Chapter 7

The Happiest Census Designated Place on Earth

The contact’s name was Bill Tanzer and from the outside of his house, you’d have no idea he was a terrible person. His home was tucked back into a rural hillside, the only neighbor visible from our truck was a small cabin further up the road. Bill’s house was an older, rundown single-level covered in bright yellow paint, which I thought was a little optimistic on Bill’s part. The outside of the house and yard told me that Bill tried just enough to keep what few neighbors he had happy, but he either didn’t have enough time for solid upkeep, couldn’t afford to put money into the place, or flat out didn’t care. The combination of overly cheerful paint, run down exterior, and isolated geography did sketch a fairly good picture of our new friend.

“It looks like a serial killer lives here,” I said, peeking out of the truck window.

“He breeds creatures for pit fighting,” Tally said, looking out over the hillside. “I’m not sure where that places him on a scale of good-to-serial killer.”

I grunted, because she wasn’t wrong, but Tally still irritated me and I didn’t want to really bond over anything. “The problem with Bill’s place is that we can’t really sneak up on it. The neighbor could see us. Strangers stick out like crazy out here.”

“Where are we, anyway?”

I showed her the map on my phone. “Somewhere on the edges of Happy Camp, California.”

Tally frowned. “So far it doesn’t like it’s a very happy town.”

I turned off the map and flipped through my contacts. “Technically, it’s a Census Designated Place, and I highly doubt Bill’s house is the highlight of their local tour. For all I know it’s the best place to live ever.”

“What’s a Census Designated Place?”

“Fuck if I know.” I hit call and waited for Edda to answer.

“Yes?”

“Is that how you answer your phone? Rude.” I’d left the truck idling down the road from Bill’s, ready to tell any passerby that we were lost. We hadn’t seen another soul, which is always disappointing when you have a plausible lie ready. “Bill’s place is out in the open, but I think we can approach from the back. There’s some tree cover that should block us from view. Since you’re on a nimble bike and I’m in a big, obnoxious truck with a horse trailer, I need you to look for a good place for me to park.” I hung up before Edda responded. She had to say yes, so what was the point of waiting?

I eased the truck around. Backing up with a horse trailer is a huge pain.

“Why didn’t you leave him at the farm?” Tally asked. “It would be easier to move around without the trailer.”

“Because we’re a team,” I said, stopping at the end of Bill’s road since I wasn’t sure where I was going yet. “And because Bill is a dealer. If he has freaked out creatures—likely deadly—on his grounds, Steve can communicate with them and hopefully chill them out. Trust me, it’s worth the hassle of his trailer.”

Edda sent me a text with directions to a spot a short distance away—a nice dead-end road that led to an old foundation of a house. The house had been torn down at some point, but it didn’t look like anyone had plans to rebuild any time soon.

I got Steve out of the trailer, slipping on his halter and lead. This provided dual camouflage—first, people got weird if they see you just walking around with a giant horse. These days they got weird if your *dog* is walking off leash, but they absolutely cannot comprehend a horse clopping around next to a human unencumbered. *I* knew Steve wasn’t going to run off, but they didn’t. Though I have to admit, the idea of a unicorn rampaging through a small, rural Census Designated Place and causing absolute mayhem was kind of funny.

The other thing that Steve’s harness does is provide him with *actual* camouflage. There are several wards stitched into the fabric that will keep people from noticing his horn. Steve did have his own cloaking magic. He’s never told me how it works, but it would keep him from getting spotted as a unicorn if he were to wander off on his own. The harness, however, is convenient and keeps Steve from having to make an effort, and I wanted him to save all of his magic for Bill’s house.

Edda joined us and we moved as quickly and quietly through the trees as we could.

“How long do we have?” I asked, looking at my watch.

“Bill left his house ten minutes ago,” Edda said, keeping her attention on our surroundings. “It’s a fifteen minute drive to the meeting place. Grant and Jonah will keep him talking as long as they can, but we don’t know how jumpy this guy is. Let’s say five to ten minutes. Then another fifteen.”

