

I

I soared in wide circles high above her.

A few graceful flaps of my wings occasionally interrupted riding the air currents. My movements resembled those of a bird of prey. Tracking its prey high above the earth. Waiting for that fatal error in judgement that left it open for death. I preferred the favorable analogy to that of a carrion bird, though I supposed had I not used the ability to cloak my body while in the full grace of my natural form, I would resemble the latter over the former to people below. Most humans have yet to see a dragon beyond CGI imaging, or from an artist's rendering. Only a minority of them know of our existence.

In the summer of 2014 groups of preternatural creatures revealed their presence to mankind. History dubbed the event the Unmasking. Historians omitted many of the uglier facts surrounding the events. One such fact being humans unrelenting hunt of non-human creatures. Elders of various preternatural races agreed to reveal their existence.

Harder to hunt in the dark what exists in the light.

I found considerable irony in the course my thoughts took. Contemplating humans that hunted preternatural creatures while I hunted one from above. Dragons were not alone in remaining out of the spotlight of the Unmasking. Many other preternatural creatures joined us, including demons.

The one I hunted jogged below me. With minimal foot traffic I could have dove down. Tucked copper scaled my wings close to my body and attacked before she knew, quite literally, what hit her. Uncertainty kept me in the air. The sulfuric stench that accompanied demons was so degraded on her I missed it the first time around. In addition to her diminished demonic scent, her deeds during the period I watched her were not the actions of an innate evildoer. Observing her at the last crime scene

her reaction appeared genuine and real. The skinned state of the bodies disturbed her. Not the response I expected from a demon ridden human.

A demon possessing a homicide detective? Possible, but something was off. I learned many lessons in my youth. None so painfully as the consequences that accompany a rash decision. I followed my instincts and watched her for a week. Five days later I found myself no closer to figuring her out. If the demon kept to schedule, the sands just about drained from the top of the hourglass.

I disengaged my surveillance when she returned to her home. I spent enough mornings following to know when she departed her brownstone in forty minutes, she would be heading to her precinct. Banking to the left, I flew out over Lake Michigan and headed to my boat docked a short distance away in Burnham harbor.

Flying. I loved it. The stretch of my muscles when I beat my wings harder and drove my body faster. The wind pressing my scales flat as it rushed over and under my body in answer to the increased speed. The kaleidoscope of scents pushed into my nostrils. More than anything I loved the dive. That rush in the pit of my stomach when I tucked my wings close to my flanks and hurdled my body towards the earth.

I did not pull up. I sucked in a deep breath, sealed off my nostrils and took a header straight into the lake. I remained underwater and pushed my body through the transformation back to my human guise. Docking in the last berth allowed me to surface unseen by anyone who might have been asleep on their boats and awaken when I broke the surface of the water with a thunderous clap from a cloudless sky.

Using the ladder at the rear of my boat, I climbed halfway out of the water and paused. While I stalked a Chicago police detective that might be a demon, someone boarded my boat. A deep breath in brought a familiar scent to my nose.

Without a stitch of clothing on I climbed the rest of the way onto the stern of my boat, not the least bit surprised to find Victor Carter, parked on one of the outboard cushions.

“I do not remember giving you permission to come aboard.”

“One of your neighbors let me in the gate.” He sat with his right leg crossed over the left, and his arms spread across the back of the bench. He kept his eyes purposely trained on my face. His expression somewhere between amused and annoyed. “Any particular reason why you’re naked?”

“I was in dragon form.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you do have the ability to clothe yourself when you change from dragon to human. Or did you make that up?”

“When I left this morning, my boat was empty. I expected to find it that way when I returned.”

“Feel free to magic up some pants.”

“It does not work after I have changed.”

As much pleasure as Victor’s discomfort brought, standing naked on the deck of a boat docked in a public harbor was not the best way to keep peace with the neighbors. Although Mrs. Fisher, the retired schoolteacher to my immediate left might not mind.

I motioned for Victor to stand. When he did, I raised the cushion he vacated and removed a towel from the stack hidden in the storage area under the seat.

“Better?” I questioned after I secured the blue and white striped cotton around my waist.

“You have no idea.”

“Coffee?”

“Please.”

I led the way inside, sliding open the door separating interior from exterior after typing in a numeric code. Once inside, Victor followed me down into the galley. I gestured for him to sit in the kitchen nook area while I put on a pot of water in an electric kettle for the French press.

“Dark roast?”

“Please.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“Battery acid black.”

I added the grinds to the bottom of the press.

