in Buxton looking for you. All I knew was that you were a cop, so I had to get creative with engineering our meeting. Mrs. Brown, unfortunately, chose to die instead of telling me where you lived. All I managed to torture out of her was the city you lived in and your occupation. The rest was great detective work on my behalf."

*Dead.*

Mrs. Brown was dead.

I felt my world shiver a little with that declaration, like the very fabric that made it up had been torn down the center.

"She's never coming back," I muttered. Dead. Dead. Dead. I stared at him, rage filling me like an overflowing cup. "Why?" I hissed. "Why did you

kill her?”

“I couldn’t have her warning you now, could I? I needed to reclaim Avi’s opal, and now that I have it back, I’ll be able to rule Wonderland.”

Behind me, Avi shifted on her feet, then there was a swish of fabric moving. Clearly, she’d had enough standing around and listening and had moved back to her throne.

I stared at the man who was responsible for Mrs. Brown’s death. I stared at the man who had maimed and slashed his way through my life, taking what he wanted in an effort to get what he wanted. Hayliel was dead. Ben was injured. My department was still reeling from an attack meant for me.

Anger pummeled my body, making my blood catch on fire. Willis’s smug smile ignited the fuse, and I felt the spark rush through in my veins. Reaver appeared before me, just coming out of nowhere because it had felt my need.

In one quick step, I scooped up the sword and lunged for him.

But then...

.... a black blur passed me and fell onto Willis instead.

Avi had launched herself at her lover, a small dagger in her hand. Screaming, she slammed the deadly tip into Willis’s neck repeatedly until his head was cleaved clean from his body. When his blood was pooling on the floor, and his body had finally stopped twitching, Avi stood and threw the dagger away from her. It skittered across the hard marble floor, spinning a dozen times before coming to a stop about twenty feet away. Tendrils of black smoke wafted harmlessly from the metal.

“Not that I’m not thankful, but why did you do that?” I asked.

Avi panted as she looked over at me, holding her hand out in front of her. Huge, angry welts covered her palm, bleeding and puss-filled like it had been infected for months. “Because I don’t share my power with anyone, least of all males like him.” She tilted her chin at Willis, her expression twisted into pure disdain. “He was a fool to think he could take my power from me. He was an even bigger fool for underestimating me.”

“Remind me not to piss you off,” I muttered, then frowned. I was pretty sure I was firmly into piss-off-the-fae-queen territory, so I added softly, “Anymore.”

Her dark eyes darted down to the stone around my neck. “Now that the usurping bastard has been taken care of, I’ll take what’s mine.”

Well, nope, that wasn’t part of *my* plan. Before she could get close, I pulled the black business card I’d stashed down the front of my dress and

said, “Roxanne Monroe, Roxanne Monroe, Roxanne Monroe,” as fast as I could. I had no idea how quickly the vampire mistress would arrive, or if she could *even* get into Wonderland.

The card spontaneously erupted in flames.

“Catherine Ellen McKenzie,” a woman said in a purr.

“Gah!” I whirled around to find the mistress of the Buxton Kiss standing there. The first time I saw her, she was wearing an Antebellum style dress. This time she was clearly in the mood for ass-kicking, dressed in black leather pants, a leather corset sinched painfully at the waist, and a pissed-off attitude. Her blonde hair was slicked back into a high ponytail, and her blue-lilac eyes practically sizzled with hate.

Avi let out a strangled moan.

I returned my gaze to the queen. “Surprise!”

“How?” Her dark eyes darted from the vampire to me. “How do you have the vampires on your side? They’re loyal to no one. And how did she get into Wonderland, into my throne room?”

I shrugged. “If I knew, I’d totally tell you.” *Not.* “Let’s just chalk this up to who-the-fuck-knows-but-Cat’s-happy.”

Turning my body so I could see both threats at the same time, I saw that Roxanne’s gaze was fixed on the fae queen—her *hungry* gaze.

“What have you brought for me, Cat? A present?” Roxanne opened her mouth, her fangs elongating with a hiss. “I haven’t tasted the blood of a fae for centuries.”

Avi shuffled back another step, a look of horror on her face. Damn, I wish I had my phone to snap a pic. That would’ve gone straight onto social media with a couple dozen hashtags all related to getting-fucked-up.

“No,” Avi said in a choking whisper.

But the vampire wasn’t listening—she was advancing on Avi instead.

“Roxanne,” I called, drawing her to a stop. She peered over her shoulder at me, her blue-lilac eyes glowing. “I didn’t call in my boon so you could have a snack. I just need you to subdue the fae.”

“And that is all you require of me? To simply *subdue* her?”

As tempting as it was to let Roxanne have at her, Astrid’s words echoed in my mind. Wonderland needed balance into order to thrive, so I couldn’t let the vampire kill Avi. “Yes. That’s all.”

“And I can achieve this however I like?”

I’d probably regret this, but I said, “Yes.”



Roxanne bowed her head but never took her eyes from me. “Consider it done.”

If I’d blinked, I would’ve missed it. One moment Roxanne was there. The next, she was at the throat of the fae, bending the queen back until her spine was an elegant arch. Roxanne’s mouth was at Avi’s throat, drinking deeply. Whether it was instinct to remain still while someone was tapping a vein, or shock, I didn’t know, but Avi remained completely still.

I opened my mouth to tell her not to eat too much of the fae, but then shut it. She was subduing the queen, and that’s exactly what I’d asked for. Walking over to Sawyer, I leaned in close to his mouth to hear his breaths, then felt for his pulse. It was a strong, hard knock against the tips of my fingers.

Happy he would survive whatever Willis had done to him, I grabbed the pair of warded cuffs from Sawyer’s pocket and walked toward the vampire and the fae.