“Right.” I set a timer. “I want us out in thirty just to be safe. We don’t want to tip Bill off if we don’t have to.”

The backyard was fenced, the wood tall and weathered. Steve peeked over it for me to make sure it was empty before we moved around to the side gate.

If I’d had any doubts about Bill, the backyard dispelled them. At the far end there was a large metal pole sticking out of the ground with a thick chain attached. Whatever Bill chained to it had been left there long enough to wear a groove in the dirt. Next to that was another vertical pole with a shorted metal shaft at the top that was perpendicular to the ground. A rope hung from it. “Spring Pole,” Edda sneered, and spit on the ground.

Spring poles didn’t look like much, but they were used to strengthen neck and jaw muscles and build endurance. There was also a thick leather ball that had been torn almost in two. Outside the gate, we hadn’t heard or smelled anything out of the ordinary. Once we were inside? A strange, eerie howling that set a chill up my spine. The yard smelled like animal waste and blood. It likely hadn’t rained out here in a week or two, and that smell can build up, even in grass.

“This place is heavily warded,” Tally said. “The fences, the house.” Tally stared at Bill’s home, her gaze hazy like she was looking at something we couldn’t see. Which she probably was.

“Can you undo them?” Edda asked.

“Yes, but you don’t need me to undo all of them. Just the alarm one” She didn’t look at us while she talked, her gaze flitting along unseen lines.

“Alarm?” I asked.

Tally nodded. “There’s a ward that will tell the owner of intruders if we trip it. Might also trigger other magics.”

“You think he also has mundane alarms?” Edda crossed her arms, her stance wide as she examined the house.

“Probably,” I said. “Tally, how long would it take you to undo the wards?”

“Undo?” Tally said, her head tilting. “Not long—ten minutes?”

“That would cut into our time,” Edda said. “We could have Steve bust through them.”

I was itching to get inside, so the idea of having Steve slam through so we could do a smash and grab sounded really tempting.

“We don’t want Tanzer to know we were here, right?” Tally asked.

“That’s the ideal,” I said, examining the glass door but not touching. Steve could easily kick it down. I was itching to *do* and all this talking wasn’t helping.

Tally’s smile was slow, but it looked good on her exhausted face because it was a *mean* smile. “You want to really freak this guy out? Sneak in and out like ghosts and take his creatures.” She continued to stare at the house, her gaze far away. “I can do that. It will take a little longer—you’ll have less time to work.”

Edda and I shared a look. Oh, it would take longer, but it would be worth it. We needed to scare these people. We needed them to start making mistakes.

“What do you need to do?” I asked.

“I’ll need to stay out here. I’ll have to draw some temporary wards to disrupt everything. I can undo them when we’re done.” She held her hands out, already tracing things in the air. “You’d have to move quickly even if you weren’t worried about Tanzer’s return. I’m going to have to hold all the magic at bay to disrupt it. That’s a lot of power, and I’m not at my best.”

I nodded, already taking out my phone. “I’m going to text Grant. See what he can do to stall. Have him call us when Tanzer leaves. You do what you need to do.”

After I texted Grant, we waited for Tally to work her magic. The funny thing about magic, is that sometimes it’s really boring. When you see it in movies it’s all dramatic, full of lots of sparkly lights, and tinkling noises. I don’t know, maybe that’s how it looked to witches, but to me it’s a whole lot of nothing until something happens. So I waited quietly—if not entirely patiently—as Tally did her thing and Edda figured out how to disrupt Tanzer’s mundane alarm system.

Minutes ticked past. Steve nudged me making me realize I’d been tapping my foot, which was a dick move. It’s disruptive and Tally was trying to concentrate, so I stopped and pet Steve instead.

Finally, Tally paused, her hands outstretched. “Okay. Move quickly.” Sweat was already beading along her hairline. “I’m not sure how long I can hold it.”

I didn’t wait for her to clarify—I reached for the sliding back door…which opened easily. What kind of moron wards and alarms his house, but doesn’t lock the door?

