

KITTY GOES TO WAR

CARRIE VAUGHN



Praise for Carrie Vaughn

Kitty and the Midnight Hour

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—Gene Wolfe

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—Loc

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Kitty Goes to Washington

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—Booklist

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—*SF Si*

Kitty and the Silver Bullet

“Not quite paranormal romance, not quite contemporary fantasy. Whatever label you care to apply it’s a pretty good romp.”

—Don D’Ammassa, *Critical Ma*

Kitty and the Dead Man’s Hand

“Another smashing addition to her popular Kitty Norville series. Vaughn has started blending elements of early mythologies, setting the stage for the upcoming *Kitty Raises Hell* in what promises to be a rock ’em, sock ’em showdown. Fast-paced and inventive, this expands upon the alpha pair’s relationship to each other and Kitty’s parents, adding a humanizing touch to this outstanding paranormal series.”

—*Monsters and Criti*

Kitty Raises Hell

“Fans of the previous Kitty entries won’t be disappointed, and the novel features a great séan sequence and one hell of a haunted house.”

—*Total Sci-Fi Onlin*

“Carrie Vaughn is like Laurell K. Hamilton, only better. . . . Nothing about her universe feels stale or worked over; if I didn’t know better, I could easily assume she was alone in her field. . . . A gripping read.”

—*The Accidental Ba*

Kitty’s House of Horrors

“Leave it to Kitty Norville to take reality TV to a whole new gruesome level! Survival is the name of the game in Vaughn’s fast-paced thriller, and the claustrophobic feel of this story is enhanced by Kitty’s first-person viewpoint. It’s nail-biting in the extreme.”

—*RT Book Review*

Kitty
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*To the men and women
of the U.S. armed forces,
who have some of the toughest
jobs in the world.*

Acknowledgments

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The Playlist

JOHNNY NASH, "I Can See Clearly Now"

DEACON BLUE, "Fergus Sings the Blues"

TOO MUCH JOY, "Magic"

DRESSY BESSY, "Shoot, I Love You"

SAM THE SHAM AND THE PHARAOHS, "Li'l Red Riding Hood"

NEW ORDER, "Love Vigilantes"

OINGO BOINGO, "Stay"

BIG BROTHER AND THE HOLDING COMPANY, "Roadblock"

LED ZEPPELIN, "When the Levee Breaks"

DEPECHE MODE, "Peace"

PINK MARTINI, "Autrefois"

FAIRPORT CONVENTION, "Farewell, Farewell"

PAUL SIMON, "Late in the Evening"

Chapter 1

I SAT AT my desk, my monitor and microphone in front of me, maps and notebook paper spread over the whole surface. I was writing down addresses and marking points on the map as people called in.

“So you’re saying it burned down and nobody could find out why?” I asked Pam from Lexington.

“That’s right,” she said. “My friend Stacy who’s kind of a witch said it’s because it was on crossroads, and something demonic must have happened there, one of those deal-with-the-devil-ty things, and the energy overflowed and incinerated it. Could she be right?”

“I don’t know, Pam,” I said. “That’s why I’m discussing the topic, to find out if these events are a coincidence or if something spooky really is going on here. Thanks for the data point. Okay, faithful listeners, that gives me about a dozen independently verifiable stories about supernatural happenings at Speedy Mart convenience stores all over the country. This is already more than I thought we’d get so keep them coming.”

After the third person suggested that something weird was going on at Speedy Mart, I started paying attention. And wondering. And remembering a couple more stories I’d heard about intersections between the chain of stores and weirdness. Then I decided to devote an episode of my call-in radio show to the subject. It turned out that maybe something strange was going on here. That didn’t explain *why* the Speedy Mart chain would have anything supernatural associated with it.

“My next caller is Al from San Jose. Hello, Al.”

“Hi, Kitty. I’m such a big fan, thanks for taking my call.”

“Well, thank you, Al. What’s your story?”

“It’s more of a question: is it true that Speedy Mart hires vampires to work the night shift?”

“Funny you should ask,” I said. “I once got a call from a vampire who said he was working the night shift at a Speedy Mart. Now, I don’t think this means that it’s a matter of policy that Speedy Mart hires vampires. I think this guy just needed a job, and there’s only so many places open in the middle of the night. But you can definitely see the advantages of hiring the ageless undead to work behind the counter. I imagine they don’t get too freaked out about holdups.”

“But there’s probably not a whole lot of career advancement for vampires there,” he said.

“Does *anyone* working the night shift at Speedy Mart have a lot of opportunities for career advancement? Although with vampires it would literally be a dead-end job.” I chuckled. I really shouldn’t laugh at my own jokes so much. “Right, we have Chuck from Nevada. Hi, Chuck.”

“Hey, Kitty! How you doing?” He was brash, a real talker. This ought to be good.

