

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LAUREN DAWES**

There's more than one  
way to skin a cat...



**BAD  
KITTY**

— GANG —

A CAT MCKENZIE NOVEL

BAD  
KITTY

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LAUREN DAWES

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

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*For P & E*

# ONE

“‘I NEED TO TALK TO THE GRAY MAN,’” HE SAID. “‘IT’LL ONLY TAKE A minute,’” I griped, leaping over a stack of boxes sitting on the sidewalk. The toe of my boot clipped the cardboard mountain, sending me crashing to the ground. I landed heavily on my knees, an *oomph* escaping my lips. From my place on the cold concrete, I added, “Who knew he’d be so *damn touchy* about being accused of stalking and murdering women at night!”

Gritting his teeth, my partner, Sawyer, stopped and helped me up. “Can we talk about this later?” He glanced over his shoulder, and I didn’t have to look to know that the lengthening shadow of the Gray Man was splashed onto the pavement.

Sawyer hooked his hand under my arm and urged me forward with his palm between my shoulder blades. “Go!”

“What the hell is that guy anyway?” I panted, rats scattering as we passed. We were running through the dark empty streets of Buxton, somewhere south of Wheeler Street, which was colloquially known as Hell. Crack houses, brothels and addicts were on every other corner, the old red brick industrial buildings looming into the night sky.

“*Am Fear Liath Mòr.*”

My knees and ankles jarred as we started down a steep one-car-wide alley. “In English, please.”

“He’s a supernatural creature who’s said to haunt Ben Macdui in Scotland. He uses fear as a weapon. He literally taps into people’s heads, finds out their greatest fears, and scares them to death.”

“What the hell is he doing here in the US then?” I yanked my head around when I heard the groan of metal against asphalt. “Shit.” A dumpster

had just been sent careening down the road behind us. There was no way I was going to outrun two thousand pounds of trash and steel, no matter how awesome I thought I was.

“On three, we jump,” Sawyer panted between gritted teeth. Doing one more shoulder-check, he started the count. “One... two... three!”

I dove off to one side, narrowly missing an up-close-and-personal introduction with the side of the dumpster. A shower of sparks was sent into the air as the metal container crashed into the damp brick wall of a nearby building. After watching it grind to a halt, I searched the other side of the narrow stretch of asphalt. Sawyer was getting to his feet, brushing off the heels of his palms on his slacks.

“Are you okay?” He ran worried eyes over my body, then strode forward, touching my hairline. I sucked in a hissed breath. “You’re bleeding.”

“Not the first time someone has tried to kill me. Death by dumpster, though? That’s new.” At his growly disapproval, I wiped a shaking hand over my forehead, a smudge of red smearing across my skin.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

Unable to help myself, I flashed him a one-finger salute. “How many am I holding up? I’m fine. See. Up. Walking. Talking. Fine.”

“Bleeding,” he ground out in a snarl.

The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly prickled in warning and the opal resting against my heart started to pulse with unnatural heat. The necklace was given to me by my father, who made me promise never to take it off. He told me it would always protect me, and his words had proven true so far, warning me when danger was near.

I turned, my breath hovering in front of my mouth. Looming at the top of the street was a figure. Ten-feet-tall. Long-limbed. It was a creature of nightmares—an equivalent to the bogeyman. The longer I stared at him, the dread filled me, threatening to overflow in an epic display of sobbing and cowering.

“Come on,” Sawyer hissed, taking me by the hand and pulling me down the road. The Gray Man glided closer. I was scanning the street, looking for somewhere we could hide, when I noticed that a steel door covered in graffiti was slightly ajar.

Without warning Sawyer, I veered off to the left and yanked the door open. My partner-come-roommate-come-consort—it’s a long story—followed and slammed the metal door shut behind us. A complex-sounding

lock automatically engaged—the final, loud *snick* ominous in the suffocating darkness.

“We need to find another way out of here,” Sawyer announced like I hadn’t already come to that conclusion.

I peered into the dark room we’d found ourselves in. Since there were no windows anywhere, it was pitch black and every inch as scary as I expected it to be. Cold air blasted under the door, the frigid wind seeping through the legs of my jeans and making me shiver.

Sawyer took my hand suddenly, and I jumped.

“Jesus. You scared me.” I rubbed at the spot over my heart, feeling the stupid organ jamming up against my ribs.

“I didn’t touch you, pussy cat,” Sawyer replied, his voice coming from about a dozen feet ahead of me. “I’m looking for a way out.”

My muscles tensed, locking down tightly onto my bones, my breathing rasping against my suddenly tight throat. Just then, my opal flared to life, illuminating the space in front of me with a pale blue glow. Gulping down on my too-dry throat, I turned around and looked *up, up, up*.

The Gray Man stared down at me with what I imagined to be dead eyes and an emotionless face. There was a sudden pressure in my temple, the room melting away and being replaced with images of the Gray Man tearing Sawyer apart filled my head, blood and gore spraying the walls of the room. Frantically, I brushed at the droplets that landed on my cheek, my hand shaking as I drew it over my nose to block the smell of flowing blood, spilled bowels, urine, and sweat.

Stumbling back a step, I tried to get away. Tripping over my own feet, I fell onto my ass, pain radiated out from my tailbone. My opal was glaringly bright, illuminating the whole room—illuminating Sawyer’s gushing from his lifeless body.

“No, this can’t be happening,” I told myself. “This can’t be happening. How can this...”

*It couldn’t be happening.* The thought came to me. As soon as it did, the image of Sawyer’s gruesome death disappeared like smoke, leaving me panting and sweating and staring at the very-much-alive Sawyer who was screaming soundlessly as he wallowed in his own nightmare.

Something large and metal clanged to the floor beside me.

*Reaver.*

Scooping up the magical sentient sword, I hauled myself off the floor.

The Gray Man—thinking I was out of the game—had turned his attention to Sawyer, and I used his distraction to my advantage. Moving as soundlessly as I could, I touched the tip of the sword to the back of his neck, jolting when a spark of static electricity zipped up my arm.

The Gray Man stilled.

With gritted teeth, I told him, “My partner’s head is not your personal sandbox. Neither is mine.” Peering around the shoulder of the supe, I checked to see how Sawyer was doing. He was panting and sweating, looking at me with eyes as wide as saucers.

“Are you okay?”

“You’re alive,” he croaked, getting to his unsteady feet.

“And in color. What did he show you?”

“You, dying...” He shuddered. “By my hand.” He stared at me in wonder. “How did you break free of the illusion?”

Jabbing my thumb at the still-glowing opal around my neck, I pulled the warded cuffs from my back pocket. The cuffs had the ability to negate whatever power a supernatural had and had come in quite handy lately. Tossing them to Sawyer, I said, “Cuff him, then let’s get the hell out of here.”

I expected the supe to try and get away—at least *try* to avoid being cuffed—but he stood there, nice and quiet. Since he was being compliant, I left Sawyer to finish cuffing him and rushed ahead. I found the handle to the door Sawyer had discovered before we’d been pulled into our own personal nightmares and opened the door, cringing when the hinges resisted, groaning loudly.

*Hello pre-cursor to getting slaughtered in a slasher flick.*

Glancing over my shoulder, I said to Sawyer, “I’ll lead the way since I’m officially a flashlight right now.” After a long moment of silent conversation with himself—because let’s face it, Sawyer wouldn’t have included me in my own decision-making about life choices anyway—he graced me with a stiff nod. To show him that I’d be fine, I raised Reaver, who began to glow steadily, and started forward.

I stepped out onto a metal catwalk suspended thirty feet off the ground. The metal railing was cold as I leaned over the side, trying to get a better look at the ground level.

“What is this place?”

“Abandoned slaughterhouse,” Sawyer whispered behind me.

“A *subterranean* abandoned slaughterhouse?”



“It’s connected by a private subway line.”

“And why are we whispering?”

He peered over the railing too, scanning the darkness. “Because we’re not alone.”

He was right. There was a dampened roar coming from somewhere below us, a bubble of noise muffled by something else. We walked along the catwalk and down a series of stairs until we reached the smooth concrete floor. I turned my head in the direction of the noise. It sounded like we were in the tunnel of a stadium right before the start of a big game, but the volume was at two percent of what it should’ve been.

“What do you think it is?”

“I have a hunch.” He walked off without me, heading toward an even darker section of the slaughterhouse—one where I couldn’t see a goddamn thing. Hustling to catch up with him, I found him crouched on the ground, his gaze intent. I joined him, the steady glow of my opal and Reaver illuminating the ground beneath us.

There was a white powder forming a foot-wide arc around the closed steel double doors directly in front.

“What is it?”

Touching his fingers to his mouth first, Sawyer dipped them into the powder.

Reaching out my free hand, I whispered harshly, “Sawyer, no!”

But I was too late.

He brought his fingers to his tongue and tasted it.

For a split second, I thought he was going to keel over and die. Who just *tastes* strange substances in abandoned slaughterhouses?

“It’s just flour and salt,” he announced a moment later, brushing off his fingers. “A ward. A witch or warlock created a muting spell to contain the noise.” He stared at the doors.

“Send the Gray Man in first,” I told him. When he arched a brow in question, I added hastily, “Just in case it’s something vengeful, hungry, enraged, or horny.”

“*Horny?* What—” He stopped himself and shook his head. “You want to use our perp as a sacrificial lamb?”

I snapped my fingers. “Yes, that’s the word I was looking for—sacrificial lamb.”

“I’m not sending in the Gray Man first.”

Before I could state my case, he pulled on the handle, revealing the yawning void the doors were hiding. The huge expanse beyond was empty, but I could still hear the muted noise.

*Let's check that one off on the creepy AF list.*

“Where *is* that noise coming from?”

Sawyer shook his head. “I think there’s a concealment spell in place too.” Hooking his hand into the crook of the Gray Man’s elbow, he took a step into the room and disappeared.

*Just poof!*

My heart thundered against my ribs as I stared into all that black, empty space.

“Sawyer,” I hissed, glancing behind me to make sure he wasn’t punking me. “Sawyer Taylor, you get back here right now.”

An empty, empty threat since I had zero recourse. As trepidation filled me, I stared at the pitch-black opening and swallowed. I could totally do this. Just watch me walk into a darkened room emanating strange noises. Nope, not creepy at all. Taking in a shallow breath through my mouth, I squeezed my eyes shut and stepped through the door.

## TWO

THE NOISE WAS DEAFENING.

Cheers.

Jeers.

Hisses.

Boos.

And even though I was still breathing through my mouth, blood was tangible on the back of my tongue as was the smell of sweat and sawdust. The room swelled with what had to have been a thousand people, all adding to the cacophony of sound. I looked for Sawyer but given that I couldn't even see over the shoulders of all the spectators—nothing new for me—I willed Reaver away, then scrambled up a rusting and structurally questionable truss girder, slotting my feet into the steel webbing and hoisting myself up until I was looking out way over the crowd.

About fifty yards ahead, there was a crude fighting ring formed by an old nautical rope suspended between more truss girders. Inside the square, sawdust covered the ground in an effort to soak up the blood that spilled from each combatant—combatants that looked to be of the supernatural persuasion.

An unarmed male gorgon was battling a male minotaur.

Stacked with muscles, the gorgon looked like a man, but in place of human skin, his body was covered in pale green scales that flashed emerald as he moved. His feet were bare, his abnormally long toes were tipped with black claws that retracted into the ground like a cat's. I expected his face to have ophidian features too—slitted pupils, a flat nose or maybe slashes for nostrils—but it was an entirely human face with completely serpentine skin.

Despite the combination, his chiseled cheekbones, strong nose and jaw, and eyes the color of emeralds shoved him into I'd-still-fuck-him territory.

You know, if I wasn't already spoken for.

The only thing that might put a woman off was his hair. It consisted of at least two dozen writhing snakes the same color as his scales. Around his hips, he wore a loincloth that did very little to hide his modesty as he moved.

The minotaur he was battling was at least eight feet tall. The half-man-half-bull creature was covered in fine black hair, the muscles in his arms, legs, and torso bulging beneath it. His face was shaped like a bull's, complete with a ring through his nose, but all his other features were an even blend of human and bovine. Large tusk-like teeth protruded from his bottom jaw, curving up over his top lip. On top of his head, he had large horns like a highland bull. Yellow eyes gave him an intelligence I wasn't expecting, but unlike the gorgon, he wore a pair of ripped jeans.

Throwing back his head, the minotaur let out a deafening roar and charged at the gorgon, swinging an axe the size of my torso. The crowd erupted into a foaming frenzy at the potential carnage.

The gorgon ducked the first swipe of the axe, but not soon enough. A bellow of pain erupted from his mouth as three snakes were removed from his head. The sheared vipers plopped to the ground, green blood immediately oozing from their sliced ends.

The spectators were divided in their reactions to the head-viper-ectomy. Half of them cheered, while the other half swore and threw whatever they were holding—betting slips, maybe?—to the ground.

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. It was Sawyer, shoving through the crowd with his Glock in his hand. The gorgon and minotaur didn't seem to notice. Or care. They continued to battle like their lives depended on it, and I had a sneaking suspicion their lives *did* depend on it.

As the gorgon charged the minotaur in an attempt to get him on the ground, Sawyer moved faster than I'd ever seen him move—sweeping his leg around and catching the gorgon's ankles. The supe fell forward, sawdust and blood flying into the air. With a snarl, the gorgon flipped over and tried to rise once more, only to come face-to-face with the muzzle of the Glock.

The whole room fell silent.

"Buxton PIG," Sawyer barked loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear. "Stay where you are!"

As the echo of his words ebbed away, there was a beat of silence before everyone bolted for the exits, including the minotaur who'd been fighting. With a swing of his axe, he cleaved the rope in two and started toward the doorway we'd come through.

I began to scramble down off the girder to stop the minotaur when—somehow—the hem of my shirt snagged on one of the rusting bolts halfway down, leaving me dangling at least sixteen feet off the ground from nothing but a scrap of cotton.

Rust-red flakes rained down around me as the metal groaned from the unevenly distributed weight. Below me, the minotaur stopped, casting his gaze back at the ring. I needed to question him, but how could I get down?

Searching my pockets, I looked for something to gain his attention, but all I found was a tampon and a couple of quarters. I pelted the two coins at him. More rust showered the ground as the coins fell harmlessly beside him, unnoticed in the noise. Which only left me with the tampon.

I hurled the paper-wrapped cardboard-and-cotton-combo at him, hitting him in the eye when he looked up to see where the rust flakes were coming from. With a snarl, he snatched up the sanitary item in his large fist, grimacing when he saw what it was.

*Huh. Recoil about sanitary products transcended species. Noted.*

“Buxton PD,” I said. Paused. Let out a breath. “Be thankful it’s not used. Also, can I get a little help?”

Peering up at me, he crushed the tampon and threw it to the side, a malicious smile pulling at his tusk-distorted lips. “Sure, I’ll help you,” he said in an equally hostile voice.

Turning, he retreated a dozen feet then began to paw at the ground with his hooved feet.

*What in the hell was he doing?*

I found out a few moments later when he lowered his head and rammed the base of the girder.

“Seriously? This is your idea of help?” I yelled, bracing myself when he rammed the steel column again. The compromised metal gave a loud groan of protest, shuddering with the impact and making my teeth clack together. The minotaur bellowed—enraged that his first strikes didn’t do much more than make it rain extra metal shavings—then lined himself up to ram the girder again.

I scanned the crowd, looking for Sawyer. He was wrestling with the

gorgon now, the pair of them rolling on the ground and getting covered in sawdust and blood. In other words, I was alone, and I had to find my own way out of it.

*Shudder.*

The girder trembled with another impact. I glared at the minotaur. Snorting, grunting, and generally being bull-like, he grinned at me and retreated once more.

“I get it, okay? You don’t like authority, but you could just use your words instead of attempting murder.”

*Shudder.*

Then...

*Rrriipp!*

My head jerked around in time to see my shirt tear even more. Now, I was hanging on by half an inch. Fuck, I was going down. Falling sixteen feet and landing on my feet wasn’t likely to kill me—it would hurt like a motherfucker, and I could sustain some pretty serious injuries—but it wouldn’t kill me. Falling *head-first* onto concrete from sixteen feet while being terrorized then possibly trampled by an irate minotaur? Yeah, I’d put money on that killing me. Which sucked because that’s not how I wanted to go out. I planned on dying after I met a unicorn in real life.

Well, a girl can dream.

The girder buckled with the next strike, the metal a couple of inches below where I was dangling starting to bend backward toward the minotaur. The aged girder was fighting the good fight but even I could see the fatigue on the metal as it gave way to brute force.

Frantic now, I screamed out, “Somebody help me!”

It wasn’t my finest hour as I prided myself on being able to figure out my own problems, but it wasn’t just my life at stake now. Sawyer and I had created a consort bond that we hadn’t been able to test just yet. In fact, nobody seemed to know the parameters of my possible immortality—if that’s what it was.

Mine and Sawyer’s lives were linked, but did that make me extra robust when it came to getting injured, or was it like it always was? Would I still get hurt? Could I die just as easily as before? Whatever the answers were, I wasn’t about to risk my partner’s life.

*Rrriipp!*

*Oh, shit.*

With a scream, I tumbled through the air, my ruined shirt flapping as I fell. Shutting my eyes tight, I braced for impact, trying to cover my head with my arms. I landed with an *oomph*, but not on the cold, hard concrete as I had anticipated. No, I was cradled against someone's chest—someone cold. Prying my eyes open, I looked up into the cowed face of the Gray Man.

“Gahhh!” I scrambled from his grip, leaping away, my heart pounding out a staccato rhythm against my ribs. His hands were free—uncuffed. *How in the hell did that happen?* Even though I couldn't see his face, the Gray Man stared at me intently as if waiting for something.

Before I could puzzle it out, the minotaur bugled—the sound high-pitched and highly irritating—before he took a running start at me once more. Knowing I only had seconds, I scanned the ground for Reaver. Surely, the sword would show up now. Life or death, right? And I was staring down the barrel of getting shish kabobbed by a supe. *Also not on the list of how I want to go out.*

But it was nowhere to be seen.

“Dammit, Reaver!”

Spinning around, I started to run, zig-zagging between the fleeing humans and trying to remain a moving target. Creating collateral damage wasn't what I wanted, but if it was my survival or some people who shouldn't have even been here getting hurt, then I would take survival every damn time.

I was running in a large circle, skirting an invisible perimeter, when I cast a look down at my opal.

Which wasn't glowing.

*Huh?* I searched for the minotaur that had taken offense to my presence and found him writhing on the ground, clutching his head and sobbing. Standing over him was the Gray Man.

Why was the *Gray Man* helping me?

*Again?*

“Pussy cat,” Sawyer said behind me.

I spun, startling when I saw blood covering his face. He had a split lip, and his left eye was already swelling shut. “Jesus,” I said softly, reaching out and touching his face. He winced, sucking in a breath at the same time I did. My eyes widened as his pain hit me like a freight train—the throbbing in my mouth, the sharp-shooter in my head, the adrenaline still pumping through his blood—through *my* blood.

His fierce expression crumbled. “I tried to keep the worst from you.”

“The worst of what?” I practically sobbed. He was in such *pain*.

“This.” He smoothed the crease between my brow, stroking, calming me. “It’s the bond.”

Wiping away the tears with the tips of my fingers, I let my shaking hand drop to my side. I sniffled, “Can you feel my physical pain too?”

“I feel your emotions more strongly,” he replied. “I felt your fear. That’s what got me back on my feet. I had to kill whoever had made you that scared.”

“The Gray Man beat you to it.” I pointed to where the ten-foot-tall supe stood over the still-writhing minotaur.

Sawyer followed the line of my finger, then returned his face to mine. “How did he get the cuffs off?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Kind of glad he did, though. He saved me from a sixteen-foot drop from a girder onto a solid concrete floor.”

His cool gray eyes traveled over the bent and twisted steel. “Why would you have dropped from the girder?”

“The minotaur was ramming the thing trying to get me off. Not the good kind of get me off, either.”

Sawyer’s pupils dilated with rage, and I felt it hammering against my head—a battering ram of explosive rage. “How can you make a joke about something like that?” he bit out, his voice warping.

I sucked in a deep breath, then said, “It saves me from crying.” Then I shrugged as his intense stare remained. Then fidgeted uncomfortably. I looked up when one last random person sprinted past us, reminding me that we’d stumbled upon something we hadn’t anticipated. “Anyway...” I gestured to the ring, “... if I didn’t know any better, I’d say we broke up a supernatural fight club.”

“I think you’re right,” he replied, still not taking his eyes off me.

“Did you manage to ask the gorgon any questions?”

“I knocked him unconscious—cuffed him. We’ll take him to the station. When he comes to, we can find out what we need from him.”

I nodded. “Solid plan.”



## THREE

SAWYER FOUND THE WARDED CUFFS THE GRAY MAN HAD SOMEHOW ESCAPED from on the ground near another girder. Scooping them up with his index finger, he handed them to me, and I stuffed them into my back pocket. The Gray Man in question was still standing over the minotaur, keeping the beast in check.

Talking out of the corner of my mouth so I didn't draw the supe's attention, I asked Sawyer, "Why is he still here?"

"Who?" my partner asked.

I jerked my head in the Gray Man's direction. "The Gray Man. In fact, I need to call him by a different name. Gray Man is too damn long. Why do you think Willy is still here?"

"Willy?"

"Yeah. He slipped the cuffs. Instead of running, he not only helped me, but he's *still* here. *Helping.*"

Sawyer's gaze finally flickered over to Willy, whose focus was still on the minotaur. "I don't know. He should've been long gone by now."

"That's what I'm saying."

Striding to the minotaur, I gave Willy a wide berth as I crouched down and snapped the first, then the second cuff onto the thick, furred wrists of the other supe. As soon as the stand had slid into the lock housing, whatever power Willy had over him disappeared, and the minotaur stopped whimpering. His back rose and fell with his shuddering breaths, until finally, he raised his head and looked around, blinking as if he couldn't believe where he was.

With my hand under his arm, I helped the supe off the ground, where he

stood on shaking legs. Willy's head was bent as he watched us, and I peered up into his cowled face.

"No more mindfucks," I warned him, turning the minotaur around and marching him toward Sawyer and the gorgon.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Bruin The Dreaded. Where are you taking us?" the minotaur asked.

"The Dreaded?" I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing out loud. "Is that your actual name or just like a name you think sounds awesome, so you use it? Are you a huge fan of D&D?"

His yellow eyes sparked with rage. "*Where?*"

I sighed. Clearly, this guy had no sense of humor. "The station. You two have been caught with your proverbial pants down, and I enjoy spanking naughty supes."

By the time we returned to the station, it was nearing two in the morning. We'd lost the Gray Man en route, but it didn't matter. We'd only cuffed him so that he would stop making our fears his own personal all-you-can-eat buffet of dread, horror, and cold-sweats.

Crossing the parking lot, Sawyer's hunger gnawed at my subconscious as we hustled the pair of supernatural amateur fighters inside. Being an incubus, Sawyer was only able to feed fully when he came inside a woman, and since I was his consort, I was the only one who could satisfy him physically.

It seemed our lunchtime quickie earlier in the day hadn't quite been enough to tide him over.

The precinct—normally crawling with Buxton law enforcement—was a ghost town at this time of night, or morning... whichever way you wanted to look at it.

"We'll interrogate them in the morning," Sawyer announced on a sigh, walking down the hallway that would lead to the PIG offices. "It's been a long night."

When we bypassed the doorway, I asked, "Err, where are we going?"

"To our holding cells."

"We have *our own* holding cells?" How had I not known this?

"Yeah. In the basement. The regular cells can't hold vampires or shifters

safely. The new cells have reinforced walls, high-tech surveillance, and no windows.” At my quizzical look, he added, “In the case of vampires. Plus, the inside of the cells works like the cuffs—it negates any powers or super strength the supe might have.”

When we arrived at the elevator at the end of the hall, Sawyer hit the ‘down’ button, the doors springing open immediately. With my hand between the shoulder blades of the minotaur, I forced him inside the elevator car. Bruin had to duck his head as he crammed himself into the seven-foot-high, ten-foot-wide elevator. The gorgon was next, his black-tipped clawed feet scratching the metal floor.

Sawyer stepped between the pair, leaving me to stuff myself in as an afterthought. Once I was inside, Sawyer reached around me, his chest brushing against my shoulder, and hit the ‘B’ on the control panel to the right of the door.

The ride down was smooth, and when the doors opened, I stepped out into a short, bright hallway that smelled faintly of Lysol. At the end of the hall, there was a steel door with bars set into a small glassless window. Beside the door was a numeric keypad. Sawyer punched a code into the keypad, the small device emitting two short beeps then one long one. The locks disengaged, and Sawyer pulled on the handle.

“Use cell one for him,” he said, gesturing to Bruin.

“Cell one. Got it.” Yanking on the cell door, it opened on silent hinges. I pressed my palm into Bruin’s back, moving him forward. “Welcome to your accommodation for the night. Housekeeping sucks, the TV is broken, and the kitchen is closed. But do enjoy our complimentary serving of a hard bed and nothing to stop your boredom.”

“Are you going to remove the cuffs?” Bruin asked, peering at me over his shoulder.

I shut the door to the cell, glancing over at Sawyer.

He nodded. “Yeah. Release him.”

“Since you asked so nicely. Come closer to the bars.” Bruin approached and turned around, shoving his hands through the spaces between the struts. Pulling the cuff’s keys from my back pocket, I unlocked the restraints, catching them in my waiting hand when they released and fell.

The supe turned around, rubbing at his wrists. “What now?”

“Now you guys get to have a sleepover...” I wagged my finger at him, “... but no pillow fights. We’ll see you two crazy kids in the morning.”

Whistling, I walked away from the cell and through the main door, where I waited for Sawyer.

“Think we’ll get anything useful out of them?” I asked, rubbing the back of my hand over my eyes. Man, I was tired. Sawyer locked the door and tested the handle to make sure it wouldn’t budge.

Seemingly happy with the security, he said, “That is the hope, pussy cat.” He turned to the elevator car and hit the ‘up’ arrow. The doors slid open immediately. Stepping inside, he waited until the doors shut before wrapping an arm around my waist.

“Tired?”

The yawn that cracked my jaw wasn’t planned, but it did illustrate just how tired I was. “Very. I can’t wait to get home so I can get in my unicorn pajamas and go to sleep.”

After collecting our things from the office, we left the precinct’s sleepy tempo behind. Strolling over to the car, I shivered—feeling as if we were being watched. Glancing over my shoulder, I scanned the shadows the precinct’s parking lot lights created.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied absently. “I just feel like someone is watching me.”

Sawyer was instantly on alert, his eyes scanning the vast expanse of asphalt and painted lines. My opal gave a little throb of power, drawing my attention to something on my left. Willy was standing just outside the glare of one of the light poles, and even though I couldn’t see his eyes, I knew he was looking right at me.

“I can’t see anything,” Sawyer murmured, resting his hand onto my lower back in a reassuring way. “Come on.”

Popping open the car door, he helped me in, then walked around the hood to get into the driver’s side. I peered out the window, my gaze latching onto Willy who hadn’t yet moved away.

What in the hell was going on with the Gray Man?

Home was a 33<sup>rd</sup> floor apartment we shared in the Astoria Building. I’d moved in with Sawyer after my own apartment building was destroyed in a witch fight. Originally, I was staying in my own bedroom down the hall, but

after we cemented the consort bond between us, Sawyer asked me to move in with him—like, all the way in. And because I wouldn't want to deny Sawyer the presence of my company, I'd agreed.

The rest, as they say, is history.

As soon as I stepped inside, I toed off my boots and left the dead soldiers by the door. It was edging closer to three in the morning and exhausted didn't even begin to describe how I was feeling. I was so exhausted that I just stood in the foyer with my eyes shut, considering whether I wanted to collapse right there or save myself the energy and sleep standing up.

Like a unicorn.

Yup. Solid plan.

If in doubt, do as a unicorn would do.

"You want to take a shower before bed?" Sawyer asked, coming up behind me, curling his arm around my waist and nuzzling my neck.

"Alone or with you?"

"However you like."

I turned around in his arms, running my hands up the length of his muscular biceps that he couldn't even disguise beneath his shirt. "We can shower together, but no funny business. My lady parts still haven't recovered from the lunchtime marathon."

He snorted softly. "Thirty minutes is hardly a marathon."

"Ah, you try having ten orgasms in that space of time. That's one every three minutes. My vagina doesn't know what's what anymore."

He nuzzled my neck again, trailing kisses up toward my ear. "I can show it what's what," he purred, nipping the lobe.

*Melting.*

Just like I always did. "I'll take a shower with you *if* you promise not to try and get in my pants."

His answering grin was salacious. "You wouldn't be wearing any pants."

"You know what I mean. You need to keep your dick away from me." When he chuckled, I shoved my finger in his face. "I mean it, Sawyer. I'm tired, and it's been about six hours since my last cup of coffee. I'm on edge. I don't know what I'm likely to do."

Infuriatingly, he kissed the tip of my nose and took a step back, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling the tails from the waistband of his pants to reveal inch after delicious inch of hard, tanned skin.

My mouth went dry. "That's not fair." I gestured to his broad shoulders

with a shaking finger as he shrugged off the fabric and let it fall onto the hardwood. “You’re playing dirty.”

He arched a brow, all innocent. “Am I?”

“You know you are.” I folded my arms, trying to be annoyed with him when, in reality, my panties were already soaked. *Stay strong, McKenzie.* “And it won’t work. I can barely keep my eyes open as it is.”

“Then shut them and let me do all the work.”

Without warning, he scooped me up into his arms and carried me into our bedroom. He threw back the quilt, growling when he saw the blow-up sex doll I’d put in there before we’d left after lunch.

“Pussy cat, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you wanted a threesome.”

I nipped his bottom lip playfully. “Shut up and just fuck me already. I’m tired.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Tossing the blow-up doll over his shoulder, he dumped me on the bed and retreated a few steps. Flicking the button from his slacks, he undid the zipper and drew them down his muscular thighs. His erection stood proudly in front of him, luring my eyes down, down, down like he’d been smuggling a unicorn statue in there—one I’d been coveting forever.

Suddenly, the lethargy that had been hammering against my body lifted. Pushing myself up onto my elbows, I stared at him, his lust bubbling in my blood just as my lust for him was bubbling in his. I gasped when an inexplicable *need* overtook my body. Without realizing I’d moved, I found myself standing in front of Sawyer. Panting, I stripped off all my clothes.

“It’s the bond,” he rasped, stroking my cheek gently with the tips of his fingers. “My feelings for you are being amplified.”

Leaning into his touch, I rubbed myself against his palm.

“But even without the consort bond, I’d still love you this fiercely.”

Reaching up on my tiptoes, I wrapped my arms around his neck and climbed him like a tree. When his hands came up underneath me—supporting me—I kissed his mouth, showing him that my feelings were just as strong. The intensity went from tame to fierce within the space of a heartbeat, his tongue plundering my mouth, my tongue stroking his with equal fervor. I tangled my fingers into the hair at his nape, holding him to me. Walking to the bed, he laid down on his back, gently cushioning my landing with his body.

Now that we were horizontal, things would be a little easier. Sliding off

his chest, I trailed my hand down his muscular pectorals, along his stomach and over his waist, finally wrapping my palm around his hard-as-fuck erection. He sucked in a hiss at the contact, his hips thrusting into my hand.

“I thought you were tired,” he said in a strained voice.

“What can I say? You woke me up.”

He growled, fisting the sheets tightly in his palms, his hips driving forward involuntarily as I pumped his shaft. I knew it was a pointless exercise. For one, he was already as hard as a steel pipe, but secondly, he wouldn’t be able to come like this. He had to be inside a woman—inside *me*—in order to reach completion and didn’t that make me preen like a bedazzled unicorn.

Riding on a rainbow.

Eating rainbow layer cake.

“Pussy cat,” he groaned, increasing the pace.