Wrenching Avi’s hands behind her back, I closed the cuffs around her delicate wrists and motioned for Roxanne to let go of her dinner. The vampire did, but with a look of displeasure simmering in her eyes.

With her powers negated, Avi simply stood there, looking into the middle distance, blood trickling from the wound at her throat. I still checked the cuffs, then said, “I appreciate you coming, Roxanne.”

The vampire wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth and sucked it off her finger with a slurp. “It was a pleasure. I haven’t had fae blood that good in centuries.”

And with that declaration, she disappeared from sight.

## TWENTY

“SAWYER? SAWYER, CAN YOU HEAR ME?” I kneeled beside my partner, watching the way his brow furrowed when I called his name. “Sawyer?”

I checked my watch. There were only ten minutes left before we had to get out of here. “I’m not missing Christmas for this shit,” I muttered, mostly to myself. I’m sure Sawyer could hear me, though.

At the sound of footsteps beyond the door, I reached blindly behind me for Reaver and stood. Placing myself between Sawyer and the entryway, I waited to see what else Wonderland had in store for me today. The footsteps still echoed, but they sounded as if they were getting softer rather than louder, farther away than closer.

I relaxed, lowering Reaver, which was a stupid move because the large doors suddenly opened and the Seelie Queen glided into the hall, her white hair, skin, and pale eyes a complete contrast to her sister’s coloring and choice of décor.

“Astrid? What are you—”

Astrid walked over to her sister, studying her for a moment before turning to me. “Was she difficult to subdue?”

I shook my head. “Not when the mistress of the local vampire kiss is in my back pocket, figuratively speaking, because I actually kept the card in the top of my dress.”

Astrid cocked her head to the side, studying me like a hawk would study a wounded rabbit. “You’re in league with the vampires?”

“They owed me a favor,” I replied carefully. It wasn’t a lie—they did owe me a favor—but now that I’d called it, I wasn’t sure I could claim that

anymore. Astrid didn't need to know that, though.

"Hmm." Astrid turned her gaze back to Avi. Gently, she pushed some of her sister's dark hair away from her face, caressing her cheek. Sawyer moaned and shifted at my feet, and I immediately dropped into a crouch beside him.

"Hey." I smiled. "Back in the land of the living?"

Sawyer's gray eyes didn't flicker to me. They were fixed on the two queens standing a few feet away. There was a grunt, and I turned my head in time to find Astrid stabbing her sister in the side with the same dagger Avi had used on Willis.

Argh, it was a regular stab-fest here tonight.

Leaping to my feet, I went to stop her when Astrid turned around, brandishing the bloody dagger at me. Her glamor was starting to disappear, revealing an angular face and dagger-like fangs. Behind her, Avi fell, too much blood surrounding her body.

"Don't be a fool, Catherine Ellen McKenzie," Astrid hissed. "I won't kill you because you aided me in my quest to regain my power, but my generosity is very limited. Interfere with me now, and I *will* slaughter you and your partner where you stand."

I gestured to Sawyer. "He's kind of lying down."

Her lips pulled away from her teeth, and she advanced a step.

Putting up my hands in the universal sign for slow your roll, I said, "Okay. Okay. We're going."

I knew I should've fought a little harder on this one, but I was pretty much done. I'd wasted my vampire trump card on a back-stabbing bitch of a fae. I wasn't going to give up Christmas for her too.

Lifting up Sawyer's arm, I draped it over my shoulder and hauled him to his feet. He grunted and clutched at the right side of his ribs as we shuffled out of the great hall. Getting back across the vast expanse of snowfield took us twice as long as on the way to Avi's palace, Sawyer's limping gait slowing us right down. Just as I'd given up any hope of getting out of Wonderland before my watch beeped, the shape of the haunted house that marked the entry and exit to Wonderland loomed out of the landscape.

"It's just up there," I told Sawyer. "Come on." I picked up the pace, dragging Sawyer with me despite his protests. "I'm sorry if I'm hurting you," I panted through gritted teeth.

"It's okay," he replied just as breathlessly. "I'll be okay. Just go."

As soon as I brushed past the curtain that divided our two realms, I was rocked by the sensation of crawling spiders, and my ears popped. A few feet from the divide, both our watches began to beep in sync. I looked down at the lit-up face and silenced it. Forty-eight minutes we'd been gone.

"How much time has passed here?" I asked, re-securing my grip on Sawyer's waist. We stepped over one of the tracks and followed them to the front of the ride.

"Forty-eight hours," he said. "It's Christmas night. I said I'd have you back for Christmas."

"You did." I helped him over the roller coaster car then down from the haunted house's steps. It had snowed while we'd been gone, the ground not just dusted in a layer of white powder but completely covered.

When we finally made it back to Sawyer's motorcycle, I brushed the snow off the seat and got him situated before sliding on in front of him. After our near-drowning a few weeks ago, I'd insisted on Sawyer teaching me how to ride his bike. Yes, these things were flaming wreckages waiting to happen, but if taking his motorcycle was the only way out of a situation, I'd do it.

The engine took a bit of coaxing to turn over considering it had been out in the elements for the last forty-eight hours, but once it did, I slowly eased it out of the lot. As we drove, I wasn't quite able to believe that Astrid had turned out to be just as bloodthirsty as her sister was when it came to power. I'd facilitated her power grab without knowing it.

This was my take away...

Kailon was dead.

Willis was dead.

Avi was dead, which meant I only had to worry about Astrid in the future—if at all.

I figured we'd reached an impasse.

I'd helped her.

She let me walk out of Wonderland alive.

I'd call that a win.