We left Steve to guard Tally while I slipped inside, Edda right behind me, our feet silent on the carpet. We were met with a very ominous and terrifying recliner and flat-screen TV and a stained beige carpet. Not much else, not even a loveseat. Bill didn’t entertain much, clearly. Edda and I separated, moving quietly through the house. Small kitchen, bedroom, office, and a bathroom. While nothing in the house was particularly nice, all of the electronics I saw were top-notch. So while Bill was making some money, he clearly just didn’t give a shit about his house.

What we didn’t find was any animals. Edda and I met up in the kitchen.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” I opened the fridge because I wanted to see what an asshole eats. Turns out assholes eat a lot of pre-roasted chicken from the supermarket and vanilla yogurt. No fruit. No vegetables. “Bill is going to get so much scurvy.”

“Which would be super embarrassing considering California is the leading provider of citrus fruit in the US,” Edda said, peeking out the front window.

“How do you just know this stuff?” I asked.

“I read,” she said. “And I watch documentaries.”

“I read,” I said indignantly. I closed the fridge. “We’re missing something. Bill clearly has animals in here. We heard them outside.” Now that we were in the house, it was deathly quiet except for the occasional *whoosh* of the air conditioner.

Edda frowned. “We checked every door, and this certainly doesn’t have any hidden rooms, Nancy Drew. The square footage matches my estimation from the outside.”

I looked down at the scuffed linoleum under my feet. “What about underneath us? Hidden basement?” I checked my watch. We were already down a few minutes. “Let’s hustle.”

It was Edda who found it. In retrospect, a hall closet with only a few blankets tossed into it should have looked kind of weird, but I’d been in a hurry. I yanked the blankets out of the way as Edda grabbed two empty wall brackets and pulled.

“False back,” she said. Moving what turned out to be a thin piece of sheetrock out of the way, revealing a set of stairs. The stairway was dark and narrow—we’d have to go down single file. I couldn’t see a light.

“No way is Steve getting down here,” I said. “So let’s hope whatever Bill’s got is friendly.”

Edda just looked at me and I shrugged. It had been a stupid thing to say. Even if the creatures had started out friendly, they likely weren’t anymore. Edda took point, slowly moving down the stairs while searching for the light switch. I pulled the brass rod that contained my spear out of my holster and followed.

About three steps in, Edda found the light and flicked it on, illuminating what had originally been some sort of cellar. Someone had dug deeper, creating a laundry room/evil lair, a sort of creepy dual space. The whole thing reeked of bleach. I wasn’t into it.

On the other side of the stairs there were several small cages and two larger ones. Only two cages were currently occupied—the small one, which had a box and a heat lamp. I couldn’t see much beyond that. Someone had shoved one of those crappy plastic kiddie pools into the large one. It didn’t fit well, and even from where I stood on the stairs I could smell the water and the tang of rotten fish. Sitting in the pool was a large seal. It didn’t make a sound as we came down the stairs, only stared at us with its dark eyes.

“I wonder what was making that howling noise.”

Edda’s feet hit the cement of the ground and we heard a low growl. She turned the upper half of her body without moving her feet. “There’s more creepy basement that you can’t see from the stairs.”

“Oh, good. I don’t suppose it’s a cool hangout area, with a couch and board games?”

“No,” she said, holding her hands out flat and moving stepping forward slowly. “But there’s a big, green dog thing.”

I stepped down behind her. “It’s not that I didn’t believe you, it’s just some things you have to see for yourself.” Across from us stood the dog-thing. It was about the size of a young bull, with shaggy, greenish black hair. When I’d stepped down, the creature’s ears had been back, its teeth bared, and its long, braided tail flicking back and forth. Green light flickered from it as it growled, casting the garage in a sickly glow.

I clucked my tongue. “Poor, buddy. What have they done to you?” It blinked at me and cocked its head. The ears pricked up, and it stopped snarling. With its head cocked, I could see the collar better. Thick and iron, it was clamped tight around its neck. A thick chain went from the collar to the wall. The only other items close by were a water dish and a big dog bed like you find at Costco.

“With Steve not down here, is it going to eat us?” Edda asked.