I ran my thumb over the weeping tip, a full-body shiver working through me. “Hmm?”

“Ride me already.” His teeth were gritted, the muscles in his shoulder and neck taut. His pupils were blown, his usually gray irises gobbled up by the darkness of his lust. As before, his hunger pushed against me with a ferocity I hadn’t experienced yet. And that was saying something because Sawyer and I had had some a-mazing sex in the past—some intense sex with hunger that pushed past my boundaries of comprehension.

“*Ride me*,” he hissed through his gritted teeth.

I whimpered at the erotic bite in his words and the way his desire lashed at me. Throwing my leg over his hips, I stood up his shaft and impaled myself on it. In unison, we groaned, each of us finally getting what we wanted and needed.

Once he was fully seated inside me, I waited for a minute, acclimating to his size. He settled his hands on my waist, his fingers cinching tighter and tighter the longer I remained absolutely still. Our eyes met as I lifted myself off him, hovered, then slammed back down again.

Sawyer barked a curse, his grip tightening in what must have been an involuntary reaction. “Sorry.” He released his fingers, but I knew there would be a bruise there when all was said and done.

“You could do anything to me right now and I’d find it pleasurable.”

With a wicked glint in his eye, he sat up, so we were facing each other, breathing in each other’s air.

“Is that so?” he murmured, his glazed eyes on my mouth. Aside from the one lift and thrust, there had been zero friction between us, which was why I was so surprised when I felt an orgasm waiting in the wings. The pressure continued to build and build, making me squirm.

On a gasp, I demanded, “How is this possible?”

He jabbed a thumb at himself. “Incubus, remember.”

I did remember. It wasn’t something that could be easily forgotten. I ground down on his shaft, rubbing my clit on him, wanting to find that last push that would send me over the edge.

Sawyer flexed his hips, driving himself in a little farther even though I was sure there was nowhere else for him to go.

Detonating around him, my inner walls gripped him tightly. Sawyer stilled as he fed on my lust, on my orgasm, his eyes flashing with a crack of lightning. Drawing my finger down over his lips, I wondered how I’d gotten so lucky to have him in my life. Wrapping an arm around my back, his lifted me up and down his shaft, the rhythm rough but steady, deliberate, yet also a little wild.

The second time I came, I wasn’t expecting it. It snuck up on me—as did the third one that followed right behind it. It was a one-two punch of desire, of pleasure, of absolute fucking bliss. Throwing my head back, I shouted at the ceiling, uncaring that the neighbors might be able to hear me.

“Onto your stomach, pussy cat.”

Rolling off him, I gladly collapsed onto my stomach, turning my head so I could still see his face. Surging up behind me, he kept my knees together as he lifted my hips high, then slammed inside me once more. The moan that came out of my mouth was part sigh, part benediction. He didn’t take his eyes off my face as he pumped into me, our connection erotic in the most amazing way.

When sweat began to bead on his brow and roll down his jaw, I knew he was close to coming—close to being able to finally feed. Reaching out with my hand, I squeezed his thigh, digging in my nails and urging him on. The peace that came after he fed was blissful, even for me.

Sawyer’s thrusts became shallower and shallower, his strokes more of a jerky punch of his hips rather than a smooth glide.

“Fuck!” he barked.

A moment later, his erection kicked inside me. Filling me. I was ready for the bonus orgasm his cum caused when he emptied himself inside me. Like



the cresting wave of a tsunami, pleasure slammed into me, leaving me suddenly breathless and a whole lot of satisfied. If I'd thought these orgasms were strong before, they appeared to be even stronger now that our consort bond had been established.

Burying my head into the mattress, I screamed out my pleasure, making Sawyer moan as I gloved him more tightly and milked every last drop from him.

## FOUR

“ARE YOU WALKING FUNNY?” SAWYER ASKED ME IN A WRY VOICE AS WE walked across the precinct parking lot at seven o’clock the next morning.

I shot him a scathing look and took a sip of my coffee. “If I am, it’s because of you.”

“Me?”

“Don’t give me that innocent, butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-my-mouth expression. You wore me out last night and again early this morning.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining.” His smile was smug.

I jogged up the stairs of the precinct. “That’s because I was practically asleep when you decided to take advantage of my lack of coherence.”

“It certainly makes it a lot quieter,” he shot back.

Pulling open the door, I turned around to flip him the bird. Before I turned back, though, I slammed into someone, my coffee spewing out of the cup and onto them in a hot rush of creamy deliciousness.

“My precious,” I whined.

“Jesus, *fuck*,” Smith snarled, making me forget about the loss of my caffeine fix. He looked down, our gazes meeting, and in that second, I saw every single ounce of hate he had for me. “McKenzie.” He said my name like a curse.

Glancing down at his shirt, I pointed out, “You’ve got a little something on you.”

Breezing past him, I walked into the precinct and down the hall to the PIG offices. When I got to my desk, I put down my empty coffee cup and shucked my jacket, leaving it draped on the back of my chair. Sawyer strolled in after me, his mouth quirked up in an amused smile.

“You don’t even feel a little bit guilty, do you?”

“Nope.” I pulled out my chair.

Gesturing with his chin, he added, “Don’t get too comfortable. We have to speak to our two suspects, remember?”

I groaned. “How could I forget?”

The ride down in the elevator was a quiet one, but as we reached the basement level, and before the doors had even opened, the skin on the back of my neck prickled in warning.

“What’s wrong?” Sawyer asked when he noticed me rubbing my nape.

“I don’t know.” I reached for my opal, trying to get a bead on what might be making me feel this way, but it was only warm because of my body. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “But something isn’t right.”

Sawyer unholstered his Glock and held it down by his thigh as the elevator car jolted, then came to a stop. I held my breath when the doors slid open, then released it when it was clear—the hall and external steel door into the cell block looking exactly as they did last night.

There was nothing out of place—nothing to indicate that something had happened or was about to happen—but I didn’t trust it. With his gun raised now, Sawyer punched in the access code and unlocked the door.

Disgust hit me, and I recoiled when the combined scent of blood, vomit, and shit hit my nose. The gorgon was huddled into the corner of his cell, his hands jammed under his armpits. He was staring into the distance, his eyes focused on something to my left.

Swallowing past the hard, dry lump that was lodged in my throat, I turned. “Sawyer,” I croaked.

My partner swung his gaze to me, then to what was left of the minotaur. Which wasn’t a lot. It was mostly unrecognizable meat. Blood was congealing around the fleshy mass, telling me he’d been dead for a while.

“What the hell happened?” I turned to the gorgon, who was still staring ahead. “What the hell happened?” I repeated. He raised his head and stared at me with empty eyes. “Tell me!”

Getting to his feet, he approached the front of the cell, looking as if he wanted to speak, but then closed his mouth with a grimace. Something was preventing him from talking.

Sawyer let out a snarl and marched up to the gorgon’s cell, reaching through the bars and grabbing him by the shirt. With a twist of his wrist, he yanked the supe to the bars, holding him in place. Lightning crackled in his

cool, gray eyes. “Tell us, you bastard.”

With acid-green tears in his eyes, the gorgon shook his head, his lips pressed together in a hard line.

“Why isn’t he speaking? He clearly wants to.”

Sawyer released him, shoving him backward. “Maybe his tongue has been cut out. Some owners do that.”

“Jesus.” I turned my attention back to what remained of Bruin. What the hell had happened to him? He was fine when we’d left.

“I don’t know,” Sawyer said in a hard voice, and I realized I must’ve spoken out loud.

“Nobody could get in or out, right? It was secure. The interior of the cells negates a supe’s abilities.”

“Yes, but only inside the cell. Anyone standing outside the cell would’ve been able to use their powers.”

I looked at him. “What kind of supe has the power to literally tear someone in two like that, then sprinkle the entrails and limbs around like it was confetti?”

“I know of a few. It is possible.”

“Okay. Remind me not to invite them to my next party.” I swallowed, then looked up at the cameras that were spaced evenly throughout the room. “Where can we watch the surveillance footage?”

Sawyer pulled out his phone and tapped into an app. A moment later, I saw ourselves on the screen. Tapping the screen again, he scrolled back the footage until I saw us from last night when we’d walked through the doors of the cell. I watched us stuffing the supes inside cells on opposite sides of the block, then leaving.

“Scroll it forward a little more.”

Sawyer did, stopping when a dark mist seeped into the room under the door.

“What the fuck is that?” I breathed, pointing at the shadow that grew and grew and grew. Eventually, it formed a swirling column of what looked like smoke and shadows. Bruin had stepped up to the bars. All it took was a second—one second for Bruin to be sliced from navel to nose, his internal organs falling out onto the floor in a rush of blood. The minotaur fell and even though there was no other movement from the tower of shadows, it was clear it was doing *something*. It pulsed with every new slash of the minotaur’s body until all that was left was unrecognizable meat.

“Sawyer, please tell me you’ve seen something like this before.” When he remained mute, I cursed. “Get the gorgon a pad of paper and a pencil. We *need* to find out what that thing was.”

Wolfe’s name flashed onto the screen of the phone, and Sawyer pressed it to his ear. “Yes? Okay. Seat him at my desk. We have a little situation down in the holding cells...” His gaze went to the mess of hamburger meat. “One of our supes of interest was killed last night. In the cell.” He put the call on speaker—you know, to share the love of being yelled at by Wolfe.

“Why the fuck were two supes in the same cell?” our boss snarled.

“They weren’t. Two separate cells on opposite sides of the block,” Sawyer explained, rubbing at his temple. “We came in this morning to find one of them torn to shreds.”

“Have you questioned the other guy about what happened? What about surveillance?”

Sawyer replied, “He’s missing his tongue. And the surveillance footage left us with more questions than answers.”

Across the line came the sound of a fist slamming onto a desk. “We do *not* need this right now, Taylor.”

“I know, sir.”

“I’ll call Lee. Just get your ass upstairs to talk to this lawyer.”

Sawyer hung up the phone and pocketed the device.

“So, that went well.”

He flicked me an exhausted look. “As well as can be expected. Come on.”

“What do we do about the gorgon?” It felt disrespectful to keep calling him ‘the gorgon,’ but if he wasn’t talking, there was no way to find out what his name really was.

“We’ll take him upstairs with us. Lee shouldn’t be too far away to collect what’s left of the body.”

In the office, Sawyer clipped the other end of the warded cuffs to the metal ring attached to his desk and indicated for the supe to sit. The gorgon still looked shaky, his skin paling out to an even lighter shade of green.

When Wolfe walked in a moment later, it was impossible not to notice

the tall man playing his shadow. He was dressed in a designer wool suit and a crisp white shirt while a Piaget watch flashed from his wrist. The timepiece alone had to be worth seventy thousand.

This guy had to be the lawyer.

Our boss's expression was set into a firm scowl, his top lip curling off his teeth like even being around the guy was irritating.

"This is Mr. Daniels."

"Please tell me his first name is Jack," I whispered to Sawyer.

Ignoring me, Sawyer held out his hand to Mr. Daniels. "Nice to meet you."

"You too. Call me Jack, please."

I pumped a fist wildly until Sawyer shot me a look. Clearing my throat, I lowered my arm, pretending nothing was doing here.

"I'm here at the request of Mr. Falcon, who informed me very late last night that one of his employees was arrested."

Sawyer replied, "Yes, that's right."

"I'm here to discuss the charges."

"We haven't pressed any charges yet," I said, drawing the guy's attention. He turned his gaze to me, and I shifted uncomfortably on my feet. There was something off about him. Maybe it was because he was a heartless bastard of a lawyer. Maybe it wasn't, but it didn't change the fact that first impressions were more often right than wrong. I wrapped my fingers around my opal.

"And you are?" he asked in a cool voice.

"Officer McKenzie. I'm Detective Taylor's partner."

"Partner." He said the word as if it was distasteful. "Well, if you haven't pressed any charges, I'd like to know why you're still holding my client."

"He witnessed a crime last night, and he's not talking."

Daniels arched a brow. "I thought he was arrested for *committing* a crime. The last I checked, witnessing a crime didn't land you in prison."

Ooo, I didn't like this guy. Not one bit. "The crime he witnessed—"

"McKenzie," Sawyer warned.

I snapped my mouth shut. Right. *Don't* spill the beans to the lawyer.

"The crime he witnessed..." Jack said, fishing.

"We're not at liberty to discuss it," I finished lamely.

Mr. Daniels smiled coldly. "Of course, you aren't. What *I* am at liberty to discuss is the release of this supernatural into my custody." He gestured to the gorgon like he was a piece of office furniture he was contemplating

purchasing.

*Sturdy. Well-made. Will suit my fuck-I'm-rich décor.*

“You’re interfering with an investigation if you don’t submit to us questioning him.” My words came out in a rush.

Jack’s brows rose. “And what investigation is that? You said yourself he’s a witness to a crime, and you can’t detain a witness. If you did, nobody would cooperate with the police. Unless PIG works differently to every other law enforcement institution in this country?”

“We want to interview him regarding an illegal fighting ring,” Sawyer interjected. “That’s where we arrested your client last night.”

Pressing his lips together into a tight line, he finally said, “You want to talk to him? Fine. You can. Where would you like to conduct this interview?”

“Just here is fine.” Sawyer motioned to the chair beside the gorgon. Mr. Daniels unbuttoned his suit jacket and took a seat, casually resting his elbows on the armrests.

Sawyer sat down on his side of the desk, placing his phone onto the surface between them. “Interview with Mr. Jack Daniels, legal representative for Mr. Falcon. Time is 7:42 a.m. Let’s start with the supernatural’s name.”

Reaching forward, Daniels lifted the snakes from the nape of the gorgon’s neck, making their tails shake in irritation. “Seven,” Daniels replied after a moment inspecting it.

“Did he have his name tattooed onto the back of his neck?” I asked. “This whole time?”

“His number. Mr. Falcon marks each of his acquisitions.”

“And his name is *Seven*?”

“Yes. It’s an efficient way to account for his supernaturals.”

Damn. That was just cold.

“Okay, Seven, you were arrested last night at an illegal fighting competition, is that right?”

Daniels leaned over and whispered in the gorgon’s ear, causing the snakes to hiss. Seven looked over at the lawyer. After a curt nod from Daniels, Seven returned his attention to Sawyer and shook his head.

“My client chooses not to answer any of your questions if there will be no charges pressed against him. Detective Taylor, you know as well as I do that supernatural slaves cannot be charged with crimes.”

“Uh... what to the what now?” I asked, looking between Sawyer and Daniels. “They can’t be charged for their crimes? How is that possible?”

“There’s no way to know whether the actions a slave takes are of their own volition or whether they’ve been commanded to do so.”

“So, get his owner down here and find out.”

Daniels smiled smugly, folding his hands over his middle and relaxing into the chair. “I won’t be calling my client’s master here unless you charge him with something. Since you cannot, I will not.”

“You can’t do this.” I stood up, indignant rage coursing through me. “You can’t use the legal system like this.”

Jack Daniels rose from the chair, buttoning up his expensive suit jacket once more. “I can assure you I can use it this way. I know everything there is to know about supernatural legal procedures. I can assure you there is no tactic you could think of that I do not know how to work around. Now, why don’t you save us all some time and release my client so he can return to his master.”

“You’re free to take your client,” Sawyer bit out, already pulling the keys from his back pocket to unlock the cuffs. “But just make sure he’s available to us later. Obstruction of justice can only be overlooked once.”

Jack’s eyes lowered to half-mast, his gaze going arctic. “I don’t appreciate threats.”

“Not a threat, Mr. Daniels. Just a simple statement of fact.”

Sawyer slid his hand under the gorgon’s armpit and lifted him onto his feet. “You’re free to go,” he told him.

With a smug smile in place, Mr. Daniels turned on his heel and stalked away, leaving the gorgon to follow him on shaky legs.

“I can’t believe we had to let him go,” I said as they both disappeared out of the office. “How in the hell are we going to find out what happened down in that cell? Not to mention who organized the fights.”

“What other choice did we have? Admitting that someone died in custody to a lawyer like him would be the end of PIG. The gorgon is the only one who knows what really happened, but without his cooperation, and Bruin eviscerated, we have nothing to go on in any case.”

Slumping down in my chair, I let out a groaned, “I know. It still sucks big hairy Amaroq balls.”

Wolfe stalked back into the office, his expression much the same as it had been when he’d escorted in the lawyer.

“Mr. Falcon has been reported dead,” he announced.

“Mr. Falcon? The same Mr. Falcon who owns... owned... the gorgon?”



Our boss's nod was grim.

"H-how is that possible?" I wondered.

"That's your job to find out. I need you guys over at his address. There's no way that his slave being in custody overnight and his death aren't related."

Sawyer looked over at me and nodded tightly. "Let's go."

## FIVE

MR. JAMES FALCON HAD LIVED A GRAND LIFE. AS I STARED AT HIS *PETITE* estate, I wondered what he had considered large.

How much was this guy worth?

The manicured grounds were crawling with reporters, but we were the only law enforcement there. Which did strike me as odd. A high-profile case like this and I'd have expected to see some of Buxton PD here too.

"How did they know?" I asked Sawyer. "And how did they get here so quickly?"

Sawyer shook his head. "Bad news travels fast."

He pulled the car to a stop and put it into park. Getting out, the sound of half a dozen local TV stations as well as another couple of national ones filled the air with a buzz of anticipation.

A microphone was suddenly shoved under my nose and a female reporter with big hair and an even bigger smile asked me rapid-fire questions.

"Are you the wedding planners or the dress designers? How will the couple celebrate their engagement? Any hints about what the dress will look like?"

I glanced over at Sawyer. What the hell was this woman talking about?

"Come on, Cat," Sawyer urged. Peeling away from the reporter, we headed toward the house, dodging more reporters doing their best trying to get the story from us. When we finally made it to the front door, an honest-to-God butler was waiting to meet us.

Sawyer flashed his badge and introduced us. The butler studied the shield in the billfold for a moment before nodding stiffly and shutting the door behind us.

“I’m Saunders. I’m sorry you were accosted like that. They’re harassing everyone who comes near the house from the UPS driver to the gardener. I’m doing my very best to keep them away, but they’re like... like...”

“Flies around a corpse?” I suggested.

The other man let out a shocked gasp.

“What?” I looked at Sawyer. “Too soon?” With a shrug, I asked Saunders, “Do they know about...” I let my question drift off, already knowing what he was going to say. If they knew about the body, they wouldn’t have been concerned about whether the bride was choosing white or ivory tulle.

Saunders shook his head.

“What *are* they doing here?” Sawyer asked.

“Mr. Falcon announced his engagement to socialite, Paris Iver, three days ago. They...” he jerked his chin in the direction of the rabble outside, “... have been here since then. Gossip journalists.” He shuddered. “They’re worse than the paparazzi.”

“What happened here, Saunders?” Sawyer asked, refocusing the butler on the reason we were here. “Can you walk us through it?”

“Of course.” Saunders pulled out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and mopped at the sweat that was beading on his brow. “Of course.”

“Were you the one to find Mr. Falcon?”

“I was. I entered the bedroom to deliver his breakfast.”

“What time was that?” Sawyer asked, pulling out his phone and starting a voice recording.

Saunders looked over his shoulder at Sawyer. “Around seven forty-five.”

“Is that the usual time you deliver breakfast?”

The butler nodded, opening a set of double doors, and walking into a long-ass hall of—what I assumed were—expensive paintings and objects d’art. “The same time every day since I began working for him six years ago.”

Out of the art gallery, he turned to the left, and we passed through an opulent sitting room that looked as if it was straight from eighteenth-century France.

“Was there any sign of forced entry?”

“No,” he replied. “I ensured the house was properly secured before I retired for the evening.”

“You returned home?”

“I have a small cottage tucked away on the eastern side of the estate.”

“You’re the only staff who lives in?” I asked, shooting Sawyer a look. Saunders here was looking more and more like the killer.

“There is also a cook, but she lives in town as she’s married.”

“So, nobody can vouch for your whereabouts last night?”

My statement had him spinning around. “Am I a suspect in my master’s death?”

*Master? Was this guy a supe?*

I tilted my head to the side, studying him. He looked human, but as I’d learned, that didn’t mean a damn thing. Ninety-nine percent of supes looked human.

“What are you?”

Saunders pulled at his heavily starched collar, and I caught a flash of gold around his throat and around his wrists when his cuffs pulled down. “I am Jinn.”

With raised brows, I cast my gaze to Sawyer.

“Colloquially known as a genie,” he said.

“Ah.” I turned back to Saunders. “You don’t look like a genie. I was kind of expecting someone...” I waved my hands in front of me, trying to figure out the best term.

“Blue?” Saunders offered.

“Yeahhh. Blue.”

He frowned. “Disney got it wrong.”

“You can say that again,” I muttered to myself. Talk about having my dreams dashed. “With Mr. Falcon being your master, he would’ve ordered you not to harm him, right?”

“There is no need. When the slave bond is activated, it becomes impossible to hurt the master.”

“Since you’re a genie, how many wishes did you grant him?”

“None.”

*What a waste.* If I had a genie, I’d definitely wish for a pet unicorn.

I knew what I was about to say was *indelicate*, as Sawyer would say, but I wasn’t Sawyer. Despite the saying about curiosity killing the cat, I asked, “How old are you anyway?”

Saunders visibly stiffened before he answered, “I was born around the same time as the Egyptian Pharaohs ruled the Nile.”

*Damn.* “And how many masters have you had? How many people have

rubbed your lamp?” I paused. That sounded so wrong. “Wait. Do you even *have* a lamp?”

He touched the slave band around his throat. “I have had temporary keepers... people who have been granted their wishes—from French expansion of power to the complete domination of the world—but no true master before.”

We eventually reached a set of over-sized cream double doors with two rectangular and two square panels, all with filagree curls gilded with gold leaf. The butler hesitated when he reached for the handle, sucking in a deep, bracing breath, before pulling down and revealing the room beyond.

A grand four-poster bed with the sheets still carefully tucked in tight took up the entire real estate on the back wall, opposite a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. At first, I couldn’t see why Saunders had been so hesitant to enter the room, but then the smell hit me.

“He’s in the master bath, off to the right,” Saunders said softly, edging away from the door. “I haven’t touched anything in the here, not since... not since I found him.”

I stepped into the room, fighting the urge to turn around and bolt.

The bedroom looked untouched—the bed made, a book on the nightstand. A glass of water too.

In front of the bathroom door, there was an upturned tray, a broken plate that had once held bacon and eggs, and a carafe of coffee turned on its side. Dark brown liquid had tipped from the spout at one point, but now all that was left was a darkening puddle.

Stalling, I turned and said, “Hey, Saunders? Strange question, but what kind of supe was your master?”

Saunders’ mouth tightened right before he said, “He wasn’t. He was human.”

*Well, hot damn, the plot thickens!*

From the corner of my mouth, I said softly, “I thought it was illegal for humans to keep supes as slaves.”

“It is,” was his grim reply.

Walking as softly as I could, even though it made absolutely no sense, I slunk into the master bath with Sawyer at my back. We found Mr. Falcon—naked—and propped up against the side of the claw-foot tub, a revolver clutched loosely in his slack hand. Judging by his lack of a lower jaw, non-existent nose, and the back of his head being blown out, I would’ve taken a

stab in the dark and said that he'd used that revolver on himself.

"Wow," I said.

"Fuck."

Yeah, Sawyer's reaction was better.

I scanned the bathroom, looking for something—*anything*—that would clue me into what had gone down here... well, except for the obvious. The vanity was clear except for a couple of framed photographs—all of them containing Thomas with some sort of celebrity—and bottles of cologne. I did a double-take when I saw the shot of him with an infamous president who'd enjoyed the company of his Whitehouse intern just a little too much.

"I don't get it."

"Get what?" Sawyer asked absently, sliding on some nitrile gloves and shaking out an evidence bag.

"Why would a wealthy guy like this choose to kill himself?"

He got a little closer to the corpse and picked up the gun, sliding it into the plastic bag. "That, I don't know. If only the dead could speak."

"Urgh, don't even *think* that, Sawyer. Knowing my luck, it'll happen one day, and I won't be prepared for it." I studied the mirror, then turned on the hot water faucet, waiting for the arctic gush to heat up.

He glanced over. Frowned. "What are you doing?"

"You know how in cozy mysteries the amateur sleuth finds a secret message written on the mirror?"

"No. I don't."

"You've got to get out more. Just wait. You'll see."

Completely confident, I turned my attention back to the reflective surface and watched it turn opaque. That confidence drained away when it didn't reveal anything other than the marks from a cleaning cloth. "Damn, no message."

"What were you expecting, a full confession?"

"Too much to ask for?" I turned away and scanned the bathroom. The towels were all in place—all pristine white except for one that had some brain matter on it. Aside from the corpse, everything looked to be in its place in this palace of white marble.

I reached out to turn off the faucet but stopped when my gaze landed on a number written on the bottom left-hand corner of the mirror. It couldn't have been any bigger than an inch tall—the numeral written not with a finger, but something thinner. A toothpick, or a nail maybe?

“Sawyer?” I said, still staring at the numbers.

“What is it?”

Pointing, I said, “I told you this mirror thing would work.”

He rose from his crouch and stood beside me. “Four,” he read. “What do think that’s supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.” Turning off the hot water, I took another look at the room. “This is so strange. No sign of forced entry. No note beside a cryptic numerical one. Why would a guy like this, whose net worth was in the billions, suddenly decide that he was going to end it all, and like this?” I gestured to the not-so-pretty remains of his face. “And why the hell did Wolfe tell us to come down here? This isn’t a supernatural murder. It’s a suicide.”

## SIX

IT WAS THE END OF A LONG-ASS DAY. EVERYONE ELSE HAD ALREADY GONE home leaving Sawyer and me at our desks, searching through the databases to see if any other high-profile deaths were as weird as the one we'd attended this morning.

Clicking out of my current search, I scooped up my coffee as I spun around in my chair. "Got anything?" I asked Sawyer after I took a sip.

"No, you?"

"Nada." Sticking out my foot, I stopped my current revolution of the room and faced my partner. "All right, what do we do now?"

At that moment, our desk phones rang simultaneously. We stared at them, then looked at each other.

"Was that weird? Because I feel like that was weird."

Leaning forward, Sawyer picked up his phone and put it to his ear. I returned my gaze to my own phone and let out a breath. Strange synchronicity aside, it was just a phone call.

Picking up the receiver, I pinched it between my shoulder and ear then said, "Hello?"

"Is this Officer McKenzie?" a woman on the other end of the phone asked.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"My name is Avah Carter. I'm a reporter with the *Buxton Tribune*."

"What can I do for you, Ms. Carter?"

"I have some information that might be of interested to you."

Leaning back in my chair, I propped my feet up on the desk. "This sounds very cloak and dagger. I'm about due for some clandestine detective work.



Do go on.”

“Last night, I was at an underground supernatural fighting event.”

I sat up. *Say what to the what now?* “Where? Where was it?”

There was a beat, then she said, “Can we meet up? I don’t want to discuss this over the phone.”

“Sure.”

“Polecat. Do you know it?”

“The strip club?”

“Yes. We can have our privacy there.”

“All right. My partner and I can meet you there in about twenty.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll see you then.”

I hung up the phone and glanced over at Sawyer, who was finishing up his own phone call with Lee.

“What did Lee have to say?”

“Just that he’s never seen a body eviscerated like that before, and he’s been an ME for over thirty years.”

“I love that we’re able to bring him new and gruesome discoveries, but does he know *who* could’ve killed Bruin like that?”

“No. He said there was next to nothing left of his body so there was nothing to indicate how he was killed other than thoroughly.”

Trying to figure out the cause of death on what was essentially a pile of hamburger meat was a tough gig—especially when there was zero other evidence around. “What about Falcon?”

“The human ME took his body and will be completing an autopsy on him tomorrow morning.”

“I can save them some time. He died because he gave his revolver a blow job.”

Jerking his chin at my phone, he asked, “Who was that?”

“A reporter for the *Buxton Tribune*.”

“What did they want?”

“She said she knows about the supernatural fighting ring but refused to talk about it over the phone. She’d like to meet us at Polecat.”

“The *strip club*?”

“Just think, you could get a lap dance while you work. That must be a dream come true.”

His gray eyes darkened a little. “I’d rather you give me a lap dance.”

My belly warmed with his words, and I let a shallow breath out through

my mouth. Sex could wait, though. “We should go. We have to meet her in fifteen minutes.”

Sawyer pushed into Polecat, holding the door open for me. As I stepped inside, I was surrounded by a sea of purple light, round tables, and multiple raised platforms with stripping poles in the center. Considering it was only a little after five in the evening, the place was almost empty except for a few of the dancers warming up.

Scanning the room, I spotted a lone woman sitting at one of the round tables in the back. There was a glass of clear liquid in front of her. She was touching it just with the tips of her fingers, turning the glass ever so slightly, back and forth.

“That must be her,” I murmured, pointing at the woman with dirty-blond hair tied in a high ponytail.

I walked a little farther into the club, approaching the table with caution.

“Avah?”

The woman looked up, blinking clear blue eyes at me. “Officer McKenzie,” she breathed, standing. She was taller than me, but then again, most people were. Holding out her hand, we shook before she turned her attention to Sawyer, and her cheeks flushed with color.

“Avah, my partner, Sawyer,” I begrudgingly introduced.

Avah stuck her hand out to shake Sawyer’s. “Avah Carter,” she told him in a highly suggestive, rasping voice, like the very thought of touching him was an erotic pleasure. It totally was, but I didn’t want her flirting with my consort, especially not in front of me. “It’s my pleasure.”

My shoulders stiffened as I waited for Sawyer to start using his pussy-soaking powers on her, so color me stunned when all he did was smile politely and nod. He shocked me even further by pulling out the chair facing Avah and gesturing for me to sit. Once I was settled, he dragged another chair over from a nearby table, turned it to face the front door of the club, and sat.

Casting my gaze around, I counted only five other people in Polecat—the two dancers warming up and three other staff. “I thought this place would be busier,” I commented absently.

“Give it another hour, and it will be,” Avah replied, picking up her glass and taking a shallow sip. “It’s why I chose to meet here.” She resettled the glass, then said, “I must start by thanking you for meeting me. After what happened last night—the bust you made at the abandoned slaughterhouse—I knew it was the time to come forward with the information I’ve collected.”

Sawyer and I shared a look. Did we tell her that the discovery of the fighting ring was a complete coincidence because we were being chased by the Gray Man, or did we own that shit, like we’d planned to go there with guns a-blazing the whole time?

“Eight months,” she said. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a red, silicone flash drive shaped like an oversized paperclip and placed it on the table. “For nearly eight months I’ve been researching this. The illegal sales. The transfer of ownership papers. *Everything*.” Tapping the USB, she said, “This is the evidence. The smoking gun.”

My eyes darted to the little silicone device. “What kind of evidence? For what?”

“Everything about this barbaric slave business. On here, you’ll find photographs, paperwork, spreadsheets of names, dates, sales, locations, and attendees of the auctions as well as the locations of the SFC fights.”

“SFC?” I asked.

“Supernatural Fight Club. That’s what they call it.”

“How did you first learn of the supernatural slave trade?” Sawyer’s tone was quiet—his rage simmering in the background.

Avah took a sip of her drink. “I met Raymond Benson at a fundraising gala I was covering for the *Trib*’s society pages last year. He had a slave with him that night—a woman who had gold bands around her wrists.”

“How did you know she was a slave?” I asked. “They could’ve just been jewelry.”

“I overheard a conversation between Benson and another Fortune 500 company owner. Benson was telling him about how he’d *procured* his fae—like she was a fucking new car he’d picked up at the dealership that afternoon.”

Sawyer placed his elbows onto the table and leaned closer. “Who was the other man?”

Avah inhaled deeply and drummed her fingers on the table. She was deliberating on how much to say, but since she’d come to us, I assumed she was going to drop her drawers faster than a virgin on his wedding night.

“Thomas Falcon.”

*Fuck.* She couldn't have known Falcon had been found dead this morning. The press had been removed from the premises before the medical examiner had arrived, and I had no doubt that a gag order had been slapped on the media in any case.

