Chapter 19

You Call it Crime

(We Call it Smart Family Business)

We spent forty-eight hours in what can only be described as high alert. Elaine and the girls stayed with my mom, which probably sounded weird to most people, but of course, this was my mom we’re talking about. Yesterday Nick sent me a photo of them laughing over tea. They were bonding, which was good.

While we of course didn’t want anything to happen, the waiting was terrible. I was worried that if we saw no sign of the ghoul, Elaine would decide to take the girls home. Or even if she didn’t, too long away and her husband might kick up a fuss. I didn’t want to have to deal with Kevin. None of us did.

I always wondered—should I feel bad about that? Not having any interest in the contributor of one half of my gene pool? I didn’t consider him my dad—that was Haiden LaCroix. He had read to me at night, cleaned my scraped knees, and gave me Hailey.

He had loved my mom as she should be loved.

Kevin…Kevin sucked.

So much for feeling bad about it, I guess.

Brid and Leo checked in frequently, letting me know that the pack members they put on the house to watch it hadn’t seen anything. They did tell me that my mom had been generous with cookies and hot chocolate because the weather had remained crisp, and it wasn’t like we wanted to be sneaky about our surveillance. I didn’t care if the ghoul knew we were watching my mom’s house.

My mom insisted they take turns coming in at meal times so she could feed them, because of course she did.

I was worried that Elaine and the girls were going to get antsy and stop worrying about their safety. Maybe do something silly like go somewhere without a protection detail.

I should have been worrying about me.

Not that I was going anywhere alone. But I’d had to do some council business, which involved some obnoxious ghosts haunting a real estate listing. Houses in the Seattle area were still selling insanely fast and at stupid prices, so for a house in a prime location in a good school district to sit for two months was unheard of. The real estate agent happened to be a vampire, so she was aware of the ghosts and irritated with them screwing up her sale. I’d met up with Kell, the council’s resident vampire, to deal with them.

An hour of negotiation later, and the poltergeists decided to move on. I’d taken Ramon with me as well as Sean. James had decided to go check the wards at my mom’s house, and he was worried that Ramon wouldn’t be enough to watch my back. I was very comfortable with paranoia if it would keep me from being eaten again, so I didn’t argue.

The last thing I remembered was rehashing the poltergeist issue with Kell to figure out if there were any ways we could have handled that better and then…nothing.

When I woke up, I was handcuffed to a bed.

But, like, not in a sexy way. In a murder-y kind of way. Which, sadly, was not a new experience for me.

Just *once* I’d like to be handcuffed in a sexy way instead of something kidnapping related. Was that too much to ask?

A girl was hovering over me. She was a few years younger than me, short and curvy, with thick hair pulled back from pale skin.

She also had hands completely bathed in fire.

“So it’s like that, huh?” I was honestly tired of being kidnapped and intimidated. Also, as far as terrifying presence goes, it was difficult to beat Douglas. Or Ed when he was really pissed off.

Ed had actually raised the bar a respectable amount, come to think of it.

“It’s like that,” she said, a slight accent to her voice that I couldn’t quite place. She tilted her head. “Though usually the people on your end are more freaked out. It’s kind of refreshing, the lack of screaming.”

Another face peaked over her shoulder, his hair bleached, though his eyebrows were dark against the white of his skin, any remnant of a summer tan fading. His pleasant face was impassive, like he was watching the weather channel, as he patted one of the dozen or so pockets on his vest. “No begging, either. That can get real annoying. Nice. Stupid on his part, but nice.” His accent was similar but much thicker, making me think east coast. The only accents from the east coast that I knew offhand was Boston and New York, and that was mostly from TV. He didn’t quite sound like that, though.

“Sorry,” I said. “But this is sadly a regular occurrence for me. After a while, it loses its edge of terror.”

“We’re thinking of getting him a punch card.” Sean’s voice came from some part of the room. I couldn’t see him—the hovering faces were blocking out most of the room—but hearing him was reassuring. At least he was okay enough to make a joke.

“Ten kidnappings and the eleventh ransom is free.” Ramon this time. Relief rushed through me.

“Kell?” I asked.

“Present.” His tone was dry and a little irritated. “Annoyed that we got jumped by half the Scooby Gang, but present.”

“I want to be Velma!” A third head popped into view, and where the other two weren’t hideous by any means, this man might be one of the most handsome men I’d ever seen. Tan skin, dark hair, whiskey eyes, his grin a bright flash that was, frankly, saucy.

“I think you’re more of a Daphne,” I said.

He eyed me. “Because she was the pretty one?” He sniffed. “Fine, I accept. But inside? I’m all Velma.”

The girl snorted. “Inside, you’re all Scrappy Doo.”

His head whipped back like she’d struck him. “You take that back this *instant*, young lady.”

She scowled at him, the flames in her hand flaring. “Don’t you ‘young lady’ me.”

The blond guy pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we stay on track, here? We’re supposed to be interrogating someone, not bickering.”

