

There's No Such Thing As A Werewolf

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CHAPTER ONE

As any werewolf knows, smells and emotions and even raised voices have colors and texture. And as any blind werewolf knows—not that there were any besides him, to the best of his knowledge—you could take those smells, emotions, and conversations and do a pretty good job of seeing. Not a great job, comparably speaking, but enough to get around. Enough to have a solid sense of the world.

“But I can’t be pregnant,” Mrs. Dane was saying. “There’s just no way.”

“There’s at least one way.”

“But I’m infertile! The clinic said!”

“Accidents happen,” he said cheerfully. He knew she was stunned, but pleased. And as soon as the shock wore off, she’d be ecstatic. He could have told her that her fallopian tubes had managed to unblock themselves over the years, but that would raise awkward questions. After all, he was just her G.P. He wasn’t treating her for infertility.

“I’d say you’re...” *Thirty-nine and a half days along* “...about six weeks pregnant. I’m going to write you a scrip for some pre-natal vitamins, and I want you to take two a day. And the usual blandishments, of course, ease off on alcohol, don’t smoke, blah-blah-blah. You know all this.” Mrs. Dane was an OB nurse.

“Yeah, but... I never thought I’d need it.”

He heard her weight shift as she slid off the table, and thus was ready for it when she flung her chubby arms around him in a strangler’s grip. “Thanks so much!” she whispered fiercely. “Thank you!”

“Mrs. Dane, I didn’t do anything.” He gently extricated himself from her grip. “Go home and thank your husband.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Now she was brighter in his mind’s eye, glowing with embarrassment. “I read

somewhere that blind people don't like it when their balance is thrown off."

"Don't worry about it. You couldn't throw off my balance." *Not without a truck* . "Don't forget to fill this on the way home," he added. He could write perfectly well, which was to say his prescriptions didn't look any less legible than a seeing doctor's.

"Right. Right!" She darted around him, nearly careened into the closed door, and left without her clothes. The gown flapped once as the door closed behind her.

"I don't think they'll let you in the pharmacy dressed like that," he called after her.

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"I'm just saying you should think about it," his nurse, Barb Robinson, argued. "I hate the thought of you going home to an empty house every night. And it would—you know. Be helpful."

"Put a harness around a dog and expect it to lead me around all day?" He tried not to sound as aghast as he felt. "That's awful!"

"Drake, be reasonable. You get around fine, but you're not a kid anymore."

"Meaning, since I'm looking at the big four-oh, it's time to check out nursing home brochures?"

Barb's scent shifted—it had been lemony and intense before, because while she was embarrassed to broach the subject, she was also determined. Now, as she got annoyed, it intensified until she damned near smelled like mouthwash.

"Very funny," she snapped. "Pride's one thing. Your safety is another. For crying out loud, you don't even use your cane most of the time."

"Will it get you off my back if I start lugging the stick around?"

"Yes," she said promptly.

Oh, for God's sake. "Fine. You may now refer to me as Dr. Stick."

"It's just that I don't want you to get hurt, is all," she persisted. "You bugged *me* about moving to a safer neighborhood."

"Repeatedly?"

"Oh, hush up. And you'd better get going—isn't tonight another one of your big nights out?"

You could say that. "It is indeed."

"Well... maybe you should take it easy. You look kind of worn out today."

"I was up late," he said shortly. "Give me the damned cane."

He heard her rummaging around beneath the counter, and then she tapped the floor in front of him. He snatched it out of her hand. “There, satisfied?”

“For now.”

“Also, you’re fired.”

“Ha!”

“Maybe next time.” He obediently started tapping his way to the front door, though he knew perfectly well it was eight feet, nine inches away. “See you Monday.”

“And think about the dog!” she yelled after him.

“Not likely,” he muttered under his breath.

CHAPTER TWO

The small gang—two boys and one girl, not one of them out of their teens—followed him off the subway. Typical thugs; they needed reinforcements to rob a blind man. He led them down Milk Street and let them get close.

“Just so you know,” he said, turning, “in about half an hour the moon will be up. So this is a very, very bad idea. I mean—” They rushed him, and his stick caught the first one in the throat. “—it’s a bad idea in general. There are only about a thousand—” His elbow clocked down on the skull of the second. “—more respectable ways to make a living.”

He hesitated with the girl, and nearly got his cheek sliced open for his trouble. He pulled his head back, heard the whisper of steel slide past his face, then grabbed her wrist and pulled, checking his force at the last moment. She flew past him and smacked into the brick wall, then flopped to the ground like a puppet with her strings cut. “Seriously,” he told the dazed, semi-conscious youths. “You should think about it. And what are *you* up to?”

“Nothing,” the other werewolf said cheerfully. “Just came down to see if you needed a hand. Christ, when was the last time these three had a bath?”

“About two weeks ago.”