“Thomas Falcon,” Sawyer double-checked. “You're sure about that?”

“Very. He's one of the organizers. I have photos of Falcon at other SFC fights, each time with a different entrant into the competition. I even have photos from last night. Even though it's illegal for a human to purchase a supe for slavery, this evidence proves that the rich don't give a shit about legalities. They're buying them and using them for blood sports and, I suspect, the sex trade.”

If Avah was right about this, James Falcon's death hadn't just opened a can of worms. It had raided the shelves of the supermarket and popped off every damn lid.

“Why didn't you come forward before now?” I asked.

“I've done as much as I can, and I can't run the story to expose this is happening. My editor has censored me. He won't even entertain the idea of publishing it since he's friends with a lot of these people, and the owner of the paper is too. He claims supernatural slavery isn't divisive enough for people to give a shit, but I know he's not right. He just doesn't want to rock the boat.”

“You could've released the story online instead. Post it on a blog. On Reddit. Fuck, even Facebook.”

“I have a clause in my contract that prevents me from publishing material on public or personal websites. If I get canned from this job, my editor will blacklist me. I wouldn't be able to get another journalism job anywhere in the country.” She jabbed her index finger into the table. “I've worked too goddamn hard to risk my career on something like this.”

“That's why you called us,” Sawyer murmured.

“Yes.”

“Do you know when the next SFC is?”

She took a big gulp of her drink and carefully put the glass back down precisely on the watermark caused by the sweating glass, then looked up when music started to play. One of the dancers had just taken the stage.

With her gaze fixed on the stripper, she said, “There's one tonight. They moved the location to a warehouse near the docks.” Then she rattled off an

address that I was familiar with.

“What time?”

“Ten.” She looked at us both steadily. “Will you take over my investigation? Will you stop this from happening?”

Sawyer and I shared a look. He nodded slightly, and I turned back to Avah. “Of course, we will.”

The woman let out a deep breath, her relief palpable. She nodded to herself, then slid the flash drive over to me. “Take it. Use what you want. But do me a favor? Don’t contact me again after this meeting. It’s not safe.”

“Okay?” I pocketed the USB. “Was there anything else we need to know?”

Chewing her bottom lip, she deliberated a little longer before saying, “Only to dig a little deeper. Things don’t often appear as they seem.”

She stood abruptly, clutching her jacket more tightly around her torso. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Wait, Avah—”

But she was already hustling from the strip club like her ass was on fire.

“We should go, too,” Sawyer said, rising from his chair. I stood as well, but when the back of my neck prickled with awareness, I turned and scanned the darkened club—cursing when I saw a ten-foot-tall tower of shadows in the corner.

“What is it?” Sawyer asked.

“Can you see that?”

He followed my gaze. Frowned. “See what?”

I looked at him then checked back. The tower of shadows was gone, but a lingering cold draft shimmied across my ankles. Shaking my head, I told him, “Nothing. I guess. Jesus, I must need more sleep.”

Sawyer pursed his lips, then placed his hand on the small of my back, ushering me out of the club. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

## SEVEN

I TUGGED AT THE BLACK, SKIN-TIGHT CLOTHING SAWYER HAD INSISTED I wear. The shirt was made of some sort of Lycra, while the pants were much the same just... more... *clingy*.

My eyes shifted to my consort's reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Not a word."

"About what?" he asked, his hot gaze dropping down to my ass. "I think you look fantastic." He stepped in close, pushing some of my hair from my neck, and kissed behind my ear. The responding shiver was immediate.

"Is this really necessary? We're going to go undercover, right? Why all the cloak and dagger stuff?"

"I'll be going undercover," he corrected. "And I don't want to have to worry about you. If you can't be seen in the shadows, then I'll know you'll be fine."

His reminder still made my skin crawl. "Do we really need the harpy for this?"

The harpy—aka Kayla—aka Kife Kayla—was out in the kitchen, waiting for us.

"Yes. She's strong and can hold her own."

With a huff, I turned and looked at myself again. "Just check her pockets before we leave. You know what she's like with her kleptomaniac tendencies."

"I heard that!" Kayla called from the bedroom.

Spinning around, my gaze darting between Sawyer and the opened bathroom door. "What is she doing in *our* bedroom right now?"

Sawyer's eyes became hooded. "You think of it as *our* bedroom?"

“Really?” I asked, incredulous. “Out of everything I just said, *that’s* what you pay attention to?”

Tugging me closer, he framed my face in his hands, his mouth finding mine as he kissed me with a restrained ferocity. “You said it was ours.”

I huffed, running my hands up over his shoulders, feeling the hardness of his muscles. “You gave me pretty unicorn things. I’m easy to win over.”

“Gack!” Kayla called, making dry-heaving noises. “Get a room!”

“We have one. You’re in it!” I yelled back while scowling at Sawyer. “Seriously, check her pockets and get her the fuck off our bed while you’re at it.”

With a condescending smile and a kiss on my forehead, he left the bathroom and shut the door. I listened to their muffled conversation, which ran along the line of...

*Kayla: You’re so pussy whipped. Do you need a moment to remove your tampon before we go out tonight?*

*Sawyer: Disrespect Cat again and I’ll rip your heart out of your chest through your throat and keep it in a jar beside my bed. Then I will rip out the hearts of every single one of your clan and dance in the rain of their blood.*

I liked bad-ass, threatening Sawyer. He was great.

There was a beat of silence before the bedroom door shut. Letting out a breath, I ran through the plan once more. Tonight, Sawyer and Kayla were going to go undercover at the fighting event, with Sawyer playing the part of slave owner entering his harpy fighter into the competition. My job was to stay out of sight, listen, and observe. The more I could blend in and disappear, the better.

It was a good plan, and I was more than happy to sacrifice Kayla if things went to shit.

Skimming my hands down my torso one last time, I scooped my teal hair into a top knot then tucked my opal under my shirt. When I glanced back down at the counter, I saw that Reaver had appeared. Picking the sword up by the hilt, I muttered to it, “You never want to go on an undercover operation without a bloodthirsty sword, right?”

The sword hummed in my hand, then vanished from view.

Looking back at my reflection, I tugged at the bottom of my shirt one last time and ran a hand over my hair. “Right, McKenzie, let’s go do some digging.”

I strolled from the bathroom to find the imprint of Kayla’s body on the

unicorn bedspread like some sort of sexually suggestive snow angel. Grumbling to myself because it felt like my bedroom had been violated, I snapped the quilt taut, erasing any sign of the harpy's shape. Out in the kitchen, Sawyer was pouring coffee into my favorite travel mug.

"Where's the harpy?" I asked in a not-so-stage whisper.

"Trying to steal your TV, but it's too big," Kayla called out. "Maybe I'll just take some of these horned donkey knick-knacks instead."

"Horned *donkey*?" I spluttered. "Don't you—"

"Let it go, pussy cat," Sawyer told me, sliding over my coffee. "She's just yanking your chain."

Swallowing down on all the vicious burns I had coming Kayla's way, I picked up my cup and took a draw, sighing in contentment. Nope, nothing could beat the high of caffeine in my veins—not even Kayla.

"Do you need a moment?" Sawyer asked, amused.

"When it comes to me and coffee, I'll always need a moment." He stalked around the counter and hauled me up against him, taking me by surprise.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't want to share your contentment with anyone else."

"Err, coffee isn't a person, although if it was, I'd totally get married to it. If you wanted in on the action, we could be a thruple."

He growled at me, playfully nipping at my ear and making me squirm. "I would commit murder if I had to share you."

I groaned—part frustration that he was ruining mine and coffee's moment, and part longing. "We're not alone," I whispered, tilting my head back and giving him better access to suck on my neck.

"I don't care." His voice was a sexy rasp.

"Yeah, well I do," Kayla said too loudly. "I came here to help you kick some bad guy ass, not witness C-grade porn."

"Hey! I resent that. We're a solid B... plus. Yeah, B plus." I shoved Sawyer out of the way—well, I *tried* to shove Sawyer out of the way. The incubus was solid muscle and at five-four, I had very little in the way of leverage. In the end, I stepped around him, losing the dramatic interjection I was going for.

Kayla put her hands up in surrender, smirking. "All right, all right, ice your boner there, fun-sized."

"Did you just..." I looked at Sawyer. "Did she just..."

"Yeah, I think she did, and she apologizes, doesn't she?" His gray eyes



narrowed on the harpy.

Kayla's smirk was still firmly in place as she folded her arms and lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "Sure, if your delicate self-esteem needs that."

"It doesn't *need*—" I started, indignant.

"It does," Sawyer interrupted. "Now, you two play nice. We can't have any bickering tonight."

I turned to glare at him, then tightened my fingers around my travel mug as the harpy tried to steal that too.

"No," I told her firmly, pointing my finger in her face for good measure. "Don't touch the coffee."

She backed away. "Don't get all butthurt about it. Clearly, someone's not getting enough action in the bedroom."

"That's right because you just cockpaused me."

She hitched one hand onto her hip. "Don't you mean *cockblocked*?"

"That would imply that I won't be getting more cock."

"Or Sawyer could cockshield you and protect himself?" she offered.

"Look, why don't you be a dear and cock assist me here, or I'll be sure to vagina shank you the next time you start drooling over a guy."

"Was it just me, or was that a lot of cock for one conversation?" Sawyer asked in a bored drawl. "Children, if you're done trash-talking each other, can we get going?"

"I want to point out that I'm an equal opportunity kind of girl when it comes to genitals, and I included vaginas."

The corner of his lip twitched. "I'm sure all vaginas everywhere are thanking you." Turning to Kayla, he said, "You have to put this on."

The harpy eyed the gold band that would go around her throat with disdain. "Hard pass."

"It's not a real one. It's a prop." He shoved it into her hand. "Now wear it. Otherwise, our story doesn't work."

With a huff, Kayla did put it on, tugging at the solid metal band. "I feel so dirty."

"That has nothing to do with the faux slave band," I told her.

"McKenzie," he warned then gestured to the door. "Can we go?"

Sawyer made sure to stand between Kayla and me on the ride down to the parking garage. When we arrived at the unmarked car, Kayla yelled, "Shotgun!" and ran for the passenger side, her boots sliding on the thin layer of road salt covering the concrete floor.

“The fuck?” I looked over at Sawyer. “Did she just yell shotgun?”

He shrugged, all *it-would-appear-so*.

“Dammit, why didn’t I think of that?” I muttered to myself, pulling open the rear door and sliding into the back. Kayla flounced into the passenger seat and peered at me over her shoulder, her multi-hued eyes glittering with smug amusement.

“You’ve gotta be quick around me,” she sing-songed.

“To stop you from stealing shit? Yeah, I know.”

Sawyer slammed his door, cutting off whatever retort Kayla had for me. “Ladies, if you can’t get along tonight—”

“Yeah, yeah, save the riot-act speech, Sawyer,” I said. “We can be civil. Right, harpy?”

Kayla flipped me the bird, but said, “Naturally. I’m super mature and shit.”

“Clearly,” he drawled, gaze skating between us. “I mean it. If our cover is blown, we can say goodbye to finding out how big this thing is.”

“I’ll behave,” I said, folding my arms across my chest. “I don’t know if she’ll be able to, though.”

“I don’t know if *she’ll* be able to, though,” Kayla mimicked, huffing out a laugh. “I’ll keep my shit tight if she does.”

The muscle in his jaw bounced before he started the engine, reversed from the allocated parking spot, and drove to the exit. To avoid staring daggers at the back of the harpy’s head, I turned my attention to the window.

When we passed one of the gray concrete pillars holding up the low roof, my opal pulsed once with near-inferno heat, drawing my attention to the column of shadows that had formed beside it. As far as involuntary responses went, my body was on board with all of them—my heart began to race, my stomach clenched into a hard stone, and my head began to spin. Pressing my nose even closer, I squinted into the darkness trying to figure out if I was seeing what I *thought* I was seeing.

“... Cat?”

“Huh?” I tore my eyes off the window and looked at Sawyer through the rearview mirror. “What? Did you say something?”

His eyes darted to the window briefly then back to my face. “I was just asking if you knew what you had to do tonight.”

Absently, I replied, “Yeah.” I turned around to stare out the rear window. “Come in after the event starts. Stay out of sight. Gather intel.”

“Right... Are you sure you’re okay?”

I spun back around in my seat to find his serious gray eyes on me. He must’ve felt the twinge of surprise and fear through our bond.

“Peachy.”

He returned his eyes to the road, and so did I, staring at the slashes of white painted lines flashing past us before we mounted the exit ramp. As he edged us into the Thursday night traffic, I kept my eyes on the streets we passed, looking for the Gray Man I knew I’d seen down in the garage. This was the third time I’d seen Willy since our accidental bust of the fighting ring, and he’d only ever appeared to me. For whatever reason, Sawyer couldn’t see him, and I suspected it would stay that way until the Gray Man chose to reveal himself.

Before too soon, the expensive high-rise apartment buildings and office blocks gave way to 1970s low-rise apartments and strip malls. Fewer and fewer people pounded the sidewalks, leaving the street empty and hollow feeling.

“This is the place,” Sawyer said, pulling into a parking lot that was strangely devoid of the shipping containers I was expecting.

“Where are the other cars?” I asked, sitting forward so I was leaning between the two front seats as I scanned the lot. “There’s literally nobody else here.”

Nothing but dirty, slushy puddles of melted snow and trash. Oh, and a humongous warehouse at the far end of the lot that looked like it had been dropped there about five decades ago and left to rot.

Sawyer shook his head, navigating us closer to the warehouse. Easing around the far corner, he brought the car to a stop.

“Oh, there they are,” I said.

In front of us, half a dozen vehicles were lining up to enter the airplane-hanger-sized double doors, one black mini-bus with blacked-out windows bringing up the rear.

“Seriously, a mini-bus? Like they’re hustling a bunch of eighty-year-old women to their canasta tournament?”

Sawyer pulled up behind the mini-bus, joining the line of spectators trying to get it.

“Did you know there’s a canasta university?” Kayla chimed in.

I blinked. “No shit?”

“Yeah. One of my lovers is an accredited instructor.”

“Is he also eighty?”

“Eighty-year-olds still have needs, you know.”

I shut my mouth.

Opened it.

*No. No, keep it shut, Cat.*

That was a whole can of worms I didn’t want to open—crusty, eighty-year-old worms.

“How’d you guys meet? A supernatural dating app? Was his thumb even flexible enough to swipe right? You know what? Don’t answer that. If I see an octogenarian in there, I’ll be sure to give him your number.”

“Cat, get down,” Sawyer suddenly hissed.

My head jerked around, my gaze focusing on a tall, beefy man approaching the car. Dressed all in black leather, he didn’t even try to hide the gun on his waist or the knife in its sheath. His bare arms were covered in tattoos that all seemed to be along the same lines of *kill* or *die*, with the über popular *your next* written across his knuckles.

And, yes, Sawyer would probably have an aneurism over that grammatical choice.

“Ask him if he buys his clothes at the Overtly Bad Guy store,” I whispered. “He could probably get us a discount.” Dropping onto my stomach, I crammed myself uncomfortably into the footwell behind his seat then drew a blanket over my head.

The coarse fabric immediately made my skin itch and the dusty upholstery tickled my nose. I listened as Sawyer wound down his window, tensing when cold air barreled through to the back.

“This is a private event,” Bad Guy said in a deep voice. “Leave.”

“I have an entrant,” Sawyer replied in his smoky sex voice. A little shiver shimmied along my spine at the sound of it.

“Did you register it?”

“Who the hell are you calling *it*?” Kayla demanded. “I’m a goddamn queen among my clan. I’m... I’m...”

I was trying to figure out why she drifted off like that when I heard the Bad Guy—BG—speak again. Only this time his voice was so deep that it sent alarm bells ringing in my head. Foreboding settled over me and even though I knew I shouldn’t have, I snuck a peek out from the sliver of space between Sawyer’s seat and the center pillar. I immediately wished I hadn’t.

The guy wasn’t human. And he was certainly done pretending too. His

body had swelled to triple its size and height, the veins in his arms throbbing. Flashes of red shone in his dark eyes and large incisors had dropped down from his upper jaw. *What in the hell was he?*

Moving slowly, I recovered my head.

There was a slap, then, “Oww!” Kayla suddenly uttered.

“My apologies,” Sawyer told BG. “She mouths off when she’s spoiling for a fight.”

“Keep her on a tight leash,” not-human BG snarled. “Or I’m going to put her on one.”

And with that declaration, he stalked away.

“Did you have to slap me like that?” Kayla asked.

“You slapped her?” I popped out from under the blanket. “How about a bit of warning first so I can watch.”

“I needed him to believe you were my slave,” Sawyer said, then looked over his shoulder. “Stay down, pussy cat.”

He drove for a few more minutes, the bright moonlight being swapped out for industrial-sized artificial lighting. After the car came to a stop, we waited there for a moment.

“I’ve parked at the back of the lot. Wait five minutes before leaving the car,” my partner said before opening the door and stepping out. Kayla did the same, their doors slamming in strange synchronicity. I stayed where I was, my breath the only thing I could hear clearly. Outside the car, there was hardly any discernible noise, but if this meeting was like the others, there would be some kind of ward in place to stop people from noticing what was going on here.

When my five minutes were up, I slowly rose from the floor...

... then screamed when I saw who was looming outside the window.

## EIGHT

SLAPPING MY HAND OVER MY MOUTH, I TRIED TO CRAM THE SOUND TRYING TO break out, back in. Willy was waiting on the other side of the window, peering inside. Was he waiting to kill me? Offering to wash my car? Collecting for charity?

Still breathing heavily, I swallowed down on my hammering pulse, then waited until I was sure no sound would come out of my mouth before lowering my hand.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked through the closed window.

Willy’s body language didn’t change—no tilting of his head to show he was listening or a shrug of his shoulders—he just stood there. I had to get him out of here because there was no way a ten-foot-tall-grim-reaper-looking nightmare of a supe wouldn’t be spotted. Although some sick part of me wanted to see what would happen if Willy entered the ring, I knew now wasn’t the time to explore that particular scenario.

From the safety of the back seat, I glanced around the warehouse, making sure nobody else was in the immediate area. The only thing I knew for sure was that tonight’s events had already started—the faint noise of the crowd was leaking through the entire building. When I saw it was all-clear, I popped open the door, forcing Willy to back up a step.

With my hands hitched on my hips, I looked up, up, *uuuppp*. “I’m going to need to put a bell on you, you know that?”

At this, he cocked his head to the side.

“You know, like a cat. Then I’ll know where you are. It makes a noise. Can’t sneak up on me? Ah, forget it.” I blinked when an image of Willy with a giant bell tied with a red bow around his neck flashed through my mind. It

was perversely comedic, in a what-the-hell-is-happening-here kind of way.

Staring at him, I asked, “Was that you? Did you send me that image?”

His head moved up and down. Once.

I rubbed my temple. The scary Gray Man was talking to me telepathically.

Great.

Fantastic.

*Deep breath out, Cat.*

Couldn't be any worse than a sentient magical sword that followed me around. Or being able to understand wood sprite chatter. Or being the consort of an incubus. Or killing a zombie cyclops. Or... you know what? I'll stop there.

Still rubbing my head, I muttered, “Look, one crisis at a time here.” I took another look around. I was alone for now, but I knew it wouldn't stay that way for long. “I need to stay hidden in here and your looming isn't helping with that.”

Willy shot me an image of him wrapping his arms around me, and I disappeared.

“I don't understand.”

Another image appeared, shadows wrapping around my feet and crawling up, up, up my legs, hips, torso, shoulders, and finally my head. I was completely covered, and I disappeared.

A shiver ran down my spine “You can do that? Wrap me in shadows? Make me disappear?”

Again, he gave me a creepy slow nod.

Dammit, it was risky. And why was he helping me like he did before? I didn't know whether this was a ploy to harm me or not.

“Hey! You! What are you doing in here?” someone roared. I peered around Willy's shoulder. Coming out from a gap in the multi-tiered racking that stretched the entire breadth of the warehouse was Bad Guy. He weaved between the parked cars, each step bringing him closer. Each step closer, his body swelled in size—muscles bulging, veins popping, irritation growing.

“Shit.” I looked back at Willy, my indecision getting punted to the curb. It was either certain death, or maybe I'll get out of this alive. I chose the possibility of living. To Willy, I said, “Gotta hustle, big guy. Let's do it.”

The Gray Man wrapped his arms around me, and I was instantly chilled to the bone. My teeth chattered. My breath hovered on the air in front of me.

Uncontrollable shivering set in.

“I-I h-h-hope this i-i-s n-n-n-normal.” I had never felt so cold before in my life. Well, except for that one time I was almost drowned by kappas—strange Japanese yokai that looked like weird turtle-men—in the lake at Christmas.

The only take away from this was that my opal hadn’t turned into a light and heat show, so there wasn’t any immediate danger coming my way. If you didn’t count Bad Guy hulking out, that was.

Willy held me in his arms for just a moment before releasing me and stepping away. I looked down. I didn’t feel any different. I certainly could still see my body, but as BG skidded to a stop, I knew Willy had done it—he’d hidden me in plain sight. Unwilling to test the theory that I was inaudible as well as invisible, I eased around BG slowly, making sure the soles of my shoes didn’t make too much noise.

On the other side of the male, I let out an internal relieved breath and started toward what was beyond the cars. Willy followed like a shadow at my back—silent and ominous.

Like in the slaughterhouse, he was aiding me, but I had no idea why so that was something I had to nut out later.

In front of the multi-tiered racking, there was a long white line on the ground. The edges began to curve about fifty feet away, telling me it was a circle—or at least semi-circular in shape. Getting down onto my haunches, I reached out a shaking hand and ran my index finger through it. Salt and flour. Just like before.

Rising to my feet, I stepped over it, the muted noise from the event growing louder. What was strange, though, was the complete black void beyond the racking. It was as if the steel shelving was a doorway, and I couldn’t see the room beyond.

I looked over at Willy, who looked ahead, unperturbed by the prospect of stepping into a completely unknown place.

“Well, I’m game if you are.” Letting out a small breath through my mouth, I stepped into the swallowing darkness. Willy followed at my back.

Like breaching a bubble, the noise went stereo, the fight club revealed in a *pop* of frenetic sights, sound, and smells. The first thing that hit my nose was sweat and blood, with undertones of sawdust and, oddly enough, expensive perfume. There were hundreds of people in the warehouse—thousands, maybe—and they all had their backs to me.



Suddenly, a mighty roar erupted from the crowd.

Jumping up and down on the spot, I tried to see what had happened, then screamed when I was abruptly lifted into the air and placed on Willy's shoulder. Apart from the strange sensation of being up so high and able to see things without straining or stretching my neck, I was struck by how *substantial* Willy was. I wasn't sure what was under the cowled hood and cape. I assumed smoke and shadows, but as I tested what my ass was resting on, I could've sworn it was muscle and bone.

Willy sent me an image of moving through the crowd, intangible to everyone, and I figured what the hell. You only live once and riding on a Scottish legend's shoulder was one thing to tick off the bucket list.

"All right, Willy, let's do this."

I got an image of Willy the Orca whale flashing through my head. Then Gene Wilder's face à la the 1971 film. Finally, one of a flaccid penis.

I patted his chest. "None of them—especially not that last one." Although, if I was honest... *hilarious*. "It's just a nickname."

He seemed to think about that for a moment before moving through the crowd. I held my breath the first couple of times we brushed past people, but I soon realized that they really couldn't feel or see us. Willy got us to the front of the crowd, and I let out a quiet curse.

There were two combatants in the makeshift fighting ring. Blood, along with hunks of muscle and bone decorated the sawdust-covered floor. One fighter was male, the other female. Both were bloody and looked to be losing their battle against blood loss. The male—a vampire—let out a battle cry and threw himself at the female. Just before contact, she fluttered into the air on delicate wings, missing the attack, but the move had cost her.

Blood cascaded faster from the wound to her throat. The vampire's onyx gaze locked onto her carotid and struck again. Too weak to fight him off, the female—a fairy, maybe?—closed her eyes and let her body go lax as the vampire fell on her, sharp teeth tearing out her throat. The crowd erupted in cheers as the light from the fairy's eyes dimmed, then finally extinguished.

Two large men lumbered into the ring, one pulling the vampire off his prey and the other dragging the fairy away by the leg. Her body left a groove in the sawdust as she was pulled out of the ring, a bloody trail in her wake. Another smaller man carrying a bag of sawdust entered the ring after the combatants were removed, covering up the blood and gore that had been left behind.

My attention, however, was snagged by the person who entered the ring next.

Because—impossibly—it was Thomas Falcon.

## NINE

IT COULDN'T BE POSSIBLE.

Thomas Falcon was dead.

I'd personally seen his body just that afternoon. I stared at Falcon 2.0 as he stood in the center of the ring, bringing the crowd to heel by simply raising his arms.

"The victor was Mr. Sola's vampire. The next contestant in the ring is a harpy owned by a new entrant to the fights, Mr. Amaroq."

*Mr. Amaroq? What the fuck?*

When Kayla strutted into the ring a moment later, I cursed. Although, maybe a small part of me was also cheering because Kayla was going to get a spanking. Can anyone say karmic retribution?

Kayla was wearing just her bra and panties, her feet bare. My gaze darted to the sidelines, where I saw Sawyer standing—his arms crossed, his expression completely unreadable. No, not completely unreadable. There was a tightness to his mouth that betrayed his concern. Had this been part of the plan, or was Kayla going off half-cocked?

"And fighting the harpy is Ms. Silverstone's banshee."

The crowd parted as a tall, willowy woman dressed in a white sheath entered the ring. The banshee's feet were bare, too, and it was clear she wasn't even wearing underwear. Her skin was translucent—glowing almost—like she was smuggling the moon inside her body. Her long dark hair fell over her shoulders and face, hiding and revealing eyes the color of emeralds and a blood-red mouth. Her slave collar glinted dully around her neck. She moved with feline grace—seductive and terrifying all at the same time. Her limbs were long, and instead of fingers, she had curved black claws at least

six inches from base to tip.

As the banshee squared up against Kayla, she clicked her claws together.

*Click, click, click.*

In response, Kayla's body began to pulse with power, silver veins growing under her skin.

The crowd began to yell, shouting at a couple of men who were collecting bets and writing down names. For five long minutes, they threw money down, picking their winners for this particular supernatural battle.

*Click, click, click.*

I returned my attention to Falcon 2.0, who was watching a pretty blonde—in a cougar sort of way—who must've been Ms. Silverstone as she was bellowing orders to the banshee. Her slave paid her no heed, keeping her sharp gaze on Kayla. The harpy—to her credit—didn't back down an inch. She met the eyes of the banshee, a small smile curving up her lips. I had no idea what Kayla was capable of, other than making me contemplate committing murder for real.

*Click, click, click.*

Falcon 2.0 walked back into the ring after the last bet was taken and announced, "Regular SFC rules apply. The supe still breathing at the end of this is the winner. The owner of the losing supe has the option to tap out their combatant if they so wish, ending the battle and awarding the win automatically to the other contestant. The fight begins at the sound of the bell."

He walked from the ring, nodding to someone on the other side of the rope as he stepped over it himself.

*Click, click, click.*

Then, the bell sounded.

Kayla launched herself at the banshee, small, feathered wings bursting from her back as she leaped. The banshee was ready, slashing at Kayla's face with her claws, then ducking, turning, and shearing off one of the harpy's wings. The appendage thumped to the ground, surrounded by a pool of blood. Kayla's pained scream incited the crowd, the masses shouting or jeering depending on who they'd wagered on. Blood poured from the harpy's back and face, the skin left behind from the claws ragged.

The blood loss didn't slow the harpy down. Kayla leaped up again, swinging toward the threat.

"Attack her!" Ms. Silverstone bellowed at the banshee, the façade of a

wealthy-put-together older woman disappearing in an instant.

The banshee opened her mouth—revealing dagger-like teeth—and shrieked so loudly that many of the spectators threw their hands over their ears, grimacing. Her keening was focused on Kayla, however, and as it increased in intensity, it forced Kayla to her knees. Blood poured uninhibited from the harpy's ears, nostrils, and the corners of her mouth.

Before the sound could die out, the echoes still reverberating around the warehouse, the banshee shoved Kayla backward. She slashed at the harpy as she fell, those long claws filleting the skin on her chest, forearms, face, and neck.

Blood poured in torrents onto the floor, the sawdust greedily soaking up every last drop.

Frantically, I looked to Sawyer. Was he going to stop what was happening? He had to, right? He couldn't let a colleague get killed on the job like this. And thank God Smith wasn't here because he wouldn't ever let me live this one down.

With a dry lump clogging my throat, I turned in time to see Kayla get her legs beneath her and kick the banshee across the other side of the ring. The supe landed in a heap, but she was up on her feet a moment later, her long hair lifting away from her face by some unfelt wind.

Kayla was back on her feet now, too, those silver veins darker than before, covering every square inch of her body. The slashes and cuts to her face and neck had already stopped bleeding, the ragged wounds on her torso closing before my eyes.

*Damn*, Kayla had some power.

Not that I would ever tell her that...

... but *damn*!

The pair of supes glared at each other, the banshee the one to make the first move. Tackling Kayla to the ground, the pair rolled around. Kayla punched and kicked at the other supe, even resorting to biting off her ear. The harpy spat out the appendage, but it didn't slow the banshee. In fact, she returned the favor, tearing off Kayla's ear and swallowing it.

The shriek that came from the harpy's mouth rivaled that of the banshee's as she got to her feet and swiftly kicked the other female in the head. The other supe tried to rise, but Kayla was there. Another kick. And another. And another.

Bones popped, puncturing the skin with white shards. Kayla was going

for the major disabling bone groups—humerus and kneecaps—reducing the chances of the banshee getting up and walking away from this—at least not right away.

The banshee collapsed onto the floor, curling herself into a ball to protect her vital organs. Kayla didn't stop wailing on her until Ms. Silverstone threw a white towel into the ring, stopping the fight.

The crowd erupted in equal parts cheering and jeering.

Falcon 2.0 stepped back into the ring. “The harpy is the winner by default,” he announced, sounding irritated. Looking over in Sawyer's direction, he tossed him a thick white envelope. “Your winnings.”

Sawyer caught the money and nodded, still playing along, not letting on that a dead guy had just interacted with him.

The same two large men from before came into the ring and easily picked up Kayla and the banshee.

“Hey, where do you think you're taking me?” Kayla shrieked as she was slung over the shoulder of one of the men. She pounded at his back, but it seemed to have no effect at all.

The banshee was also removed, and both Sawyer and Ms. Silverstone followed them away from the ring. Me, on the other hand? I kept my focus on Falcon 2.0.

Once the sawdust had been topped up, he announced the next fighters to enter the ring. After the bets were taken, and the match had begun, Falcon 2.0 stepped away, passing the MC duties to another.

“Let's follow him, Willy,” I murmured.

The Gray Man started off in the same direction, ghosting us through people as he cut across the ring and the two new combatants now fighting to the death. Past the crowd, we found ourselves in front of three shipping containers. Falcon 2.0 walked into the one on the left, and we followed. It was completely dark inside until he turned on a small battery-powered light.

I stared at the young woman standing where Falcon should've been. Dressed in black leather pants and a black tank, the woman had tiger stripes tattooed all over her arms, shoulders, and neck. Her skin was the color of warm toffee, her eyes upturned in the corners. Pure white hair curtained her face, shielding it from my view.

“What the hell?” I asked myself.

The woman's head turned, her electric blue irises reflecting the light like a cat's. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she kept her gaze trained on us. For half

a second, I wondered whether she could see us. For half a second, I wondered whether Willy had dropped the ball.

With a hiss, she turned away, switching on a computer and clicking open a digital folder before discarding it with a growl. She opened another and another, then started to swear under her breath in a foreign language that sounded like Japanese.

“Where are you?” she said in English this time. “Where *are* you, Sakura?”