“I’m doing just great,” I said, the standard line. “Where in Nevada are you?”

“Area 51.”

Deadpan, I said, “Really?”

“Okay, yeah, I’m from a little town about thirty miles up the freeway from Las Vegas. *Near Area 51*. And you want to talk about weird stuff going on with Speedy Mart, I’ve got a story for you.”

“Lay it on me.”

“UFOs.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Okay, now you’re just making crap up.”

“No, seriously, we get sightings all the time. We’re one of the stops on the Southwest UFO tour. The Speedy Mart parking lot is one of the best places to see them. UFO hunters park out there with

their lawn chairs and binoculars looking for them. It's, like, UFO central!"

"If you say so, but like I always say, there's weird and then there's weird. But I suppose a data point's a data point. Thanks for calling." I didn't have to tell him I wasn't actually going to mark the location on my map. We'd call it an outlier. A real far-out outlier.

I continued. "The real question here is: why Speedy Mart? Is it a coincidence? Does the supernatural really have some kind of strange affinity for this specific convenience store chain over any other? Or is it a conspiracy? Is there a guiding hand behind these stories? A dangerous hand? I'm not sure it's possible to answer any of these questions, which is always the trouble with this sort of thing, isn't it? It turns out the Speedy Mart chain is a privately owned company, which makes its records harder to get at. The owner and president of the company is Harold Franklin, who seems to have a typical upper-middle-class white guy upbringing, degree from Harvard Business School, vacation home in the Hamptons and all that jazz. Nothing to suggest he'd be behind any kind of far-reaching conspiracy. But who knows? For a company that's managed to open branches all over the country, not many people seem to know anything about it. It all seems a little strange to me."

I checked the monitor and picked what looked like was going to be a live one: the caller would give his or her name and city, but claimed to have worked at a Speedy Mart for several years.

"All right, it looks like we have someone from the inside on the line, a former employee of Speedy Mart. Hello, you're on the air."

"Um, hi." The voice was female, hushed, like she was trying to keep from being overheard.

"So you worked at Speedy Mart," I prompted.

"Yeah. For a couple of years when I was in college."

"You were a night-shift clerk?"

"I worked whenever I could get the hours. Sometimes at night."

"And did you notice anything strange during your time there?"

"I don't know. I didn't think it was all that strange at the time. I mean, I thought it was strange, but not supernatural strange or anything. These people would come in around midnight, about once a month. They'd be wearing cloaks. I just thought they were from some science fiction convention or Renaissance fair, driving home late. Strange but harmless. But looking back on it, they weren't real Renaissance fair type, you know? These were all older guys, middle aged and clean cut, dressed normal except for the cloaks. They came in, walked all over the store, all the way to the back and every aisle, like they were looking for something. They never bought anything—total free cheapskates. They were just some weird club. I never did anything about it because they didn't hurt anything, they weren't trying to rob me or anything, what was I going to do? I couldn't kick them out just because they didn't buy anything."

"What do you think they were doing?" I said, intrigued. I tried to imagine it, cloaked men walking around the store, every month—during what phase of the moon, I wondered? The whole thing screamed ritual.

"I don't know, that's why I'm calling. I thought maybe you would know."

"Well, that these men repeated the same action every month for—how many months?"

"I worked that shift for maybe six months. It happened every month," she said.

"And do you know if it was at the same time of the month? The same phase of the moon maybe?"

"I didn't pay attention—do you think it's important?"

"I don't know. The thing is, repetition says to me some kind of ceremony or ritual was going on. That means some kind of magic, some kind of power. Or at least they thought so—it may not mean anything. Can you tell me where this was?"

“No, I can’t, I shouldn’t even be calling, I—goodbye.” The phone clicked off.

Dang. I’d have marked that spot on the map with a big star next to it. Of course, it could be a coincidence—some weird local club had an initiation ceremony involving nothing more devious than wandering around the local Speedy Mart. Somehow I didn’t think that was likely.

I checked the clock, and we had the time, so I clicked the next call through. “Hello, Charles from Shreveport. What’s your story?”

Charles from Shreveport talked fast. “You’re right about Speedy Mart. And Harold Franklin. He’s up to something. And someone has to stand up to him before it’s too late.”

I assessed the voice: male, quick, a little thin. Kind of eager, or desperate. Not laid back, not a disbeliever calling in to try to get a rise out of me, not someone with a deep personal problem. He didn’t have the accent to go along with his Louisiana location. After doing this show for years, I’d become a pretty good judge of voices. Most of my callers fell into certain categories, and I could usually tell which one after a sentence or two. This guy had something to say, and he was the kind of person who thought late-night talk radio was a good soapbox.

“What’s he up to, Charles?”

“I’ve been tracking Franklin’s movements for decades. For example, in late August 2005, he spent four days in New Orleans, did you know that?”

