

Chapter 1

I have been accused of a lot of things; fortunately, to date none of them have needed a criminal defense attorney to clear up. A penicillin shot maybe, but not legal counsel. That is until today. Sheriff Loretta Linn, yes, that is her real name. And yes, I know it's not the correct spelling of the famous country singer, but that small detail did not stop me from making several and when I say several, the last one threw us into double digits, "Coal Miner's Daughter" references. I knew these quips were not helping my case or endearing myself to the small-town sheriff, but seriously she really wasn't putting forth much effort to make my BFF list either, *so whatevs*.

"Let me get this straight. You just happened upon a truck with a cab full of blood, cocaine, and drug paraphernalia?" Sheriff Linn asked.

"Yes," I confirmed, not hiding my frustration this go-around.

"And you've never been to Union City before today?"

"No. And I have to say, unless something drastically changes, I will not be leaving favorable reviews on TripAdvisor," I quipped. She ignored me as she had the last seventy-two times I'd popped off with what I thought was very well-timed and well-executed humor.

"Tell me again, what brought you here and down that particular desolate road?"

“I’m a Louisiana woman chasing after my Mississippi man?” I answered this time, figuring it was about time to change up the Loretta Lynn references.

“You’re not helping yourself, Miss Mattox,” Sheriff Linn said, in what I have now identified as her “you’re not in any way shape or form amusing to me” tone.

“Sorry.” I shrugged dramatically, causing the handcuffs to clang on the circa 1970s metal-topped government surplus table that I was currently secured to. “I thought I would try a different answer this time being that my previous fifteen answers to that exact same question didn’t seem to satisfy you.” She ignored me. Again. I wasn’t offended. I got that a lot.

“What brought you here?” she asked.

The honest answer was “I’m a demon hunter. A Hoyo Abi, bringer of death, and I got a little message via the demon-net during a catnap at a roadside park just outside of McCall Creek last night. Therefore, I came here to kill him and send him back through the hellhole. Literally, it’s a gopher hole to hell.” I decided to stay with the, granted really poor, answer of “I’m hunting Bigfoot.”

I know it was lame, but I’d been driving overnight, listening to Art Bell reruns on the radio and, well, it just happened. In my defense, it wasn’t that far from the truth if you exchanged Bigfoot for demon. And this particular demon could be big, smelly, and unshaven for an eternity. It’s been known to happen, so who knew? Not me obviously, because I was stuck in this lovely institutional gray establishment, playing suspect versus being out there throwing down with it.

I guess that is as good an intro as any, so yeah, that’s the fun little part about my life. I, Addison Jo Mattox — AJ or Mattox, which is a holdover from the few years I

spent on the Seattle PD where you are called what's inscribed on your nameplate — am a demon hunter. Do not attempt to call me Addison Jo unless you want your face removed and attached to the bumper of your car with baling twine. There were four Addisons in my high school; they were all petite cheerleaders who said “OMG” a lot. You will never hear me say OMG and, at 5'10”, I'm not what you would call petite. As far as my interest in anything cheerleader... we will just say I'd rather be tortured by a 24-hour Kardashian marathon while getting my nether regions waxed by a blind Chinese man using Superglue and duct tape than spend five seconds holding pompons or wearing a pleated skirt. I did, however, sleep with a cheerleader once. And though her extremely enthusiastic screams of passion during some rather impressive rounds of bendy sex did boost one's ego, the Rah Rah Rees and the overuse of the word “score” got obnoxious after round four.

Sheriff Linn tapped a meaty fingertip on my driver's license. “Your hair is blonder in your photo.” Sheriff Linn said, interrupting my thoughts.

“I was going through a phase,” I answered. *A phase called “actually trying to have a real life,”* I thought to myself. My hair was darker now, brown at its roots, and what blond streaks I had now didn't come from a salon but a la Mother Nature. I had stopped with the artificial highlights sometime after I killed my second or third demon and realized that the chemicals in my hair didn't play well with the fluorescent green blood of demons, as it tended to turn my chemically altered hair orange.