I parked in the underground lot at our building, helping Sawyer into the elevator car which was waiting at the bottom. Propping him in the corner, I reached across and hit the button before returning to his side. His gray eyes were slitted in pain.

"What did he do to you?"

He shook his head. "He cracked me in the ribs. Pretty sure he broke a

couple, then knocked me out. How in the hell did you get us out of there, Cat?"

"I called in my favor with the vampires," I said, fatigue straining my voice. "Roxanne showed up and subdued Avi. I got the cuffs on her, then Astrid showed up. You saw Astrid commit sororicide. I had money on Avi that she'd be the one to commit murder. It turned out I'd backed the wrong horse."

He leaned back against the wall of the elevator car and closed his eyes. Dark circles were already forming there, and I'd probably look the same. Wonderland was fucking draining. When the car glided to a gentle stop, I helped Sawyer into the apartment, turning toward his bedroom.

I laid him down as gently as I could, then collapsed beside him.

Christmas was just going to have to wait.

## TWENTY-ONE

I WOKE UP SUDDENLY, blinking blearily at the weak winter sun coming in through the drapes. Behind me, Sawyer was curled up against my back, his warm breath ruffling the hair on my nape. Tilting my head back, I took note of the time and groaned. It was ten in the morning. As in ten in the morning *the day after Christmas*. We'd missed it completely.

Sawyer stirred, and his arm banded around me tightening ever so slowly. When I tried to move off the bed, he shook his head, and he dragged me closer to his chest. Burying his face in my hair, he murmured, "Merry Christmas, pussy cat."

"We missed it," I replied with a huff.

"I know how much you love this time of the year."

I shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter. I mean, we don't even have a tree up." We'd just been too busy.

"Let's put one up today, then. We'll celebrate anyway. Who cares if we're one day late?"

I turned around to face him, looking into his clear gray eyes. "You'd do that for me?"

He ran a finger across my collarbone, making me shiver. "I'd do anything for you, pussy cat. Don't you know that by now?"

I squirmed at his words. When he said things like that, I wanted to forget the deal I made with myself about not getting emotionally involved. I placed my hand on his wrist, stopping the scorching path he was drawing down between my breasts. "Don't say things like that to me."

"Like what?"

"Like you'd do anything for me."

Now it was his turn to frown. “But I would, Cat.”

“Well, don’t. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“We sleep together now, and I make you uncomfortable by speaking my truth?” he asked, one skeptical brow hiking up in question.

“Yes... no... *dammit*, I don’t know, Sawyer. I guess I’m just trying to maintain some distance between us.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I need to maintain distance from you. We agreed to no emotions.”

“Fuck that, Cat. You’re my consort. You’re it for me now. I can’t feed off anyone else even if I wanted to.”

“I know,” I bit out, wondering why when he said it, it didn’t sound crazy. “I just...”

“You’re still afraid it’s a bad idea?” he asked, his tone softening.

I nodded.

Leaning forward, he captured my mouth in a kiss. It was slow and gentle, and I let him have his fill even though I was terrified of the feelings bubbling up inside me. I let out a moan when he flexed his hips into me, his erection hitting me in the stomach. When he broke away, he leaned his forehead against mine and asked, “How can this be a bad thing? You respond to me. I respond to you.”

“I don’t want this to break *us*, Sawyer.”

“It won’t, Cat. I have more at stake with this arrangement. If you walk away, I *will* die, but I know you won’t do that to me. You care too much.” He framed my face in his hands, his darkening gaze boring into me. “What can I do or say to put you at ease?”

“Say that we won’t form an emotional connection,” I blurted out.

His eyes narrowed and he pulled away from me. “Why would that be such a terrible thing?”

“Because emotions are harder to sever than a sexual relationship.”

He pressed his lips into a hard line. “Explain to me why you don’t want to get emotional with me.”

“I don’t think I can.” I sat up, threw my legs over the side of the bed and stood, stretching. I didn’t need to think like this before I’d had my coffee. I padded from the bedroom and paused at the front door when the intercom buzzed.

I hesitated just a moment, then reached for the button. “Yeah?”

“Cat? It’s Mason. Can I come up?”

I glanced over my shoulder at Sawyer, who had just emerged from the bedroom. We were still dressed in the clothes we’d worn into Wonderland, and even disheveled, he looked amazing in his rumpled tux. Wordlessly, I asked him if he was okay with this, with having Mason in his personal space.

As soon as he gave me a nod, I said, “Sure.” Then buzzed him in.

I braced myself for a snide comment from Sawyer, but he brushed past me and walked into the kitchen to start the Krups.

“I didn’t ask him to come over,” I blurted out, feeling Sawyer’s displeasure like a physical weight on my shoulders.

He glanced at me dismissively over his shoulder. “It’s none of my business who you date, Cat, but explaining our relationship is going to be hard.”

I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it just as quickly. He was right, of course. How could I sleep with Sawyer every night and maintain a relationship with another man? In short, I couldn’t. Was I truly okay with that, though? I wanted Sawyer. I could have him, so what was my issue? Was Sasha right, and it was more about *what* he was rather than *who* he was?

I sucked in a breath and let it go. “I don’t want to get involved with you because you’re a supernatural,” I told him with a wince. Just putting it out there made me feel like a complete bitch.

He leaned against the counter, folding his deliciously muscled arms. “Why?”

“Because I’m terrified that if I fall any farther into this world, then I’m going to lose my humanity, too.” I wrapped my arms around my middle and ducked my chin. I couldn’t look Sawyer in the face right now. I couldn’t see how my words hurt him. “I’m afraid that I’ve already gone too far, and if I’m your consort, that means I’m deeper into this world than I thought.”

