

MAGGIE MAYHEM

POSSESSIVE
MONSTERS

ROCK AND A
HARD PLACE

A PARANORMAL MONSTER ROMANCE

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MAGGIE MAYHEM

Rock and a Hard Place

Possessive Monsters Book 4

By Maggie Mayhem

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CHAPTER 1

LILLIAN



“SO WHAT ARE YOU anyway, sweetheart? Like a panda shifter or sumthin’?”

I ignored the drunk frat boy who’d plopped onto the barstool next to me. He probably thought he was being so witty and original, but if I had a nickel for every time some drunk-ass, skirt-chasing idiot asked me if I was a panda shifter or a dragon lady on account of me being Asian and living in Darlington, I’d be fucking rich.

And no, I was neither of those things. I wasn’t even sure if panda shifters were a real thing. If they had ever existed, and were anything like real pandas, they’d probably all died out. Real pandas never wanted to procreate, why should the shifter kind be any different? And many were horrible

mothers to boot. As for being a dragon shifter, if I was, I sure as hell wouldn't be getting rip-roaring drunk in a dump like this.

Unfortunately, ignoring the ass didn't make him leave. He leaned closer in and tried to put an arm around me. I batted his arm away.

"Touch me, and I'll burn you to a crisp." I tried to channel my best Angry Dragon Bitch vibe.

"Aw, come on, babe. I'm just trying to be nice. Let me buy you another drink."

Ugh. He smelled like too much Axe body spray and cheap beer. And if that wasn't bad enough, his friends were watching us, cackling and jeering on the other side of the bar.

Yeah. So attractive. Not!

"I'm not your *babe*. Now, beat it! I'm not interested."

"But you're drinking all by yourself. I can't let you go home alone; it wouldn't be gentlemanly." He grinned, like he was super proud of himself for coming up with that line. "Girls like you need someone to take care of them."

"*Girls like me?*" I hissed, letting my usually brown eyes flash a frosty blue-green that faded at the edges to yellow just long enough for him to see that he was not, in fact, dealing with some fluffy panda shifter. I let my claws grow long and tapped them loudly against the counter for emphasis.

I hoped he bought the bluff. He didn't need to know that I only had the tiniest amount of shifter in me and might as well be human, really. Those claws were nothing more than a parlor trick.

He bought it.

"Oh shit." His eyes went wide, realizing I was a predator of some sort.

"This idiot bothering you, Lillian?"

The bartender, Levi, was a jackal shifter from the African savannas. I'd

known him ever since I moved to Darlington seven years ago as a fresh-faced college student. He drifted a little closer and glared at the Casanova wannabe. “Whatever. No one wants such a frigid bitch anyway.” The asshole slid off the barstool and stomped back to his friends.

“Thanks, Levi.” I turned to my friend and trusty provider of alcoholic beverages.

“No problem. We used to never get these types here.” He picked up my empty glass.

By “these types”, he meant human guys bouncing in from out of town in hopes of picking up a shifter or some other supernatural. Now that I thought about it, the comments about me being a panda or dragon shifter hadn’t started until after The Wall fell. Back then, Darlington was magical folks’ best-kept secret.

It was one of the reasons I’d given up the chance to study at Stanford and decided to take classes here instead. Well, that, and Darlington University had a special program for physical therapy geared toward shifters. It had meant an extra year of school, but it was totally worth it.

Most shifters let their extra strength and agility get the better of them and wound up injured. And while their bodies did heal faster, it didn’t mean they were immune to chronic pain. As a result, many clinics now had at least one therapist who specialized in shifters and other magical folk, especially since the fall of The Wall.

The Wall had been a spell that had hidden monsters and magic in plain sight for millennia. One day, it had just...Poof!...disappeared. I still remember sitting in the college cafeteria when the news alert about it played on the big screen TV. Darlington had been a lot smaller then, and most everyone at the University knew about magic. I’d known monsters existed; I mean, I was

technically one too, since it was a catch-all term used for anyone who had a non-human form, but knowing and seeing were two different things.

“Another gin and tonic?” Levi asked.

I probably should stop, but just thinking of the mess I had to return to tomorrow morning had my mouth saying, “Yeah, sure. Thanks” without asking my brain how it felt.

Ninety-nine problems, and this bitch had all of them.

In four days’ time, a complete stranger was going to arrive at my door and whisk me away to a country I’d never been to so I could marry a guy I’d never met. I didn’t even speak the language! And all because I had a tiny smidgen of snow leopard shifter DNA.

I’d gotten the call yesterday, on Wednesday. They’d given me until Monday morning to “get my affairs in order” before they came to pick me up.

Honestly? I’d considered making a run for it. I still might. But the problem with that was, I didn’t know *how* to make a run for it. Especially since these people had found out my phone number, email address, *and* my address despite my parents’ refusal to cooperate.

I didn’t know how they tracked me down...I don’t even post on social media...but I was sure that no matter where I ran, they’d find me and come for me. I’d just be postponing the inevitable. These people had a shit ton more money and resources than I did, and I knew it.

The only way for me to get out of this would be if I was already married. I’d toyed with the idea of paying someone to marry me by Monday but ruled that out when I realized that one, I didn’t have any candidates; two, I didn’t have much money, certainly not enough for something like that; and three, Monday was only four days away.

Levi put a fresh gin and tonic down in front of me, and I took a much too

large swig. Welp, if I was going to be hungover in the morning—because I didn't have the shifter resistance to hangovers either—I might as well keep going, right?

It wasn't just that the people who'd ignored me my whole life because I couldn't shift now demanded I do something to save their crummy species that had me down. Nope. The rest of my life was in shambles, too.

First, I'd gotten to work this morning to find out that my job was gone. Sure, they could call it a reshuffling as much as they wanted, but the only person being reshuffled was me. I bet Holly was ecstatic to get all my physio clients. She'd always been super competitive, even though there were plenty of patients to go around.

So I'd packed up my stuff and headed back home, only to get a call from my landlord saying I had to find a new place to live because he was selling the this one. I didn't believe him. I'm sure he just wanted to put the place back on the market at the new inflated rent prices.

Not that losing my job and my home really made a difference when I was going to be shipped off to God-knows-where next Monday, but still. It was three life-changing events all together. It was actually a bit suspicious, and made me wonder if The White Claws, the snow leopard shifter group coming for me, had orchestrated everything to work in their favor.

With no job, no home, and a crushing amount of student debt, being whisked away to marry some rich guy on the other side of the world became much more appealing. And it would be—for most. But not me. I'd always had a fiercely independent streak and hated people telling me what to do. Nothing could be worse than some stupid shifter organization telling me who to marry and how many kids to have.

I brought the straw to my lips again, only to realize I'd finished yet another

drink. Oh man, I was going to be so hungover tomorrow. But hey, call it my last hurrah before I got suckered into domestic life with the proverbial stranger in a strange land.

I didn't realize another guy had sat down next to me until he ordered whiskey on the rocks, the low rumble of his voice pulling me out of my thoughts. I turned my head to the rich, growly sound.

Holy fuck, so much muscle. He was massive, with broad shoulders, a huge chest, and thick arms that looked like he'd spent his entire life lifting weights at the gym. That said, I wasn't sure if they made weights heavy enough for him.

His jawline was so sharp and perfect that it looked like it had been chiseled out of granite. And the artist must have been ultra generous the day he carved him because, damn! I was suddenly very hungry for a bite.

He moved, and there was a barely detectable shimmer. Oh. Glamour. This wasn't his natural form. No wonder he was so damn perfect. He had magical help.

He downed his whiskey in one gulp before ordering another. I was pretty sure it was considered blasphemous to do that with whiskey, but he didn't seem to care. Hey, would you look at that? Seemed like my sorry ass had company in the "drink your sorrows away" department.

For a moment, I wondered if the two of us could drown our sorrows in other ways. Together. Hell, it was probably one of my last nights of freedom. I wouldn't mind spending it with someone like him. We could spend the next few days fucking like bunnies.

I wondered if I was ovulating. Could you imagine The White Claws' surprise when my first kid came out not a snow leopard, but whatever the hell this

hottie was? I should totally do it just to spite them. Nah, I wasn't a heartless bitch. We're talking about a kid here.

But I could most definitely get behind the idea of a night of exploring that massively muscled body. I started picturing running my palms over those broad shoulders, across his pecs, and down his (most likely) perfect abs, and...oh wow. I squeezed my thighs together at the sudden need that rushed between my legs at the thought of what was hidden in those pants. I wondered if it was as big as the rest of him.

My object of desire froze, empty whiskey tumbler still in his hand. He sniffed loudly, groaned, turned to me, and totally caught me sizing up the goods. I wasn't even being discreet about it. I was straight-up ogling him like he was a pint of Ben and Jerry's, and I was five days into a low-carb diet.

By the way he sniffed the air, his eyes closing briefly, he'd smelled my arousal. I still didn't know what type of monster he was, but shifters had a great sense of smell and could scent lust.

I had the decency to look contrite. At least, I tried. I was much too tipsy at this point to really pull it off.

"You're new here," I said, slurring my words.

Oh. Forget tipsy. I was already full on smashed.

"Yeah. I usually go to the Howling Wolf."

That was the other shifter pub, a few blocks over. I'd been there once or twice, but The Pint—short for The Pint of No Return—was my usual spot.

"Gunnar." He stuck out his hand, and I reached over to shake it.

"Lillian."

The moment we touched, it was like an electrical shock. I gasped and tried to pull away, but he held my hand firmly. I looked up into a pair of gorgeous greenish-gray eyes, wondering if he was feeling the same thing. Something

swirled under the surface, but then he blinked and it disappeared. He released my hand.

“Shitty day?” I asked, eyeing his empty glass.

“You could say that.”

“What do you do?” It was a Thursday, and given that most people worked Monday to Friday, I assumed it was work stress.

He hesitated for a second, and I wondered if I’d accidentally asked a spy or an assassin his job. That would be a hoot. After a moment, he said, “I work security.”

“Well, duh,” I said, smacking my forehead, which I immediately regretted because it made the world start to spin. “With a body like that, of course you do. I bet you make a great security guard.”

He looked amused, like he didn’t realize he was the size of a Mack truck. “I guess I do.” He grinned, and the smile zinged straight to my tummy, stirring up the butterflies there.

Something inside me urged me to rub myself all over him like a cat. Strange. I’d never had that urge before.

Maybe I’d had too much to drink, and downed that last gin and tonic way too fast. Maybe it was time to go home before I did something stupid to embarrass myself, like hump his leg or something. I really wanted to. His huge, muscular leg was one hundred percent hump worthy.

Ugh! Of all the times for my more animalistic side to come out, it chose now! Maybe I just needed a bathroom break and some water to sober up. I excused myself, asking him to hold my seat, and slid off my stool.

The world spun around me, and big hands reached out to steady me. I looked up and was caught in his gray-green eyes again.

“You okay?”

My face flushed. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

I gave him my best smile and sashayed over to the ladies’ room, desperately trying not to face plant.

CHAPTER 2

GUNNAR



I WATCHED AS LILLIAN disappeared down the corridor toward the ladies' room, her dark, silky hair swinging behind her. Her form-fitting faded black jeans hugged her luscious ass, and her boots made the sexiest *clack clack clack* on the floor as she walked.

She didn't recognize me. Good. Let her believe I was just a simple security guard, not one of the co-owners of Redrock Protective Services.

The moment women found out who I was, they instantly got that look in their eyes, like they could smell the money. Which was hilarious to me, because for most of my existence, I'd been just a gargoyle, not worth considering for anything more than a little bit of fun by the witches and other magical folk who knew what I was. Definitely not mate or marriage material.

My brothers and I had run Redrock together for years, but it wasn't until our gig covering Desmon's wedding that we became a household name. At first, I loved the attention. But with the good came the bad, and if I could go back in time and vote against taking that job, I would. Even though I'd been the one who'd insisted we take it to begin with.

It wasn't like we needed the money. We'd already made more than enough over the centuries to live well for the rest of our lives. We'd only started Redrock so we'd have something to do, really. As gargoyles, we had strong urges to guard and protect. It was a good fit.

The bartender noticed me staring after her and shot me a look.

Whatever. She was the one who'd eyed me like a piece of meat first. I didn't mind. I'd rather she be after me for my body than my money, especially when she smelled that good. Just one whiff of her and my cock was as hard as the stone I'd been carved from and raring to go.

And that was before I even got a good look at her. She was of East Asian descent with pale, flawless skin and dark eyes framed by inky lashes and ringed with messy liner. The remnants of her brown liner clung to the edges of her lips, though most of it had rubbed off at the center.

She was wearing a black leather jacket, left open in front to reveal a skin-tight dark green camisole underneath. She had multiple piercings in her ears and two matching rows of small, silver hoop earrings. Her nails were painted the same dark green as her top.

Overall, the look was edgy but put together...and right up my alley. I wanted her in my bed yesterday.

I ordered another drink and took a swig when it came, this time actually tasting the whiskey instead of chugging it.

I hadn't come here to pick up chicks. I'd only left the Howling Wolf because

everyone else at my table was happily mated and making eyes at each other, and I felt very much out of place. Grayson and Griff, my brothers, both had amazing women by their sides. Even Eamon the demon, our honorary brother, had found someone worthy of him.

Usually, Graham was with us, which meant I wasn't the only unmated one at the table. But today, he was off guarding some diplomat's kid while the family was in town, so it was just me and the rest of the love squad. In the past, I hadn't minded the public displays of affection, but recently, it was starting to remind me that I was all alone.

It wasn't that I couldn't find a woman for some fun. There were plenty of women who wanted to warm my bed. The problem was, I wasn't sure if any of them actually liked me for *me*.

Graham straight-up wasn't interested in a mate—he'd had a bad experience in the past with a woman—and I pretended that I felt the same, but it was all a front. The truth was, I was very envious of what my brothers had.

I hid that envy behind the mask of a player. All the Redrock brothers had had our share of fun when we were first released from the magical bonds that held us to the evil wizard and his castle. Many witches and succubae had been happy to add a gargoyle to the notches on their bedposts.

But that was in the past. Graham had sworn off women after what happened with Julia, and frankly, I didn't blame him. I, on the other hand, still had my fun—although the encounters had gotten less and less “fun” recently.

That was why I'd been so disappointed when Sybil, our go-to witch for wards and barriers, had gotten hitched. We'd been compatible in and out of bed, and she didn't care about my money. But she was happily mated to her naga now. Seriously, *everyone* had found someone except me. Well, and Graham, but he didn't count since he wasn't looking.

I glanced over at Lillian as she made her way back to her seat. She had fresh lipstick on, haphazardly applied so that it was a little bit messy, and my brain immediately went there, imagining her smearing it all over my dick.

She waved down the bartender, asked for some tap water, and paid her tab. She gulped down her H2O before turning to me.

“I was thinking...um, uh... I know you just got here, but did you want to go somewhere else?”

I grinned. She was trying to pick me up, and by her awkwardness, she didn't do that often. My body screamed an enthusiastic yes, but I'd only had two whiskies, which were nowhere near enough for me to ignore the fact that she was way ahead of me in the drinks department, and it would be irresponsible of me to accept.

At times like this, I really hated myself for having a conscience. Part of me wanted to take her home and fuck her until she was hoarse from screaming my name. But another part was worried she'd wake up in my bed in the morning and be horrified. I was a gargoyle, after all.

So I said, “I'd love to. But I don't want you to regret anything in the morning. Can I have your number? I'd like to take you out this weekend on a proper date.”

I couldn't help but notice the bartender scrubbing the perfectly clean counter near us with his towel, pretending not to be listening to our conversation. He was looking out for her. She must be a regular, and I'd be able to find her here again. Maybe next time, she wouldn't be three sheets to the wind.

Lillian grinned for a second before the smile disappeared from her face and she shook her head. “I'm leaving soon, so there's no point.”

Leaving? Where? I glanced over at the bartender, but he looked surprised too. I guess she hadn't told him.

“How about I give you my number and you can call me when—”

“No. It’s—” She put out a hand to steady herself. “Thank you. But...” She shook her head sadly. “Have a nice night.” Then she turned and headed out of the bar.

Fuck. I considered running after her and taking her up on her offer after all. I’d only just met her, but it felt like someone very important was walking out of my life. What the hell was up with that?

I finished the rest of my drink and was about to order another when the bartender let out a low growl. It wasn’t directed at me. I followed his gaze to see a human man following Lillian out the door.

Shit. I knew trouble when I saw it.

Underneath her enticing feminine scent was the faint smell of cat. It was very weak though, and I couldn’t pinpoint what kind exactly. Maybe something small, like a bobcat. Despite the fact that she looked very much like someone who could take care of herself in a jam, the guardian part of me screamed to follow them.

I exchanged a look with the bartender, slapped a bill on the counter, and walked out after the human.

I found the ass trying to chat up my little cat half a block down the street. She was giving him very clear signs that she wasn’t interested that he was completely ignoring. I followed them silently, watching their interaction.

As they passed a parking lot, the man’s demeanor changed. He reached for Lillian, grabbing her and trying to pull her roughly toward a car.

“What the fuck!” Lillian tried to shove him away. “Get off me, you jerk!”

One of the cars honked, its headlights flashing for a second, and the jerkwad pulled her toward it.

Suddenly, there was a flash of silvery claws, and the idiot howled in pain as

Lillian swatted at his head. Yep, definitely a cat of some kind. Thin lines of blood appeared on the cretin's cheek, and he let go. Lillian stumbled a few steps away.

"You bitch!" Instead of getting the message and backing off, the man grabbed her hair and pulled her again toward the car.

I waited for Lillian to shift, but for some reason she didn't. She did scream, though, and the sound was more than my protective urges could take. Unable to stand back anymore, I snarled and stepped out of the shadows.

I considered letting my glamour drop and showing this asshole what I really was. It would make things so much easier. The human would probably shit himself at the first sight of me and run back to his friends. But that would expose who and what I was to Lillian as well. I'd rather her keep thinking I was a nobody.

"Let her go."

As the idiot sized me up, his eyes flickered to some movement behind me. His buddies from the bar. Realizing he wasn't alone, he got brave.

"What's it to you, *monster*?" He clearly could tell I wasn't human despite my glamour and he said the word like it was an insult.

"Let her go," I repeated.

"Aww, she's just playing hard to get, aren't you, sweetie?"

"Yeah," one of his friends said from behind me. "Leave them alone."

"Fuck you!" Lillian wriggled out of the asshole's grip while he was distracted with me.

Sudden movement had me turning as one of the men, the biggest of the group, rushed forward, a bottle raised in his hands. I swiped at the bottle, and it smashed on the ground. Then I picked the guy up by the neck and lifted him straight into the air with one hand.

The man that had been accosting Lillian froze, gaping at my superhuman strength. I tossed his friend at him. The two of them smashed into his car, then slid to the ground, landing in a muddy puddle. The car's alarm went off, causing several others around it to start wailing too.

"Fuck this noise," one of the guys said, looking around. He backed away a few steps before turning around and heading back to the bar.

"This skank isn't worth it anyway," said the original asshole as he picked himself up, his left side completely covered in mud. He and his friends left, leaving Lillian and me alone with the noisy car alarms.

Lillian wobbled on her heels as she picked her way around another puddle, and I hurried over to her, gathering her into my arms. "You okay?"

She looked up at me, her hands holding onto my shirt. "Yeah." Then she reached up, struggling to put her arms around the back of my neck.

Amused, I hunched over to make it easier for her, and she pulled me close to her, kissing me on the cheek.

"Thank you." Her warm breath played over my skin, making me hyper-aware of our proximity. "Security guard to the rescue."

Her hand slid over the fabric of my top, across my pecs, and she made a soft humming sound. Her eyes were closed and she had a dreamy smile on her lips. I should stop her; she wasn't any more sober than she'd been ten minutes ago. But it was like I was mesmerized by her and couldn't move. Hey, if it made her happy to feel me up, then so be it.

After a long moment, I pulled away. "I'll get you home safely. Which way?"

She frowned. "I don't really want to go home anymore." She squeezed my bicep and her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

"No? What do you want?"

There was zero hesitation. "You."

Then she was pulling me down again, her mouth plastered against mine. Even with the taste of gin lingering on her tongue she was delicious, and I kissed her right back. Her lips were soft but insistent. It was a messy, sloppy kiss, and fucking hot. She wasn't shy either, as one of her hands roamed low, feeling up the muscles of my abs.

My cock was hardening again and with our height difference, it was hard to hide it, especially with her hand so close. I groaned when her arm bumped it. Then I groaned again when she groped it directly, moaning into my mouth.

Fuck! I wanted to—

It was the beeping sound from a nearby car as someone came out to turn off their alarm that made me remember where we were. I pulled away again.

“Say, you're not bad at all,” she giggled. “You should totally marry me and fix all my problems.”

Her problems? What type of problem could be solved by me marrying her? She didn't know who I was, she thought I was just a security guard, so it couldn't be money-related.

“Why me?” I asked, curious now.

“Because you're better than my other option.”

“What other option?” I checked her left hand, but there was no ring. “Did you leave your engagement ring at home?”

She giggled. “Pfft... I don't have one, silly.”

“But you're engaged?”

“No, and that's the problem.” She rolled her eyes at me. “I need to be. By Monday. Actually, I need to be married by Monday. That's why I was asking you.” She poked me in the chest with a finger. “Hey. Let's make this official. Will you marry me?”

I grinned at the very adorable but also very drunk woman in my arms. She

was touching me again, her hand sliding under my top to touch my skin directly this time. I didn't mind. I wanted to explore her right back, but that would have to wait until tomorrow.

I didn't want to walk her home anymore, at least not to her home. She could stay with me and sober up in the safety of my place. Then she could tell me why she needed to marry someone by Monday.

"I'll take you home with me."

She grinned. "Ooh, is that a yes?"

I just pressed my lips together, trying not to laugh, and called a cab on my phone, asking for one of the larger SUVs so I could fit. We made our way back to my place and she leaned on me heavily as we rode up in the private elevator up to my penthouse, her eyes closed.

I wasn't sure she'd even remember any of this in the morning. She'd definitely had too much. By the time I'd removed and hung up her jacket, she was already stumbling up the stairs to my bedroom, which, while private with a door, was on the lofted part of my suite. It was probably the gentlemanly thing to do to give her the bed anyway.

"I'll sleep on the couch," I volunteered.

She pouted. "And leave me all alone? You're no fun."

"I'll be right here, Lillian. If you still want me tomorrow morning when you are sober, I'm all yours."

"But this might be my last chance. They're coming on Monday."

"Who are 'they'?"

She tripped, and I scooped her up before she smashed her head on the floor. I carried her the rest of the way up my stairs.

"Who do you mean by they?" I asked again.

"Dunno," she said. "I've never actually met them."

I laid her on my bed. She looked so perfect there, and I paused for a moment to drink in the sight.

Fuck. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to keep my hands off her if she started to touch me.

But the decision was taken out of my hands when she started snoring. My little kitten was already fast asleep.

CHAPTER 3

LILLIAN



I SQUEEZED MY EYES shut and cursed the beam of sunlight that had the audacity to shine through the window and hit me directly in the eyes. I turned in bed, groaning. My head felt like it had been soaked in pickle juice all night and then dredged in salt.

What the hell did I do last night? Images came drifting back of me throwing myself at a ridiculously hot...well, I actually didn't know what he was, but I did know he was the hottest male I'd ever seen, man or monster. Didn't matter. He'd rejected me, and I'd left the bar, only to get cornered by—

I bolted upright, suddenly not sleepy in the slightest. I wasn't in my own bed. I shoved away the unfamiliar blankets and found myself—

Thank fuck! Fully clothed.

I looked around the room. The giant floor-to-ceiling window overlooked Darlington. The furniture was made of heavy wood and metal and had a rustic industrial vibe. Not the cheap reproduction stuff, either, but the real thing.

The door opened, and in stepped the gorgeous hunk from last night. He wore a pair of low-slung jeans on the bottom and nothing at all on top. Oh, yummy!

“You’re awake.” He held out a glass to me.

Water! I could kiss him. But I probably had morning breath bad enough to wake the dead. I took the glass from him and chugged down half of it greedily.

“Thank you. I was parched.”

Now that my thirst was quenched, my body decided to alert me of other pressing matters. “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Next door. I put out a new toothbrush for you,” he said.

He did? Super sexy *and* sweet. Wow. I must still be dreaming.

“Come back here when you’re done,” he continued. “We need to talk.”

“Um...okay.”

That sounded ominous, but considering my life as I knew it was over anyway, how bad could it be?

I looked around for my purse and found it sitting on a chair. Grabbing it, I stepped out of the room and into the bathroom. It looked more like a high-end spa.

Marble and stone clad every flat surface, and the bronze fixtures screamed luxury. Unlike the small bathtub-shower combo I had in my apartment, Gunnar had a huge jacuzzi-style tub and what looked to be a custom-built shower that was the size of a small room. Curious, I poked my head in. There

were two giant showerheads mounted to the ceiling and an oversized cedar bench running along one wall.

Fancy, huh?

I did my business and brushed my teeth, horrified when I saw my raccoon eyes. God! Was this what that sexy stud muffin had seen? What a horrible trade. I did my best to remove the makeup before stepping back into the bedroom.

Gunnar was sitting on the bed, his eyes on me.

“Um,” I started awkwardly. “Thank you for helping me out last night.”

Now that I was more awake, I remembered him showing up and chasing off the asshole and his friends. I also remembered totally feeling him up. Shit. Was that what he wanted to talk about? Was he pissed that I’d basically copped a feel on the street?

My face heated. “Listen, I’m sorry for touching you without—”

“I liked your hands on me.” The words were said in a matter-of-fact, quiet growl that had my stomach flip-flopping.

“Oh.” I swallowed. “Then what did you want to talk about?”

“Why do you need to marry me by Monday?”

Oh God. What the hell had I told him? I tried to recall, but all I got were fuzzy snippets of how good his hard muscles had felt under my hands and how good his lips had tasted against mine.

Gunnar patted the bed next to him. “Sit. Tell me. I promise I won’t judge you. You’re safe here.”

I sat down, letting the heat of his leg warm mine. “I guess I should start from the beginning. My parents are both 100% human. I’m adopted. They had no idea I was a shifter or that shifters even existed until I made my first mitten.”

“Mitten?”

I laughed, slightly embarrassed, realizing he had no idea what I was talking about. “It’s a term we made up to describe my partial shifts.” I sighed. “I can’t fully shift.”

“I was wondering why you didn’t shift to protect yourself last night.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at my now-human hands dejectedly.

Some full shifters had always thought of me as less because of it. I thought of my ex from college who’d left me for a full shifter who could run with him.

“I don’t think there’s enough snow leopard in me,” I admitted. “I can do this.” I held my hands up and concentrated. Two furry paws appeared where my hands had been. “And this.” I closed my eyes and willed my cat ears into existence.

This earned me a soft appreciative sound from Gunnar. I opened my eyes to see him grinning from ear to ear.

“Adorable.” He reached up but snatched his hand back before he actually touched my ear.

“Yeah, I know. I always have a built-in costume for Halloween, and I’m every furry’s dream.” I blew out a breath. “But it’s not really useful except to keep my hands warm in the winter. So yeah, that’s why my parents decided to call my half-shifts mittens. I was six years old when it first happened. I was being a little shit disturber and I’d been sent to my room. I was so mad. My parents were shocked to find all my sheets and curtains shredded.

“Mom freaked out. Dad thought it was the coolest thing ever. But being completely human themselves, they didn’t have a clue what to do with me. In the beginning, it only happened when I was angry, and I didn’t know how to control it.

“They contacted the adoption agency and asked a bunch of questions, but nothing that might give my special condition away. There wasn’t much

information since I had been surrendered as a newborn, but there was enough for them to start digging. They found what they thought could have been a possibility, a group of snow leopard shifters in central Asia, and tried to contact them through multiple means.” I paused, anger at what had happened flooding through me.

A large hand landed gently on my lower back. “What did they say?”

“Dad speaks fluent Mandarin, so when we got a phone call asking if I could shift, he replied that I could just make mittens. They laughed and hung up.”

That had stung, even as a kid. “And then we sort of forgot about it until I was off at college.”

I grabbed the glass of water on the bedside table and finished it off, hoping I wasn’t boring Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome to death with my life story.

“When I was away at school, my parents got a call from a group of snow leopard shifters. The person on the phone said as one of the few snow leopard shifters left, it was my duty to mate with one of our own and continue the line. They’d matched me with someone already!” I snorted. “As if I’d do that after they basically told me I was useless.”

“What did your parents say?”

“Dad laughed in his face. He told them I was my own person now and didn’t live with them anymore. Nothing happened after that for a while. I was already here in Darlington getting my degree. I’d looked for years for another snow leopard shifter.”

“Did you ever find one?”

“Nope. I’ve met tons of big cat shifters, but no snow leopards. I guess we *are* pretty rare. Anyway, about two weeks ago my parents got a surprise visit from some guy and his scary-looking thugs. With his expensive suit he

straight-up looked like a Triad gangster from a movie. And he was looking for me.

“Mom told him I didn’t live there anymore. She lied and said we didn’t really keep in touch so she didn’t know where I was. Then she called me to warn me.”

I could feel Gunnar’s body stiffen beside mine.

“I started getting calls the next day. I don’t know how they got my number, and I ignored the calls at first, but then they left a message saying they knew where I lived and were coming to pick me up and to have all my affairs in order. The next time they called, I picked up. That was on Wednesday.”

Fuck. Only two days ago. It felt like a lifetime ago that I’d had a normal life.

“I politely reminded the man on the phone that I couldn’t even shift and that I doubted they wanted me. But he was adamant that any unmarried female with snow leopard genes was required to be part of the breeding program to save the line. So I lied and said I was already engaged.”

Gunnar nodded. “And what did he say then?”

“He said he didn’t care! And that if I was still unmarried by the time he got here, then I had to go with him. This is why I must miraculously get hitched this weekend.”

“And why you were rip-roaring drunk on a Thursday night and asking me to marry you.”

“Yeah.” I fidgeted. “Plus, my job let me go yesterday, *and* my landlord suddenly wants to sell the place. When it rains, it pours, you know? Like, where am I supposed to find someone willing to be my pretend husband at such short notice? I thought of paying someone to do it, but even then, I’d only have four...no, three now...days to get it done. I’m screwed.”

“I’ll do it.”

“What?” I must still be dreaming.

“I’ll do it. You don’t even need to pay me. “

I shook my head, sure I was going to wake up at any moment. “Really?”

“Why not? It’s Friday. We still have the rest of today and the whole weekend. I know a guy who can get the license to us in an hour, as long as we have all the documentation we need.”

“You’re serious?” I searched his face. He looked completely sincere. “What’s the catch?”

He cocked his head, and something flashed hungrily in his eyes. “You’ll stay here with me, and we’ll continue what we started last night.”

“So, you’re saying you’re willing to be my fake fiancé with benefits?”

He shrugged. “It would make it more believable. Unless you’re not—”

“Sold! I’ll do it!” I wasn’t going to give him the chance to second-guess himself on this. I was about to jump his bones last night anyway; might as well get a solution to my problems out of it.

He stood, grinning, and opened a drawer in his bedside table. He fished out an enormous gold ring with a rectangular ruby on it and knelt between my knees.

“Lillian, will you marry me?” He held up the large ring in front of me.

Man, I wished he was saying it for real. “Yes. Gunnar. I will.”

As he slipped the giant ring on my thumb—because there was no way that thing was going to fit on my ring finger—I giggled at how ridiculous this all was. What a strange couple of days this was turning out to be.

My stomach took this moment to complain about how empty it was. One reason the alcohol had hit me so hard last night was because I’d skipped dinner, having had no appetite after my fucked up day.

“Let’s get some food into you, Kitten.”

“Kitten?”

“Do you like it? I figure if we’re getting married, I should have a nickname for you.”

“Kitten is purr-fect.”

We stepped out of his room and into a tastefully decorated loft-style condo. I’d been so focused on getting to the bathroom earlier that I hadn’t taken it all in. The rest of the place looked just as swanky as the bathroom had, though it did have a lived-in bachelor feel.

“I don’t keep a lot of food on hand, but there should be eggs and bacon in the main kitchen,” he said when we were at the bottom of the stairs.

Main kitchen? Was there more than one?

Seeing the question on my face, he replied, “I share this penthouse with my brothers and their mates. This is my private area.” He gestured to a door.

“The rest of it, including the main kitchen, is out there.”

I’d been wondering how he could afford such a nice place, especially working as a security guard. Darlington had gotten exponentially more expensive after The Wall fell. Even my tiny apartment now cost me just short of an arm and a leg. I couldn’t imagine how much a penthouse like this would cost.

He pushed open a door, and my jaw dropped as I followed him into the main area. He didn’t just share a penthouse with his brothers. They had the entire top floor of the building—two if you considered the lofted areas as a second floor.

The first things that caught my eye were the two giant bird of paradise plants framing the doors to the rooftop patio. I loved houseplants and had a bird of paradise myself in my tiny apartment, but it was just a baby compared to

these two gorgeous and magnificent specimens. Of course, with the super high ceilings they got tons of light from the floor-to-ceiling arched windows. Like in Gunnar's area, the furniture and fixtures were done in dark woods, metal, granite, and leather—all except for the plush beige rugs in front of each large reclining couch. There were four couches in total, arranged in front of what looked like a mini home theatre system.

Suddenly, a yellow, orange, and green mass swooping down on me had me ducking for cover. I gawked at the bird when it landed on Gunnar's outstretched arm. Only then did I notice the cage tucked away in the corner.

“Such a cutie! Such a cutie!” the bird squawked.

“Lillian, this is Chicken Nugget. Nugget, this is Lillian.”

CHAPTER 4

GUNNAR



I TRIED MY BEST to flip the eggs without breaking the yolk as Lillian ransacked the kitchen for what she considered proper coffee. She hadn't considered the expired instant stuff she found at the back of the cabinets "real." I usually went down to the coffee shop across the street for my caffeine fix, as did everyone else who lived here.

My brothers and I usually ordered delivery, but since Tansy and Shelby had started living here, we'd begun keeping the basics on hand, and I'd found eggs and bacon in the fridge, along with orange juice, grapefruit juice—Yuck! Who the hell did *that* belong to?—and some sandwich bread.

The door to Eamon's suite opened, and Tansy stepped out. Nugget, who'd been playing with her toys on top of her cage, flew over to greet her witch and cuddle up in her hoodie.