She took longer to assess my face. Her eyes traced the path the C-shaped scar made on its way down my forehead, taking a right turn through the edge of my right eyebrow, disappearing into my hairline. The scar was a

little too cliché anti-hero for my tastes, but the demon who took the potshot at my face didn't want to stop to talk about it first. Bastard.

The sheriff met my eyes, or more accurately the black bags under my eyes. I'm sure I looked as if I hadn't slept in a week. It had only been three days, but they had been a very long three days.

"Do you do drugs, Miss Mattox?"

I threw down my best suspicious, back-alley pimp look, shooting glances over both shoulders before coming back to her, leaning forward to stage whisper, "Dude, are you, like, offering?" I looked around again. "I mean kudos to you, Sheriff. Bold career choice with the whole mixing sheriff with drug dealer. Kind of ingenious. Most dealers go all dark, street corner, but you ..." I leaned back in the chair as my finger took a loop of the room, "ballsy."

The sheriff leaned back as well, crossed her arms over her chest, which was no small feat I must say, and stared me down.

I huffed out a sigh of defeat. "No, Jesus. I don't do drugs." She raised an unconvinced eyebrow.

"Fine, once at a Backstreet Boys concert when I was eighteen, but seriously there was no other way to get through it. Otherwise, I down Aleve like Pez once a month to curb the girlies and that's it. I don't do drugs. I'm just really, really tired."

"Because you're out Bigfoot hunting at all hours of the night ..."

"Bingo," I answered quickly. And thank you for that supplied answer, as I'd almost forgot my alternate trade, as again I am really, really tired.

The door to our little tête-à-tête room opened and a deputy came in and whispered into the sheriff's ear. The

sheriff scowled, waved the deputy off, and then stood. She pointed a finger at my face. “Stay.”

I lifted my wrists and dropped them so the handcuffs and chain that had me doing just that clanged loudly on the table. “Oh, okay. But only because you asked me so nicely.”

Once the sheriff left the room, I laid my head on the cool metal of the table, hoping for just a few minutes of quiet. Something I hadn’t had much of since I got my little demon-hunting gift from an old drunken Indian in Oklahoma. Okay, fine, he wasn’t drunk. That part had been played by me but, whatever, I was seventeen and a total lightweight back then.

How in the world did that happen, you ask? Sure. We have some downtime apparently. I was there on a summer trip with my grandparents. They liked to take my younger sister and me on “educational” vacations during our summer breaks. I thought I received a fair amount of education throughout the rest of the year, but my mom said I was going. Since she controlled my wardrobe and my car, I went. To be honest, although I liked to act like the petulant teenager, I loved my grandparents and loved hanging with them and taking trips, educational or otherwise. That was up to and until the Oklahoma “Learn About the Native Americans” trip.

The OLANA trip as I now call it. Or when I’m tired, grumpy, or getting my ass kicked by a demon, I might refer to it as “the fucked-up trip that totally screwed up my whole entire life”. “Fucking trip” for short, when I’m pressed for complaining time. Anyway, we took the OLANA trip the summer before my senior year in high school. After two fun-filled days of classes, which included The Fine Art of Basket Weaving, Teepee 101, and

Moccasin Making, the third day was reserved for sightseeing and shopping. The day had started out normal enough. I was wearing my moccasins, to be later known as “stupid blister-making moccasins.” We’d returned to our authentic teepee, complete with cots and a box fan, with a nice stash of turquoise-infused jewelry. I had the added bonus of collecting the name of a cute Native American boy and a secret plan to meet him later that night out by the hide-tanning tent.

I waited for my grandparents and sister to fall asleep before I snuck out. FYI, teepee flaps are, yeah, *way* easier to sneak out of than bedroom windows, especially with the convenient cover noise of the box fan. I quickly found Steve. *I was a little disappointed in the name thing myself.* It would have been a way cooler story to say, “Yeah, I threw back some corn whiskey and made out with Running Bear or Braveheart.” But Steve was cute enough and the corn whiskey was, well, kind of like licking a corn cob dipped in kerosene. Fortunately, it took only a couple of shots to make me lose the feeling in my toes, and luckily my tongue as Steve was not that great a kisser. Fun had, I started back to the teepee while I still had some control of my lower extremities and before my grandparents woke to find me missing. That was when I discovered the super-fun fact that all the authentic teepees looked exactly alike. Same shape. Same size. Same buffalo, deer, and wolf symbols painted on them.