Sawyer was quiet—too quiet for my liking—and I sneaked a quick glance. His expression was shuttered, and I had no idea what he was thinking. Eventually, he said, “Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Because Smith says so? He’s been spitting the same sort of shit for weeks now. Is that what you really think, that you’re less human because you work with supernaturals, that you live with one?”

“Yes,” I whispered. Smith’s jibes were all the thoughts I had deep down. Maybe it was residual beliefs from my parents’ secret life. Or maybe I had to



woman up and realize it was more to do with my own personal insecurities.

“I think you’re scared to give love to someone else because every time you do, they disappear,” Sawyer said, and I jerked my head up to stare at him.

“*What?*”

“You’re using this as an excuse for not addressing the real problem. You’re terrified of giving something of yourself to someone for fear of them disappearing from your life.”

I bit my lip then shook my head. “No.”

“No? Tell me, Cat, have I ever abandoned you? Taken something from you and not given something back? Have I ever *not* been there for you?”

He’d always been there, and I told him as much.

“So, why can’t you trust me with your heart, too?”

“I—” I paused when Mason knocked on the door.

Sawyer went back to making coffee, putting our conversation on pause.

Shaken and in need of a distraction, I opened the door. “Hey, Mason,” I said with far more cheer than I thought I could muster. “Merry belated Christmas.”

Mason stepped into the apartment carrying a gift wrapped in unicorn paper. Dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of designer jeans, his hair was tied loosely at the back of his head. He handed the gift to me with a shy smile.

“Merry Christmas. I know we’ve only been on one date technically, but I saw this while I was passing a store on the way home from work the other day. It reminded me of you.”

“Hey, Mason, want some coffee?” Sawyer asked in a strangely chipper voice. I flashed him a quizzical look, which he ignored.

“Please. That would be great. Thanks.” Then, to me, he said, “Please, open it.”

I walked to the couch and sat, my dress pooling at my feet.

“I tried to call you yesterday, but it went straight to voicemail,” he told me, settling in beside me, his gaze darting down to my dress.

“Oh, yeah, my phone died.” I looked down at the gift, feeling something soft inside. “And Sawyer and I were working a case last night, and we got in late. Didn’t get a chance to change.”

He nodded, then gestured to the parcel in my hand. “Please, open it.”

With a bob of my head, I peeled the tape off one side and peered under the wrapping paper. When I was sure it was something that wouldn’t bite—

because I'm sure the supernatural world would throw that one at me soon enough—I pulled out the fleecy material and unfolded it. It was a hooded sweater in bubblegum pink with a design of a unicorn standing in front of a rainbow on it.

“Wow, thanks so much, Mason,” I said, staring at the image, running my fingertips over the curve of the rainbow. “It’s great, but I haven’t got you anything,” I added sheepishly.

“No problem. Like I said, we’ve only been on one date, and I just saw this in passing. Anyway, I have so much to catch you up on...”

Sawyer walked into the living room with two mugs of coffee. He placed one down in front of me and the other in front of Mason. I watched as his gaze darted to the sweater, then to my face. His expression was utterly unreadable.

But I knew what he was feeling. He was hurting. I saw it in the way his gaze lingered on my face. Was I throwing the chance at a relationship with Sawyer away because I was being a stubborn idiot? I hadn’t lied when I’d told him that him being a supernatural was one of the reasons I couldn’t date him, but it wasn’t the biggest issue. The biggest issue was the one he so tactfully brought up—I was afraid of giving my heart to someone.

From the age of ten, my mother was gone. Then my father may as well have been dead for all the times I saw him. Mrs. Brown had stepped into the parenting role, but by the time my father had died, I was already at college, and Mrs. Brown wasn’t needed either. Sawyer was right. I *did* have abandonment issues, and I was just using my fear of the supernatural world as a cover for that.

From day one, Sawyer never rejected me. He was there, leading me through things even when I was scared shitless. Even when I thought I couldn’t do it. He’d never judged me either—he just accepted me for me. I knew I was quirky. I mean, what kind of grown woman had a thing for unicorns?

Reaching forward, I took a sip of my coffee, then looked at the mug Sawyer had put it in. It was my new favorite since most of my collection had been destroyed in the destruction of my building. On the front was ‘I don’t believe in humans,’ written in a rainbow color scheme and with a little fat unicorn beside it.

I blinked when I felt tears sitting in my eyes.

“Mason?” I asked, interrupted whatever story he was telling me.

He pushed his glasses up his face, looking at me expectantly. “Yes?”

“Thank you for the present. It’s great, really, but I don’t think I can do this.”

He frowned. “Do what?”

“Date you. I just don’t think I’m ready for that.”

Mason’s gaze darted quickly to Sawyer, looking for advice on how to proceed, no doubt. “You don’t want to... date me?”

“I’m sorry, but no.”

With a sharp bob of his head, he placed his coffee cup back down and slid to the edge of the couch. All the happiness that had lit up his body was now gone, and I felt terrible for being responsible for that.

“I respect your decision,” he said, shoving his glasses up his nose once more. “And I’m really glad I met you.”

“You, too,” I mumbled.

He walked to the door, and I scrambled off the couch to walk him the rest of the way.

He turned to face me, his expression tight. With anger? With sadness? I didn’t know him well enough to read that. “It was fun while it lasted.”

“If fun includes attempts on my life while on our first date, then yeah, it was fun.”

“I’d like to include me making you dinner as our second and final date, too,” he replied. “That was a fun night.”

My body heated when I thought back to when Sawyer had dragged me into his bedroom to chew me out for inviting Mason to the house—an ass-chewing which had turned into a hot-as-fuck pseudo dry-humping session.

“Yeah, it was.” I opened the apartment door for him, giving him what I hoped was a warm smile. “Thank you again for the present.”