“Hey, Gunnar. What’s the occasion? You never cook.” Then she noticed Lillian, who had stopped rummaging in the cupboard to poke her head over the counter.

“Ooh!” Tansy said, comprehension dawning.

Before I could do the honors she’d already made her way over to Lillian and was shaking her hand while Lillian introduced herself.

“I’m Lillian.”

My little kitten didn’t offer anymore, so I added, “We’re getting married.”

Tansy gasped, then grabbed Lillian’s left hand. The ring was still on her thumb, even though it was so big she had to keep her hand curled up so it didn’t fall off. We’d need to find something better later today.

“Oh my God, Gunnar, you could’ve at least gotten her something that fits!” Then she turned to Lillian. “I can’t believe he’s been hiding you from us all this time.” She spun back to me. “Was this why you disappeared on us yesterday?”

Lillian looked at me awkwardly, probably not sure what to say.

“It’s okay, Lillian. My brothers and their mates can know. Tell her.”

The two sat down at the table along with Nugget, and Lillian brought Tansy up to speed while I finished making brunch for two. It was almost noon; I’d let Lillian sleep in. I figured if she was getting wasted on a Thursday night, she wouldn’t have to work today. And sure enough, I found out this morning she’d lost her job.

I plated up our breakfasts and brought them to the table along with the juice cartons.

“Ooh! Grapefruit juice!” Lillian looked positively giddy. “Yes please!”

“Eww.” I made a face but poured her a glass anyway.

She laughed. “Yeah, it’s a bit of an acquired taste. As is coffee. Which we

don't have, by the way."

I loved that she said "we".

"I'll order from True Brew," Tansy said, pulling out her phone. "They deliver."

As we ate, I made a few calls and sent some messages to get the ball rolling on our surprise wedding. Then I asked for her phone and listened to the message the group called The White Claws had left. It did sound very official.

Tansy called her mate Eamon out from his office, and after another round of introductions and explanations he did a quick search for The White Claws in the EA's database. The demon was Redrock's official liaison with the Enforcement Agency, the magical world's version of an international police force, though the rest of us had done our share of jobs for them as well.

Technically, I was on payroll too, but Eamon had greater access to the files. It was impossible to keep the demon out of places he shouldn't be, so they'd just given up and gone with it.

Sure enough, the number that had called Lillian belonged to The White Claws. It turned out they were linked with large, influential corporations right across Asia, as well as with illegal "Black Societies," which had nothing at all to do with skin color and everything to do with organized crime.

Lillian had stopped eating by now, and was looking pale. "Listen, Gunnar, if this is more than you signed up for and you want to back out, I will totally understand."

Did she think I was scared because this group had a bit of clout? Clearly, she didn't know who I was.

"And miss out on you playing house with me for the foreseeable future? Never. That"—I pointed to the antique ruby ring she'd taken off so she could

use utensils without dropping it in her eggs—“means you’re mine. No Triad is going to scare me off.”

Her mouth made the cutest little O.

Nugget, who had followed my index finger to the ring, was thrilled to find a new, sparkly toy. She hopped over and snatched it up.

“Hey, give that back!” Tansy reprimanded her.

Nugget’s response was to fly off with her new prize.

“I’ll get it.” Eamon floated up and flew after the mischievous little sun conure. It was handy to have a demon around at times like this.

Being a gargoyle, I could fly too, but I needed a huge amount of space to spread my wings. As Lillian watched the demon and the bird play tag, I considered. She didn’t even know what I was yet.

How desperate must she be that she was willing to marry some guy she’d just met without even knowing what type of monster he was? Would I be any better than the guy The White Claws had matched her with?

As Eamon retrieved the ring from Nugget, I knocked on the door to Grayson’s part of the penthouse. Shelby opened the door, her hair up in a messy bun, a pencil stuck behind her ear. Shelby ran a successful made-to-order clothing business. She looked past me at the demon currently chasing the bird around the room, then at the two women laughing at the table, and quirked up an eyebrow.

“I’ll introduce you two and explain everything,” I promised. “But before I do that, do you have a spare length of cord?”

I helped Lillian out of my Lamborghini Urus. She'd been quiet the whole ride over to her apartment. It had started when we'd gotten into the private elevator to head down to the parking lot, and got worse while I was debating taking my Urus or the Hellcat.

My brothers and I had our own private section in the underground parking lot of the Imperial, and there were not one but three Dodge Hellcats in it, as that was one of the few sportscars that was big enough for us.

The matte black one was Grayson's, and the one in classic TorRed red was Graham's. Mine was the bright one in Sublime green. Because, why not? If I wanted to drive my beast, I wanted it to be the loudest thing on the road, audibly and visually. I'd wanted to take my kitten in the Hellcat but had decided on the Urus instead since she needed to move her stuff out of her place, and it had more cargo room.

Her change in behavior had me wondering if I should've taken her in one of the company SUVs instead. I held her hand as I ducked and squeezed into the tiny elevator in her building. My wings, which were still hidden by the glamour spell, were smashed up uncomfortably against the ceiling, and my tail, similarly concealed, was wrapped around the elevator awkwardly. I hoped no one else walked in because it would get cramped.

Luckily, no one did.

Lillian visibly relaxed the moment we stepped into her apartment. The place was a riot of green, with houseplants lined up three rows deep at every window. Two large shelves lined the walls, and on them were more plants under grow lights. I'd walked into a hidden urban jungle. Even the kitchen table was an excuse for more greenery.

"You like plants."

"I love them. I keep telling myself I won't buy more, but that never works."

She stepped over the piles of her belongings and cardboard boxes strewn on the floor. “Sorry about the mess. I normally don’t have garbage bags full of stuff in every room, but I was doing a major declutter. I was packing up my stuff because...” She didn’t finish the sentence. “They told me two pieces of luggage only. I actually have all the essentials packed already.”

She went over to the two large suitcases next to the couch.

“I just wasn’t sure what to do with everything else.” She looked longingly at her plants. “For these guys, I was considering putting them on the curb with a *For Free* sign in the hopes they’d go to good homes.”

“Bring them to the penthouse. I don’t mind.” It might mean we’d need to make multiple trips to collect everything, but her things were important to her, which meant they were important to me.

“Are you sure? It’s a lot, and transporting them is going to get messy. You have a nice car, and I don’t want it to get dirty.”

I peered at the closest plant. Instead of potting soil like the ones at the penthouse, these ones were sitting in hard, round balls. “What’s this?”

“Oh, that’s LECA. It stands for lightweight expanded clay aggregate. I grow all my plants in it.” For the first time since we left the penthouse, the spark was back in Lillian’s eyes. “It’s perfect for people who worry about over- or under-watering their plants. The plants are sub-irrigated.” She pointed to a tray of water sitting underneath. “See? I just add the nutrient solution to the reservoir, and the plants take up whatever they need. And when there are a ton of little plants, like those guys over there, I just put them all on one tray and water the whole thing at once.

“It makes it so much easier, and you get to control the pH of the water, what nutrients which plants get—oh! And it keeps pests at bay. The only problem is converting to this semi-hydroponic way of growing is difficult, and if you

do it wrong, you lose the plant. Same with converting back. Plants that have gotten used to growing like this don't do well if you just shove them back in a pot of soil. The roots are different."

She looked flustered. "Oh my God, I'm sorry. I just totally geeked out on you there." She covered her face awkwardly with her hands.

"That's okay. You're cute when you get excited." I liked that she had something she was so passionate about.

We found the documents she needed to apply for the marriage license, and I cleared my throat.

"I know we were only here to pick up a few things, but since everything is already half packed, did you want to finish up and we can move all your stuff to my place while we're at it?"

She looked hesitant.

"I mean, you said you had to move out anyway, right? When do you have this place until?"

"End of the month. So next week. I know, the landlord technically needs to give me more notice than that, but with everything else that was going on, I didn't want to fight it."

"We can bring most of your things today and come back later for the rest."

She bit her bottom lip, still unsure. My phone buzzed with two messages almost simultaneously, from Desmon and my lawyer. Both were surprised I was getting married. I'd asked Desmon to officiate our wedding because surely even The White Claws would think twice before they refuted the words of a dragon. Meanwhile, my lawyer was insisting on a prenup.

My lawyer was right. A prenup was a good idea. I didn't think Lillian would try to take half my wealth after we tied the knot, but just in case.

"I have to take some calls." I rubbed the back of my neck, deciding to broach

the sensitive subject head-on. “My lawyer is drafting a prenup.”

“Of course. That makes perfect sense.” She didn’t even bat an eye. “Thanks for doing all the legwork on this.”

“If I give you an hour and a half, do you think you can get most of your stuff packed?”

She looked around her cramped apartment. “I think so. I’ll only bring what I really love.”

“Perfect. I’ll be back. Don’t open the door for anyone except me.” I started to leave.

“Wait!”

I turned back around.

“Catch!”

She tossed her keys at me.

“So you don’t need to be buzzed up.”

“Thanks.”

CHAPTER 5

LILLIAN



I HEAVED A SIGH of relief when Gunnar left. It was so hard to think when he was around. What the fuck had I gotten myself into?

Getting confirmation that The White Claws did indeed have ties to organized crime was chilling, but what had really scared me was Gunnar's reaction to the news, or should I say non-reaction. He'd made it seem like it was no big deal. His nonchalance about pissing off the snow leopard shifters, combined with his obvious wealth, were giant red flags for me.

He'd lied about his job. He was no security guard.

Okay, technically, he'd said he "worked security". I'd been the one who'd assumed he was a plain ol' security guard, but then again he hadn't corrected me either. Hmm. Criminals and gangsters needed security too. That was the only thing that would explain his lavish lifestyle.

No normal security guard could afford the place he and his brother lived in and a collection of expensive cars. His daily ride cost as much as a small home.

Not to mention, he hadn't turned off his glamour once this entire time. Glamour spells took a lot of energy to cast and maintain, and I'd heard they weren't comfortable. What the hell was he so desperate to hide?

It made me wonder if I'd jumped out of the frying pan and right into hot coals.

But then when he'd pointed to the ring and declared that I was his? Gah! It had both excited and terrified me. Warning bells had never sounded so sweet! And the worst part of it was that I was stuck with him unless I wanted to end up on a plane on Monday. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Gunnar had seemed like such a great option until his story stopped checking out. He'd bailed me out of a difficult spot yesterday, and had been a complete gentleman when he could have totally taken advantage of me. He and that Eamon guy even had access to the EA's files. Wasn't the EA like the supernatural police? Did that mean he had friends in high places, and that's why he wasn't worried about The White Claws?

Or was it because he was something worse? Was that why he hadn't shown me his natural form yet? I still had no idea what kind of monster he was. At first, I thought he was a shifter, but now I wasn't so sure. Whatever he was, he was huge. I didn't miss the way he'd held his body in my apartment building's little elevator.

How long was he going to keep me in the dark about this? What if he was hideous, and I was stuck with him after, and he wouldn't let me leave? But

he'd mentioned a prenup, and that had to be a good sign that he wasn't some axe murderer or possessive freak who'd never let me go.

I sighed. I'd have to figure it out as I went. He was still definitely my best option. And I really didn't think he was an axe murderer. I mean, come on. Would axe murderers let potential victims meet their housemates and their partners?

Maybe it was naive, but I couldn't imagine Gunnar being anything but nice to me, which was why I was ignoring all the redder-than-red flags and moving in with him. I just hoped I wasn't making a horrible mistake.

I looked around at all the things I owned scattered across the room. I'd started the big declutter on Wednesday, right after I'd gotten that call. Whatever was already in the heavy-duty trash bags could probably stay in there. I thought of the much too expensive dress that made me feel like a sausage every time I wore it. Yup, that could stay in the garbage.

I'd already packed up my electronics and all my important legal documents. I'd emptied out my dresser and tossed everything in my closet that didn't fit right or otherwise looked bad on me. Everything that had survived the clothing cull was already in the two suitcases.

Now that I could bring more with me, I shoved my stack of notebooks and sketchpads into a box. I had planned on burning them if I ended up leaving. I'd written all my dreams and ambitions in them and what was the point of hanging onto those if I had to give up the life I knew? But there was hope now, so damn right I was keeping them.

I thought of the tragic lack of decent coffee at the penthouse and decided to bring my espresso machine, my French press, all my premium coffee, and my other coffee-making paraphernalia. That espresso machine had been my first

splurge when I started making decent money. As someone who ran on a steady supply of bean juice, I'd thought it was worth it.

The plants had come next. And oh boy, did they come! They came, they saw, they conquered. They'd now taken over most of my tiny one-bedroom apartment. I couldn't possibly bring them all to the penthouse, so same as I'd done with my clothes I got to work choosing the ones I'd like to keep.

Fifty. Fifty plants made the cut, most of them big aroids. A few succulents made it in too, including the adorable little Lithops. It was flowering right now and looked for all the world like a tiny butt with a flower sticking out of it.

So stinking cute!

What didn't make the cut were the dozens and dozens of cuttings I'd taken from my plants in the hopes of selling them online. They were also the only specimens not in LECA. I was rooting them in coco coir. They'd be extra messy to transport.

I was just packing up my grow lights when my doorknob jiggled.

Shit! Was it time already? I grabbed my phone from the coffee table to check. It had only been an hour.

The knob jiggled again, but the door didn't open. Then there was a knock.

A sense of dread filled my stomach. That wasn't Gunnar. He had my keys. Silently, I turned on the TV, muting it the split second I powered it on, and switched to the building's security feed channel. I cursed in my head as the video footage slowly looped through the hallway cameras on each floor.

There was another knock, followed by someone trying the handle.

Damn it! Why couldn't the feed go faster?

Three more floors. Two. One. Finally the video showed my floor. There were two Asian guys at my door who looked like they'd walked straight out of the Hong Kong mobster films Mom and Dad used to watch. Seriously?

My first instinct was to call Gunnar. I grabbed my phone from the coffee table before I realized I didn't even have his number. He'd offered it to me last night after refusing my drunken attempt to initiate a one-night-stand, but I'd said no, believing that I'd never have the chance to use it. Damn it.

One of the guys dug into his pocket and brought out his phone as the other one pressed his ear to the door. I quickly muted my phone, just in case. Sure enough, a moment later, the phone in my hand lit up with a call. It was coming from a different number than the one they had used to contact me before.

Ha! They thought they could ferret me out by making my phone ring, did they? Too bad so sad!

I could hear their low voices through the door as they talked, but I didn't understand what they were saying. Shit. I'd tried to learn Mandarin since so much of the world used it but had failed horribly. Now, I wished I'd tried harder.

Dad was from Macau, and Mom was from Hong Kong. Despite settling here in America, they'd adopted from China so their kid would look like a part of the family. Growing up, they mainly spoke English to me, with generous sprinklings of each of their own preferred languages. We called it Por-chinglish. As a result, I spoke English fluently and had baby talk levels of Cantonese and Portuguese.

It wasn't much use right now. The asshole on the phone had told me to be ready on Monday when in fact they had shown up on Friday, in case I was thinking of running. Those sneaky bastards.

I stayed completely silent and still, hoping the fact that I lived here and everything smelled like me anyway hid my scent from them. I wondered if these two were snow leopards themselves, or if The White Claws had other shifters working for them.

The security feed on my TV was no longer on my floor so I waited. After what seemed like an eternity, and two cycles through the floors later, my hallway was clear. I switched to the feed from the lobby. I wanted to see them walk out that door.

As I waited for them to emerge from the elevator, Gunnar walked into the lobby and headed straight for the stairs. He was here! The two goons stepped out into the lobby only moments after Gunnar disappeared up the stairwell. They'd just missed each other.

A few minutes later, Gunnar stepped into my apartment. I was so happy and relieved to see him that I hurled myself at him.

CHAPTER 6

GUNNAR



I KNEW SOMETHING WAS wrong the moment I opened the door to Lillian’s floor. The smell of shifter filled my nostrils. Not the delicate scent of Lillian’s cat, but something stronger. Canine.

Fuck. I’d expected them to come early for her, but I thought we’d have at least until tomorrow.

I hurried over to her door and was glad to find that it was still firmly closed, and there were no signs of a struggle or anyone tampering with the lock. I opened the door and was greeted by a very relieved-looking Lillian, who practically threw herself at me. I wrapped her up in my arms.

“What happened? I smell wolf.”

The stench of her fear still lingered in the air, spiking my protective instinct, and I couldn’t help the low growl that came from my throat.

“Is that what they were? They were here; you just missed them. They got off the elevator into the lobby right when you were coming up the stairs.”

She gestured to the screen where the building’s security feeds were still playing.

“Do you have access to the recordings?” Knowing what these guys looked like would help a lot.

“No. Everyone in the building has access to this channel, but that’s it. We can’t even replay it.”

At least security would have a recording. “I’ll talk to Security and get a copy.”

“I think they told me Monday on purpose so they could come grab me early, and I wouldn’t have time to leave.”

I grunted. Yup, that was exactly what had happened. “We’ll move the wedding to first thing tomorrow morning. They’re probably waiting outside for you. It wouldn’t be safe for us to move all your stuff now. We’ll just take the essentials and a few extra boxes, and I’ll send someone else to pick up the rest.”

“But what about my car?” she asked.

“We’ll get someone else to move that for you. They’ll probably be watching for it. If they know where you live, they probably know what you drive, too.”

We moved all the things she wanted to keep into the living room and shoved everything else into the kitchen to make it easier for whoever came to pick the stuff up later—probably me, or Graham. Then I picked up her two suitcases she had already packed, and we took the stairs down to the underground parking lot.

Her apartment was only on the fourth floor, and the stairs were not only faster and more comfortable for me, it would avoid exposing her should the

elevator doors open on the ground floor. They might still be watching the lobby.

I insisted she stay in the Urus, which was both magically warded and bulletproof, while I went back up for two more boxes.

I made a pit stop at the front desk to ask for the footage from the camera feed, saying I was from the EA and needed it for an investigation. The guy on duty did his due diligence and insisted he call them to confirm.

“Sure thing, ask for Eamon,” I said. “The EA is huge, and one department doesn’t know what the other is doing most of the time.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, man. Sounds like every organization.”

After a quick call, he sent the videos over to an email address Eamon provided. I hadn’t always enjoyed working with the EA, but I was very glad to have this resource at my disposal now.

Then we were off to our appointment at city hall. As my contact drafted up the marriage license for us, we stopped for a snack at the café next door. Lillian sipped her Argentinian coffee and nibbled delicately on an alfajor as I booked a private appointment at the jeweler’s.

“We’ll have the store to ourselves for an hour when we’re making our ring selections,” I explained.

“Oh, that’s...” She put her cookie down and looked around the café carefully. We were in a secluded corner. “I have to ask. What are you? You’re not a regular security guard. Not with your home and your cars and the ability to tell a store to close for an hour so you can shop on your own. And you don’t seem one bit fazed that you’re essentially taking something that The White Claws want.”

Well, I’d always known I couldn’t hide my identity forever.

“My brothers and I co-own Redrock Protective Services.” I waited for her

reaction, watching her eyes carefully.

“Redrock. That sounds so familiar...”

“We covered Desmon’s wedding.”

She gasped. “That Redrock!” She covered her mouth and looked around the place again. Then she lowered her voice. “You’re a gargoyle.”

“I am indeed,” I agreed, amused.

“Can I see? I mean, not now, duh, but later. I’ve never actually seen a gargoyle before that wasn’t just a stone one on a building.” She pressed her lips together. “Sorry, I hope that’s not rude to ask.”

“Not at all.”

“Oh man, I’m so relieved.”

“Why?”

“Well, I didn’t know who you were, and”—she rubbed her neck—“with your nonchalant reaction to The White Claws, and the fact that you kept your glamour up all day and everything, I thought the worst. I was pretty sure you were...well, not an axe murderer, but I hadn’t ruled out other things, like maybe when you said security, you meant security for the Mafia or something.”

I chuckled. She was so cute when she was flustered. “No, nothing like that.”

“Gunnar Redrock...” She made a face. “Wait a minute. Aren’t you the *bad boy* Redrock brother?” She made air quotes around the words. “Wasn’t there some woman who claimed you got her pregnant and then dumped her?”

Fuck. Not this shit again. It’d happened shortly after Desmon’s wedding, when the Redrock name was all over the tabloids.

I grumbled. “I didn’t ‘dump her’, because we were never a thing. It was a one-night-stand, nothing more. I have a contraceptive spell, and the timing is

wrong, anyway. The kid's not mine. The rightful father's a bear shifter; he's currently trying to get full custody."

"Oh. I guess that part of the story never made the news. No wonder you were trying to hide who you were. It must suck to deal with all that."

I grunted. "It sure does." But I hadn't hidden my identity from Lillian because of that; I'd wanted Lillian to get to know me and like me for me, and not for my money.

"Well," she smiled, "you've already made a good impression on me by chasing off those guys last night. I'm just happy I didn't escape the Triads only to get involved with the Mafia. I still feel kinda bad that I dragged you into all of this."

"Trust me, I've dealt with people who are just as bad as—"

The door to the café opened, and several women walked in, gossiping loudly. I couldn't miss Lillian's sudden change in demeanor, like she was trying to disappear into the background.

"Let's continue this conversation in my car. We'll have more privacy."

She polished off her alfajor, getting a bit of the powdered sugar on her nose and lips. It was adorable.

"You've got a little..." I reached over and wiped it off her nose, then licked the sugar off my finger.

She watched me, her eyes riveted to my mouth. Gripping her chin, I bent my head and kissed the powder off her lips. The sugar was sweet, but she was sweeter. Unable to stop myself, I kissed her harder, forcing her lips apart.

The café around us disappeared, and in that instant, it was just the two of us. She mewled against me as I slid my tongue around her mouth, stroking and tasting her. Lillian clutched my shoulder, giving me her tongue too. I sucked on it possessively.

She had no fucking idea what she did to me. She thought I was being a good guy, helping her out, but the truth was, I was doing all of this for purely selfish reasons. I wanted her. I'd known the moment I saw her that I'd never be happy until I had her in my bed, under me, screaming my name. I also knew that once would never be enough. And if I had to go up against The White Claws to make that happen, then so be it.

It was the whispered "Isn't that the monster who got that model pregnant?" that broke the magic.

"Ooh. I think you're right. What was his name? Hunter something?"

"Gunnar," the first woman replied. There was the sound of a purse unzipping. Lillian stiffened, and made to pull away. But I held her in place, reaching up to cup her face and give her a bit of cover. Then I heard the sound of a phone taking a photo.

I let Lillian go, then turned to glare at the woman who'd just taken the picture and was totally pretending she hadn't.

"Come on, Kitten. Let's go," I said, emphasizing the nickname I'd given her. As we walked to my vehicle, I couldn't help but notice Lillian looking around her anxiously, as if she was afraid someone would pop out of the shadows at any time and steal her away. I held her hand, wanting to reassure her. "I won't let anyone get to you, I promise."

Once we were safely inside, I said, "We need to plan this thing out."

She nodded. "Yeah. I have no clue what I'm doing or what I'm up against."

"I don't think a simple marriage certificate is enough to stop The White Claws if they really want you. We need to make this believable, and there also have to be consequences for stealing you away."

She stiffened. "Do you think they would do that?"

I wanted to pull her into my arms, but the Urus' center console was in the

way. This car was great for my big size, but not conducive to intimacy.

“If they believe it’s worth it, yes. They’d have no qualms about putting you on a plane and making you disappear, even if you were married.”

She fidgeted. “Then why go through all this wedding stuff at all? I might as well just give up.”

“Because they’ll only do it if they think they could get away with it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If they think this is a sham marriage and that I wouldn’t come knocking on their door armed and ready for a fight if they took you, they will surely attempt to kidnap you. Same goes for if I were just any random guy on the street.” I grinned. “But I’m not just any random guy on the street. I’m Gunnar Redrock. So we need to convince them that you are in fact my beloved wife, and that I’ll show up with a small army if they try to take you from me.”

I let that sink in, both for her and myself. Pretending to be her husband would be no hardship. I was already getting way too excited about this marriage, even though I knew it was all a lie.

“There are also other consequences to trying to take you,” I continued. “Like publicity. It’s my understanding, seeing what the EA has on them, that The White Claws like to keep a very low profile.”

“Because of their not-so-legal dealings?”

“Exactly. They like to appear clean and proper.”

She nodded. “That makes sense, especially if they are also affiliated with large corporations. They’d want to appear squeaky clean. I guess a public kidnapping wouldn’t look too good on them.” My clever kitten was catching on.

“You got it. If we make this wedding public—not the ceremony itself, but the knowledge of it—and really hype it up, they won’t be able to do anything

without it being painfully obvious. We'll have the media attention on us, but in this case, that's a good thing. They can't make you disappear if you're in the spotlight, right?"

She made a face. "Right. But for the record, I absolutely hate the spotlight. Like, hate it with the passion of a thousand screaming huskies. I don't even post on social media. My profile picture is a cup of coffee next to a cactus, and I only have an account because it looks weird to potential employers if you don't have one."

"It'll be only for a short while. The media gets bored fast and will move on to the next thing. But if anything should happen to you in the future, you bet they will be on that story like cats on catnip."

"I guess I could handle a *bit* of attention." She looked thoughtful. "Let me guess. It's already started. That's why you waited long enough for that woman to snap a photo."

I grinned, glad she'd caught on to that as well. "Yeah. They were the ones that gave me the idea, actually. I learned the hard way the power of social media. This time, I'll use it to my advantage. I'll have someone keep an eye out for the image, and when she does post it, we'll make it go viral. I'll get Graham to take some photos from the window of us ring shopping in the jewelry store and leak those too."

"But wouldn't it be clear that you're only marrying me to stop them from taking me if they know we're only getting our rings today?"

"Not necessarily. We'll say that we were already engaged, but then this new development had us rushing down the aisle. The media eats that kind of shit up." My reputation would actually help us here. That little fiasco had thrown me unwittingly into the public eye, and now I was going to use that to my advantage to help Lillian.

“You mean tell everyone that they were going to take me away if I wasn’t married? Put them under a microscope?”

“That’s right. If they care about their public appearance, and they do, a lot, they’ll have to be on their best behavior.”

Lillian broke into a smile. “I think this might actually work. You’re a genius.”

“Thanks. I know.”

CHAPTER 7

LILLIAN



HOLY SHIT. MY EYES grew round at the rings laid out in front of me. These were some of the biggest diamonds I'd ever seen.

Back in the car, I'd tentatively mentioned that my bank account would only be able to stretch to very basic rings, and Gunnar had looked almost physically ill that I'd thought he wasn't covering it.

"I don't expect you to pay for them."

"But this was my idea, and you're only—"

"You're getting the biggest diamond they have in there, and that's final. Otherwise it wouldn't be believable." He'd fingered the ruby ring on the cord around my neck then. "Unless you are partial to this. We could try to get it resized, but I'm not sure we'd ever get it small enough to fit your finger."

The prenup, which we'd signed right after picking up our rush wedding license, had stated that I couldn't try to take half his wealth in the event of a divorce but that I could keep any gifts received during our time together. It hadn't mentioned anything about the rings. I figured I'd just return them to him after. Hopefully, he'd be able to get a good price for them.

"The ruby is lovely, but I don't think it's possible for them to make it fit me without ruining the design of the ring." It was very clearly a man's ring. "I think it looks much better on you, anyway."

"Thanks, it's my favorite. It's the one I usually wear."

That had settled it. We'd pick up another engagement ring that was more suitable for me.

When we'd gotten into the jewelry store, we'd made some small talk with the clerk, Mindy, sticking to the story we'd decided on in the car. Then Gunnar carefully untied the cord holding his ring and handed it over to the clerk, asking her to show us engagement rings of a similar value.

"I was impatient and proposed with that." He'd grinned and rubbed his neck.

"But it's not exactly Lillian's style."

The clerk's eyes had grown wide. "I recognize that. You had it on in the photos I've seen of you. That ruby is huge." She hefted it. "I'm not sure if we have anything of similar value, but I'll see what I could find. The really nice stuff is locked up in the back." She'd handed Gunnar back the ring and disappeared behind a red velvet curtain.

And that was how it came to pass that I was now staring down at three of the most ornate rings I'd ever seen. Every ring had not just a giant diamond but also halos of other precious gems too. The style was also very elaborate, and I suspected that the detailed and exquisite workmanship partly contributed to the high cost.

“We met when those rumors were still circulating about me,” Gunnar said chattily. “We wanted to keep our relationship private, so she wasn’t caught up in all that.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, looking up from the rings. “I like my privacy. That whole thing was almost a deal breaker, but Gunnar convinced me to stick around.”

Gunnar met my gaze, and for a moment, I was lost in the swirl of green-gray in them. They were more beautiful than all the garish gems on the table. I wanted to be lost in them forever.

“I never believed her anyway.” The sales clerk’s words brought me out of my trance. “Kid looks nothing like you.” She handed me a ridiculously luxe sapphire and diamond ring. “Try this one on.” She slid it on my finger.

“It’s very beautiful. But...really...it’s a little...much.” I eyed the much more understated rings in the case below us. “What about something simpler?”

Gunnar followed my gaze and frowned, clearly not finding them fancy enough for his liking.

“Oh! I think I have just the thing,” Mindy exclaimed. “Wait right here.”

Gunnar took my hand, and I twisted the ruby ring, which was now on his pinky finger, where it fit perfectly. It definitely looked better on him. My eyes scanned the jewelry under the glass case, landing on a pendant in the distinctive shape of a monstera leaf. It was in white gold, delicately molded so that the edges of the leaf curled up slightly, and had three tiny emeralds scattered on it.

It was so cute. Maybe one day, when I had extra money to burn, I’d get myself that as a yay-me present.

Mindy returned with two rings. Unlike the others, these ones were less intricately designed and didn’t have the halo of stones around the diamonds. The diamonds were no smaller, though. The first one had three brilliant round

stones set in a row, the one in the middle the largest. But it was the second one that had me sucking in a breath. It was a solitaire braced by simple platinum leafy vines.

“These ones aren’t quite as ornate, but the diamonds are absolutely flawless. The simple design helps show off the superior clarity and fire.” She noticed I hadn’t taken my eyes off the solitaire. She handed it to me. “Here. Try it on.” I did. I held it up to the light, smiling so hard that my cheeks started to ache. Despite the size of the diamond, it looked perfect on my hand. Just enough of the vine detail peeked out from under the stone.

“Beautiful choice,” Mindy rattled off all the stats for the diamond.

I had no idea what all the letters and numbers meant, but Gunnar was nodding thoughtfully, so they must mean something to him.

“It’s perfect,” Gunnar said, his eyes on me instead of the ring. “We’ll take it. But I’m choosing the wedding bands.”

I grinned at him. “Go ahead.”

He chose a thick platinum eternity ring with three rows of diamonds for himself and a thinner, single-row version for me.

“Wonderful!” Mindy clapped her hands, looking positively giddy. “I’ll get these sized for you and courier them over as soon as I can. I’ll put a rush on them and you’ll get them by the end of the day.”

A slight movement at the window caught my attention, and I tried to look natural as Gunnar’s brother took the picture that we’d “leak” later. How long had he been standing there? I hated photos. Somehow, I always managed to have triple or quadruple chins in them, no matter how good I thought I looked in real life. Honestly, at this point, I’d be happy for a photo with just two chins.

As Mindy and Gunnar finished up the purchase, I walked around the store,

staying well away from the window, looking at all the pretties on display.

We left the shop and drove back to the penthouse, where Tansy and Shelby were waiting for me. They'd insisted on helping me with my dress. Shelby was a seamstress who did mostly custom work for those with extra curves and she had a bunch of samples for me to try. They probably wouldn't fit me as is, but she could easily alter them, especially with Tansy's magic to help speed the process along.

"Apparently, I'm not allowed to see you in the dress until tomorrow," Gunnar said with a roll of his eyes once he and I were in the private elevator leading up to the penthouse. "Don't they understand that it's not the dress itself I care about, but taking it off you later?"

My face heated at the thought of Gunnar undressing me, his huge hands exploring my skin as he peeled off the gown. I pressed my legs together, hoping he couldn't sense or smell my arousal, or whatever gargoyles did to detect that.

No such luck.

Dragging my gaze up his body to his face, I caught a flash of pure need in his eyes. His neck and shoulders were corded with tension, like he was trying to keep himself in control. The control didn't last long, however, and I quickly found myself pressed between the elevator wall and a whole lot of thick, hard muscle.

"Wrap around me," he demanded as he lifted me up and guided my legs around his hips.

I wound my arms around the back of his neck and was reminded again just how freaking huge he was. Whatever glamour spell he used helped hide some of his mass, but now that I was pressed up against him, the illusion was broken. Just like every time he'd touched me before, I found myself

drowning in a sea of lust and I clung to Gunnar like he was the only thing keeping me afloat. He consumed me with his mouth and lips, and I rolled my hips shamelessly, unable to stop myself.

An impossibly large bar had grown at the front of his pants, the tip of it pressing firmly against me. I released his mouth and tried to slide down his body for better access, kissing my way down his chiseled jawline.

“Please,” I whimpered, my face nuzzling his neck.

I’d wanted him from the very moment I saw him last night, and so far all I’d had were kisses. I wanted more. Needed more. Gunnar bucked his hips, rubbing up against me, the movement hitting my clit. Even through my jeans, it was ridiculously intense.

The ding of the elevator cut our make-out session frustratingly short. I stepped out into the hallway that served as the landing for the elevator and straightened my clothes as best I could, though I was sure I still had that “just kissed” look.

Shelby and Tansy greeted us in the foyer, and for a moment, I felt self-conscious. My hair was a mess, and my lipstick was probably all smeared. I glanced over at Gunnar: sure enough, there was a telltale streak of pinky-brown on his jaw.

The two women didn’t seem to notice, though, or if they did, they had the decency not to mention it. Shelby grabbed my elbow, pulling me from Gunnar.

“We’re stealing your wife-to-be for an hour. Go find something else to do,” she said as she bundled me through the door that led to her and Grayson’s suite.

“And no peeking!” Tansy added, stepping in behind us.

CHAPTER 8

GUNNAR



“I’LL GO GET THE rest of your stuff,” I said to Lillian as she disappeared through the door to Grayson’s suite.

What I really wanted to do was take her to my room and have my wicked way with her. But I reminded myself that the wedding gown was a big deal to most women. And even if it wasn’t to her, if Lillian showed up tomorrow in any old dress, it might not be as believable, especially when The White Claws got news of our wedding.