I ended up wandering in and out of the maze of endless teepees until the flicker of a campfire caught my attention. I made my way closer as the low rhythmic song seemed to beckon me forward, enchanted me. I paused when I came upon the source of the sound: a circle of Native American men sitting ... well, hmmm ... Okay, I’m

not going to say it. Regardless, they were sitting around the campfire. The men chanted in perfect unison. I didn't understand what they were saying, but their words were like a siren's call to my soul. I kept to the shadows as I moved closer, needing to hear, needing to witness what was about to transpire.

One man's voice started to rise above the others. He was draped in traditional dress made maybe of elk or buffalo hide. I didn't know exactly as I hadn't paid a whole lot of attention to the traditional clothing exhibit. I could tell, however, that he was older than the others, and much older than the boy that sat across the flames from him. I hadn't initially seen the boy, whom I guessed to be roughly my age, among the older men until the man next to him stood and moved to a row of bowls positioned on a low table off to the side of the fire.

I'd tracked the man's movements as he picked up the first bowl, his chants never wavering. He turned back to the fire taking fistfuls of whatever was in the bowl, some kind of ash or powder, and threw it into the flames. The fire bucked and sparked when the substance collided with it. The man moved slowly, throwing a handful at a time and continuing his chant while circling the fire. When he came full circle, he returned the bowl, selected the second, and completed the same routine. He did so again with the third and the fourth.

The fire began to grow dark with the last bowl's contents. Its flames were a dark blue-gray now, as the smoke billowed from its depths in thick waves. It cast an eerie scene, more so when the chants stopped abruptly and were replaced by the slow pounding of a drum. The eldest man moved to kneel at the edge of the flames. He closed his eyes, his hands reaching up as he looked heavenward.

His voice was silent but his mouth was moving as if he were talking directly to the Gods. His voice slowly lifted just enough that I was able to catch phrases of an unrecognizable language. I could only assume it was an ancient tongue not yet lost. I edged closer, hiding behind a large basket outside the nearest teepee. I wanted, no, needed to hear the man's words even though I knew they were not ones I would be able to understand.

The two men on either side of the teenager stood, taking the boy by the elbows and leading him to the edge of the flames. I could see only the boy's back now, as they sat him directly across the fire from the praying man.

I remember wondering if I was getting an insider's view of some coming of age, boy to man, ritual, and vowing that if they brought in a goat or any other animal I was sooo out of there. In some sense, I had been correct that night, minus the livestock. It was a ritual, a transition of one life to another, but it wasn't that of manhood.

The drumbeat grew in intensity, and the smoke from the fire responded by dancing and swirling, powered by something more than just the air. My heart lunged with the final powerful strike of the drum and the smoke that shot up in the darkened sky, twisting as it ascended. Then, with a single beat of the drum, the smoke returned in a fiery descent.

The older man's body jolted as the smoke entered him through his eyes, nose, and mouth with a violent strike. I gasped loudly. But thankfully the wind, which had picked up and was whipping viciously within the circle of men, covered my intrusion. I clamped a hand over my mouth and watched as the smoke shot out of the man in a burst of bright light, its tentacles now flickering and sparking with golden flames.

I had only one thought at the time, “That freaky ass thing just stole his soul.” The smoke held the pulsing golden light above the flames, swirling and twisting around the light as if it was the only thing holding it together; containing it.

I jolted when the low “dooooom ... doooooom” of the drum punched through the night’s thick air, its beat coming once to every eight beats of my heart. The men’s rhythmic chants started as soft whispers, gaining in strength and cadence with every strike of the drum. One of the men moved behind the elder, catching him as his body went limp, lifeless. He gently guided the man down, taking care to cover him with a blanket—Indian or otherwise. I didn’t pay attention as I was transfixed by the light that continued to spark and whirl within its smoky restraints. My heart raced, matching the drumbeat’s quickening pace.

“You shouldn’t be here,” a voice whispered in my ear.