I slipped around her. I held up the brass rod that held my spear and showed it to the dog. He—I’d peeked and discovered that yes, it was a he—started growling again. I made a big show of setting the rod down and nudging it away. Then I held my hands flat and stepped forward.

“Is that a good idea, Lena?”

The giant dog had stopped growling again and I paused a few feet from it and curtseyed, dropping my eyes. “Greetings, Cu Sith.” When in doubt, be polite.

“Coo She?” Edda asked.

“Scottish fairy dog,” I said, not taking my eyes off the Cu Sith. “The collar is likely made of iron, so it can’t disappear. There supposed to be harbingers of death. I have no idea how Bill got his grubby mitts on one. Do you see any keys?”

“They’re hanging on the wall behind those machines.” The raspy voice came from the cages. The seal was gone. In its place was a young woman clutching a seal skin in her hands. She still had dark eyes like the seal, and her skin was the same rich brown as the skin in her hands. She was also very pregnant, her stomach distended and round.

“Thanks,” Edda said, grabbing the keys off the wall and tossing them to my feet.

I reached down and picked them up, sorting through them until I found a likely candidate for the Cu Sith. I held them up so he could see. “I’m going to unchain you. Then you’re free to go. Okay?”

The Cu Sith sat gingerly on the floor, it’s black eyes on me. I would take that as a yes. “Please don’t eat my face.” I stepped closer, and carefully reached for the collar. When the Cu Sith didn’t rip into my arms, I gingerly felt for the padlock. The first key didn’t work, but the second one did. The lock popped open and I undid it, sliding it out of the metal holes in the collar. I shoved the keys in my pocket and undid the heavy collar.

As soon as it was off the Cu Sith shook its head, then leaned to the side so his foot could scratch the spot, only to yelp. Where the collar had been, most of the hair was matted, some of the spots showed raw skin. I tossed the collar to the floor and held my hands out. “Want me to look? I might be able to help?”

The Cu Sith’s tongue lolled out, a shocking pink, the wolfish version of a laugh. “What’s so funny?” The creature licked my face, his tongue hot and scratchy. “Hey.” Then it shook itself out and disappeared.

“He will heal now that he’s free of the iron,” the selkie said, faint amusement coating her tone.

“Okay,” I said, straightening. “I knew that.” I pointed at the small cage with the heat lamp. “What’s in the box?”

“Harpy eggs.” The selkie shifted in the water. “They are due to hatch soon.”

I grabbed the keys and unlocked the small cage so Edda could grab the box. She also grabbed the heat lamp, and took it all up the stairs. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” the selkie said. “Though I might need some help up the stairs.” After I unlocked her cage, I helped her out, then quickly relocked both cages and the collar. I wanted it to look at first like everyone just vanished. Then I shoved the keys in my pocket. I looked at the collar that had held the Cu Sith. Cages were easily replaced, but that iron collar looked specially made and I didn’t want anyone filling it any time soon. I grabbed my copper rod from the floor, squeezing the sides until it extended into a spear. I sent up a silent prayer to my mother and her people, then struck the collar with the spear. The collar shattered into dozens of pieces.

“Did you know it would do that?” The selkie asked.

“Nope.” I collapsed the spear and put it back in its holster. “But I figured, why not give it a shot?”

The selkie wrapped the fur around her naked body like a towel and I helped her up the stairs. The minute we got to the top, my phone started to buzz. I took it out, the screen showing me several missed texts. Apparently the basement had shitty cell reception. The last one was from ten minutes ago, telling me that Tanzer was heading back. My cell chimed again, showing me a text from Edda. *Tally had to drop the wards. Everything is back in place.*

“Fuck.” My timer hadn’t even gone off yet.

The selkie next to me started to shiver, and that’s when I heard the rumbling engine of a truck. I shot of a quick text to Edda. *Tanzer back. Get everyone back to the truck.* I grabbed the false closet back and shoved it into place, quickly closing the door. As soon as that was done, I heard the truck door slam. I snagged the selkie’s arm, dragging her back into the boring TV room, a finger over my lips. We edged away from the door, out of sight from the hallway. Then we stood quietly, waiting for the front door to open.