“No. What has that got to do with anything?”

He sounded like he was reading off a list. “Biloxi, Mississippi, in August 1969—that was his first big showing. He was supposedly on a fishing trip right after college, but you know what happened next. He’s only gotten more ambitious since then. February 1978 in Boston, April 1991 in Bangladesh, October 1991 in Nova Scotia.”

How intriguing. My favorite kind of call—devoted and a little crazy. “How do you know all this? Have you been stalking him?” I was buying myself a little time, trying to figure out what Charles’s pin markers in space and time meant. I wished I had an Internet browser on hand.

“He always leaves a couple of days before the worst of it hits. Always.”

“The worst of what?”

“The worst of the storms!”

New Orleans, August 2005. Matt, my board operator, knocked on the booth window, and I figured out at the same time I read the scrawled note he pressed to the glass: KATRINA.

Biloxi ’69: Hurricane Camille, wanna bet? And if I looked up the rest, I’d probably find other epic hurricanes, blizzards, perfect storms.

I leaned into the microphone. “What are you saying, Charles? That Harold Franklin has really bad luck with the weather?”

“I’m saying it’s not luck,” he said.

“Do you know that experiments have shown that people have a tendency to find patterns, even when no actual patterns exist? In our attempts to make order out of the universe, we see connections where there just aren’t any.” Playing the skeptic—the term *devil’s advocate* made me nervous when we were talking about the supernatural—usually got my callers riled up, which had high entertainment value. But it also made them explain themselves. Made them delve, and often exposed more information.

Frustrated, he said, “If he was at any one of those locations it would be a coincidence but not noteworthy. But the fact that he was at all of them? Right around the time of some of the most destructive storms in modern history? And doesn’t it make you wonder about the storms *before* modern history? That maybe Harold Franklin is just the latest in a long line of weather terrorists? Do you know that some people believe that the storm that scattered the Spanish Armada in the English

Channel in the sixteenth century was created by English witches?"

"How did you get so interested in this?" I said. "How did you know to look for Franklin?"

"Have you ever met him?"

"No."

"Well, I have. And there's something off about him. I think he should be brought to justice for what he did to New Orleans."

He certainly wasn't alone in thinking someone ought to be brought to justice for what happened to New Orleans. But most people were referring to events after the hurricane, not the hurricane itself.

"The thing is, Charles, science provides us lots of perfectly reasonable, natural explanations for how storms happen. Most people will say that Katrina wasn't anyone's fault. There's no need to go looking for malevolence."

"It's a nice little arrangement, isn't it? He wreaks all this havoc and everyone just writes it off as convection currents."

The guy may have been a crackpot or he may have been spot on the money. But I ran into the problem I usually ran into when dealing with the supernatural: how did we go about proving the connection?

"Charles, thank you very much for calling, but I'm running out of time and need to move on, are you right?"

"As long as you listen to me. You have to listen. You're the only one who can do anything to stop him."

I highly doubted that. I highly doubted there was anything to do.

Matt gave me a neck-cutting signal through the window, then held up a finger—one minute to go. I'd been doing the show long enough that my sense of timing was pretty good—I'd given myself just enough time for a closing.

"All right, folks, we're out of time. I want to thank everyone who called in for helping me out on my little research project. I'll certainly let you know if anything comes of it. In the meantime, I've said it before and I'll say it again: you never can tell what's out there. So good night, stay safe, and until next week this is Kitty Norville, voice of the night, on *The Midnight Hour*."

The on-air sign dimmed, and the recorded closing credits rolled, a familiar wolf howl playing in the background. My own wolf howl, my other voice, the other half of my being.

I slumped back, exhausted, pulled my headphones off, and rubbed some feeling back into my ears. Matt came in to stand in the doorway between the booth and studio. He was stocky, and he'd recently cut his black hair short. Way short. He used to wear it in a ponytail, but he'd noticed it was thinning up top and didn't want to end up like our boss, Ozzie, KNOB's station manager, who compensated for his thinning hair by growing his graying ponytail even longer.

Just another little change in the world. If you didn't pay attention to the little changes, you'd wake up one day and the whole universe would be different.

"How do you think it went?" I said.

"I think it went fine," he said. "I always like it when you do investigative stuff. But it's going to suck if you don't actually find some conspiracy. Al Capone's vault, baby."

"That won't matter," I said. "No conspiracy theory ever really dies. I'll be perfectly happy if nothing comes of this, because then I won't have to look over my shoulder every time I drive past Speedy Mart."

"You do spend an awful lot of time looking over your shoulder, don't you?" he said, and I grimaced because he was right.

I was sick and tired of secrets and conspiracies. These shadow groups, entire shadow worlds that seemed bent on destruction, with the rest of the world none the wiser. The worst part was how justified I was in feeling like a conspiracy-theory nut. I'd seen the results with my own eyes. I'd bled over it.