The more beautiful and talk-worthy the better for our purposes. As it was, we weren’t going to have a proper reception, so we had to make the ceremony really count. After it was over, I planned on sticking a *Just Married* sign on my Hellcat and driving off.

I hurried back down to collect the few boxes we'd brought back. The top of one of the boxes was open, and I grinned when I saw the assortment of coffee-making paraphernalia inside. The woman really liked her coffee.

I put the boxes next to the couch in my personal living room, deciding to let her find homes for everything on her own. I didn't want to dig through her stuff.

Then I went to my home office to check my email for the video feed from her building that Eamon had forwarded. Looking at the footage, she was right. I really had just missed the two wolf shifters.

They looked like low-level gangsters to me, not the ones calling the shots. Surely, The White Claws had not only sent these two measly grunts to collect their stray.

I zoomed in on their faces and took a screenshot, sending it to some contacts to see if anyone recognized them. Then I went through the feeds from the various cameras again, following the guys out the door until they got picked up by the cameras in the parking lot outside.

Bingo!

I'd have zeroed in on the car and the older Asian man in a suit even if the two thugs hadn't been walking straight toward him. He had to be the one in charge. The gleaming Bentley stood out like a sore thumb. The guy's suit looked custom-tailored, and there was a fancy gold watch on his wrist, though the footage wasn't clear enough to show the brand.

You'd think they'd try to be a little more discreet instead of renting a Bentley while they were here. But I guess if he was used to being carted around in a Rolls Royce, a Bentley was slumming it.

I would've expected the Bentley to draw a lot of attention since it obviously didn't belong in the building's parking lot, but every passerby ignored it,

almost like it wasn't there. Hell, I'd walked right past it myself. There was definitely magic involved.

The man was clearly upset that Lillian hadn't been home. He drove off but left the other two posted in front of her building. As I'd expected, they were waiting for her to return, watching the entrance and the lobby. I was glad I'd ushered her straight into my Urus.

I called Eamon, and he picked up almost right away. It sounded like he was in the middle of a workout.

"Hey—want to help me pick up the rest of Lillian's stuff from her place? I think the guys who knocked on her door might still be outside her building. I thought we could do our own sleuthing and see what we're up against."

"Yeah, why not."

We took one of the company SUVs this time, both because they did a better job at hiding in plain sight and because they had more room for her things. Sure enough, when we arrived at the building the two were sitting on a bench outside, watching the door. Occasionally, they glanced up to Lillian's window on the fourth floor.

"I'll do my thing," Eamon said. His form flickered, and in the blink of an eye, a teenager with a cap and a backpack stood in his place. That was one of the handy things about being a demon: he could make himself look like anything he wanted. The cap and backpack didn't actually exist; they were his soul stuff, shaped to look like them.

With his phone in hand, he made his way over to the benches in front of the building and plopped himself down on the bench next to the two goons. He might look like some kid playing a game on his phone while waiting for his friend, but he was actually recording their conversation. With him in place, I entered the building's underground car park using Lillian's key fob.

I kept the lights off when I opened her apartment door, and I avoided the windows, just in case the two were looking.

There were only two more boxes of her belongings left, but there were also about a dozen large plants which had to be brought down two at a time. The smaller ones were arranged on trays so I could bring a bunch down in one go. She'd already emptied the water from the reservoirs, so it was simply a matter of getting everything down to the parking lot and into the SUV without losing all the little round clay balls in the process. I was careful, but even so, by the time I took my last look around her apt, there were little clay balls everywhere.

The rest of the stuff, she'd said, wasn't important to her. She wasn't particularly attached to her furniture since it was just whatever she'd been able to afford when she first moved in as a starving student. She hadn't had the chance to upgrade any of it yet.

It was fine. She had all the furniture she needed over at my place, except for maybe a wardrobe and some extra storage for her things. We could go shopping for that together later. It would be fun. She definitely wouldn't need her bed or sheets because she'd be sharing mine, and unlike last night, I planned on fully enjoying her presence there, tonight and every night thereafter.

Was I taking advantage of the situation? Maybe, a little. I was trying my best to be a good guy in all of this, but it was proving remarkably difficult. Lillian was one tempting little morsel, and it would take the self-control of a saint not to take a bite. Despite my best intentions, I knew myself too well. I'd have her screaming under me by the end of the night.

I couldn't wait.

There was only one more item to bring down, a charming little three-tiered

cart. It held all her indoor gardening supplies, including a bag of unused LECA, some twine, a watering can, and various bottles of colored liquids.

One of the labels read: *ExtremeGro-Grow Big or Go Home!* Another bottle said: *ExtremeBloom-The Bud Buddies!* The hydroponics nutrients were clearly designed to appeal to cannabis growers. There were other things, too, like PH adjustors, micronutrient boosters, and pest control sprays. It seemed a very strange and unnatural way of growing, but I had to agree that her plants all looked *extremely* healthy.

I pushed the cart out of her door, locking it behind me, then decided to take the tiny elevator since I had the cart. The door opened just one floor down, and a lady with a stroller took one look at me and the cart and offered to take the next one instead. Good. I didn't think there was room enough for both of us. I got all the way down, loaded up the SUV, drove out of the parking garage and picked up Eamon, who was still in harmless kid form.

“Catch anything useful?”

Eamon held up his phone. “My Mandarin isn't good enough. I sent it to a buddy of mine to translate.” His phone chose that moment to buzz. “Hopefully that's him now.”

According to Eamon's buddy, these two were surprised they'd run into any resistance at all. Lillian was supposed to be an easy retrieval. Her adoptive parents were not famous, nor were they rich, and they said they were no longer close to her. She didn't have a large social media presence; in fact, she had none at all. And according to everything they had on her, she was single despite claiming to be engaged.

More importantly, she no longer had a job or a home. She also had a bunch of student debt. Surely, she'd want to leave all this behind for a better life with a rich husband.

The two thugs had called her ugly since the photo they had of her didn't fit the typical Asian beauty standards. They'd even said that she should be grateful to have a man to marry so she wouldn't be alone anymore. That part really pissed me off. Lillian was fucking gorgeous.

Apparently, there were several other options for the breeding program since the man who was Lillian's biological father had gone through a highly frowned-upon phase of sowing his wild oats. He claimed he'd been careful but somehow still ended up with more than several illegitimate children. Lillian was just the lowest-hanging fruit.

Well, the joke was on them if they thought this was going to be easy. You couldn't just run a breeding program for shifters like you did for wild animals.

"So, Lillian is half-shifter?"

"Seems to be the case." Despite a thorough search, we hadn't yet been able to find the name of the man who was supposed to be Lillian's biological father. The adoption agency was keeping that information locked up tight. Then again, he hadn't been in her life at all, so what did it really matter?

Lillian had said she thought she had very little shifter in her since she couldn't fully shift, but it seemed she was fully half snow leopard.

"Let's go pick up some dinner for the ladies," I suggested.

"You're not taking Lillian out? I thought you'd want to take her somewhere fancy, maybe even in your gargoyle form, you know, to drum up some extra talk."

I frowned. "Lillian doesn't really like being the center of attention. And she's been through enough already the last few days. There's plenty of time to make a stir after the wedding. And besides, I want to spend some time alone with her, just us. No cameras."

“You like her.” It wasn’t a question.

“I do. But I don’t know her that well yet, and she doesn’t know me.” I wanted to change that.

Eamon messaged the girls as we drove, and we settled on picking up dinner from the Middle Eastern restaurant owned by a djinn couple who’d been in Darlington for so long that some wondered if they’d been here when it was first founded. They’d certainly been around since long before my brothers and I had been carved from stone and given life. They were no longer in the business of granting wishes, but they made a mean Kabuli Pulao...so I guess they did still make everyone’s food wishes come true.

We ordered enough food to feed a small army, which was usually the perfect amount for a household that included three gargoyles and a demon, and started back.

CHAPTER 9

LILLIAN



I EYED THE SELECTION of gorgeous gowns lined up on the couch. Only one of them was white, but Gunnar had mentioned that Tansy was a witch, and maybe color changes were possible with magic.

“I wish I had more to show you. These are just the basic samples I keep around to show clients the different styles of dresses I can make. They are also too big for you. For sampling purposes, I always go large and pin them to show clients how they’d look on,” Shelby explained. “Usually, I wouldn’t be able to make such a significant alteration on such short notice, but Tansy and I have been working on a process to use her magic to speed things up. I hope you don’t mind being the guinea pig.”

“Not at all. I’m super grateful for your help. All this is happening so fast, I didn’t even think about the dress.”

“Well, we’ve got you covered,” Tansy said. “Literally.”

An awkward feeling washed over me. I didn’t really know these women that well, and all they knew about me was that Gunnar and I were only faking it to get me out of a jam. What must they think of me?

They didn’t give me much time to dwell on that, however, because they immediately had me trying on dress after dress, spinning in front of the mirror, and taking tons of photos. By the time we’d gone through all of them, I was exhausted, and I couldn’t remember what the first one had even looked like.

“Okay, which do you like the best?” Shelby asked. “Ignore the color, because we can totally change that. Try to imagine them all being white.”

We went through all the photos. I wasn’t sold on any of the fairytale ones with poufy skirts. There was a pink one with a low back and a flared mermaid tail that I loved the style of, but I was short, and the best part of the tail would have to be cut off. It was also huge on me, and once pinned, the low back wasn’t so low anymore.

I picked up the mermaid dress. “I’m not sure this would work on me, but I like the basic idea.”

Shelby took it from me and analyzed it, her professional gaze flitting between me and the dress. “Once it fits, it’ll look great on you.” She turned to Tansy. “So how do we do this? Color first, then fit?”

“Definitely color first. And we’ll do it right on her.”

Shelby helped me into the dress again, and Tansy started to recite a spell. Magic shimmered in the air, and my skin started tingling. I’d seen spells being cast before—back at the clinic, we had a witch who often heated her lunches with a spell since she didn’t trust microwaves—but I’d never felt

magic on my skin before. I rubbed the goosebumps from my arms, and kept my eyes glued to the mirror as the pink slowly faded into a creamy white.

“Ooh, that’s so cool!” Shelby clapped her hands and bounced up and down a little. “All right, now hold your arms out to the sides.”

I did, and she started rattling off instructions to Tansy: take it in here, lift and shorten it here, scoop some out here. I held my breath as sparkling tendrils of magic swirled around me. They felt like little fingers as they nipped and tucked the fabric into shape. Minutes later, I stood in front of the mirror in a wedding gown that fit me to a tee.

Shelby was right. It looked amazing on me now.

“Thank you. I—” A lump caught in my throat. “I know this whole marriage isn’t real, but this still means a lot to me. I don’t know how to thank you both.”

“Pfft, we’re not going to let some big shot organization just show up in a woman’s life and tell her who to marry,” Shelby said. “No way. That’s just wrong. They can go take a hike.”

“Yup!” Tansy agreed. “Plus, Gunnar’s a great guy.”

I looked down at my hands. “I know.” I told them how he had offered me his number, refusing to take advantage of my drunkenness. “I almost wish we’d met under different circumstances. Then maybe we could’ve ended up as something real.”

The two exchanged a look.

Tansy spoke first. “It’s not too late. Give this a chance. And don’t believe Gunnar’s reputation of being the wild, irresponsible Redrock brother.”

“Yeah.” Shelby started to gather the other dresses up in her arms. “Gunnar likes to pretend that he doesn’t care, and that life is just fun and games, but he

can't fool me. The guys might not notice it, but he watches his brothers, and I swear he wants what they have: a mate. He just doesn't admit it."

I shivered. Could it be that Gunnar Redrock was looking to settle down? What if this fake relationship ended up as the real deal? Could I really be that lucky?

"Now, let's take the photo that's going up on my company's socials right after the wedding tomorrow. I'd like one photo of the fitting and one of the event."

I posed awkwardly with her dress form in front of the arched windows, hoping my extra chins wouldn't be too obvious. She checked it, frowned, then took a few more, moving her phone around to get the right angle.

"Perfect!" she grinned, turning her phone around to show us.

I smiled and only pretended to look at it. Most photos of me just made me feel like shit. It was particularly upsetting when I felt super hot or beautiful, like I did in this dress, only to have the photographic evidence shatter the illusion. I didn't need that punch to my self-esteem right now.

"If The White Claws think they can sneak in and sneak out again with you in tow, they're in for a surprise. The whole town is going to be talking about this wedding, and about *them*, in a few days. They won't be able to move without reporters breathing down their necks."

I paled at the thought of all the attention.

"You suddenly look a bit overwhelmed. Getting cold feet?" Tansy asked.

"I loathe being gawked at, and I hate photos," I admitted. "Like legit hate them. I always have multiple chins. Or, if it's taken from a high enough angle that you don't catch all my phantom chins, I look like I've got no legs. I think this whole making it public idea is a solid plan, and I'm sure it'll work, so I

know I have to suck it up and deal with my insecurities. Just don't show me any of the pictures."

"What? You look amazing!" Tansy exclaimed.

"Oh, trust me, I feel amazing too, especially in this dress. But I'm not photogenic, and I know it. I can look like hot stuff in real life and end up a sasquatch in the photos."

Shelby sighed. "Okay, I know I'm supposed to tell you that you're wrong, that it's all in your head, that you look great in photos and all that jazz, blah blah blah. But I know how you feel, so I won't. Some people's faces just look better in person. I'm like that too. In most of my photos, I look like this," She scrunched her face up so she was all chin and made a face. "Even when I look like a million bucks in the mirror."

I laughed, relaxing. She got it. That must be why she bothered to adjust the angles when taking the photo of the dress.

"Yeah." I made the same face as her. "Just like this."

That had both her and Tansy cracking up. Tansy made a face too, and soon we were all laughing our asses off. It was refreshing that she understood and wasn't insisting I looked fine, like everyone else always did. I had eyes, damn it; I knew how I looked in photos. I also knew I was a hottie in real life, so there.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Shelby said through the giggles. "My gram's a green witch. She wants to do the flowers."

"A green witch?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's phenomenal with plants."

I was great with plants too, but I was no witch. Just a defective snow leopard.

"I thought maybe we could use some of my plants as greenery. I don't have a

lot of flowers, but I have tons of big, leafy plants. It would be different, but very me.”

“Why not both? I’m sure she can incorporate them.”

Her mention of her grandmother had me thinking of my parents. I was supposed to call them today. They knew The White Claws were coming for me and had tried to convince me to get on a train to head over to them. But I hadn’t wanted to put them in danger.

“I really need to call my parents and let them know what’s happening, but I worry The White Claws will be able to tap my phone. I know I’m being paranoid, but they did manage to find out where I lived, even though I never post online.”

“You’re not being paranoid at all. That could totally happen. You can use one of the Redrock phones; they can’t be tapped or traced, even if they’ve bugged your parents’ line,” Tansy said. “I’ll go grab one for you from the offices downstairs.”

Back in the main living room, the one with all the couches, I mentally ran through how I’d explain everything that was going on, then texted Dad, telling him to pick up the next incoming video call from a strange number. They never picked up any call from a number they didn’t recognize now.

I video dialed and was waiting for him to pick up when Tansy got a call from Eamon asking what we wanted for dinner.

“I eat anything,” I said. “Surprise me.”

“What’s the surprise, Tiger Lily?” Dad asked.

I turned to see Mom and Dad on the screen. I took a deep breath and launched into my story.

CHAPTER 10

LILLIAN



I PUSHED MY PLATE away to stop myself from eating another bite. I was already beyond stuffed, but everything was so good! When the guys had first come back with all the food, I'd thought we'd never be able to finish it, but would you look at that! Most of it was gone. I guess that was what happened when there were three gargoyles in the house.

They'd ordered a variety of dishes, and we ate family-style. A lucky thing, because there was no way I could have chosen just one dish. I'd been to Three Food Wishes before, since it was just a quick walk from my apartment, but I'd only ever ordered from the takeout window. I always got their special, the Kefta Kebab, because it was affordable, healthy, and delicious, which was a rare trifecta. Usually, healthy and delicious meant it wasn't affordable, and affordable and healthy meant it wasn't delicious.

I'd never tried anything else on the menu, or been inside the dining area. The rumor was that the owners were genies, but I never knew what was fact or conjecture here in Darlington. According to the website, the owners had traveled extensively before moving to and settling in Darlington. They offered pan Middle Eastern cuisine as well as some fusion dishes of their own creation.

Gunnar sat next to me, our legs touching the entire meal. It was nice, and I felt very safe next to him.

"Did you want to join us for Friday night movie?" Shelby asked at the end of our feast. "We do movie night most Fridays. We always have popcorn, too. Extra butter."

I glanced over at the oversized reclining couches and the big screen, then at Gunnar. As much as I wanted to join them, I had a lot I had to get done. Gunnar had left my cart and plants in front of the door to his suite. I needed to get all my plant babies set up. Ooh, maybe I'd check out that walk-in shower or the giant tub I saw in his ritzy bathroom afterward. I also wanted to spend some time alone with Gunnar, getting to know him better.

I'd noticed that none of the gargoyle brothers had dropped their glamour the whole time they ate. I doubted they usually wore illusion spells at home in front of their mates, so they must be doing it because of me. I didn't want to continue intruding on their Friday night and adding to any discomfort.

Gunnar spoke before I did. "Lillian and I should spend some time together alone. Get to know each other. You know, to make it more believable." He looked across the open central area to my plants by the entrance to his personal suite. "And we should set up your plants. Don't the clay balls need to be in water?"

"Oh yes, of course," Shelby said. "You've got practice doing *couple things*.

No problem. There's always next weekend."

Couple things. My brain immediately pictured Gunnar and I coupling up, his rock-hard body on top of mine and his—

"Gram's going to have a bazillion questions for you when she comes over tomorrow."

I blinked, realizing I had been so focused on my X-rated vision that I had no idea what she'd said. "Excuse me?" Heat rose to my cheeks, and I prayed that it wasn't as visible as it felt.

"Your plants. My grandmother is a green witch, but I've never seen plants grown like that before."

"Oh." Of course, that was what her gram would ask about. Duh. "Yeah, it's unconventional, but it works for me, and the babies seem happy." At least, I hoped they were. I wondered if her grandmother could tell me. What if they weren't, in fact, happy? Would I have to move them back to potting mix and deal with all that mess again?

Gunnar and I excused ourselves, and we started moving my plants into his home. I'd packed most of my grow lights into one of the boxes, but he had so many windows in the main living portion of his home, I doubted I'd need to set them up. Aside from the lofted area where his bedrooms and bathroom sat above his kitchen, the rest of the place had super high ceilings, and therefore, giant windows.

With Gunnar moving my plants into their trays and saucers and me mixing up gallons of the various nutrient solutions, the work went by quickly, and in only ten minutes, we had everyone happily settled in front of a window. What had looked like an overgrown jungle in my tiny apartment looked like only a small collection here.

That meant...room for more plants! Plant problem? What plant problem?

“We’ll need a shelf for the smaller ones in the trays,” Gunnar said. Currently, they sat on the floor.

“Uh-uh. A shelf means more room, and that means more plants. Trust me, you don’t want to encourage me.”

His eyes sparked with mischief. “Maybe I do want to encourage you. I like them.”

I laughed. “Are you trying to tempt me into your bed with talk of more plants?”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“Totally.” Though I didn’t really need tempting. Our kiss in the elevator flashed in my head, and I blushed.

I cleared my throat. “I was, ah, hoping to check out that custom walk-in shower.”

Gunnar grinned. “I’d love to give you a personal tour.”

“A personal tour of your shower?” I raised my brows. “Very well, if you insist, I accept.”

He took my hand and led me upstairs and into his gorgeously designed bathroom. An alert had Gunnar checking his phone. “It’s the courier here with the rings.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Shitty timing. You get started first. I’ll join you as soon as I can, I promise.”

He turned on the water to the oversized shower for me, showed me how to adjust the temperature and water pressure, and then left.

Eager to feel the water on my tired and sore muscles, I stripped in record time, threw my clothes over a hook, and stepped into the shower. It was hot and steamy, just the way I liked it. I increased the water pressure until it felt like a thousand little hands were massaging the day’s stress away.

I lost track of how long Gunnar was gone, but suddenly I gasped when a hard

wall of very naked muscle caressed me from behind.

“Enjoying your shower, Kitten?” He reached for a pump bottle attached to the wall and came away with a handful of foam in his palm.

“Oh yeah. This is perfect.”

I leaned back against his rock-hard body as he lathered me up, his hands moving sensuously across every curve and dip of my body. His cock sprang to life behind me, sliding across my soapy back. Curious to finally see what he looked like, I turned around.

I couldn't help the stab of hurt when I saw that he was still wearing his glamour. Did he plan on keeping the mask up until we were married? Did he not trust me to see his real form?

“You know, maybe this is a bad idea.” I backed away, but he immediately took a step to close the gap again.

“What's wrong, Kitten?” He tilted my chin up to meet my gaze.

I sighed. “You're going to take a shower with me with your illusion spell on? Do you trust me so little? Did you plan on fucking me with it on, too? I'm disappointed and frankly kind of offended.”

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath. “It's not because...” His hands dropped to his sides. “Okay.”

His lips moved, and he mumbled something unintelligible. There was a shimmer, and his body started to change. He grew bigger, taller. His skin took on a gray hue that grew stronger and stronger until he looked to be sculpted from stone. His facial features became more severe, and the angular lines of his face that had given him his masculine appeal became more exaggerated until it no longer looked human. Behind his shoulders, a pair of wings materialized. He sprouted a tail as well.

But the thing that had me really gasping was his massive cock, gray like the

rest of him. The thick mushroom-shaped head formed a thick ridge, and the veins on the shaft were so pronounced I wondered if I would feel them when he was inside me.

I took a step back, wanting to get a better view of him, but he stepped forward to close the gap between us again.

“Is this what you wanted?” he demanded, his voice tinged with something hard and angry. “To see the monster? Well, tell me: do I frighten you?” He took another step toward me, backing me up against the wall. His arms came up to brace on either side of me, preventing my escape. “Do you regret your arrangement with me now?”

With our height difference, he towered over me, and his cock pressed against my tummy, the tip of it reaching all the way up to my chest. He was trying to scare me, but this angry note in his voice didn’t sound genuine. Was he in fact worried that I’d run when I saw him?

“I’m not scared. I already know what you are...”

I reached up to press a palm to his chest. It still felt warm, alive. The surface of his skin still had some give, like it was flesh, but it was much harder than any muscle I’d ever felt before. I traced water droplets with my fingertips over his skin, and he made a pained sound like he was trying very hard to control himself. I wanted to break that control.

“...and I don’t regret a thing.” I got on my tiptoes and pulled him down for a kiss.

His mouth devoured mine hungrily, his tongue thrusting and claiming everywhere it touched. I skimmed my fingers over his face, touching the inhuman features.

“I like what I see, Gunnar,” I said when I was able to catch my breath. “All the things I found attractive about you before just got amplified. I think

you're hot as fuck.”

“Do you, now?”

He turned his head and rubbed his jaw across my face and chin, right down my throat and up again, almost as if he was marking me like a cat. Interesting, since I was the one with the snow leopard DNA. His musky, masculine scent filled my nostrils, and I caught myself rubbing him back. A soft rumbling sound that I'd never made before came from my chest.

I was purring!

“Is that a yes, Kitten?”

Instead of replying with words, I moved my hands down to his belly before losing the fight not to grab his cock. I wrapped both hands around it, marveling at its size and shape. I could barely wrap my hands around it. It truly was a monster cock. I stroked him from base to tip. Gunnar grunted and clenched his hands into fists on the stone wall on either side of me.

A drop of precum glistened at the tip, and I leaned down to lick it up. I opened my mouth and engulfed the head. I didn't have a wide jaw or a big mouth, so it was a struggle to take much more of his length, but just trying was turning me on bigtime. I reached down to touch myself as I sucked on him, my other hand sliding up and down his shaft.

“Fuck,” he snarled. “That feels so good.”

He pushed my head further down, trying to get as much of himself into my mouth and throat as possible, his hands tangling in my wet hair. I gagged, which just turned me on even more. Lust had overwhelmed my senses, and I was loving every moment.

Then I found myself pressed against the wall again. This time, he'd trapped both my wrists in one giant hand and was exploring my body with the other.

He cupped a breast, circling my nipple with his thumb. Something snaked lazily up my thigh toward my pussy.

But if both his hands were already occupied, then what—

I looked down to see his tail at the V of my legs.

“Open,” he ordered.

He slid the tip of his tail over my slit, my juices coating the tip. The hand on my chest moved up to my throat and pressed me against the wall. I cried out at the first thrust. The tip of his tail wasn't as thick as his cock, but it was still substantial. Immobilized against the shower wall, all I could do was feel.

My knees wobbled, threatening to buckle. I was hyper-aware that from his vantage point, he could see every little detail as he fucked me with his tail.

“So beautiful.” The words were a hoarse whisper. “Fuck, Kitten. I need to be inside you.”

He released my hands and caught me before I fell. I wound my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. Then he was replacing his tail with his cock, the broad head stretching me even wider. Despite how wet I was, his cock met with some resistance as my body took some time to adjust to his size. I hissed and clung to him.

With one hand still supporting me, he reached a hand between us to stroke my clit. I moaned at the sudden pleasure that shot through me. It was followed by a whimper when the massive head slid deeper into me.

“Good girl.” He bucked his hips again, and a combination of pleasure and pain blinded my vision. It was so much. Too much.

“You can take all of me, Kitten. Just relax.”

He rocked his hips, and each movement seated him deeper into my body. He didn't let up until he hit the back of my channel. He stayed there, letting me

get used to his size while he continued to play with my clit. The pain receded and was replaced with pure pleasure.

I was so full I almost couldn't breathe. His fingers danced across my clit, and a tightness started winding in my core. I panted against him as the tension built. The sound of water falling around us drowned out anything else, and all I could feel was him.

I was on the precipice when Gunnar removed his finger from my clit to grip my ass with both hands. I whimpered from the loss, especially when he pulled out, agonizingly slowly, until it felt like I was perched atop his cock. I writhed and clawed at him to fill me up again. I was so close.

With a grunt, he shoved back inside me. The hard thrust drove me up against the wall. It felt like his massive cock was cleaving me in two, breaking down the dam that had held back all that pressure as he filled me impossibly deep. My breath came out in a strangled cry as the rush came.

And then my climax hit hard, crashing over me in unrelenting waves. I could hardly breathe between my screams and ravaged sobs that filled the room as the water continued to pour down.

CHAPTER 11

GUNNAR



LILLIAN'S CRY OF PLEASURE was too much. Every ounce of self-control I had left spilled out onto the shower floor and circled down the drain. Grasping her hips with both hands, I bounced her up and down on my cock. Her pussy walls fluttered, gripping my cock in a velvet vice and making me have to fight to move.

“So—perfect. Fuck.” I punctuated each word with a jerky thrust.

Every breath I took filled my nostrils with Lillian's addictive scent. This was everything I'd wanted since the second I saw her, and it was even better than I had imagined. I could die like this and be happy.

The look on her face was one of pure bliss, matching the feeling in my heart. At this moment, Lillian was my everything. There was nothing but us in the entire world.

I set a brutal rhythm, hammering into her, and soon her gorgeous pussy was tightening again. This time, I felt her climb, felt every muscle in her body tightening and hurtling toward another release. Her eyes were closed and her mouth open, every breath a moan or a cry or a shriek.

Then she was pulsing around me again, milking my cock. I couldn't hold back any longer. I gritted my teeth and drove into her, fucking her wildly as the shower filled with her screams of pleasure. With a snarl and one final thrust, I emptied my seed into her.

I don't know how long I stood there with Lillian clinging to my body, her eyes closed, her cheek pressed against my chest. She'd surrendered to me, trusted me, even after seeing me in my true form. She'd even said I was hot as fuck, and it hadn't been a lie. Her actions afterward had proved she meant it. There was no disgust there. And she hadn't treated me like a novelty, something to try once, either.

Had I really gotten so lucky that the most perfect girl in the world had drunkenly asked me to marry her? I was just supposed to be her fake fiancé, but right now, it felt really fucking real to me. What if I wanted to keep her after all this was over? Would she stick around?

The flutter of her lashes against my skin had me looking down. Her dark brown eyes had a dreamy look as she grinned up at me.

"Now I know for *sure* that I don't regret a thing. In fact, I insist we finish every day from now on with a shower just like this one."

I raised a brow. "Demanding."

"Don't you know it."

"But what about the tub?" I asked playfully.

She scrunched up her face, thinking. "You've got a point. Okay, we can alternate."

I chuckled. “Deal.”

We took turns washing each other before I turned off the water and handed her a towel.

“Oooh, it’s warm!” she exclaimed, eyeing the towel rack. “Nifty. I didn’t realise that was heated, I thought it was just decorative. I could definitely get used to this.”

I sat her down on the cedar seat, and she looked confused for a moment until I brought out a hair dryer. She closed her eyes dreamily as I dried her hair, finger combing through the long, dark strands.

By the time we were done, she looked ready to fall asleep.

“Let’s get you into bed. We’ve got a wedding to attend in the morning.”

She stretched and yawned. “We sure do. I have no idea how you managed to book the chapel and an officiant on such short notice, but thank you,” she said as I helped her into my massive custom-made bed.

She looked tiny in it. Just seeing her sitting sleepily in my sheets had me wanting to fuck her again. But she needed rest, especially with the big day we had tomorrow.

“We’re not going to a chapel, by the way.” I took the towel from her and gave her a playful push down onto the bed.

“Oh?” She raised a brow.

“We’re getting married in Desmon’s courtyard, and he’s performing the ceremony.”

Her eyes grew round. “Desmon himself is marrying us? As in Darlington’s dragon?”

“Yes. He’s a friend and is licensed to officiate at marriages, so why not?”

“You’ve got everything figured out. The only thing that’s going to be tricky tomorrow will be walking in these shoes. They’re super cute and go with the

dress perfectly, but we couldn't find anything that actually fit my wide-ass feet."

"As long as you can make it down the aisle."

"I should survive."

"Would it help if I gave you a preemptive foot rub tonight?"

"Would it ever." She lifted a dainty foot and extended it to me.

Grinning, I grabbed it. Her foot was soft and smooth; the nails were painted a dark forest green, just like her fingernails—to match her plants, of course. I started at her arch and heels, which earned me a happy sigh. I moved on to the balls of her feet and noticed a splotch of lighter green on her big toenail was an attempt to paint a leaf. Adorable!

I brought her foot to my lips and kissed it right on the leaf. She giggled.

"I tried, but I was never much of an artist."

"I think it's cute."

I went back to massaging her foot in earnest, and she closed her eyes with a soft moan. Then I did the same to the second foot, lavishing just as much attention on it as I had the first. When she was completely relaxed, I moved farther up her leg to give her calves some attention too.

Her knees parted, and I could see her wetness glistening between her legs.

Fuck!

Maybe I should fuck her one more time after all. If it were up to me, I'd fuck her so long and so hard that she would barely be able to move tomorrow. But then again, I didn't want her most vivid memory of our wedding day to be of her struggling to make it down the aisle because she was so sore. She didn't have the ability to heal quickly like a full shifter did.

I had an idea. I hadn't tasted her yet. Things had happened so fast in the shower that my plan to seduce her slowly, giving every part of her attention

and tasting her before I took her, had gone right out the window.

I could make up for that now. I positioned myself between her legs and started kissing my way up from her knee to her pussy, eager to taste her cream.

“I thought,” she panted, “that we were going to bed.”

“We are,” I murmured against her skin. “I heard a snack right before bedtime will help you sleep.”

CHAPTER 12

LILLIAN



“WHAT AN INNOVATIVE WAY to grow plants!” Iris exclaimed. Shelby’s grandmother had arrived with more flowers than I’d thought we could possibly use, but somehow, every last petal had found a home. In addition to the flowers, she’d also worked her magic on Desmon’s already-gorgeous and perfectly manicured courtyard, making all the hedges and garden beds even lusher till they positively glowed with vitality. I’d also brought two of my favorite plants along. The gorgeous *Philodendron Verrucosum*, which I’d trained up a wooden plank, graced one side of the wedding arch with its giant, velvety, heart-shaped leaves. On the other side was my *Monstera Deliciosa*. It was a common plant, but this one had grown so big as to be a true monster; the thing was huge. It had been my first plant, the one that started it all.

“It’s a kind of hydroponics,” I explained to the older woman. “They call it *semi-hydroponics* online, but it’s not ‘semi’ anything. It’s plain old sub-irrigated hydroponics. I lived in the tiniest apartment, and I was having huge trouble with all the fungus gnats. Switching them over really helped. I know online, some people lost part of their collection while switching them over, but I was lucky, and most of them survived.” I pointed at the monstera. “That one barely had a transition phase. I know it’s a little silly, but I like to think that my plants are happy.”

“Of course they’re happy, dear. All plants are happy around a green witch.”

“Oh, I’m not—” I started to protest.

“Of course you are! It’s not very strong, and the magic is diluted, but it’s definitely there. The plants know.”

“Oh. I had no idea. I was adopted,” I explained. “I know I’ve got snow leopard in me, but I guess a witch snuck in there somewhere too.”

“That’s three for three,” Shelby said. “I guess the rumor is true.”

“What rumor?” I asked.

“They say that even though they don’t deliberately look for it, gargoyles naturally gravitate toward women with a bit of magic. You, me, and Emily all have magic of some kind, but none of us are particularly strong.”

I’d met Emily earlier; she was Griff’s mate. He was the only Redrock brother who didn’t live at the penthouse. Eamon took his place instead at the fourth corner of the building.

“Interesting theory, except Gunnar and I aren’t really—”

“A thing? Pssh! That’s bull-kaka.” Iris waved her arm dismissively. “I’d bet all my plants that this will be your one and only wedding. You and Gunnar will stay together.” She sounded very serious, like she was making a prophecy.

“Grams!” Shelby laughed. “Just because you declare it in your Official Voice doesn’t mean it’ll come true.” She turned to me. “Unless... Do you *want* it to come true?”

I thought about it. “When I first met Gunnar, I just wanted him to be my last hurrah before they carted me off to God-knows-where to marry God-knows-who. But I was a little bit more drunk than I’d expected to be, and I accidentally asked him to marry me instead. I know this is all supposed to be a sham, but...I like him. I really do. He’s been so kind to me. Unless he starts waving red flags by the dozen in my face the second we say I do, then yes, I think I’d like that.”

