

"KITTREDGE
IS A WINNER!"
—Jim Butcher

WITCH CRAFT

A NOCTURNE CITY NOVEL

CAITLIN KITTREDGE
Bestselling author of *Second Skin*

Witch Craft

A Nocturne City Novel

Caitlin Kittredge



St. Martin's Paperbacks

For all my readers—you know who you are

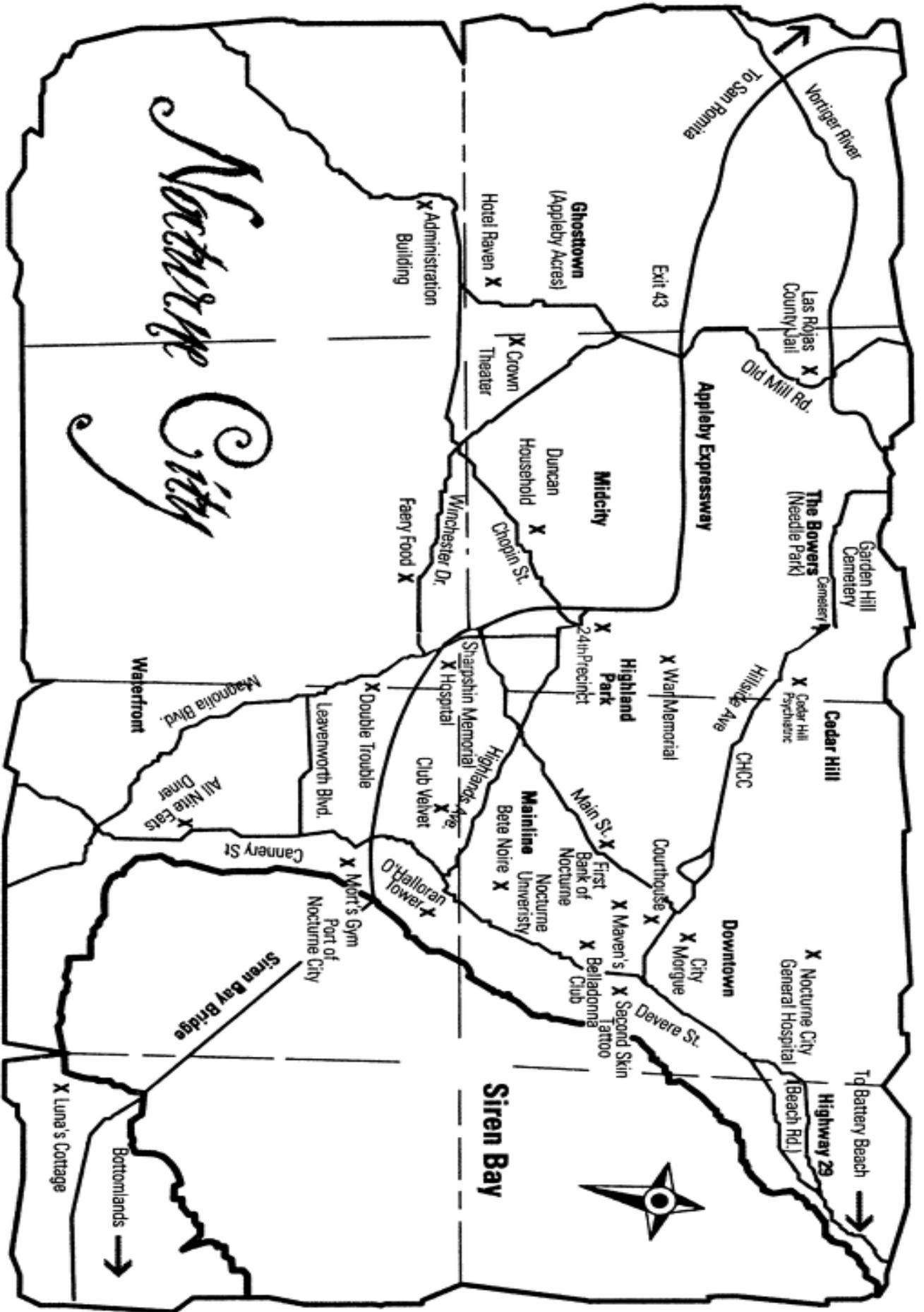
Acknowledgments

Rachel Vater and Rose Hilliard, agent and editor supreme.

All of Team Seattle, and their insistence that sometimes, I have to leave my office and have a life.

Agent Heidi Wallace of the ATF, whose unparalleled knowledge and fantastic stories of her job ensured that I had to include an ATF agent in the novel.

Lastly, and most of all—thank you to my readers. You helped bring Luna's world to life and here we are four books later, still going strong.



One

Chaos crept up on me like someone had tossed a stone into a pond. I was sitting in a window booth at the Devere Diner, shoving a double bacon cheeseburger into my mouth, while across the expanse of red formica table Detective David Bryson did the same with a grilled chicken club.

“Cholesterol,” he explained around a mouthful of lettuce and dead bird. “Doc said I’m going to keel over if I don’t cut back on the carbs or calories or what have you. Put me on one of that whatchacallit—Long Beach Diet.”