No more. No one else should have to die for shitty power games. If something was going on with Speedy Mart, I'd figure it out. If nothing was—then that was just fabulous, too. I'd be happy looking like an idiot if it meant nothing was wrong.

Matt and I said our farewells for the night. Outside the building, Ben was already parked at the curb, waiting to pick me up. My sense of relief and pleasure at seeing him in his car, looking out the window at me, was physical, a warm flush across my skin.

It didn't matter how many times we played this scene out—my crawling into the passenger seat after my shift, leaning into each other for a kiss hello—it never got old.

I leaned in for a second kiss, and a third, this one long enough to taste him.

"Hm. Hello to you," he said, when we finally broke apart. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said with a sigh. "Just a little tired." I kept my hand on his leg as he drove away from the curb; even that light contact helped me relax. I could feel warmth through the fabric of his pants, and the flexing of his muscles as he pressed the gas pedal.

"Are we going out or going home?" he asked.

"Home," I said. "I don't want to talk to anyone else but you right now."

Ben smiled his crooked smile, and all was right with the world.

TREES MEANT safety. Forest was home. So when I felt trapped, it was in a building, an impossibly vast mansion, with corridors turning at sharp angles, floors rising and falling steeply. I ran, not knowing I was on two legs or four. It felt like four, but my skin was smooth, furless, which meant I hadn't turned Wolf. I could smell blood, rotting blood, but I couldn't track it. It was everywhere. Sometimes blood meant food, sometimes it meant danger. Conflicting feelings of desire and terror confused me. It meant I ran without resolve, even though danger was close at hand, in the next room. Other people were here, also fleeing, and if we could only find each other we'd all be safe. But I couldn't find anyone. I couldn't save anyone. I was alone, running and cornered at the same time, and when a shout rang out, I flinched, feeling the burning pain through my body—

—and woke up, sitting up, breathing too fast, my pulse racing in my throat, painful.

"Kitty, shh, it's okay. Calm down." Ben was right there, arm across my shoulders, face close to mine, whispering comforts. I'd woken up like this before.

When I could separate myself from it, I knew what the dream was: the building that trapped me was the lodge in Montana where I'd been hunted with a dozen others. Five of us had escaped. We survivors had all been wounded to one degree or another.

I still had nightmares, months later.

I covered my face with my hands and took a deep breath. Part of me was still flailing, terrified and furious, looking for a way to lash out with claws and sharp teeth—my Wolf side, surging to the fore. I took all my self-control to soothe her, to pull her back into the cage. I imagined all that power shrinking to a hard knot in my belly. As long as my heart kept racing it was difficult to listen to Ben, my husband.

"Keep it together," he murmured, nuzzling my neck, a wolfish gesture of comfort. He stroked my hair, and finally my heartbeat slowed, my muscles unclenched, and I could breathe without thinking about it.

Human now—mostly human—I slumped into his embrace, wrapped my arms around him, and l

out a sigh. I was safe, I was home. Kneeling in bed, we held each other for a long time.

“You okay?” Ben said finally, his breath ruffling my hair.

“I don’t know.” My voice was muted by his shoulder, where I rested my head and took in the scent of him. “I dream about them.” The ones I hadn’t saved; Ben knew.

He pulled away and smoothed my hair back. “You think maybe you should talk to someone about this? Get some counseling?”

Ben’s gaze was full of concern, and maybe a little frustration. He’d skirted around the subject before, and I’d dodged because I liked to think I was a tough girl.

I scratched my head and rubbed my eyes, which ached. I needed more sleep, and I was starting to hate sleeping. “I thought I could handle it.”

“I know,” he said. “I would just really hate to wake up one night and find your wolf tangled up in the sheets. How would I explain the growling to the neighbors?” The condo complex had a no-pet policy. If I ever did lose it and turn Wolf—yeah, that might get a little noisy.

“That would almost be amusing enough to try it,” I said, turning a lopsided grin.

“How about I let you talk to them when the complaints come in?”

“How about I just try real hard not to turn Wolf in the house?”

His brow furrowed, giving him a perplexed look. “Do other lycanthropes have house rules like that? No shape-shifting indoors? No silver in the silverware drawer?”

Ben was still getting used to being werewolf. He was good at overanalyzing the situation, which I found endearing. Even in the dark, I could make out his form and features: his lean frame, handsome face, shadowed eyes that would be hazel in the light, and scruffy hair sticking out, begging me to comb it with my fingers. So I did. That pulled him close to me, and we kissed, his warm mouth lighting my nerves. Lingering tension melted away, and I pressed my naked self to his naked self. He pulled me under the covers, and sufficiently distracted, I felt much better.