“Of course.” He leaned in and brushed his lips to my cheek—a chaste kiss for our goodbye. I was glad he didn’t try and go for my mouth. With Sawyer standing and watching only a few feet away, it would’ve ended in a brawl, and I had a very good idea who the victor would be. “Be happy, Cat.”

“You, too, Mason.”

With one final nod, he turned and started down the hallway. I let out a breath and shut the door, then turned to face Sawyer.

He had his arms folded across his chest, his eyes narrowed to slits. “You got rid of him,” he said softly, but I heard the edge of his control fraying a little.

“Yes.”

“Why?” He stepped toward me but kept his arms locked around his chest.

I stared up into Sawyer’s gray eyes, inhaled his whisky and chocolate scent, felt the heat from his body and knew. I’d made the right choice. “Because I want to see what happens between you and me. I was scared, I’ll be the first to admit it. Scared of being abandoned after you were done with me, but you’ll never be done with me if I’m your consort. I don’t care if you’re an incubus. You haven’t been influencing me. Every time we’ve come together... no pun intended,” I added with a wink. He chuckled and let his arms hang by his side. “Every time we’ve come together, it’s because I’ve wanted it. I could’ve said no at any point, and you would’ve respected my decision.” I glanced down at my feet, then back to him. “I’m willing to try even though our working relationship and friendship are at risk. I’m willing to try because I think you’re worth it.”

A grin started to spread slowly across his face. “You *think* I’m worth it?” he needled in a teasing tone.

I rolled my eyes. “I know you are, okay? And don’t get a big head about it. Just know that I value our friendship over whatever this relationship evolves into. And if it all falls apart—”

“It won’t,” he pressed.

I waved him off. “*If* it does, promise me we’ll go back to being friends. We’ll go back to what we have now before feelings and jealousy and fucking life messes everything up.”

“I promise you that, Cat.” Taking my hand, he held it to his chest. Underneath his smooth tux shirt, I felt that powerful organ pounding against my fingertips. “I swear it to you now.”

I bit my lip then nodded. “Okay, then I’m all in, but we need to figure out whether we keep this on the down-low at work and around the team.”

“I think for your sake we should. I don’t give a demon rat’s ass about what people think of our relationship, but I know Smith would have a field day if he found out.”

“I fucking hate that guy,” I muttered.

Sawyer wrapped his arms around my body and pulled me against his chest. I went willingly because who wouldn’t want to be held by a smoking hot guy.

*My smoking hot guy.*

“Can we get matching Christmas sweaters?” I asked suddenly, peering up

into his gorgeous face. “*Really* ugly ones. You know, the kind you want to burn afterward or use to make a sacrifice to the Devil.”

He arched a brow. “It’s not Christmas anymore.”

I snorted. “Not for everyone else, but we missed it. Therefore, I think we should celebrate it tonight. We’ll put up the tree, decorate it, have a turkey dinner...” Sawyer’s smile had disappeared from his face. “What? What is it?”

“I’m sorry we never got a chance to put up the tree.”

“Murder attempts on my life will do that,” I shot back with a casual shrug.

We spent the rest of the day choosing a live tree—because a fake one at Christmas simply doesn’t count—and decorating it. Sawyer had some really old Christmas decorations in his collection, just like the angel I was cradling carefully in my hands. It was made of blown glass. The figure had its palms together in prayer, a tiny halo adorning her head. Even though it was yellowing with age, it beat any modern reproduction.

“This is beautiful,” I told him, gesturing to the angel. “I mean, a unicorn would’ve been better, but I think this will be okay, too.”

He ran a gentle finger over the face of the angel. “She’s very old. My mother gave it to me sometime around 1870. Would you like to put her on the tree? I can give you a boost,” he added with a smirk.

I looked up at the nearly seven-foot behemoth. “No short joke on Scat Christmas,” I muttered.

He laughed, his eyes dancing with humor. “What is *Scat* Christmas?”

“Oh, I just made that up. Sawyer plus Cat equals *Scat*. You know, I’m clever, cute, and creative.”

“You certainly are,” he replied in a deep rumble that seemed to caress me like a hand between my legs. I jabbed a finger at him. “Hey, no sex until we’re done here. We wasted three hours this morning before we could hit the forest to steal this amazing tree.”

He pressed his body to mine, his words warm and soft in my ear when he said, “Three *magical* hours.”

I shoved him away. “You have a one-track mind.”

“Of course I do. I’m a sex demon.”

I waved away his statement because I couldn't win this one. "Just give me a boost, so I can put our angel at the top."

He dropped a kiss to my head and wrapped his arms around my chest. "I like the way that sounds?"

"Boost?"

He snorted. "No. *Our*. You said *our angel*."

A blush crept up my cheeks, then I shrugged. "You know what I mean."

With a mischievous smile, he banded his arms around my legs and lifted me. I yelped, unprepared for the sudden rise in elevation, wobbled, got my sense of balance back, then placed the angel at the top. "Okay, you can let me down now," I said a little breathlessly.

After he lowered me to the floor, we stepped back and looked at our beautifully trimmed tree. "It could definitely use more unicorns, but for a tree with only *one*, I think it's pretty good."

"You and your unicorns," Sawyer grumbled.

I turned to face him. "I don't want to hear any grumbling about that. You knew when you met me, I had a thing for them."

"I did, yes. And maybe you could add this to your collection," he said, leaning over and pulling out a gift bag from behind the couch.

"Where did this come from?"

"I got it out when you were half-buried in the decorations box."

"Touché," I muttered. I'd kind of fallen in there and couldn't get out, but that's neither here nor there. Taking the bag, I settled onto the couch and practically tore the top of it open because, hello? Who doesn't love Christmas?