“How’s it going, Drake?”

“It’s going like it always does,” he said carefully. He had known Wade when they were younger, but it paid to be careful around Pack.

He held out his hand and felt it engulfed by the younger man, who smelled like wood smoke and fried trout. Drake was a large man, but Wade had three inches and twenty pounds on him. If he wasn't such a pussycat, he'd be terrifying. "Still keeping to your place in the country?"

"Sure. This city is fucking rank, man. I only came in to stock up. The day got away from me."

"Try not to eat any of the populace."

"Yuck! Have you seen what *they* eat? I wouldn't chew a monkey on a bet."

"That's not nice," Drake said mildly.

"Yeah, yeah, pardon my un-fucking PC behavior. Humans, okay, and never mind what they originated from. No, really! They should be *proud* to be shaved apes."

"Tsk."

"Hey, I'm glad I ran into you. You should head out to the Cape, say hi to the boss and Moira and those guys. Did you hear Moira got hitched?"

"I did, yes. To a monkey, right?"

"Yeah, well..." Wade stretched; Drake could hear his tendons creaking and lengthening. Their change was very close. Luckily, adolescence was far behind them both; they would stay well in control. "The new alpha gal, Jeannie, she heard about...uh...she noticed that none of the Pack...uh..."

"Was cursed with a devastating handicap?" he asked pleasantly. He tapped his cane for emphasis.

Wade coughed. "Anyway, she hit the fucking roof when Michael told her the score, and they pissed and moaned about it for, like, a damn month, during which time our fearless leader was *sonot* getting laid, and finally Michael said it wasn't an automatic, it would be up to the parents, and they both had to agree."

Drake was silent. For the Pack, this was forward thinking indeed. Handicaps were so rare they were nearly unheard of, and when a Pack member was born blind, or deaf, or whatever, it had been tradition since time out of mind that the sire killed the cub. The dam was usually too weak from whelping, but was almost always in agreement.

Hissire, however, had died in Challenge before his birth, and his mother had wanted him. Had hidden him away at the time so the well-meaning Pack leader, Michael's father, couldn't find him and kill him. Had raised him defiantly and heartlessly—absolutely no quarter given, or asked.

Drake had eventually left the Pack on his own, made his way to Boston, made a life among humans. Here, at least, he could hold his own. Humans didn't care about Challenges. They didn't even *know* about them.

"Well, maybe I will pay them a visit," he lied. "It's been a long time." Michael hadn't even been pack leader when he'd left...Moira had been a precocious brat, one of the few who'd tried to talk him out of leaving.

No. Done was done.

“A long time?” Wade was saying. “Yeah, like about twenty years. It’s a little different now. Michael’s a modern dude. No one will fuck with you.”

“Thanks for passing on the news. But I didn’t leave because I was afraid of being fucked with.”

“You did win all your Challenges,” Wade admitted.

“I left because I was never allowed to be myself.”

“You think you’re allowed that *there* ? In Monkey Central?”

He shrugged. Loneliness was such a central factor of his life, he barely recognized it anymore. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, think it over. I know Jeannie’d like to meet you. If nothing else, to be proved right. She lives for that shit.” This was said in a tone of grudging admiration.

“We’ll see.”

Drake heard Wade inhale, and stretch again. “Fine, be a stubborn ass, *I* don’t care. Better beat feet out of here. Gonna be a long one. Last night of the full moon.”

“Happy trails,” he said dryly. “Again, try not to eat anyone.”

“Again,” the larger man said, loping off, “don’t make me puke. Company coming.”

“Yes, I—” He nearly fell down, right there in the alley. “I know.”

“Jeez,” the girl said, coming closer. She glanced over her shoulder at the rapidly retreating Wade, then turned and glared at the unconscious gang. “You gigantic losers!”

Everything was suddenly very bright, very sharp. The exhalations of the would-be attackers, Wade’s retreating footsteps, the girl’s perfume—L’Occitane Green Tea.

He could *see* her.

Not sense her, not get an idea of where she was and how she felt by her voice. *See* her. Everything around her was shades of gray, but she stood out like a beacon.

She was short—her head stopped right around the middle of his chest. And her hair was that light, sunny color he assumed people meant when they said blonde. Her eyes were an odd color . . . not blue like ice was blue, and not purple like people had described irises . . . somewhere in between.

Her hair was brutally short and so were her nails. She was wearing six earrings in her left ear, and eight in her right. She had a nose ring, a hoop through her left eyebrow, and her shirt was short enough to show off the bellybutton ring. Her stomach was sweetly rounded, and she was wearing shorts so brief they were practically denim panties. Her black tights were strategically ripped, showing flashes of creamy skin. Her tennis shoes (what color was that? Red? Orange ?) were loosely tied with laces that weren’t any color at all.