MONDAY, BACK at the office, I spread the map from the show across my desk. I’d marked a dozen spots, locations where people had told me intriguing stories about Speedy Mart. The marks were spread all over the country, in no discernable pattern. So much for that idea. I was about ready to pack it all off as some statistical anomaly—it wasn’t that crazy stuff only happened at a Speedy Mart, it was just that no one talked about it when it happened anywhere else.

I was still pondering when I got a call. “Hi, Kitty? This is Lisa down in reception, I’ve got a letter here that you need to sign for.”

“Really? Okay, I’ll be right down.” Now this was exciting. I wasn’t expecting anything fancy. Certainly nothing I needed to sign for.

I went down the hallway from my office, and down the stairs to the lobby of the KNOB building where a reception desk against the back wall faced the glass front doors. Lisa, a prim, professional twenty-something, was standing with a delivery guy. He looked to be from a courier service rather than from the postal service or one of the big parcel companies. He wore a jacket with a company logo, but a plain shirt and slacks rather than a uniform. They both looked up at my approach.

“Are you Katherine Norville?” the guy said. He held an nine-by-twelve manila envelope and a clipboard.

“Yeah.”

“Could you sign here?” He pointed to the line of the form on the clipboard, showing that, yes, I did receive the envelope in question. Then he handed me the envelope.

“Have a nice day,” he said, with kind of a leering smile, then sauntered out of the building.

“What is it?” Lisa said. “You expecting anything cool?”

“Not a thing.” I’d started to have kind of a bad feeling about this. The envelope wasn’t all that thick; it probably had some kind of document in it. Something official and important, no doubt, to be delivered by private courier. I opened it right there at the reception desk.

It was indeed a document, only a few pages thick, fairly innocuous looking. But the cover letter was printed on linen stationery and had an intimidating logo and letterhead with a string of names and “Attorneys at Law” after it. I read the text of the letter a couple of times and still wasn’t sure what exactly it said. But I got the gist of it.

“Huh,” I said. “I’m being sued for libel.”

Chapter 2

REALLY, IT was bound to happen sooner or later.

I took the document—an honest-to-God summons—to Ozzie, the station manager. I thought he'd blow a gasket, but he seemed to have the same reaction I did—confusion, colored with a tiny bit of awe. The suit was being brought against me on behalf of Harold Franklin, the president of Speedy Mart, for derogatory and damaging comments made on my program about both him and his beloved and respectable business.

“What the hell did you do?” Ozzie asked, reading the letter for the fourth or fifth time, as I had.

“Um, I did the last show on Speedy Mart and whether or not it's at the center of a supernatural conspiracy.”

He stared at me a moment. “So this doesn't really come as a surprise.”

“I know,” I said. “But it was so fast!”

“You must have really offended him for him to move this quick,” Ozzie said.

“Or maybe he really does have something to hide,” I said, pointing. “Maybe there really is some kind of cover-up and he's diverting attention.”

“Kitty—”

“Okay, I know. But we just hand this off to the lawyers and they should be able to wiggle us out of it. Right?”

“I think you should go pull the recording of that show for the lawyers. And what do you mean *us*?”

I escaped before having to come up with an answer for him.

The thing was, Franklin had a point. If my show somehow made people afraid of going to Speedy Mart, or damaged the company's reputation to a point where the business was negatively affected, then the guy had a right to sue me. I just didn't think I was a big enough fish for him to notice. I had a decent sized market share, but not *that* decent. This seemed like an overreaction. A cease-and-desist order and maybe a request for an on-air apology seemed more appropriate. Maybe Franklin and his lawyers were just trying to scare me, and they'd ask for the apology in exchange for withdrawing the lawsuit. I wouldn't be able to argue with that kind of deal.

While I was pulling the digital file of Friday's broadcast and burning it to a CD for the station lawyer people, I called my own live-in lawyer for advice.

After our hellos, I launched right in. “Well, Mr. O'Farrell, attorney-at-law. Guess what? I'm being sued for libel.”

“Well,” Ben said. “That's a new one even for you. Who's suing?”

“The president of Speedy Mart.”

“Already? That was fast, you only did that show a couple of days ago.”

“I know. I'm almost impressed.”

“I suppose it was only a matter of time.”

“That's kind of what I was thinking,” I said. “But I thought libel was when you lied about someone in print.”

“Print or broadcast media,” he answered. “It's libel because you have a built-in audience.”

“So how do I get out of it?”

“You either prove that what you said wasn't damaging, or that it isn't libel because it's true. You

were pretty good about saying that you were only speculating. I wonder what argument they're going to make."

"You think they have a case?" I asked.

"I don't know. This isn't my area of expertise. A civil suit's a long way from criminal defense. Do you think they have a case?"

I shrugged. "My instinct is that something really is going on. But I don't have any way to prove it. I think my mistake was bringing up the president by name. Because even if something is going on, I may not have anything to do with it."