“I can do both,” the pretty one said. “Because I’m a Velma *and* a Daphne. I’m sure if my precious dumpling would consider things for a few minutes, she would apologize for such hurtful words. Scrappy Doo. How dare, dumpling. How *dare.*”

The girl sighed and brought her flame closer to my face. “Look, this could go on all day. I’m glad you’re not screaming and all that, so I’m hoping that you’ll continue to be cooperative and answer our questions.”

I stopped myself from shrugging—it wouldn’t work in my position. “You do know you could have just asked before you, I don’t know, kidnapped me and handcuffed me to a bed?”

The girl pointed a finger at me, the fire dancing along her finger. “We have to treat you like a dangerous suspect, thank you very much.”

“What do you think Sammy did?” Ramon asked. “Because there’s like a fifty, maybe sixty percent chance he didn’t do it.”

“Thanks, Ramon.” If I ever got out of these handcuffs, I was going to give him a wedgie.

“We’re looking for June,” the girl said. “And you were the last person to see her.” She examined me with a critical eye. “You’re supposed to be a spooky necromancer, too. You don’t *look* very spooky, but then, appearances are deceiving and all that.”

Ah. Okay. Things were becoming slightly less murky. “We’ve been trying to call June. I wanted to warn her about something, but we haven’t been able to get ahold of her.”

“June doesn’t always answer her phone,” Ramon offered. “Especially if she’s binge-watching something. We were kind of hoping it was something like that.”

“Instead of what?” This came from the bleached hair guy.

I hesitated. We didn’t exactly want the whole “ghoul” thing to get around. But I needed to tell them something, or I was going to spend the rest of my short life handcuffed to this bed. I didn’t make the mistake of thinking for one second that, just because they were young and seemingly non-threatening, this group wouldn’t kill me and dump the body in a handy sewer. They were too nonchalant about what they were doing. They also had the air of a seasoned unit.

“Less thinking,” The pretty one said. “More talking. I have things to do. Like any good Velma, I’m *busy.* Doing *things*, mysterious and otherwise.”

“First, I need you to answer one of my questions,” I said.

The girl snorted. “I can’t believe you’re making demands. Then again, you’re Council, so what did I expect.”

“It’s a safety issue,” I admitted. “What’s your connection to June?”

The girl pursed her lips, her gaze on me diamond-hard. She didn’t check with her compatriots before she finally responded. They both seemed content to let her take the lead, even though she appeared younger than them. Then again, age amongst the magical world was deceptive. Just look at James.

She sighed, snapping the fire away from her hands. It guttered out and vanished like it had never been there. “She’s a friend of ours.” The sentence was grudgingly uttered. “And an even bigger friend of our boss.”

“You don’t want to fuck with our boss,” the pretty one said cheerfully. “He would end you. No one would ever find your corpse. Your loved ones would have nothing to mourn while he slept like a baby on sheets worth more than your car.”

“How do you know your boss’s sheets are worth more than Sammy’s car?” Ramon asked.

“It’s a saying,” pretty-boy said. “People say it.”

“No one says that,” the blond pointed out.

“I just did.”

The fire-girl made a strangled screaming noise.

As a saying, it didn’t do much for me, and as assurances went, it was worse. Then again, I wasn’t really in the position to bargain. “What I’m going to tell you can’t go further.”

Ava was already shaking her head. “We have to tell the boss.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “Fine. But make sure he knows that this information, if it gets out, will be dangerous for June, okay?”

They all nodded.

That was the best I was going to get. “Something is going after necromancers. A ghoul. We were trying to warn June.” I gave them an extremely edited version of the story. Once that was done, the blond one stepped away to make a phone call.

About ten minutes later he came back, and I was finally allowed to sit up. The cuffs came off after the girl gave me a stern warning that she could, at any time, set me on fire. An effective threat for sure, coming from her.

I finally got to take in the room, which was your basic generic motel room. The kind with a bland, yet somehow hideous bedspread about thirty years out of date and the “art” bolted to the wall.

Ramon and Sean were both in chairs. They’d been placed back-to-back. They weren’t cuffed, but were instead completely encased in what seemed to be some kind of thick vine. As I watched, Ramon flexed, the vines moving with him, keeping a firm grip, but not snapping.

Kell was in the remaining chair, bound in chains, a small, dark-haired man with sun-tanned skin and large brown eyes hovering over him in a menacing fashion. As I watched, he bared his teeth at Kell. They were sharp in a way that told me he was something human-adjacent.

Or he’d paid a dentist a lot of money to get a mouth full of nightmare teeth.

The question of how the team had known to question us was made clear as well. Seated on the small table, a card game in front of them, sat Merry Death and Merciless Blade, the two gnomes that had rejected us in Mississippi.

“I would say it’s nice to see you again,” I said, rubbing my wrists. “But it’s not.”

Merry didn’t even look up. “We like June. If she leaves, a different necromancer might move in. We don’t want that.”

“Besides,” Mercy said, tossing down a card. “We owe her.” She turned her head my way, her lip curling up. “Your security is terrible.”

“Usually it’s really good,” I said. We’d just been cocky in the knowledge that I had two shapeshifters and a vampire with me. “You just caught us at the right moment, I guess.”