“South Beach,” I corrected him, taking a pull at my diet soda. Just because I have a werewolf metabolism doesn’t mean I need to abuse it.

“However you call it,” Bryson said. “All I know is that in a week, I get to maybe eat a burger once in a while.” He regarded his sandwich the way most people regarded a dead pigeon on the sidewalk.

“My sympathies,” I said, and signaled the waitress for a slice of pie. Bryson glared at me. The waitress finished writing an order for two uniformed cops at the counter and sashayed over. Bryson checked her out. She checked him out.

I cleared my throat. “I’d like a slice of key lime, when you two are done.”

“Krystal,” said Bryson, reading the name tag. “You ever get down to my part of the city, cutie?”

“Depends what part we’re talking about, honey,” she said, batting her heavy fake eyelashes at him.

I kicked Bryson on the ankle. “Pie. Key lime. Essential to my continued good health and temperament.”

A fire engine roared down Devere, sirens going full blast, and drowned me out. The waitress cupped her ear. “Huh?”

“Key lime!”

A pair of patrol cars followed, their lights revolving heartbeat quick, tires laying black rubber streaks as they took the turn onto Hillside Avenue at top speed.

“Say that one more time, honey.” The waitress was still smiling at Bryson. She was brassy-skinned from a spray-on tan and had a red bouffant piled on top of her head. She and Bryson, who was a bull-necked man with powerful arms, a greasy pompadour, and small bright blue eyes, would make a cute couple. You know, if you were into that sort of thing.

“Key lime,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. I could still hear the sirens, even though they were long gone into the crisp October air. Were hearing is sensitive. I could hear Bryson’s heartbeat, too, how it quickened when Krystal looked at him.

It was five days before Halloween. The leaves were falling and paper pumpkins and ghosts were everywhere. Halloween made everything seem benign. You could almost forget that the real monsters might be sharing a subway car or a cubicle with you.

The patrolmen at the counter jumped as their radios crackled. The dispatcher burred their call numbers and then squawked out, “Eleven-seventy-one in progress at One-oh-seven Hillside Avenue. Fire and rescue en route. All units respond.”

To give the cops credit, they were a well-oiled machine. One dug out a twenty and threw it on the counter while the other grabbed his car keys off the counter and ran out the door to start their prowler. “Dispatch, Ten-ninety-seven is en route,” the second cop bit off into his clip mic, before he followed his partner.

The ripples spread out from the stone fall, and a beat after the door slammed shut after the two uniformed cops, my BlackBerry went off. Bryson’s pager followed it a moment later.

I tore it off my belt and looked at the text message. *107 Hillside. ASAP.* That had to be Annemarie. Only she would dare *ASAP* the boss. Bryson looked at me, blinked once. “One-oh-seven Hillside?” he asked. I nodded.

Bryson snapped his fingers at the waitress. “Krystal, doll? We’re gonna need that pie to go.”

I smelled the smoke before I saw it—my nose is my best feature, and I’m not just talking about it complementing my pretty face. Werens can smell a lot, which normally is a mixed blessing. Do you have any idea how a hobo smells to a werewolf? You’re better off not knowing.

A black cloud stained the faded-denim blue of the sky, boiling up from the crest of the hill. I pushed my foot down on the accelerator of the Ford LTD that I’d gotten from the motor pool a few months previously, and was rewarded with a groan from the transmission and no discernible increase in speed.

I hit the steering wheel. “Piece of crap car.” My previous ride, a 1969 Ford Fairlane, had blown up when I drove it into an open chasm with a pissed-off Wendigo spirit clinging to the hood. Both the spirit and the car were crispy now, and I was back to driving the Cop Standard model, stale upholstery, dubious brakes, and all.

“Jesus Christ, that’s a big fire,” said Bryson. “Somebody’s McMansion is McToasted, for sure.”

We were in the exclusive section of the Cedar Hill neighborhood now, Victorian stately homes sitting shoulder to shoulder with large modern monstrosities shoved wherever the developers could find a spare greenbelt. They were uniformly hideous. “How much you

wanna bet me it's the fucking ELF or PETA or one of those fucking hippie groups that set their armpit hair on fire to save the whales?" Bryson said.

"I think we wouldn't have gotten paged," I murmured as I rolled up on the scene. Three ladder trucks were hosing down a blaze that was giving off enough heat to break a sweat down my spine and curl my hair, even from twenty yards away. A token ambulance and a phalanx of patrol cars had the street blocked off, and neighbors were staring.

We crossed the street to the cordon and I found the fire chief on scene, a barrel-chested man named Charlie Egan. "I'm Lieutenant Wilder," I said, flashing my badge. It was still new enough that the shine hadn't come off the bronze crescent-moon seal.

Egan grunted. "So?"

"With the Supernatural Crimes Squad," I elaborated, and waited for the inevitable wisecrack, sigh, or meltdown that followed with most city personnel.

The big fire chief just grunted again. "We don't need you."

That tone carried so much more than the words would imply. *We don't need the freak squad reminding the plain humans that there are things in Nocturne City that will bite their faces off with a smile.*

"Someone paged us," I said. "You mind filling me in, since I left a perfectly good lunch for you?"

"No," Egan said. "In case you hadn't noticed, we got a situation here."