“Well of course he’s kind. All the Redrock brothers are. The real question is...” Iris wagged her brows. “How’s the sex?”

“Grams!” Shelby covered her face, mortified, and I laughed.

“It’s spectacular,” I admitted without going into detail.

Iris nodded sagely. “Then you two will be just fine.”

Tansy approached us, holding up a tablet. “Would you like me to open a portal for your parents? I know the plan was to have them watch through a video call, but maybe you want them here live?”

“A portal?” I’d heard they existed in real life, but I’d never actually seen one in use, or knew anyone who’d been through one.

“Yep. Doing this at Desmon’s place means I don’t really need to hold any protective wards. He’s got his own protection. So I’ll totally have enough power to open up a portal to your parents’ house and have them step through.”

“But if we have access to a portal, why did we drive here?” I asked. “And why did Iris have to move all her plants in her truck?”

“Because portals take a lot of energy to keep open,” Tansy explained. “And

moving items over long distances drains a witch's energy even more. Magic still follows the basic rules of physics. I mean, I could handle a few people. But"—she looked around—"that's a lot of plants. I'd struggle with that."

"Ohhh, that makes sense. So you can't really have a whole army march through a portal like in the movies?"

"It'd take a lot of witches or wizards to hold a portal that size. And they'd need to be siphoning magic from something very powerful. In that case, I'd worry more about *that* than any army."

"What happens if you run out of energy in the middle of moving something through a portal?"

"You mean if a portal closed mid-transport? I don't know. That's never happened before. I'm not sure if the item would materialize wherever they happened to be in physical space or if it'd be stuck somewhere in the *in-between*."

I shuddered at the thought of being stuck in some immaterial realm. Tansy must have noticed because she immediately reassured me that my parents would be perfectly safe.

"Why don't we call them and let them make the decision," I said.

I punched in their number, and Dad picked up almost immediately. I got straight to the point, introducing them to Tansy, Iris, and Shelby, and telling them about the portal idea.

He was all gung-ho to try it, but Mom balked at the thought of walking through a hole in the middle of her living room and magically appearing out of thin air a few states over. I didn't blame her, after my mental image of being stuck somewhere that was neither here nor there.

"I honestly don't mind if you're not here in person," I assured them. "I did just spring this on you yesterday."

“I’ll prop the tablet on a chair in the front row,” Tansy said. “It’ll be like you’re right here.”

“It’s probably for the best anyway.” Dad panned his phone down his body, then over to Mom. They were wearing matching pajamas. “We got comfy to watch your big day.”

“I told you: it’s not that big, Dad.” I rolled my eyes. I had already explained to them this was all a sham, and that was why I wasn’t upset they weren’t going to be here live and in person.

“We’ll come visit you two in person another time, Tiger Lily,” Dad promised.

I grinned at the nickname. It had been an inside joke since I was a kid, a jab at the fact that the snow leopards hadn’t wanted to help when they found out I couldn’t shift. After another meltdown involving my claws and some unsuspecting curtains, our neighbor had approached my parents about me. She just happened to be a tiger shifter.

The Wall had still been active back then, but since she was a shifter herself, Mrs. Khan had seen right through whatever The Wall did to explain away the incidents. She’d helped me get in control of my angry murder mittens.

“You don’t need to be a snow leopard,” Mom had said. “You can be our tiger, Lily.” And the nickname had stuck.

On the screen, Dad cleared his throat. “I do want to speak to this Gunnar guy, though.”

Oh boy. “Dad, he’s doing me a favor.”

“That’s very nice of him, but I still want to talk to him before he does you this favor.”

“Fine,” I sighed.

“I’ll bring you over to him,” Tansy said. She left with the tablet, disappearing

through the door.

“Let’s get these finishing touches done,” Iris said.

I looked around. “I thought we were done with the flowers.”

“What? No! You still need your bouquet.”

CHAPTER 13

GUNNAR



I WIPED MY HANDS on my specially tailored pants again. They weren't actually sweating, since I was in my gargoyle form, and we didn't get such inconvenient human things as sweaty palms when we were nervous. But I *was* nervous, and it was making me fidgety.

Not in a something's-going-to-go-wrong kind of way, but in a something-big-is-happening way. I reminded myself that this marriage wasn't real, just a temporary scheme to get The White Claws off Lillian's back, but that didn't help. If anything, it made it worse.

"You're going to rip your pants if you keep doing that," Grayson said. "And don't expect my wife to patch them for you five minutes before the wedding. It's not going to happen."

Shit. Was I doing it again?

All my pants were specially tailored so that my tail could move freely behind me, but I only had a few pairs for special occasions. Formal events weren't usually my thing, though I did go to the yearly Monsters & Magic Charity Gala and the Darlington Christmas Monster Bash. Technically, it was a Monster Ball, but most of us called it the Monster Bash for fun. Honestly, I only did it because Redrock Protective Services was expected to put in an appearance.

“Don't tell me you're getting cold feet. I get it: you have your reputation as the bad-boy brother who's never going to get tied down to keep up. But this is only temporary. And she signed the prenup, so she won't be able to take half of what you have at the end. I don't get the impression that Lillian is like that model anyway—what was her name?”

“Steph.” I wished I could forget her name.

“Right, Steph. I don't think Lillian is anything like her and is just doing this to get at your money.”

“I know she isn't. Because she didn't even know who I was when all this started. She thought I was a regular security guard, like a mall cop.” I couldn't believe that was only two days ago. Well, one and a half, if I wanted to be picky. I shouldn't have any feelings at all for her, not yet.

Grayson laughed. “Really? Mall cop? I don't think they make those silly uniforms in our size. Anyway, your assets are safe. Our lawyer has your back.”

Was this seriously what my brother thought was making me nervous? It wasn't.

“What... What if I'm not sure I want this to be temporary?” I said slowly.

Desmon, of course, decided now was the perfect time to join us. “You're not?”

Since he did come to my aid, agreeing to do this ceremony with almost no notice, I figured I owed him an explanation.

“No, I’m not. I’ve been attracted to her from the get-go. I want to get to know her, date her, and do all the things normal couples do. But because of all this, I’m afraid she’ll never see me as anything more than a fake husband. I know we’ve only just met, but something inside me tells me she’s important.”

Grayson and Desmon exchanged a look, and I wondered if I’d overshared. I was close with my brothers; it was hard not to be when we’d known each other for centuries, but I didn’t talk to them about women. Then again, that was mostly because I didn’t remember many of them. My usual pattern was to go into every dalliance knowing full well that it would be nothing more than a fling.

This felt...different.

“When I first met Shelby,” Grayson said, “I couldn’t leave her alone. Sure, I thought she was only there to crash your wedding, Desmon. But even after I found out that she really did have the fireproof cloak for your ceremony, I couldn’t leave her alone. I was devastated when she snuck away while I was busy apprehending those damned photographers.”

I remembered. “Didn’t Eamon say that you considered showing up at the address on the dress box just to see her?”

“Yeah, I totally considered it. I was about to go full stalker mode. Remind me to thank those wizards at the WEC for giving me an excuse to spend time with her.”

WEC stood for the Wizard’s Elder Council, a group of uptight old wizards who hated that The Wall coming down meant they could no longer hide their magical meddling with politicians and corporations. They’d kidnapped Shelby for her untapped magic.

But Shelby had ended up being Grayson's mate; of course it would make sense that Grayson had been smitten from the beginning. Could Lillian be—
“It was the same with Carly,” Desmon said, interrupting my thoughts. “I knew she was special the moment I saw her in my museum. She was giving a tour to a bunch of sixth graders and keeping them entertained with descriptions of all the bloody battles each of the weapons had been used in. It was the first time I'd seen kids not bored to death at my museum. The teacher was less impressed.”

Like all dragons, Desmon had a giant hoard. Most of it was hidden away from the public, accessible only to him and his mate. But he'd decided to open the Darlington Museum and put part of the collection on display. Despite how priceless some of the artifacts were, I was sure none of the museum pieces were actually important to him.

Desmon had built and owned many of the larger establishments here in Darlington, and had offered sanctuary for any monster or magical creature that needed it here. In the early days he had been the only one funding the town, though it hadn't been purely out of the kindness of his heart. Darlington was built next to a gold mine.

That mine was now empty, its contents part of Desmon's hoard. But even after the mine was gone, the creatures stayed, becoming a hidden, thriving community of monsters and magic.

The door opened, and Tansy waltzed in, brandishing a tablet in front of her. She shoved it into my face, declaring, “Here's the lucky groom now!”

I took the tablet from her as she swished back out the door. On it was a human couple that I would've thought were Lillian's biological parents if I hadn't known she was adopted. They looked taken aback for a moment, and I

remembered I wasn't wearing my glamour. Then the man schooled his features and spoke.

"So, you're the one marrying my Tiger Lily." The screen panned to focus on just him.

Tiger Lily? Cute.

"Yes, sir."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I looked you up. Gunnar Redrock. You look different."

"I was in glamour in those photos, sir. I usually wear it when I'm out in public. We've decided to do the wedding in my natural form."

"I see. And what about the rumors about you and this model?"

Grayson groaned, and Desmon pressed his lips into a thin line, trying to remain calm.

"Just that," I answered. "A rumor and nothing more. Lillian has already grilled me on that. The kid is a bear shifter, and the rightful father is fighting for full custody."

"Alright, fine. I know you're doing this to help our Lily, so thank you. But I don't care if it is just to fool those stuck-up snow leopards. If you break her heart, I won't care if you're a gargoyle; I know kung fu."

There was a cackle from just off-screen from his wife. "Tai chi is not kung fu, honey."

Something blocked the camera. "Whatever, same thing!"

"What are you going to do? Slow motion him to death?" his wife asked.

"You're supposed to back me up, woman."

There was even more laughing. "Okay, I'll get the cast iron frying pan. That will do more damage."

"Fine, fine. You might be right."

Desmon made a small strangled sound like he was trying not to laugh. I grinned. Lillian's parents really did care about her. I was glad she was raised in such a fun and loving household.

"You don't have to worry about me breaking her heart, sir," I said as Lillian's father took his hand off the camera, deciding not to burst his bubble and tell him that blocking the camera did not also block the sound. "Honestly, I'm more worried about her breaking mine." And I knew it was true even as I said it. What happened when Lillian didn't need me anymore? "When The White Claws are no longer a threat, I wish to start at the beginning with Lillian and date her properly."

Her dad held his hand up. "If you're about to ask for my approval, don't. I won't give it. And you don't want it, anyway."

"Why not?"

Lillian's mom poked her head into the frame. "Because our Tiger Lily has never done anything we wanted her to do. Ever."

"That's right," her dad agreed. "You want us to *forbid* her to see you after this is all over and done with. Then you won't be able to get rid of her. She'll be stuck to you like glue."

Desmon cleared his throat. "Maybe it would be best if we just let the relationship take its natural course?"

"Oh! You're the dragon. I saw you on the internet," Lillian's mom said. "Wow, honey, we're talking to a dragon."

Just then, Tansy walked back in. "Okay, chop chop, everyone, we need to get this show on the road. Seth just took down two drones those idiot photographers tried to send into the courtyard. They're in your garden shed, by the way, Desmon."

Seth was Tansy's long-lost but recently-found brother. Well, technically,

Tansy had been the lost one. Seth and his demon partner, Liam, were responsible for many of the wards set up around the dragon's abode. Seth was particularly strong because he dabbled both in wizardry and witchcraft, two disciplines that rarely met in the middle.

Tansy took the tablet from me. "Lillian's all ready. The stage is yours...and yours." She looked first at me, then at Desmon.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and marched out into the courtyard. The place was decorated with more flowers than you could shake a stick at. Iris must have had a blast. The green witch sat with Shelby on one side of her and her husband Alex on the other. Grayson went to take the seat next to his mate.

Desmon and I continued to the arch they had set up in front of the fountain. The arch was also covered in greenery and blooms. The music started, and Lillian walked out from behind a set of curtains.

She was ravishingly gorgeous. It knocked all the air right out of me. I swallowed hard, not believing how perfect she looked, like something straight out of my dreams. Her dress, which hugged her upper body and showed off her beautiful curves, flared out like a fish tail behind her.

But it was the look on her face when she caught sight of me that really took my breath away. That radiant smile was genuine, and her eyes shone with excitement for the future, for our future.

This image would be indelibly etched into my mind for the rest of my life, and I knew that I had to do everything in my power to keep her forever. No other woman could ever come close to replacing her, ever, nor would I want them to. Lillian was it.

Holy fuck. This was it: the moment monsters waited for their whole lives. I'd found my mate.

I'd always had doubts about the mate phenomenon. Like, who could possibly fall in love that fast? Insta-love wasn't realistic. Everyone must have been exaggerating.

But here I was, eating my fucking words, because there she was, standing in front of me, everything I never knew I wanted.

Desmon stopped talking and everyone's eyes were on me expectantly. Shit. I'd been so transfixed on Lillian that I hadn't been paying attention. I was supposed to repeat what he had just said. He took pity on me and said the lines again. I repeated after him, finally ending with, "I do."

Now it was her turn, and as she repeated the same words back to me, my eyes couldn't leave hers. It was as if they were held prisoner by some unseen force. I wondered if she'd cast some magical spell on me after all.

My eyes moved down to her beautiful lips as she pronounced her final words. "I do."

I looked around in confusion for the ring bearer, realizing I had no idea who they'd chosen for the job. I'd trusted my brothers and their mates to get all the details together. I gawked when Tansy stepped up with Nugget perched on her arm, a little box strapped to her back. She did not look too happy, and I wondered if it was only the glare of a dragon that was stopping her from flying off with the precious jewelry.

We retrieved the rings, relieving Nugget of her burden, and exchanged them.

"...I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

I pulled her close, and when our lips touched, the room exploded in applause, reminding me that we were not alone. Supporting her back with my arm, I cupped her cheek and angled my body to shield her from the sight of the others so I could steal a deeper kiss, just briefly, earning me a soft hum before releasing her.

“Ready to make a grand getaway, Mrs. Redrock?”

CHAPTER 14

LILLIAN



I COULDN'T STOP THE excited giggle that escaped my lips as we sped away from the paparazzi who had gathered just outside the dragon's private property. I wondered if Gunnar's connections in the EA also extended to the human police force, or if we were going to get pulled over. Imagine the field day the tabloids would have with that!

"So... I know the plan was to head back to the penthouse, but did you want to play hooky?" Gunnar asked as we peeled away.

"With my brand-new husband? Of course I do. Where did you have in mind?"

"I have a second home in the country."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. It’s just a cottage. Sometimes I go there when the city becomes too much. It should be beautiful now with all the leaves turning colors.”

“Won’t this car be super easy to spot, though?” The bright green Hellcat was decked out in streamers, a *Just Married* sign, and had cans jangling at the back, but even if we removed all that, his beast of a car would certainly draw a pile of attention.

When we’d first gotten into the car, I’d wondered how he managed to sit in a car and drive with his tail until I realized the vehicle had special custom-made seats. I guess the Urus did too, but I just hadn’t noticed because I had other stuff on my mind.

“Anyone who’s looking for us is behind us, Kitten. And once we leave the city, it won’t matter how flashy the car is because there’s no one out there to see it.”

“But what if they follow us with drones?” I asked.

He grinned, looking like the cat who caught the canary. “They already tried to use those to film the wedding inside the courtyard. They’re all currently disabled and sitting in Desmon’s shed. The only drones in the air now are ours.”

They’d leaked the wedding details on purpose to a few select independent media outlets and photographers; the goal was to make sure they caught a few photos of us hand-in-hand as we left the dragon’s abode. The magical sparkles they’d thrown over us in lieu of rice—and no, it wasn’t because rice made birds explode, that was an urban legend—had ensured Gunnar and I both looked fabulous in every single photo and that they were taken from our best angles.

“Yes! Let’s go. It’ll be an impromptu mini honeymoon.”

“One mini honeymoon coming right up. When this is over, I’ll take you

somewhere nicer than my cottage for a proper one.” Gunnar’s eyes darted to the rearview mirror, and he let out a grumble. “We have a tail. No. Two tails.” After a quick check of the map, he said, “Hang on tight, Kitten.”

That was the only warning I got before he floored the Hellcat through the intersection, making the end of the yellow light *just* in time, and curved onto the highway on-ramp. I gasped at the thrill the quick acceleration shot through me, and held my breath as we leaned into the turn. The scary rumble of his car rattled through me, almost but not quite drowning out the pounding of my heart.

We wove through the traffic, Gunnar controlling his vehicle like it was an extension of his body. When we’d put enough space between us and the two cars following us, he slowed so that we were keeping pace with the surrounding traffic.

“You okay over there?” He put a hand on my knee.

I nodded and managed a high-pitched squeak. “Yup.”

“Baby, call Eamon.”

I frowned. “I don’t have his—”

“Calling Eamon,” the front dash of his car said in a dulcet yet slightly robotic female voice.

I narrowed my eyes and turned to him accusingly. “*Baby?* You call your car *Baby?*”

“Aww, Kitten, you’re not upset, are you? I was a bachelor for a long time...”

Before I could reply, Eamon answered. “What’s up?”

“Slight change of plans. Heading over to my cottage. Didn’t want you guys to worry.”

“Gotcha. Thanks for that. And congratulations again.” He hung up.

“I can change her name if you want.”

It took me a moment to realize we were back to talking about the car. I thought about it. “Nah, it’s fine. I don’t need to be your Baby when I’m already your Kitten.”

That seemed to please Gunnar just fine.

Once we were beyond the city limits, he stopped on a side street to remove the gaudy decorations from the car. He handed me a duffle bag.

“As much as I’d love to tear that dress off you later, I thought you might want to change into something more comfortable for the drive.”

“Yeah, I’d like to. Thanks.” I looked inside and found several changes of clothes as well as my toothbrush. “Hey... You planned this.”

“Everyone knows the Redrock brothers live in that building. Once news gets out, The White Claws will come knocking. But few know about my cottage. It’ll give us a bit more time before we have to face them. If they want to see us, they will have to agree to my terms.”

I nodded. I’d take all the extra time I could get, especially if I got to spend it with my sexy new husband. *My husband*. What a weird feeling!

I didn’t love him. I mean, I’d only just met him, and I wasn’t some hopeless romantic who believed in love at first sight. But what about love at first touch? First fuck? Or first...foot massage? That was a thing, right?

I quickly changed into a thin sweater dress, perfect for the fall weather, and my brown leather mid-calf boots, the ones with the brass buckles, which was the only pair of footwear he’d packed. The rest of the way to his country hideaway was smooth sailing until we got to a winding road that twisted and turned as it hugged the curves of a lake.

“This is my favorite part of the drive. Baby, check for oncoming traffic.”

I went to crane my neck around but stopped when I remembered that Baby was his Hellcat. Hmm, maybe he did need to find another name for it.

He slowed down for the approaching curve, and the screen on the console flashed a map of the area. There were two icons that represented other cars, but they were pretty far away.

“Perfect! Hang on, Kitten, and lean right back on the headrest.”

He had the sexiest grin on his face when the car growled, sped up, and took the first turn aggressively. I let out a small involuntary squeak of sudden fear which turned quickly into exhilaration when, after slowing down for just a second, he sped up again at the next turn.

My eyes flickered to the speedometer, and I was surprised to see that we were actually going slower than we had been earlier on the straightaway. It was the curves that made it feel so fast.

“Don’t be nervous. I’ve driven these roads thousands of times. And I’m going light on the pedal,” Gunnar said when we were on another short straightaway.

“*That* was light on the pedal?” I asked incredulously.

“What did you expect? You’ve just married the bad boy Redrock. I’ve done the calculations. My car can take these turns safely at four times the recommended speed. I promise you, you’re safe.” He reached over and squeezed my knee. “I’d never do anything that might put you in danger. There are some more curves ahead—do you trust me?”

Did I? The car had been in perfect control the whole time, and he’d checked to make sure there was no one on the road but us.

“Hell yes! Let ’er rip!”

The smile Gunnar shot me was one I’d remember forever. This time, as we leaned into the turn, a thrilled giggle bubbled up from my belly. Now that I was more aware of my surroundings, I saw how his body and the car

appeared to move as one. Every turn of the wheel and press of the pedal... It was as if he was the one speeding around the curves.

It was totally sexy. Something I never thought would turn me on. Okay, so the thrill of it all helped. I pressed my legs together as we rounded the last curve, and he sped up to meet the straightaway's speed limit.

"You liked that," he said with a satisfied lick of his lips. "Did you know gargoyles have a good sense of smell? Not as good as a cat shifter, but your arousal is driving me insane."

"I wouldn't know anything about a cat shifter's sense of smell. When I say I can only make mittens, I mean it. So tell me, husband, how *do* I smell?"

"Delicious," he growled. "Do you know why I chose this dress?"

"Why?"

His voice growled even deeper. "Easy access." He reached over and slid his right hand up my thigh and under my skirt. "Lean back and open your legs, Kitten. Be a good girl for me."

I shuddered. Holy shit, if he put it like that, I'd do anything he asked. I leaned back in the seat and spread my knees, moaning as he slipped a finger into my underwear. I arched my back when he teased a fingertip along my slit.

He kept his left hand on the wheel, taking the gentle curve leisurely.

"Fuck, you're so wet for me already." He played in my folds before moving up to find my clit.

My face turned bright red, even though I wasn't particularly shy. It was more the adrenaline rush of being pleased while he drove.

"Aren't you supposed to keep your attention on the road?" I panted as he played with the sensitive nub.

"I am." Gunnar shifted in his seat, adjusting himself as he continued to rub my clit. Despite this being a big car, there really wasn't a lot of room for such

a big guy. And it was hard to miss the giant erection tenting his pants.

He explored lower, dipping his finger into my wet heat, and groaned as if he was the one being tortured by deft fingers, not me. He thrust in a few times, and I closed my eyes, pressing my lips together.

I could feel the tide rising fast, my body primed by the thrill and excitement of racing around the bends. All it took was another finger pressing in, filling me, and the pulsing started in my pussy before radiating out to my belly. I let out a small cry as pleasure flooded me.

It was good, but not mind-blowing like the orgasms he'd given me last night. Then again, he was still driving. When he pulled away, I made a mewl of protest. I was greedy and wanted more. So much more.

He grinned as he licked his finger clean before turning off the road. We were here. I straightened my clothes and looked around curiously as he drove down the long driveway. There were trees on either side, giving the property plenty of privacy. The gorgeous fall-colored leaves arched over and around us. He parked in a deceptively rustic-looking garage, which actually had all sorts of modern features.

“Stay right there.” He got out, came around the front of the car, and opened my door for me, helping me out. “Don't worry, Kitten,” he whispered into my ear. “We'll finish what we started later. I won't be happy until you're hoarse from screaming my name as you come.”

I let out a shaky breath, wondering how I was going to be able to survive the weekend with my feelings intact. I'd always had difficulty separating sex from love.

Nestled in a secluded spot by a lake, the cottage was the opposite of the hustle and bustle of the city we'd just left. It had an old-fashioned thatched roof, stone walls, and a whimsical design that made it look like something

straight out of a fairytale. The garden was a bit unkempt, and the flowers and trees looked eager to reclaim the stone path that led to the door.

“Sorry. I thought a front yard of native wildflowers would be a good idea, but it kind of...took over.” Gunnar smiled ruefully.

“I think it’s wonderful. It could use a bit of taming, but I love things kind of wild like this.” It reminded me of how crazy and out of control my apartment had gotten before I implemented my strict one-in, one-out rule for my plants. At the side of the house was a glass and metal greenhouse. It looked like it had fallen into disuse.

“Is that still intact?” I asked. Because, of course, my brain immediately went to all the plants I could grow in there.

“It should be. Honestly, I haven’t taken care of this place well. But I think it’s still good, and even if it’s not, any broken panes should be easy enough to replace. The previous owner said her late husband had put a drip system in there. She showed me a bunch of hoses buried just below the surface. I don’t know how it works, but you might. If not, we can figure it out together.”

“That would be amazing! A drip system means we could be at the penthouse most of the time, and the plants would still be happy.” Then I caught myself. “I’m talking like I’m going to be living here and at the penthouse long term. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Who knows, you might be stuck with me for longer than you think. I’m pretty sure The White Claws aren’t going to just take one look at a marriage certificate and give up on you. They are going to be watching us closely. But that’s okay. I don’t mind having you around. At all. I... I like you, Lillian. A lot.”

I searched his mesmerizing green-gray eyes but couldn’t find any deception in them. “I like you, too. Even if I didn’t have The White Claws after me, I’d

still totally have hit on you at the bar.”

“When this is all over, let’s stay together and keep pretending until it’s real. Agreed?” Wow, he looked so serious.

I nodded. “That sounds perfect.”

He cupped my face and leaned in to kiss my forehead before taking the duffle bag in one hand and my fingers in the other. “Come on, let me show you inside.”

We were about to walk into the quaint cottage when he paused. “Oh—I almost forgot.” He handed the duffle back to me, opened the door, then bent down to pick me up.

I let out a small squeal, not expecting it.

Then, with me cradled in his arms, he carried me over the threshold.

CHAPTER 15

GUNNAR



I FLIPPED THE GRILLED cheese sandwich and silently cheered at the perfectly golden brown perfection that greet me. Lillian and I had both skipped breakfast to get the wedding done by noon, and I'd heard her stomach growling as I carried her through the door.

She was still exactly where I'd set her down on the couch: the only difference was, she'd kicked off those cute boots and fallen fast asleep. She must be exhausted after the busy morning we'd had, running around on nothing but coffee. Good coffee from her stash, but still. She must be hungry too. I was.

As much as I wanted to rush into pleasuring my new wife, I also knew we had plenty of time. Especially since the first place The White Claws would look would be the penthouse. Not that they'd get up there.

I was glad I'd left the inside of the cottage relatively tidy compared to the disaster that was the grounds. I didn't come here too often, but I'd been here just last week to get away from how revoltingly sweet all the couples were. Once again Graham had been working, and I hadn't wanted to be a seventh wheel. So, I'd escaped here.

Now that I thought about it, Graham had been taking on many of the smaller gigs we would usually allocate to the other agents on our roster. Maybe this whole thing about not wanting a mate was a front, and he was working all the time so he didn't have to spend his evenings alone dwelling on the past.

His failed relationship with Julia was literally decades ago. Surely, that was time enough for him to get over her. But maybe not. We all knew better than to push him when it came to women.

Because of my recent visit to the cottage, I had all the fixings on hand to make a mean grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup lunch. There were tons of options in the freezer for dinner as well. Unlike Eamon, I never got good at cooking, but I became an absolute pro at ordering in and popping premade meals into the oven.

I plated the sandwiches, cut diagonally into triangles—because cutting them into squares was blasphemy to me, I mean, really, what psychopath would do that to an innocent grilled cheese—ladled the soup into bowls, and brought the tray over to the coffee table.

Lillian was already stretching and yawning awake when I got there, making room for me to sit.

“Thanks, Gunnar. This looks great.”

We ran into a size difference problem right away. If the table was far enough from the couch for me to eat comfortably, it was a stretch for her. And if she could reach her food properly, the table was right up against my shins.

“Any rules about the cushions not being allowed to touch the rug?” she asked.

“Nope. I don’t generally have any house rules.”

She pushed the table out so it was at a comfortable distance for me, put a cushion on the floor next to me, and sat on it. “There! Hmm, no rules, eh? So, I can do...*this*?” She lifted her foot in a show of athleticism and rested her heel on the corner of the coffee table, far from our food.

I frowned. Her butt was on the cushion on the floor, and her toes must be at least at her shoulder height. “How is that possibly comfortable? Wait, are those frog socks?” I hadn’t actually looked at the socks too carefully when I’d stuffed them into the bag.

She took her foot off the table and crossed her legs under her. “It’s not comfortable at all. I was just testing your no-rules thing. And yes. Those are frog socks. I love frogs. A frog named Pickle was my first pet.”

“You had a frog as a pet? Are you positive you’re not part witch?” I bit into my sandwich, savoring the perfect combination of real aged cheddar and American cheese. Nothing quite got ooey gooey in grilled cheese like the processed stuff. It was a vice I planned on keeping forever.

“Actually, Iris thinks I’m a green witch, and that’s why my plants are so happy. I’m not sure if I actually do anything special with them, except hope they survive and thrive, but I’ll take it.”

Interesting. She had magic?

“The girls told me that gargoyles tend to be attracted to women with a bit of magic,” she said, looking a little askance at me as she chewed.

“I guess it could be true. I never tested that theory before.” Before she could ask me about my previous conquests I asked her my own question. “What’s this about a pet frog?”

“Two of them! Pickle and Poopmachine! I caught them as tadpoles at the park near my house when I was eight.”

“Poopmachine?” I said with a chuckle.

“Yes. And before you ask, yes, I named them myself. I know, I know. Hey, I was eight. But it did poop a lot.”

“So why was the other one named Pickle?”

“We brought them home in pickle jars. Duh! Anyway, Mom’s a high school biology teacher, and she thought it was the perfect opportunity to teach me about amphibians. So we brought them home and watched Pickle grow his little legs, and little arms. Then he absorbed his tail. I thought it was the coolest thing.”

As she spoke, her eyes lit up with the memories, and the air around her seemed to shimmer. Maybe she did have magic, and talking about these happy memories with the creatures and plants of the Earth brought it out.

“Do you know what was the first thing Pickle did as a frog?”

“No, what?”

“He ate Poopmachine.”

That was not what I’d expected. I guffawed in surprise. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh. That’s horrible.”

She shook her head, taking a big bite of sandwich. “Not at all. That’s just nature,” she said around the mouthful. After swallowing, she said, “Pickle was a bullfrog, and they’re freaking strong. I had him in a tank, and he learned he could strong-arm that lid right off. We had to start keeping a heavy textbook on it after Dad found him in his shoe one morning.” Her eyes grew fond. “Pickle was my gateway frog.”

“You had others?” She was so animated talking about this I didn’t ever want her to stop.

“Oh yes, I also had two White’s tree frogs named Bean and Poko. But in the end, I couldn’t handle having to raise the crickets to feed them. I’m terrified of bugs. I devised this contraption with a paper towel tube, Saran wrap, and an elastic so I could pick them up and toss them in with the frogs before they could get loose. Even using tweezers was too close for me. Then one night there was a jailbreak, and we woke up to crickets everywhere.”

I had been just about to ask if she wanted to take up keeping frogs again, but now I held my tongue. I wasn’t sure I wanted to deal with cricket jailbreaks.

She giggled. “The tiny bit of cat in me insisted I go chase after them. Which meant I’d chase one and smash it, but then freak out because it touched me. It was very confusing. Needless to say, that science project ended right then and there. We returned Pickle to his pond and found a collector for my two Whites. But the crickets serenaded us for months afterward from all the nooks and crannies of our house. We couldn’t actually find them, but we heard them.”

I grinned, imagining her as a kid trying to fight her feline nature while the human part of her freaked out over a smashed cricket. I’d always wondered how shifters dealt with their nonhuman side.

“I still think frogs are really cute, though,” she chattered on. “Did you know frogs swallow with their eyeballs? Seriously. They do this.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “When they push their eyeballs down, it forces the food into their stomach.” Then her face turned an adorable shade of pink. “Oops. I’m sorry. I’m talking your ear off about frogs, aren’t I?”

“I don’t mind. Because no, I didn’t know frogs swallowed with their eyeballs. That’s cool.” I liked learning more about her, and I loved that she got so passionate about something like frogs. “There are tons of frogs out on the

stiller shallows of the lake. You can hear them calling all summer long. We'll sit out there next spring and listen to them. Maybe catch a few."

She grinned. "I'm holding you to that."

As we loaded our dishes into the dishwasher—yes, I had one here—we got a call from Shelby, who was monitoring social media and gossip magazine websites for any mention of my name.

"It's already starting," she giggled gleefully. "There's the article we leaked about you two secretly dating but suddenly needing a rush wedding to stop some mysterious snow leopard shifter organization from taking her away. But there's also a photo of you two sharing a tender moment at a café. And videos of you getting into your car and driving off after the wedding. Oh, and someone went and interviewed the sales lady at the jewelry store who says, and I quote, 'Gunnar isn't anything like I thought he'd be. He's absolutely in love with her and so sweet. They're super cute together, and I hope they come back for their anniversary bands.'"

I chuckled. Of course she would. Mindy was on commission.

"So it's working," Lillian said. "What about The White Claws? Any talk there?"

"We didn't mention them by name on purpose," Shelby explained. "But there's a lot of speculation on who it might be. We're waiting for them to show up here at the building to leak that part. You know, feed it to the public one tantalizing tidbit at a time. Keep that buzz up."

"I'm glad one of us knows how this stuff works," Lillian muttered.

"Oh, it's not me. I did my part posting about your *gown fitting*, along with photos from the wedding, and I commented on and reshared any photos or posts about the two of you I came across. But it's mostly our contacts at the

EA doing this. Apparently, some of them owe Eamon favors. And others are just bored. This is a lot more fun than their usual paperwork.”

“You can say that again,” I said darkly. Filling out paperwork for the EA was one of the least favorite things in my life and one of the reasons I avoided taking on any bodyguarding jobs for them.

“Anyway, I’ll let you guys go, but I’ll keep you updated. Enjoy your time at the cottage!”

CHAPTER 16

LILLIAN



I STARED INTO GUNNAR’S freezer, amazed at the giant selection of meals he had ready to go. When he’d told me he had a lot of freezer meals, I’d expected the ones you’d get from the supermarket. You know, where *ground beef* actually meant textured soy protein with a smidgen of beef flavoring, and *chicken* was mechanically separated poultry product.

Instead, rows and rows of neatly arranged meals in uniform foil trays, clearly homemade, stared back at me from the chest freezer. One stack was labeled *High Protein*, and the other was labeled *Comfort Food*. There was even a stack of pies, cakes, and other desserts.

“So, this is where you spend your extra income,” I teased.

“Yeah. It’s hard to get delivery all the way out here,” Gunnar said from behind me.

“Right. Well, I love to eat, but I don’t particularly like to cook, so that’s fine by me. I do like to bake, though,” I admitted. Then I giggled. “Spending your money on gourmet freezer meals made by a personal chef is a whole lot better than spending it on drugs and whores.”

“Haha, yeah...”