Mercy scoffed, her brown eyes full of derision. “If there was a moment, then the security wasn’t any good.”

“I will admit,” Kell said, his attention never leaving the man in front of him. “That we made an inexcusable tactical error.” His voice held the easy grace I expected from Kell. Like we were on a pleasant social call sipping lemonade instead of kidnapped in a seedy motel. “I didn’t see the threat in a group of young people, two of which had toddlers on their hips. Glamours and magic, the simplest of tricks, and I fell for it. I’m too old to do something so stupid.”

“We didn’t even need Bianca,” the girl said smugly. “Just walked right up.”

“Shouldn’t have worked,” the blond said.

“It was simple,” the pretty man said with a one-shoulder shrug. “Simple is always best.”

The menacing man smiled at Kell. “If you so much as twitch, I get to eat you. It’s been a long time since I’ve had vampire.”

I stopped rubbing my wrists, suddenly irritated. I channeled my inner James, letting my voice go cold and haughty. It was an impression I was getting better at. “We’ve been very forthcoming, despite everything. I’d like some answers. Now.” I waved a hand at them. “Who are you?”

The girl turned to the blond and he nodded.

She folded her arms, her face stern. “If we let you three out, will you cooperate?”

“You project a lot of authority for someone so short,” Sean grumbled. I was pretty sure he was annoyed that they’d gotten the drop on him so easily.

“Runt of the litter energy,” Ramon said as he flexed against the vines. “You got to watch out for the little ones. They’ve survived despite being tiny. That takes a certain amount of cunning and aggressiveness.”

“Can confirm,” Merry said.

“We promise to be good,” Kell said. “I’ll even order some food for your kelpie here. I’m assuming this fine establishment doesn’t have room service?”

Sean recoiled. “You have a *kelpie* with you? What kind of banana-pants people team up with kelpies?”

Sean’s reaction was completely justified. Kelpies were sort of aquatic murder ponies. You avoided kelpies. You didn’t recruit them.

Kell’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, what kind of people?” The question was absently said, more thinking out loud than actually expecting an answer. “You’re one of Alistair’s teams.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. Seeing my confusion, Kell huffed. “East Coast one-man council.”

My eyebrows winged up. “He controls his area by himself?” The *how* went unspoken between us.

Kell’s expression was droll. “By employing kelpies and the Drove.”

Drove…drove. Nope, I had nothing. I glanced at Ramon. His expression was equally blank.

Sean swore. “He teamed up with the hares?” He shook his head. “Bananas. You’re all bananas.”

“Hares?” I was picturing a gang of wigs, which didn’t seem right at all.

“Like the rabbit,” Sean said, “but with considerably more knives.”

“The drove does like their blades,” the girl mused.

“Yes, very stabby.” The pretty guy tossed a key to the kelpie. “Stop teasing the vampire and undo his chains. I’m hungry and he promised food.”

The girl brightened. “Can we get more teriyaki? Ooooh, and maybe some Thai I wouldn’t say no to a pizza, either.”

The blond gave her what could only be described as a besotted look. “I promise we’ll feed you.” He tapped the vines holding Sean and Ramon in place, murmuring something. The vines dropped away, folding in on themselves, seeming to grow in reverse. Within a few seconds, they were nothing but a handful of seeds that the man tucked into one of the many pockets on his vest. “I’m Lock.” He pointed to the girl. “Ava, and the ridiculously handsome one is Ezra. The cannibalistic one is Fitz.”

Fitz scowled at him. “It’s not cannibalism. I’m not a vampire.”

“You say that like you wouldn’t eat another kelpie,” Ezra said, leaning against the wall.

Fitz hesitated, holding the key over the lock. “Maybe. I mean, not one I *liked*, obviously.”

“Well, obviously,” Ava said under her breath.

Fitz unlocked Kell’s chains. He stood up, shaking them off. “Sam, I apologize for every time I’ve called your group annoying, obnoxious, or vexing. Current circumstances inform me that it could have been worse.”

“You’ve never called us annoying,” Ramon said. “Or any of those other things.”

“In my head,” Kell murmured. “Many, many times.”

Ava pointed at Kell. “Less chatting, more food. We need to plan, and I can’t plan when I’m hungry.”

“Plan?” I asked.

“Well, we’re going to stay and help you, obviously.” This was from Ezra. He shook his head slowly. “It’s clear you need help. Supervision, really. Like babes in the woods.”

“I’d like to see him with James,” Ramon said. “They’ll murder each other. Or make out. It could go either way.”

I was betting on murder, especially since they’d kidnapped us. How long had we been missing and off the radar? James was probably going nuts. That was a good point, actually. “You kidnapped us, and now you want us to team up?”

“Are you still on that?” Ezra asked. “That was like ten minutes ago.”

“I like to bring up old shit,” I said dryly. “Minor things, like the felony that just happened.”

Ava put her hands on her hips. “Really. Ezra’s right. That was like, ten minutes ago, and it was just a teeny *tiny* felony. Don’t be such a baby.”

“James,” Ramon said slowly. “Is going to eat them alive.”

Personally, I couldn’t wait.