The first thing I saw laying on top of another present was a small box, no bigger than the size of a large Diamond brand match box. I picked it up, lifted it to my ear, and shook. There was a muffled sound inside.

Sawyer was sitting on the floor in front of me, his face serene as he watched me.

I peeled off the wrapping, which was more unicorn print paper, and smiled when I saw what was inside. I held up the box of kids' unicorn design bandages and cocked my head to the side. "Is this because I'm always getting hurt?"

He nodded, a huge smile on his face. I don't think I'd ever seen him this relaxed before. "Keep going."

Placing the box to the side, I opened the next present which was a unicorn

wine holder, where the mouth of the bottle went into the mouth of the unicorn. The next gift was a hot pink plush robe with a foil unicorn print in gold. The next, a t-shirt with Deadpool riding a unicorn on a rainbow.

I was giddy with excitement at this point, my happiness bubbling in my blood like champagne. “This is amazing,” I told him.

“It’s not over yet. Keep digging.”

I dove back into the bag, finding a travel cup with a unicorn on the front and the words ‘Glamorous AF’ and finally, at the bottom, a pink unicorn onesie, complete with a gold horn on the top of the hood. Surrounded by all the awesomeness, I grinned at Sawyer.

“Thank you. This is all amazing.”

“You’re amazing.”

“You have to say that because I’m your consort.”

“I have to say that because it’s true. You’re amazing. You’ve come into our world and thrived. You’ve come into *my* world and turned it upside down.”

“I don’t know about the thriving bit, but the upside down? I am all over that.”

Getting on to his knees, he pushed between my legs and pressed his body to mine. Leaning in, he kissed me softly. “Merry Christmas and thank you.”

I glanced down. “I love all my horned booty... wait, that didn’t come out right.” I shook my head. “Don’t tell me you just bought me all this stuff. I know Amazon Prime is the bomb, but, really?”

Chuckling, he replied, “No, I’ve been slowly buying things for the past few weeks. I know how much you love Christmas.”

“I do love Christmas.” I picked up the onesie. “And this bad-boy is getting worn. Right now.” I stood and stripped out of my leggings and Sawyer’s shirt that I’d changed into after our three-hour-sexfest. He growled when he saw I was wearing a lace bra with a matching set of panties.

“There’s your first present,” I told him with a wink. “But it’s not for now. We can’t get distracted.” I pulled on the onesie, then disappeared into my bedroom. Reaching under my bed, I pulled out Sawyer’s present and hesitated for just a moment. He’d given me such thoughtful gifts, whereas I was kind of giving him a gag present. Well, the rest of his Cat present would come later, but compared to his thoughtfulness, I looked like a cheapskate.

“He’s got to accept me for me,” I said softly with a shrug.

Walking back out into the living room, I found him on the couch looking

relaxed. I handed him the box, then sat beside him. He looked between me and the gift I'd just given him.

"Just open it."

He did, laughing when he saw the picture on the front of the packaging. I'd gotten him a customizable blow-up sex doll complete with teal hair and a saucy wink. I would've opted for a smile, but given her mouth was set into a permanent 'o,' that was a little hard.

"It's a Cat doll," I told him excitedly. "I got it before we were a thing." I shrugged. "Maybe we can just keep her in the living room. Otherwise, I'll have to shiv the bitch for watching us fuck."

"Jesus," he muttered, then kissed me. "I love it." He set her to the side then turned to face me. "I much prefer being with the real flesh and blood version, though."

Grinning, I scooted closer. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," he growled. "She feels so much warmer. And softer. She makes amazingly sexy noises when I kiss her here." He leaned in and nipped me on the side of the neck, making me gasp. "Now, I've waited all day, and it's time to eat."

He claimed my mouth in a searing kiss, and for the first time, I let myself sink into him without thoughts of whether this was right or wrong.

This was us, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

Need to find out more about Cat & Sawyer?

You can [pre-order](#) "Bad Wolf" - book #4 in the Cat McKenzie series right now!

Keep reading for a sneak peek of "Bad Wolf."

***A rookie cop. A team of supernatural detectives. A shifter with some impulse control issues.***

*My name is Cat McKenzie, and I thought wood sprites weren't a thing.*



*Apparently, they are. Fun fact: they enjoy eating carrion which was how I discovered the body of a hunter in the woods. The local werewolf pack confirms it's a bad wolf doing the biting.*

*Add two more to the body count and we have a furry serial killer on our hands.*

*Life can't be as easy as that though. From new recruits at PIG to questions about mine and my sexy-as-sin partner's connection, I'm left trying with more questions than answers.*

*Murderous will-o'-the-wisps, dryads and a thieving harpy... could life get any crazier?*

BAD WOLF

## CHAPTER ONE

*\*\*Please note this is an unedited chapter.  
Any mistakes are my own\*\**

“It’s a dildo,” my best friend said slowly, turning the rectangular box around in her hands and peering at it in complete bemusement.

I clapped my hands excitedly, snatching it away from Sasha. “A twelve-inch monster!” I’d gotten the toy for my bestie for Christmas before she’d gone and gotten herself engaged to Brad while away on a skiing trip over Christmas.

“Why would I need a dildo?”

I gave her a look. “Why would I give the woman who not only has a drawer *full* of sex toys, but a whole section of her closet devoted to the vibrating, titillating, orgasm-inducing objects a new dildo? PS I used titillating in a sentence.” I held my hand up for a high-five.

With that same look on bemusement on her face, Sasha leaned over and smacked her palm against mine. She took the box back from me and stared at it. “I shouldn’t need this now. Not with my fiancé being able to do its job—” She grinned “—and then some.”