I screamed as I launched myself forward, all in one motion of sheer epic freak-out. I fell ass over elbows over the basket, which caused me to tumble into a drunken backward somersault. I slammed into one of the seated men who fell forward, effectively causing me and my half-mooning ass to go full-retrograde over him in a twisted heap. I fell hard. Flat on my back in the circle, with the wind knocked out of me, I gasped for air as my last conscious thought of “Oh, fuck” passed through my brain and I watched the smoke and golden-light twisted mass racing toward my face.

I don’t really remember anything after that, at least not until I woke with five men and the boy leaning over me. They sat me up at the risk I’d hurl on their shoes, gave me a really good hangover cure- I still need to get that

recipe by the way- and laid on the news that I, AJ Mattox, white girl from Missouri, had tumbled straight into the middle of an ancient spirit ritual. The rite of passage in which the old man, whom I now know to be the chief of the Choctaw tribe, was passing the “Hunter Spirit,” that golden light thing I mistakenly thought was his soul, to his grandson, Dyani.

Instead, no. I had rolled in and wham, bam, thank you, ma’am, stole the show. And by the show I mean the Hunter Spirit, which has assisted the Choctaw tribe in fighting demons and protecting their people as well as everyone else in the world for the last several centuries. And as for Dyani, which means deer or something; I just call him Danny, got downgraded to faithful companion. His new role and main responsibility is to help keep me safe, or at minimum alive, so we can fix my little blunder at the next Hunter’s Moon, the next time the spirit can be handed back. Fun fact: That only comes about every fifteen or so years.

There was a bunch of stuff in the middle that happened, but that’s pretty much the start of how and why I’m here, trying to explain how I didn’t have anything to do with the murder and cocaine situation in the middle of a national forest.

I rolled my head to the side as I heard muted mumblings from down the hall. A man was talking to the sheriff. Their words were just out of my range, but I did make out “I have it handled” when the sheriff’s voice rose heatedly.

Something about the exchange had my head coming up from the desk. I didn’t know who the man was, but he had my hackles up, and by hackles I mean The Hunter, who was coming alive within me. The Hunter whom I

affectionately, and sometimes not so affectionately, call Norm for no good reason except that I thought it was fun to go old-school Cheers on him every time he decided to enter the scene. Except for this time. This time was not a good time. We didn't need to add crazy possessed person to the suspect title that the friendly sheriff already tagged me with today.

Since Norm's little body invasion my senses are heightened beyond normal human abilities. This includes my sight and hearing, as well as my speed and strength. When Norm fully surfaces, it feels like every muscle in my body is on 'roids. My vision is that of an eagle on the clearest day. It's even better at night, so much that it would rival that of an owl. My sense of smell is as keen as a wolf, and my speed falls somewhere between the fastest man and a deer. Yep, I'm all kinds of cool badassery except for one small caveat: These abilities are used to fight demons that have escaped from hell. Oh, and one other small thing: With Norm front and center right now, that means my pupils have gone to pinpoints and my irises have changed from their normal hazel to a supernatural smoky white. A super-not-good thing while one is on a date or in moments like now when I hear a new voice enter the scene, a door slam, and the sheriff's angry footsteps head back my direction.

"It's not a good time, Norm," I whispered.

I tried to steady my breathing, talk Norm back down into his little hidey-hole where he hung out when he wasn't sending my body into hyper-alert, superhuman status. The voices were getting closer; therefore, I didn't have time to determine why Norm was trying to alert me as he never just pops in for a chat over muffins and chamomile tea.

My efforts were quickly becoming desperate as I could now hear two distinctive voices with two distinct types of soles hitting the hallway floor and then stopping outside my door.

Two female scents commingled in my nostrils, the musk of old coffee and last night's whiskey that I now recognized as the sheriff, and a new soft, clean scent mixed with the wild of the forest. The second woman spent time outside and her perfume was the perfect pairing, just a hint of spice to mix with her natural sweet scent. I took a deep breath, enjoying the soft scent as most of the women I encounter smell like they've stewed in a vat of potpourri.

As the doorknob turned, my head was back resting on the table with my eyes closed, covering any lingering evidence of Norm's presence. "Come on, buddy, I need you to go nighty-night for me," I coaxed. I sighed in relief when I felt my body temperature cool and the extra boost of strength dissipate, a clear sign that he'd slid into the background.