A month or two ago I probably would have grabbed him by his polyester tie and made him do what I wanted, but instead I shielded my eyes from the smoke and stepped back. Letting Egan know he was in control, that his manly manliness was secure. "When you've got the fire under control, Chief, you and I will talk again." *And when we do, it will be for a royal dressing-down on your part, mister.*

He didn't pick up on my nuances. Men are like that.

I recrossed the street to find Bryson scooping the last of my key lime pie out of the box with his fingers. "Dammit, David!" I yelled. "What happened to your diet?"

"Hey, I got job stress." He shrugged. "My therapist said I'm a emotional eater."

I turned my back on him and leaned on the hood of the car, watching the blaze. The house wasn't a McMansion—it was one of the old ones, a timber-frame place with too much scrollwork, now a nightmare of gingerbread and burning shingles that made me cough.

Egan strode around looking important until he realized he wasn't doing any more good than Bryson and me, and stomped over to us. "Guy that lives here is named Howard Corley," he snapped, like he was giving me an order. "Deals in antiques. Works from home."

He paused to let that sink in. I winced as I looked at the smoke and the flames, which had started to recede, barely. “You think he was in there.”

“Car’s in the garage,” said Egan. “Gas tank blew, almost took the scalps off a couple of my men. No reason to think he’s not.”

I wasn’t any closer to understanding why Annemarie had paged me, but I smiled at Egan anyway. “I appreciate it, Chief.”

“Yeah, well. Keep your spook squad out of the way if it comes to that.”

Then again ... I sighed and kicked at the concrete, forgetting for a moment I was wearing classy Prada flats instead of my usual combat boots. “Shit,” I sighed. The wardrobe that went with being lieutenant of the most-hated task force in the Nocturne PD was massively expensive, the headaches even larger.

“I have better things to do than stand around a crime scene that isn’t even ours. Or a crime scene, yet,” I complained loudly to Bryson, hoping Egan heard me.

“Well, here comes Hotlanta. Why don’t you ask her?”

Hotlanta was Bryson’s personal nickname for Annemarie Marceaux, a firecracker-redhead who hailed from Louisiana ... one of the northern parts, with some tongue-twister French name. She was tiny and slender and efficient, a near-constant *bless her heart* smile in place. A new hire in the department, she’d been shunted to the SCS and taken the news pretty well, at least outwardly.

“Sorry I’m late, ma’am,” she hollered at me. “Damn traffic cops wouldn’t let me through!”

She was also profane, funny, and a hell of a lot nicer than an ex-special victims detective had a right to be. I liked Annemarie. Bryson snorted, low. “Here she is, Scarlett O’Hara.”

“Hello there, David,” she said brightly. “You’re looking slender today.”

Bryson turned about eight shades of red, and wiped the sweat away from his forehead. “Hiya, Annie.”

“Lieutenant,” she said breathlessly. “I’m sorry for the cryptic message, but I was in the area and I saw the blaze start. There’s something here for us, believe me.”

“Okay,” I said. “Spill it.” The firefighters had finally gotten the flames under control, and new smells were creeping in: char. Cooked electrical circuits. Burnt meat.

Egan had been right about someone being at home.

“I saw the fire start, ma’am,” Annemarie said.

I focused on her, and tried to block out the smell. “You don’t say.”

“Yes,” said Annemarie, stepping out into the street and gesturing at the traffic cameras, a few at the intersection. “I think those picked it up, too. It wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen, Lieutenant. It caught all at once, from all points. An inferno.”

“And you just happened to be driving by?” I cocked my hip and glared at Annemarie. Her cheeks were flushed from the fire and she seemed almost happy. I don’t know too many people who get happy about fire and death, except weirdos, and I had enough of those in my life already.

“Oh, I was visiting a friend who lives on the other side of the hill,” she said. “Going to clock in when I saw the fire. I called it in and paged you, ma’am.”

“Detective Marceaux, if you don’t stop calling me ma’am I’m going to slap you right in the head, got it?”

She nodded, going even redder. “Sorry, ma’—Lieutenant.”

“‘Luna’ would be just fine, Annemarie. Go find out when we can walk the scene, and call the rest of the squad.”

After she walked back to her own car, Bryson snorted. “Time was, I only had to put up with you. Now there’s another one running around, like some kind of tiny, evil doppelganger.”

“David, did you actually just use the word ‘doppelganger’?”

He spread his hands. “I watch a lot of horror movies. So what?”

I shook my head, hiding a smile. “Never mind.”

Two

The sun had nearly set by the time the wreckage was cool enough to be examined, but it gave the rest of the Supernatural Crimes Squad time to get to the scene.

Pete Anderson, our resident CSU tech, stood in what had once been the home’s foyer, and shook his head. “There’s nothing overtly hinky here, Lieutenant Wilder. Even burn patterns, no accelerants used to the naked eye, no smells you wouldn’t expect in a burned-out hulk.”

“Then how do you explain what Annemarie saw?”

Pete spread his hands. He had an angelic face, chocolatey skin, and close-cropped hair, both flawless even in the ash and the ovenlike heat of the burnt house. Sweaty, sooty, and unkempt as I was, I sort of hated him.