*Sakura?* Who the hell was Sakura, and why was this woman looking for her?

Willy shoved a mental image into my frontal lobe, this time of someone approaching the shipping container. I turned when I heard footsteps. Bad Guy was standing in the doorway.

“The fight’s over,” he announced in a bored drawl. “Are you coming back out?”

My gaze flickered back to the woman...

Only, it wasn’t the woman standing there anymore.

Falcon 2.0 was.

“Leave. Now,” Falcon commanded.

“You got it.”

Bad Guy lumbered off, flicking one last look in our direction. Falcon’s outer shell disappeared with a shiver, the woman standing there once again, looking irritated.

Patting Willy on the shoulder, I said, “Let’s go and find Sawyer and the harpy.” I’d figure out who this woman was *after* we found my consort...

... and Kayla as well, I supposed.

I mean, Wolfe would probably chew me up and spit me out if I let one of the new PIG recruits get killed.

Willy left the shipping container, moving toward the one in the middle of the trio to see if Sawyer was in there.

“Dammit,” I muttered. “The door is closed.”

Willy still approached it though.

“No. No. Nononononono.” I patted Willy’s shoulder again, trying to get him to stop, but he was heading directly for the closed steel door. He didn’t even slow, leaving me with no other choice but to squeeze my eyes shut and brace for impact. When my face didn’t get broken, I pried one eye open then another.

We were standing inside the shipping container, startling Sawyer and Kayla with our sudden appearance.

Sawyer rose abruptly from his spot beside the wounded harpy, who had a bandage wrapped around her head, and was sitting on a low stool nursing her shoulder after the wing-ectomy.

“Jesus, Cat, where have you been?”

Patting Willy on the shoulder, I said, “Let me down, big guy.”

Sawyer marched forward a few steps, but stopped abruptly, his expression pinched. “What the hell is he doing here?”

I hiked my thumb in Willy’s direction after my feet were back on level ground. “Oh, this guy?” I went to pat his stomach, but my hand seemed to go straight through him. “Oh, sorry about that, Willy.” I turned to Sawyer. “He’s on Team Cat now. He comes in handy with his whole disappearing act and general terrifying... ness. Plus, *bonus*, he can totally reach those high shelves in the supermarket for me too. I think we might get some matching t-shirts.”

“Cat, this is ridiculous.”

“All right, you can get in on the t-shirt action too.”

“Think about this. He could be here to hurt you.”

I shot a look at Willy, but to be honest, his expression was unreadable. “Look, could he have hurt me? Absolutely. A hundred times over, but he hasn’t. Plus, I might enjoy having someone tall at my disposal.”

My partner folded his arms. “Where did you find him?”

“Waiting for me outside the car after you and Kayla left. He made me invisible, so I got a realllllly good look at Falcon 2.0. You can thank us later with loads of sex and maybe someone to terrorize. I call shotgun on the terrorizing.”

My partner massaged his brow like a huge headache was setting in. His chest expanded with a deep breath, then he asked, “What did you find out about Falcon?”

He walked back to Kayla, handing her a sterile gauze pad.

“Aww, remember when you used to patch me up like that?”

“McKenzie!”

“You’re right. There isn’t anything *used to* about it. Look, whoever is wearing Falcon’s skin is a woman with tiger stripe tattoos on her upper body.”

He looked over at me. “Tiger stripes?”

“Yeah. Maybe a shapeshifter of some sort?”



“I know of only one kind of supe who carries the marking of their cat on their body in human form.”

“Kitty shifter!” Kayla yelled, the outburst both unexpected and grating.

Sawyer glared at her. “Yeah, but there are about half a dozen different species of cat shifter out there. We’ll have to narrow it down.”

“Ah, I just want to point out that she has *tiger stripes* tattooed on her arms. Isn’t it pretty obvious what flavor she is?”

“You, of all people, should know that supes are not always what they appear to be.” Sawyer approached me again, keeping an eye on Willy who hadn’t moved more than a few feet from my side. “What else did you find out tonight?”

“The fact that a *dead* guy was up and walking, being worn like a fleshy costume by a kitty-shifting woman wasn’t enough intel? Jesus, Sawyer, what more do you want from me?”

He pursed his lips. “We need to get Kayla home. Her wounds aren’t healing as well as they’re supposed to.”

“I need blood,” the harpy called. When we both looked over, she added, “To heal. I don’t, like, you know, enjoy drinking blood for the sake of it or anything. I’m not a vampire. Plus, vampires are complete douches.”

*Finally! We agree on something.* “Amen, sister.” I turned back to Sawyer. “Any idea where we can find her a blood source? And don’t even think about looking at me. We did that once, remember? I didn’t appreciate it the first time, and I can assure you I won’t enjoy it any better this time.”

“It has to be blood from the opposite sex.” She pinned her eyes on Sawyer, her top lip curling up at one corner. “Any volunteers as tribute?”

Fuck. No! Nope. Never going to happen. I’ll shiv that bitch like a unicorn before I allow her to touch my man.

Before I could open my mouth and scream denial, Willy ghosted from the room, reappearing a moment later with a struggling man. Once they’d both solidified, Willy shoved the man in Kayla’s direction. The human tripped over his feet, landing on his knees in front of Kayla, unwittingly offering himself in supplication.

“Ooo, perfect. I love blonds.” Kayla reached forward, taking the man by the nape and drawing him closer. Without any preamble, she struck, savagely biting into his neck and taking deep draws of his blood. Instead of a pained gasp like I expected, the man moaned, his hips starting to pump.

I spun around. “I feel like a voyeur,” I whispered to Sawyer. He was still

facing the action, his gray irises completely gobbled up by the seething darkness of his hunger. Well, I suppose him getting a snack out of this wasn't such a bad thing.

In a low voice, I said, "I didn't know harpy's drank blood too. Are they related to vampires in some way?"

My question drew Sawyer's gaze, his eyes completely black. I glanced down at his hips, knowing an erection would be straining against his zipper. What I wasn't prepared for was the force of the lust that slammed into me at the sight of it. I drew in a ragged gasp, let out the breath, and returned my eyes to his. Heat flooded me while wetness pooled in my panties. Talk about an inappropriate time to get frisky.

Sawyer skimmed his hands along either side of my jaw, framing my face in a firm grip. He tilted my head back, dominating my senses as he dominated my body. He kissed me, and I loved every stab of his tongue, clash of teeth, and bite of lips. Shoving me up against the side of the container, he wrapped his hands under my ass and lifted until I was straddling his waist. His hard cock rubbed against my center and, holy shit, this was hot. So hot, in fact, that I almost forgot we were undercover, and we had an audience.

"Yo, fuck bunnies, as much as I enjoy watching two people bone, we need to get going."

Kayla's snarky tone infiltrated my head. Breaking away from Sawyer, I found myself panting, needy, achy, and thoroughly pissed off that I'd gotten so lost. Kayla had finished her snack, leaving the man slumped against the side of the shipping container, a wet stain spreading across the crotch of his pants.

The harpy followed my gaze as she unwrapped the bandage from her head. Her ear had completely grown back. "My bite is orgasmic," she said, shrugging. "Hey, don't give me that look. It's a pretty great deal for a human. I get blood and heal. He gets the best fucking orgasm of his life, and he won't remember a goddamn thing afterward."

"I didn't know harpies could do that." I tapped Sawyer's shoulder, letting him know I wanted down. Besides, speaking with your professional arch-nemesis while being pinned to the wall by your lover didn't really scream *power position*.

Kayla flipped her hair over her shoulder and replied in her southern drawl, "I ain't no ordinary harpy." Turning, she went to retrieve her jacket,

and I saw her back was now completely free of damage, too.

The black bled from Sawyer's eyes, the cool gray returning, as he said gruffly, "We need to go."

As he turned away, I grabbed the sleeve of his shirt. "It's okay," I said in a soft voice, knowing he was battling with his very nature—a battle he had no hope of winning. "We'll finish up later, okay?"

Hungrily, he licked his lips, then whispered into my ear, "I can already taste you on my tongue."

Annnddd, that was it. I was done. Squeezing my legs together, I tried to erase the ache that had formed there, but the friction only made it worse.

Courtesy of Willy, an image of people approaching the container was shoved into my head.

"We have to go," I announced. "Willy, can we get ghost again?"

The big guy nodded, opening his arms for me. Before I stepped forward, Sawyer stopped me, barely contained aggression beading off his body. He looked from Willy to me. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Yeah. I think he has my back. Don't ask me *how* I know this, though. Just a feeling, really."

Someone slammed a fist on the door of the container, propelling me into motion. I ran into Willy's embrace, breathing out a cloud of iciness that had wrapped around my body. It only lasted a moment, then he released me. Sawyer was staring in our direction, but I knew he couldn't see us.

"Stay safe," he whispered before snapping at Kayla, "Get that slave band back on."

The harpy clicked the shackle into place just as the door opened, and Falcon 2.0 walked in with Bad Guy trailing behind him. Falcon focused on Kayla, scanning her from head to toe.

Voice hard, he said, "She's healed."

"Yes."

Falcon's lip twitched. In annoyance? "How?" A harsh demand that expected a prompt answer. "Tell me how you did it?"

Kayla wiggled her fingers in the direction of the human slumped on the ground. Crotch-stain and all.

The Walking Dead Falcon's top lip curled off his teeth in disgust. "You need to leave. Now."

Sawyer took Kayla by the arm and dragged her from the container, and we ghosted out after them.

Under his breath, Sawyer said, “We need to find out who this woman is and why she stole Falcon’s image to disguise herself. For now, let’s just get back home.”

## TEN

“SO, THAT WAS FUN AND ALL.” I SHOVED MY HAND INTO THE CENTER OF Kayla’s back and pushed her toward the front door of our apartment. “But you need to go now.”

She spun backward to face me before I could give her the last prod, my palm hovering dangerously close to her breasts. I wrenched it back, relieved to have missed that close call.

She gave me a mock frown, exaggerating a downturned mouth for a moment before her usual sardonic expression took up residence again. “Just like that? You’re done with me? I feel so used.”

Opening the door, I replied, “Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure it’s nothing new for you. Buh-bye.” Once again, I tried to remove the harpy from my personal space, but the bitch dug in her heels. Literally. Scratching up the hardwood.

“Now, wait a minute,” she said, hiking her hands onto her hips. “Why do I feel like you’re getting rid of me so you guys can have sex.”

“Because we are,” Sawyer said from behind me. “Goodbye, Kayla. Don’t make me order you from our apartment.”

With a haughty little smile on her lips, she finally left, finger waving at me. I showed her what I thought of her cutesy finger waves, flipping her the bird instead. As soon as the door was slammed shut, I let out a breath and turned to face Sawyer.

His hunger had been bearing down on me the entire ride back home, so when he picked me up and pressed me into the door—using the wood to pin me in place—I was ready for him. He tore open the zipper on his pants, freeing his straining cock.

“Multi-tasking?” I asked breathlessly, loving every single second of his

dominance.

“I can’t wait.” Sawyer’s voice was a smoky drawl that made all my pleasure receptors light up.

Then catch fire.

Then raze all my self-control.

“Tonight was dangerous. I need to reaffirm you’re okay. That you weren’t hurt.”

Damn this sweet, fierce man. “I’m okay. Really. Willy saved my ass.”

At the mention of the Gray Man, the muscle in his jaw jumped. “I don’t trust him.”

“I know, but...”

“What?” he rasped, pressing his hips into mine, making me gasp.

“He saved my ass. Twice. I don’t think he means me any harm.”

Sawyer shook his head, eventually, biting out, “He chased us. Tried to kill us. Then, all of a sudden, he stops and now he *helps* us? Why?”

“Well, he helps *me*,” I stated. “You know, because I’m amazing and all.”

“You are amazing and all...” he told me in a wry tone, “... but I still want to know why this supe is following you around like a lost puppy.” Then he narrowed his eyes, and muttered, “Unless...”

“*Unless?* Unless what?”

He looked lost in thought for a moment before refocusing on my face. “Reaver.”

*Reaver?* I wiggled so he’d let me down. This seemed like an important conversation, and him rubbing his dick against me as we talked just seemed wrong. He lowered me to the floor, and I walked into the living room. Dropping onto the couch, I asked, “What about Reaver?”

Tucking himself back into his pants and zipping up his fly, he sat beside me. “You melted Anansi’s slave band with Reaver.”

Anansi, the African goddess who also took the form of a school-bus-sized spider. She’d been enslaved by the Amaroq, who was now petrified and decorating our living room.

I gulped. “Yeah. So?”

“Did you use Reaver on the Gray Man at all?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. “The electrical charge,” I muttered out loud, staring at the hardwood.

“What electrical charge?”

“I felt it zip up my arm when I rested the tip of Reaver to the back of the

Gray Man's neck. It was then that he stopped trying to murder us... and started to help me." I focused on Sawyer's face. "Do you know what this means?"

With a grim nod, he said, "I think Reaver absorbed the power of the slave band from Anansi, and given how old and strong the Amaroq was, I think that power lingered on Reaver until it made contact with another living being."

With a frown, my gaze flickered in the direction of the Amaroq. "Are you telling me that..." I began shaking my head because it couldn't be true. This was madness.

"You made the Gray Man your slave."

"Shhh, shhh, shhh." I pressed my index finger against his mouth. "Don't say it."

Sawyer removed my finger from his lips. "Reaver is ancient... powerful. It can do things other swords cannot. Trying to find sense in the supernatural world is hopeless. But it all makes sense now. The Gray Man—"

"Willy," I corrected.

He rolled his eyes. "Willy listens to everything you say."

Was now the time to let him know that Willy had appeared to me multiple times previously without Sawyer knowing, or that he could also show me images inside my head to communicate?

Probably not.

One problem at a time.

"What am I going to do? I don't want to be a slave owner..." I whined. "Wow, there's a sentence I never thought I'd ever say."

"It's not slavery as you know it, pussy cat."

I turned to him with a scowl. "No, it's probably worse. I feel like Willy has absolutely no free will at all." Shit. What was I going to do? Maybe Reaver could, I don't know, *undo* the connection. I rose from the couch and started to pace.

"Cat? Cat? *Pussy cat, stop.*"

Suddenly, Sawyer wrapped his arms around me from behind, pulling me against him. I sank into his embrace. He was still hard as steel, his erection prodding my back. The knowledge that he was ready for me, made my lust return with a roar. But he always put his needs second to mine. Another reason to lo... *like* him. A lot. I *liked* him a lot.

"What am I going to do, Sawyer?"

“We’ll figure it out, pussy cat. We always do.” Pushing hair from the side of my neck, he placed a gentle kiss against my pounding pulse.

So why did I feel like things weren’t going to end as cleanly and neatly as Sawyer assumed they would? Shit. Why did my life have to be so hard? Speaking of hard...

Turning in his arms, I wrapped mine around his neck and climbed him because sometimes you just needed to forget about your unintentional slavery of a supernatural being with some hot, filthy sex and multiple orgasms.

He took my weight easily, our mouths coming together with the same ferocity as before. His lust hadn’t diminished at all. It had only been banked like a fire until it was given more oxygen to burn.

Wrapping his hand around my hair, Sawyer tilted my head back, deepening the kiss and all thoughts of Willy, accidental slave connections, illegal fighting, and grisly murders fled my mind.

All I knew was Sawyer.

All I could taste, hear, and smell was Sawyer.

He lowered me to the couch, settling his weight on top of me. I whimpered, tightening my grip around him, holding him to me. Propping himself onto his forearms, our gazes met. Our breaths mingling together. Our connection was more than just physical now.

It was soul-deep.

“I need you.”

His declaration slayed me.

“But I don’t think I can be gentle with you.”

“Good, because I don’t like it when you’re gentle with me.”

His eyes flared, wicked heat burning in his darkening gray irises. “Are you sure? It’s going to be rough.”

Leaning forward, I bit his bottom lip, running it between my teeth. Sawyer reared back, hissing, his hunger burning between us.

“Remember, this is what you wanted,” he warned. He reached between us, clawing at the waistband of my pants, tearing them from my hips and shredding my panties in the process.

“That was my favorite pair,” I breathed, staring into his black eyes. They were flashing with bolts of lightning, electric blue forks arcing across his now black irises.

“I don’t care.” His words came out warped. “I *need* to get inside you.”

Soaking. Wet. Panties.



Oh, wait, I wasn't wearing any. The shredded remains of that pretty unicorn material taunted me from the floor. And even though I should've been angry, I couldn't bring myself to care.

I writhed against him. "Get inside me already."

Dragging his fingers through my heat, he spread my arousal over his dick, then sank into me. I came immediately, my inner walls clenching down tight on his shaft, drawing a long, loud groan from both our throats.

He began to pump his hips, thrusting inside me, dragging his cock over my sensitive flesh. He was chasing down my next orgasm like it had insulted his mother—driving himself deeper. Harder. Fiercer. The release caught me unaware, and for a moment, I was sure I'd blackout from the pleasure. I remained conscious, though, staring into his fathomless black eyes.

"Two down." His voice was strained. "Ten more to go."

"Sawyer, no I can't do a dozen orgasms toni... Oh, *fuck*." I bit my bottom lip, drawing blood as I came again, Sawyer wringing the pleasure from me in a relentless pounding.

"Three," he panted, sweat beading on his brow. "Now, let's get number four."

I thrashed my head from side to side, "No more, Sawyer. I beg you."

Leaning back, a wicked grin on his handsome-as-sin face, he said, "I like it when you beg. I should make you do it more often."

Pinning my arms above my head, his pace became more punishing, his thrusts deeper, his growls of satisfaction growlier. Sawyer needed this confirmation that I was alive and well and his, and I let him take it. My breath exploded from me, ruffling his hair, just as his hot breaths ruffled mine.

Straining against his hold, I screamed his name when I came again, and the utter gratification on Sawyer's face made me want to slap him. He knew exactly what he was doing—pushing me to my physical limits.

Thrashing.

Writhing.

Moaning.

Begging.

Sawyer didn't let up until the twelfth orgasm rolled through me hours later. He came with a roar that shook the glass in the windows. Emptying himself into me felt like a transcendental moment. But then again, sex with Sawyer always felt like a transcendental moment. As I breathed through my

last orgasm, his hips churned against me, his cock continuing to kick inside, until, finally, he drew to a stop.

Sweat beaded on his brow as he touched his forehead to mine. We breathed each other in. Him with his whisky and chocolate scent. And me... well, I didn't know what I smelled like to him. I hoped it was unicorn awesome.

Releasing his hold on my wrists, he massaged the joints, encouraging the blood to flow once more. Then he dropped small kisses to the tip of my nose, my eyelids, and the corner of my mouth.

"Feeling better?" I asked, watching as the black was erased from his eyes.

"Yes." He kissed me again. "Was I too rough?"

I wriggled, highly aware that he was still sheathed within me. "No. I love it rough. I love it soft. I love it any way with you."

"I love *you*, pussy cat." He stroked my face reverently, staring deeply into my eyes.

I made my fingers into a gun, motioning pulling the trigger, and winked at him. "Ditto."

His brow rose. "Really? That's all you have for me?"

I grinned. Shrugged. "I'm charming. What can I say?"

With a mock growl, he said, "I'll hear those words from you soon, pussy cat."

"Maybe, but you should know I'm stubborn as fuck."

"Oh, you are? I hadn't noticed."

"I'm supposed to be the sarcastic one. We went through this on the first day we worked together, remember?"

"All I remember is being completely enamored by the most frustratingly annoying human I'd ever met."

I patted his face. "Aww, you say the sweetest th—"

The sound of Sawyer's phone ringing in his pants pocket interrupted me.

"Oh, handy, you don't even have to bend down to get it." I pointed at the slacks Sawyer was wearing. He'd been so desperate for me that he hadn't even bothered to undress.

Not gonna lie—it made me a little power drunk.

"Taylor," he said, smirking at me while answering the call. "Yes, boss."

Cupping my hand like I was telling him a secret, I asked in a whisper, "Is it weird that you're still inside me while talking to our boss, or is it just me?"

He grimaced, and slid himself free. "At home." He listened for a moment,

then looked back at me, his mouth tight. “McKenzie and I will be there soon.”

“What is it?” I asked when he hung up.

“Another body. Ms. Silverstone from the fight tonight. Her supe, the banshee, reported her death.”

“Fuck.”

## ELEVEN

MS. SILVERSTONE LIVED IN ONE OF THE PENTHOUSE APARTMENTS OF THE Matriarch Building uptown. Given how freaking early it was, we were the only people around, but Lee had beaten us there. We found him standing by the bank of elevators in the one-thousand-foot, marble-drenched lobby.

He pushed his glasses up his nose as we approached. “Detective Taylor, Officer McKenzie, how are you both?”

“Lee,” Sawyer replied, holding out his hand to shake. “Sorry to drag you out of bed so early.”

“That’s quite all right.”

A security guard walked our way. “Are you folks ready to head up?”

“Yes,” Sawyer replied, stepping to one side so the guard could call the elevator. The doors skimmed open smoothly, the mirrored sides reflecting our images back at us. My eyes widened, though, when I saw Willy standing behind me. I spun around and scanned the lobby, but he was gone.

“What’s wrong?” Sawyer asked in a low voice. “The pulse at the base of your neck is hammering.”

Rubbing my temples with my thumb and index finger, I let out a breath. “I thought I saw Willy behind me.”

The low growl he emitted spoke to me on a primitive level. I knew Sawyer would protect me at all costs, but feeling the rush of aggression from him was something else. He, too, looked around the lobby, his body taut with restrained hostility. “I don’t see him.”

“Neither do I.”

With a possessive hand on the small of my back, he ushered me inside the elevator, herding me to the back corner.

The whole left side of my body was suddenly covered in goosebumps, and I knew that Willy had ghosted in with us. The guard swiped a gray key fob over a small black rectangular panel and hit the top-floor button.

“Mr. Faraz, the night doorman, will meet you in the penthouse,” he said, stepping out of the car before the doors slid shut.

Trying to ignore the fact that Willy was with us, I asked, “What do you think we’re going to find up there?”

“Probably something similar to what we found at Mr. Falcon’s place.”

I nodded. “Cool, cool. I’ll set my phasers to *grossed out* then.”

Sawyer whispered, “That was an inside thought, pussy cat.”

I smiled at the medical examiner and shrugged. “Sorry. No filter.”

He pushed his glasses up a little higher onto the bridge of his nose and replied, “That’s quite all right. I find your levity quite refreshing, Officer McKenzie.”

I elbowed Sawyer in the ribs, eliciting an *oomph*. “He thinks I’m refreshing.”

My consort only smiled indulgently.

The elevator car came to a smooth stop at the top of the building, the doors opening directly behind me. As one, we turned to find an overly modern apartment filled with cream carpets as far as the eye could see. Ultra-modern glass and steel furniture competed with a whole buttload of pink violently splashed through artwork, cushions, and other décor, breaking up the cream-on-cream nightmare.

A man wearing a jacket emblazoned with the Matriarch’s logo on the breast pocket was waiting for us. That had to be Mr. Faraz.

“Are you with PIG?” he asked. He shook his head. “Of course, you are. You wouldn’t be up here if you weren’t.” He cleared his throat, seemingly composing himself. “I’m Mr. Faraz, the night doorman for the Matriarch.”

“I’m Detective Taylor. My partner, Officer McKenzie, and this is the medical examiner, Dr. Lee.”

Mr. Faraz nodded to each of us in greeting. “Thank goodness you’re here. We had to... *subdue* the supe living here. She tried to leave the building after she reported the crime, but security detained her.”

“Where was Ms. Silverstone’s body found?”

“In her bedroom.”

Sawyer led the way into the bedroom. I stepped in behind him, blinking at the scene in front of us.

“Jesus, change the victim, and we have the same scene,” I said to him.

Ms. Silverstone’s expensive face had been blown apart by the .40 still slackly clutched in her left hand. She was dressed in a sheer pink nightgown, a bright pink teddy beneath. On her feet were a pair of fluffy slippers—also in pink.

Lee bent down to study what was left of the woman’s face, his shrewd gaze tracking down to the gun. “She shot herself,” he announced. “At least, I believe she did, and not too long ago either. Once I get her in to the lab, I’ll be able to confirm this.”

I lifted the toes of my boots that were about to touch the still wet pool of blood. At a guess, I would’ve said sometime in the last few hours. “I’m going to speak with the banshee.”

Sawyer grunted, not paying attention at all.

Exiting the bedroom, I asked Mr. Faraz to take me to the supe who was our only witness in this case.

“She’s in the butler’s pantry,” he informed me, taking me into the spacious kitchen. “We didn’t know where else to hold her.”

“At least she can grab a snack if she gets hungry,” I replied.

After opening the frosted glass door, I stepped inside. The banshee was wearing torn jeans and a stretched-out t-shirt—both covered in blood—but she looked nothing like the female who had fought last night. She eased off the edge of the marble counter, a small grimace twisting her features, and faced me.

Although she wasn’t bandaged from the injuries she’d sustained during the fight with Kayla, I did notice her movements were slower—more deliberate—like her bones were still regenerating. Her long, black claws weren’t on display right now, though, for which I was grateful.

She stared at me like I was the enemy, her emerald eyes dull and lacking the same spark as they had when I’d last seen her. Curiously, the gold band that had circled her throat was now gone. She had purple-red circles under her eyes, a split lip that hadn’t healed, and a gash on her cheek that was still bleeding.

“I’m Officer McKenzie with Buxton PIG,” I told her. “And you are?”

The banshee stared hard at me, her emerald eyes sparking to life with defiance.

“I can wait all day,” I said. “But you should know I enjoy singing in confined spaces just like this, and I can’t carry a tune.”

Still, she remained mute.

I shrugged, shaking out the cuffs of my jacket. “All right, get ready for my rendition of “I Kissed a Girl” by Katy Perry... gospel style.”

Completely prepared to follow through on my threat, I opened my mouth to sing the first line, when the banshee rolled her eyes and said, “Lilith. My name is Lilith, and I swear to God if you sing, I’m going to stab my own ears with the dried pasta.”

Grinning, I said, “See? That wasn’t so hard. Now, I’m here to talk to you about what happened to your mistress.”

Lilith dropped her gaze and folded her arms loosely, wincing a little as she did it. “Isn’t it clear what happened?”

“Maybe. Mind if I record this conversation?” I asked, easing up against the wall and taking out my phone.

She flicked an annoyed glance my way, but nodded. “Do whatever you want. Whatever I say, it won’t matter. Nobody will believe me.”

Turning on the voice recording feature, I placed my phone on the shelf between us. “Why is that?”

She gave me an are-you-fucking-serious look. “I’m a slave and a supernatural. Humans will never believe my word against the word of the doorman who screamed bloody murder and called the cops when he saw me come down in the elevator to try and find help.” The banshee released her hold on her body and sat on a stool that had been placed in the palatial pantry.

I looked around. “Jesus, this thing is bigger than my old apartment used to be.”

She looked around too. “It’s ridiculous,” she spat. “The wealth these people have makes them feel as if they’re entitled to anything they want. But they’re not. They can’t treat supes like this.”

“Beat you? Make you fight to the death?”

Her head jerked up. “How do you know she beat me?”

“The bruises that are forming under your eyes. The split lip. The cut on your cheek. Did she do that one with her rings still on?” I pointed to each of the injuries as I spoke. “She probably did it last night after coming back from the fight. To punish you for losing, maybe?”

Lilith conceded the truth with the dip of her chin. “She lost a lot of money last night.”

“And you paid for it with a pound of flesh. Got it. Then you decided to get your own back and shoot her in the face, then stage it to look like a

suicide.”

“I did no such thing,” she snarled, fire finally blazing to life in her emerald eyes. She bared her needle-sharp teeth at me. “The crazy bitch did that all on her own.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was in my room when I heard Ms. Silverstone talking to someone. At first, I thought it was herself, she was a batshit crazy old woman, after all, but I definitely heard the timbre of someone else’s voice, although I couldn’t hear what they were saying exactly.”

“What was Ms. Silverstone saying?”

Lilith frowned. “She said she didn’t know who Sakura was.”

*Sakura?* This was the second time I’d heard that name. “Do *you* know who Sakura is?”

The banshee shook her head. “No. Never heard of her.”

“What happened after that?”

“I ignored it... until...”

“Until?”

“I felt the slave bond break between us... the exact time I heard the gunshot.”

“What time was that?”

She shrugged, the bones of her shoulders showing through the thin fabric of the shirt. “Four forty-four—and before you ask why I know that, I looked at the clock, okay? When I felt the bond break, I was released from her order to stay in my room and walked into Silverstone’s room to find her beside the bed, her brains leaking onto the floor.”

Gray Matter—the Ultimate Accessory for the Wealthy and Cruel.

“Now that you know I didn’t do it, can I go?”

“I’ll speak to my partner. We need to take you into the station to test for gunshot residue before we can release you as a suspect.”

“Whatever. My hands are clean. I had nothing to do with her murder.”

I knew that was true since all supernatural slaves automatically heeded the rule of not harming their masters.

“Oh, one more question. Was Ms. Silverstone human?”

Lilith gave me a *well-duh* look. “Of course, she was.”

*And then there were two.*

With a nod, I said, “Thanks.”

Leaving Lilith in the pantry, I wandered back into the bedroom. EMTs



had arrived to take away the body. The PIG CSI team was already there—the three fae working wordlessly and efficiently.

“What did you learn?”

“Lilith heard the gunshot at 4:44.”

Sawyer frowned, that number tipping him off like it did me. “She’s sure?”

“Yup.”

“Which would explain how the blood is still fresh,” Lee replied, joining the conversation. “Was there anything else she said?”

I nodded. “Yeah. She said Ms. Silverstone was talking to someone a little while before she heard the gunshot.”

“Who was she talking to?” Sawyer asked. “And was it on the phone or in person?”

“In person. Lilith doesn’t know who they were, but they were asking about someone named Sakura.”

Lee pushed up his glasses. “That’s a Japanese name. It means cherry blossom.”

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you this before, but when I was with Willy, we followed Falcon 2.0 into one of the other shipping containers,” I said to Sawyer. “The woman with the tiger stripe tattoos was in there. She was going through files on the computer. She’d mentioned the name Sakura too. Do you think it’s linked somehow?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence not to be related,” Sawyer replied, beginning to pace. Suddenly, he drew to a stop and crouched by the window. “There’s a partial footprint here in the pile of the carpet.”

I walked over to see for myself. Sure enough, between the chaise lounge and the window, there was a boot mark. I cast my gaze farther out. *Bingo*. There was another leading out of the bedroom. Although the carpet was littered with the unmarked soles of Ms. Silverstone’s slippers and our own prints, I tracked the other set of footprints out into the living room. There was a glass sliding door that led out onto a balcony. The footsteps had come from there, but how had someone gotten up there?

“Everything okay?” Mr. Faraz asked when he noticed me crawling along the ground.

Glancing up at him, I asked, “Can anybody get into this apartment?”

“No. The lift is activated by key fob. Besides that, they’d have to get past me and building security first.”

“What about that way?” I pointed at the sliding door. “Could anyone climb over from another balcony? Maybe from the other penthouse?”

He shook his head. “No. The other balcony is around the side of the building for maximum privacy.”

I stared at the balcony, at the door, at the footsteps.

“Cat, what is it?”

“Someone came through these doors.” I pointed.

Sawyer came in for a closer look, following the line of prints. “The banshee?”

“Maybe,” I replied absently. Standing, I went back to the butler’s pantry and opened the door. Lilith looked up from picking at her nails.

“Can I go now?”

“No. What kind of shoes are you wearing?”

She looked down. “Chuck Taylors. Why?”

“Have you worn them since coming home?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Let me see the tread marks.” Without waiting for her okay, I lifted her foot and checked the sole. The familiar pattern was clean of blood. The markings on the floor didn’t match the Converse sneakers even slightly.

“There was someone else here,” I told Sawyer, stepping out of the butler’s pantry. “Someone who spoke to Ms. Silverstone before she shot herself.”