The sheriff slapped her meaty hand down on the metal table, making my head bounce. "Wakey, wakey, Sunshine." The sheriff smirked when I raised my head to glare at her.

I wiped away fake sleep from my eyes with the knuckles of one fist and blinked though I had no problem bringing the woman accompanying the sheriff into delicious focus. I gauged that the woman would nearly match me in height, just shy by an inch or so, maybe 5'8"-5'9". Her face was the kind that made my insides stand up and scream, "Yes, please! I'll take two with extra whipped cream." Soft features were atop a well-toned body with a cute smattering of freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. Her hair was several shades lighter than mine, and

her sun-kissed highlights told me she too spent the majority of her waking hours outdoors. As if the package wasn't lust-worthy enough, her eyes could steal a person's soul, a mesmerizing pale green with streaks of golden brown racing through them. They were alluring and kind, curious and intelligent, and I couldn't help but smile when I heard her heart pick up as they locked with mine.

"Miss Mattox, this is Ranger Parker," the sheriff started, "Ranger Parker, this is your ..." Here she scoffed, "Bigfoot hunter, Addison Jo Mattox."

"I prefer AJ or Mattox," I advised.

Ranger Parker stepped forward and extended her hand in greeting.

I simply looked down at my handcuffed wrists.

She grinned. "Right. Sheriff Linn, I think we can uncuff Miss Mattox while we continue our conversation." She turned her eyes to me. "You're going to behave yourself, aren't you?"

She was knowingly using her sexy smile to persuade me into cooperation. I countered with a not-so-innocent smirk. "Absolutely, Ranger Parker," I returned in a tone that hopefully conveyed I'd pretty much do anything she'd ask me to do, if she kept that smile aimed at me.

"Thank you." She nodded at the sheriff, who huffed out her best 'I'm a grumpy bitch' protest but leaned over and uncuffed my wrists anyway.

The sheriff gave me a glare before turning to the ranger. "I'll be outside if you need anything."

"I need a coffee and a warm snickerdoodle cookie if you have one? Make that two cookies. That would be super great. Thanks." The sheriff just glared at me.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine, Sheriff Linn. Thank you,” Ranger Parker replied as she pulled out the chair across from me and sat.

We both watched the sheriff reluctantly leave the room. When the door shut, Ranger Parker turned and laid another will-melting smile on me. “So I hear you found a little mess in my forest?”

This was so the best good guy routine I’d ever seen. The only problem with their good ranger, bad sheriff plan was the fact that the only thing I would be confessing to today would be me wanting this good ranger in a very bad way.

Ranger Parker wasn’t one of the park volunteers or a simple gate greeter; she was the law enforcement side of our National Park Service. She wore the standard green tactical pants and button-down, complete with a duty belt and an empty gun holster on her hip. I guessed her weapon was probably out in the gun locker in the hall per the golden rule of not bringing a gun into an interview room. But she did have her ASP, OC spray, or maybe it was bear spray, and two sets of handcuffs around her oh-so-perfect waist. Which meant that pretty little Ranger Parker was a fully licensed federal police officer and she, not the sheriff, would have jurisdiction over the crime scene. Lucky her. *Even luckier me.*

When she quirked an eyebrow at me, I realized I had taken too long to answer. “Yeah, I just happened across the guy.”

She nodded in understanding. “And you were out on the park road looking for ...” She trailed off, wanting me to complete the sentence.

“Bigfoot,” I supplied.

“Right. Bigfoot. So, Miss Mattox-” she started.

“Call me AJ,” I interrupted.

“Okay, AJ.” She smiled her approval. “How long have you been a Bigfoot hunter?”

How long have I been in here? I thought. “Years,” I answered instead. Again, it wasn’t technically a lie if we went by the very loose definition of Bigfoot as big, bad, hairy dudes. Just a month or so ago, I had taken down a hairball of a demon with a taste for Nilla Wafers and humans. I’m just guessing on the wafers part as the demon had ransacked the campsite of a young couple outside Yellowstone, and all I found was the familiar yellow box shredded among the blood and destruction. The incident had been reported as a rogue bear attack, as were a lot of demon attacks near forests, but Danny and I had tracked the demon for three days before catching up to him and having a little showdown throw down, ending his little wafer-raiding party.