“Maybe Annemarie made a mistake.”

I looked over at her petite frame, as she picked carefully through the wreckage with Javier Batista. Next to Sergeant Batista’s ex-SWAT bulk, she seemed even slighter. “Has Annemarie ever made a mistake in the time you’ve known her?”

Pete's mouth crimped. "Nope."

"So walk the scene and see what jumps out at you," I said.

The medical examiner's staff appeared, somber and silent in their blue jumpsuits, and unfolded a body bag in what was once a study. Ash from paper and books drifted around them as they rolled the corpse of Howard Corley into the bag, zipped and tagged it, and carried it between them back to the van. Corley didn't look anything like a man now. He was raw and featureless, just flesh.

Before the morgue attendants got their cargo shut away, a black Mustang roared to a stop behind the cordon, and disgorged a lanky figure in a black suit.

I checked out the car before I checked out the driver. It was glossy, unmarred, so shiny I could have fixed my makeup in it, had I been wearing any. Red leather bucket seats and a matching detail on the steering wheel. Chrome reflecting the dying sun. Maybe a '67 or a '68. The driver cared about the car, to the point of obsession. And he had flashy taste and probably a glove box full of speeding tickets.

The driver argued with the uniform for a minute and then did an abrupt left turn and stopped the morgue attendants, making them set down the body bag and open it. He took out a penlight and bent over Corley.

I held up my finger to Pete. "Excuse me." I covered the distance to the stranger and the corpse in about two seconds flat. Another benefit of the were, to counteract all the hassles it gives me.

"Excuse me!" I said, loudly.

The stranger looked up at me, tilting square black fifties-style sunglasses down his nose. One inky eye regarded me. "Yes?"

"Why are you poking my corpse?"

He stood, brushing at his knees. His black suit was wool, a custom-tailored job, and the shirt was crisp linen the color of virgin snow. A skinny black tie and cuff links completed the look, along with a swath of burnished blond hair swept back from a high forehead. Mid-Century Hipster with overtones of G-Man.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it belonged to you."

I crossed my arms, wrinkling my suit jacket. It already had soot and sweat on it—a few wrinkles wouldn't hurt. "Cut the smart-ass act and let's see some ID."

He blinked. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

I stared at him, at a loss, which is rare for me. He stared back, one eyebrow cocked, until his jaw twitched and he broke into a grin. "I'm sorry. I'm just messing with you." He stuck out a hand. "Will Fagin, Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms."

“Lieutenant Luna Wilder.” I took the offered hand, shook, and gripped it hard enough so that he couldn’t let go. Bones creaked. Fagin yelped.

I reached into his inside jacket pocket with my opposite hand—brushing a silk lining, no nylon for the G-man—and drew out his ID wallet. Sure enough, he was staring back at me from the corner of his ATF laminate. I heaved a sigh. “What the hell are the feds doing at this crime scene?”

Fagin grinned weakly. “You mind letting go of my hand, She-Ra? It’s hard to formulate a witty response when I’m worried about my metacarpals.”

I released him. “And I ask again: Why are you here?”

Fagin gestured at the burnt husk. “I’m a silent E.”

“What?” Was everyone at ATF crazy, or just this guy?

“ATF also covers explosions and explosives, especially since 9/11. We call ourselves the silent E in ‘ATF.’ You know, because it’s not in the acronym ...” He trailed off and shoved a hand through his hair. “And I see the little anecdote that works so well on girls in bars is not working on you, is it?”

“Signs point to ‘no.’ ”

That grin swam up again, dazzling me. “Can I at least have my ID back, Lieutenant Wilder?”

I slapped the wallet against his chest. “Take it. And while you’re at it, take yourself back to that penis replacement you call a car and get out of my crime scene. I’m not giving the feds jurisdiction without a good Hexed reason, and your skinny ass isn’t it.”

I expected the requisite pissing contest to follow, but Fagin just lifted one bony shoulder and nodded, putting his sunglasses back on. “I’ll see you around, doll. Watch for me.”

“Very intimidating, coming from a guy who’s dressed like a reject from *Reservoir Dogs*.”

Fagin gave me a mock salute, and loped back to his car. I watched him leave. “Jackass.”

Bryson came over to me, looking even more hangdog than usual. “I’m gonna clock off and go get supper, boss. I’m gonna pass out otherwise.”

“Go,” I said. “We’re done here.”

I made sure Pete would follow the body to the city morgue and collect trace evidence, and then satisfied that we’d done everything we could for a crime scene that we didn’t even belong at, I signed out and went back to the SCS’s squad room to end another shift no better than when I’d started it.

Frustration was my life, since I'd been promoted to lieutenant in August and given the task of heading the SCS and all its associated baggage. The city had created the task force because they couldn't ignore the monsters anymore, not after a Wendigo named Lucas Kennuka had raised a hunger god in the center of the city. Couldn't ignore Wendigo, couldn't ignore witches running most of the infrastructure from the shadows, daemons rising in the slums. Couldn't ignore the were in me—who was already the were face of the department, thanks to a propensity for people trying to kill me, right out where everyone could see.