“Are you all right, guy? I’m really sorry if they tried anything. I told them to cut the shit. I didn’t think they, y’know, meant it.”

He gaped at her.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, glancing at the cane. “I didn’t realize. Do you need me to walk you somewhere? Did they hurt you?”

“I can see you!”

“Ooooookey-dokey.” She took a cautious step backward. “Listen, I’ve got stuff to do tonight—last chance. D’you need me to call you a cab or something?”

“Holy Mary Mother of God!”

“So, no. Well, ‘bye.” She turned, and, frozen, he watched her walk away. Her butt was flat, and she hitched up her shorts, which gaped around her waist. He couldn’t begin to imagine her age—twenty-two? Twenty-five? He had at least fifteen years on her.

He heard a crack, and dropped the cane—he’d been gripping it too hard, and it had split down the middle. Why could he see her? Why now? Was it a function of the full moon? If so, why hadn’t it ever happened before? Who was she? And where was she going in such a hurry?

The clouds scudded past the moon, and suddenly he had twice as many teeth.

CHAPTER THREE

Crescent stood on the rooftop and stared down at the street. It wasn’t so far. One measly story. Shoot, people fell that far all the time and survived...mostly...and besides, she wasn’t a regular person. Probably.

If she was ever going to fly, now was the time.

She put her hands on the ledge and started to boost herself up, when she felt a sharp tug on the seat of her shorts and went flying backward. She hit the gravel rooftop and all the breath whooshed out of her lungs. So she lay there and gasped like a fish out of water, and when she was able, rolled over on her knees.

The largest wolf she had ever seen was sitting three feet away. She was too startled to be frightened. And he wasn’t growling or biting, just staring at her in the moonlight.

A dog she could almost understand, even here, in the middle of the city. But a wolf? Where had it come from? Did it escape from a zoo? And how did it get up on the roof? Could wolves climb fire escapes?

Was there a fire escape?

If she spread her fingers as wide as she could, its paws were just about that size. And its head was almost twice as wide as hers, with deep, almost intelligent brown eyes. His fur was a rich, chocolate brown shot with silver strands, and when the breeze ruffled its pelt, the wolf looked noble...almost kingly.

“What’d you do*that* for?” she asked the wolf. “If I want an animal biting my butt, I’ll start dating again.”

It stared at her. She supposed she should have been scared, but had no sense of menace from it.

“All the better to see you with, my dear,” she muttered. “Now you stay here. I have to do something.” She got up, brushed the dust off her knees, and started for the ledge. She got about a step and a half when she heard a warning growl behind her. She threw up her hands and spun around. “Jeez, what*are* you? Why are you picking on me? And why do you care? Look, I won’t get hurt. I can fly. I mean, I’m pretty sure. And if I’m wrong—but I don’t think I am—it’s only one story.”

Nope. The wolf wasn’t buying it.

“Well, hell,” she said, and sat down cross-legged.

It had been a long day, and a longer night. Almost before she knew it, she was tipping sideways. The gravel was probably cutting her cheek, but it felt like the softest of down pillows.

She slept.

CHAPTER FOUR

She was stiff, and freezing, and someone was shaking her by the shoulder. What the hell had happened to her cot?

She opened her eyes to see a man down on one knee beside her. And, hello!*Not bad* for an old guy. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and had great dark eyes, brown hair touched with gray, and smile lines bracketing his mouth. His shoulders, in the dark suit and greatcoat he wore, were impossibly broad. His thighs were almost as big around as her waist, and he was crouching over her like a dark angel. It was a little disturbing, but kind of cool.

“Good morning.” His voice was deep, pleasant. He probably worked in radio. “Are you all right?”

“Sure,” she said, but she groaned when she sat up. “I can’t believe I fell asleep up here.” She brushed gravel off her cheek and looked around. The wolf was gone, thank goodness. “Oh, shit! I never got to—never mind.”

“What are you doing up here?”

“Mind your own beeswax,” she said. “You can go now.”

“You don’t seem suicidal,” he commented.

“I’m not!”

“Then why are you up on a roof?”

“You’ll laugh at me.”

“Doubtful.”

“Also, it’s none of your business.”

“Well,” he said pleasantly, “I’m not leaving you up here by yourself. So you might as well tell me.”

“Dammit!” What was going on? First the gang decided to be dumb (dumber than usual, anyway,) then a weird-ass giant wolf tormented her, and now *this* guy. God hated her is what it was. “Fine, I’ll tell. I’m pretty sure I can fly. I’ve felt I could all my life. It sort of—runs in my family. Except my family’s all dead, so I never really knew *forsure* for sure, y’know? So, anyway, last night I finally screwed up the courage to try, but I couldn’t because—never mind, you’ll think I’m a nut-job. More so than now, I mean. Anyway, that’s why I’m up here. Not to die. To fly.”