“How could they have gotten in?” Mr. Faraz asked from his position by the door. “I would’ve seen them.”

I thought of Willy and how he could move invisibly. “A supe who can turn invisible could get in. Which leaves us with what, ghosts?”

“You’re thinking it’s not suicide?” Lee asked, incredulously. “All the evidence points to it being done by her own hand.”

“Argh, I know, but something doesn’t feel right about this. The same with the other death. And I’ll figure out why that is.”

## TWELVE

“CAN YOU PLEASE HOOK UP AN IV OF COFFEE?” I BEGGED SAWYER FROM THE chair in his library, stabbing my finger into the crook of my elbow. “Just put it into my vein so I can function.”

“How about I *don't* hook it into your vein and give it to you instead,” Sawyer replied gently, placing my unicorn mug down onto the table beside me. His gaze flickered over to Reaver, who had popped up in the chair opposite a few minutes after I'd sat down.

“I know,” I said. “It's the strangest companion animal I've ever seen too.”

We'd gotten into the office to test for that residue on Lilith's hands at six in the morning. After it was clear she'd had nothing to do with the crime, we released her. We'd returned home for a couple of hours of sleep, but I couldn't seem to switch off my brain.

And now I was here in the office, leafing through the thousands of books Sawyer had on supes as well as a scary amount of noir fiction.

Sawyer stood behind me, massaging my shoulders. I groaned, letting my head roll forward as I submitted to his strong fingers. “I found something about panther shifters. Did you know there's a whole US-based pride system here? There's even a pride in Wyoming.”

“Yes, I am aware of them. It's a highly patriarchal society from what I understand, but there isn't a lot more detailed information about the Leo of the Back Claws.”

“I also found information about lion shifters, cat shifters. Bastet—the Egyptian god— sith cats, the Matagot, the vampire cat, the Wampus cat, and some freaky-ass shit about the Black Cat of KillaKee. But nothing about tiger shifters.” I closed the book in my lap and peered up at him. “Got any other

ideas?”

“Tiger shifters are rare because humans mistook them for the animal and many were shot and killed before they went into hiding. There are no leopard shifters left—they were driven to extinction in the 1800s by Rogue Faction.” He ran his hand along his strong jaw. “What about white tiger shifters?”

I sat forward in my chair, scooping up my coffee and taking a sip. “Is there such a thing as a white tiger shifter?”

“I met one a long time ago. They’re an elusive species—only really venturing out into society when they’re forced to breed.”

“Okay.”

Walking to the bookshelf, he pulled on the spine of a book, tipping it down and letting it slide into his hand. “They’re called byakko—a kind of yokai in both Japanese and Chinese legends.” Opening the cover, he turned it around and showed me an illustration of a white tiger surrounded by clouds.

“Byakko are known for their healing abilities, which are passed from mother to daughter. They’re also rumored to have control of the weather. But they’re calm creatures, more inclined to help than hinder.” He perched on the edge of the other armchair.

Placing my coffee cup down, I said, “All right. So, if this woman *is* a byakko, and she’s supposed to be gentle by nature, why did she steal Falcon’s skin and parade around in it?” Then an idea hit me like a freaking lightning bolt. “Wait, wait, wait. Do you think she *killed* him?”

“Falcon’s murder has been ruled as suicide.” He didn’t say as if the idea was ridiculous—more like he was playing devil’s advocate. Because that’s what we did.

I stood and began to pace. “I know, but let’s pretend it wasn’t. Is there any way it could be made to look like he’d shot himself?”

“Possession is a possibility,” he conceded. “But there are so few supes who are capable of it.”

Slumping back into my chair, I asked, “What about white tigers? Are they known to have that ability?”

“I don’t think so.” He shrugged. “But there isn’t a lot of information about them so I don’t think we can rule it out.”

“We need to figure out who Sakura is, and why this woman needs to find her.” I rubbed my eyes, feeling fatigue like a physical weight. “I’m going to take a shower, then we can head into the office. We have a flash drive full of information about these events and maybe we’ll find something on there that

might give us some answers.”

Thirty minutes later, I was behind the wheel of the unmarked car I'd claimed as our own. I tapped the head of the Funko Pop Deadpool riding a unicorn that lived on the dashboard as soon as I got in.

Sawyer opened the passenger door and slid inside. “Are you sure you don't want to rest a little longer? You didn't sleep at all. I can go in and start without you.”

“Nah, I'm fine. Besides, the sooner we solve this case, the sooner we can —”

“Move onto the next one?” he provided.

“I was going to say get loose and tattoo each other's faces on our asses, but yeah, moving on to the next one is a good idea too.”

Grinning, I started the engine, my gaze flickering to the rearview mirror out of habit, where I saw Willy standing there. Rolling down the window, I said, “Stand down, big guy.”

Sawyer jerked his head around. “Is the Gray Man here?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “You can't see him?”

“No.”

I stuck my head out the window again. “Mind letting Sawyer in on the joke?”

An image of a comedy club filled my head.

“Yeah, kind of like that. Just become visible when Sawyer's around.”

When I heard my partner curse, I knew he'd done just as I'd asked, only reaffirming that Willy was, indeed, my own personal slave. When I pulled my head back inside the car, Sawyer asked, “How often have you seen him without my knowledge? How often has he come to you?”

Tracing a pattern onto the top of my thigh, I thought about how to answer that. “A few?”

His jaw tightened. “A few as in a literal few, or a few as in if you tell me, I'll lose my fucking mind.”

I made a weighing-up gesture with my hands, tipping my left hand up a little higher than the right. “A little from column A, a little from column B.”

When Sawyer next spoke, his words were a smoky growl. “When was the

last time? In the lobby of the Matriarch?”

I couldn't lie to him so I nodded.

“That explains the thread of fear I felt through the bond. Does the Gray Man scare you? Because if he does—”

I cut him off with a kiss. “He doesn't scare me. I'm kind of still surprised when he shows up. It's like having a tiger for a pet, but forgetting it's a wild animal.”

“I still don't like it,” he ground out.

“Noted, but until I can figure out how to break this bond that won't physically or metaphysically hurt either one of us, I'll do it. For now, we'll just deal.”

Sawyer turned to face the front, a muscle in the corner of his eye twitching. “I don't like sharing you.”

I snorted. “You aren't. Willy and I hardly have a sexual relationship.”

“I... I don't know how to explain it—only that I don't like it.”

“Noted.” I checked my mirrors once more, not at all surprised to see Willy sitting in the back seat. Turning to Sawyer, I asked, “Would it be weird to get a ‘baby on board’ sticker for the back?”

His dry reply was, “In so many ways.”

After giving him a mock salute, I reversed from the parking spot and made my way to the garage exit.

When we arrived at the precinct twenty minutes later, I slid into our designated spot and killed the engine. Twisting around in my seat, I said to Willy, “Stay out of sight today. Unless you see Smith. You can scare the pants off of that guy.”

Glancing over at Sawyer, I expected him to berate me for that one. No? Nothing? Opening the door, I got out, waiting for my partner. We walked into the building together with Willy ghosting behind us. I frowned when I noticed everyone quickly glancing at us then away, like they were afraid to meet our gazes.

“Why are people acting strangely?” I asked Sawyer from the corner of my mouth.

He scanned the room, then peeked over his shoulder. “I think it's the Gray Man.”

I looked, too, because I thought I'd told him to stay out of sight. I felt the weight of his stare on me in return but realized he wasn't visible at all.

“He's a walking nightmare. His power is leaking all over the place,

making the humans feel a high level of fear and anxiety.”

“Cool... I mean, *not* cool,” I corrected at his scowl. “So *not* cool.”

We made it through the sea of beat cops and detectives, stepping into our own office. The three recruits were all working independently now, covering their own caseload.

“Took you guys long enough,” Kayla said loudly, looking up from her computer screen. “Did you two lose track of time while you were banging in the shower this morning?”

“On the kitchen counter, actually,” I replied, unashamed by her question. “Loads of dirty, filthy sex. Multiple Os.”

With a snort, she returned her attention to her work. I walked to my desk, plonked down into the chair, and slid open the top drawer. The USB in the shape of a giant paperclip was just where I’d left it, sitting on top of a pad of yellow paper and beside my emergency candy bar.

Taking off the silicone top of the flash drive, I slid the USB connector into the port of my computer and waited for the digital folder to open.

“Woah,” I breathed.

“What?” asked Sawyer, rolling his chair a little closer.

There were literally thousands of files on the flash drive. Spreadsheets, PDFs, photographs—even a few movie files. I clicked into one, the media player window popping open, but not playing right away. The static image was grainy, but I could clearly see the outlines of people’s shoulders and a spot-lit fighting ring beyond.

“Press play, pussy cat.”

Moving my mouse over to the triangle that would play the movie, I drew in a deep breath then let it go. The sound of voracious jeers filled the office, making everyone stop what they were doing and turn in our direction. Avah—who I assumed was filming—stepped past people and moved closer to the ring, where two supes with glittering gold collars around their necks came at each other in a violent clash.

Both males were covered in blood and gore, hunks of muscle and meat hanging from their shoulders, back, arms, and torso. One fighter looked to have blond hair, and the other black. Stacked with muscle, the blond was just a few inches taller than the dark-haired male. Arching over their shoulders were wings—the blond with black wings and the dark-haired one with pure white.

The pair of them were fighting to the death, and it was almost sickening

to watch with the knowledge that one of them wasn't going to walk away from this fight.

"This one's an angel," Sawyer said, motioning to the male with dark hair. "The other is a fallen angel."

"They're killing each other."

His nod was grim. "I don't know how an angel was taken as a slave."

The *hows* didn't matter now. I watched, my heart in my throat, as the fallen angel tackled the angel to the ground, wailing on his face. The angel tried to get to his feet, but the fallen angel wasn't letting up. Suddenly, a black-bladed sword appeared in the fallen angel's hand.

The angel's eyes widened before he tried to wiggle free from the cage of the fallen angel's legs.

I hit pause. "What's happening there?" I asked.

"A sword of fire wielded by an angel will destroy a fallen angel," Sawyer murmured. "In the eternal sense." He tapped the screen. "But that's not a sword of fire. That is something else. A sword that carries hellfire, perhaps?"

"But..." I was about to say that weapons weren't permitted in the ring, but that wasn't true. Bruin had had one—an axe.

Sawyer stroked his jaw. "It looked like the sword appeared when it was needed."

*A lot like Reaver appeared when it was needed.*

Spinning around so quickly it felt like my brain was sloshing around in my skull, I said, "Are you trying to tell me Reaver is a demonic sword?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what Reaver is. The fallen angel it was confiscated from had won it in a poker match a few weeks before. Besides, I wouldn't say an object is good or evil—it just is. It's the wielder of the weapon that gives it morality."

I let those words sink in. Reaver had only ever helped me, but the origins of it were still hazy. Returning my attention to the screen, I hit play again, needing to see this snuff film to the end. The sword the fallen angel held burst into black flames, and with a wicked grin on his face, he removed the angel's head.

My stomach threatened to revolt. I'd just watched a cold-blooded murder and the knowledge that there wasn't a damn thing I could have done about it ate at me.

Reaching over me, Sawyer reloaded the video.

"What are you doing?" I shoved his hand away. "I don't want to watch



that again.”

“We need to see who else was there. Maybe we can ID some of the spectators.”

I swallowed. Nodded. I could do this. “Okay. But can you put it on mute this time?”

Turning off the speakers, he hit play, and we watched once more. I kept my focus trained on the people watching the fight. I pointed at the screen when I saw Ms. Silverstone in the crowd as well as Mr. Silas, who owned the vampire from the fight the other night. Everyone else, though, I didn’t recognize.

“Roll it to after the decapitation?” I asked in a small voice.

Sawyer did as I asked, rubbing my back as the footage sped through the loss of a head. When he resumed it, two giant men had lumbered into the ring to remove the body. The fallen angel was swaggering around, throwing his arms up and down to incite the crowd. Many cheered along silently with him, and I could just imagine the volume hitting fever pitch when the combatant picked up the severed head and showed it to the crowd.

The camera angle suddenly changed, and we were staring at a close-up shot of Avah’s face. There were unshed tears sitting in her blue eyes. Her mouth was moving, and I reached over quickly to unmute the video.

*“—ond fight this evening that has ended in death. The owner of the winning slave receives one hundred thousand dollars prize money. Once the bodies are removed, another fight begins. Mr. Falcon is one of the operators of this chapter, although I know there are also clubs up in California, Massachusetts, and Mississippi.”*

The camera spun around again in time to see James Falcon enter the ring. He was wearing an expensive suit, crocodile leather shoes, and had chunky gold rings on each of his fingers.

*“Now, it’s time for the main event. Mrs. Black’s fighter will be battling Mr. Fox’s entrant.”* He looked away, nodding at someone off-screen.

Avah panned the camera to the right, capturing the moment the minotaur—Bruin—we’d arrested two nights ago stepped into the ring. The camera moved again, showing a male enter the ring from the other side. Behind him, was another man, who I thought I recognized.

I was about to ask Sawyer if he recognized him too when the supe’s body began to swell, muscles growing, veins popping. There was a glint of red in his eyes, and when he opened his mouth to let out a roar, huge teeth jutted

from his upper jaw.

“It’s Bad Guy,” I said. “From the other night.”

Sawyer got a little closer to the screen. “I think you’re right.”

“What the hell is he?”

“A berserker. A violent fighter who loses control in battle, often slaughtering everything and everyone within his reach.”

We watched as the two did battle, the pair evenly matched. The two supe slaves circled each other, trading violent punches, brutal kicks, and savage bites. At one point, Bruin gored Bad Guy. He’d turned his head horizontally at the last moment, ensuring that his horns went through the berserker’s chest and stomach simultaneously. The issuing roar shook the dust from the rafters. Bruin pulled away, bits of intestine and chunks of meat hanging from his horns, while the rest of Bad Guy’s internal organs fell onto the sawdust-covered floor.

Without missing a beat, the berserker scooped up his small intestine and shoved it back into his abdominal cavity. Keeping one hand on his stomach, he slammed his fist into the minotaur’s bovine face—the sound of shattering bones unmistakable. The berserker let out another roar, throwing his head back. The crowd cheered him on, screaming even louder when the berserker tackled the minotaur to the ground. The pair rolled, trading fists. Blood spurted. Teeth flew. The berserker leaned down and tore out the throat of the minotaur, spitting the trachea out, where it landed a few feet away.

Bruin’s owner—a woman who looked to be no older than twenty-five—threw a white towel into the ring, stopping the match instantly.

“Should Bruin have died from that injury?” I asked softly.

Blood was gushing from the wound to his neck, covering the floor. The sawdust greedily soaked up what it could, but even that had reached maximum saturation.

“He should be dead, right?”

Sawyer’s jaw was tight. “If not dead, then recovering from the injury for quite a while.”

“Maybe it’s an old tape?” I asked, my eyes already darting to the file name. “Nope. It’s dated four days ago. We arrested him two days ago, and he was completely healed.”

“I’ve never heard of a supe healing so quickly from an injury like that before.” Sawyer shook his head. “It doesn’t add up.”

I stared back at the screen. The video had stopped so I opened another. It

began with Avah facing the screen. She looked to be sitting in her car.

*“I’m outside the Buxton slaughterhouse. There’s another competition on tonight. I’m going to try and get more faces this time.”*

The picture cut to the inside of the slaughterhouse, and everything came flooding back to me. The combatants in the ring didn’t look familiar, but I did see Bruin there with his master. Falcon was also there, watching a fight between two women—one seemingly human-looking with white wings and another with red skin and a long red tail—cartoon devil style.

“A Valkyrie and a spectra demon,” Sawyer informed me.

I swallowed. “A Valkyrie? Like from Norse mythology?”

A nod, then he pointed to the other combatant. “Spectra demons are known to be trouble-makers—low-level demons in hell. Her tail, however, has a poisoned spine at the end. See it there?”

The spectra demon whipped her tail around, using it like another appendage. She struck at the Valkyrie, the barb embedding in the other woman’s shoulder. The Valkyrie screamed, wrenching the spiked point from her shoulder and tearing chunks of muscle off in the process.

Blood poured from the wound, the edges of the torn skin attempting to knit back together but couldn’t for some reason.

“The poison stops any wound from healing, turns it necrotic. The only way to remove the poison is to remove the tissue surrounding it. A lot like you’d remove a cancer from a human.”

“Damn.”

The spectra demon whipped her tail again, this time slashing at the Valkyrie’s face. The other woman dodged the blow, landing her own punch and driving her fist through the demon’s body and out the other side. The Valkyrie held the still pumping heart of the spectra demon in her hand for a moment before pulling it back through the front of her body and presenting it to the frothing crowd.

The spectra toppled to the ground, the sawdust shooting out through her new decorative chest hole.

Avah then panned the camera out, getting a better look at the spectators. As she moved from left to right, I lunged for the keyboard to stop the video.

Pointing at a face in the crowd, I said, “That’s her.”

“Who?”

“The woman who was wearing Falcon’s skin. That’s her. That’s the one looking for Sakura.”

Sawyer got a little closer to the screen, studying the freeze-frame woman. “I can see the stripes now. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“You’re filling me with confidence, Sawyer.” I tapped my chin. “Maybe she’s also in earlier videos.” I loaded up the previous video we’d watched, dreading watching the match between the angel and fallen angel again. About a minute in, I caught a flash of an arm with tiger stripes on the edge of the frame.

“There,” I said, pointing. I fast-forwarded a little more, seeing the woman again in the contest between Bruin and the berserker. “And again.” I moved a little closer to the screen. “She’s not watching the fight though. She’s looking at the slave owners.” I turned to Sawyer, whose face was incredibly close to mine. “Who do you think she is?”

“I think the only way we’re going to find out is if we go to another fight, and the only way we can find out where the next fight is going to be is to talk to some of these slave owners.”

I looked back over at the screen. “Hey, isn’t that guy the GM of Spotlight, the event management company? His company just listed on the stock exchange.” I recognized him from an article in *Runway* magazine I’d been forced to read while I was waiting to see the dentist. I swear, that was my own personal hell right there—a glossy gossip magazine in a confined space with fear riding you hard before an appointment with a dental drill.

After a quick Google search, I compared the photo I’d found on the search engine to the freeze-frame of the video. Yup, it was the same guy.

As I slid on my jacket, I asked, “How are we going to play this?”

“I don’t want to make the same mistake as we did with Falcon and Daniels. We can’t afford to have him walk away from this.”

“What do you suggest then? Play good cop, bad cop? Can I be the bad cop?” I pounded my fist into my palm. “I’ll act *the shit* out of the bad cop.”

“Let me take the lead on this one, pussy cat.”

## THIRTEEN

“CAN I HELP YOU?” A WOMAN BEHIND A HUGE GLASS DESK ASKED WHEN WE stepped into the offices of Spotlight. Her work surface was spotless—everything in its place. The pens, the pencils. A tablet. A legal pad. She even had a bowl of candy.

“We’re here to see Mr. Fox,” I said, dragging my eyes off the candy and smiling sweetly.

The receptionist pursed her lips. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Nope. Do we need one?”

“What my partner is trying to say...” Sawyer smoothly interjected using his *fuck-me-now* voice, “... is that we’re with Buxton PIG and we’re here to ask him some questions about our current investigation.” He flashed her his badge, although by the way she was looking at it, I would have thought he was flashing his junk at her.

She studied the credentials, her lust-heated eyes darting to Sawyer’s face before slooowly traveling down his chest, torso, before finally lingering on his hips.

When her undressing gaze eventually returned to his face, she smiled—all pouty, filler-filled lips. “I’ll just see if Mr. Fox is available for you.”

“And me,” I said, waving. “Don’t forget about me.”

The receptionist blinked like she’d forgotten I was even there. With a false smile, she added, “Of course.” She picked up the phone and pressed a button. “Mr. Fox, I know you said you didn’t want to be disturbed this afternoon, but I have a detective here from PIG to see you. Yes, I’ll send him in.”

Just *him*? Damn, Sawyer was working his pussy-soaking powers *hard*

today.

She replaced the receiver with a *click*. “Mr. Fox will see you now. Last door at the end of the hallway.” She gestured off to one side, eyeing Sawyer again like she was thinking about him naked.

He nodded his thanks and walked away. Me, on the other hand, I needed her to understand that I didn’t take her sexual perusal of my partner so lightly. You know... without actually *letting* her know we were more than partners.

“He’s gay,” I told her. “And you do *not* have a magical pussy. I think you need to hear that.” Reaching forward, I grabbed a large handful of candy and pushed it into my jacket pocket. Then took another. Shoving my bulging fists under her nose, I said, “I’m keeping these.”

She glared at my back as I walked away. When I found Sawyer at the end of the hall waiting for me, amusement lit up his crystal gray eyes. “How do you know she doesn’t have a magical pussy?”

I offered him some candy, which he declined with a shake of his head. “You heard that, huh?”

“Your jealousy was kind of hard to miss, but you don’t need to worry because you’re the only one I want.”

Snorting, I patted him on the shoulder. “I’m the only one you *can* have. I just needed her to know that too.” I gestured to the door, indicating he should get this show on the road. Was I embarrassed that I’d reacted the way? Maybe. Marking my territory wasn’t my style, but the very concept of someone staring at Sawyer sexually made me want to tear off heads.

Stroking my cheek with the back of his fingers, he murmured, “I think I like this jealous streak of yours.”

I knocked his hand away, squaring my shoulders. “Not a streak. More like a dash or a minor trace.” Wiggling my fingers at the closed door, I added, “Carry on.”

Turning, he knocked on the office door of Mr. Freddy Fox.

“Jesus, his name sounds like it belongs to a kids’ cartoon character,” I muttered as I unwrapped a candy and popped it into my mouth.

“Enter,” came the terse reply.

Sawyer opened the door, ushering me inside before him so I got the first look at Fox. A middle-aged, balding man sat behind a six-foot-long oak desk, his hands folded in front of him, his face firmly telling us that he didn’t appreciate being interrupted. Well, too bad for him because I didn’t

appreciate supernaturals being used for blood sports.

“Danielle said you needed to speak to me. Who the fuck are you? And what the hell do you want?”

“Detective Sawyer Taylor and Officer Cat McKenzie,” Sawyer replied. “We’re here to talk to you about the illegal fighting competition you attended two nights ago with your slave.”

There was no change in his expression—nothing to betray his shock. He was unruffled in his expensive suit and Cartier watch.

“I can assure you I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He stood smoothly from his chair, buttoning up his suit jacket as he moved around the desk. “Now, if that’s all you came in here to tell me...” He motioned to the door. “You can let yourselves out.”

“We have you on film,” Sawyer interjected. “We know you were there, so you can either talk to us here and now, or we can arrange to meet you down at the station to be formally interviewed and *charged* with the ownership of a slave.”

Mr. Fox’s mouth pressed into a hard line. It was clear he was a man who didn’t like being told what to do. With sharp, jerky movements, he undid the button on his jacket and sat again. It was then that I noticed his desk was as uncluttered as the secretary’s had been. To test the theory, I reached out and nudged his phone a little to the left so it wasn’t at a right angle to the desk anymore.

Fox leaned over and repositioned the whole unit carefully back into position.

His angry gaze flickered to me before he let out a thinly disguised sigh of annoyance. “Ask your questions, Taylor.”

Sawyer set his phone up on the desk, hitting record on the device. “No questions. What I have are facts. You were at an illegal supernatural fight two days ago.”

“That’s a big statement,” Fox retorted smoothly. “But without evidence, it’s just conjecture. And might I say that if you continue down this path, I’ll sue you for defamation.”

*Ooo, someone was a little defensive.*

Sawyer was unfazed. “We do have evidence. Video footage of you at an event from two days ago. Look, Mr. Fox, we don’t want to come after you, but we will if we have to. All we want is information about your involvement—involvement you probably don’t want your investors to know about.”

“You have the fucking *gall* to threaten *me*?” Fox snarled, slamming his fist onto the table. “I am *not* the kind of man you want to have as an enemy.”

“And we’re not the kind of cops to sit back and let you do what you’re doing to your slaves. So let me say this, if you can’t cooperate with us here, we’ll be forced to release this footage to the media, and we’ll let your stockholders know of your extracurricular activities.”

A muscle feathered in the man’s jaw. He knew his dick was caught in the zipper.

“I want to see this footage.”

“Fine. You can come down to the precinct with us, and we’ll show you.”

He seemed to think about that for a moment before rising from his chair and buttoning his jacket. “I won’t be meeting you without my lawyer.”

“I suggest you call them then.”

Yanking up the phone, he hit a button and waited. “Ross, I need you to meet me down at the police precinct ASAP.” He hung up without waiting for a reply and glared at us. “If I find out you’re wasting my time—”

“We’re not,” Sawyer bit out. “We’ll see you down at the precinct.”

Four hours later, Fox strolled into the now-empty PIG office, a regal-looking woman with slicked back blonde hair and an expertly cut power suit at his side. The bastard had made us wait—a deliberate tactic to prove he was winning this pissing contest. Seeing the asshole sweat when he saw that video was going to be awesome.

“Where have you been?” my partner asked, irritated.

“I was waiting for my lawyer’s schedule to free up so she could meet me.”

For a man as wealthy as Fox, I would’ve thought his lawyer would be working exclusively for him, rather than taking on additional cases. Something didn’t sound right.

Sawyer motioned for them to take a seat in the chairs in front of his desk.

“Ross,” he said, then gestured to Sawyer. “Taylor and McKenzie. Taylor, you’ve laid some pretty fucking serious accusations at my door so let’s see this evidence you allegedly have.”

Sawyer nodded to me, and I double-clicked the file I’d placed on the



desktop—the most incriminating video Avah had recorded. It seemed pretty stupid to show the bad guy just exactly what our source was, so I'd dropped two video files there and stashed the flash drive away and out of sight.

Turning my computer monitor around, I hit play and watched how Mr. Fox's expression went from smug confidence to fixed concern.

"As you can see, your face is visible here... here... and this next one is an awesome closeup. You can actually see spittle sitting on your lip as you rage out... right about... here," I said, commentating to the footage. I hit pause on the unflattering image of Mr. Fox screaming frenziedly, his eyes bulging, his hands balled into tight fists.

As soon as I turned the screen around, Fox sat back in his chair, his furious gaze fixed on Sawyer. "What is it that you want from me *exactly*?"

"Everything."

After a scowl at his lawyer, who only nodded once in agreement, Fox said, "I want your word that no charges will be pressed against me for what I'm about to tell you. If anyone asks you where you found out this information, I'll deny it, then sue you for so much money that you'll still be paying for it long after you're rotting in the ground."

I wanted to put my hand up to point out that that wasn't physically possible, but I remembered Sawyer's request to let him handle this.

My partner placed his phone onto the desk between them and began recording. "Agreed. Do you attend these fights?"

Fox glowered at Sawyer for a moment longer before biting out, "Yes."

"And you own a slave," Sawyer pushed. "A berserker, who fought two nights ago. The same berserker who you saw in the video footage tearing the throat out of the minotaur?"

Fox—the stubborn bastard—conceded the statement with a terse nod.

"Can you please give your answer verbally—for the record."

"Yes." Fox bit the word out like it tasted bad. It probably did.

"When did you purchase the berserker?"

"Six months ago."

"Where?"

Fox eased back in his chair and let out a deep, calming breath. "At an underground sales market in New York."

"Why so far away?"

"There are only three locations to purchase supernatural slaves in North America. New York, LA, and Toronto. New York is the closest."

“How many slaves do you own?”

“Three.”

“In addition to the berserker or including him?”

“Including.”

“Can you elaborate on the other two slaves you own?”

“I have a siren and a dwarf.”

“And do you fight these supernaturals too?”

Fox shifted in his seat uncomfortably. A tell? “No. I have other uses for them.”

I could just imagine what he used the siren for. Ick.

Fox turned his dark eyes to me. “I don’t use her for sex. I’m more than satisfied with my wife.”

Blinking, I looked to Sawyer. At his nod, I replied, “I didn’t say you used her for sex.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it on your face. The siren helps me sleep with her song—a far better method than popping pills, I can assure you.”

“Can you confirm that your berserker is also used for things other than fighting?” Sawyer asked, getting us back on track.

“Mr. Falcon, the fight organizer, uses Urban for security on the nights he isn’t fighting or when he’s too injured to successfully compete.”

Urban—no longer Bad Guy, although Bad Guy suited him much better.

Urban sounded like some celebrity’s baby’s name.

“Is it just Mr. Falcon who’s involved in the organization of these events?”

“There’s another man too.”

Sawyer sat back in his chair. “Got a name for me?”

Fox’s lips drew back in a snarl. “Mr. Black.”

“Is that his real name or are you blowing smoke up our asses?” my partner demanded. “If we find out later you lied to us, I’ll ensure that video haunts you for the rest of your days.”

Fox looked about really to blow an aneurism. “Mr. Black is the name we use when he fights. His legal name...” he bit out, “... is Barry Hall. And if you tell him I spilled the information—”

“I won’t,” Sawyer assured him. “Now, let’s get back to the fights. How common are injuries?”

“Common. Supes fight—the champions earning the right to use a weapon of their choice. Most owners stop the fight before their entrant is fatally harmed.”

“Why?” I asked, curious.

“Because owners spend a lot of money training, feeding, and clothing their fighting stock. Letting that supe die is a bad investment decision.”

It was just like the gladiatorial fights of ancient Rome.

“How long has Urban been fighting?”

“Five months, ever since Falcon began the chapter.”

*So, sometime last August.*

“How many fights are there per competition night?”

“Anywhere from six to ten.”

“Is it a witch who casts the dampening spells?”

Fox’s eyes flashed with anger. “A warlock.”

“Who does he belong to?”

“Hall. Falcon runs the events. Hall makes sure they’re secure.” He stared pointedly at Ross. “Are we done now?”

She nodded firmly. “Yes, I think you’ve shared enou—” Ross began.

“Just one more question, Mr. Fox,” Sawyer interjected smoothly. “When is the next SFC meeting and where?”

I could’ve sworn there was a vein throbbing on Fox’s forehead. Then again, a man like him wouldn’t enjoy being hamstrung like this.

“Tomorrow night.” With sharp, jerky movements, he pulled forward a pad of paper that was on Sawyer’s desk and scribbled something down. Tearing off the sheet, he held it out to Sawyer between his index and middle fingers. “This is the address.”

Sawyer took the paper. Looked at it. “Be sure you’re in attendance, Mr. Fox. We wouldn’t want to raise any suspicions.”

With a sneer, the businessman rose from his seat, angrily pulling the two sides of his jacket together.

I watched the pair leave, then said to Sawyer, “You were *badass*.” Reaching over, I slapped my palm over the slip of paper and read the address. “Is that the abandoned boarding school on the outskirts of town?”

“Yeah. St. Lucia’s of the Cross.” Sawyer looked at his watch, then at my weary face. “It’s late. We’ll get a few hours of sleep, then we can dig further into those files first thing in the morning.”

## FOURTEEN

I PULLED OPEN MY DESK DRAWER THE NEXT MORNING, FROWNING AT THE space that used to be filled with a giant paperclip-shaped USB.

“It’s gone,” I muttered, shoving the candy bar out of the way and searching through the drawer once more.

“What do you mean it’s gone? It was there last night.”

“I know, and now it’s *not* here.” I looked around the empty PIG office, my eyes narrowing on Kayla’s desk. I stalked over to the harpy’s workstation, yanked open her top drawer and rooted around in there. Besides a glass dildo and a collection of *MAD* magazines, the drawer was empty.

“Where could it have gone?” I muttered to myself.

“Pussy cat?”

Sawyer was crouching beside an empty beer can on the floor near the trash can.

“Drinking on the job on a Saturday morning?” I shrugged. “I’m down. Not sure Wolfe would approve, though.”

“It’s not mine,” he said, picking up the can, sniffing the top and grimacing. “A *clurichaun* has been in here.”

“Did you say a *leprechaun* has been in here?”

“No. A *clurichaun*.”