And I couldn't ignore or forget Lucas, who'd stabbed me in the gut with a silver knife while he was possessed by his hunger god, and later had saved my life. I'd let Lucas go when the department wanted to lock him up, and I'd sworn I'd never see or speak to him again.

It had to be that way, no matter how much I might want it different. Lucas was a fugitive and I was a cop, a cop who was on thin ice as it was with my history.

I steeled myself as I pulled into the Justice Plaza, the former courthouse that now held the administrative staff and all of the major-crimes task forces—Narcotics, Vice, Special Victims, Fraud, SWAT. The nice, normal folks got sprawling floors of the turn-of-the-century building all to themselves.

The SCS was in the basement.

I successfully avoided everyone's eyes in the lobby, and took the elevator down, watching the storage level and the parking level tick by before the light finally announced "B." Bowels of Hell: supernatural crimes, occult occurrences, dumping ground for problem cops.

"Lieutenant Wilder!"

I flinched. Norris had spotted me. Norris Obermann was the department secretary—or administrative assistant, as he'd be quick to correct you. He was a civilian, old as the hills, and hated everyone. In his spare time, I imagine he hit things with a cane and hollered at kids to get off his lawn.

"Yes, Norris?" I said, turning around with a brilliant fake smile on my face. Norris was so old-school that he didn't even know he was supposed to be an asshole to me because I was female. He was simply perplexed at how "nice girls" like Annemarie and me had come to be in a line of work that involved gun toting and arresting people.

"You have messages," he said, like that was a grave failing on my part. "I've forwarded them to your mailbox. And I tried several times to raise you on your cellular telephone, but you did not answer. Was there a reason for this? Department protocol states—"

I cut him off. "My phone was silenced."

"Department protocol states a ranking officer must be reachable at all times during an assigned shift," he scolded, crossing his wiry little arms. Norris proper came up to my neck, and his shock of gray hair came up to my chin. His sweater-vest and checkered shirt were, respectively, brown and yellow today, and his tie was green paisley.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I must have forgotten department protocol while I was dealing with a corpse that had been burned over ninety percent of its flesh.”

Norris swallowed, two blossoms of color springing to life in his cheeks. He hated any discussion of dead things.

“You know when you burn a sausage?” I continued, moving in closer. “And then you cut it open and the insides are all ... squashy?”

Norris swayed, swallowing so hard I thought his Adam’s apple would pop out of his skin. “I ... yes. I ...”

I dropped him a wink. “Thanks for taking my messages, Norris. You have a nice night.”

He grabbed his coat and satchel and scurried to the elevator. I smiled for the first time since I’d gotten to the fire scene.

My messages weren’t anything I didn’t expect—one from the chief of detectives, asking me again for a progress report on my three months of running the SCS, which he’d forget about as soon as he got to the cigar club tonight, one from Pete letting me know that he was going to stop at the trace lab and process the evidence from the body, and one from my cousin Sunny.

“I’m going to stop by and make dinner for you. Grandma is driving me insane. You better not be working late.” She hung up without a good-bye, but it was all right.

Sunny lived with my grandmother and viewed any defection to spend time with me as some sort of volley in the territorial war we’d been playing out since I was a teenager. I smiled again when I thought about the old bat sitting alone watching TV and thinking up ways to get back at me. The rift between my grandmother and me is simple—she and Sunny and practically everyone else in my family are witches. I’m not, and a shape-shifter to boot. It makes for awkward family holidays, to say the least.

I poked at my computer for a few minutes, before the quiet got to me and I went out into the bullpen. Two detectives were working late—Andy Zacharias, a wide-eyed, vacant-brained rookie who had been in uniform until a few months ago, and Hunter Kelly, a washout from Narcotics who had more suspensions than I had pairs of designer shoes.

“Gentlemen,” I said, passing between the empty desks to the charge board. It was pathetically empty, only three open cases, two of which were simple assaults where one or both of the participants happened to be a witch or a were. Annemarie had made Zacharias write in the fire—his pained scrawl read *suspicious death*. I rubbed out the *s* and changed it before moving to an empty slot on the board.

“Hi, Lieutenant Wilder,” said Zacharias, and then spilled his coffee all over whatever he was writing on.

Kelly just grunted. If Bryson was burly, Kelly was simply a grizzly bear wearing a cheap suit. He was younger than me by a few years, taller by almost six inches, and wide enough that he overflowed his desk in all of his pro-wrestler glory.

“Don’t strain yourself,” I told him. The sole reason Kelly was still on the force was the number of busts he pulled in, in a division where force and little else actually got results from time to time. Then, when Internal Affairs had had enough of him, they washed him out to me.

Kelly gave me the evil eye. I gave it right back, daring him to stand up and finally say something with more than two syllables. I would love for Kelly to take a swing at me so I could get rid of him. Weres are strong, and tough, and I wondered if he knew that I could bounce him off the ceiling.

Zacharias watched us both like a small child when Mommy and Daddy are fighting. I pointedly turned my back on Kelly and wrote *Squad Briefing—10 A.M.* Anything before ten was asking Bryson to show up hungover and cranky, and Kelly not to show up at all. My squad. I was so proud.