"I assume KNOB has lawyers who can handle this?" Ben said.

"The legal side of it. I'm not sure they can do anything about proving there's any supernatural involvement."

He paused; I could almost hear him thinking over the phone. "I think I have an idea," he said finally. "You coming home soon?"

"It may be an hour or so. What's the plan?"

"We'll talk about it tonight."

"At least no one's trying to kill me this time."

"Yet," he said. "Give it time."

There was just no arguing with him. As a lawyer, he was trained to expect the worst.

WHEN I got home, Ben met me at the door and turned me right back around.

"You feel like going out to dinner, don't you?" he said.

"Um, sure?" Ben had that predatory, on-the-prowl gleam in his eye. Not the predatory gleam that came from being a werewolf, but the one he'd had long before he became a werewolf. This came from being a lawyer.

He had a plan, and I couldn't wait to see what it was. We were in the car, headed for the freeway when I asked, "Where are we going?"

"New Moon."

New Moon was a downtown bar-and-grill-type restaurant, and we went there more than anywhere else because it felt like home. It practically was home—Ben and I owned it. I'd made it a refuge, a neutral territory for the lycanthropes in town. A place where we could go and not worry about territory or posturing. New Moon's manager was Shaun, Ben's and my lieutenant in Denver's werewolf pack. Any given evening, a few of us from the pack hung out there.

When we entered the restaurant, I got an inkling of Ben's plan—Cormac was sitting at our usual table in back, against the wall.

Cormac had been out of prison for five months and I still wasn't sure how I felt about him. Every time we got together, I was happy to see him. And worried, anxious, relieved, guilty, confused, and a few other emotions to boot. I could sense Ben tensing up beside me, a similar stew of conflicting emotions roiling in him. Cormac had saved our lives and ended up in prison for it. He'd had to put his life on hold; we hadn't. Cormac and I had had a thing, once upon a time. Then he'd brought Ben, his cousin and victim of a recent werewolf attack, to me. I'd taken care of him, Cormac went to jail, and Ben and I got married.

The three of us understood each other when no one else did. No one else had the history to be able to understand us. We were like the three musketeers, but kinda twisted.

Cormac stood to meet us as we approached. He had an athletic leanness to him, and an easy, calm way of moving that could be nerve wracking. Physically, he hadn't changed so much—same rugged

features, short brown hair, a trimmed moustache. But he'd aged. His face was a little more lined than it had been, a little more tired. Like even though he'd spent two-plus years behind the same set walls, he'd seen too much.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said back. And there ended our usual, laconic greeting.

Ben looked Cormac over, and he wasn't very subtle about it. He craned his neck, checked his side, looked as far behind him as he could without actually walking around him. Looking for telltale shapes.

Cormac glanced ceilingward and said, "I'm not wearing a gun."

"Sorry," Ben said, defensive. "You can't blame me for worrying."

"I'm not stupid," Cormac said.

"So you don't have a gun anywhere? You're sure?"

"Like he could forget he was wearing a gun," I said to Ben. "You can smell him, he's not wearing a gun." That was another thing about Cormac that had changed, along with the tired expression; I was used to Cormac smelling like firearms. Gunpowder and oil. Now he smelled like soap, clean human skin, and the leather of his jacket. As antsy as his old collection of weaponry made me, he smelled like something was missing.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I haven't seen you without a gun since high school," Ben said. "I'm still getting used to it."

"I'm still getting used to it." He slumped back into his chair and took a sip of his coffee.

Cormac was a convicted felon on parole. Legally, he couldn't carry a gun. Technically, he *could* carry a gun—he just couldn't get caught with it by his parole officer or the cops, or they'd lock him up again. So he didn't carry a gun. Once upon a time, Cormac might have taken the risk. The preprison Cormac would have been confident in his ability not to get caught. But something had gotten to him.

Ben and I slid into chairs across from him. I had a weird sense of familiarity, Ben and me sitting side by side, looking at Cormac across the table from us. This was how we'd sat when we visited him in prison. Then, we'd had a Plexiglas wall between us.

"I've got a job for you," Ben said. "How do you feel about a little PI work? PI work that doesn't involve carrying a gun."

Cormac looked away, frowning. "You don't have to give me a job because you think I need the work. I'm doing just fine without any charity." His parole officer had gotten him a part-time warehouse job—it may have been the first aboveboard job he'd ever had. He even had his own apartment. He was determined to be independent.

"Cormac, I'm not asking you to do this because I feel sorry for you. I'm asking you to do this because you're the most qualified person I know for the job."

That got his attention. He straightened a little. Ben looked at me to do the explaining.