“Years?” Ranger Parker asked.

“Yep, years,” I repeated, adding a convincing nod, clearing that little matter right up.

“Interesting. In all these *years* have you seen any evidence of Bigfoot?”

I pondered. Ranger Parker was an intelligent woman, and she wasn’t simply curious about my success in my nonexistent career as a Bigfoot hunter. She was trying to lead me down a path I really didn’t want to go. So, vague would be my weapon of verbal choice today. “Some, maybe. But you know how it goes, it could also be a large bear, bobcat-”

“Really? So specifically, what kind of evidence have you found? Footprints? Claw marks? Dwellings?” she countered.

“Yeah, you know,” I said with a nonchalant shoulder shrug, “some of all of that.”

“No, please, I’d like to hear the details. I’m extremely curious. Creatures in my forest are kind of my thing.” She tapped the patch sewn on her sleeve, displaying the distinctive arrowhead, bison, mountain, and tree scene.

My eyes glanced at the patch, then the badge, but quickly wandered off, finding other things in the immediate area that I found a tad more interesting. The open V of the ranger’s uniform shirt led me to her long sensuous neck, one which I wouldn’t be opposed to getting a taste of later. My eyes roamed back to her face as I watched a dimple activate in her left cheek. *Ahh damn, Shazam, cute woman dimples were totally my kryptonite.* When I met her eyes again, they were lit with curiosity or maybe amusement; either way, at that very moment I vowed to curiously amuse her ... *often.*

“AJ?” Ranger Parker prompted in a whisper.

“Yeah?” I responded in an equally soft tone.

“Bigfoot evidence?”

Okay, ditching vague and going with flirt, I leaned forward and smiled the smile that has served me well over the years. “I didn’t say I was a good Bigfoot hunter, Ranger Parker.” As I’d hoped, I heard the sexy ranger’s heart accelerate in her chest. I grinned wider. This little trip to bum-fuck might not turn out too bad after all, I thought as she placed her arms on the table and leaned forward.

She countered with her own wicked grin that in turn made my heart go all boom da’ boomy. “I’m going to take a wild guess here that you’re good at just about everything.” The way she drew out the word “everything” in a sex-laced whisper made my insides go weepy.

We sat there for a long moment, testing each other's will. "Most everything, yes," I finally confirmed.

She did her own once-over of me. I watched as her eyes rolled over my black tank top, the single talisman that I wore around my neck. Her eyes took a slow stroll from my chest, up my neck, to my jawline. Her stare traced my scar before landing back on my eyes. "You know, I'm curious about something ..."

Please say how we would fit together naked in a bed, I thought. "I'm happy to help satisfy any curiosities you might have, Ranger." That little comment got me a quick smirk.

"Good to know. What I'm curious about actually are the contents of your truck." She let the sex and tease leave her eyes, to be replaced with the serious cop. "Most Bigfoot hunters travel with high-tech cameras, video recorders, and sound detection devices. When I took a glance in your vehicle, all I found was a cooler, a McDonald's cup, a duffle bag, and a sleeping bag. No, sorry. Actually, I believe there were," she held up two fingers, "two sleeping bags." She leaned back in her chair awaiting my explanation.

So the good news here is that she apparently didn't find my weapon stash. The bad news is that apparently there wouldn't be any naked sexy time with the ranger. *Maybe*. I mimicked her movements, sitting back in my own chair. "I have a partner. A Bigfoot hunting partner," I added for clarification.

"Ahhh. Care to share his or *her* name?"

"*His* name is Danny. He carries all the techie gear. I carry the food and sleeping bags."

She nodded. "So this Danny, does he have a last name? And where is Danny now?"

“Whitefang. Danny Whitefang. And he is likely somewhere between here and McCall Creek where I left him.”

“White Fang, like the movie? He’s ...”

“Whitefang, one word. And yes, he’s Native American. Choctaw Indian to be exact,” I offered.

“Why did you leave him behind?”