I twisted around and leveled a devastating look at him. “Explain,” I said, crossing my arms.

“No whores, I promise,” he said immediately. “That wasn’t something I wanted or needed. Not to mention, The Wall could only do so much to hide what I was doing, so I had to be careful who I spent time with.”

Grr. I bet he’d had plenty of non-human women to keep him company. I tried to shove the green-eyed monster back down where it had suddenly come from. I had no right to be upset at his playboy ways from before he met me. But what about any drug habits that might linger?

“Keep talking,” I said.

He shrugged. “Let’s just say I’ve been to parties where you’d swear Tony Montana himself was there. It takes a hell of a lot of the white stuff to have any effect on a gargoyle. But that was during our party days, before we opened Redrock.”

I relaxed. “Okay, that’s fine. I’m no prude. As long as it’s not a habit.”

“Not a habit. It only shows up occasionally at parties when we’re schmoozing with the rich and famous.”

“That’s fine. I went through a wild phase when I was younger, too,” I admitted.

I looked down at the selection of meals. We’d had Beef Stroganoff yesterday for dinner, with tender egg noodles, strips of perfectly seasoned beef, garlic,

onions, mushrooms, and peas finished with sour cream, so I wanted something lighter today. I picked up the one marked Maple Salmon.

According to the sticker, it was “wild Sockeye salmon, marinated in an aromatic orange and maple sauce, with seasonal vegetables and a fluffy rice pilaf”. It was also labeled high-protein and healthy. That sounded perfect.

“Tell me more about your party days,” I said as I got ready to put the meal in the oven following the directions on the label.

“My brothers and I started life under the control of a wizard. Not a nice guy. We guarded his abode without him giving us anything in return. He ended up pissing a lot of people off, including a very powerful witch. She freed us from our bonds when she killed him. The wizard had no heir, and the witch had no want for riches herself, so we took everything we could when we left. It was our first taste of freedom, and my brothers and I reveled in it. We were like kids in a candy store, suddenly having all these choices in life.

“Eventually, we were hired by another wizard to protect his estate. By then, we’d learned not to spend everything all at once. That’s also where we met Eamon. He’d been ensorcelled too, much like we had been before. But that’s his story to tell.”

We walked over to the couch and sat down; we had a whole hour before the meal was ready.

“I guess it’s the gargoyle equivalent of going wild in college,” I said.

“Humm, yeah. Let’s just say lots of witches wanted to say they had bedded a gargoyle.”

There was that stab of jealousy again, until I saw the hurt on his face.

“But a quick thrill was all I was good for until my brothers and I had finally put away enough in savings for the interest to really start building. Compound interest is a hell of a thing.”

He didn't need to say anymore; I understood. They went from not wanting him at all to wanting him for the wrong reason.

"I earned the bad-boy moniker because after The Wall fell, I went back out there, trying my luck again. But with the new technology—cameras on every cell phone, social media, all that—I ran into problems I'd never had before."

"Like that model?"

"Exactly."

"I guess you'd missed it? The partying?"

"No."

"Then why go back out there?"

For a moment, he didn't reply, and I wondered if I should just drop it. Then he said, "I was looking for someone special. But I guess I was looking in the wrong places. I have my brothers, but..." He shrugged.

Oh, my heart. That was so...*human*. "You didn't want to be alone."

"No. But I'm not now. I have you. I want every party to be a private one with you."

I grinned. "Ooh, smooth." I knew he'd just said that to be cheesy, but it still made my cheeks glow and my tummy flutter.

He waggled his brows. "Still got it."

He pulled me over and kissed me affectionately on the forehead, then continued to cuddle me in his huge arms.

Whatever awkwardness there had been when we first stepped foot in this cabin was gone, and I was sure we'd fool anyone that we were indeed a real couple. Even me.

Sure, I didn't have the hills and valleys of his washboard abs memorized yet, but give it some time, and I would. This kiss felt natural. And nobody with eyes could say we didn't have passion.

If Gunnar told The White Claws that he'd search for me if they ever took me, and mete out his own form of justice when he found me, they'd believe him. Especially if they saw us now, lazing on the couch, his tail wrapped around my ankle like he needed to be touching me at all times.

That was how I'd woken up this morning too, after a night of bliss. This morning we'd taken his boat out onto the lake, and he'd given me a tour of the area by water. We'd even joined the nautical version of the mile-high club by the end of it. Then we'd come back for a late lunch before going for a walk in the woods as he showed me the most beautiful places in the area. I almost forgot the strange way our relationship started.

I was so happy that he'd been the one to suggest we continue seeing each other after all this was done. Technically, we wouldn't even need to divorce unless the real relationship proved to be a failure later. I marveled again at how backward our relationship had been so far: it had started with a drunken proposal, then continued with waking up in his bed, the spilling of secrets, mind-blowing sex, and then a wedding. We were finally on to the dating part now.

But somehow, it worked.

Again with an hour to kill before our dinner was ready, we went back to bed to relax. Gunnar was a cuddler. He'd told me earlier he was happy to lie around doing nothing but cuddle...well, and fuck me in between the cuddles...all day long. I didn't believe it at first, but I did now. This was the best doing nothing I'd ever known.

Right now, though, I wanted the fucking part of doing nothing. It was hard not to when I had such a virile male specimen at my disposal. There was just so *much* of him! His hands were massive and strong, his shoulders impossibly wide, his biceps were as thick as tree branches. And every inch of

him was covered in bulging muscles. He was so strong I bet he could snap me in half without even trying.

But he wouldn't, I knew that. I'd never felt so safe in anyone's arms before. He might look like stone, but he radiated heat. When he cradled me in his lap, I relished how his body completely engulfed mine. I never knew I had a kink for size difference before, but I clearly did—and was loving every moment of it.

I tossed my leg over his hips to straddle him and I flattened myself against his broad chest, trying to touch all him at once. His cock hardened between our bodies.

“Lillian...” He said my name in a warning tone. “Keep this up and I'm going to be fucking you again.”

CHAPTER 17

GUNNAR



LILLIAN SHOT ME A playful grin and stretched up to drag her little teeth across my jaw. “Is that a promise? Because we have a whole hour to kill before dinner’s ready.”

My wife didn’t need to ask me twice. I was on her in an instant, pushing her back onto the bed. She was demanding and greedy when it came to sex, and I loved it. If this was pretending, then I wanted to pretend forever. I never wanted this to end.

With her in my arms, I finally felt like I had something that was mine. All mine.

Exposed to the cool air, her nipples stiffened into little buds, and I couldn’t help but brush my thumb over one. I crawled over her and took it into my mouth, lapping the tight bud with my tongue. I licked my way over to the

other side and did the same thing to the other one, then lifted my head to admire my work.

I made my way down her body, licking, kissing, and nibbling a trail to her belly. It was so soft and round compared to my chiseled abs, the ultimate in femininity.

Her hands tangled in my hair, urging me lower.

“More, Gunnar. Please.”

I settled in between her knees. She smelled so good, and I hummed in appreciation before licking the length of her slit up to her clit. Lillian let out a shuddering sigh.

Covering her mound with my mouth, I suckled on her clit, rolling my tongue around the little nub before thrusting my tongue into her depths. Her flavor filled my head, obliterating any other thoughts. Her muscles clenched and fluttered around my tongue, trying to grip me. I thrust a few more times before replacing my tongue with two thick digits and moving my mouth to her clit again.

She made a sobbing sound and her fingers tightened in my hair. Her pussy pulsed around my fingers and her channel flooded them with fresh wetness.

I lifted my head to watch her as she writhed on the bed. I reached down with one hand to pump my cock, but I wasn't ready to fuck her yet. I hauled her up by the knees and shoved a pillow under her ass to get her in a better position, then circled the tiny rosebud that was her back hole with a wet finger. I pressed in slowly. Lillian immediately tensed up.

“Relax, Kitten. This is going to feel so good.”

With my finger still in her, I reached over to the bedside table, where I kept a bottle of oil that I used to slick my hands when I masturbated. Her natural

lubrication was enough for my finger, but it'd never be enough for my tail, or my cock.

I drizzled some onto her puckered little asshole, working it in with my fingers.

“You’re mine now. And that means I’m going to claim every part of you, even this. Did you think I was going to forget about it?”

Lillian whimpered and shook her head. Lust filled the air between us. Leaving her empty for a moment, I poured a generous amount of the oil into my palm, passed my tail between my legs to the front, and oiled up the tip.

“Do you regret this now, little cat? You’ve married a monster in more ways than one. I want to defile you. I want to hear your screams. I want to stuff you so full that you’ll never be able to think of anyone else again. You’ll be all mine. Would you like that?”

She nodded.

I grinned. She had no idea what she’d just agreed to.

“Say it out loud, Kitten. Tell me you’re all mine. And that I can do whatever I want with you.”

I poised my tail at her ass, and pressed in, feeling the tight ring squeezing me. She gasped and closed her eyes.

“Open your eyes,” I demanded. “Look at me.”

She did so, biting her lower lip.

“Now tell me you’re mine.” I pressed in a little more, watching her tiny hole stretch open to accommodate me.

“I’m yours, Gunnar,” she said breathily.

Yes! “Now beg me to do anything I want with you.” I pumped my tail a few times in and out of her.

Her eyes were round now as I went deeper, and my tail became thicker. She

tried to speak, but could only choke out a sob when I pressed my thumb to her clit.

“I didn’t hear you, Kitten.” I rubbed her clit in tight circles.

Her pussy was so soaked now, it was dribbling wetness down the crack of her ass to my tail.

“You don’t want me to stop, do you?”

“No,” she whined.

“Then tell me. Beg me to use you any way I want.”

The words were shaky and barely audible, but she said them. “Please, Gunnar. Please. Fuck me. Use me any way you want.”

CHAPTER 18

LILLIAN



THE DEVILISH CHUCKLE THAT rumbled in Gunnar's throat sent shivers through my body. I wondered if I'd just made a huge mistake, but I was so fucking turned on right now I really did want him to do anything and everything to me.

God! I never knew I had this in me. I was lying in a gargoyle's bed, with a tail in my ass, and begging for more. I'd tried anal before, but it hadn't been fun. This time, the pinch of pain was tempered with pleasure, and I found that I liked it. It made me crave something in my pussy at the same time.

For a moment, I had been embarrassed. But then Gunnar had said all those naughty words to me, and my desire had knocked away anything else.

Gunnar crawled up my body and braced himself on an elbow as he reached down between us to guide his cock to my pussy. I was sopping wet, and his

cock slid against my lips, missing the mark. On the plus side it rubbed against my clit instead, which was just as good.

I moaned and bucked my hips, making his tail sink in deeper. The tip of his tail was rounded and slim, but the farther up it went, the thicker it was.

“Don’t move, Kitten,” Gunnar murmured.

I stilled and he tried again, this time using his hand to keep the head of his cock from sliding up. He pressed it in. At first, I thought it was going to be impossible. The tip of the head barely went in before my body rebelled and pushed it out again.

He withdrew his tail a little, so that only the tip was in me. This time, the head of his cock slipped in.

“Fuck!” I gasped loudly, my nails digging into his bicep.

He was relentless. He pulled out an inch before thrusting back in, this time going almost all the way in. I screamed. Then he was fucking me using long, powerful strokes, and I could hardly breathe.

I gasped for air when he stopped. Then his tail was moving, pushing its way back into my ass.

“Oh my god.” It felt like I was going to burst at the seams. There was no way. I’d die if he moved.

But he did move, and I didn’t die. He pushed in his cock and pulled out his tail, then vice versa. It felt like he had to fight to move. My brain had short circuited and all I could do was hold on and feel.

“Fuck, yes,” he snarled. “Take me, Kitten. Take it all.”

He pressed into me again, and held his cock there as he filled me as much as he could with his tail. Then they moved together again, simultaneously in and out of me, making me cry out with blind pleasure. When he angled his body

so that his pelvis hit my clit with every thrust I kept screaming, though no actual sound came from my throat.

The orgasm that tore through me had no ending. Maybe it was several joined together, and my body was unable to determine where one ended and the other began. I wondered if they would ever stop, or if I was destined to climax until I expired from sheer exhaustion.

Gunnar rutted into me like a wild beast. Somehow, he seemed to grow even larger and harder than before. He snarled against my neck as he came, filling me to the brim with jets of warm cum. I held onto him, our bodies shaking together.

I wondered how he was not a sweaty mess, then thought—what a strange thing to think about at a time like this. Everything felt surreal, like I would never come back down to Earth. I gazed up at his gray-green eyes. Did he feel the same way?

He lowered himself just enough to kiss my forehead, then he collapsed next to me, and pulled me into his arms.

And cuddled me.

CHAPTER 19

GUNNAR



WE PLAYED HOUSE AT the cottage uninterrupted until Monday around noon, when we got a call from Grayson. Apparently, Lillian's phone, which she'd left with my brothers, had been blowing up all morning from several international numbers, as well as one local one.

We'd been having so much fun I'd forgotten today was the day they'd said they would come to take her away.

There'd been no reason for her to bring her phone. The only people she wanted to hear from could go through me for the time being. Even her parents had my phone number now. So she'd left it behind so my brothers could keep an eye on the callers.

"The local number belongs to a woman named Holly."

She frowned. “Why would Holly call me? I didn’t even know she had my number.”

“Who is she?”

“Former co-worker. We also went to college together. It’s strange she’d call. She never really talked to me unless it was to say something bitchy.”

“Well, she left a number where you could get back to her,” Grayson said.

“The others were from that rich dude The White Claws sent to retrieve you, the same guy the two thugs met up with after failing to find you at your apartment on Friday.”

“What’s this?” Lillian asked. “I never knew about a third guy.”

I described the stuffy looking guy in the expensive suit from the video feed.

“He was waiting in his Bentley out front.”

“A Bentley at my apartment building?” She sounded incredulous. “That’s not strange at all.”

“They probably had a look-away spell,” Grayson said.

“It fooled me,” I admitted. “I didn’t see it there myself at first, and walked right by it. I guess he’s calling for Lillian?”

“Weeell.” Grayson drew out the word. “Yes and no.”

“Why else would they call?” Lillian asked.

“You might want to open your laptop and check the feed from our private elevator up to the penthouse,” was Grayson’s cryptic answer.

I’d brought my laptop along but was hoping I wouldn’t actually need to use it. I’d planned on spending however long we had at the cottage doing nothing with Lillian. A whole lot of uninterrupted doing nothing. Which was what we’d done so far.

I powered on the laptop and pulled up the elevator feed. There were two men inside, looking peeved and pounding on the door.

“It’s them!” Lillian exclaimed over my shoulder. “Those were the two at my door before.”

“So Mr. Bentley Man is calling for you and his missing lackeys. I don’t know how they managed to enter the elevator and get it moving—I called down to Brandon and he swears he didn’t let them in—but it alerted us to the intrusion right away. We have them trapped in there for now.”

I doubted it was Brandon. He’d been working at the front desk for the last ten years and knew us well.

“Could they possibly have a copy of the keycard?” Even as I asked it, I knew they wouldn’t.

“Wait, what’s that device in his hand?” Lillian asked.

One of the guys was holding something to the elevator’s card reader, but nothing happened.

“They must have something that scrambles it,” Grayson said. “What should we do with them?”

“Anyone up at the penthouse?”

“Eamon and Tansy are out.”

“That’s perfect. *Officer Eamon*, can you kindly meet our new friends downstairs and confiscate that device? Tell them it’s illegal. I doubt they know our laws.”

“Um, but isn’t impersonating an officer a crime?” Lillian asked.

“What are they going to do?” I asked. “Tell the police they were breaking into an apartment when they were approached by a fake cop?”

Lillian chuckled. “Good point.”

“Eamon’s not going to be happy to cut their outing short,” Grayson said. “But that’s probably the best idea.”

“Wait. Eamon and Tansy don’t need to cut anything short. If no one needs to

use the elevator, then just lock them in there until Eamon and Tansy finish what they need to do. They can wait. That's what they get for trying this shit."

I grinned. "That's a wonderful idea."

"What about the guy calling?" Grayson asked. "He seems to be the one in charge."

"Set up a meeting with him tomorrow at noon at the office. We'll meet with him then."

I couldn't help but notice when Lillian stiffened next to me. I reached over and put a comforting hand on the small of her back.

"Got it," Grayson said before hanging up.

"You'll be fine," I murmured when it was just us two again. "I won't let anything happen to you."

The last few days had shown me a life I never knew I could have. If they wanted her, they were going to have to tear her from my cold, dead hands.

CHAPTER 20

LILLIAN



“DR. SHEN IS WAITING in the office now.” Eamon rolled his eyes. “Did you know Shen literally means snow leopard in a certain Tibetan dialect? But of course the last name has several other meanings, none of which have anything to do with big cats of any type.”

“Of course.” I rolled my eyes.

“They really do enjoy hiding in plain sight, don’t they?” Gunnar remarked.

It was stupid, really. The equivalent of a wolf shifter calling himself Mr. Wolfe. But considering how much influence The White Claws had, it made sense that they wouldn’t worry too much about hiding their identity these days. And anyone claiming there were such things as big cat shifters before the fall of The Wall would’ve been sent to the looney bin.

Eamon turned the screen toward us so we could quickly read Dr. Shen's resume. The older man was well-educated, with degrees from both Cambridge and Tsinghua Universities. He was publicly affiliated with plenty of large multinational corporations and not-so-publicly with other less desirable groups.

I was a bundle of nerves, and it must have shown because Gunnar cupped my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

"Everything is going to be fine. You are mine now, and I'll never let them take you."

God! Music to my ears. I never thought I'd crave hearing a man call me his. It just seemed so old-fashioned. But this felt right; I was his and he was mine. We were faking it so well that I was beginning to believe that it was real.

We stepped inside the office and were greeted by an impeccably dressed older Asian man. He had a clear accent but spoke English fluently, as if he'd been speaking it most of his life, perhaps for both school and work. Sitting behind him were the two goons who'd been at my apartment. We shook hands with the gentleman in the suit but Gunnar ignored the others, so I followed his lead. After some quick introductions, we sat down and got to business.

"Do you like the new friends I've given you?" Gunnar gestured to the photographers swarming around the Redrock office window. "Don't worry. The glass is one way. They can't see us."

Of course Gunnar would start by antagonizing the opponent. I wish I had his unshakable confidence.

"They will not keep me from my mission."

"No, but I will. This is my *wife* you wish to steal." Gunnar stressed the word.

"She was not married when—"

“But she is now,” Gunnar said firmly. “Let’s not beat around the bush. Lillian is mine, and I will not let you take her. And if you try, no ocean could stop me from reaching her to get her back. Surely there are other candidates for your, for lack of a better word, breeding program? Candidates that wouldn’t draw the attention of reporters and the ire of a dragon? Desmon is a”...he paused for dramatic effect...“personal friend.”

I highly doubted Desmon would stick his neck out for me. But that didn’t stop Gunnar from name-dropping.

Dr. Shen didn’t answer; instead, he tilted his head pensively, turning to me. “I’m surprised your wedding was so...public. I have not been able to find out much about your life online. And nothing about this relationship until just before the wedding.”

“I don’t have social media. I don’t like to overshare.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Most snow leopards are private people. It’s in our DNA. But still, I have to assume you have not been dating for long.”

I stuck with the story we’d been telling everyone. “Three months.”

“Gargoyles recognize our mates quickly,” Gunnar said. “There’s no need for a long courtship. Isn’t it the same for snow leopards?”

Mates? I gasped on the inside but I schooled my features, hoping my surprise didn’t show on my face. I hadn’t realized he was going to pull the mate card, but it made sense. Having someone like Gunnar as a mate would be a dream come true for me.

Of course, I didn’t have enough snow leopard DNA to know how recognizing a mate would feel. Or at least I didn’t think so...unless this intense connection that I felt to him after just a few days was it. But that was just a truckload of lust combined with gratefulness that he chose to help me, right?

“I wouldn’t know,” said the older gentleman. “I met all the eligible females

when I was young, and none was my true mate. I married my wife because she was the best match. It does not need to be a true mate bond for love to grow; she became my mate over time. Do you feel the mate bond with this gargoyle, Lillian?”

I chose my words carefully. “I’m not sure I have enough shifter blood in me to feel a mate bond, but despite my short time with Gunnar, I believe that he is the one I want to stay with for the rest of my life.”

The words came out much easier than I thought they would, probably because it wasn’t exactly a lie.

“I see.” Dr. Shen nodded. His smile grew crafty. “It has been brought to my attention that this *gargoyle* had you sign a prenup. I don’t pretend I know all the intricate workings of relationships here in the West, but does this not scream a lack of trust to you?”

What was his angle? That was not what I’d expected. I also didn’t like the way he said *gargoyle*, like they were inferior beings or something.

“Prenups are pretty common here, actually.” I had no idea if I was lying or not. Up until now, I hadn’t needed to know.

The man rubbed his chin, then changed the topic again. “I seem to have misjudged you, Lillian. I assumed you were a commoner from the address we found linked to your name and the information we had on your place of work, a simple young American girl struggling to make ends meet. That is my fault. You’re clearly well connected.” He eyed the giant diamond staring him down from my hand; if an inanimate stone could challenge a man, this one had just done so. “And you are clearly accustomed to a good life.”

His eyes landed on the Hermes bag Gunnar had insisted I take to this meeting. It was one of the decoy purses Redrock gave to their ritzy female clients, especially when they needed to move them from place to place.

Apparently, ditching an empty decoy was useful for distracting the paparazzi or crazy fans.

Dr. Shen took a folder from one of the lackeys sitting behind him. He opened it, turned it around, and slid it over to me, completely ignoring Gunnar. The page showed an image of a businessman in his thirties.

“This is Kang Pao. The *alternate* candidate we’ve subsequently matched you with after realizing our mistake. You should find him more to your liking. We certainly do not expect you to lower your standard of living for our program.”

Oops. I hadn’t even looked at the file they’d sent me through email with the original guy.

“Mr. Pao owns a chain of hotels across Asia.” He turned the page to show images of high-end hotels, then to another page full of numbers. “Here are his assets and his net worth. I assure you that should you decide to join our program that your quality of life will not suffer.”

Was that why he thought I was reluctant to leave? Because I’d jumped from my shitty apartment into the lap of luxury and refused to give it up?

Also, gah, that name! All I could think of was Kung Pao Chicken. Even with my limited Cantonese, I knew “pao” or “bao” could mean leopard, but still, talk about unfortunate.

Shen and Pao. These snow leopards really did hide in plain sight, using Asian languages’ many homonyms to their advantage. Pao could, depending on how you said it, also mean to explode, to wrap, a bun, or, if said in a lower inflection, to have a full stomach...ugh. Could you tell why I never felt compelled to become proficient at the language? The Pao next door could be a baker...or a snow leopard shifter...or, surprise! A snow leopard baker! Brain hurty.

“Your current home is nice, and the *gargoyle*”—oh my God, that tone again! —“has done well for himself, but Mr. Pao owns penthouses in several similar or better buildings in Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing, London, and New York.”

He’d gone from ordering me to marry some guy I didn’t know to trying to sell another one to me like an investment. *Look what your womb could buy you! Just pop out a few snow leopard babies, and you, too, could be living the high life!* I had no words.

“I’m aware you have spent most of your life here—”

“All of my life, since before I can remember.” I hadn’t left American soil since I arrived here as a baby.

“Mr. Pao spends considerable time in New York. If you wish to stay in the States to be closer to your adoptive parents, I’m sure Mr. Pao will be amenable to the idea. We understand the importance of family ties, even if not forged from blood. Kang was raised with traditional values, and with his business ventures well-established, he is now ready to focus on family.

“He understands that sacrifices are needed to make a relationship work. There are no prenups amongst snow leopard shifters because none are needed. From my understanding, it is this way in most shifter cultures.” He grinned slyly.

“But a quick search shows Mr. Redrock seems to, shall we say, get around, so I understand the appeal of one.”

Gunnar’s thigh, which was pressed against my own, tensed. That was completely unfair: he was straight-up making digs at Gunnar now.

“I’m not interested. I’m not with Gunnar because of his money.” To be fair, I’d initially lusted after just his body, but that wasn’t the case anymore.

“Well, the offer is on the table. We’ll give you two weeks to weigh the pros and cons before we extend the offer to another. Who knows, you might

change your mind. You have my number.”

He said it like he was doing me a favor.

“I won’t be changing my mind, but thank you.”

“Since there is nothing else to say, I think we are done here.” Gunnar didn’t sound at all amused. He stood, causing the two behind Dr. Shen to do so the same. “Dr. Shen, I wish you and your associates a wonderful stay in Darlington.”

And with that, the meeting was over. I didn’t relax until we were upstairs in the penthouse and surrounded by my new friends.

I handed the ridiculously expensive bag back to Eamon, glad I hadn’t wrecked it in the time I’d had it in my possession. “Do you think he’s really giving me a choice? Or do you think I’m going to be kidnapped the moment no one’s looking?”

“I think The White Claws now believe you to be not worth the effort, unless you were to go along willingly,” Eamon said. “Though I’m not sure what they would do if you and Gunnar suddenly divorced. I think you’re stuck with Gunnar for a while.”

“Nah,” I said. “More like he’s stuck with me!”

Gunnar seemed to relax for the first time since Dr. Shen started telling me all about Kang Pao’s merits. I smiled to myself.

Squee! I think he likes me!

CHAPTER 21

GUNNAR



I GOT GRAYSON TO cover me on my weekly yacht trip gig with the businessman who seemed convinced a mermaid was going to rise up from the depths and drag him under for something he did decades ago. That was one of my easiest recurring jobs, considering he was boating on a freaking lake and not the ocean. But he was willing to pay big bucks for me to stand on his yacht for a few hours, and I wasn't going to be the one to tell him mermaids didn't frequent fresh bodies of water.

With my schedule cleared, I planned a week exploring the city with my new wife. Our first stop was the Darlington Conservatory: given her obsession with tropical plants, I knew she was going to love it. I'd even set up a decoy for the paparazzi on the other side of the city. By the time the photographers realized their mistake, we'd be well on our way to dinner.

I knew how self-conscious she was about cameras, and I'd deliberately planned the day so she'd face them as little as possible. But that wasn't quite enough.

I went over to knock on Eamon's door, and Tansy greeted me, a special charm dangling from her hand on the fine gold chain I'd picked up at the jewelry store.

"This should do it," she said, handing it to me. "I've never crafted something like this before, though, so you might want to test it out first."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

I returned to the main foyer to find Lillian all ready to go. She had on the cutest leaf print dress that hugged her curves. It flared out mid-thigh and swished around her when she walked. She'd paired the wholesome dress with a mean pair of black thigh-high boots. The combination worked, somehow making her both edgy and cute at the same time.

I held up the necklace.

"I've got a little something for you. Well, Tansy cast the spell on it, but I bought the necklace."

Her mouth formed a little O when she caught sight of the monstera leaf charm. I hadn't planned it, but it matched her outfit perfectly.

"The necklace from the jewelry store! How did you know?"

"I saw you admiring it and thought it would be a great place to hide a spell if we ever needed to do that. It looks like something you'd wear." I stood behind her and put it on, my large fingers struggling clumsily with the tiny clasp for a bit. "I had Tansy put a spell on it that's supposed to prevent anyone from taking photos of you."

"Wow, she can do that?"

"I hope so. She said she hasn't actually done it before."

“Oooh, I get to be a guinea pig. Exciting! Let’s try it out.”

I took out my phone and snapped a quick photo, and she leaned in to see the result. Most of the photo turned out normal, but her face was all blurry and pixelated.

“Try again,” she insisted.

I took several more. All of them came out the same way, even when I tried recording a video. “It probably depletes a bit of Tansy’s magic every time it happens, so let’s not overdo it.”

“Oh, is that how it works? I’m still so new to all this. I mean, I didn’t even realize I had any magic until the wedding. Let’s not tax her powers, then.”

As much as I wanted to take the Hellcat, it was easier to ninja through traffic in the Urus. So despite having portaled back to the cottage so I could drive my green beast home yesterday, a trip that Lillian insisted on taking with me I might add, it had to stay in the garage. Oh well. Baby did draw a lot of attention. And it wasn’t like it was that much fun to drive her in the city.

“Is it even open today?” Lillian asked doubtfully when we got to the giant indoor botanical garden. “The parking lot’s completely empty.”

“Oh, it’s open. For us.” I helped her out of the car, and we stepped inside.

The man who greeted us looked confused for a moment until I said, “It’s booked under Desmon’s name. I have the reservation number and payment confirmation if you need it.” The man blinked a few times. “You’re Gunnar Redrock and the Cat Lady person.”

“My wife’s name is Lillian,” I said firmly.

“Yes. Of course. My apologies, sir. I’m just a bit shocked to see you two, that’s all. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Booking the place out under a different name was an extra precaution to make sure we’d have the place to ourselves. There’s a lot of media attention

on us right now, and we enjoy our privacy.”

Was it excessive on my part? Okay, maybe. But I wanted Lillian to be as comfortable as possible exploring the city with me. I’d been on the receiving end of public curiosity before, and it wasn’t much fun...and I *liked* attention. Meanwhile Desmon was currently at the aquarium with Carly, which was the outing I’d booked under *my* name. While his mate didn’t love the extra attention, she had a laissez-faire attitude, and nothing really phased her, certainly not the cameras.

“It’s usually quiet on Wednesday during the day anyway, but you did book the place for yourself, so it’s all yours. And so am I.” He gestured to the gold name tag on this shirt, which listed his title as Horticulturalist/Educator. “I’m Jason. Did you want a thorough tour, or to just go around enjoying the exhibits yourself?”

I turned to Lillian. “Your pick, Kitten.”

“How about we go through on our own, and if we have any questions, I’ll ask you later?”

“Works for me.” Jason handed us each a brochure with a map. “Make sure you don’t skip the tropical section. We just put in a new waterfall, and it’s gorgeous. People sometimes miss it, because it looks like a dead end, but if you stick to the right, that stone path leads right behind the fall and out the other side.”

“Thank you,” I said with a nod.

Then Lillian was pulling me into the first section, which was labeled *Primeval Gardens*. Her excitement already was enough for me to know I’d made the right choice coming here.

“Did you know I’ve been living in Darlington for years and I’ve never visited this place?” she said as we stepped into a warm, humid world of giant ferns

and fuzzy mosses.

“You, of all people? I’m surprised. Why not?”

“I only got into plants in the past...maybe...three or four years, after I started working. And I haven’t seriously dated since...” She made a face as if remembering something unsavory. “College. I know, I know!” She held her hands up placatingly. “I can come here on my own, it doesn’t have to be a date. But it just never happened.”

“Why haven’t you dated since college?”

“Well, I’m in Darlington. And there’s a lot of shifters.”

I didn’t understand. “But *you’re* half shifter.”

“Exactly. Only half. The White Claws’ reaction to my inability to shift isn’t unique. I know some shifters don’t care, but when they’re looking to date another shifter, they do.” She pressed her lips together.

Someone had made her feel not enough. I wanted to find the guy and tear him to pieces.

She shrugged. “I wasted almost two years of my life with a lion shifter. He said it didn’t matter at first, but eventually it did. He ended up cheating on me with someone who could shift; he said he needed someone he could run with on the full moon. They announced their mating two weeks after we broke up. Then there was the lynx shifter. That only lasted a few months. He mated with the next girl he dated, too.”

No wonder she’d said being part snow leopard hadn’t done her any good.

“Their loss is my gain.” I smiled.

She smiled back at me. “It was years ago. I’m over it. More recently, I didn’t date because there are human guys coming to town just to bang a shifter now, like those idiots you helped me with when we first met.”

“Monster chasers. Yeah. The world is still adjusting. It’ll take a few more

years, even with how fast things change today.” Some strange-looking trees caught my eye. “You don’t have anything like these at home. They’re neat.” “You mean the cycads?” She turned her gaze to the ancient tree-like plants. “I’ve always wanted to add one to my collection, but never had the room. No more ferns, though.”

“Why not?”

“Whatever magic Iris thinks I have, it doesn’t work on ferns. They turn crispy every winter when I turn on the heat.” She looked around her. “I kind of imagine them like really old people who refuse to follow new rules because they are so set in their ways. They *are* ancient.”

We continued wandering through the different exhibits. They had one on medicinal plants full of flowers and herbs, many of which had *Poisonous!* signs stuck into the ground in front of them. The alpine rock garden was charming, with the cutest little flowers beating the odds and growing out of the tiniest cracks between rocks. The special exhibit featuring edible plants had Lillian talking about starting a vegetable garden.

But it was the large parklike display at the center of the conservatory holding the tropical plants that held her interest the longest. I recognized some of the plants she had at home, but the specimens here dwarfed the ones currently sitting in front of my window. Upon closer inspection, some of the plants only looked like the ones at home at first glance. The leaves at eye level looked similar, but as they climbed up the exhibit’s bark-lined walls, they morphed, developing additional fenestrations and changing shapes.

The air was humid and smelled like green, if color had a smell, and the waterfall they’d installed added the sound of rushing water to the scene. It truly was a tropical paradise.

Lillian spun in a happy circle. “I love it! I never thought I’d say this, but I

totally want my own waterfall in a greenhouse full of tropical plants. If I had a boring desk job, I'd put my workstation right in the middle of it all." Then she turned serious. "Damn it, that reminds me: I still need to find a new job."

I frowned, remembering how her old job had mysteriously let her go right after The White Claws had called, and how her co-worker, who Lillian wasn't even close with, had called on Monday when they couldn't find her.

"I'm not sure I'd want that job anymore. I mean, I still find how the human body works fascinating, and I love the idea of helping people get their mobility back after an accident, but I'm not sure physiotherapy is what I want to do for the rest of my life, you know?"

I turned her to face me. "You have time to figure it out, Kitten. And if you want to do nothing but take care of your plants, that's fine with me. But I have a feeling you'll find something you're passionate about. Maybe you can start a greenhouse for exotic plants that doubles as a frog sanctuary."

She giggled. "Until the crickets take over." Her smile was genuine as she got up on her tiptoes—and I surreptitiously bent down so she could reach—to place a kiss on my cheek. "Thank you."

A warmth filled my chest at the simple gesture.

I spotted the stone path Jason had mentioned, and we went over to pick our way carefully through the densely growing foliage and to the hidden spot behind the waterfall. Even the walls here had plants, the aerial roots clinging to the wall as the leaves extended out beyond the darkened overhang as they searched for light.