“Ohhh...” I cocked my head to the side. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Are a unicorn and a Pegasus the same thing?”

I gasped, clapping my hand to my chest. “I can’t believe you just uttered those words. It’s like you don’t *know* me at all.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how leprechauns feel about *clurichauns*. They’re related, but *clurichauns* are the destructive cousins.” He rose to his full

height, pitching the beer can into the trash. “Clurichauns like to drink. A lot. If they’re not drunk, they’re not happy.”

“Are you saying a clurichaun broke into our office last night and used it as a bar?”

“The little bastards would do just about anything for a beer, but the only way they can get one is if they earn or steal it.”

“Sounds suspiciously like a harpy.”

“I can assure you that’s where the similarities end.” He walked around the rest of the room, searching for more beer cans.

“Why would a clurichaun break *into* a police station? Do you think he was *that* wasted that he didn’t know where he was going?”

“They’re small and are often used as thieves.”

“How small?”

“About the size of a garden gnome.”

My gaze darted back to my desk. “And you think a clurichaun *stole* the flash drive?”

Damn, it even sounded ridiculous to me, and I’d seen some shit.

“Maybe.”

I swallowed. “Okay. I’ll bite. *Why* would a clurichaun steal the flash drive?”

“There’s a lot of incriminating evidence on there. It would be invaluable to a lot of people, especially if they were on that list.”

Well, yeah, but who would steal it? Fox had spilled all his secrets in order to secure no charges. Silverstone was dead. Falcon was kind of dead, unless you wanted to count the whole being-worn-as-a-giant-skin-costume thing.

The wealthy elite who attended these fights had no idea it was even in existence. Except...

“Fox was four hours late. Do you think he spent that time warning the other slave owners?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Which completely fucked with our case. “Dammit! We really should’ve —” I stopped when someone burped loudly out in the hallway... then started to sing a jaunty little Irish folk song, slurring the words in changing pitch and volume.

We hustled outside to find out who had decided to serenade us so early on a Saturday morning. The hallway was clear, but my opal pulsed with heat, leading me in the direction of the bullpen.

“Jesus, how are we supposed to find him in all this?” I asked myself, staring out at the sea of desks, foam-backed cubicle dividers, computers, and work-related kitsch.

“You go left. I go right,” Sawyer said.

Entering the maze, I ran between the desks and scanning the floor at clurichaun height. I stopped when a beer can landed a few feet away from me, a stream of amber liquid glugging slowly onto the floor.

Tracking the trajectory of the can, I startled when I saw a ruddy-skinned man in a pair of dirty, stained red overalls and an equally battered red tricorne hat leap from a gap between the desk and chair.

“Can’t waste the precious alcohol,” the clurichaun said in a thick Irish brogue, scooping up handfuls of the beer from the linoleum and sucking it up from his cupped palms. “Can’t waste my precious.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop myself from laughing. *His precious?* Had we stepped into another fantasy book—I mean, into *a* fantasy book. It wasn’t like my life was a hilariously terrifying novel or anything...

The clurichaun slurped the last of the beer from the floor, then let out another loud burp.

I cleared my throat.

He turned, looking up, up, up... then smiled—chagrined.

“Stop righ— sonofabitch!”

The clurichaun darted away, navigating underneath the rows of desks. I lost sight of him quickly, cursing when I spotted the door between the bullpen and reception open and close.

I gave chase, yelling over my shoulder to Sawyer, “In pursuit!”

Pumping my arms, I came across the last desk between me and the door, grinning wildly when I saw the opportunity to skim across the top of it like it was the hood of a car. With a whoop of excitement, I leaped, sliding across the empty space. But as I dismounted the desk, my foot knocked the computer monitor from its perch, and sent it crashing to the floor.

Sawyer was there in an instant, helping me up. “Are you okay?”

I could feel the grin forming on my face. “Okay? I’m better than okay. I’m *freaking amazing*. Did you see that? I’ve always wanted to do that.” I took a closer look at the desk to see who it belonged to. When I saw the nameplate, I pointed at it. “And on Smith’s desk too? Ha! Man, if I had more time, I’d totally document my defilement of all of his stuff.”

“Too bad you don’t have the time,” was Sawyer’s wry reply, yanking

open the door that led into reception. I vaulted through the opening, running the couple dozen feet to the main entry doors. The receptionist, who had just settled in behind her desk, startled when she saw us.

“Did you see the clurichaun?” I asked in a rush, still running past her.

“The cluri-*what*?” she shrieked.

“Never mind!” I yelled, pushing open the precinct doors and clambering down the stairs. It was still early by Saturday morning standards, the traffic on the streets sparse. Turning my head from left to right, I scanned the area around the building, clutching my opal in one hand.

“Where would he go?” I asked Sawyer.

“Probably to the nearest bar.”

Nearest bar.

*Nearest bar...*

“O’Malley’s is on the corner.” Suddenly, there were blaring car horns and squealing tires as brakes were slammed on. The clurichaun was dashing across the road without waiting for traffic to stop. He ran into the bar, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sawyer took off after the tiny alcoholic, trying to jimmy the handle of the bar when he reached the entrance.

“It’s locked,” he growled, retreating a few steps and ramming his shoulder into the solid oak. After the third attempt, the barrier splintered down the middle before shattering.

Inside, the bar was dark and quiet—but it was a loaded silence—like the whole building was holding its breath. The scent of beer and warm stale air drifted out, making my nose twitch. On the far wall, a red neon Miller beer sign flickered every now and again, sinking the bar into blood-tinted twilight.

“Where the hell is he?” I asked. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled in warning, and I spun around, scanning the street beyond the broken door. We were alone, but it didn’t stop me from feeling like we were walking into a trap.

“Cat, get down!” Sawyer barked, shoving me out of the way.

A bottle of whisky shattered in the spot I’d been standing—exploding in a peat and wood spiced cloud.

Sawyer’s eyes darkened. “Call up Reaver and stay back.”

But I didn’t need to call for the sword. It was already there, just inches from my hand. Wrapping my hand around the hilt, I lumbered to my feet and waited.

Sawyer leaped onto the bar top and peered down. “Buxton PIG.” He pulled out his Glock and took aim. “Stop. Now.” His voice held the ring of authority—the timbre making me shiver and think about very bad things.

The haze of my lust washed away when a stream of indistinct, yet clearly hostile, words peppered the air.

He dodged to the left, yelling, “Duck, pussy cat.”

I hit the deck, peering up to see another bottle of whisky fly through the air. It was quickly followed by another and another. The scent of peat and smoke got thicker, the astringent tones of pure alcohol growing stronger.

“What’s going on, Sawyer?” I asked, getting to my feet, and brushing glass from the sleeve of my shirt. Another bottle sailed through the air, my opal pulsing in warning. I yelped, realizing too late that it was heading straight for my face.

A split second later, I was spun around, something warm and hard pressed against my back. Sawyer’s familiar scent wrapped around me, slowing my pounding pulse. He grunted—hissed—then released me. He’s taken the hit from the bottle, blood welling from a deep gash to his shoulder.

“Jesus, are you okay?” I asked, frantically inspecting the wound.

“Fine. It’ll heal. We have to subdue the cluricha—” He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes narrowing.

My throat felt tight. “What is it? Sawyer?”

The air was suddenly thicker—heavier—with something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Gone was the smell of peat and smoke. In its place was the scent of petrichor and ozone twined together—warring for supremacy.

It was then that several things happened all at once.

My opal pulsed in warning once.

Reaver began to glow steadily—growing brighter and brighter—just as it did in the abandoned slaughterhouse, revealing writhing shadows that seemed to have moved from the corner of the bar.

“McKenzie!” Sawyer called, suddenly frantic. He dove at me, slamming me into the ground, pushing the wind from my lungs and knocking Reaver free from my grip. A bolt of lightning arced through the air, spearing through the space I’d just been occupying.

My breath puffed out in front of my mouth.

The temperature was plummeting.

Fast.

Ice crept along every surface of the bar, burning my back from where I



was pressed into the hardwood. Sawyer stared at me with luminous gray eyes, his fear lashing me. He didn't know what was happening either and that *terrified* him.

Wind began to howl, wrenching at our clothes and tearing my hair from my ponytail.

"We have to get out of here," he yelled over the growing wind.

"What about the clurichaun? The flash-drive? All that information?" I yelled back.

"It doesn't matter. I'd risk it all to keep you safe."

I hated letting the clurichaun go. I prided myself on making the bad guys pay for their crimes, and without that flash drive, making sure we got every single player in this sick game was going to be hard.

Another bolt of lightning stabbed violently through the air, the thunder that rumbled afterward deafening. More and more lighting lashed the interior, the forks repeatedly striking like a cobra at its prey. Electricity charged the air, arcing across my skin. Sawyer urged me onto my stomach, pointing at the front door.

Over the howling wind, he shouted, "Get out of here!"

Moving like there was a bunch of rabid wood sprites behind me, I began to army crawl my way out of there. As I moved, my shirt rode up, exposing the skin on my stomach to the slick ice that covered the floor. As I passed Reaver, I reached for the hilt, only to withdraw when lightning struck the handle.

"No," I whispered. I waited for the smoke to clear, praying the blade was okay. When I could see clearly again, I breathed out in relief. Despite the bolt directly hitting Reaver, somehow, the sword was intact. With a shaking hand, I reached out again and gripped the pommel, wrapping my fingers firmly around the handle. "Come back later," I said softly, and it disappeared.

Continuing my army crawl across the floor, lightning struck without warning, and I was stunned at the way it moved with purpose. Each strike seemed to aim for a table, setting it alight. The fires burned hot and fast, violently consuming the timber. Smoke filled the bar, quickly rising, and the heat began to melt the ice, creating puddles of water.

Shit, shit, shit.

If one bolt hit the water, I was toast.

I felt when Sawyer realized this too. His fear was like another person in the room, slamming into my body like a physical blow. I was only six feet

from the doorway now. I had to keep going.

Five feet.

Four feet.

Three feet.

Sawyer slid his hands under my armpits and lifted, propelling me through the door. We landed heavily onto the sidewalk outside the bar, my lungs seizing from the dramatic change in temperature. From the fires of hell to the frozen streets of Buxton. My breath tumbling out of me in a puffy cloud as the realization that we could've been burned alive or fried by lightning, finally settled in.

“McKenzie!” Sawyer shouted, followed by a wracking cough.

*Sawyer?* Wrenching my head around, I saw my partner staggering toward me.

*If Sawyer is there, who in the hell saved me?*

Peering over my shoulder, I saw Willy staring down at me.

There was an Irish-accented “fuck!” and I turned in time to see the clurichaun leap from the door of the bar. A bolt of lightning shot out after him, the end splitting, forking out to create an electrified hand with clawed fingers. They closed around the clurichaun like a fist, but the little supe was a hair's breadth faster, sliding through the closing gap and darting to stand behind me.

“That was close, lass,” he panted, resting one hand on my shoulder, and bending at the waist, breathing heavily. “I thought I was done for.”

There was a loud clap of thunder, and a column of angry clouds began to take form in the doorway of the bar. Lightning stabbed from inside the swirling mass, backlighting the silhouette of a woman. She stepped completely through the clouds, her tiger-striped skin covered in crawler lightning. White hair danced around her head, lifted by both the wind and static charge. Her electric blue gaze narrowed on the clurichaun.

“Give me the flash drive,” she commanded, her voice echoing with power.

Reaver was suddenly nudging my hand, and I scooped it up, then lumbered to my feet. I pointed the sword at the clurichaun. “Don't move,” I shouted.

The clurichaun's gaze moved from me, to the woman playing as a Tesla coil, then to me again.

“You're already being charged for petty larceny,” I hedged. “Don't make

me add trafficking stolen property to your rap sheet. Give me the flash drive and stop making poor decisions like a sexually repressed Catholic girl at a frat party.”

The woman hissed at me, baring fangs the size of my index finger. To the clurichaun, she said, “Give *me* the flash drive, and *I’ll* let you live.”

The clurichaun looked back to me and shrugged. “Sorry, lass.” Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the USB and threw it to the woman. She caught it in one hand, grinning. The storm behind her began to build once more. Clouds billowed out behind her, enveloping her body. With one final clap of thunder, the storm dissipated, the clouds thinning until nothing was left.

“Who the hell was that?” I panted, staring at the now burning bar once more.

Sawyer reached down and nabbed the clurichaun as it tried to sneak away. “*That*, pussy cat, was a byakko.”

“No shit?” I whistled, then looked at the clurichaun. “Why the hell did you steal the flash drive?”

“She paid me to steal it.”

I snorted. “What was she paying you with?”

“Beer, of course.”

*Of course.*

“Did she say why she wanted it?”

“She said she’s looking for her sister.”

*Sakura!* Sakura must be her sister. Jesus, if there was another byakko out there like her, we were in bigger trouble than I thought.

“Can I go now?” the clurichaun asked.

“No,” Sawyer and I replied in unison. “You stole police property—crucial evidence in an open case, no less. You’ll be coming to the station with us.”

The clurichaun stared longingly in the direction of the burning bar. “Can I at least get a drink for the road?”

Glass was shattering from the heat of the blaze, rafter timbers falling and sending sparks into the air. “You’d risk your life for a drink?” I asked, incredulously, gesturing to the inferno.

He shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

“Dude, if you’d risk third-degree burns for a bottle of beer, you have bigger issues than just being arrested.”

Thirty minutes later, I closed the acrylic door of the cage on my desk that served as our micro-criminal holding cell. The clurichaun spun around, indignant, and began slamming his palms against the half-inch plastic, attempting to get out. Well, good luck to him because this stuff wasn't budging for a gnome-sized supe whose only power was kleptomania.

Sawyer said, "All right, we're charging him with petty larceny and trafficking stolen property."

"What about willful destruction of property? The owners of the bar are going to be *pissed*."

"That charge belongs to the byakko, who we don't have in custody."

"Petty larceny and trafficking it is." I tapped on the clear wall of the clurichaun's temporary holding cell. "You hear that? Your ass is mine."

A stream of rather adorable, Irish-accented expletives began to pour from his mouth as he repeatedly slammed his palms against the door. "You can't keep me in here," he yelled. "She'll come back."

"The big, bad kitty shifter? I hope she does. It'll save us the time looking for her."

## FIFTEEN

“PUSSY CAT, WAKE UP.”

I rolled over with a groan, pushing him away. “How can your dick still be functional right now?” I muttered. “It’s physically impossible.”

A pause, then, “Cat, we *have to go*. Another suicide has been called in.”

Suicide. A new *suicide*. I lurched into a sit and turned to look at him. “Think the kitty shifter is breaking bad again?”

“I can’t say, but it doesn’t look good. You’ve got five minutes. Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen.” He slid from the bed, padding from the room and leaving me to get my head in the game. Shoving the quilt from my body, I threw my legs over the side and rubbed my eyes. According to the clock, it was five in the morning, which meant—after Sawyer’s six-hour feeding *bone-anza*—I’d had exactly two hours sleep.

Cognitive function wasn’t looking likely for today.

Stripping out of my unicorn sleep shirt, I pulled on a bra, then slid on a black t-shirt. Next was a pair of jeans and my motorcycle boots before I snagged my red leather jacket from the hanger in the closet on my way out of the room.

When I walked into the kitchen, Sawyer handed me my unicorn travel mug filled with delicious coffee, and I took a draw from the top.

“I love you, coffee,” I whispered.

Sawyer shook his head. “You know, I’m standing right here.”

I grinned at him, then sobered when I remembered why I had to be up on my feet right now. “Where are we going?”

His mouth thinned into a hard line, and I knew I wasn’t going to like what he was about to say. “Ascotvale.”

Now, why did that sound familiar? I frowned. “Isn’t that the estate where Draco, that bastard vampire who killed my first partner, used to live?”

“It is. You know who else lives there, right?”

“Umm, just every wealthy businessman, landowner, developer, and entrepreneur in Buxton...” I frowned. *Shit*. The kitty shifter must have begun her kill-list early. I swallowed roughly. “Who is it?”

“Fox.”

Well, I couldn’t say I was upset. The guy was an absolute dick. Did it mean he deserved to die? Probably not. Was I upset he bit it? Nope, not one bit.

I took another sip of my coffee. “Would it be petty to make him wait four hours before we show up to his suicide investigation?”

When we arrived at Fox’s address, there was one marked car parked out in front of the grand estate. I pulled in behind it, shutting off the engine.

“Here’s a fun fact for you. Did you know every time a woman shaves her legs and *doesn’t* get laid, a unicorn dies?”

Sawyer cast me a side-eye glance. “Seriously, what goes through your head?”

I shrugged. “A lot. It doesn’t make sense most of the time, but a lot.” Opening my door, I stepped into the cold night.

“Come on. Lee will be here as soon as he can. We should at least get started.” Sawyer stepped up to the front door and pressed the doorbell. The loud gong reverberated inside the house, but I couldn’t see beyond the frosted glass.

The uniformed officer opened it, and I looked at his nametag—Rhodes.

“Officer Rhodes,” Sawyer said.

“Detective Taylor, thank you for coming out.” Rhodes’s navy-blue gaze darted my way briefly, then back again. “The death was reported by Mr. Fox’s wife.”

“Where is she?” I asked, taking note of the expensive furniture, the multi-thousand-dollar area rugs, and collection of Warhol paintings—all of which were in the entry foyer.

“In the sitting room.” He gestured off to a set of French doors to his right.

Sawyer asked, “Can you interview Mrs. Fox while I take a look at the scene?”

Could I get out of viewing a body? Hell yeah, I was born for that shit. “Sure.” Walking over to the double-doors, I knocked gently before pushing them open.

The room was dark—all the drapes drawn against the sun that would rise in the next hour or two. The only source of light was from a crackling fire in the hearth and a table lamp with a sheer handkerchief thrown over the top of the shade.

“Mrs. Fox?” I called.

“It’s Ms. Ryan,” a tired-sounding female voice said from behind the high back of the wing chair in front of the fire. There was a slurp, a satisfied groan, and the click of glass on marble. “I never changed my name even though Freddy wanted me to.”

I stepped farther into the room. “Ms. Ryan, my name’s Officer McKenzie—the human liaison to PIG. I understand you discovered your husband’s body?”

Peering around the outside wing, I found a small, plain woman seated there. Beside her was a martini glass, half full, one olive already eaten. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight chignon, and her face was free of makeup. An oriental-style dressing gown framed her narrow shoulders, hiding what I assumed was a slender body. She was not what I was expecting. Wealthy men tended to go for the trophy wives—the prize they could parade around when necessary. The ones who needed to be regularly topped up with silicone parts.

Ms. Ryan peered up at me, her eyes a little unfocused. “Ask what you need to ask before I have another drink.” She gestured to the martini glass. “The next one is imminent.”

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I asked, “Is it okay if I record the conversation?”

For a beat, she simply looked at me. Then, she waved her hand in an imperious manner, motioning for me to continue.

After I got my phone set up, I put it on the fireplace mantle and hit play. I started the recording with the time and date, then added, “Interview with Ms. Ryan, wife of Mr. Fox. Ms. Ryan, can you tell me what happened?”

“Call me Meghan. I always hate it when people use my full name. It makes me feel old.” Rolling her shoulders back, she shuffled into a more

comfortable position, and said, “I was asleep. Something woke me up, I couldn’t say what it was, but I remember getting cold suddenly. I thought maybe Minnie had left a window open. When I woke, I reached for Freddy so he could get up and shut the window, but his side of the bed was empty. I called for Minnie, but I doubted she heard me.”

“Who’s Minnie and why wouldn’t she hear you?”

“My housekeeper. She’s ancient, and her hearing isn’t the best. She’s been in my employment for the past sixty years.”

I looked at the woman. She didn’t look a day over thirty-five.

“Damn, I’ve got to get the name of your surgeon then.”

Meghan laughed. “Minnie was my nanny when I was a child. Of course, my parents didn’t know she was a selkie at the time, otherwise, I highly doubt they would’ve hired her. She’s aging now, though, and the energy it takes to maintain her glamour becomes too much. She stays in a sort of in-between state.”

“Ah,” I said lamely. “How old is she? Exactly?”

“At least two hundred. Well, you know how supes age differently to us.”

My mind whirred as I tapped my fingers against my leg, wondering how well the next question was going to be received.

“Is Minnie enslaved to you? Was she enslaved to your parents?” If Fox kept slaves, there was a chance so did his wife. Buuutt by the look of outrage on Ms. Ryan’s face, I may have been wrong.

“The keeping of slaves is barbaric,” she exclaimed. “Not to mention *illegal*.”

Shit, shit, shit. She had no idea what kind of business her husband was in, did she? “This is correct, yes. The only reason I ask is because your husband was known to keep a slave or two.”

I watched her face carefully to see whether she was aware and hadn’t done a thing about it, or whether she was truly ignorant of her husband’s extra-curricular activities in the underground fighting rings.

Ms. Ryan’s whole body became rigid, shock overtaking her. She started to shake her head—slowly at first—before picking up speed. A thin, long-fingered hand came to rest against her mouth as she muttered, “It can’t be true. My Freddy wouldn’t do that. I’ve worked tirelessly to *prevent* the use of supernaturals in this way—ever since the reveal.”

I wanted to point out that it hadn’t even been a year since Kailon Perry had nip-slipped that little truth to the world, but who was I to tell her she was



wrong. Maybe she *had* been working hard to outlaw it? Maybe she already knew about the supernatural world from Minnie.

“I’m afraid the evidence we have does indicate that he was heavily involved in not just owning a slave, but also in an underground fighting ring that has been taking place for some months now.”

“No,” she reaffirmed. “Not my Freddy.”

Heaving out a breath, I decided to try another line of questioning. “Can you tell me what happened after you discovered Mr. Fox... Freddy... wasn’t beside you in the bed?”

“Well, I got out of bed to go find him. It wasn’t unusual for him to fall asleep in his office, so that’s where I checked first.”

“And that’s where you found him? In the office?”

She dipped her chin. “Yes, that’s where I found him, but I didn’t see him right away.”

“What did you see?”

“The drapes.”

“Excuse me?”

“The drapes were billowing inside the room. Snow and leaves all over my antique Persian rug. I walked over to the window to find that *both* French doors were wide open. I shut them immediately, and when I turned around, that’s when I saw Freddy slumped in his office chair.”

“Dead?” I clarified.

“No, alive,” she replied.

*Wait, what?* “He was alive?” I asked slowly.

“Yes, and still working even though it was well past four thirty in the morning. When I scolded him for staying up so late, he gave me the most peculiar look—almost like he didn’t know who I was.”

“What happened then?”

“He said he’d be up shortly and told me to leave.”

I ran the information through my head once more. “So, around four thirty in the morning, you woke up because you were cold, discovered your husband wasn’t in bed, went to look for him, and found him in the office?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” I rubbed at my stinging eyes. “Can we talk about when you discovered his *dead* body?”

Reaching over, she picked up her martini glass and swallowed the rest of her drink. “Minnie?” she called. “I need another one.”

Someone waddled into the room—a woman with black hair with white patches, brown leathery skin, and thick, black whiskers growing either side of her nose. My own nose twitched when I caught the faint whiff of fish.

“Ma’am?” she asked in a strange voice that seemed to be a mix of a harbor seal and an elderly woman.

“Another martini.” She looked at me. “Something for you, Officer McKenzie?”

“Coffee?”

Minnie folded her chubby-fingered hands in front of her, the shape they formed very much like a flipper. “Yes, of course.” She gave a tonal honk and lumbered from the room.

Like the interruption didn’t even happen, Meghan continued, “I returned to my room, and I was just about to get back into bed when I heard a gunshot. From downstairs. I rushed back down there, and that’s when I found him dead in his office chair.”

“What time do you think that was?”

“Sometime between four-thirty and four forty-five. I was too concerned about the gunshot to think about looking at the time.” Meghan munched on the lone olive left in her glass before pitching the toothpick into the flames.

Minnie was there a moment later, lifting the empty glass, placing it on the tray then putting down the fresh drink.

“Thank you, Minnie,” Meghan said on a sigh.

Minnie waddled toward me, the tray and drink on it surprisingly steady given her gait. “Your coffee.”

“Thank you.” I lifted the mug to my mouth and took a draw off the top. It was perfect.

Ms. Ryan scooped up her new drink and sipped, smacking her lips afterward.

“Did your husband have any enemies?”

“He ran an events company. What kind of enemies could a man like that have?”

“No business deals gone bad? Bad blood with investors? Nothing?”

“Freddy kept his business to himself. I wasn’t privy to its inner workings.”

I picked up my phone, staring at the time ticking away. There was time for one last question.

“Does the name Sakura mean anything to you?”

“Sakura? No, I’m sorry it doesn’t. It’s a pretty name, though.”

Shutting down my recording app and putting my phone back into my pocket, I told her, “It is. I’d best go and speak with my partner. Thank you for your time, Ms—Meghan,” I corrected at the last minute. “You’ve been a great help.”

She raised her martini glass to me in salute. “I’ll be here all night.”

As I left the room, it struck me that Meghan didn’t seem too upset by the death of her husband. I mean, she’d discovered his body, but she was totally calm in explaining what had happened.

Out in the hallway, I found the beat cop who was standing guard. His gaze flickered my way before darting away. “Officer McKenzie?” he asked, nervously.

I hiked a hand onto my hip. “You won’t die if you speak to me.” His head jerked around. “Oh, yeah, I know what they’re saying about me—that I’m the twenty-first century equivalent of Bloody Mary.”

“I didn’t... I don’t...”

“McKenzie?” Sawyer called from down the hall. “You’ll want to see this.”

Following the sound of his voice, I found Sawyer standing in the entryway to the study.

“*Want* is a strong word,” I told him as I peered over his shoulder. “What have we got?”

“Same as before—looks like a suicide. Fox shot himself in the mouth, his gun still in his hand. Come and see for yourself.” He handed me a pair of gloves, which I shook out with trepidation. Seeing bodies wasn’t getting any easier.

Stepping into the room, the scent of copper was strong. I shuddered when I got my first look at Fox. He was propped up in the leather desk chair, papers scattered all around him like he’d been looking for something before he decided to pull the trigger. Walking around the desk, I found all the drawers open, papers and office supplies decorating the floor beneath them.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“What’s that?” Sawyer asked, coming to stand on the same side as me.

“Fox was anal about how his desk was organized at work. Why wouldn’t it be the same at home?”

He studied the scene, drumming his fingers against his chin. “You’re right. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Which leads me to think that maybe it wasn’t actually suicide at all.” Crouching down, I got a good look at Fox’s position in the chair. “It leads me to think that maybe he was forced to do it. Or maybe possessed to do it.”

“We’ve discussed this theory before, and there aren’t too many supes who have the ability to possess someone.”

“A byakko could, though, right?”

Sawyer shook his head. “I don’t know. We don’t know enough about them.”

“Who does?”

“I can talk to some of my sources and find out.”

Even though I didn’t want to, I made myself scan Fox’s body again. That’s when I noticed his Cartier watch had been smashed—the glass on the front spider-webbed in about three different fractures. Edging closer, I got a better look at the time it had stopped at.

“Sawyer.” I swallowed. Pointed. “It’s 4:44 again.”

He got a closer look and frowned. “What’s the significance of that time?”

“Or that number.”

“What number?” Lee asked, walking into the study, escorted by Officer Rhodes.

Sawyer replied, “Four. This is the third murder, and that number has been present at each one in some way.”

Lee lifted his glasses to rub his eyes, resettling them in place once more. “Numerology holds a lot of power in some cultures—even our own. The numbers seven and thirteen, for example. The Chinese value the number eight because it sounds like ‘wealth’ or ‘fortune.’ The Afghanis dislike the number thirty-nine because it translates into *morda-gow*, which literally means ‘dead cow.’”

“What about the number four?” I asked.

“Well, the number four is considered lucky in Germany, but unlucky in China and Japan.”

*Japan?* “What does it mean for the Japanese?”

The doc put down his medical bag and pulled out some gloves. “Death,” he stated simply. “It sounds like *shi*. To get around this problem, they have another word for four—*yon*.”

I looked at Sawyer, wondering if he was putting the pieces together like I was.

“What do you know about byakko, doc?”

Lee looked up from his study of Fox's blown-apart face. I was pretty sure there was a couple of teeth that had landed on the desk. "They're benevolent yokai. Known for their ability to heal others. They're reclusive, though, only emerging to breed once every half a century."

"Their numbers must be pretty low then, right?"

"Quite the contrary. I believe their numbers are quite high. In Japan, people hold the byakko in high esteem and protect them. It's only in western cultures that they're hunted for sport."

Sawyer asked, "Could there be byakko in the USA right now?"

"It's entirely possible, just as there are supernaturals that are native to the continental US like wendigo and Big Foot in other places around the world."

"Do you know how they heal people?" I asked. "Is it something they physically do or metaphysically? Mentally?"

"I once read they had the ability to heal by turning to mist and entering someone's body in order to heal them from the inside out." He pulled his glove a little tighter, letting it go with a *snap*. "Now, let's have a proper look at Mr. Fox here."

## SIXTEEN

FOX'S BODY WAS LOADED INTO THE WAITING CORONER'S VAN AND DRIVEN away, leaving Lee, Sawyer, and me standing in the Fox family driveway. The sun had risen in the time we'd been inside, and I turned my face into its rays, letting it warm me a little.

"What are the chances we can go home for a nap?" I asked Sawyer with my lids still closed.

"You can go hom—"

His phone started to ring, and I peeled my eyes open. Pressing the green phone icon, he held the device to his ear. "Taylor." He listened for a beat, frowned, then glanced over at me.

*Oh, great. What now?*

"That's only a few blocks away from where we are now. We'll go straight there."

"Go where?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound whiney. "What's happened?"

*Please don't say another body.*

*Please don't say another body.*

*Pleasedon'tsayanotherbody...*

"Another body."

"*Shit.*" Even though I didn't want to ask, I kind of *had to* ask. "Who is it this time?"

"Someone called Dr. Katz. His son found him dead in bed."

"Yeah, that's probably going to require some therapy later in life."

Letting out a sigh, I said, "I guess we should go."

We all piled into the unmarked car and drove the two blocks over to a street called White Elm, which had the trees it was named after lining the

sidewalks. Their limbs were still bare, but I could just imagine how good they'd all look in spring and fall.

"Which h—" I began, then shut up because I could clearly see which house it was. There were three squad cars parked out in front of a sprawling Georgian mansion. "Remind me again of what we know about Dr. Katz?"

"We didn't have the opportunity to dig that far before the flash drive was stolen, so other than he was a doctor, we have nothing else to go on."

"So, he could just be a human, and there's no supernatural funny business going on?" I crossed my fingers.

"It's a possibility," Sawyer conceded. "But I wouldn't pin all your hopes on that being the case."

I pulled the unmarked to a stop behind one of the squad cars and killed the engine. Together, we walked to the front of the house, ducking under the police tape that had been slung around the porch. When we stepped inside, we traveled back to Georgian England. The entry foyer was filled with solid oak flooring, ornate furniture, and a seven-and-a-half-foot tall grandfather clock. The *pièce de resistance*, though, was a solid oak staircase with a frieze depicting oak leaves and acorns on all the risers and the outer stringer. The staircase wasn't the most ostentatious part, though—the hand-painted, bespoke wallpaper in ochre and *eau de Nil* tones depicting pheasants frolicking in the woods was.

"Detective Taylor?" a cop was standing off to one side asked.

"Yes," Sawyer replied

Her gray eyes drifted lazily from his face down, lingering on the lower half of his body. When it was clear she wasn't going to continue her line of thought, I snapped my fingers impatiently in her face. The other woman blinked rapidly, breaking free of her Sawyer haze.

Her eyes darted to mine before she flushed. "I'm sorry." She cleared her throat. "The boy who reported the death is in the drawing room."

"This place has a drawing room?" I asked Sawyer from the corner of my mouth as we followed her through the house and into a room with a huge white marble fireplace and walls painted Georgian green. A boy—probably no older than fifteen—was seated on the cream sofa, his hands wedged between his knees. There was a glass coffee table in front of him, laden with architecture books.