Three

Sunny was in my cottage when the LTD grumbled to a stop in the driveway and I extricated myself from its vast interior like Indiana Jones fleeing the rolling rock ball. Sunny had recently gotten a new car, a bubble-topped hybrid that she adored. Everyone except me had a car that didn’t suck. Especially Fagin. Damn him. If I ever saw that guy again I was going to kick him in the shins, just because.

I unlocked the front door, stripped off my suit jacket and my shoulder holster, letting it hang from the coat tree with the butt of my new service weapon displayed. In a fit of extreme retail therapy just after my promotion, I had decided that as long as I had a new rank and a new office, I needed a new gun, and traded in my Glock for a Sig Sauer P226. It was very sexy, a TV cop’s gun. I’d never actually had to use it.

“In the kitchen,” Sunny called. I kicked off the decidedly *un*-sexy Pradas and padded toward her voice. She was cooking macaroni and cheese, the sharp tang of the cheddar tickling my nostrils. Sunny was a vegetarian, but she made mac ’n’ cheese like nobody else.

“Thanks for cooking this ...” I started, and then stopped, staring at my cousin.

Sunny crossed her arms and glared at me. “What?”

“Nothing,” I managed. Her caramel hair was swept up and off her face, secured with a silver clip. She was wearing makeup—actual makeup—and a green velvet blazer with jeans that would have cost me easily a few days’ pay, plus my lunch money.

“Is there something going on I don’t know about?” I said, trying to discreetly rub the soot out of my shirt. “Is this an intervention?”

“Why?” said Sunny, as the oven timer went off. “Have you done something?”

“What are you wearing?” I demanded. “You look like ... well. Normal.”

Sunny rolled her eyes and pulled out the casserole dish. “Gee. Outpouring of approval. Thanks.”

Normally given to peasant tops, loose skirts, or T-shirts exhorting me to *Visualize World Peace*, natural hair and skin that never saw a dab of cosmetics, Sunny looked fantastic. She was prettier than me anyway, but usually I could ignore that by telling myself she looked like the deranged hippie child of Keira Knightley and Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

“I’m sorry,” I said, grabbing flatware and place mats to apologize. “You look really good. Is that my blazer?”

“It will be fine,” said Sunny, knowing how jealously I guard most of my vintage finds. “I’m just going to a late movie. Nowhere with a water hazard or messy food.”

Shock all over again. “You have a date?”

She nodded, a flush creeping into her cheeks. “Who with?” I demanded.

Sunny chewed on her lip while I grabbed a soda from the fridge and served myself casserole and salad. “Troy McAllister.”

I promptly choked on my first bite. “*Mac?*”

“Yes,” said Sunny, straightening her spine. “That’s what I said. Troy.”

Just as I was about to lay into her for forgetting to mention the small fact of dating my old lieutenant from Homicide, my ears picked up a sound outside the back door of the cottage. It wasn’t much of a sound, really, just a sliding of skin along sand. My rental overlooks the beach, and it wouldn’t be the first couple I’d roused from a blanket and a bottle of wine.

“Wait here,” I commanded Sunny. “Don’t think we aren’t going to discuss this.”

She just flapped her hand at me. I ran to the door and grabbed my gun in its holster. Never hurts to be ready.

I shut the door silently behind me and killed the outside light. I didn’t need it to see, and whoever was down there trespassing didn’t need to see me until I was ready.

The wind bit into me. It was cold, during the night Gooseflesh blossomed up and down my arms.

Again, that sound. The hiss of something slick and wet over sand, and along with it this time a low burbling of voices in a language that sounded like rocks scraped by waves.

I wasn’t dumb enough to call out, not with some of the things I’d encountered during my time in Nocturne City. Blood witches sacrificing to their particular spirits, the daemons who roamed the mists between worlds, Wendigo feeding on the hearts of the living, and enough nasty werewolves to form my own country club.

The moon was half-full, and it tugged on my mind as I crested the dune and started down the rotten steps to the beach. I was in the shadows, and whatever was down there was exposed. Point to me.

The Sig was sweaty in my grip, despite the chill, as I scanned the sand, noticing tracks that came out of the water and crossed the tide line.

They weren't human tracks. They weren't like anything I'd seen before.

Bubbling talk came again, and I crept along in the shadow of the dune, lifting my nose to scent the wind. Salt, a lot of it, something rotten from the ocean floor, and that particular singed scent I associated with magick. Not the good happy kind.

I saw them then—three shapes, hunched and crawling along the sand, their rounded heads gleaming under a half-moon, still damp with salt water. Their flippers were the source of the odd tracks, and the sound, I realized as I watched the closest throw its head back, was laughter.

They were seals. Sentient, giggling seals. Just when you think life can't possibly get any stranger ...

A big piece of driftwood was between me and the seals, and I crouched, watching. They didn't smell right, seals or not, and I wasn't about to let some weird ritual take place fifty yards from where I slept.

The trio circled for a moment, and then one of them paused and, with a groan and a shift, shrugged out of its skin. A human form unfolded from the sealskin, a female form with long tangled hair.

Wind picked up, and I shivered again, realizing my teeth were chattering. The second pair followed their sister, becoming human before my eyes, their skin still gleaming an unearthly deep green. "Holy crap," I muttered, watching the seal women bury their skins and turn toward the water. Their eyes were inky black with no pupil or iris, like most things that didn't come from this part of the world, and their hair was long, dreadlocked with seaweed and sea glass.