"Oooh! It's almost magical here," she said with a note of wonder.

We stayed there for a long moment, just holding each other and listening to the sound of the waterfall. I didn't think there was enough room in the

greenhouse at the cottage for something this elaborate, but we could definitely put in a small water feature.

It was my rumbling stomach that prodded us to keep walking. It was so loud that Lillian had cowered for a moment and thought it was thunder.

“What’s the plan for lunch?” she asked as we moved through the final exhibit before the exit, a desert room full of cacti and succulents.

“I have us booked in at The Starving Aardvark, if that’s okay.”

“Yes! I love that place! I already know what I’m having: Chicken and Waffles, and an Affogato for dessert!” Her excitement was palpable. “Let’s finish up here and get you fed, Husband.”

CHAPTER 22

LILLIAN



I SAT SANDWICHED BETWEEN Gunnar and Shelby at a U-shaped booth as I picked at my giant plate of the world's crispiest sweet potato fries and chipotle mayo. It was Saturday night, and we were all at The Howling Wolf, just a few blocks down from where Gunnar and I had first met.

Gunnar had mentioned The Howling Wolf that first evening, but I didn't realize that his brother Griff, the only brother who wasn't part of Redrock Protective Services, actually lived on top of the building. I'd met him and Emily only briefly on the day of the wedding, and it was great to spend more time with them.

Between trips and outings during the day and mind-boggling sex and tender moments at night, Gunnar had kept me so busy the last few days that I hadn't even thought about Dr. Shen and The White Claws' offer. After realizing that

there was magic involved and that they were never going to get a good photo of us, many of the photographers had given up after several failed attempts, especially since some rich kid decided to make headlines by getting himself arrested. Entertainment news cycles sure moved fast.

I couldn't believe the wedding had only been a week ago. I'd almost forgotten already what my life was like before all this started. Gunnar and I had spent the rest of the week exploring all the places in Darlington we wanted to.

We'd gone to the Royal Reef Adventure, where between it not being made of glass like the botanical gardens and Gunnar knowing the owner, privacy wasn't a concern. The giant aquarium had recently opened up in the city and was rumored to be owned by a kraken. I didn't get to meet him, but I did get to experience a private *Swimming with Sharks* session.

Tansy's privacy charm had deemed the wearing of a snorkeling mask enough protection that it allowed several photos of me interacting with sharks to be taken, which was great because I had a lot of fun sending them to my parents. Mom thought it was the coolest thing. Her childhood dream had always been to be a marine biologist, but she'd had to settle for teaching high school biology.

Dad just kept asking if I rode one. Because, well, Dad. Every time a new shark showed up in a picture: "Did you ride that one?" "How about that one?" "What about you, Gunnar? Did you ride one?"

It was only after this call with my parents that Gunnar told me my dad had pulled the "I know Kung Fu" line with him before the wedding, to which I groaned and covered my face. I'd bet Mom reminded him that Tai Chi is not Kung Fu. They did this schtick all the time. I swear, sometimes I thought Dad did this just to embarrass me.

We also took a helicopter tour of the city, which was very cool to me but kind of blah for Gunnar. It was only then that I realized it wouldn't be that special for him since technically he could fly, though I hadn't seen it in action yet.

"Hey! Steal fries from your own wife!" Shelby exclaimed as Gunnar reached around my shoulder to steal some of her fries.

"Aww, but she's got sweet potato fries. I want the normal ones."

Tansy, who sat across from me, grinned. "They do this routine every week. No one steals Shelby's fries. We don't know how she does it, but if we sit here long enough, she eats every last one."

I glanced over at her portion, which was just as large as mine. She'd been the one that had convinced me to get the larger size.

"Impressive."

Shelby beamed. "It's my one achievement every week."

I reached over, swiped a few normal potato fries from her plate, and stuffed them into my mouth.

"Hey!" she exclaimed in mock rage. "Not you too!"

Next to me, Gunnar bellowed a laugh and held the hand that wasn't wrapped around my waist up to me for a high five.

Shelby swiped a handful of my fries in retaliation. I finished the last swig of my rum and coke and leaned in against Gunnar.

"Did you want to leave a bit early so we can stop by The Pint of No Return for a drink on our way home?" I asked Gunnar.

"Why The Pint?" Tansy asked. "That place is full of college kids."

"It's where we met," Gunnar said, smiling at me.

"I've been going there since college myself," I said. "I guess the clientele never changed."

I wanted to say hi to Levi to let him know I was okay. I hadn't kept many

friends from college, but Levi had always been there behind the bar, offering a quiet ear throughout my school, work, and boy troubles.

Gunnar grabbed a generous handful of what was left of my fries. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

“I need the ladies’ room first. I’ll be back.”

I made my way over to the edge of the U and started toward the back of the pub. To my surprise, not a single guy tried to get handsy or chat me up. Like The Pint, The Howling Wolf was a shifter pub, but unlike The Pint, there were fewer college-aged human males in here trying to pick up chicks, most likely because there were fewer young women to draw them in.

And to think I’d gone to The Pint of No Return the whole time because I thought it would be safer with more women around. Then again, maybe I wasn’t getting any unwelcome attention because I very clearly belonged to a gargoyle, and the Redrocks were regulars here.

I stepped into the stall, did my business, and stopped in front of the mirror after washing my hands. The door to the bathroom opened, and a blonde who looked vaguely familiar but that I couldn’t place walked in. She stopped by the sink next to mine.

“Is it true that you’re really a snow leopard shifter?”

The question caught me off guard, and I stood there gawping like an idiot before I recovered. I wanted to tell her to mind her own business, but when I opened my mouth, what actually came out was, “I have snow leopard shifter blood in me, yes. But I’m just a normal girl.”

What the actual hell? That wasn’t what I’d intended to say at all. I took a good look at her, but she was human as far as I could tell. Was she using witchcraft? But why?

“Interesting. Are you and Gunnar really together?”

This time, I kept my mouth firmly shut, not trusting what would come out if I opened it. I hurried out of the bathroom, leaving the woman behind. A feeling of misgiving filled me as I walked swiftly back to the table.

“What’s wrong?” Gunnar, sensing my discomfort, stood and gathered me into his arms.

I told the group what had happened and looked around the pub for the woman, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“What did she look like?” Tansy asked.

“She was...” I searched my memory, but all the details had disappeared from my brain. Weird. “I can’t remember. When I try to recall her face, it’s just a blank. If I hadn’t told you guys right away, I’m not sure I’d even remember it happened at all.”

Even now, I could almost believe I’d only imagined it.

“A forget spell.” Tansy made a concerned face. “What did she ask you again?”

“She asked if...oh my God, I don’t remember.” Panic infused my body. I’d just told everyone; how could I possibly have forgotten already? What the fuck?

Tansy stood and looked around, but found nothing. She took out her phone and recorded herself recounting my story. “Just in case we start forgetting too,” she said.

“I’m glad you told us right away,” Gunnar said. “I’ll ask you again after the spell has had some time to dissipate, maybe you’ll remember more then.” He looked around the pub but shrugged. “I don’t sense any danger. Let’s go.”

We said our goodbyes and headed out for the short walk to the Pint of No Return.

Levi looked relieved to see me. “Lillian! You’re alive and not kidnapped!”

He gave Gunnar a curt nod before focusing back on me. “What can I get for you?”

“Rum and coke for me today.” I didn’t want to mess with mixing drinks. I found it was always safer to stick with one type of booze a night.

Levi got me my rum and coke and Gunnar a whiskey on the rocks, and gestured for us to take the two seats at the far end of the bar since it was more private.

He turned to Gunnar. “Thanks for going after her that night. I knew those guys were up to no good.”

Gunnar only grunted.

“I read about what’s happening, Lillian. You could’ve told me you were in trouble, you know.” He did that thing where he cleaned an already clean portion of the bar while we talked. “I would’ve married you to stop them.”

There was a look, something in his eyes I hadn’t noticed until just now.

Crap.

He liked me.

I mean, I always knew he did. But not like *that*. I always thought he liked me like a kid sister—and an annoying kid sister at that, who only knew how to complain. No matter the issue, whether it was a breakup, having to deal with Holly at work, or just a shitty week, I’d ended up here over the years to have a drink and unwind. Levi had always been there for me.

A low growl started rumbling in Gunnar’s throat, and I put a hand on his arm to calm him.

Levi stuck his hands up in surrender. “Hey man, I’m not going to poach your woman. She came in here smiling today. That’s a good thing, if you ask me. Keep her happy, and we’re fine.” He turned back to me. “It was my fault. I

was slow on the draw. Several years too slow. And then you swore off shifters.”

Yeah...that.

The next words were directed squarely at Gunnar. “But if you make her cry, Gargoyle, you’ll quickly learn why the ancient Egyptians associated us with death and the afterlife.”

The two stared at each other for a long moment as I prayed that a fight wasn’t about to break out over this. I liked Levi, and I’d had no idea he felt that way about me. I didn’t even have his number. But looking back... Well, I understood now why they said hindsight was 20/20.

Levi moved away to serve two women who were dressed to impress. When he returned, it was like nothing had happened between him and Gunnar and he was telling us all about the pub’s upcoming Christmas Around the World party, something I attended almost every year.

I was glad they weren’t going to duke it out or anything. That was the last complication I needed.

CHAPTER 23

LILLIAN



I LOOKED OUT THE window at the bustling city below us. I was supposed to be looking for a new job, but it was hard to concentrate on that when my head kept going back to Gunnar. He was off on his weekly lake cruise job for that rich guy with the yacht and the irrational fear of mermaids.

Now that I'd been around for a while, I realized that the brothers delegated most of the routine jobs to one or another of the well-trained and well-armed guards on their roster, choosing to do only the most sensitive gigs themselves. Things like Desmon's wedding, or special requests from the EA. Or the fun ones, like on a yacht.

I tried to pull my focus back to my search for job openings in my field but somehow ended up looking at greenhouses and houseplants. That led to me visiting the Aroid forum where I was excited to see there was a message

waiting for me. Someone was interested in one of the cuttings I had posted for sale!

My excitement lasted until I realized the cutting she was after didn't exist anymore. I'd left it behind at my old place, and after Gunnar had confirmed that I had everything I wanted, he'd sent someone to clean it out so my landlord could do a walk-through.

They'd also driven my crappy-ass used Prius back here where it was currently parked in a garage full of cars that were on a whole other level, looking like a stale dinner roll in a sea of croissants.

I was writing her a boilerplate "Sorry, that one has been sold, would you like to call dibs on the next one" reply when a thought came to me. Iris seemed to think I had magic of some kind. Maybe, just maybe, I could get a cutting rooted in record time and sell that one instead.

I tapped my chin, thinking. Was that even possible? Those cuttings had taken weeks to root, especially the more expensive collector philodendrons like this woman wanted. There were so many people online trying to sell single node cuttings with no leaves on them for ridiculous prices that I'd thought I could offer something higher quality for less, but it had been hard to get the ball rolling without social media. I'd sold a few cuttings through the forum's buy and sell section, but that was it.

I sighed. Maybe it really was time I figured out social media. I didn't need to post pictures of myself, just my plants.

I fished out my phone and was about to text Shelby to ask for Iris' number when I noticed several missed calls and two messages from a number I didn't recognize. I read the messages. It was Holly from my old work. Oh, right! I'd almost forgotten. Grayson had told me she'd called.

I fired off a message to Gunnar, letting him know I planned on getting back

to her, and to let me know now if he thought I shouldn't.

Then I sent Shelby a message asking for Iris's number.

Shelby's reply and Gunnar's "Go ahead" came at the same time.

I decided to indulge my curiosity first, texting Holly back asking how she got my number. Because I was a hundred and ten percent sure I didn't give it to her.

Her reply was that I gave it to her at the company Christmas party last year... which I hadn't attended. Whatever. I decided to humor her anyway to see how she was related to The White Claws.

I asked her what was up, and she responded by calling. I sighed. I was happy to deal with texts, not a phone call, but I was too deep in to back down now. I took a long breath and picked up.

"Hello?"

"Lillian? *Hey!*" Holly sounded much too cheery, and her false perkiness made me want to punch her in the throat right through the telephone line.

"What's the reason for your call?" I didn't owe her any niceties and had no plan on beating around the bush. Sometimes, being blunt was best. "I don't think you've ever phoned me before."

"Oh! Um, I just wanted to know how you're doing. You know, being let go on such short notice and all."

"I'm doing great, actually. I just got married." Let's move this conversation along, Holly.

"Oh *yeah*, I heard about that. I had no idea you two were dating! You never said anything about Gunnar at work."

"You and I never talked at work. And I never share my personal life anyway."

"Sure you do. You told us when you visited your parents last year."

I frowned. “Yeah, because I needed someone to cover my appointments. I don’t share my personal dating life.”

“That’s because you don’t date.”

What the fuck was she getting at? Did The White Claws actually send her to suss out whether this was a real relationship? “I clearly did date, because I’m married now. I just chose not to talk about it at work. Is this why you called? To question me about my love life?”

“I’m just curious, that’s all. So, how long have you and Gunnar been together —”

“Long enough. Look, is it really that boring at work without me that you have to call and ask about this stuff?” I looked at the time. “Don’t you have a client to see? It’s Tuesday at 1pm. Isn’t that my weekly appointment with the lady with the frozen shoulder?”

She laughed awkwardly but didn’t answer the question. “So, have you been looking for a new job?”

“Not really,” I lied. But was it really lying when I spent just five minutes looking and then the next half hour checking out greenhouses and plants and daydreaming of Gunnar?

“Why not?”

I took a moment to think about why she would possibly be asking this question. If she really was helping Dr. Shen gather intel, then saying I was looking for a job would be suspicious, especially since he thought I was in it with Gunnar for the good life he could give me.

“Because I don’t need to.” I looked at my computer screen with all the images of the greenhouse I’d saved and the half-drafted reply I’d planned on sending to the lady inquiring about the cutting. “My *husband* says I can take

however long I want to figure out what I want to do. And if I want to do nothing, that's fine by him, too."

Okay, I was gloating a bit, but she totally deserved it.

Then, for good measure, I tossed in, "Maybe I'll wait until after the first baby to decide."

"I see," was her reply.

I was purposefully vague there, making sure I didn't actually say anything concrete. Let her talk. Let them all talk. I really didn't care anymore.

"Thank you for calling to check up on me," I said in my sweetest voice ever.

"I'm kind of glad all this pushed Gunnar and me into getting married sooner.

It was the right choice. He makes me very happy." I was saying the words hoping she'd repeat them to Dr. Shen, but then I realized that they were the absolute truth.

"Lucky you," she said, sounding more than a little pissed off. "Well, anyway, my break's over."

"Say hi to everyone there for me."

"Sure will," she said, totally not meaning it, and hung up.

Well, that was interesting. If all went well, she'd tell Dr. Shen that she thought I was maybe pregnant, or at least trying to get pregnant, and that would hopefully be enough to convince him we were in it for real and for the long haul.

Now, onto my plants, which were a lot more exciting. Armed with Iris' number, I approached my plant babies, who were all happily growing by Gunnar's giant west-facing windows.

They really did love this place much more than my old apartment. They had more room to stretch and grow, and had all the light they wanted here. I hadn't even needed to set up the grow lights.

I checked to make sure they all had water in their reservoirs, then realized I still had the big tray sitting directly on the floor and made a mental note to look online for a shelf for the smaller plants. That would be a lot more fun than browsing job openings.

You know what? I was glad I hadn't found any jobs I wanted to apply for yet. If I had, and The White Claws found out, it wouldn't fit my story very well.

Satisfied that all my plant babies were happy, I called Iris, who picked up with a jovial, "What's up, witch bitch?"

It made me laugh. She was fun.

I told her my dilemma and how I now needed a rooted cutting as soon as possible.

"Oh, that's easy peasy lemon squeezy. Plants want to grow around us anyway. I'll walk you through it. I'd start with something easy, like a pothos or a monstera. Something you don't mind dumping the cuttings of, because you might end up with some weird ones."

"Weird ones?"

"They get over-enthusiastic sometimes, and you get all vines with no leaves, or one giant leaf. Or if you're trying one of those new-fangled hybrids with a lot of pink and white, you get all pink and white leaves that start dying the moment the magic is gone since they can't photosynthesize by themselves."

"That makes sense." I turned back and surveyed my army of tropicals. "All right, everyone," I said. "I need a volunteer."

CHAPTER 24

GUNNAR



I CHECKED MY PHONE again before stepping from our private parking area into the elevator up to the penthouse. Nothing yet. I'd messaged Lillian, asking what she wanted for dinner, but hadn't gotten a reply. Odd, but she was probably busy getting her life together. She'd gone through such a huge change recently, and must feel somewhat out of control.

When I opened the door to my suite I was immediately greeted by a very green, very shocking sight.

Her plants had taken over my home. The climbers had latched onto my walls and were racing up them like they owned the place. One of the specimens was sprawled all over the floor, sending up an oversized leaf every few feet. There were vines hanging everywhere. And in the center of it all was a very

panicked-looking Lillian with a humorously small pair of garden snips, trying to control it all.

“What the hell happened here?” I asked, trying not to laugh.

“I’m sorry. I must have made a mistake. Iris was teaching me how to speed up the process of getting a cutting to root...”

Iris. The green witch. Hadn’t her husband Alex always warned that she was trouble?

“Well, I did it successfully twice, with her on the phone. So after I hung up, I decided to see if I could get my other plants to grow so I could take some cuttings. But when I tried it by myself, nothing really happened, or else it was growing so slowly I couldn’t tell. I was tired, so I went and took a nap. And I didn’t tell it to stop growing. And then...this happened.” She pushed a piece of hair which had escaped her messy ponytail back from her face.

“I know, I know. Iris told me to be careful and limit how much magic the spells used. But I didn’t really know how. She said I could just tell it to stop after each time, and it would work the same. But I didn’t know it was actually running. I thought since nothing was growing that the spell didn’t work...”

Yes. And while she was napping, and replenishing some of her magic, the spell continued on its merry way with her none the wiser. It was a rookie mistake every magic user ran into at least once in their life, so I’d heard.

This was when I realized she still looked exhausted despite her nap. She’d let her magic run unabated, and it had drained her.

“Have you told it to stop now?”

“Yes. I stopped the spell. No more magic is being used. I think. I’ll clean it up, I promise. I’m so sorry about the walls.”

I gathered her into my arms. “It’s okay. Breathe, Kitten. Shit happens. We’ll clean it up together. But first, you need to eat, rest some more, and recover.

Being drained of your magic is dangerous.”

“You’re not angry about the walls?”

“They’re just walls. Actually, I kind of like them with leaves. But we might need to give them something better to climb in the future so they don’t do any structural damage. Perhaps a bark wall like they have at the botanical garden.”

I guided her to the couch and grabbed her a soda from the fridge. “You. Sit. Tell me what to do, and I’ll fix it.”

I grabbed a sharp knife and under her instruction wrangled the wayward plants back under control. Before long, we had row after row of what she called “three-node cuttings” lined up on my coffee table. She picked up one that already had roots growing out of the bottom and stuck it in a glass of water.

“This one already has a buyer. She’s in Darlington too, so I don’t even need to pack it up and mail it.”

“A buyer?”

“It wasn’t the one she wanted, but we left that one at my apartment. This one’s better. It’s got three nodes, and there’s new growth on it already.” She pointed at the paler chartreuse-colored leaf that was started to unfurl. “I hope she’s happy with it. I was going to make the exchange tomorrow downstairs in the lobby.”

“You can use the Redrock offices if you like.”

I recalled the dozens and dozens of plants I’d left behind at her place. Many of them had only one or two leaves, smaller versions of these “cuttings” we had now. I didn’t realize she’d been growing them for sale.

She’d certainly done well at restocking her supply today, though I had a feeling she hadn’t been ready for this level of success. She looked at the rows

of plants with an overwhelmed look on her face. “We need to get these cuttings into water, or better yet, some coir or sphagnum moss.”

“I’m up for a trip to the plant nursery if you are. If we hurry, we’d make it before it closes.”

“Really?”

“Sure, as long as we grab food after. I’m ravenous.”

As we headed downstairs, she told me about her conversation with her former co-worker, and we both agreed that it sounded like Dr. Shen could be paying Holly and other people at Lillian’s previous job for information. It also explained the way they’d conveniently let her go at just the right time.

We picked up everything we needed at the nursery and were waiting for our takeout when Lillian’s mood started to change.

“Do you feel that?”

“Feel what?” I stood still, watching and listening for a warning that something was wrong. Nothing dangerous stood out to me. Whatever it was must be magic.

“It feels like I’m being watched.”

I looked around, but didn’t see anyone trying to take pictures of us “Does it remind you of the feeling you had back in the bathroom of The Howling Wolf? With that lady?”

She grimaced, tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips. “What lady?”

The forget spell had struck again. I reminded her what had happened last weekend.

“Oh yeah, I remember now. Or rather, I remember telling everyone. Not it actually happening. But I think I want to say... Yes, the feeling is similiar.”

She huddled a little closer to me.

I wrapped an arm around her protectively and stood a little taller, as if to

block whatever was spying on her from seeing her. This didn't feel like Dr. Shen or The White Claws. This was something else.

I recalled when Grayson had accidentally painted a target on Shelby's back simply by showing interest in her. At the time, the WEC had been kidnapping women with magic who couldn't control or wield it properly in their crazy efforts to reestablish The Wall. The wizard council had used The Wall to hide their meddling in things like politics and corporate affairs.

Could this be their doing? I made a note to check with my contact at the EA to see if they'd caught wind of another crazy plot to re-cast history's largest and most complex spell.

We grabbed our food and hurried back to the car. I didn't fully relax until we were back in the safety of my penthouse.

CHAPTER 25

LILLIAN



I REACHED OVER AND snatched the gossip mag straight out from under Tansy’s purse. She’d picked it up, seen the headline, made a face, then tried to hide it from me. I couldn’t believe that in a world full of online gossip, the print version still existed. But here we were.

“Bad-Boy Redrock Can’t Shake The Golddiggers”, screamed the headline in bold font. Under it was a photo of me and Gunnar, my face blocked by his shoulder. According to the horribly written piece, I was actively trying to get pregnant because I didn’t want to go back to work. The source? Holly, my *good friend* of many years, who also happened to work at my old workplace. She was quoted as saying, “Her dream has always been to marry rich and quit her job. I’m so happy for her.”

I made a hiss that sounded very much like a snow leopard, and Tansy raised her eyebrows at me.

“Wow, spicy kitty! That’s why I was trying to hide it from you. Don’t worry about it. You know how these gossip rags talk out of their asses.”

Sure, I’d known Holly from school, but that didn’t make us friends. Probably the rest of the article was just as inaccurate.

That didn’t stop me from continuing to read it, of course. According to the piece, my old workplace had reached out to offer me a job, but I’d refused. That was a lie as well: I hadn’t gotten any other calls or emails from anyone else at work. But the thing that pissed me off most was the fact that they’d called me a masseuse!!!

There was nothing wrong with being a massage therapist, and as a physio, I worked closely with one, since both aided in healing. But the article heavily implied that I did the rub and tug type of massage.

I was fuming. This was literally my worst nightmare come true. I hated being the center of attention at the best of times, but this was so much worse. Not only was it negative attention, but all the facts were wrong, and there was no way for me to fix it. There was absolutely jack shit I could do about this.

I tried to keep reading, but I was so angry that I couldn’t even see the words anymore. Suddenly, I felt very much like that angry kid who had just been sent to her room, irrational and inconsolable. Then my murder mittens sprang out, and the gossip mag was being violently shredded into a billion pieces.

When I looked up, Tansy and Shelby were gawking at me. Shit. I’d made a scene. I looked around the café nervously, but no one else had noticed my little outburst other than the two of them, thank goodness.

“I cast a look-away spell,” Tansy murmured as she dug in her purse.

Now it was my turn to gawk, because she reached so impossibly far into her

purse that most of her arm disappeared into it. Then she brought Nugget out.

“You need an emotional support animal.” She shoved the bird at me the moment I had my claws under control.

“You think giving a bird to a pissed-off cat is a good idea how?” But I was already cuddling the little cutie. It really was hard to stay angry with Nugget in my arms. “And please tell me how you managed to pull a bird out of your purse.”

“Oh, it’s enchanted. I have one purse that leads to the inside of a cupboard at home and another that opens to Nugget’s cage. Today, I decided I needed Nugget close.” She opened her purse wide and showed me the colorful toys that lined Nugget’s cage back at the penthouse.

“Cool. That’s so convenient.” I gave the little parrot a quick scritch on the neck.

Thanks to the look-away spell, no one noticed a parrot in the café.

It was the Darlington birthday parade today, which meant we had to avoid Main Street, but it meant that the rest of Darlington was pretty quiet, so Shelby, Tansy and I had planned a quick day out away from the festivities.

The general consensus was that The White Claws weren’t going to snatch me off the streets now that they knew someone would be looking for me. They believed what Dr. Shen had said about me having a choice now. But it was still best if I only left the penthouse with a friend in tow.

I was glad they were here. Otherwise, everyone would’ve witnessed me making a scene at that stupid article.

“The people who matter know better,” Shelby said comfortingly. “Don’t pay any attention to that shit.”

“And let’s say you and Gunnar do stay married—”

I looked around warily, but Tansy just kept talking; she must have a lot of

trust in her spells.

“—and you don’t want to go back to work...so what?” Tansy continued. “I never finished the degree I never wanted, and I’m taking some time off to figure out what I want in life. If I decide to stay home with our kid when Eamon and I decide to have one, then that’s my choice.”

“Eamon’s kid? Combined with your magic? That kid is going to be a full-time job in itself,” Shelby laughed.

Seriously, Tansy would have her hands full.

“But you still have your own income,” I said.

“Yeah, I do the occasional magical chore for Desmon or the EA. But it’s not like a job-job or anything.”

“It totally is!” Shelby exclaimed. “You get paid for it, it’s a job.”

“It’s not consistent work.”

“So what? That’s part of being your own boss.”

“Did you decide yet if you wanted to rent out the unit that just became free next to the Redrock offices, so you have a place to do your fittings again?”

Tansy asked.

“Yes, I’m going to take it. It’s pricey, but I miss having a place to meet with clients and do fittings. The Redrock offices are nice and all, but it’s not the right feel. I want something more relaxed, you know?”

“That’s so exciting!” I said. “It must feel good to know your business has taken off again.”

I thought of my tiny bud of an idea of selling rare plants to the ever-growing plant community. I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to get so big that I’d need a storefront. But then again, when I’d first thought of it, I’d only had time for it to be a side gig.

I wanted to talk about it with the girls because in my head, if I talked about

something, it became more real. At the same time, I didn't want to jinx it.

Shelby beamed. "The amazing thing is that I have fewer one-of-a-kind orders than before, but I earn more because the clientele is more upscale. Of course, all my regulars from before get a discount for sticking with me through the good and the bad. But I was selling myself short before and didn't even realize it."

"That sounds win-win to me." Then, I decided to just spit it out. "You need to give me a quick rundown on how to use social media. Shelby's Creations' account is gorgeous."

"Ooh! Are you finally thinking of dipping your toe in?" Tansy asked.

"Not my toe. My plants' roots." I told them about my plan to sell cuttings online, the ones I'd had to leave behind at my apartment, and how I'd started thinking of doing it again after someone on a forum had asked if one was still available. I even told them about falling asleep with the spell going and waking up with my plants taking over the room.

"Ugh," Tansy said. "Rookie mistake. But that's better than my first plant growth mishap."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Let me preface this with, I'm not a green witch, so it doesn't come naturally to me." She held up a hand. "But the first time I tried to make a plant grow, it burst into flames."

"What? No way!" I exclaimed.

"I got frustrated and threw too much magic at it. And well, magic is energy, so...yeah. It caught on fire. Apparently, green energy is gentler. But it's great that you were able to replace all your cuttings. Exotic plants are big right now. You should totally make this a thing."

"My buyer was so happy. Usually, buying plants online is such a crapshoot.

Some people sell cuttings with no roots, and it's a gamble if it even survives shipping." I showed them a listing for a rootless cutting someone had posted for an arm and a leg just because it was rare.

Shelby covered her mouth with her palm. "He wants how much for a leaf with no roots? That's crazy."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But they sell. I figured I could offer better quality for the same price or maybe even less."

"You totally could! And of course I'll help you set up your social media. What's your business name?" Shelby asked.

"I was thinking Tiger Lily's Tropicals. But it's not set in stone yet."

"Tiger Lily?" Shelby asked.

I told them the story about the tiger shifter neighbor who had helped me control my paws when I was little, and the nickname I got because of it. Then I looked sadly at the shredded magazine. "I guess the claws still come out when I'm upset."

"Hey, I'd be upset too!" Tansy said. "But I'd probably set the stupid thing on fire."

That had me chuckling, happy that I'd found these two. Meeting Gunnar that evening had been a stroke of good luck. I just hoped the luck would keep holding up.

CHAPTER 26

GUNNAR



I STOOD STOCK STILL next to the temporary display at the Darlington Museum. The priceless artifact, on display for one day only, was a piece of the city's history. The massive gold nugget had been what had drawn Desmon to the area centuries ago, and he had since kept it hidden in his hoard, bringing it out for just one day every year for Darlington's birthday.

The thing was enormous, and unlike the other similarly sized world-famous nugget, the *Welcome Stranger*, Darlington's *Golden Beauty* had not been melted down and turned into ingots. Desmon liked to keep his treasures in their original shape if at all possible.

It had been while I was protecting this giant nugget from the covetous claw of another dragon that I had ended up befriending the dragon of Darlington. Defeating the numerous thieves sent for the priceless piece of gold had been

good fun, especially since, unlike when I worked for the EA and the police, I didn't need to keep them alive. There'd been plenty of magical dragon fire to get rid of all the evidence and absolutely no paperwork to deal with after.

Ah. Simpler days.

Currently, the legendary gold nugget was sitting inside a shatterproof glass display, and on either side of it was a guard. I was one of them. The other was a manticore, his scorpion tail slowly swishing from side to side as he eyed the people admiring the gold.

As per Desmon's request, we were both in our natural forms, since fear deterred theft the best. A fancy purple velvet rope separated us from the droves of people coming in to see the not-so-little piece of history.

Since I was the motionless one, looking very much like a statue, people in the crowd were getting a lot closer to my end of the velvet rope than Mateo's, including two kids whose mother was busy talking to her friend. Without moving, I eyed the two children as they came extra close to take pictures with the "ugly monster," as they called me.

It wasn't the name that irked me; it was the fact that the two spoiled brats already had their own smart devices to take photos of each other with. It almost felt as if children these days came out of the womb holding a phone.

They climbed on top of the bench in front of me and posed. Then they jumped to the ground, pushing people out of their way. The boy crashed into a man holding a thermos, and the contents, coffee from the smell of it, splashed all over his shirt. The man grumbled something under his breath about absent parents and gave the two a wider berth. When they'd had enough of taking pictures and being a nuisance to everyone around them in general, the girl dared her younger brother to "go touch the creepy monster."

Moving nothing but my eyes, I exchanged a look with Mateo, and we both

directed a glare at the mother, who was still far too busy chit-chatting with her friend to notice her crotch goblins were *this* close to going under the velvet rope to “touch the monster.” She also hadn’t cared that the kids were treating the bench like their personal playground.

“It’s just a statue!” the little boy protested. “And we’re not supposed to go over the line.”

The line being the velvet rope.

“You’re just scared,” his older sister taunted.

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh yeah? Then prove it. Go touch him.”

“Fine. But then, I’ll win. And you’ll be a loser.”

I knew these were only children, but it brought back memories of the early days when gargoyles were considered nothing more than monsters who guarded the abodes of evil wizards and other powerful men. Even the ones atop the cathedrals and churches were things of horror.

The kid ducked underneath the velvet rope. Even then I didn’t move, though I could see Mateo’s tail twitching harder. When the boy got close enough to the case holding the gold that no one could deny he’d trespassed, I made my move, grabbing him by the shirt.

“Boo!”

He froze for a silent moment before letting out a shrill shriek that had everyone in the room looking our way. The girl turned, all set to flee the scene of the crime, abandoning her brother. Charming girl.

“Whose child is this?” I asked, my eyes on the mother. “Looks like I caught me a little thief.”

The woman’s wide-eyed look was one of horror. But the horror wasn’t because of her kids triggering the gargoyle alarm. It was because of me.

“Oh my God!” she cried. “The monster’s got my babies!”

Oh, great. The hysterics better not start. What did she think I was going to do, eat them? And they were far from babies. Babies didn’t climb benches with clear “Do Not Climb” signs on them.

And besides, even if I did eat babies...which I didn’t...these ones didn’t look particularly tasty.

I took a deep breath.

But before I could speak, Mateo did. “Ma’am,” he said, swishing his tail, “I’m going to have to ask you to calm down or leave the exhibit. Unless you’re the thief’s accomplice.” He eyed the kid.

“I wasn’t trying to steal anything, I swear,” the kid cried. “Jenny dared me to do it.”

But Jenny was long gone. The mother looked around. “Where’s my little girl?” She ran out of the room, looking for her missing kid.

I looked at the boy, who was still struggling to get away from me, then at Mateo.

“Looks like they both abandoned him,” Mateo said, winking at me. “Should we wait till the cops get here, or just throw him in the dungeon?”

The museum didn’t have a dungeon, but the kid didn’t know that.

“Ohh, I think the dungeon is full,” I said, playing along. “Maybe this one isn’t that bad. Hey kid, what’s your name?”

“Ry-ryan.”

“Ryan, do you promise to follow the rules from now on, and be careful not to bump into people?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

I pointed to the guy in the coffee-stained shirt. “Go apologize to that man for bumping into him.” I let Ryan go, and he did exactly that. The man gave me a

thumbs-up.

“Okay, now sit on that bench until your mom gets back. You’re off the hook this time.”

Go figure, the kid was suddenly very well-behaved.

According to the information I was getting in my earpiece, Jenny had hightailed it down the hall and had been “caught” by Officer Cooley, who was patrolling outside.

The mother returned with Jenny in tow and gathered her son up like he was the most precious thing in the world, giving me a glare that told me exactly what she thought of me. Then they left the exhibit, whispering about how hideous monsters really needed to invest in glamour spells and how some women must be blind or seriously messed in the head to actually go out with the truly monstrous ones, even if some of us were rich like “that Gunnar guy”.