"For the last couple of years I've been hearing weird stories about the Speedy Mart chain," I said. "Supernatural goings-on, all over the country, and all of them at a Speedy Mart. Usually at midnight. Vampire clerks, satanic rituals, intersecting ley lines. Think of every crazy supernatural angle you can and there's probably an anecdote about it happening at a Speedy Mart."

Cormac looked thoughtful. "That vampire, the one you had me go after while you were doing the show—what was that, three years ago? Four?"

"Estelle," I said. I hadn't forgotten Estelle.

"She was hiding out in a Speedy Mart."

"Yeah, exactly," I said.

"That's stretching it even for you," Ben said. "It's coincidence."

I said, “Each of these stories don’t mean anything by themselves. It’s when you put them together things start looking weird. I need to know if there’s anything to it.”

The bounty hunter—former bounty hunter—gave a nod, lips pursed. “All right. I’m interested. I see if I can find anything.”

“Stop by my office tomorrow; I can give you what I’ve been able to dig up so far,” I said.

Business concluded, Ben looked around, craned over his shoulder. “Hey, isn’t the service around here usually better than this?”

It was; if Shaun was here, he usually stopped by our table himself first thing. Ah, there he was, hiding out behind the bar. He was a hip twenty-something, short dark hair, brown skin, laid back and sensible in a T-shirt and jeans. When he saw all three of us looking over, he finally came over.

“Took you long enough,” Ben said.

Shaun wilted, hurt and puppylike. “I wasn’t going to interrupt whatever powwow you have going on here. You look like you’re planning the takeover of a small country.”

“It’s not that serious. Do we look that serious?” Ben said.

“It’s the body language, hon,” I said. “We look like we’re hunting.”

“Uh, yeah,” Shaun said. “But if you’re all done with that maybe I can get you something to drink.” He looked hopeful.

We gave him our order, and Ben tried to be nice to make up for making Shaun nervous.

“Huh. Werewolves,” Cormac said, shaking his head.

CORMAC STOPPED by the KNOB offices at noon the next day. I met him at the lobby and brought him upstairs.

“Déjà vu a little, isn’t it?” he said.

I glared at him, unamused. The first time Cormac and I had met, he’d been stalking me at the studio in the middle of my show, intending to shoot me. Very uncool.

“No comment,” I said.

My office was more like a closet, just enough room for the desk and a couple of chairs, but it was mine. Inside, Cormac took the seat I offered while I sorted through the papers on my desk: the magazine, the notes, the news articles printed off the Internet that verified some of the stories. I really didn’t have very much when I put it all together.

“It’s not very impressive,” I said by way of apology. “Ben’s right, there’s probably nothing there. Maybe we can settle the lawsuit out of court.”

“Don’t jump to any conclusions,” he said, leaning forward to start reading.

I’d never seen him so studious. He usually—at least before he went to prison—cultivated this air of indifference. Not quite apathy as much as a sense of apartness, like he wasn’t interested because he lived on a different plane of existence. It would have been almost Zen-like, if it hadn’t been so creepy. Now, he really seemed interested. Fascinated, even. Hand on his chin, he chewed his lip.

He even smelled different. Slightly, bookishly different. Paper and ink. But this was Cormac, and he didn’t have anything to worry about. Right?

The office had become so still that when he spoke, I flinched.

“I need to do some checking, but I have some ideas,” he said, looking up at me, calm and steady. It was all Cormac again.

“Really? Like what?”

“Not sure,” he murmured. “Maybe ritualistic magic. Maybe something else.”

I was never going to find out just how much Cormac knew about the supernatural. When we’d finished

met, he knew more about werewolves than I did, even though I was one. He'd hunted them for half his life, after all.

“How long do you need?”

“I'll let you know,” he said, standing, rolling the pages up and tucking them in the pocket of his jacket. Preoccupied, he walked out without a word or second glance. I stared at the open doorway for a minute or so, wondering if he really was okay.

Chapter 3

I COULDN'T DO much else about the lawsuit business, at least not for a while. The wheels of justice were turning, and it was in the lawyers' hands. There'd be response, counterresponse, deal making and all I had to do was stand aside and look innocent. What were the odds?

Or maybe Cormac would come up with something interesting, in which case there might be fireworks. I didn't know which outcome to wish for more.

During my office hours the next day, I tried to stay focused and avoided calling Cormac, even though I wanted to, to see if he'd learned anything yet. It had only been a day. This would take time. My phone still sat on my desk, taunting me, luring me.

When it actually did ring, I jumped out of my chair to pounce on it. The voice on the other end wasn't Cormac's.

"Kitty, this is Elizabeth Shumacher, from the CSPB."

That was Dr. Elizabeth Shumacher, who headed up the Center for the Study of Paranatural Biology, the research clearinghouse for all things supernatural that was part of the National Institutes of Health. I'd had a long and not always wonderful association with the center, but I liked Dr. Shumacher. The center had become much more rational and useful—rather than clandestine and paranoid—with her at the helm.