The air shifted, and as one they turned and looked in my direction. Lips curled back to show sharp abalone teeth.

They smell you.

"Shit," I said out loud as the three women began to advance, deliberately and with a delicate step, in my direction. The beads and shells in their hair clacked in the breeze.

I had about three seconds before they found me, and less time than that to make a decision. Every sensible bit of me dictated that I should just hide and hope it wasn't me they were smelling. But I'm not famous for being sensible about anything, from my shoes to my boyfriends.

So I stood up, aiming the Sig. "That's far enough."

They hissed at me, and kept coming, the one in front reaching for me with hands that ended in sharp, gleaming obsidian nails.

Okay, so first instincts aren't always right. I started backing up, fast, my finger itching to lay on the trigger of my gun. But they hadn't actually *done* anything yet except creep me the hell out. I had never killed someone who didn't have it coming, and I wasn't about to start now.

The seal woman screeched something at me that made my ears ring and set my teeth on edge, and then she leapt and sprang, fluid as if she were still in the water.

I threw myself to one side, landed hard in the sand, lost my gun, grabbed it again, and decided, *Hex this right to the seven hells*. I ran for the house. Behind me the three seal women gave chase, and I felt cold air on my neck as one set of claws barely missed my skin.

I cleared the steps two at a time, and saw the lights from the cottage. "Sunny!" I bellowed. "Get your ass out here and help me!"

There was a sick crack, like an old bone snapping, and pain sank teeth into my leg. I lost my balance and fell, the Sig skittering away across the crushed shell of the drive.

My foot had gone clean through the rotten steps, and jagged wood drew blood from my ankle that gleamed in the low light.

Fantastic. Not only had I marked myself as a threat to those things, but I'd put my blood into the wind. Could I be asking *Please eat me* any louder?

"*Sunny!*" I hollered. I'm fine in a close-in fight with just about anything this side of the netherworld, but there was no way in the seven hells I was getting close to those things if I could help it. I needed long-range magick.

The three stopped at the foot of the dune, and at some signal from their leader all three of them sprang, loping up the sand on all fours like they were still in the deepest ocean.

"Fuck," I snarled, low, tugging at my leg. There was a rip, and my suit pants came free. There went three hundred dollars straight down the tubes. My actual leg was another matter, still shackled by rotten wood. The pain caused bright flashbulbs to explode in my vision, but my desire to survive was stronger.

I resumed yanking, tears springing involuntarily to my eyes as I felt skin and wood grate, slicked with my blood. I could smell it—heavy, metal, dank with fear. My stomach lurched. I can deal with decomp and stinky gym socks and other weres, but my own blood? Not so much. It's a thing with me.

The lead predator was on me, and she landed, spraying sand into my face. Noises like stones in a brook burred from her mouth. She was laughing at me.

Just as I started thinking I was Hexed, my skin prickled as the air around me changed, electrified. A small strong hand closed around my shoulder and tugged hard, Sunny's familiar scent and the sting of her magick wrapping around me.

She met the seal woman's eyes, and Sunny's were snapping with power as she pulled it out of the aether. "Back off of my cousin, bitch."

Sunny's caster was in her other hand, the wooden disc she used to focus her power wreathed in energy. I felt my skin begin to siphon off Sunny's power, pulling the magick through my body to augment my were DNA to heal me and help me. Being a Path, able to absorb the power of others, the magick I got from the were who turned me—that's also a Thing with me.

The pain in my ankle lessened marginally, and I jerked it free with a cracking of wood and a spray of blood. Sunny yanked me over the lip of the dune, and I thought we were home-free as I felt the crunch of the driveway under my butt.

Then a hand latched around my ankle, digging into the wounds and making me yelp all over again. The seal woman snarled, and even though I didn't understand any of what she was spouting, I've been cursed out enough to know it when I hear it.

"Let go!" Sunny cried. "I swear to everything Hexed and holy I'll fry you!"

I whipped my head to the left. My Sig was still out of reach, but that didn't mean I was defenseless.

"Should have listened to her," I told the seal woman, and flexed my hand. With a sting, my were claws sprouted from my fingers, and I felt my monster explode into the forefront of my mind. I raked my claws across the seal woman's face, digging deep and leaving bloody furrows from forehead to cheek. Being bloody, terrified, and pissed off is prime time for your were to come out, and I was all of the above.

The seal woman squealed and fell backward, clapping her hands over her face. She and her sisters retreated, staying just out of my reach like a pack of hyenas.

That was exactly what they were—hungry, hunting predators. I rolled over, grabbed my gun, and fired three shots into the air. The seal women fled back down the beach and grabbed up their skins, slipping back to flippered, hunched shapes as they took to the waves and disappeared.

Sunny helped me up and we hobbled awkwardly back to the cottage, me leaving little dribbles of blood that looked black under the moonlight across the shells.

"What the *hell* were they?" I demanded, as if Sunny should know everything just by virtue of being a witch.

"You're asking me?" She transferred my weight to the doorjamb and nudged open the front entry, helping me in and dropping me on the sofa. "Lift your leg up," she ordered. "Don't bleed everywhere."