’Cause he ate the last of the Oreos and I’m PMSing or just bitchy. It’s even hard for me to tell sometimes. “He’s a late sleeper. I was stir-crazy and wanted to get a head start.”

“Just the two of you? No one else?”

“Just Danny and I.”

Ranger Parker tapped a thumb on the edge of the desk as she pondered. “Just the two of you and you drive separately?”

Ummm, we do now. “We were coming from different places when we met up, so yeah, two cars.”

“So where were you before here?”

“McCall Creek,” I offered, starting to tire of the question-and-answer game.

“Right. Where you left your boyfriend,” Ranger Parker stated casually.

I narrowed my gaze. “My partner,” I clarified for her.

“Sorry. Partner,” she repeated. “And before McCall Creek?”

And we were back to the dangerous line of questioning. A few pieces of information like that and I knew, between the ranger and the sheriff, they could track Danny’s and my little road trip across America. Eventually they’d connect the dots that Danny and I have mysteriously been in or around the scene of four suspicious murders in

the past four months. The last two just so happened to have been in other National Forests. “Here and there,” I offered instead.

“Care to expand on *here and there*?”

Nope. Time to go on the offensive. “Ranger Parker, am I being charged with a crime?”

“Have you committed a crime?”

I couldn’t help but smirk at her super-cute attempt to incriminate me. “I didn’t have anything to do with the guy in your forest,” I answered.

She assessed me for a long moment. “I can’t help but notice that you didn’t answer the question. Not exactly anyway.”

“I can’t help but notice you didn’t answer my question either,” I countered.

She nodded touché, then replied, “I don’t have significant evidence to hold you,” she paused for effect, “and we haven’t found the body ... *yet.*”

I pushed my chair back from the table. “So I can go then?”

“For now, but I’ll need you to stay in the immediate area.” She pushed her own chair back and stood. “I recommend the Shamrock Motel. Not the fanciest of accommodations but it’s clean-ish. And more importantly, it’s the only motel in the area.”

“I’m more of a fresh air, under the stars kind of girl.” I stood. “If you want to find me, I’ll be out by Lake Lanier, south side.” I gave her a quick glance over my shoulder as I reached for the door. “Feel free to find me,” I suggested before exiting the room.

I heard the ranger exhale a long “*lord help me*” as the door closed. I hoped that meant I would be seeing the sexy ranger again.

The sheriff was standing behind a tall counter that separated the desks and their work areas from the general public. I sniffed the air. A man's cologne was still lingering. *Was this the guy she had been arguing with?* I filed the scent for later.

The sheriff dropped a brown bag on the countertop with the delicacy of a water buffalo with a fluorescent bulb. I could only assume the bag was full of my property that she'd taken off me when she found me at the scene this morning. "I'm not done with you," the sheriff sneered.

I leaned an elbow on the counter and fluttered my eyelashes. "You say the sweetest things, Sheriff."

She shoved the bag at me. "Don't leave town," she ordered.

"Not 'til after the fire is gone?" I responded in my best country thick Loretta Lynn accent.

I heard the ranger stifle a laugh behind me. I gave the sheriff a wink, straightening as I snatched my bag-o-belongings and spun slowly on my boot heel toward the woman behind me. "Ranger," I acknowledged, offering her own personal appreciative wink before I strolled out of the sheriff's department.

I paused on the steps outside to let the heat and sun warm my skin. Norm and I become restless when we spend too much time contained inside walls. I never had that little problem until he and I became roomies in my body. Sometime within the last seven years, my simple appreciation for the outdoors had grown into a need.

I dug in the brown bag for my phone and keys, quickly turning on my phone with its newly cracked screen. *Thank you very little, Sheriff.* I noticed four missed calls before the ping da ping tones of text messages began to fire

like hail bouncing off a tin roof. I read through Danny's texts.