She had no idea I *was* that Gunnar guy.

I knew full well that gargoyles were not a well-accepted type of monster. Never had been, not even before The Wall fell. Vampires were, thanks to pop culture, and shifters usually were too, since they had fully human forms. But I couldn’t turn into a human, even if I tried. The best I could do was hide behind a glamour spell.

Sure, there were some women who found us attractive, with or without the illusion spell in place, but most women wanted the beast to turn back into the handsome prince at the end of the story. The ones like Lillian, who seemed to honestly find me attractive just the way I was, irresistibly so even, were not the norm. Most reacted to me the way that woman had.

It wasn’t just the way I looked, either. It was that gargoyles had originally been created to be nothing but mindless beasts to guard buildings. We

weren't supposed to have thoughts and wants of our own. We were...less.

"Wow. The more things change, the more they stay the same," said Mateo. He understood, perhaps more than most. He truly looked like a monster, with the head of a man, the body of a lion, and the tail of a scorpion. For bonus points, he also had the wings of a wyvern, so he was a real amalgamation of parts. He couldn't shift into a fully human form, either. His lion-man form was as close as he got, though he could become more leonine with four limbs if he so chose.

The worst part was that the word manticore came from an old Persian word with its roots in Greek and Latin that meant man-eater. Talk about a bad rep. Many other monsters had the same problem. Just ask the ogres. At least I didn't need to deal with that.

The parade was winding its way toward the museum, and most of the visitors stepped outside to watch it pass by.

"How are you two holding up?" Officer Cooley asked us. "Aside from having to babysit and parent small children, that is."

Despite being fully human and devoid of magic, she and her partner Hayes always ended up getting assigned to the special jobs that required working with magic and monsters.

I shrugged. "Eh. It's like this every year."

We'd only ever had one attempt at stealing the gold nugget, and that had been a long time ago, before Cooley's time.

Liam and Seth, the wizard-witch and demon duo, came to relieve us from our post.

Cooley narrowed her eyes at Seth. "You. You stole my cruiser."

Seth stuck both hands in the air in mock surrender. "That was months ago, and it was an emergency. Technically, it wasn't even me who drove it. It was

Eamon.”

“Fine. You’re off the hook. But only because I like your sister Tansy; she’s sweet. You still owe me, though.”

It was Liam, Seth’s demon partner, who replied. “How about we make it up to you by taking you out to dinner?”

“Absolutely not!” Cooley stomped out of the room.

Liam shrugged. “I tried.”

“One day, she’s going to say yes just to spite us, you know,” Seth said, shaking his head.

Freed from guard duty, I triggered my glamour spell back on and left via the back door, heading for home and my mate.

I’d just gotten into my Urus when I got the call.

“They have her!” Shelby’s panicked voice was shrill in my ear. “We were taking a side street to avoid the crowds. She was walking ahead of us. The moment we stepped out to the main road, a car stopped, and someone pulled her into it. Tansy managed to attach a magic marker to the vehicle. Wait...”

There was some muffled words I couldn’t hear, then, she said, “They’re at the Hilton. Eamon’s close by; he’s heading that way now.”

The anger in my head roared like waves crashing against rocks in a storm. I floored it toward the hotel. Whoever had stolen my mate was going to pay.

CHAPTER 27

LILLIAN



I RECOGNIZED HIM THE moment I stepped into the ritzy hotel room: Kung Pao Chicken...err, I mean, Kang. He'd looked stuffy and boring in the photo they'd shown me, but in casual street clothes, he looked suave, a lot younger, and fashionable. I wouldn't have been surprised if his sneakers alone cost more than my entire wardrobe.

He was tall, lean, and muscular, with a light olive-toned complexion, just a shade darker than mine, which was pretty light right now since I'd spent much of the summer indoors. His hairstyle highlighted his chiseled cheekbones and sharp jawline. He clearly spent a lot of time at the gym, or maybe that was just the natural build of a snow leopard shifter.

Having already seen the brief on this guy, I knew he was every mother's dream for their daughter. But I wasn't interested. I had Gunnar.

“Um, Kang, right?”

“Um, I actually go by Kevin.” He spoke perfect English with not even a trace of an accent. Didn’t Dr. Shen say he spent a lot of time in New York? It showed.

“Oh. Well, Kevin Pao does sound a lot better.”

He chuckled. “Sure does. But for the record, I do actually love Kung Pao Chicken.”

I relaxed a little at his attempt at a joke at his own expense.

“I’m sorry for the...methods...I used to get your attention. I asked those idiots to convince you to visit me on your own, but they had their own ideas on what ‘convincing’ entailed. It’s my fault for not being more clear. They are not who I usually work with. This trip was rather last minute, and unlike Dr. Shen, I don’t have two lap dogs always at my beck and call.”

I tried to gauge if he was lying, but I only sensed honesty.

“Well, Kevin, Dr. Shen told me all about you, and I’m sure you’re a great catch. But I’m really not interested. So if you’re here to—”

“You’re not?”

He looked happily surprised, which had me a little confused.

“Wait. Aren’t you here to convince me to choose you and make a bunch of snow leopard babies?”

“No. I’m here to convince you *not* to take their offer. I was ready to pay you off if you insisted on it.” Kevin relaxed in his seat. “I’ve been dating a model I met in Milan for almost a year, and I’m getting ready to propose to her. She’s not a snow leopard, but I don’t care.”

I held my hand up, showing off my gargantuan diamond and wedding band.

“And I’m already happily married. I don’t plan on ditching my husband for someone I don’t even know.”

“To the gargoyle who owns the protection agency, yes.” He nodded, his eyes on the rings. “Dr. Shen tried to tell me it was a sham wedding intended to fool them. But that’s one heck of a ring for a fake wedding. It’s gorgeous. Big, but still understated. Not too flashy. Who’s your jeweler? I might actually hit them up for something for Sofiya.”

“I don’t know who the designer is, but we got it at that small jewelry store downtown. They had it hiding in the back. He actually proposed with a giant-ass ruby, but there was no way that thing was fitting my finger, so we picked out another one instead.”

Kevin laughed. “Those old gargoyles need to get with the times. Most modern women don’t want a treasure from the past. That shit only flies if you’re a prince and the jewel once belonged to the queen or something. I bet it looked ridiculous on you.”

I pulled out my phone and showed him the photo I’d taken of the ring hanging loosely around my thumb.

He covered his face, laughing. “You’d need to wear that on a chain around your neck!”

“That’s what I did!” I laughed with him. “But Gunnar is actually a lot of fun and a great guy. The whole bad-boy moniker is a myth.”

Kevin gave me a warm and genuine grin. “There is no way this is a fake marriage. You can’t make this shit up. And you talk about him like you really do care for him.”

“I do. And just Dr. Shen watch. We’ll still be together after he leaves.”

“Hopefully by then, Sofiya and I will be engaged.” His eyes were somewhere else, like he was mentally picturing his supermodel girlfriend.

“Wouldn’t you want to marry her quickly so they couldn’t try to set you up again?”

“That might be a good idea. Except Sofiya would want something grand; she’d have to plan fast.”

“I can’t wait to see Dr. Shen’s face when he finds out.”

“Oh, he’s going to be pissed.”

We both laughed, our shared determination to escape The White Claws’ endangered species breeding program uniting us for the moment.

The door smashed open, and I gasped. Then I calmed when I saw that it was only Gunnar.

“Gunnar, you’re here. This is—”

He wasn’t listening. “She’s mine,” he growled.

He didn’t give Kevin time to say anything, dropping his glamour and lunging for him.

Before I could even shout out a warning, a giant white and grey cat burst out of Kevin as he sprang to evade Gunnar. Kang landed on his feet deftly and hissed. Gunnar charged him again, flinging a chair out of the way and knocking over a table.

Kevin batted him away, claws retracted. He was still only in defense mode despite Gunnar’s attack.

“Gunnar, stop it.” I reached for him, stupidly getting between two fighting monsters with nothing to protect me but mittens.

I immediately got tossed aside. My back thudded against the wall, and I gasped. Then Eamon was there, steadying me.

Gunnar had not stopped. If anything, me telling him to stop had only worked him into a more furious frenzy. He swung at the snow leopard, chasing it around the room. Kevin, having had enough, unsheathed his claws.

“Eamon, do something to stop them! Kevin isn’t here to take me away; he’s here to convince me not to take the offer. He’s got a girlfriend already.”

“Yeah, I heard.” Eamon approached the brawling pair but stopped when he realized he could only hold one at a time.

“I’ll help,” Tansy said. She mumbled something and made a motion as if she was throwing a net.

The giant snow leopard froze in place, as if tangled so tightly in the magical net that he couldn’t move. Eamon leaped on Gunnar. And when two arms proved insufficient to stop the gargoyle, smokey appendages shot out from the demon’s body to help.

Eamon managed to hold onto Gunnar, but Gunnar didn’t calm down. Kevin, on the other hand, had changed back to his human form and was now naked, his clothes having been torn from his body when he first shifted. I averted my gaze. He looked composed, so Tansy released him.

“I’m sorry, Kevin. Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine. Us snow leopards are quick. This is a normal reaction. He thought I was trying to steal his mate” He fished a new set of just-as-fashionable clothing out of his bag. “I’d planned for the unexpected shift.”

“Thank you for being so understanding. Good luck with Sofiya.”

“Thank you.”

Then he was gone, and I was facing a still very angry Gunnar who was being held back by Tansy’s magical bonds.

“I can’t believe you were considering his offer!” Gunnar yelled, his eyes flashing a stony gray.

I stepped back, shocked that he was turning his anger on me.

“I wasn’t—”

“Bullshit! I thought you’d been kidnapped. Then I get here to find you laughing with him?”

“We were just—”

“I don’t fucking care what you were doing. You tried to protect him!”

“Yes, because you jumped to conclusions and attacked him! You didn’t even ask, you just assu—”

“How much money did he offer you?”

I heard Tansy’s audible gasp and knew I hadn’t misheard.

What the fuck? Okay, now I was angry. It was bad enough that he was cutting me off every sentence and refusing to listen. Did Gunnar really think I’d entertain leaving him just because someone offered me some money? What type of fickle, shallow woman did he think I was?

I thought of the gossip mag I’d ripped up the other day. I’d expect this from them, but not from Gunnar. It was shitty enough to read that bullcrap written by a stranger. To have my husband imply it right to my face was devastating. I wanted to curl up into a ball and cry.

But no. Nu-uh. I wasn’t going to cower while my husband accused me of being able to be bought. I’d never once done anything to let him believe I was in this for the money. I’d thought he was a simple security guard at first. And we signed a preup. Which meant when we parted, I’d get nothing. Nada. Zilch.

Was that why he thought I’d agreed to stay around? Because I wouldn’t get anything if I left? Well, fuck that.

“He didn’t offer me a thing. And for your information, he didn’t come to convince me to take the offer. You’d have heard that if you hadn’t been too busy jumping to conclusions. He came to convince me not to take Dr. Shen’s offer. He has a girlfriend. A supermodel girlfriend. Who he’s going to propose to. And I told him I wouldn’t leave my *husband*,” I stressed the word, “for anyone. And, for what it’s worth, we were laughing at how disappointed Dr. Shen was going to be.”

Gunnar had finally calmed down enough to listen, which was just as well because now I was really pissed.

“But silly me. My husband clearly thinks I could be bought with money.” Suddenly, I was beyond talking, beyond explaining. “You know, I thought we had something here. Something good, and real. But I guess I was wrong.” I needed to get away from him. If my cat had its way right now, I’d go all murder mittens on him, and that would kind of be abuse. I turned to Tansy. “I need to leave. Now.”

Tansy, who had released Gunnar from her magical bonds, put a hand on my shoulder. “You got it.”

“Wait, Lillian—”

Before I could think it through, I blurted out, “And you can forget about trying to make this work after. We’re done!”

“Come on, let’s get you home.” Tansy waved her hand and murmured something under her breath, and a portal opened up in front of us.

Numb with anger and disappointment, I let her guide me through it.

CHAPTER 28

GUNNAR



I WATCHED AS MY mate disappeared through the portal. My rage, which had just moments before controlled my words and actions, faded away.

Shit!

What the hell had I done? I took a step toward the portal, but it had already closed behind them, and I was left staring at a blank wall. The soft whooshing sound from the portal closing lingered in the room, taunting me.

I'd never meant to hurt her, but my accusatory words had popped out before I could stop them. In all my years, nothing had prepared me for the horrible sinking feeling that the woman I loved might find a better option than me somewhere else. I'd let that insecurity control me and turn into anger because anger was so much easier compared to admitting that I might not be enough.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Eamon smacked me upside of the head.

I didn't even try to stop him. I deserved it. "I'm an idiot."

"Yes, you most certainly are. How could you even say that? Has she ever once done anything that might make you think she was in it for money? I told you to wait. I was listening in on their conversation."

And indeed Eamon had had his ear, morphed into the shape of a large funnel, pressed to the door when I'd arrived on the scene.

I shook my head. "I don't know what came over me. I heard them laughing through the door, and my brain just got—"

"You got angry is what you got. That's some serious red flag shit right there." Eamon shook his head as if disappointed in me.

He was right. I had no reason to accuse her of abandoning me for a higher bidder. I'd jumped to conclusions, and in doing so I'd hurt her. And all because I hadn't ever dealt with my deep-seated feelings of not being good enough for anyone to consider as a long-term option until I finally had a bit of money. But that wasn't her fault. That was all on me.

"What the hell were you thinking anyway? I can't believe you'd think she'd jump ship for some cold, hard cash."

"I... I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh yeah? Then how the fuck *did* you mean it?"

"I thought if she gave me a number, I'd double it to make her stay." Even as I said it I realized it was a dumb idea, but the desperate feeling I'd gotten when I thought she'd been tempted away from me had done all the thinking.

Eamon looked at me like I'd grown another head. "Oh, sure, like that's any better. That would still mean you think she'd choose whoever pays her more. Look, I know some women are like that, and there's nothing wrong with women like that as long as they are being honest and upfront about it. But it's

pretty clear to me Lillian is not like that, and would be upset to think you thought she was.”

He was right. But in the heat of the moment, I’d turned into an idiot caveman trying to trade anything I had, *everything* I had, for a woman’s love. The only thing going through my head at the time was that I’d die if I lost her.

Eamon’s phone rang, and when he picked it up I could hear Tansy’s voice on the other end.

“She’s pissed. And I don’t blame her. Gunnar should probably give her a few hours, maybe even a day or two, to calm down before talking to her.”

Eamon turned his attention to me. “You heard the lady, Gunnar. Give her some time.”

Tansy’s voice came out a little louder, like she was raising her voice to talk to me directly. “Make her cry again, and I’ll turn you into a frog.”

That wasn’t much of a threat. Lillian loved frogs. But I didn’t say anything. The important thing was that Lillian was crying because of me. I hated that.

“Anyway,” Tansy continued, “I’ll go talk to her. Gah! You men can be so dense sometimes.” Then she hung up, muttering something about me being a dumbass.

I deserved that. I’d reacted without thinking. At. All.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” Eamon looked around the trashed room. “On second thought, let’s go down to the front desk and see what we can do about taking care of the damage.”

It turned out, however, that a certain Mr. Pao had already spoken to the front desk and offered to cover the costs to fully redo the room.

When we got back to the penthouse, I didn’t head upstairs; I went to Baby instead. I needed to drive. Needed to let the wind clear my mind.

I hadn’t planned to go there, but found myself back at my cottage. It must

have been subconscious muscle memory. I always came here when life got tough or I needed somewhere to think. But this time, instead of a neutral place where I could be alone with my thoughts, it was filled with memories of Lillian.

I couldn't stay inside.

I stepped back out and closed the door, looking around the property. It really was a mess. Maybe getting some work done out here would take my mind off things. Many common and invasive weeds had snuck in here and there in the wildflower front yard. The ones with the spikey leaves were easy to recognize, but the others were tougher. The leaves all looked the same to me, and it was hard for me to tell one species apart from another when they weren't in bloom.

Lillian wouldn't have any trouble with that, I thought glumly. She'd know what was what.

I shook my head, focusing on the task ahead. The worst thing I could do now would be to rush back to the penthouse to be around Lillian. I wanted to apologize, to make things right. But she needed some time, so that's what I'd give her...even if I had to overhaul the entire yard just to stay occupied.

There was also the footpath to the house to take care of, now that I'd pushed back all the plants growing over it and could see it properly. The path needed to be wider to accommodate the wild growth patterns of some of the plants. I considered. I could head over to that large boulder by the west side of the lake. Flat pieces chipped off it every year and were perfect for pathways—after a quick tumble, of course, to get rid of any sharp edges. I wouldn't want Lillian to cut herself.

Then there was the greenhouse. But one look at that and all I could see was Lillian working in it, the place brimming with her plants. And that only

brought back her last words to me: *Forget about trying to make this work after. We're done!* That was just said in anger, right? Like how I'd said some beyond stupid things in the heat of the moment? What if she actually meant it?

Realizing I'd never be able to distract myself enough to stop thinking of her entirely, I decided to give up on the idea. I'd just have to work with her in my head.

Maybe if I made this place perfect for her, she'd stick around and give me another chance.

CHAPTER 29

LILLIAN



“I’M DISAPPOINTED WE WEREN’T able to change your mind, but I understand now that we went about everything the wrong way. Not just now, but from the very moment we knew of your existence. And for that, I’m truly sorry.” Dr. Shen sounded and looked genuinely regretful over the video call. Something about the way Dr. Shen spoke to me had changed since we met. He seemed warming, more friendly. It was odd, and I didn’t really trust it, but I wasn’t going to question a good thing.

“Snow leopard shifters, more so than many other shifter cultures, are secretive and keep mostly to ourselves,” he continued. “It served us well in the past when we were targeted by various groups for our differences. We were able to prosper and grow rich. But the world is changing, and we find

ourselves at a crossroad of sorts. The Wall falling has had a lot to do with that.”

I nodded. “Technology and magic, too. It’s impossible to hide now.”

“Yes.” The older man paused, picking his words carefully. “I realize now that we must embrace all our members, even the ones who are unable to shift, the ones born abroad, or with mixed blood. If we don’t, we may die out. What is the point of all this wealth when our numbers are dwindling, and there are no children to pass it down to?”

“I’m sorry. And I hope you find a way to save your species.”

“It’s your species too, Lillian. You are half snow leopard shifter, and that is a lot more than many others.”

I couldn’t stop the derisive scoff that tumbled out.

He nodded. “Yes, I understand we haven’t done anything to make you feel particularly welcome. We didn’t know about you until your adoptive parents contacted us. We had no idea who you were, or whether you were actually a snow leopard, or just another cat shifter.” He sighed audibly. “It took us years to confirm who you were. Records were...lacking. By the time we did, you’d already grown up. I hope you can one day forgive the way we’ve treated you in the past. We don’t have packs like some canine shifters do, but we do have customs and traditions that are passed down through the generations. Not being able to shift has always been hugely shameful, but maybe it’s time for old ideas like that to go.”

I thought back to my failed relationships. “That’s going to be hard. Even with other shifters, it’s very important. Running together as a family when the moon is full is a tradition.” A tradition I could never participate in.

“Then we must lead the way. I may not have been successful in completing my mission here in Darlington, but I’ve had a lot of time to rethink this entire

project. Lillian, I...” It sounded like he wanted to say something more to me but he stopped himself. “It was nice to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me over video chat so I could see your face again. I’m boarding my plane now, but you have my number. Please feel free to use it for whatever reason.”

I thanked him, even though I highly doubted I’d need to call him, and said goodbye.

So that solved itself faster and better than I ever thought possible. I had a feeling Kevin coming out publicly about his relationship with Sofiya had put the final nail in that coffin. He was most likely the only single male candidate they had that could’ve gone up against Gunnar on paper; everyone else was married.

I sent a recording of the conversation to the rest of the penthouse, an easy task since I had made the video call using the Redrock tablet. The general consensus was that The White Claws were no longer a worry for me, though I should keep up the ruse of being married for as long as possible. It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to go. My apartment was gone, and I was still technically jobless, though if you asked Shelby, she’d probably say I was a budding entrepreneur.

I looked around my temporary room. I’d moved everything except my plants into one of the spare rooms in the main area, mostly because I needed to be away from all the things that reminded me of Gunnar while I was trying to calm down. I didn’t want to claw up anything of value and regret it later.

Our argument had been two days ago, and he still hadn’t returned. I’d wanted some time alone, but not this much. Now I was worried perhaps he was done with me.

When Tansy and I had gotten home, my mittens had gotten the biggest

workout of their fuzzy lives. Tansy and Shelby had brought over all the things they wanted to get rid of, and I'd only fucked up one good pillow, which I'd replaced.

We'd had a girl's night dinner of wine and ice cream. Apparently, Shelby always kept Ben and Jerry's on hand just in case. She'd told me how Grayson had accidentally implied once that he needed to pay for her things because she was sleeping with him, and how cross she'd gotten with him. But he hadn't meant it in a bad way.

It was just that gargoyles came from a time when men were expected to be the breadwinners, and a man's worth was determined by how well he provided for his mate. This was especially true in the more well-to-do levels of society. If your wife needed to work, it meant you weren't doing a good enough job taking care of her.

Apparently, Gunnar told Eamon he was prepared to offer me twice as much as Kevin had...or should I say twice as much as he *thought* Kevin had...to keep from losing me. A huge part of me hated that he felt money was even something I cared about, but at the same time, knowing that he was willing to do anything to keep me around was...well, it was nice.

But then I'd freaked out on him, and he hadn't been back since. Was he waiting for me to call him?

I picked up my phone again, my fingers itching to send him a message.

Oh, what the heck. It wasn't like anything about our relationship was normal to begin with. I wrote a short message telling him I wanted to talk. The message stared back at me, mocking me from my screen.

I should send it. Get the ball rolling. Extend that olive branch. But I wimped out. What if he didn't reply? I was too chicken shit; I erased it without hitting send.

Argh! Why was I like this? I could think perfectly fine until love had anything to do with it, and then my brain turned into a pile of mush—

Love? Holy shit, was I in love?

How did that happen? I shoved my phone deep into my purse and stomped out of my room so I wouldn't be tempted to check it every thirty seconds.

I went to my espresso machine, which I'd set up in the main kitchen, only to discover that I'd run out of my favorite beans. Well, now that I didn't have a secret organization with ties to organized crime after me, I could actually get out of the house and go buy some more.

I knocked on Shelby's door and asked if she wanted to come along, but she was busy rushing to finish a test garment. Tansy was visiting her brother, Seth. It was just me then. Me and my rickety old Prius. It was my first solo outing since I'd met Gunnar.

The first stop was my go-to specialty grocer, who carried my favorite roast of Colombian beans. It wasn't until I was walking back to the car that I had that sinking feeling of being watched again. We'd been so focused on The White Claws that we'd forgotten about the other, unexplained person, or people, that had been watching me. Or maybe that was the insidious forget spell in action again. I hurried into the car, not wanting to take any chances.

I dug in my purse for my phone and pressed the first contact on my list, Gunnar. I pressed the button to record and dictated a message telling him what was going on, with all the details I thought he needed.

I just needed to make it back to the penthouse.

I was trying to make a left turn when a large, black SUV blocked my way. Another black SUV was behind me. Okay, stay calm. I'd just loop around and try again.

Easier said than done. At the next turn, the same thing happened again. I tried

to be sneaky at the third turn, putting my blinkers on to go the opposite way I wanted, but again they blocked me from both sides. Soon, I noticed a pattern: they were running me out of the city.

So I did the only thing I could: I put on my blinkers and slowed to a halt. There was no way I was going to let them drive me out into the middle of nowhere. At least here, I had witnesses. Even a look-away spell couldn't trick security cameras.

But they wouldn't let me stop, rear-ending me when I tried.

Fuck!

The Prius might as well have been made of tin foil. Fuck trying to be good to the environment; my next car was going to be a freaking Hummer.

These people didn't know how little I cared about this car. I slowed and stopped anyway, forcing the SUV behind me to push my car along before we all stopped, my car sandwiched between the two larger vehicles.

I glanced over at my phone. No reply from Gunnar. I sent another message, telling him they had me stopped at the side of the road after pushing my car for some distance.

As two huge dudes got out of one of the SUVs, their faces masked, I triple-checked to make sure my doors were locked, then pressed the call button on my phone before leaving it on the passenger seat. It was then that I noticed the SUVs didn't have license plates. There was definitely some magic going on here if they weren't getting pulled over for that.

A smaller guy, also masked, got out and made a gesture at my car, and suddenly the Prius doors unlocked. One of the huge dudes opened my door, and I felt a pinch as he reached in to pull me out.

Then the world went dark.

CHAPTER 30

GUNNAR



I PACED THE LIVING room of the penthouse as I waited for Dr. Shen to pick up. I had an inkling he wasn't involved, but he was my last lead. We'd exhausted all the other ones.

I regretted having had a few drinks while I cleaned up the greenhouse because now I wasn't working with all my brain cells, and I needed to be. I'd checked my phone and noticed a missed call and two messages from Lillian. The call had gone to voicemail, and it had recorded the struggle as whoever had taken her broke into her car.

"What do you need, gargoyle?" was Dr. Shen's terse greeting over speakerphone.

"Lillian is gone. Abducted from her car. Tell me you don't have anything to do with this."

There was a low growl on the other line. “I do not. I am currently flying over Hawaii, and Lillian is not with me. Don’t tell me you’ve lost my granddaughter.”

“Your what?” That was news to me.

I eyed Eamon, who was listening in together with everyone else. He mouthed, “I’m on it” before pulling out his phone and starting to tap away.

“Never mind.” Shen yelled something I didn’t understand, probably to his pilot. “Tell me the details, Gargoyle.”

I told him all I could, starting with the missed calls and messages. Checking all the CCTV feeds from cameras dotted about the city, we’d found where they’d stopped her car. I sent him the recording I had of the two thugs manhandling her into one of the SUVs. Then one of them got into her car, and the three vehicles sped away.

“We found her car in a ditch just outside the city limits,” I finished. “Then the trail goes cold.”

“There is a lot of magic involved to make people to ignore all that on a busy street,” Dr. Shen said thoughtfully. “I’m turning my plane back around. What are you doing now to find her?”

“We have drones and a helicopter in the air looking for her.” And I’d called him.

“Call me when you have any more information.” He hung up.

The chopper was from the EA, but the human police said they wouldn’t help until she was missing for longer. They’d suggested that The White Claws probably had her, then had hung up.

But it wasn’t The White Claws. Dr. Shen wouldn’t be turning his plane around if he had her.

Frustrated that the call hadn’t led me any closer to finding my mate, I hurled

my phone at the couch. It landed with a thud on the soft surface.

“Here’s what I found on Dr. Shen’s children,” Eamon said. “He had two sons and a daughter. His second son is mated to the daughter of a high-ranking Chinese official. His daughter was reported as missing about ten years ago. And his first son is deceased. A car accident. Totaled his Lamborghini. He was reportedly a playboy and got around. I’d bet any money that he was Lillian’s biological father.”

We’d known Lillian was one of many illegitimate children of a snow leopard shifter. We just didn’t know who the shifter parent was. Had Dr. Shen taken on this project of revitalizing the snow leopard bloodline for personal reasons as well as professional ones? Was he on a search for all his missing grandchildren?

Here, perhaps, was an unexpected ally.

“Is she wearing her charm? The one I spelled for her?” Tansy asked.

“She could be. Why?” I asked.

“It still has my magic attached to it. I can try to change the spell a tiny bit so I can see images through it, instead of it preventing others from taking images of her. Sometimes it’s doable. Do you still have the box the charm came in?”

I did. I retrieved it for her. She took it from me and sat down on one of the couches, the box in her hands.

“This might take a while, so keep scanning the drones.”

I did so, going through the feeds on my laptop, my heart sinking. We’d gotten the drones into the air too late. The SUVs had long arrived at their destination. The city of Darlington was going about its day as usual, none the wiser that my life was imploding. What would I ever do without Lillian? She was all I lived for now.

We had a few drones circling just outside the city limits as well, but

Darlington's surrounding countryside was quiet, as per usual.

"I see a ton of marble. And a room with golden bars. Shit—that's a cell. A very pretty cell, but a cell nonetheless. I think she's lying on the floor. I can only see what the charm sees, so it's not much."

Whoever had her had money. A lot of it, too, if they were keeping her in a marble cell.

"What the fuck?" Tansy shook her head. "There's a lion in the cell next to her. Like a mane and all. And it's huge." She blinked twice. "And...that's all I got. I just got kicked out."

"Animals in a cell?" Shelby asked. "Like a zoo? Didn't some rich bitch try to trap Sybil's naga Zayn for her collection?"

"Yep, Avalon. They caught her," I said. "I was there to bring her in after Sybil wrapped her up nice and tight. You think she's behind all this?"

They'd freed two gators and a saltwater croc from her collection, as well as a lone wolf shifter. Avalon's daddy had paid a fine, and she'd walked away with just a slap on the wrist, like most super-rich people do. Knowing this, Zayn and I had made sure that the idiot she was working with, a man who'd harassed and threatened Sybil, was removed from the equation in a rather permanent fashion.

"Well, they are a family of witches, and there's been plenty of magical interference through all this," Tansy said. "It would fit."

"We'll get the EA to officially send someone over," I said. "They won't be able to search without a warrant, but we can check out their other properties while they are distracted. I doubt they'd keep them at their home in the city."

The EA already had a list of the family's significant number of properties, which were scattered across several states. We'd check out the closest ones first, a vineyard and a farm. Neither of them made much of a profit, but that

didn't matter. All the family money was old money, earning interest in the bank.

I couldn't just sit around and do nothing. I stood, shoving away my chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Out," I said, making my way to the rooftop patio. "I can't just sit and watch screens. I need to go look for her."

"Understood, brother." Grayson said. "You helped me when the WEC took Shelby, so if you need backup, I will be there."

"We all will," Eamon said.

Graham nodded. "Just because I don't plan on getting mated doesn't mean *you* don't deserve happiness. You can count on all of us."

I stepped outside just as a chilly autumn wind swept across the rooftop. I walked to the edge, stepping up onto the railing. In one motion, I leaped into the air and spread my wings. There was a moment of vertigo as I dropped, then the air caught my wings, and I was gliding across the city.

CHAPTER 31

LILLIAN



I WOKE UP IN a cell with a pounding headache. In the cell next to me was a massive lion with an impressive mane. I'd seen my ex's lion before, and this guy made him look like a kitten. He paced back and forth in the tiny space. Across from the lion was a tiger. It, too, was pacing.

What the fuck was going on?

I took stock of the room. For a place that was full of cells, it was awfully fancy. The floor was tiled in an alternating pattern of plain marble and a darker stone with iridescent, mother-of-pearl inlay. Even the antique gold-colored bars of the cell I was in were capped with decorative filigree at the tops. I doubted their delicate appearance made them any weaker; they were probably made of tough stuff underneath.

I was literally in a gilded cage. It reminded me of an image of the world's most expensive stable that I'd seen online. This place was designed with the comfort of those outside the bars in mind, not the horses.

"Ahh, our new snow leopard wakes at last." A middle-aged white man wearing a polo shirt was sitting in a chair in front of my cell. Next to him was a blonde woman who looked very much like him. "I can't believe we had such a rare shifter as a snow leopard living here in Darlington the whole time, and I didn't even know it. I finally have a pair." He turned to the younger woman. "Great job, Avalon. I was annoyed that you cost me part of my collection before, but this completely makes up for it. I always knew you were my favorite daughter."

"Does that mean I get my bigger allowance back?" the blonde asked with a whine.

"Of course, dear. In fact, have these." The man handed her something shiny. My engagement and wedding rings! I saw red.

"Ooooh, pretty." She beamed. "Thanks, Daddy!"

I let out a feral-sounding growl. That was my physical connection to Gunnar. What the fuck was going on here? A "collection"? I looked at the other cats in the cells and a dawning realization made me want to hurl. Those weren't just animals; they were shifters!

"Hey, I know you. You're that social media starlet who was caught trying to imprison shifters!"

You'd have to have been living under a rock to have missed that. They'd freed her small collection, but I didn't remember how else she was punished. Looked like she never was. Typical. Avalon, Avalon... Didn't her dad have a related name? Damn it, now I wished I did more than just read the headlines of whatever newspaper was on the break table at work.

Blondie just rolled her eyes and walked away, my rings jammed onto her pinky finger.

It was the older man who spoke. “*And* they seized her collection. Well, my collection, really, since it all belongs to the family. But it seems I’ve had a stroke of good luck. It is so good of you to make your existence known, my dear. And you gave us a perfect scapegoat, too. The whole world is going to blame those snow leopards for your disappearance. There are already eyewitnesses swearing up and down that they saw that Shen guy loading you into his Bentley.” He grinned, shaking his head, and his smile made him look genuinely evil. “My, my. People are so gullible.”

He stood from his chair and approached the bars. “Now, to figure out why you didn’t shift after we gave you the shot. What powerful magic are you hiding?”

“Magic? None,” I lied. He didn’t need to know I could make plants grow. “I didn’t shift into a snow leopard because I can’t.”

“Lies. The snow leopards don’t consider children who cannot shift to be leopards at all. The White Claws would never want you for their breeding program if you were already proven to be a dud.”

A dud? Great. That was one name for it.

“That proves how much you know,” I spat back at him. “I can’t shift. Never have been able to. All I have are mittens.” I made my mittens, which came out fast and easily, the claws super sharp, since I really, *really* wanted to claw this guy’s face into fettuccini.

“Mittens?” The guy looked very pissed and more than a little incredulous. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am. I tried my whole life to shift and failed every time.”

His eyes focused on the charm around my neck. “No no, you can shift.” He

opened the cell door, stomped over, and ripped off the necklace. “This has magic. Some sort of illusion spell.”

He held something out to me, and I only registered it for a fraction of a second before I felt the stabbing of the prong. It was like being stabbed by two white-hot knives. Every muscle in my body spasmed uncontrollably. My brain felt like it was being rattled violently in my head. The shock had me writhing on the floor.

The asshole just tasered me!

The big cats in the nearby cells, already tense to begin with, growled and hissed.

My hands turned into paws, and from the tingling on my ears, I was pretty sure those had become fuzzy too. But a second later, I was fully human again. “Shift, damn you. I demand that you shift.” He made to tase me again.