Taking the toy from Sash’s hand, I dropped the box onto the cushion beside me and took her hands in mine. “I’m so excited for you, Sasha. A little blind-sided I have to admit, but still super pumped that you’re finally getting your happy ending.”

Then I laughed.

Because I couldn’t help myself.

She threw a cushion at me.

“Hey!” I said, rubbing the side of my face.

“That’s what you get for having your mind in the gutter.”

“I think you’ll find it’s always in the gutter,” I shot back, indignantly. “Besides, you try living with an incubus and tell me how much you *don’t* think about sex. I’ll save you the time and tell you that it’s about one hundred and ten percent of the time. I feel like I’m a teen boy who just found his daddy’s stash of porn under the bed.”

She picked up the cushion and placed it in her lap, stroking the fabric. “So, things between you are good?”

“They’re great. More than great.” I brushed at the knees of my jeans. “You were right.”

She cupped her ear. “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

I snorted. “I said, you were right. About me. About Sawyer. About my true feelings. About him being a supe and not human. You were right. And so was Sawyer.”

She pumped a fist in victory.

“So there. I like Sawyer. I may even more than *like* Sawyer. And bonus, we’re kind of irrevocably tied now anyway.”

At this statement, my friend’s brows rose. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Slinking forward in my seat, I grabbed the glass of water off the table and took a sip. “I’m his consort?”

“Why did you phrase that like a question?”

Because I wasn’t sure how she’d react. Sasha always had my back, always wanted the best for me, but I wasn’t sure she’d support *this*. Sex was one thing. A life-long connection with a near immortal supernatural creature was quite another, and who knew how long I was supposed to live. Sawyer had said an incubus’s consort was supposed to be a supernatural too. Clearly, I wasn’t, but did that mean when I died in however many years from now that Sawyer would die too?

“Cat? Hello, Earth to Cat?” Sasha snapped her fingers in front of my face, jolting me from my thoughts.

“Hey. Yeah. Sorry.”

“You’re his consort?” she nudged.

I let out a breath, nodding. “We’re just a little unsure how that works on account of me being human and all.”

“What does being an incubus’s consort mean, anyway?”

I lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “I’m the one person who can stop

the drive to constantly feed off other people.”

“He can’t feed off other people *at all*?”

I took another sip of my water. “He can still feed off the lust of others, but he can’t, you know...” I made the finger-in-the-hole gesture and shrugged. “Fuck them.”

She shook her head. “You’re so crass. Besides that, how was Sawyer right? You said I was right but how was he also right?”

I bit my lip. “He said I was afraid to let anyone else in because I thought they’d disappear from my life again.”

Sasha’s expression softened. “Oh, Cat.”

I waved off her concern. “I’m fine, but it did get me thinking. What if he was right and I was keeping my heart locked down? So, I decided to just... try.”

“I think that’s awesome. But if he hurts you, so help me, Cat, I’m going to chase him down and cut off his dick. With an over-sized axe because I’d have to go for maximum impact.”

I grinned. “You really know where to hit a man where it hurts.” My gaze ran over the huge rock on Sasha’s finger. Jerking my chin in the direction of her hand, I asked, “How many carats is that thing?”

She seemed to light up from the inside at the mention of her engagement ring. “Brad said it’s a ten-carat radiant cut diamond in a platinum setting.”

“It’s gorgeous, just like the woman wearing it.”

Sasha beamed as she continued to stare at the diamond. I’d never seen her this happy before. She’d dated a lot of guys, and by dated, I meant she slept with a lot of guys and rated the size of their dicks in the hope of finding the one who could capture and hold her attention for more than a couple of weeks. She was a smart woman who knew what she wanted in and out of the bedroom, and I’m glad Brad was the man to finally win her heart.

“When can I meet Brad? It feels weird that all I really know about him is the size of his dick and that he’s loaded.”

She laughed, a wicked gleam in her eye. “He’s a magnificent eight.”

“You should get that on a t-shirt.”

“You know what *you* should get on a t-shirt?”

“What’s that?”

“Maid of honor.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Say what now?”

“Will you be my maid of honor, Cat?”

A very un-Cat-like squeal burst from my lips as I launched myself at Sasha. “Are you serious?” I asked.

“Yes, deadly serious.”

“But are you *really* sure? You know how much shit seems to happen to me. I can’t guarantee I’ll be any good at this.”

“You’ll be amazing because you’re you and that’s all I need.” She tightened her arms around me, squeezing. “We’ll need to get started on the wedding planning sooner rather than later though.”

I pulled back, shoving some of my teal hair from my face. “Why?”

“Because we’ve already set the date and we want to get married in the spring.”

“That’s only three months away.”

“Four. We’re getting married in April.”

“Shit. You don’t mess around, do you?”

She shrugged happily. “When you know, you know.”

“Well, yeah, but I just thought you always said you’d never settle down. That all men were dicks. That they were only good for one thing—”

“I know! But Brad is different. He’s sweet and kind and considerate—especially in the bedroom—and I know he’s the one for me. I also know I sounded like an idiot for thinking that I’d never get married and settle down. Sometimes all it takes is one person to show you the error of your ways.”

I scoffed. “Now you just sound like a Hallmark card.”

Waggling her finger in my face, she chastised, “It’ll happen to you one day, too, Cat.”

I shook my head, erasing the very thought. Sawyer and I were tied together now, but I didn’t want to assume that our connection would turn into anything more than what it was—mainly more about his survival than anything else. I mean, did I want to be with him? Absolutely. I loved the way he worshiped my body, but did I think we would get married and blah, blah, blah happily ever after? No.

Sasha reached for my hand. “It will. Look, if *I* can settle down then so can you.”