"You don't live here anymore," I reminded her, crabby. "And I'm already healing up, anyway."

That was a lie, but by morning I'd be good as new. Between the speedy regeneration given by the bite and the energy I'd Pathed from Sunny, which kicked all of my were side into overdrive, you'd swear nothing had ever happened to me in forty-eight hours. It's a good thing I don't scar, because otherwise I'd look like Frankenstein.

Well, I didn't scar anymore. The worst of the scars was still there, itching even now against my trapezius muscle on my right shoulder. The bite would never go away. I shoved a finger under my collar and scratched at it, feeling the four round rough patches in my skin.

Silver also doesn't go away. I had two of those, one from a daemon armed with silver rounds in his big-ass gun and one from a Wendigo's silver knife, whom I let too close because I was a big-ass idiot.

Sunny came back and interrupted my mental catalog of scars. "Here. Towel, bandages, antiseptic." She'd done this enough times to know what I needed. "You going to be okay?"

I blinked. "Yeah, sure. I've had a lot worse."

"Good, because I'm late for my date."

I'd forgotten all about that. "You and *Troy* behave yourselves. No sneaking off to make out."

The towel whapped me in the face. "Grow up, Luna." She flounced out the door, not a hair out of place even after she'd rescued me.

I cleaned the blood off of myself and bandaged up the cut, which was deep. I felt lucky—an inch lower and it would have punched into my Achilles tendon.

Maybe it was just a random attack, and maybe I wasn't as lucky as I thought. Briefly, I scrolled through the list of people who had the juice to send three supernatural hunters after me. It was a short list, these days. Alistair Duncan, a blood witch whom I'd killed, had no more followers who were loyal, and besides, the Big Daddy of Nocturne City's blood witches owed me a favor. No blood magick user would dare.

The Warwolves, whose pack counsel I'd sent to Death Row at Los Altos for murder, could care less about me. I was an *Insoli*, a packless were, and rated next to nothing.

The Wendigo who had stabbed me was long gone, and had been possessed by a Wendigo hunger spirit when he pigstuck me, anyway. When he'd been himself, he'd saved my life and I'd saved him from the cops. We may not be best friends, but we were even.

There was one person—if you could call him that—whom I hadn't heard from lately, who might want something from me. This could just be his sick way of getting my attention, after the last time we'd parted, when I'd ended up owing him a favor.

"Asmodeus?" I whispered, experimentally. The daemon had a habit of showing up, demanding things, and vanishing again back into whatever world he called his. He was, ostensibly, among the last of his kind. They called him the Wanderer between the worlds, the only daemon to escape being cast out of our dimension by caster witches, with golden eyes that could look into your soul. I'd met him for the first time when an insane blood witch had summoned him, only to have Asmodeus turn. He was inhuman in the coldest, most alien way possible, and he scared the hell out of me.

Nothing happened, except for the whining of the wind under the eaves. The power flickered as a particularly strong gust rattled my windows, and the waves sent subtle vibrations through

the floor as they pounded the beach. I hoisted myself off the sofa and skip-hopped over to the stairs, up to my bedroom.

At least up there, it was a little less creepy.

Four

The day did not dawn bright and early. As I drove across the Siren Bay Bridge toward downtown, it was wrapped in mist, fingerlets of moisture curling across the LTD's dirty windshield. It was like driving through the netherworld, or what I imagined the netherworld looked like.

I stopped at Java Jones, the cutesy chain coffee place where all the baristas wore precious yellow aprons and visors with cheap plastic sunglasses wired to them, in a nod to Jones, the fictional founder of the place. His visage graced their logo, a fisherman's hat and huge shades overshadowing a moustache. He looked like a cartoon Hunter S. Thompson with overtones of seventies porn star.

After I poured a double mocha into myself, I felt marginally more alive, and even greeted Norris with a smile when I stepped off the elevator. He thrust a sticklike arm at me, pink sheets clutched in his fingers. "Messages."

Not *Messages, ma'am*, or *Messages, Lieutenant*, or *Yo, dude, you got some messages*. I accepted the slips from him and leaned on his desk. He completely ignored me, and swiveled back to his workstation with a snap. When Terminators from the future took over, Norris would fit right in.

"Why didn't you send these to voice mail, Norris?" I asked, gently as I could.

"Phones are down. This entire place is going to shit." Bryson stomped by, pastry crumbs adorning his violet shirt and matching tie.

"Internet, too," Annemarie said, following him. "He's just pissed because he can't get online and quest for the Holy Grail, or some nonsense."

"It's not the Holy Grail!" Bryson yelled. "For the last time, I'm a paladin and I'm trying to find the cup of rejuvenation! I need it to level up!" He slammed the conference room door after him. Annemarie shook her head and gave me a *can you stand him?* smile.

"I guess it's better than surfing for Japanese porn," I sighed.

"Who's surfing for porn?" Zacharias had a look of absolute terror on his face as he scuttled past us. "It wasn't me! Kelly must have used my workstation!"

I rolled my eyes. "Relax, Andy. It was a joke."

"Come on, honey," said Annemarie, taking him by the arm. "Let's get you some decaf before the meeting starts. You look a little high-strung."