“I believe this is my first time being on your boat.”

“No one from the team has, save Emily. I place a high value on my privacy.”

“Am I supposed to read into that?” Victor asked.

“If I did not want you here, Carter, I would have issued a request for you to leave by now.”

“Good to know.”

Carter watched me with a guarded look while I added the boiling water to the press. I waited to push the plunger down until the hue of the water grew darker than my guest’s skin. No matter how many time Carter and I worked together, each new case began with us sizing each other up. Each time I asked myself why I assisted his team. Something kept me from placing my full trust in him. Or, perhaps my desire to rid the world of demonic entities overrode my trust issues.

“Emily passed on your analysis.” Carter stated. “Hence my presence.”

I poured half the contents of the decanter into a cup and placed it in front of Victor, and then sat opposite him.

“FBI does not sit on their laurels.”

“Six murders warrant a fast response. The others will be here this evening. I wanted to fly out ahead and start greasing the bureaucratic wheels.”

I clasped my hands on the table and held Victor’s gaze, but slowly lost focus on the conversation he attempted to initiate around the murders spanning the last six weeks in Chicago. My mind returned to the detective.

“You with me, Brynmor?”

I blinked at my name and returned my focus to the federal agent in front of me.

“My apologies.”

Victor took his first drink of coffee and gave me a pointed look of satisfaction. “Everything all right?”

“I am just thinking,” I began and rubbed one thumb over the other. I met Victor’s eyes and pushed up from the seat. Leaning against the counter, I crossed my arms over my chest and faced him again.

“I may have been mistaken in what I told Emily last night.”

“Which part?”

“I am not entirely certain the detective is the demon we are looking for.”

“But she is a demon. Right?”

I voiced my answer after a breath of hesitation. “I believe so.”

“You believe so?” Carter placed the cup back on the table and turned his body out to face me head on. “You’re not sure?”

“I am not infallible, Special Agent.”

He held his hands up. “A little touchy this morning, aren’t we?”

I parted my lips to apologize but held off and opted to use the still hot water to make a cup of tea. Carter was right. I was touchy, but why? The demon bothered me. As did the beyond brutal manner in which the women were murdered. No ritual came to mind that required the victims to be skinned, which meant the demon did it for fun, for shock, or both.

“Let me ask you this, is it possible for two demons to coexist in one city?”

I raised both eyebrows quickly and answered, “It is more common than you might imagine.”

“I have quite an imagination.”

Adding a smidge of cream to my tea I returned to leaning against the edge of the counter facing Carter.

“Demons operate in a pecking order. When multiples are present in one location, the one with the most seniority will take the leadership position while all the others fall in line.”

“Which is the detective? Leader or follower?”

“That is what troubles me. The more I think on it, I feel she is neither. Her reaction to the murder does not fit with someone who is aware or part of it. She was genuinely upset.”

“Aren’t you the one always reminding us demons are marvelous liars?”

I began with a nod but ended up shaking my head. “I cannot put my finger on this but there is a difference.”

“But the murders are the work of a demon?”

“Unmistakably.”

“So, if there are two here, one is rogue?”

“Now *that* would truly be a unique situation,” I remarked and sipped my tea.

Carter drained his cup and stood. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“Leaving?”

“Yeah. I have a meeting with the police superintendent and mayor in an hour.”

“Mm,” I returned to my seat with my cup and held in my hand. “I am meeting up with a friend, a reporter whose been tracking the story. She has been digging into the background of the lead detective. Seems the public is not particularly fond of the police at the moment.”

“With six brutally murdered and mutilated, and a big ol’ question mark instead of a suspect, or even a person of interest, is there any wonder why?”

I raised my right shoulder in a shrug. “I will watch her tonight. If the pattern is adhered to, tonight is a kill night. If she is not the demon, perhaps she will lead me to him.”

“Don’t you think you’ll need backup?”

“If I need backup, I will call Emily to teleport you to my location.”

“Right.” Victor touched his right finger to his forehead and headed to the ladder. He stopped and turned back around after he placed one foot on the bottom rung. “I almost forgot. What’s this cop’s name? No offense to your reporter friend, but no one digs up dirt like the bureau.”

I hid my hesitation behind drinking my tea. Why did I not want to give up her name? The swell of an overwhelming instinct to protect this woman, this demon created even more confusion. It made no sense. It ran contrary to everything I felt about demons. I should have led the charge to rip out her heart, but instead...

“Brynmor?”

I looked up and met Carter’s eyes.

“Her name?”

“Detective Veronica Sykes.”