6:30 A.M. *Where r u?*

6:37 A.M. *Did u freakin leave?*

6:38 A.M. *U better not have left me.*

6:38 A.M. *Again!*

7:15 A.M. *Why arent u answering ur phone?*

7:45 A.M. *Im calln Grandfather.*

7:46 A.M. *Grandfather said u need 2 get back
here & pick me up.*

8:30 A.M. *FINE! I'm sorry I ate your stupid
Oreos!*

I had to smile at the last one. As much crap as I like to put Danny through and as much as I said otherwise, he was my best friend. I had grown to love and depend on him like a brother. Sure, he was annoying, frustrating, and ... Okay, maybe that was more me than him, but he did tend to be a tad overprotective and all responsible-like. Plus, he did admit to eating more than his fair share of the Oreos so he deserved all the crap I flipped him. Mostly.

I texted him back. "*N Union City. Demon ground 0. Kinda got arrested. Buy urself a car & whatevr equipment Bigfoot hunters use.*" I hit the send button. Then added, "*& a phone & Oreos make em Dblestuff. U kno where 2 find me.*" And for fun I ended it with a kissy face emoji.

I shoved the phone in my pocket, pausing another second to listen to the voices I could still hear through the closed doors of the sheriff's department.

"I don't trust her," Sheriff Linn was saying.

"There's definitely something that she's not telling us," Ranger Parker replied. "Will you please check into the drug connections for me? You'll have a better line on that. I don't know, the one thing I don't get ... well, there are

several things, but if it was drug related, then why didn't she take the drugs?"

"Because I ran up on her before she could load them in her truck and get away," the sheriff answered.

"Maybe. But then where did she put the body? Better yet, why did she even mess with the body? Why not kill him, take the drugs, and be long gone? Plus, I saw the truck on the way in; whoever killed the victim would have had blood all over them." She paused. "Yeah, no. I don't buy that she killed a guy, took time to hide the body, cleaned up, and then went back to get the drugs."

"Then she has a partner," Sheriff Linn supplied.

"That's a possibility. She did admit she has a partner. A guy named Danny Whitefang."

"And bam. I'd got Danny pegged as my murderous sidekick." I swiped my hands together. "I think my work here is done." Not wanting to waste time taking all ten steps down to the sidewalk, I simply leapt. 10.0 landing if I do say so myself.

My legs were stiff; they needed a run. I scanned the parking lot for Woody, my beloved '89 Jeep Grand Wagoneer. I found him in the visitor's parking. One of the deputies must have driven him in while Sheriff Linn was giving me the privilege of a personal Uber ride.

"Hey there, Woody," I greeted my old friend affectionately, running a hand down the faux wood grain that graced his side. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

I unlocked the driver's door, remembering I needed to get it greased, as it groaned and popped in resistance. "We need to get you a little love, don't we, buddy." I gave the dash a little pat before firing him up.

I loved the old beast. He drank gas like a thirsty eight-year-old with a juice box, but he was tough and

allowed me to get anywhere, in any kind of weather. An added bonus, since I removed the rear seat his spacious cargo area serves as a store-all and sleeping shelter on rainy nights.

Needing to restock supplies and since I would apparently be taking up residence for a while, I decided to scope out the town for groceries and something that would pass for an outdoor store. I had only caught the edge of town this morning on my way to find the demon, but I could tell there wasn't a whole lot to Union City. It was likely that all I would find was a one-stop shop where I could get basic food items and hopefully some simple hunting supplies.

I found what I was looking for on the far side of town, Betty's Grocery 'N Mo. I was pretty sure it was supposed to be "more." Or maybe it was Mo. I'd met a Mo for sale once; she'd been a big-breasted hooker with an appreciation for leopard-themed spandex and the catchy little reel-'em-in sales pitch of "Mo will make ya mo-o-o-MOoan." I didn't buy it, but a bald, buck-toothed white guy had, in the back of a four-door Accord, and that's how I came to meet Mo and also came to appreciate the elasticity of synthetic animal prints.

Betty was an extremely practical lady and she had everything a demon hunter would need, minus the hookers. I came out with three days' worth of food; new filters for my water bottle; a half-dozen bolts for my crossbow; a box of 12 gauge shells for Nancy, my sawed-off shotgun; and a new knife sharpener for my various knives, which were in desperate need of attention after their last go-around with a thick-skinned demon. I also picked up some batteries, waterproof matches, a little door grease for Woody, and a pink camo "Princess" koozie for Danny.