I didn’t correct her assumption that I wasn’t looking for more. If anything, I craved that deeper connection with someone, but being the consort to an incubus was new territory for me. We’d already agreed that if it didn’t work out in a monogamous relationship like I wanted, I could date other people and we would remain friends.

Fuck-buddies, but still friends.

Explaining that to potential romantic partners was going to be tricky though. I doubted there were many men out there who would let their girlfriend fuck another man because she was obligated to keep that man alive.

“—your therapist tonight? It is Friday.”

I blinked, refocusing on Sasha. “Sorry, what? I was somewhere else just then.”

“I know. I asked if you had to see your therapist tonight? Maybe afterwards we could go out for a drink—just the two of us?”

“Oh. Yeah, No, no more therapy for me. Mrs. Joanna Wong thinks I’ve got enough coping skills now to not have to see her every week.”

“Well, that’s great, isn’t it?”

“I wasn’t seeing her because I needed coping techniques. I was seeing her because I was drowning in guilt and anger. Being with Sawyer and the rest of the department has helped though.”

She reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “Yep, I totally get that. Did—”

Behind us, the door to the apartment opened and closed. Sawyer’s whisky and chocolate scent wafted on the air a moment later. And with that, my pulse spiked.

Sasha turned her head.

“Hot damn, Cat,” she muttered. “Why didn’t you tell me your partner looked like *that*?”

I’d forgotten that she’d never actually met my partner-come-roommate-come-lover.

Sawyer was dressed in running shorts and was bare-chested despite the sub-zero temperatures outside. Sweat ran in rivulets down his chest, ambling casually over his six pack and into the waistband of his shorts.

He turned to look at us, his usually gray irises turning dark as he caught the tendrils of our lust. “Pussy cat,” he rumbled before flicking his hungry gaze to Sasha. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

I shook off the stupor of my flat-out need for him and grouched, “Argh, that sounded like a pick-up line. And I will as soon as you put a shirt on. *This*,” I hiked a thumb in Sasha’s direction, “is an engaged woman and *she* doesn’t need to see all that.”

With a rather boyish grin, Sawyer disappeared down the hall and emerged a few moments later with a shirt on. Unfortunately, him covering himself up

did absolutely nothing for my libido. Just catching a glimpse of Sawyer was enough to make me drool.

“Sasha, this is Sawyer, my partner and roommate.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sawyer said, swooping in and shaking Sasha’s hand.

My best friend actually blushed.

“Dial back on the smoldering, Sawyer,” I grumbled. “Your pussy-soaking powers are too powerful.”

He flashed me a grin, but even I felt the pressure ease in my body. And I was used to his lust-stoking abilities. I could only imagine how Sash was feeling.

Which was hot and bothered.

She was fanning herself, nibbling on her bottom lip. “Well, I’m finally glad we met. Any friend of Cat’s is a friend of mine.”

I blinked, unsure I’d heard those words. “What happened to cutting off his dick if he hurt me?”

“You were going to cut off my dick if I hurt my pussy cat?” Sawyer asked, one hundred percent aware of what he was doing.

I pulled his face toward me. “You. Stop.” I whirled on Sasha. “And *you*? You should be thinking about Brad right now.”

“Oh, I *am* thinking about Brad right now,” she purred. She stood, scooping up her bag in one swift movement. “And right now, I’m thinking he needs to pay some attention to my lady parts.”

“Don’t forget—” I started. Sasha swiped up the dildo and shot me a smile. “Your present,” I finished. I watched her leave the apartment without so much as a goodbye then turned to look at Sawyer.

The smirk on his face was so smug.

“You did that on purpose.” I hiked my hands onto my hips, trying to go for outraged, but the erection tenting his running shorts was too distracting. I licked my lips.

“Do what?”

“Made her want to go get some.”

Sawyer closed the distance between us, wrapping his hands around my waist. “And do you want to come and get some because I think I might need your help in the shower.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

He dropped a lingering kiss on my lips, and I opened for him, tasting



chocolate and whisky and the male he was. “I’m insatiable when it comes to you, Cat.” Running his hands down my sides, he settled them on my hips and drew me in even closer. “So, what do you say? Want to help me wash my back?”

I rolled my hips against his cock, a soft moan escaping my lips. “Only if you say please,” I teased.

“Please.” The word came out as a growl, hitting me between the legs. Damn him and all his abilities to make me writhe. I yelped as he swooped his arm behind my knees and hauled me against his chest. I wrapped my arms around his neck, staring at his profile. His dark hair was plastered to his temples and sweat still trickled down his brow. His gray eyes, although darkening, were still playful and I was glad I brought out this side of him.

We’d just stepped into his bedroom when his phone began to ring from his nightstand. He growled in its direction but didn’t stop.

“You have to get that,” I told him. “It could be work.”

“It’s too early for that.”

“You know we never stop working. Besides, we’ll be in at the office in an hour. What difference does it make?”

Sawyer kissed me roughly, nipping at my bottom lip. “You’d rather me take a phone call than be ravished?”

“I’d rather do both, but we’re short of manpower right now so stop being a mindless incubus and answer the call.”

With a huff, he lowered me to the floor and answered the call with a barked, “What?” After listening to a second, he put the call on speaker and Vaile Wolfe’s rumbling voice filled the room.

“Is McKenzie with you?” he demanded.

“I’m here, boss,” I said, wrapping my arms around myself. A call before work even started was never a good thing.

“I need you two to meet me on my pack’s lands ASAP.” He rattled off an address. “We have a problem.”

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Lauren Dawes is a USA Today Bestselling Author. She writes dark urban fantasy and paranormal romance and is the author of the Half Blood series, the Dark Trilogy and the Blood Bound Series. She likes her vampires dangerous, her shifters vicious and her Norse gods ruthless.

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