I sat back down and calmed myself. "Hi, Doctor. What's up?"

"I'm afraid . . . well, there's no good way to put this. We have something of a problem, Kitty. We need your help."

I recognized the tone of voice; she sounded like someone calling into the show. "Who's we? Is something with the lab?"

"We—" She sighed. "I guess you could say it's the U.S. government."

Okay, that sounded heavy. My impulse was to vehemently deny that I could possibly be of any help whatsoever. Then hang up and refuse to pick up the phone when her number showed up on caller ID. Then maybe flee the country so she could never find me again. That might have been an overreaction. "What is it? What's going on?"

"It would be much easier to explain this in person. Would you be willing to meet with me? The sooner the better. Today, if possible."

"I'm not sure I could get out there on such short notice," I said.

"I'm not in D.C. right now, Kitty. I'm at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs."

About eighty miles away, in my backyard practically.

"What are you doing there?" I said.

"I'd rather explain it all in person." Clearly spoken in a tone of bureaucratic stubbornness.

"Is this a werewolf problem?" I said, fishing.

After a hesitation, she said, "Yes."

Color me intrigued. "It'll take me a couple of hours to get there, but I think I can make it."

"That would be wonderful," she said, clearly relieved.

I agreed, and she gave me directions about getting to the huge army base south of Colorado Springs, then what to do when I got there. I had the impression she'd set up a temporary office at the hospital there. This made me think that her problem was military in nature—or maybe she just felt more

home at any government installation, whatever the flavor.

THE NOONTIME drive to Colorado Springs was crisp, wintery, and clear. I managed to miss rush hour.

I didn't spend much time in the Springs. It had started life as a quiet, respectable enclave for the state's nouveau riche a hundred-plus years ago, and since then had turned into an almost Lovecraftian behemoth of urban sprawl. It's also home to something like half a dozen major military bases and even more fundamentalist Christian organizations, which established a rather dubious reputation for ultraconservatism, giving the place a weird vibe. A couple of our pack members lived here, and marked what we considered the southern boundary of our territory.

After pulling off the freeway, I wound my way along side roads to the main gate at Fort Carson, which looked simultaneously innocuous and aggressively military. Chain-link fence strung with barbed wire, then tall black fences, lined the street. But behind the fences lay normal-looking suburban tract housing. The gate looked like a toll plaza, but the attack helicopter parked on display outside it indicated that this wasn't so ordinary.

Dr. Shumacher had given my name to the security guards on duty. I still had to hand them my ID and car registration, and they inspected my car's trunk and undercarriage. I supposed it was comforting, but I still felt twitchy. There didn't seem to be any problems, though. The guy handed me my driver's license back, gave me helpful directions to the hospital, and ordered me to have a good day.

Very carefully, I pulled away. Five minutes of driving on a long, winding road brought me to a modern building of tan brick and narrow windows. Again, I might have mistaken the area for a typical suburban hospital and neighborhood, except that in the parking lot, a lot of the cars had "Army" and "Infantry" stickers in their windows.

Dr. Shumacher was waiting for me outside the building's glass front entrance.

She looked like a scientist, in a cool way. In her fifties, she was short and brisk, her dark hair going gray, cut in a bob around her ears, and had smart wire-rimmed glasses. Her gaze was intense, her expression serious. She wore a dark fitted sweater, a skirt, and sensible shoes.

When she saw me, she smiled. "Kitty, it's so good to finally meet you in person."

"Likewise." I offered my hand for her to shake.

Inside, she guided me down a hallway to a windowless conference room, with a tile floor and off-white walls, white boards, signs of AV equipment, and a table. Nothing too sinister yet, except maybe the guy sitting at the table. He wore a crisp green army uniform, with all the bells and whistles, lots of insignia I didn't know the meaning of. He had eagle pins on his shoulders. He was tall, broad, with short cropped hair and a drill-sergeant stare. He stood when we entered the room. His stance was aggressive, shoulders back, spine straight, ready to leap. He was probably never anything but aggressive.

"Kitty, this is Colonel William Stafford. Colonel Stafford, this is Kitty Norville."

As I had with Shumacher, I reached my hand for him to shake before he could decide not to offer me his. He studied me hard, assessing me, and seemed skeptical. Worried. But maybe he wasn't worried about me.

"Thank you for coming, Ms. Norville," he said, firmly and politely, and some of the tension left me. He sounded genuine. We all sat at the table.

"I'm happy to help, but what is this all about?" I said, my curiosity becoming overwhelming.

They glanced at each other, the confident scientist and assured colonel, and looked chagrined. As they were debating over who was going to explain it. As if they were embarrassed. The colonel fidgeted with the corner of a manila folder in front of him. I waited. I could stare them down.

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