The boy's head jerked up when we entered the room.

"Who are you?" he asked, nervous eyes darting around.

“I’m Detective Taylor,” my partner said. “My partner, Officer McKenzie... and this is the medical examiner, Dr. Lee. What’s your name?”

He looked at us all for a moment before muttering, “George Katz, the third.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, George,” Sawyer continued in a calm voice. “We’re here—” His cell rang again, interrupting him. With a sympathetic smile, he added, “Sorry, George, I have to get this.” He fished the phone from his pocket and barked, “What?” After listening for a few moments, he pinned his eyes on me.

“What is it?” I asked, dread making my gut churn.

“Another *call* has been made,” he ground out.

I read between the lines.

“Okay. Where?”

“It’s in the city.”

Our entire morning could be filled with these calls because we had no idea how long the byakko’s trail of destruction was. I licked my lips nervously.

“We should divide and conquer,” I told him with a nod.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. You stay here with Lee, and I’ll take the car to the other scene. Once you guys are done here, you can take one of the patrol cars and meet me there.”

Sawyer’s jaw bulged as he considered my plan. He didn’t want to be separated from me, which I absolutely understood. Since completing the consort bond, he’d been more protective over me while still giving me room to breathe. The idea of splitting up now must have been making all his instincts fire, but we didn’t have time to coddle his feelings.

“I’ll send you the address,” he eventually said, typing out a short message.

My phone vibrated in my back pocket, and I took a look. “Got it. I’ll secure the scene, collect evidence, and interview whoever I can.”

Sawyer’s shoulders were tight—his back ramrod straight—as he stalked toward me. Given we were in a less-than-private space right now, I knew he was holding himself back. “Be careful.”

“Aren’t I always... No! Don’t answer that.” I patted him on the cheek, hoping he could see that I was going to do as he asked. “I’ll see you later.”

I returned to the car, tapped Funko Pop Deadpool on the head and



buckled myself in. Starting the engine, I did a wide U-turn to go back the way we'd come. As I drove, I wondered if the people in the mansions on either side of the road knew there'd been two murders in their coveted and insulated little world last night?

Probably not.

They were probably only concerned that their lawns were green and their children went to the most exclusive schools.

One of Ascotvale's boundary lines was the Melusine River, the bridge across it marking the southern entry and exit point into the estate. I was approaching the two-hundred-foot-long span when the temperature in the car suddenly plummeted to arctic levels.

My gaze jerked to the rearview mirror. Willy was sitting in the back—all silent and scary.

"Coming along for the ride?" I asked, my voice only a tiny bit shaky. "Awesome." Which was a total lie. The churning in my stomach hadn't stopped yet, and my opal was beginning to pulse with increasing pace.

"We need to get that flash drive back, big guy," I said, babbling anxiously. "Because if we don't, who knows how many more people are going to get themselves killed."

As I drove, I kept checking my mirrors, waiting for a dark van to appear out of nowhere and run me off the road, which, knowing my luck, could totally happen.

But I was so intent on finding out what was behind me, that I didn't realize what was in front of me until it was too late.

I cursed and yanked on the steering wheel to avoid hitting Urban—the berserker from the fight club—who had just stepped in front of the car. I swerved into the other lane, checking over my shoulder to see whether I'd clipped the supe by accident.

Where in the hell had he come from?

"Where is he?" I muttered out loud, turning back...

... in time to come face-to-face with the bridge's guardrail.

"Shit, Willy, brace for impact."

The front end of the car sliced through the guardrail like it was butter. Both front tires went over the edge of the bridge, the undercarriage getting jammed on the deep concrete lip, and stopping my momentum abruptly. I was flung forward in my seat, the seat belt simultaneously saving my life and cutting into my shoulder and waist.

Like a bad dealer, my body dropped a shit-ton of adrenaline into my system, making my fight-or-flight instincts rage and my mind froth. Jabbing my thumb into the buckle of the belt, I released its hold on me then turned around to peer through the rear window.

I hadn't hit the berserker.

Buuutttt he was coming at the car like T-1000—unhurried and oh, so menacingly.

Pulling at the handle, I shoved my howling shoulder into the door.

Once.

Twice.

A third time.

But the bastard didn't budge.

My gaze fixed on the side mirror, and I watched Urban stroll casually up to the car. His over-muscled body seemed to keep growing, getting bigger and bigger by the second. When he reached the trunk, he braced two hands on the car and smiled at me, flashing his huge fangs.

The sound of metal grinding against concrete filled my ears as Urban *pushed* the car further off the edge of the bridge. All my mind could do was throw up all the ways this could play out. Drowning. Getting torn apart limb from limb by a homicidal supe. Dying in a fiery ball of flames. Not getting a nap today.

I swallowed, trying to get more air into my lungs, but my chest felt too tight. The smell of gas and burned rubber filled my nostrils, and it was like an olfactory death shroud. One more good shove and the car's—and my—center of gravity was suddenly going to be far less horizontal and a whole lot more diagonal before swan-diving off the edge.

Sparks shot up the sides, and death-by-fiery-ball-of-flames was looking more and more likely.

Reaching across the passenger seat, I tried the other door handle—my hands shaking—but that was jammed too. Even though my vision was going spotty, I searched the car for Reaver, hoping it deemed *this* to be a life-or-death situation.

My head jerked up, though, when an enraged roar filled the early morning air. It shook the glass in the windows, and my whole body became like a tuning fork—responding to it. I looked through the rear window to see Sawyer getting out of one of the squad cars that had been parked at the victim's house.

He looked ready to rage out.

He looked like he was about to commit murder, then write home about it.

And it was so fucking *hot*.

He ran at Urban, leaping into the air, twisting and flipping at the last minute to kick at the berserker's kneecaps.

*Pop! Pop!*

Bone and cartilage gave way, felling the other supe with lethal efficiency. With a grunt, Urban dropped to the ground. Given the berserker had literally scooped up his own intestines and crammed them back into his body to continue fighting, I doubted a little kneecap relocation was going to slow him down.

Sawyer must've realized it, too, because he hung back, his hands curling into fists. Blood already smeared his knuckles, a thicker stream dripping onto the asphalt, and I wondered whether he got in a sucker punch too.

With a snarl, Urban leaped to his feet and stalked closer to Sawyer. The berserker wound his fist back and unleashed, the power of the strike knocking Sawyer off his feet and into the barrier. The berserker grinned, closing the distance between them. Reaching down, he plucked Sawyer from the ground, held him at arm's length, and punched him in the face again.

Blood sprayed from the broken nose, covering the berserker's chest, which only seemed to make him grow bigger. *Did the blood of his foes make him stronger?* Probably something to think about later. Right now, I needed to get out of this metal death trap. All it would take was one perfectly timed shove, and I'd be over the edge.

I turned when the window on my left frosted over. I peered through it to see Willy standing outside the driver's side door.

"Where the hell have you been?" I demanded, shouting because I was absolutely terrified. "Get me out of here."

His head bent as he looked at the door handle. Reaching out, he pulled once then stepped back.

"It's jammed," I shouted, pointing at the lock button on the inside of the door. "See? It's not moving."

Willy cocked his head to the side and showed me a mental image of preserves being bottled, a backed-up freeway with bumper-to-bumper traffic, and a drawer unable to open. I had to think about it for a moment, then said, "The last one. You need to find another way to get me out of here."

Before Willy could try again, the car pitched forward suddenly, the metal

frame whining in protest. Even as I braced my feet against the dash, I knew it was stupid. I couldn't stop the momentum of a four-thousand-pound Crown Victoria.

A quick look back confirmed it was Urban again. He was like a dog with a freaking bone. Putting all his weight into it, he shunted the car forward, more sparks flying as the framework was shoved over the concrete lip and pushed closer to the edge, and the point of no return.

Another push.

Then...

... the chassis moaned and began to tip, tip, tip forward...

My breath caught. I was teetering on the edge, looking straight down into the icy river, the rush of water rising to greet me.

One more push was all it would take.

Another whine, and the whole thing slowly teetered back the way it had come. I let out a relieved breath when the car's rear tires hit the concrete again, and I scrambled into the back seat to maintain that balance. My knuckles were white as I gripped the upholstered back seat, watching through the rear window as the two men grappled with one another—grunts and snarls, the soundtrack of their battle. Pumped up on violent energy, the pair continued to try and dominate the fight. Sawyer finally gained the upper hand, tackling Urban to the ground. The berserker thrashed wildly, trying to buck Sawyer off his back.

"Can you get out of there?" Sawyer yelled, gritting his teeth as he slammed Urban's face into the asphalt.

"The doors are jammed," I said. "Willy can't open the door."

"What about Reaver?" he asked, digging a hand into one of his pockets. He grunted when the berserker dislodged Sawyer from his back with one well-timed jerk. Urban leaped to his feet once more, blood cascading from a deep gash on his forehead. It streamed down his face, along either side of his nose, into his mouth and over his chin. He either didn't notice, or didn't care, because he ignored Sawyer and kept coming my way.

Behind him, Sawyer stood on shaky legs, and pulled out his Glock. He started firing—aiming for Urban's knees, shoulders, elbows, and legs. The shots weren't designed to kill him, just to slow him down.

They did not slow him down at all.

If anything, they just made the guy angrier—his muscles growing bigger and bigger with each slug that hit him. With an irritated snarl that made the

hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, he spun around, facing Sawyer once more. Now that he had the berserker's attention, Sawyer re-holstered his sidearm, and I realized he was just running interference until I could get out of the car.

I was suddenly showered in glass, and Willy peered through the passenger window he'd just shattered.

*The window! Why didn't I think of going through the window?* "Willy, you're a genius." Hauling ass, I cleared as much glass from the frame as I could, then positioned myself to shimmy out through the opening.

There was a hoarse yell that sounded a lot like my partner's voice. Urban slammed his palm into Sawyer's chest, sending him sailing through the air and landing twenty feet away.

Sawyer's pain suddenly became my own, and I sucked in a choked breath. It felt as if my heart had been torn from my chest, crushed in someone's hand, then thrown back into my chest cavity. Hunched over the car door—half inside and half out—I tried to breathe in deeply through my nose.

Sharing his physical pain *sucked*.

The only positive from this was I knew he was still alive.

With Sawyer out of the way, Urban returned his attention to me—an evil grin twisting his mouth.

"*Shit.*" I tried to wriggle faster, reaching out my hand to the Gray Man.

Unhappy with my escape attempt, the berserker threw back his head, roared, then ran—full tilt—at the back of the car.

"Willy!" I shouted, reaching for him. My fingertips grazed the edge of his sleeve.

The car slid sideways...

... off the bridge...

... and into the icy water.

## SEVENTEEN

THE CAR HIT THE FRIGID WATER NOSE-FIRST, THE FORCE OF THE FALL YANKING the top half of my body one way, while my lower half went the other—stealing my breath in the process. It had landed in front of a partially submerged tree trunk that was slowly rotting in the elements. It also happened to be the only thing saving me from being swept downstream by the strong current.

Like a cork, the car bobbed on the surface for a moment before steel began to lose its battle with buoyancy and started to sink. Planting my hands, I hauled my body from the side window, wincing at the newly forming bruises.

Once I was out, I maneuvered to the slowly descending rear of the car, my legs wide and my arms outstretched to keep balance. Icy water lapped at my shoes, and I stared at the rushing surface of the river with trepidation. The current was buffeting the car, making it rock gently, forcing me to adapt my stance to stay on top. Craning my head back, I tried to see whether Willy was standing at the railing or had written me off for as good as dead, but the angle I'd fallen at only showed me the murky underside of the bridge.

“Lost, isn't ya?” someone snuffled out from the darkness below the span.

Automatically, I grabbed for my opal and I squinted into the gloom. “Who's there?” I demanded.

“Ekon. Who is you?”

“I'm Cat,” I replied, shaking water from my foot. I probably only had another thirty seconds before the car was completely swallowed by the freezing river. “What are you?”

“Not nice question,” Ekon snuffled. “Ekon is not what.”

“Sorry,” I replied in a rush. “That was rude. I’m a little anxious because, you know, I’m about to get wet and not be able to breathe. Not like erotic asphyxiation getting wet and not being able to breathe. More like the permanent death by drowning. I’m babbling. I know I’m babbling...” I pressed my lips together tightly to stop myself from vomiting out another word and drew in a deep breath through my nose. I smelled wet stone and moss, but also the tang of an unwashed body.

There was a loud splash, then another, the shadows beneath the bridge moving—*growing*.

I gasped as a creature—at least seven feet wide from shoulder to shoulder—appeared from the dank gloom. He stood up to his full height, the top of his bald head brushing the arched underside of the bridge. He had an almost squashed square-shaped head with a flattened nose. Underneath his deep brow ridge and deeply wrinkled forehead, I caught a flash of two small orange eyes. His mouth was huge, but the severe underbite meant two large and two smaller tusks protruded from his bottom jaw and over his top lip. His upper body was bare, his lower body fitted with torn trousers.

“Ekon is troll.”

“A troll,” I repeated then nodded. I swallowed, wondering if I was being lulled into a false sense of security. Ekon seemed almost... friendly. I gripped my opal once more. The stone wasn’t glowing in warning, and Reaver hadn’t shown up, so I let out a breath. “It’s nice to meet you, Ekon.”

He seemed to study my precarious position on the trunk of the car. “Not safe. Staying like that.” He jabbed a thick finger covered in riverbank mud at me. “Why you stay there?”

“I can’t get off without going in the water,” I replied, readjusting my footing. The water was a couple of inches over my shoes now. “If I go in the water, the current will take me away, and I’ll probably only survive a few minutes.”

“Ekon help?”

Licking my lips, I contemplated all my options. Surprise! I had none. Except for this seemingly innocent, pronoun-sensitive troll. “Yes, please. Are you able to help?”

Ekon came out a little further but stayed within the shadows of the bridge. “Ekon burn in sun,” he told me. “Jump to Ekon?”

The distance between the car and the troll was around eight feet. It was too far for me to jump. When I looked back at him, I shook my head. “Too

far.”

He nodded to himself and lumbered back under the bridge.

“Wait! Ekon!”

The hope that had flared was snuffed out. When it was clear he wasn’t coming back, I gave myself a pep talk. “Right, Cat, you have to get yourself out of this one.”

The water was rushing just under half a foot over the trunk now, my boots and ankles soaked through. I looked up, all around, searching for a way off the car. Something crept into my line of sight, and I jerked my head up to see Ekon holding out a six-foot-long, half-foot wide cudgel with steel spikes attached to the tip. Blood stained the dark wood, and I tried not to think about which poor bastard had been introduced to the end of the weapon.

“Jump,” he said, checking to see he wasn’t too close to the fall of the sun. “Jump. Ekon catch.”

My gaze ratcheted back to the cudgel. I had to jump and catch myself on it, without slicing open my fingers on the steel. Indecision tore at me. Should I take this chance, or should I wait?

Icy water splashed onto my calves.

“Okay,” I said to myself. “Okay, I can do this.” I took one last look at the distance between salvation and certain death when I noticed something bobbing up to the surface of the water. Bending, I scooped it up, shoved it inside my shirt, then prepared myself to jump.

The car groaned and shifted as I pushed away. I hadn’t gotten the leverage I’d needed, but instead of spiraling into panic, I focused on the edge of the cudgel. When my fingers wrapped around the club and didn’t get sliced off, I could’ve cried with relief. I dangled there for the longest minute of my life before Ekon pulled me into the cool shadows of the bridge.

The scent of moss, wet stone, and mud grew stronger, as did the scent of an unwashed body. Ekon lowered me slowly onto a set of slick black rocks, my feet immediately coming out from under me. I landed in the mud, the sticky, smelly sludge covering my arms up to the elbow and my jeans up to the knee. Shoving my hair out of my face, I streaked more mud across my cheek, then looked for another way to get up.

Ekon held out his thickly muscled arm, and I got back on my feet.

Once I had my balance, I said, “You saved me, Ekon.”

The troll smiled, revealing an almost completely toothless mouth. “Ekon happy.” His orange gaze darted to my chest, and I looked down too. Pulling



out the Deadpool Funko Pop I'd collected from the water, I showed it to him.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

"Ekon like unicorns."

"Hey, me too!"

"They delicious."

I tried not to pull a face—really I did. "I prefer them *not* dead, but hey, that's just me."

He hadn't taken his eyes off the little vinyl figurine yet.

"Would you like it?" I asked.

Ekon stared at me, his smile growing. "Ekon keep?"

I handed it to him. "Sure."

He plucked the tiny figurine from my hands between two fat fingers and brought it up for closer inspection.

"Ekon keep," he repeated.

I smiled at him, then looked to see where we were. "Can I get up to the bridge from here?"

Without taking his eyes off Deadpool, he pointed with his other hand. "Climb stones. Onto bridge that way."

"Okay, well, thank you, Ekon. You really did me a solid today." But he didn't hear me. He was too busy cooing at Deadpool and the unicorn, petting the pink mane and golden horn.

Clambering up the rocks, I emerged onto the other side of the road.

Sawyer was sitting on the asphalt with his back to me, his knees bent and head bowed. The back of his shirt had been slashed to ribbons, each gape in the material revealing a deep wound that still dribbled with blood.

"Sawyer?" I asked cautiously, climbing over the guardrail.

His head jerked up, his black eyes lightening to gray the instant he saw me. He moved quickly—despite his injuries—wrapping his arms around me and holding me close. "I thought you'd been swept away." His words were barely a whisper, and I felt every single bit of his relief. "I felt your fear. How did you get out of the car? How did you survive?"

"There was a troll. Under the bridge. Ekon. He helped me."

Sawyer immediately stiffened. "A troll? Under *this* bridge."

My cheek rasped against his torn shirt. "He was actually... pretty cool. I gave him my Deadpool Funko Pop to say thanks." When Sawyer remained quiet, I cleared my throat and asked, "What happened here?" I gestured to Urban, who had been cuffed and was lying prostrate, his head turned to one

side. The berserker's eyes were shut, his breathing deep and even.

Sawyer released me, and I got my first proper look at his face. It was one mass of bruises and cuts, blood marring nearly every inch of his skin. The perks of being a supe? He was already healing. "I was finally able to subdue him."

I frowned. "How? You broke his kneecaps and shot him. And he *still* kept coming."

Digging into his pocket, Sawyer produced a syringe with a hypodermic needle on the end. "I've been carrying pre-loaded doses of ketamine since Thursday morning. Just in case we came across a slave shifter who was out of control."

"Smart." I looked back at the sleeping beauty. "Did you know it was going to work on a berserker?"

He shook his head. "It was more just wishful thinking."

"How long until he wakes up?"

"Not sure, really."

"We should get him to the cells before he does."

## EIGHTEEN

“I WANT YOU TO TAKE A SHOWER,” SAWYER SAID AS SOON AS WE WALKED into the apartment.

I opened my mouth to argue but then looked down at the mud caking my hands, arms, and legs and decided maybe he was right. He gave me a little push in the direction of our bedroom, and—begrudgingly—I allowed it.

“Just FYI, I might actually fall asleep in there.”

“I’ll be sure to keep an eye on you,” he replied from behind me, amusement in his tone. I gave him a flirty grin. “Is that the only thing you’re going to keep on me?” I asked, my tone breathy. His pupils had already gobbled up the color of his irises, leaving them black and streaking with lightning. I liked it when he got this way.

Hungry.

For me.

“What else would you like on you?”

That tone got me every damn time. “Hands. Mouth. Tongue.” I shrugged casually, knowing he saw the shiver of anticipation that tracked down my spine. “Take your pick.”

With a growl, he scooped me into his arms and walked me the rest of the way into the bathroom. Kicking the door shut behind us, he gently placed me on the edge of the counter. The marble was cold against my palms.

Leaning forward, he kissed me on the mouth, then dropped to his knees. He pressed himself in between my thighs, urging my legs farther apart. “Um, I think I need to be naked in order for this to work,” I pointed out, already squirming with anticipation.

He glanced at me, passion sizzling in his hot gaze. “I need to get your

boots off before I can get you naked.”

I swung my legs to peer at the dried mud caked to them. “Touché.” Flicking my wrist, I said, “Carry on.”

After divesting me of my boots, he set me on my feet once more, peeling the wet jeans and panties off my legs.

“You smell like river troll,” he said, affectionately rubbing his nose against mine as he pulled my shirt up over my head.

I sniffed my skin and shrugged. There was no point in denying it. He unhooked my bra and dropped it on top of the pile of soaked and smelly clothes, taking a moment to run his gaze over me. There wasn’t anything sexual about this perusal. He was checking me for injuries. Reaching out, he prodded at my waist, and I smacked his hand away.

“You’re hurt.”

“From climbing out the window... and the fall into the river,” I explained. “I’m okay though. It’s just a bruise.”

Although his jaw was tight, he said nothing more. Stepping into the shower stall, he started the water, keeping his hand under the spray until the right temperature was reached.

He crooked a finger at me. “Come here, pussy cat.”

I padded closer to him, feeling like I was prey caught in the web of a very pretty spider. Stepping past him, I positioned myself under the showerhead and let out a moan of absolute pleasure. Water sluiced over my body, stripping the mud, grime, and general chill from my skin.

I shut my eyes and tipped my head back, getting lost in the heat. When I opened my eyes again, Sawyer was kneeling in front of me—still fully clothed. His erection strained against the zipper of his pants, demanding to be released. Steam curled around him, making him appear almost ethereal. With his hands on my knees, he gently pressed my legs apart until I was open to him.

Leaning forward, he dragged his tongue through my wet folds, wringing a gasp from my throat. He kept his eyes on me the whole time he licked and lapped at the apex of my thighs, bringing me to the edge of orgasm, then far beyond it. His small noises of satisfaction echoed around the shower stall, cocooning us in a steamy bubble of desire and longing.

When the last of my cries of pleasure ebbed away, he turned off the water and wrapped me in a towel.

“Get into bed,” he said.

“Are you coming to bed too?” I looked down at his shaft still trying to replicate that scene in the *Aliens* movie where it burst from that guy’s chest. “I can take care of that for you.”

His whole expression softened. “You need to rest.”

“Ah, nope. I need you to get inside me.”

Tucking some stray strands of hair behind my ear, he pressed his forehead to mine. His chocolate and whisky scent instantly enveloped me, making my pulse rocket. “Are you sure? I can wait until after you’ve rested.”

Reaching between us, I gripped his cock and ran my hand up its length. He rocked into my touch, and I knew I had him. “I want this. Give it to me.”

“I can’t say no to my consort,” he eventually said. “Get into bed. I’ll take a quick shower first.”

I watched him walk away before padding to the bed—yawning—as I pulled back the unicorn comforter. Dropping the towel, I pulled on one of Sawyer’s shirts that I’d claimed as my own, then slid between the sheets—curling up on my side. As soon as my head hit the pillow, my eyes began to close. I tried to force them open—keep them open—but it was a losing battle.

Despite the promise of more orgasms, sleep, it seemed, was more appealing.

My eyes peeled open slowly, feeling like the backs had been replaced with sandpaper. I didn’t know what time it was, but something had woken me. I rolled over to check the clock. It was a little after seven and judging from the lack of light trying to stream in past the drapes, I took a stab in the dark and figured it was seven in the evening. I must’ve slept for about ten hours straight. Why in the hell hadn’t Sawyer woken me?

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, noticing the tips of my fingers were freezing. So was my nose. My breath crystallized in front of me on my next exhalation. Looking around the darkened room, I saw Willy standing in the corner like a phantom.

“What’s going on, Willy?” I asked, blinking rapidly to clear the haze of sleep. Was it him who had woken me?

He sent me an image of the undercover car going over the bridge—all from his vantage point. It was shocking to see the way my eyes bulged with

fear. My arm, outstretched for his. Me, screaming his name.

Tears pricked my eyes as his concern for my safety wrapped around me too. He'd been worried about me. But why? I'd enslaved the poor supe without knowing it, and he actually *cared* for my welfare?

If I needed any more confirmation that he did care, it came in the form of four letters appearing in my mind—slowly like he was sorting through the whole alphabet to find the ones he wanted.

R-U-O-K.

I jolted. This was the first time he'd communicated without the aid of images. Was my Gray Man growing up?

"I'm okay," I told him. "If you hadn't broken the window, I wouldn't have been able to escape the sinking car. So, thank you."

He floated closer to the bed, stretching out one arm to me. There was something red sitting in the middle of his sleeve-covered hand and I wondered if this was a Gray Man equivalent of a cat bringing home a dead mouse and leaving it on the doorstep.

My eyes widened when I saw what it was. Picking up the flash drive, I asked, "How did you get this?"

In my mind, I was taken back to before the accident.

*Past me's gaze jerked to the rear-view mirror.*

*"Coming along for the ride? Awesome."*

*I looked lost in thought—my brow knitting—then said, "We need to get that flash drive back, big guy... because if we don't, who knows how many more people are going to get themselves killed."*

Dislodging the last of the images, I muttered, "You got it because I said we needed it?"

He nodded.

I stared down at the flash drive feeling like we'd just prevented the deaths of so many people. There was no doubt in my mind that the byakko had every intention of working through her kill list with as much vigor as Jack the Ripper had.

The apartment door opened and closed, then, Sawyer called, "Pussy cat?"

"In here!"

I looked back in Willy's direction, only to find him gone.

"Feeling more human?" Sawyer stood in the doorway, scrutinizing me. "Are you in any pain? Can I get you anything?"

"No. I'm fine." I swallowed. "Where have you been?"

“At work.” He settled on the edge of the bed. “I wanted you to rest.”

“Any more bodies reported?”

“No, but I did speak to Urban.”

I squeezed the flash drive a little more tightly. “What did he say?”

“He said he didn’t remember anything from this morning.”

“Wow. I thought my attempted murder would be at least a *little* memorable.”

Sawyer pushed some hair behind my ear. “The last thing he did remember was meeting a woman earlier in the evening—a woman who was looking for her sister. She asked for him to help her, and he agreed. After that...” He shook his head. “Nothing but blank space until he woke up in the cell.”

Recognition dawned. “Do you think Urban was possessed, and that’s why he can’t remember what happened?”

Playing Devil’s Advocate, he asked, “Memory loss doesn’t mean he was possessed.”

“You’re right, but we know byakko are capable of turning into mist in order to enter a body to heal it. What if these people aren’t killing themselves at all? What if our byakko temporarily possessed their bodies, made them pull the trigger, then misted away afterward?”

With a quick nod, he agreed. “It’s a possibility, but what’s her motive?”

“If I knew how every supe’s mind worked, our job would be a hell of a lot easier. I might have something that could help, though.”

“What is it?”

I showed him the flash drive. “Willy got it. I don’t know how, but he got it back.”

Reaching out slowly, he plucked the USB from my hand and studied it.

“We should see if a byakko or white tiger is mentioned on there somewhere,” I said.

Sawyer’s gray eyes sparked with excitement. Leaning down, he kissed me. It was only meant to be a peck, but when his tongue stroked into my mouth, I shuddered. Stretching out beside me on the bed, he wrapped me in his arms, then trailed his mouth down my jaw, onto my neck, nipping lightly at my skin.

“You’re hard,” I said, gasping when he rolled his hips against me.

“Pussy cat, I haven’t stopped being hard for you since this morning.”

Heat crept up my cheeks and pulled back a little to look at him. “I guess I fell asleep, huh?”

Framing my face in his hands, he assured me, “You needed to rest.”

“Weeeelllll...” I palmed him through his pants. “I’m sure I can find some time to take care of it for you now.”

With his eyes darkening, he captured my lips in another kiss, fiercely possessing my mouth. I was dizzy when he trailed his mouth to my neck, sucking on my pounding pulse.

“We should take a look at this file,” he murmured between licks.

*Wait. What?*

“Is Sawyer Taylor—*gasp*—turning down sex?”

He growled playfully. “Postponing it.” Rubbing his nose against mine, he said softly, “The next fight starts in a little under two hours, and when I make love to you, I’m going to need more than two hours.”

Shiver. I was so on board with a marathon sesh—especially now that I was well-rested. Instead of letting him know that, I worked the guilt angle. Heaving a theatrical sigh, I unwrapped myself from his body and got out of bed. I followed him into the office, perching on the edge of the desk while he took the command seat in front of the laptop. He inserted the drive into the USB port, the folder containing all the evidence of the slave purchases and fights opening up on the screen. He clicked onto the search icon and typed in the name Sakura and the keywords byakko and white tiger shifter.

The computer swept through the records, revealing two matches with the keyword *white tiger shifter*. One was a document file and the other an image file. Sawyer opened the image first, the picture of a white-haired woman with blue eyes and oriental features filling the screen.

“Shit, she looks just like the byakko we encountered at the bar.”

“Yeah, she does. Twins then.”

Fuck. *Twins?* I jerked my chin in the direction of the monitor. “What’s in the document?”

He clicked on the icon, opening up the word processing app. His eyes darted across the lines of text, just as mine did.

“*Imported?*” I asked. “She was *imported* into the States by Dunn & Dunn, an import/export company based in New York.” I shook my head. “Damn. What’s so special about this kitty shifter. And did that company know what they were doing?”

Sawyer pressed his lips together in thought, his brow knitting. “Maybe they brought her over because of her ability to heal.”

“Like a nurse?”



“Maybe,” he said slowly, like he’d just thought of something. Returning to the folder, he scrolled through the files once more. He opened two videos—the ones that involved the minotaur—Bruin.

“His throat had been torn out here, yet two days later...” He loaded up the second file and hit play. “He’s back and fighting again.”

“He was healed,” I said, the pieces clicking together. “Sakura must’ve been used to heal him. Which would mean...”

“Mrs. Black has her.”

The name tugged at something in my brain. “This isn’t the first time I’ve heard that name.” I leaped from the edge of the desk and started to pace. “Where else have I heard that name?”

“Mr. Fox,” Sawyer said. “He told us Barry Hall is one of the organizers and uses the name Mr. Black when he has a fighter in the ring.”

Drawing to a stop, I chewed on my bottom lip. “So, *Mrs. Black* could really be Mrs. Hall... the wife? Coincidence?”

Jaw tight, Sawyer rose from the chair. “Not from where I’m sitting.”

“Can you search to see if Mrs. Hall is named anywhere in the documents?”

Sawyer typed in the name, then hit return. “No entries found.”

“Probably the only reason she’s still breathing,” I replied.

His phone started to ring, and he pulled it from his pocket. “Taylor... Hang on, Doc, I’ll put you on speaker.” Hitting a button, he placed it on the desk between us.

“Can you hear me?” Lee asked, and I could just picture him nudging those glasses farther up his nose.

“Loud and clear, Doc. What have you got?”

“Well, it appears both Dr. George Katz and Ms. Penn—the other case that was called in at the same time—committed suicide.”

I still wasn’t buying it. How was it possible that all these uber-rich people just chose to end it all?

“Hey, Doc,” I said, speaking for the first time. “Do you find it strange that five wealthy, well-known public figures have all died from suicides in the last three days?”

“Well, yes, it is rather odd.”

“One suicide, you might be able to understand, but *five*?” At least, they were the ones we knew about.

“What are you theorizing, Officer McKenzie?” he asked, genuine

curiosity in his voice.

“We know that byakko are able to mist inside someone’s body to heal them. Would it stand to reason that they were also able to control someone by doing the same thing?”

“Byakko are gentle by nature,” he reasoned.

“So are most dogs, but every so often you get one who won’t think twice about attacking for no reason.”

Doc Lee made a series of assenting noises. “I see your point, Officer McKenzie. Even my own nature is an oddity among my species.”

“Exactly.”

“Was there anything else we needed to know, Doc?” Sawyer asked, flashing me a proud smile.

“Yes. Dr. Katz had the number four carved into his forehead, and in the case of Ms. Penn, the number was written in blood on the bedroom wall, where her body was found.”

“And that is what we call a serial killer,” I announced.

“Thanks for the update, Doc. We’ll talk to you later.” Sawyer hung up the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. “You should get dressed. We’ve got an hour to get to the boarding school.”