I braced for the impact, but the lion threw its entire body against the cell bars and roared deafeningly, and the man stumbled back. Instinctively, I crawled closer to the lion so that I was pressed right up against the bars. They were wide enough apart for the lion’s paws to reach through, and that was enough to dissuade the man from getting any closer. I bet both the tiger and the lion would kill him in a heartbeat if given half a chance.

Hell, *I* wanted a miracle so I could shift and do the honors myself. But no such luck.

“Sir,” the man behind him said. “The EA wants to talk to you. They’ve sent someone to the mansion.”

The EA? Eamon? Maybe even Gunnar himself? The way the guy said “the mansion” made me think that wasn’t where we were now. Of course, he didn’t keep his illegal shifter zoo at his mansion. That would be silly.

I remembered his name now: Arthur. This was the family of ultra-rich

witches who claimed to be related to the legendary royal line.

Angry and disappointed that I couldn't shift—what was new?—Arthur threw my monstera charm against the wall, stomped out of my cell, slammed the door shut, and left. His armed guard followed behind him, and I was left alone with my two fellow prisoners.

I turned to the lion. “Thanks for protecting me.”

It chuffed but didn't turn back into a human. They must have been given something to prevent them from shifting back. I was about to move away, but it pawed at me, claws retracted, and I took that to mean it didn't want me to leave. I hesitated for a moment, but then decided that I was in no immediate danger from him and decided it was safe to stay.

I was exhausted. Whatever they'd dosed me with, combined with being tasered, had really knocked the stuffing out of me. So I leaned against the bars and closed my eyes.

I woke up to the sound of three sharp beeps. The paw that I'd fallen asleep on moved. There was a clicking sound, and the door to my cell swung open by itself. Both the lion and tiger got up and walked out of their cells. When I didn't move, the lion chuffed, came into my cell, and prodded me toward the door.

Okay, then? I followed them out into a hallway and picked up my necklace. The chain was broken, but I was happy to see the charm was still intact. I stuffed it into my pocket and continued to follow the lion along a corridor that led up and up, confirming my suspicion that we were underground.

The door at the end of the corridor led out to a fenced courtyard with cloth stretched overhead to provide shade. The fences were tall with an overhang that jutted inward at the top, preventing any of the big cats from getting out. There was also a tower built in the middle of the yard with two armed guards standing on top of it.

The lion hurried over to a corner and raised his leg, and I averted my gaze as he relieved himself. I wondered if this was the only chance we had to do that. But I was stuck as a human and couldn't just lift a leg like everyone else, especially since there was a pair of armed guards watching over us from the top of the tower. I decided that if they didn't give me a bathroom break later, I'd just crap all over their marble floors. They could clean it up.

I rubbed my arms from the cold, wishing I had fur like everyone else. Around me were a dozen other animals, mostly predators. It was like recess for a shifter zoo, and this was our prison yard.

It wasn't just big cats. There was a massive silverback slamming itself repeatedly against the bars of the fence, as well as a huge grizzly and a smaller bear, the species of which I didn't recognize.

There were two wolves pacing back and forth across the yard, snarling. They'd worn a path of bare dirt where they paced; I guessed they did this every day. I had to remind myself that these were all shifters, even though I had no idea how long they'd been kept this way, unable to shift back. How horrible for them.

Hadn't the Champawat Tiger, the Bengal tigress who held the Guinness Book of World Records title for the highest number of human fatalities from a single animal, been a shifter stuck in her shifted form? Or was that just a legend? It would explain how she'd managed for years to evade hunters from

various villages, as well as the Nepalese army, racking up a total of 436 lives claimed across two countries.

Had any of these shifters been stuck as their animals for so long that they'd lost their humanity? The lion, I thought, was good. He'd protected me and offered me comfort, even if it was just a single paw through the cage bars.

I looked around at the animals around me and did a double take at the snow leopard, who was staring at me with a questioning look. I wondered if he recognized what I was by the way I smelled.

He took a few steps toward me, as did all the other shifters. They were all probably curious that I was in human form.

"I can't fully shift," I explained. I held out a hand and made a mitten. "That's all you get."

The snow leopard approached and sniffed me. It was strange to be surrounded by so many wild animals. Again, I had to keep reminding myself that these were all shifters with fully functional human brains and that no, I couldn't just start petting one. No matter how soft the fur looked. Especially since, by the looks of it, the snow leopard was a male. He might get the wrong idea.

He sniffed my hand, so I made mittens again and showed them to him. "That's all I can do. Arthur was pretty pissed."

He chuffed.

"Yeah. I'd like to rip him to shreds, too."

I surveyed the area. There was a farmhouse a little way away and a barn off to the side. In the field beyond the fences were bales of hay and several horses. Arthur had hidden his private shifter zoo under the guise of a farm.

Above the shade cloth, which covered the entire fenced-in area, was open sky. But the grass under my feet—they'd taken my shoes—was still green,

which meant that the shade cloth had to be down some of the time. They probably only put it up when the shifters were let out. A bunch of wild predators hanging out in a horse pasture would look suspicious for sure.

I walked to the fence, and the snow leopard and lion followed me, both chuffing at a wolf when it got too close. The fence was heavy duty and bore the scars of many failed previous attempts to break through it. A kudzu vine that had started to climb up the fence caught my attention. Man, those weeds were everywhere.

It gave me an idea. I found what looked to be the weakest part of the fence, though I was sure, given the fact that the silverback was still slamming itself repeatedly against it with no effect, that that wasn't saying much.

"Grow," I whispered urgently. I mentally directed the vines to pull on either side of the weak spot. I didn't know if it was the right thing to do, since I'd never tried it before, but it was worth a shot.

Almost immediately, the vine latched on and started to grow. When a tendril reached too far past the weak point, I touched it and redirected it to pull the other way. It did. Cool.

But I didn't think it was enough. I focused on the tree just outside of the fence and past my reach, hoping I could do this without touching it. Technically, I hadn't touched every plant in my collection that first day, yet they all grew while I napped, so maybe?

"Grow your roots," I whispered. I directed them to grow into and through the foundation of the fence.

The lion and the snow leopard still had their gaze firmly on the weedy vines, as they wrapped around the fence.

"Let's not be too obvious while they do their thing, hey guys?" I made my way back to the wall. "How often do we get let out? Every day?"

The lion chuffed twice.

“Twice a day?” The sun looked like it was about to set, so this must be the second time today. “Again tomorrow morning?”

He chuffed again. There were no words, but it sounded like a yes.

“Good. That will give it time.” I wasn’t powerful, and while the kudzu was easy enough to grow and control, the tree wasn’t. I felt tired already and regretted not having learned yet how to ration my energy. I had learned how to stop and restart a spell, though. So I’d take a break if I had to.

I looked at the guards at the top of the tower. Now that I’d taken a longer look, they were holding tranquilizer guns, not real rifles. “What about them, when the time comes?” I hoped I was whispering quietly enough.

The two cats exchanged a look before the lion wandered off to sniff noses with the tiger. After a quick sniff of the slowly growing kudzu vines, the tiger looked over and gave me a quick nod.

Okay. I guess that was it. We had a plan. Kind of. I had no idea what they planned to do to get rid of our guards, or what would happen after we got that fence down. But I did know one thing: I wasn’t staying here.

CHAPTER 32

LILLIAN



IT WAS COLD AND rainy the next morning. It didn't seem to bother any of the other shifters, but I was freezing.

I'd stopped the spell last night just before lights out. I hadn't noticed just how exhausted I was until I'd finally gotten one of the guards to let me out to use the bathroom. I had to be the first human form shifter kept here, and a woman to boot, and that must have made a difference in the way they treated me when I pleaded to the camera that I really needed to go. I doubted the others would have been allowed out. Especially since they were all extremely dangerous in their shifted forms.

One of the overnight guards had been clearly upset when Arthur confirmed to him that I couldn't shift. He'd mumbled something about being paid to watch

monsters, not innocent people. I decided to use that to my advantage and let him believe I was just a normal woman.

The walk back to the cell had been brutal, like I was trying to finish a marathon. At first, I thought I'd come down with something, but then I remembered I had two spells going and I shut them down real quick.

Gunnar hadn't been kidding when he said it was dangerous to drain my powers. Last time, I'd been surrounded by my plants, which, as a green witch, also charged my powers. Technically, if I were to stand in the middle of a jungle, I should be able to recharge while I discharged and keep simple spells on indefinitely, even with the limited powers I had. Sitting in the cell yesterday, I hadn't had that luxury.

I was relieved to see this morning that the plants had done their job. The ground at the base of the fence rose up ever so slightly, as if the tree roots underneath had grown overnight, pushing up the ground. And two sections of the fence were covered in kudzu.

But I wasn't the only one who had noticed. The guard standing atop the tower had spotted the change as well.

"What the fuck? Was that there yesterday?" he asked his partner.

"Dunno. Don't think so," was the reply.

"Shit," I mumbled under my breath. "Guys, we need to do this now."

It was as if I'd given a secret signal. My new lion friend prowled away, placing himself on one side of the tower as the tiger slinked to the far end of the yard. Everyone had stopped to watch them. Only the guards weren't looking, because they were busy taking photos of the fence.

Did the other shifters all know what was about to happen? Had the plan spread to other prisoners, even though no one technically used language in their shifted form?

The tiger started to sprint toward the lion. Both leaped into the air, the lion going straight up while the tiger aimed itself at the top of the tower. I realized it was going to try to jump all the way up there. The tower must be at least twenty feet tall. There was no way he'd make it!

But he wasn't aiming for the tower; he was aiming for the lion. For a moment, I thought they were going to collide in mid-air. Instead, the lion boosted the tiger up higher. The tiger's second jump had him landing right on top of one of the guards.

The man let out a scream that ended in a wet gurgle.

"Fuck!" The second guard stumbled back, reaching for his tranquilizer gun.

But it was too late. The tiger made a bloody mess of him as well in short order.

By the time the tiger landed again in the middle of the yard, the lion was charging at the fence, aiming at the spot where the vines changed directions. The fence groaned and creaked, threatening to come apart. Then the snow leopard was charging at it. Parts of it broke and shifted, but not enough for anyone to get out.

By now, an alarm was blaring, and more guards would be out anytime. Surely there had to be more than two guards in this whole place.

The lion was about to try again when the silverback shoved him aside. He pounded his chest, then charged. That did it. The fence broke, simultaneously coming apart at the weak spot and tearing out of the ground. The concrete blocks that had once held the fence in place crumbled from the force of the roots.

It was chaos as everyone made a mad dash for it. But with only two legs, my bare feet slipping on the wet ground, and shivering from the cold, I had only

just made it over the rubble when the door slammed open, and several more guards charged out.

Fuck!

One of them shot at me, but missed. I dropped to the ground to hide.

“What the fuck, man?” came an angry voice. I recognized it as belonging to the guy who’d taken pity on me and let me out for a bathroom break last night. “Are you trying to kill her? These darts are dosed for big cats. She’ll never wake up.”

I peeked over the rubble.

“*You* go catch her then,” said one of the other guards.

“Fine! Whatever.” The guy started running towards me.

I bolted, running across the slick field on my bare feet. Wet grass and smooth skin did not make for speed, and I only made it a quarter of the way to the trees before he grabbed me.

“Gotcha!”

I struggled, flailing around wildly, and my paws came out to swipe at him. I got him good across the face, and he dropped me hastily. I landed on my feet but slipped, twisting my ankle, and ended up on my ass instead. Why, oh why, couldn’t I make boots with the fur? Then I wouldn’t be slipping all over the place.

I expected anger or disgust from him now that he realized I’d lied and could shift a little, but what I saw was worse. He leered at me lecherously, his hand covering the scratches on his face, which were now oozing blood.

“Oh, that’s sexy. Paws and ears? You and I are going to have some big fun once I get you back into the facility.” He grinned lewdly and reached for me.

“Did you know the boss doesn’t care what we do with the animals, as long as there are no permanent injuries?”

I scrambled back, kicking his shin. From my downed position on the ground, it was the only thing I could reach.

He yelped and stepped back onto a slippery patch of grass. Down he went. I scrambled to my feet and limped away, realizing that my ankle was very sore and could barely hold my weight.

The douche canoe grabbed me again, this time hauling me against his body and groping me with his free hand. Gross. I freaked out, but he was ready for my claws this time; he trapped my arms easily behind my back.

There was a shadow, and suddenly, I was being torn from his grip. I stood facing a gray wall of stone. It took me a moment to realize that it wasn't a wall but a very well-muscled back from which sprouted a pair of magnificent wings, still unfurled.

"Release. My. Mate."

Gunnar!

With a swipe of his claws, he sent the asshole to the ground. He didn't give him a chance to get up. He stomped on him hard, twice, and the man never got back up.

Then Gunnar was in front of me, checking me anxiously for injuries. He slicked my wet hair off my face.

"Gunnar!" I threw my arms around him. "I'm fine, except for my ankle. I can't run."

"I will carry you, mate."

In one smooth motion, he pulled me into his arms. Then he jumped, and we were in the air. His wings flapped hard behind him. What the—I tightened my grip on him, wrapping my legs around too for extra hold. *We were flying!*

"It's okay, Kitten. I've got you."

"What the hell is that thing?" one of the men on the ground bellowed.

“I don’t know, but shoot it.” The words were followed by the sound of real gunfire, not just that of tranquilizer guns.

Several of the shots whizzed by us, and Gunnar grunted. Then we lost a bit of altitude. He adjusted me in his arms, angling his body to shield me from the hail of bullets.

I yelped and held on. “You’re shot.”

“I’m fine,” he lied.

We were soon out of range of their weapons, but Gunnar was struggling to stay in the air. In the trees below us, I thought I saw a flash of orange and black, but when I looked again, it was gone.

Gunnar landed, managing to put me down before he braced himself against a tree. There were more than a few holes in the membrane of his wings. There were several bullet holes in his body, and a tranquilizer dart was sticking out of his thigh. I grabbed him, trying to help him move to the next tree. He stumbled a few more steps before dropping to his knees.

“Fuck,” he grumbled as he slumped against the trunk. “Backup should be here soon. I’m sorry, Kitten.”

“For what? Don’t be. You saved me.”

“Not yet. They’ll still be looking for you.” He cupped my face with one palm, then shoved something cold and hard into my hands. It was a gun. “Safety’s on the side. Just point and shoot. Now go. Run. Get away from here.”

“No way!” I clung to him. “I’m not leaving you.” I was afraid they’d finish the job if they found him.

His hands dropped from my face. “Go, Kitten. I love you. Please. I need you to be safe.” His last words were soft and slurred.

The sound of shouting men echoed through the forest, but it was his barely audible I love you that rang out the loudest in my head. Happy tears welled in

my eyes.

“I love you too, Gunnar.” I crawled over his body and kissed him, even as his lips and body went limp and his eyes fell closed.

If he thought I was going to run and leave him behind, he was wrong. And no, I wasn't being stupid. I couldn't have run even if I wanted to. My ankle had started to swell, and there was no way I would get very far. I'd leave him unprotected *and* get caught anyway. It'd be lose-lose.

Nope. I was staying, and I was fighting.

I positioned myself in front of my mate and switched off the safety on the gun. I'd only been to the shooting range once with my ex, and that was years and years ago. My aim with anything other than a rifle was horrendous; the long barrel made aiming so much easier. A handgun like this? I bet I'd be all over the place. But they didn't need to know that.

The first of our enemies came into view.

“You again?” He sounded annoyed. “Just come over here, and I won't hurt you.”

I aimed and shot at him.

“Fuck!” He scrambled behind a tree. “The bitch is armed.”

He poked his head out from behind the tree, and I aimed again. To my surprise, this one actually hit the tree he was hiding behind, mere inches from his face.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered to the tree. Then I had an idea.

I tried to focus on the plants around him, looking for more kudzu or other vining plants. Trees took too much energy to grow, and I was already tired.

“Grow,” I whispered to the smaller plants around him.

At first, nothing happened. Then there was cursing from behind the tree, and he scrambled away from his hiding place. I aimed and shot at him again. I

didn't hit him, but the shot made him duck behind the tree again, where my vines were.

"Fuck! The fucking bitch is a witch!"

"Grow. Grow. *Grow*," I pleaded, hoping to catch him there and restrain him before he could get away.

When he started screaming for help because he was stuck, I stopped the spell to conserve energy. Unfortunately, all his screams called his friends over. There were several of them now. And I doubted my one little gun could make a difference against all of them. I also really wasn't sure how much more magic I had. I was tired from the escape.

"Give up, little cat. You're surrounded," one of them shouted.

The men approached, but then unexpectedly, one of them stumbled back, and then another.

"Oh shit," someone sputtered.

There, slinking out from the trees behind me on silent paws, were all my new friends. I stood a little taller and aimed my gun at the nearest asshole as the snow leopard and the lion came to stand beside me.

Then, from the other side, came three more shifters I didn't remember seeing in the yard. Another snow leopard and two wolves. Where had they come from? Somehow, despite never seeing them before, they looked familiar, especially the snow leopard.

Who was surrounded now?

My lion pal gave a roar, and they all charged.

CHAPTER 33

GUNNAR



I WOKE UP TO find myself surrounded by the strangest pack of shifters I could imagine, all in their shifted form: canines, cats, bears, even a massive gorilla. It was a menagerie.

“You’re awake.” Lillian’s voice was like a fresh breeze, clearing the fog from my head.

I reached toward her. “My mate.”

She held onto me and kissed me softly on the forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Groggy. But perfect, now that you’re here.”

“How about your injuries? I tried to get them to patch up your bullet wounds, but your body had already pushed the bullets out, and the holes were already closing.”

“I heal fast.” I flexed my muscles.

“You had me so worried, Gunnar. I swear, when you are motionless, you look exactly like a lifeless stone statue. I was so worried you’d never move again.”

“I’m sorry I worried you, Lillian.” I pressed my forehead to hers. “And I’m also sorry for what I said before. Will you forgive me? Please? You are everything to me.”

She wrapped her arms around me. “Already forgiven. I was rash too and said things I shouldn’t have.”

“I guess this counts as our first fight?”

She grinned. “I think it’s the first part of our relationship that’s finally happened in the right order.”

Someone cleared their throat. “I told you he’d wake quickly. Those gargoyles are tough, and the darts don’t work long on them.” The slight accent gave away the speaker.

“Dr. Shen.” I blinked at the older gentleman.

He wasn’t wearing a suit this time. He was in sweatpants and a T-shirt. He must have been the snow leopard I’d seen prowling the area right before I swooped down to rescue Lillian from that jackass. And the other two were the wolves.

“I’m surprised the darts worked at all, actually,” I said. “Usually, they bounce right off me.”

Dr. Shen held up an empty offending dart. “These ones were made specifically to puncture thick hide and fur.”

The EA and cops arrived, along with the paramedics, who had no idea what to do with all the shifted shifters milling around. These were not the usual victims they treated.

No matter how rich they were or how much clout they had, I was sure Arthur and his family wouldn't get away with just a slap on the wrist this time, not with so many witnesses and victims. Some of the shifters hadn't stopped at simply attacking but had straight-up killed the guards. I didn't blame them. They'd thrown all the bodies into one big pile, including the guy I'd stomped. It would be hard to pinpoint who had done what if it ever came to that.

A movement to the left caught our attention. It was a snow leopard. Dr. Shen got up and approached it carefully, then knelt in front of it. After a moment, he got up, his head hanging in disappointment.

"It's not her," I said gently.

"No. It's not." He didn't even ask how I knew. "This is a male, a stranger. I should've known even from afar by the eye color. But I was so hopeful..."

"Who is *her*?" Lillian asked.

"My daughter." Dr. Shen took a deep breath and turned to Lillian. "I should tell you now before you hear it from your mate. You are my granddaughter. I only found out a few years ago, when you were already in school here in Darlington. Your father is...well, he passed away in a car accident, and we never found your mother."

Lillian blinked a few times, then shook her head. "No. You're kidding me."

"He's not, Kitten. His story checks out," I said.

"In the beginning, I was willing to use any force necessary to bring you home. But after I met you, I changed my mind. My daughter ran away from home because she did not wish to marry the match we had found for her. Even after we promised to let her live her own life, she refused to come home. About ten years ago, we lost all trace of her. I'd do anything to see her again.

"Then I met you. You look different in photos, but your mannerisms and

temperament are the same. You did not say much, but you meant every word. I knew I'd never be able to force you to do anything against your will. That is why I offered you a choice instead."

Lilian nodded. "I see. This is a lot to take in, but I appreciate you telling me. And thank you for coming back to help."

"I understand that I was not in your life when you were growing up, and you cannot think of me as family. But I hope this is the first step of us forging a new relationship, whatever it may be. And...gargoyle?" Dr. Shen held out a hand to me, and I shook it. "You are...not so bad. But do *not* lose my granddaughter again."

With one last nod, he turned and left, disappearing into the trees before the EA could ask him for his statement. Smart man.

"Come on," I said, getting up and gathering my Kitten into my arms. "Let's follow your grandfather's lead and disappear before they start asking for details. I'll write up a full report for them later."

"Wait. I need to say thank you."

Lillian went around to her new shifter friends. I had to stop myself from charging in and making a scene when she wrapped her arms around the lion for a big hug. She was just being friendly, though I had no doubt by the way the lion looked at her that he'd gladly snatch her up and steal her away if I hadn't already made it exceptionally clear that she was my mate, and that I wouldn't hesitate to pummel anyone who dared to challenge me for her.

"All right," Lillian said, limping back to me. "Take me home."

"Wait!" a shrill female voice cried out. "We haven't taken your—"

But I already had my beautiful wife in my arms. Then I leaped into the air and was airborne.

CHAPTER 34

LILLIAN



I SCROLLED DOWN MY new website with an ear-to-ear smile so wide it threatened to split my face. Tiger Lily's Tropicals was officially open for business! I couldn't believe I'd put all of this together myself. I'd thought I'd need to hire a designer, but Shelby had shown me how she used a popular website builder service to create the page for her dress shop, and it had turned out to be so much easier than I'd thought it would be. Also, doing it myself meant I could put up new listings whenever I wanted.

The orders had started rolling in even before the website was completely live. The lady who'd bought that first cutting had raved about it on the forum, both in terms of price and quality. A bunch of established sellers immediately got mad and took action, claiming I was a fraud and conniving with the other member to steal the plant community's hard-earned money.

Whatever. To be honest, I wasn't particularly surprised. I'd seen this happen to others before. I had, after all, gotten my rare plants from somewhere. I already had an idea of how the industry worked.

But, just like with any community, the online plant scene wasn't just assholes. There were some good guys too. The sudden, undeserved backlash had the unintentional consequence of giving me a lot of publicity. Any publicity is good publicity, right? Some people ended up ordering, just to see if the rumors were true.

I'd packed up a few cuttings and had sent them out just this morning. Having received plants by mail before, I knew how to pack them up to prevent damage. A tiny, teeny drop of magic in each package also helped keep the plants happy until they made it to their new homes. I was still nervous. What if the courier decided to play football with them?

I twisted the rings on my finger. I'd gotten them back yesterday after Gunnar visited Arthur and Avalon in lockup as they waited for their family to bail them out. I wasn't holding my breath that the two would get a heavy sentence; there was obviously someone very powerful protecting them. But at least this time, they were going to get a lot more than a slap on the wrist.

I wasn't going to lose sleep over it though, since there was nothing I could do. The important thing was we got all the shifters out.

I'd updated Mom and Dad with what had happened, including the fact that Dr. Shen was actually my biological grandfather. I made sure they understood that they were the only parents I'd ever have, and I loved them to bits and pieces.

As for my surprise-granddad and The White Claws, they started a new forum to which they invited all the snow leopards they knew, even the ones that were only of mixed blood or couldn't shift. It was still in our nature to hide

and stay quiet, always working in the shadows. But it was a place for people to connect and learn about their history.

The goal was to not only connect everyone, but also to draw anyone who might have been hiding out of the woodwork. There was some talk on there too on how to keep the gene pool alive and save the species, including cross-breeding with other large cats.

I found Aleksandr on there—or, rather, he found me. He was the Russian snow leopard shifter I'd met while locked up. Kevin was on there as well. No signs of my half siblings though. It was strange to go from having just my parents to having an online family of hundreds. Kevin had actually been one of my first clients, requesting a *variegated Monsterabe* sent to his New York home as part of a gift for his new fiancée. It turned out Sofiya was a plant mama too, since her busy schedule on the fashion runway made it difficult for her to get a pet.

And now I was worrying about today's shipments again.

Gunnar's tail, which had been wrapped around my ankle, slid lovingly up my leg. "Still thinking about the shipments, Kitten?"

"Yes. I know there's nothing I can do about it at this point. But that doesn't stop me from worrying. They're like my babies! I'm sure after the first few shipments arrive in good condition and I get some more good reviews, I'll relax a bit."

"I'm so proud of you, Lillian. This is huge, and you did it yourself." He stood, walked behind my chair, and started rubbing my shoulders.

"Thanks, Gunnar."

I closed my eyes and sighed contentedly as my mate worked his talented fingers into the knots in my neck and shoulders. I couldn't believe this all started with a very drunk proposal to someone who was practically a stranger,

who ended up being the love of my life. He didn't give a rat's ass whether I could shift or not. To him, I was perfect just the way I was.

I thought he was pretty spectacular, too. He was fun, but still a hard worker. Possessive, but still gave me freedom to grow. And it didn't hurt that to me he was hot as hell. I didn't care what others thought of him: in my books, he was the ultimate catch.

It wasn't long before he had me relaxed, my head tipping back to lean against him. The height of my chair meant my head ended up rolling right over his crotch.

Oops.

I started to lift my head, but Gunnar's hand slid to my throat, grabbed it firmly, and pressed me back against him. I reached up and stroked the enormous bulge tenting his pants lazily.

"Is this how you want me to distract you, little cat?" His voice was husky as his cock stiffened next to my head.

I inhaled sharply as fiery tendrils of lust started in my belly.

All I managed to get out was a whimpered "yes" when he released my throat. He spun my chair around with me still on it and stepped in between my legs. He undid his belt, and suddenly I was face-to-face with the world's most perfectly sculpted, gorgeously veiny cock.

I looked up at my hunk of a husband, hardly believing that he was all real, and all mine.

His hands tangled into my hair. "Open wide, Kitten."

I did, savoring the taste of him as he invaded my mouth. There was nothing else but him. He might have been a fake fiancé, but our happy ever after was very, very real.

EPILOGUE

GUNNAR



I SPUN LILLIAN AROUND before dipping her low. Her gorgeous green dress swirled around us as we danced. The Darlington Christmas Monster Bash...er, Ball...was a yearly mainstay in our Yuletide traditions.

I used to hate big, glitzy events like these where I had to wear a tux, preferring the more casual parties. Tuxes and I didn't get along well. The pants and jacket, custom-tailored to fit around my tail and wings, were too restrictive. But for Lillian, I'd endure wearing it twice a year, once for the Charity Gala and again for the Christmas Bash.

She was just as mesmerizingly beautiful as she'd been the first Christmas we were here, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. Even the exquisitely decorated ballroom paled in her presence.

The song changed, and I led Lillian to the dessert buffet at the back. While we were dancing, I noticed they'd brought out a tower piled high with cupcakes, and I planned on snatching at least one of each flavor. We returned to our table, struggling to balance our plates overflowing with mouthwatering treats.

Lillian had her mouth full of cream puff when the notification pinged from her phone. She glanced at the screen and frowned. "It's Mom."

We'd left our son, Gideon, with her parents for the weekend. They'd moved to Darlington shortly after Gideon was born. They were technically retired, though her mom still sometimes took substitute teaching jobs at the local high school.

Her brows furrowed as she showed me the first image.

It was a cushion. Well, it had been one. It was now a few shreds of torn fabric, barely stopping the stuffing from exploding out. The next image was the couch. Except now, it had very distinctive claw marks on it. Tiny claw marks.

Gideon! That little rascal!

He looked very much like me when I had my glamor spell on, so in effect, a human version of me, except for the wings. He had gargoyle wings, though we're not sure if they were functional yet. It was kind of like Lillian being only able to make mittens.. I didn't mind that he wasn't a full gargoyle like me. Since my brothers and I had been carved from stone and made living through magic, it was already a blessing that we could procreate at all.

"I guess Gideon can make mittens too," Lillian said with a laugh. "I feel bad for Mom and Dad. And their furniture. We should replace that couch. It is really old; they bought it to replace the one I'd ruined."

"Maybe we should offer a raincheck on that until he gets old enough to

control his mittens,” I suggested, thinking about the potential future damage to the couches back home at the penthouse.

Lillian shot her parents back a message as I stuffed the pistachio and raspberry cupcake into my mouth in one go and chewed.

The phone chimed again just as Lillian was about to put it away. Lillian’s jaw dropped.

On the screen was not a boy with paws but a snow leopard kitten, fully formed from ears to tail. And no wings at all. He looked pissed off and ready to swipe at the camera. Gideon had a bit of a temper; he got his spiciness from his mother. Okay, maybe a bit from me as well.

“Would you look at that,” I said after swallowing the raspberry goodness. “He can do a full shift. Your granddad is going to be ecstatic. He might even come and visit.”

“A half gargoyle, with wings, but nothing else, who can shift into a snow leopard.” Lillian shook her head and took a sip of her coffee. “Has that combo ever happened before?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? But with all the crazy combinations we’ve been seeing in the years since The Wall fell, it probably won’t be that strange in the near future.”

A few years ago, the idea that The Wall had done more than just hide magic and monsters from the rest of the world had been considered conspiracy theory. Now, however, it was generally accepted that the spell had corrupted over the millennia and had been suppressing magic as well. It was a good thing it fell when it did. With it gone, magic flourished.

In fact, The Wall had most likely been partially responsible for the snow leopard shifters’ declining numbers, preventing half and sometimes full-

blooded shifters from shifting. Many of the children born since didn't have this problem.

Another chime, another photo, and this one had Lillian looking horrified. It was of one of her parent's houseplants torn to shreds.

"Not on my watch! I'm no tiger mom, but we're going to set some ground rules. The plants are off limits!"

I laughed. It wasn't like Lillian couldn't just make them all grow back with a wave of her hands.

I pulled her over to sit on my lap. "We'll worry about it on Monday when we get the little rascal back. Let's enjoy the rest of our weekend." I leaned in and whispered the next words into her ear. "We can take a quick break to our room."

I'd rented a suite in the hotel so we could crash at the end of the night and have a place to take breaks during the long event. Besides, having a gourmet brunch delivered to the door was always a bonus the morning after a hard night of dancing.

"Oooh." She wiggled her ass against my crotch. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

My hands tightened on her hips, stopping her movement. "Be careful, Kitten. You continue like this, and we'll never make it to our room."

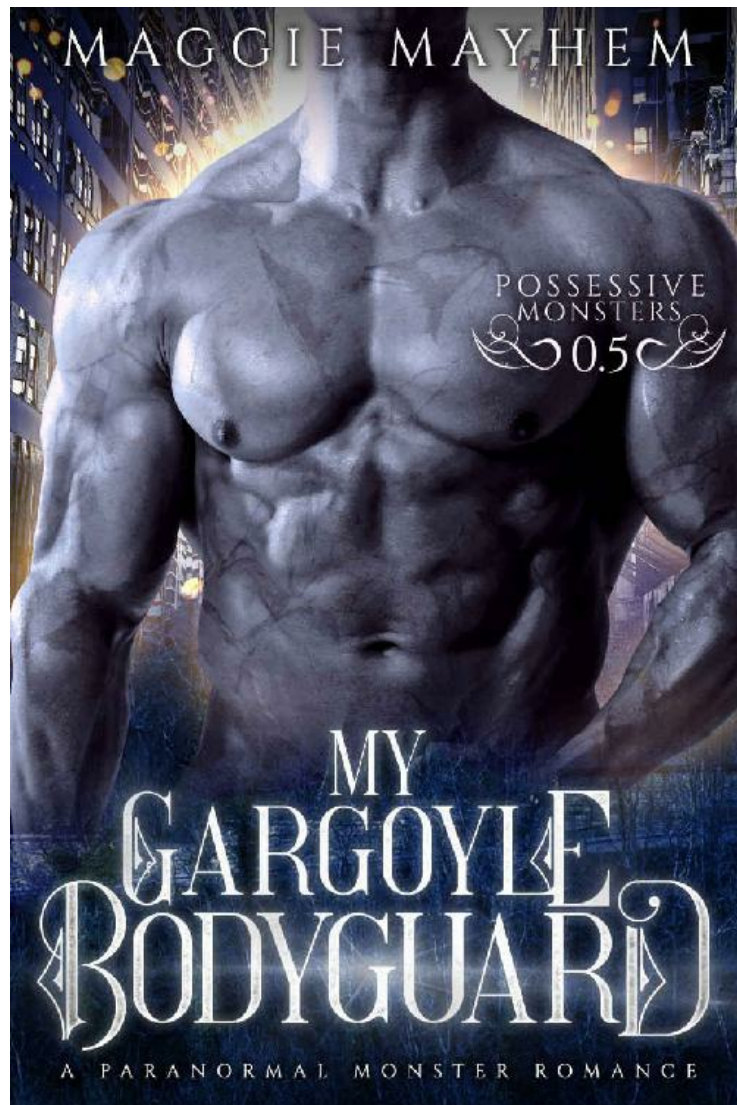
She wiggled again. "Oh no, we can't have that!" She slid off my lap, leaned in to give my hardening cock a little squeeze through my pants, and winked before turning around and sashaying toward the door, her hips swaying enticingly from side to side.

I grinned as I followed behind her, riveted and feeling like the luckiest gargoyle in the world. This smart, gorgeous, brave woman was mine. All mine. And in approximately two and a half minutes, the time it took for the

elevator to reach our floor, I'd get to show her that I was hers too. Forever and ever.

THE END

I hope you've enjoyed Rock and a Hard Place. Please consider leaving me a review on Amazon to help more readers discover this book. Looking for more Possessive Monsters? Pick up this FREE copy of Griff and Emily's story.



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ABOUT MAGGIE

MAGGIE MAYHEM IS A steamy paranormal romance author and full-time dog mom. Her love for the fantastical and supernatural has been a lifelong passion, and she finds every opportunity to escape into a good book. When she's not writing, Maggie can be found pulling her canine cloud out of the snow, savoring a glass (or several glasses) of good wine, or exploring the scenic trails of her local parks.

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