## NINETEEN

WE TOOK SAWYER'S MOTORCYCLE OUT PAST THE CITY LIMITS UNTIL THE ONLY source of light we had was from the headlight of the Ducati. The moon could barely make an appearance on account of all the cloud cover.

The motorcycle bounced along the road, making me cling a little more closely to Sawyer's back. Now that our undercover car was decorating the bottom of the river, we were back to riding on the death trap again.

"How much farther," I asked through the comms system in my helmet.

"Not far," Sawyer replied, reaching down to pat my knee. "I've missed this, you know?"

I snorted. "You missed me being terrified and wanting to scream until I'm let off this thing?"

"I miss having you this close. Being pressed into my back like this."

"We sleep together, Sawyer and you know damn well I'm a snuggler. This isn't new."

"No, but it reminds me of the time before we got together, when you were struggling with your feelings for me, and I was doing my best to ignore you altogether."

I rolled my eyes. "That's a great story, but we both know you were powerless to resist my lovable yet quirky sense of humor."

His answering chuckle would've brought me to my knees if I were actually standing. He geared down on the motorcycle, slowing it as we approached a barely visible driveway on the side of the road. He eased onto the gravel, the ride smoothing out on account of all the weeds growing through the rocks.

As we traveled down the drive, the moon finally made it out from behind

a cloud, illuminating the night and the small building fast approaching. In the moonlight, the sandstone walls glowed and was reflected off the black roof slates. In the middle of the structure was a double-height tower covered in ivy. The only reason I knew it was a tower was because the parapet and its crenellations were still visible, poking through the sea of waxy green leaves.

“The gatekeeper’s house,” Sawyer told me. “From when this used to be a sprawling estate. I’m sure the school repurposed it in some way.”

As we passed it, I saw Willy hovering in the doorway—already in position.

Sawyer must’ve seen him too because tension began to radiate from him, and it didn’t let up even as he pulled to a stop behind a matching pair of Bentleys. Switching off the engine, he lowered the kickstand, and we both dismounted.

“I don’t like this,” he said, removing my helmet.

“What part?”

His free hand gripped my waist, his fingers tightening. “You disappearing with Willy to find Mrs. Hall.”

I let out a sigh, gearing myself up for the conversation... again. “We’ve talked about this. It makes the most sense that I do it since you’ve already appeared as a spectator. All I’m going to be doing is checking things out. I promise I won’t engage until you get there.”

The muscle in his jaw popped. “Do you swear you’ll wait?”

Holding up my right hand—palm out—I held my thumb and little finger down and touched the tips of my fingers to my forehead. “I swear it, Sawyer.”

He eyed my hand, his lids narrowing. “Did you just use the Scout salute?”

“I know you’re big on authority, so I had to go straight to the big guns.”

He laughed despite his foul mood. “Only you can make me see the levity in these situations.”

“It’s a gift.” I breathed in deeply, then let it out. There was a storm on the way—the smell of petrichor and ozone building. When I returned my gaze to his face, I said, “I’ll see you on the flip side.”

His grip on my waist tightened, his fingers digging into my hip.

“You know, letting me go usually helps with the leaving.”

Flexing his fingers, he muttered an apology. Before he tried to change my mind again, I pressed a kiss to his mouth, darting away before he could deepen it. I grinned at him, walking backward toward the shadows of the

trees that lined the driveway.

“Wait until I get there,” he repeated.

My cocksure smile made him scowl. “Sure.”

Safely in the cover of the trees, I made my way back toward the gatekeeper’s building. As I backtracked, I watched more and more cars rolled into the grounds of the school—Lexus, Teslas, Audis, and BMWs. I peered at the drivers and passengers as they passed, hoping to catch a glimpse of Sakura.

I didn’t step from the shadows until I reached the gatekeeper’s house and Willy.

“Hey, big guy. Let’s get ghost,” I told him in a whisper.

He opened his arms to me, and I stepped into his embrace without any hesitation. I was instantly chilled to the bone, the thought that I’d never be warm ever again running through my mind. He lifted me onto his shoulder and started toward the main building, walking down the middle of the driveway—the cars passing straight through us.

Half a mile past the carpark, St. Lucia’s of the Cross came into view. The building was also constructed of sandstone—perfectly symmetrical with large bay windows running up all three stories on both sides of the building. Once upon a time, the rooms inside had been filled with hundreds of students, but now, most of the glass in the windows in those former classrooms had been broken, the tables and chairs stolen or destroyed.

The staircase leading to the double-door entrance hall was a little worse for wear, but still intact, and that was how many people were entering the event.

“Let’s go around the back,” I told Willy. Around the rear of the building, it was just as grand as the front façade. A large gravel courtyard separated the dormitory block from the main building. Weeds speared through the gravel here too—not that we needed Willy’s footsteps to be deadened in any way.

A door off to one side had been left ajar, and I tapped Willy on the chest and pointed. “That way.”

He moved in that effortless way he had, floating through the door without opening it. It took a moment for my eyesight to adjust to the darkness inside—so much darker than I anticipated it would be. It was silent too, but then I remembered the other fights had had spells activated around them to both mute the sound and hide it from view.

Scanning the oak floor, I saw the ring of salt and flour just ahead of us—

beyond that, it was just black—an endless void.

To settle my nerves, I sucked in a breath, then released it. “Let’s go, Willy.”

The Gray Man passed over the flour and salt ring without disturbing it. When we came onto the other side, everything changed—light, sound, and smells assaulting me. We were at the back of a gutted old kitchen, black and white tiles still lining the floor. Willy exited the kitchen, passing through a long hall until finally reaching an archway that revealed the room beyond.

Light flooded the vast space. At least sixty feet wide, the room was packed with people milling around, chatting, betting, drinking. This must’ve been the holding area until the main event started. Furniture covered in dusty white sheets were pushed against the walls, waiters in tuxedos served champagne on silver platters.

“Can I have your attention, everyone?” A voice suddenly boomed from the other side of the room, and everyone quieted down. Sitting on Willy’s shoulder, I was able to see it was a man with cropped salt-and-pepper hair dressed in a well-cut suit.

*Where was Falcon 2.0?*

“Tonight’s competition is about to begin.” Turning, he opened a set of double doors, flinging them wide to reveal another cavernous room, where a ring was already roped off in the center, and the floor was covered in sawdust.

The crowd moved forward, and Willy and I ghosted straight through them. Behind us, I heard people mutter, “Is it cold in here?”

“Did you feel that?”

“Why do I feel like I want to cry right now?”

With a grin gracing my lips, we entered the hall. It was as wide as a football field and half the length. At one end was a stage area with a door on either side. The floor was oak, some patches bald from where thousands of feet had walked before.

The same man who made the announcement was standing in the middle of the ring, waiting for the first hall to empty into the second. When the double doors closed behind the last person, the man said loudly, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am Mr. Black.”

Mr. Black was Mr. Hall—just as Fox said.

He continued, “I will be your MC for tonight. Our first fight this evening is between my darling wife’s entrant and Mr. Muller’s. Competitors, enter the

arena.”

A tall male with a slave band around his neck and platinum blond hair stepped into the ring, his attention on a woman with dark hair. That had to be Mrs. Hall. When the supe turned around once more, he seemed determine, exuding the same kind of sensuality that Sawyer did.

On the opposite side of the ring, a creature over twelve feet tall stepped over the rope and huffed out a breath, the motion lifting the slave band around his throat. With the skull of a deer for a head, as well as the antlers, I had a fleeting thought that this supe was a wendigo like Ben, but then I noticed his body was made from a tree trunk. I knew of only one supe who had a tree trunk for a body, and that was a dryad—but even then, he didn’t look at all human like the dryad I’d met.

Willy sent the letters L-E-S-H-Y into my head.

“Leshy?” I whispered.

He nodded once but didn’t send any other information. I’d have to ask Sawyer about it later.

“Competitors,” the man announced. “Fight until your last breath if you’re directed to. Owners, call it over and forfeit your prize.” Stepping from the roped-off area, he shouted, “Fight!”

The crowd’s anticipation for bloodlust pressed upon me in an instant. As they foamed at the mouth, I directed Willy to walk around the perimeter of the room, checking out what was behind the two doors near the stage. We ghosted through the first door to find it completely empty. The other room, however, held the jackpot.

It looked like the school band’s instrument storage room had been taken over. Flutes, trumpets, and violins hung on the walls on specially designed hooks, the tops of the instruments covered in a thick layer of dust. They were the only things that were dusty, however. The rest of the space had been cleared—an upright piano pushed against the far wall—leaving a staging area for combatants to get patched up. A metal table much like the ones I’d seen at the morgue took up the prime real estate, while a steel trolley full of medical supplies sat beside it. Against one wall, there was a locked cabinet with glass doors—its shelves overflowing with drugs.

Back out in the main hall, the fight was already over. The platinum blond combatant was on the floor, breathing in sawdust, while the leshy stood over his prone form. Mr. Hall stepped back into the ring, two huge men lumbering in after him to pick up and drag the blond supe away.

“Mr. Muller, be sure to collect your prize at the conclusion of the evening. Next up folks, we have...”

I shut out Mr. Hall’s voice, focusing on where they were taking the blond. Would he be patched up here, or did Mrs. Hall keep Sakura somewhere else?”

“Follow them, Willy.”

They dragged the supe into the triage room, lifting him onto the metal slab.

The dark-haired woman walked in after them. She was dressed in a long, cream satin gown, the sleeves of which covered her delicate arms, but highlighted her enhanced bust. She was holding what looked to be a diamond-encrusted dog leash, except it wasn’t a dog who followed her in.

It was Sakura.

“Out!” she shouted at the two men. The pair shared a look, then left. As soon as the door was shut, she locked it, then whirled around to face the fighter. Dropping the leash, she rushed to him, petting his face and cooing softly.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” she told him. “Barry was getting suspicious of us. I had to enter you tonight.”

The male’s eyes opened, and they were glazed with pain. Despite that, he smiled at her. “Worth it,” he croaked in a thick French accent.

“Are you okay? I felt everything.” She touched her head like she was recovering from the fight herself. She’d *felt* the blows. If that were true, that would mean...

“No fucking way,” I breathed.

Mrs. Hall swung her gaze in my direction, fear making her eyes widen. After studying the space I was occupying, she turned her attention back to the incubus in front of her—her *consort*. Holy shit. This was... this was... freaking *amazing*.

“I’m okay, *mi amore*,” the incubus replied, clutching her hand and kissing it. “I will heal.”

“You’ll heal a lot faster with Sakura’s help.” She beckoned the byakko forward.

The incubus reached out to gain her attention but groaned, wincing as he clutched his ribs. “Maggie, my darling, no. Keep her strong for those who really need her. Some fractured ribs and a broken leg won’t kill me.”

Mrs. Hall’s—Maggie’s—face contorted in pain at the denial. “No, Thalix,



you will heal.”

“What about your husband’s entrants? What if one of the wounds is fatal?”

The woman chewed on her bottom lip, torn between wanting to save her consort and keeping up the pretense with her husband. With tears sitting in her eyes, she said, “I don’t care. I love you. You are all that matters.”

Thalix let his head fall back to the table, resigned. “You know I can deny you nothing, *mi amore*. I will accept the healing if that is what you want.”

“It is,” she replied. She beckoned Sakura closer, removing the leash and collar around the supe’s neck. “Heal him, Sakura. Please. And do it quickly.”

The byakko nodded, her white hair already dancing with the wind. She’s just sucked in a deep, bracing breath when the door burst open, and the byakko’s twin sister stalked into the room.

“Neko?” Sakura asked in a small voice. “Neko, is that you?”

Neko turned her gaze on her twin, and she stumbled back a step. “I found you, sister,” she croaked, emotion thickening her throat.

Maggie had rallied from the shock. “You can’t have her,” she told Neko, her voice pitching and wavering. “You can’t have my Sakura.”

Neko turned her electric blue eyes to the woman who had been keeping her sister as a slave. “*Can’t?*” she hissed. “She is not *your* Sakura. She is *my* twin sister. You stole her, and she will be leaving with me.”

Guilt flared in Maggie’s eyes. “You can’t. I need her to heal my consort after he battles.” She gestured to the incubus still trying to rise from the metal table. “My husband doesn’t know. I can’t lose Thalix.”

Neko hissed again, only this time, her canine teeth had grown longer. Actually, her stripes were more prominent now too. “I have been looking for my sister for months. Traveling across the country, attending these matches. Every time I found a slave owner, I interrogated them, trying to find out where Sakura was. When they couldn’t give me the information I needed, I made sure they suffered as they made their slaves suffer.”

“You-you could stay with her?” Maggie hurried on, unaware of the very real threat to her life. “Twin byakko are very powerful. You could stay and heal with her.”

When Neko next smiled, it was like looking at the smile of a viper about to strike. “Sakura is the healer. I am the tormentor. Where she takes pleasure in helping people, I take pleasure in harming them.”

Maggie’s lip trembled. “Then come and work as security for me,” she

reasoned. “I can pay you well. Of course, you’d have to wear a slave band while in public, but your sister does that—” Maggie’s words came to an abrupt stop, taking in the wild destruction in Neko’s eyes. Lightning was crawling across her skin—sparking—and highlighting her tiger stripes.

“I am nobody’s slave,” she boomed, bolts of lightning shooting from her fingertips. Storm clouds boiled up from the ground, swirling around her body. They roiled and writhed against the shifter’s body, growing larger and larger until Neko receded from view.

Then, the clouds began to dissipate just as quickly as they’d formed—their disappearance heralded by a thunderous roar. A white tiger the size of a Mini Cooper stepped from the turbulent ribbons of atmosphere—black stripes bold against her sleek platinum coat, her tail swishing angrily. Lips peeled back from saber-like teeth, and a growl trickled menacingly from her throat.

Terror blanched the color from Maggie’s face, who was backing away from the threat—her hands outstretched in supplication before her.

“Neko, no,” Sakura said in that same quiet voice. “Violence isn’t the answer.”

Neko ignored her sister’s plea and stalked forward. Her sharp gaze was on the woman who had bagged and tagged her sister. Maggie looked around for a weapon, lunging to the side and pulling a dusty, old violin off the wall. Neko hissed and swiped with her giant paw, batting the instrument out of the woman’s hands. It landed on the floor, the delicate neck and strings separating from the body and ricocheting across the other side of the room.

“Right, shit just got real,” I said to Willy. “Let them see me.”

I knew the instant I’d become visible because Maggie’s scared, wide eyes darted my way. “P-p-please,” she implored softly. “Help me.”

Neko spun around, irritated by the intrusion. A long, drawn-out growl burbled up her throat. Her tail lashed from side to side wildly, and her top lip peeled off her sharp fangs.

“Neko, you don’t want to do this,” I told her, trying to ignore the heavy throbbing of the opal around my neck. “Killing her isn’t the ans—No!”

Neko pounced on Maggie, riding her body down to the floor. The woman did her best to fend off the attack, shoving her forearm up to protect her face. Neko’s jaws came together with a *snap*, the sound of bone crunching making my stomach turn. An ear-shattering scream pierced the air, the sound of agony echoed by Thalix, who was trying to get himself off the slab to help his consort.

His broken leg collapsed beneath him, and he fell to the floor. It didn't stop him from crawling, so desperately trying to reach Maggie. The look of absolute determination on his face mirrored Sawyer's when he was on that bridge, and I had a moment of complete clarity. This is what he must've felt like when I was trapped in that car. And when I was almost drowned by the kappas. And every other time my life was put in danger.

This was a male trying to save his consort, and knowing there was a chance it wouldn't happen.

Knowing that it might be the end.

There was a low-pitched humming coming from my left. I turned and found Reaver hanging from one of the storage pegs. Wrapping my hand around the hilt, I held it in front of me, stunned to see the blade sparking with electricity. Swallowing down on my dry throat, I said, "Neko. Stop."

But the byakko didn't stop. She reared back and lunged for Maggie's neck, snapping the delicate column of bones in an instant. Maggie's eyes widened in shock. Her whole body stilled, her slack arms falling out to the side, her legs no longer scrabbling for purchase of the floor.

She gasped for breath once. Twice...

"No!" Thalix shouted, watching the light in her eyes flicker, then die. The incubus roared for the loss of his consort, but then a moment later, he went quiet—his body going boneless. He collapsed a few feet from Maggie, his breathing labored. Stretching out his arm, he wrapped his fingers around the heel of Maggie's shoe before releasing his last breath.

I was rocked. It felt like all the air had been pushed from my lungs, and I was sharing their deaths. Deliberately, I sucked in a deep breath just to make sure I could, to make sure I wasn't part of some unseen web that connected all incubus and their consorts. Completely and utterly wrenched in two, my heart ached with the loss.

It was Neko's warning snarl that brought me from inside my head. I blinked rapidly, focusing on the real danger. Letting out a breath, I raised Reaver with one hand and waved Neko over with the other. She attacked immediately, swiping out a paw to trip me up. I fell hard on my tailbone but kept my grip on the sword's pommel. Swinging, I nicked her on the shoulder, hoping that might slow her down just a little. Red blood poured from the wound, staining her pearlescent fur—the attack seemingly giving the byakko pause.

Sakura ran over to her sister, tugging at her side. "Neko, stop this," she

begged. “You’ve killed enough people.”

Neko batted her sister away gently and refocused her attention on me. I scrambled to get onto my feet. Before I could get vertical, Neko placed one giant paw onto my thigh to hold me in place, her claws protracting and piercing my skin. My hand opened reflexively, releasing Reaver. Gritting my teeth, I kept the scream of agony inside but couldn’t stop the four streaks of fresh blood that welled.

I shoved at her paw. “Now we’re even,” I ground out. “I drew blood. You drew blood, but now, you have to stop this.”

Neko cocked her head to the side, and I could almost hear her saying that we were far from even. With her free paw, she knocked Reaver over to the other side of the room. It skimmed across the floor, crashing into the far wall.

Sakura was back, tugging her sister’s tail this time. Neko swung around to look at her, but kept her paw in place—pinning me to the floor. Suddenly, there was a pained bellow, and the pressure on my thigh lifted. Looking down my body, I saw Neko leap away, trying to pull something from her flank with her teeth. What the hell was that? She yanked what looked to be a—*mace*?—from her side and dropped it to the floor. Hypodermic needles peppered the surface, and I followed the line of the thin chain that was attached to it.

Sawyer stood in the doorway to the medical room, holding the wooden handle of the *urticate*—a heavily modified weapon that could bring down an out-of-control shifter with a high dose of ketamine.

“Pussy cat, are you okay?” Sawyer demanded, not taking his eyes off Neko, who was stumbling around like she was drunk. She hissed at Sawyer, at me, at her sister before finally collapsing onto the floor—unconscious.

Panting, I glanced from Neko to him and asked, “You couldn’t have gotten here five minutes earlier?”

## TWENTY

BY THE TIME WE GOT NEKO TO THE STATION AND LOCKED IN THE CELL, IT WAS way past one in the morning. We'd had to wait for the human and supe MEs to show up as well as the CSI team. Every single person who attended the fight was being charged and processed by the rest of PIG.

Unfortunately, a human owning a slave only came with a large fine rather than any real jail time, which meant it was hardly a deterrent for people wealthy enough to pay for the privilege.

Exhausted, I stared at the woman who had caused so much trouble.

"Where's my sister?" she demanded from her perch on the metal cot—her words still slurred as the ketamine left her system.

"She's safe," I replied. We'd set Sakura up in a hotel in town—somewhere she could lie low in case Mr. Hall came looking for her. It was more than likely she'd be returning to Japan alone at this point—Neko was going to be in jail for an incredibly long time.

Propping myself up against the wall to keep the weight off the leg she'd used as a pin cushion, I said, "Now that you know she's okay, tell me why you killed all those people? Just because you were looking for your sister, or did you have another motive?"

"Only for my sister," Neko replied, dropping her chin to her chest, her lids coming down on her ice-blue irises. She was quiet for a moment, and I was sure she'd fallen asleep. But then she jerked her head up, blinked, and added, "She was stolen from me. I had to get her back."

"Stolen, how?"

Neko lifted her heavy head, resting it back against the wall. "In Japan, she went shopping one day. She never came back. I came here because I heard a

rumor that a byakko had been imported, but I didn't know who had purchased her."

Sawyer asked, "How did you take the form of Mr. Falcon?"

She peered at him with narrowed eyes. "Unlike my sister, I have the ability to assume the identity of a person. Mr. Falcon was an organizer for this chapter of fights. He seemed like an obvious choice."

"You possessed Urban, too, didn't you?" I jerked my chin in the direction of the other cell.

"I did."

"For what purpose?"

"To kill you." She said the words so calmly—the mark of a true sociopath. "Because you kept interfering in my tasks."

"Your task of a mini killing spree?"

She blinked, her eyes clearing of the haze. "They got what they deserved."

We could add unremorseful onto the list of traits a sociopath has. "How did you kill them?" I asked. "That's the only thing we haven't figured out yet."

"I possessed them."

"How?" This question was from Sawyer. "Do you mist into their bodies like you do when you heal someone?"

A sneer pulled up her top lip. "Yes."

Sawyer glanced over at me. He'd heard enough, and quite frankly, so had I. Pushing off the wall, I started toward the door, favoring my injured leg.

Neko laughed suddenly, and I turned to glare at her. "Something funny?" I asked.

The byakko pulled herself off the metal cot and staggered over to the bars. Wrapping her hands around them, she leaned in, and I jerked backward, a hiss escaping my lips.

She'd unsheathed a claw and dug it into my upper thigh. "I should slice through your femoral artery and finish the job right now."

Warm blood dribbled down the inside of my leg, soaking my jeans. There was a click, like a gun had just been cocked. Peering across to my right, I found Sawyer with his Glock out and aimed.

"Sawyer," I breathed, my throat dry. "Don't—"

My words were cut when a dark shadow began to form between us, spiraling up, up, up, swirling toward the ceiling. The lights flickered and

went out, plunging us into darkness. I expected my opal to start glowing, but it remained quiet against my chest.

“Sawyer?” I called, panicked because I couldn’t see him anymore—not even an outline. “Sawyer!” My heart lodged in my throat, choking me. “S-S-Sawyer.” The word came out as a whimper edged in a shiver. It was suddenly so cold in here.

“Pussy cat?”

The wind was whipping, and I only just caught the sound of his voice over it, but it was enough for me to cling to. Starting toward him, I stopped when there was a scream of terror behind me. I spun, searching through shadows with my arms outstretched. My palms smacked into the bars, sliding off them a moment later. The heavy, coppery scent of pennies saturated the air.

Then just as quickly as the black funnel appeared, it disappeared, and the overhead lights flickered back on. I blinked rapidly, my retinas adjusting to the change. Then again because I couldn’t be seeing what I was seeing.

“Sawyer?” I asked, unable to tear my gaze off the cell.

“I’m here. I’m fine,” he replied.

“Great. But she’s not.” I pointed at the mass of blood and other things that should’ve been on the inside of a body but were decorating the floor of the cell instead. Neko had been completely destroyed. Just like with Bruin, there was nothing left of her except unrecognizable meat and blood.

“Cat?”

I glanced over at him, startling when I realized Willy was standing there. He was pulsing with power, but he was looking at me.

He sent the letters R-U-O-K to me again. When he inclined his head, I knew he was referring to my new injury. It was kind of hard to miss the blood seeping from my leg.

“I’m fine,” I croaked, narrowing my eyes at him. An idea was forming in my head. “Willy, did you do that?” I asked, indicating to the cell. “Did you kill Neko?”

He nodded his head once.

I let out a breath, my gaze darted around the Gray Man to Sawyer. Disbelief was shining in his eyes too. Licking my lips, I said to Willy, “And the minotaur from Wednesday. Did you do that too?”

He replayed the girder incident to me—where Bruin rammed the steel frame I’d been clinging to at the slaughterhouse fight.

Holy shit. My eyes widened as realization struck. “It was Willy,” I told Sawyer. “He was protecting me—getting revenge, really, but still in his own way...” I stared in awe at the Gray Man. “Is that something a slave would do?”

Sawyer rubbed his jaw. “No. A slave wouldn’t actively avenge you. That’s something more like what a—”

“Gah! Don’t say it.” I didn’t need him to say that maybe Willy was bound to me in more ways than a slave ever would be because finding a way to break that bond might now be impossible.

He shut his mouth, and he didn’t look happy about the revelation. To be honest, neither was I. Limping closer to Willy, I peered up into his cowed face. There was nothing but darkness under there, but it did make me wonder what his expression was like. How did he feel about it?

“We should head home,” Sawyer said softly. I regarded him from around Willy’s body. His shoulders were tight, his arms crossed protectively over his chest. I had to make him understand that this didn’t change anything between us. Walking up to him, I pulled his arms apart and stepped into his reluctant embrace. With a shudder, he wrapped his arms around me, fitting me so perfectly against his body. Breathing in his chocolate and whisky scent, I knew everything was going to be all right.

Well, as all right as having a Gray Man bound to me in any case.



## EPILOGUE

“PROMISE ME SOMETHING?” I SAID TO SAWYER LATER THAT NIGHT.

“Anything.” He kissed the tip of my nose. We were tucked up in bed together, our faces close, our breaths mingling. It had been a long half a week.

“Promise you’ll never leave me?”

His eyes grew serious. “Where did this come from?”

“I was just thinking about what happened with Maggie Hall and her consort, Thalix.”

“Yes?” He stroked some hair from my face.

“I watched Thalix die after Maggie was killed by Neko, and...” I felt a traitorous tear fall onto the pillow, and Sawyer’s entire demeanor changed. Before he said anything more, I added, “I watched him die, and even though he knew it was hopeless, he still tried to get to her, to touch her one last time.”

“Oh, pussy cat. Come here.” He pressed my face into his bare chest, and I let the tears fall.

I didn’t know this would affect me so much, but I hadn’t been able to get the images out of my head since that night.

“I’ve been alive for over one hundred and fifty years. I never thought I’d find my consort, and you better believe I’m not letting you go without a fight now.”

“I know.” I sniffled pulling back a little to look at his face. “But you’re not immortal, and I’m certainly not.”

“No, but you *are* more robust than most humans. Plus, you have a personal bodyguard now.”

My mouth twitched. “Are you saying you *like* Willy now?”

“Like isn’t the right word,” he grumbled. “Tolerate, maybe.” He heaved a sigh. “I appreciate that he’s got your back if at any point I’m not there.” He stroked my face reverently. “And with you, pussy cat, trouble is never far away.”

Hot damn. How could I not love this male? All he wanted was to protect and love me in return, and after seeing how Maggie and Thalix adored one another, it was stupid for me to hold back now. Even though I’d wanted to keep this arrangement completely free of feelings, I knew it had been a losing battle since then.

Framing his face in my hands, I finally said the words I’d been too afraid to say to him. “I love you, Sawyer.”

His whole face lit up, his mouth pulling into a grin. “Did you say you loved me?”

I made a show of glancing around, then returned my gaze to him. “Ah, yeah, I did. Did you not hear it? Want me to speak a little louder, grandpa? I mean you *are* ancient. It’s understandable that you didn’t actually hear m—”

He growled playfully and slapped his hand over my mouth. “Can you just let me enjoy this for a while longer?”

Suddenly solemn, I nodded.

“I love you, too, pussy cat.” Releasing his hand, he ran the tip of his nose against mine. “And I always will.”

Slanting his mouth over mine, he kissed me, pouring all his love for me into that one action. I did the same, clutching him to me and refusing to let go.

Trailing one hand down the side of my body, he gripped my hip and rolled me onto my back. Careful of the injuries Neko inflicted on my thigh, he shimmied under the quilt, positioning himself between my legs.

I gasped at the first spearing of his tongue through my aching heat, fisting his hair to hold him in place.

“You taste so good, pussy cat,” he said on a moan.

“Like unicorn awesome?”

He chuckled, his warm breath feathering over my sensitive flesh before lapping at me once more. “Better, I think. You taste like home to me.”

Heart.

Melting.

“More, Sawyer. Give me more.”

“What my consort wants, my consort gets.” With a feral growl, he fed one finger inside me, then another, filling me, stretching me. Writhing against him as he worked those fingers in and out, my hips bucking as he used his wicked tongue to lash at my clit.

He banded his free arm over my hips, holding me in place while he brought me to my first orgasm, quickly and without mercy. Sweat beaded on my body as the rush of pleasure cascaded through me, a plaintive moan leaving my throat. He withdrew his fingers and sat up. His lips were glossy from where he’d kissed me, and I let out a small moan—biting my bottom lip—when he brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked off my essence. I was riveted—watching him take pleasure in the taste of me.

“I want to possess you,” he told me.

My next words came out on a pant. “I’m yours.”

His usually gray eyes had darkened off to black as he traced them down the length of my naked body. I squirmed under the scrutiny, knowing he was going to wring every last drop of pleasure from me. Leaning down, he captured one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking and biting the distended tip until I cried out in pleasure. With a wicked grin on his sinful mouth, he paid attention to my other breast until I was mewling like a kitten.

“Enough playing,” I told him, barely able to get the words out. “Fuck me, already.”

“I’ll stop playing,” he said, laving his tongue through my belly button, making me gasp. “But I won’t fuck you. I’ll make love to you.”

Frustrating, wonderful male.

Bracing himself on his elbows on either side of my head, he lowered his hips until I cradled him. “I don’t want to hurt your leg,” he said on a hiss, barely hanging onto control.

“You won’t. Promise.”

Flexing his hips, he brushed the tip of his erection through my wet folds, making us both suck in a sharp breath. He did it again and again until I felt an orgasm crest. Pleasure washed over me gently, comforting warmth settling into my bones.

On his next thrust, he entered me, slowly pushing his way inside. He rested his forehead against mine, and he moved, his hips slowly undulating against me, my body absorbing it. Nothing had ever felt this good. Nothing would ever feel this good again. Sawyer was the other half of my soul, and nothing was ever going to change that. I tried to hide a wince when I rubbed

against the bandage on my thigh.

He withdrew from me suddenly, flipping over onto his back. Urging me to mount him, I straddled his hips and slid down onto his hard length once more. That was all it took for orgasm number three to boil over, my inner walls clenching tight around his shaft.

His fingers dug into my good thigh, while his other hand fisted the sheets at his hips. "Like being gloved in silk," he grunted.

Sawyer watched me with hooded eyes, his mouth slack. If I didn't know any better, he enjoyed ceding control to me. I began to move, rolling my hips and drawing a surprised chuckle from his lips. His hungry gaze traced along my neck, my chest, my stomach. When they landed on my thigh, I saw the anger boiling.

Touching the side of his face, I murmured, "Just concentrate on me, okay? My leg isn't bothering me."

"You can't lie to me, pussy cat. I can feel the pain."

I arched my back, his cock rubbing deeper inside me. "Can you also feel my pleasure?"

"Yesss," he replied, his jaw tight, his eyes smoldering. "Every single drop of it."

"Then focus on that." I whipped my hips. "Focus on my pleasure and nothing else. Make me forget everything that's happened in the last five days."

Leaning up, he captured my lips in a kiss, slanting his mouth, demanding more. His tongue plundered, his teeth scraped, the scruff on his jaw rasped deliciously against my chin. He was all in and completely focused on me.

He didn't find his own release until my tenth orgasm had crested and ebbed away, leaving me boneless and satisfied. With one final thrust, Sawyer came, his release bringing on orgasm number eleven for me. This one danced with pleasure and pain, but I gritted my teeth and took it all.

I collapsed on top of him, my muscles unable to hold me up anymore, and he wrapped his arms around me. With my nose in the hollow of his throat, I breathed deep, the searing knowledge that this man would do anything to keep me safe like a healing balm. Yes, somewhere down the line one of us could die, but that was life.

For right now, all we had to do was live life to the fullest.

Love to the fullest.

Collect unicorn paraphernalia and be happy.

Thank you so much for reading Bad Kitty!  
I hope you loved joining Cat and Sawyer on their (mis)adventures.

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