“Mmmm.” He put a big hand on her face and peered at her pupils. “Well, you’re not on drugs. That’s something.”

“I quit doing drugs when I was seventeen,” she snapped, and batted his hand away. “I’ve been clean for ages.”

“And you’re not terminally ill,” he finished.

“Howd’you know *that* ?”

“I’m a doctor, it’s my job to know.”

“What, did you do a blood test in my sleep?”

He ignored that. “What’s your name?”

“Why do you care?”

He looked at her soberly. “I care.”

Weird. But cool. Okay, fine. “It’s Crescent.”

“That’s it?”

“No, I have a last name, but I’m not telling.”

“Why? Are you a fugitive?”

“I wish. It’s just that everybody laughs. You’ll laugh.”

He raised his hand, palm out. “I promise I won’t laugh.”

“It’s Muhn .”

“Crescent Moon?”

“The h,” she said with as much dignity as she could, “is silent.”

“That’s all right,” he told her. “My last name is Dragon.”

“Doctor Dragon?”

“Doctor Drake Dragon.”

“Oh dear.” She giggled. “We’re both cartoons.”

“You realize, of course, that we must get married.” He said this with a perfectly straight face, which made her laugh harder.

“It’s just too good a story to tell our grandchildren,” she agreed. “But first I have to do this. So, good-bye.”

“Come down and have breakfast with me instead,” he coaxed.

Interestingly, she was tempted. He really was a stone fox. And she hadn’t been on a date in... Let’s see, she had been able to legally drink for three years, and there was that guy who took her to the rave right after...

Wait a minute.

“Wait a minute!” God, she was slow this morning. “You’re the blind guy from the alley!” Except he didn’t *seem* blind. He’d checked her pupils, for crying out loud.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“You don’t seem very blind.”

He hesitated, then said again, “Have breakfast with me.”

“Why?”

“You might as well. I’m not going to let you jump.”

She sighed. “Well. I am hungry.” And I can ditch this guy after I cadge a free meal off him. “*Okay. Lead on, MacDuff.*”

CHAPTER FIVE

He offered her his arm when they were at street level, and her smell shifted to amusement—ripe oranges. After a moment, she grasped it.

“Cripes, I can’t even get my fingers around your bicep. D’you work out, like, nine times a day?”

“No. But I like to keep in shape.”

“Y’know, we don’t have to go anywhere fancy,” she said. “We could just get a cup of coffee.”

“You’re underweight for your height. We’ll get a proper meal.”

“Bossy,” she coughed into her fist.

He smiled. “Yes.” It was all he could do not to gape at her like a schoolboy. He had no idea why he could see her, but the effect hadn’t worn off with daylight. . . . she was like a flame in a street of shadows. “I’m afraid it runs in my family.”

“Can I ask you something? How come you don’t use a dog? And where’s your cane? Didn’t you have one last night?”

“I get around pretty well,” he said, avoiding her question. “I’ve been blind all my life. It’s all I know.”

“Oh. Well, like I said, you don’t seem blind.”

He shrugged. Humans always told him that.

* * * * *

Over a breakfast of three pancakes, six pieces of toast, and two cups of coffee (hers), and a bowl of oatmeal (his), they talked.

“Don’t you want some ham or bacon? Please, order whatever you like. I can assure you I’m good for it.”

She shuddered. “No, thanks. I’m a vegetarian.”

“Oh.” Hmm. That could be interesting. “You know, that’s really not the best diet for an omnivore.”

“Dude, I’m not chomping on dead flesh, and that’s the end of it.”

“Drake,” he corrected.

She mopped up syrup with the last pancake. “Yeah, whatever. Can I get more coffee?”

“Of course.” He signaled the waitress, then asked, “Why are you so thin?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?”

“I’m interested in you,” he said simply.

“Uh-huh. Dude, you’re, like, twice my age.”

Yes, that was annoying. But it couldn’t be helped. “Stop calling me dude. And it’s probably not twice. I’ll be forty this year.”

“Oh.” She seemed surprised. “You look younger. I’m twenty-four.”

“You look younger, too. If I may ask, where are you staying?”

“There’s a shelter on Beacon Street,” she said without a trace of embarrassment. “I lost my job—the economy, you know—and couldn’t make rent, so I’ve been bouncing around a bit.”

“Is that how you fell in with the little gang who attacked me?”

“I didn’t know they were going to do that,” she said earnestly. “I thought it was just talk.”

“I believe you. What about your family?”

“Don’t have one.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I never really knew them. Like you—I guess—being by myself, it’s all I know.”

“Why don’t you stay with me for a while? I have a big house in Cambridge, and there’s plenty of room for a guest.”

She snorted into her coffee cup. “Right. Go home with the strange guy who showed up out of nowhere, who says he’s blind but doesn’t trip over anything. *Not too* creepy.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You could kill me in my sleep.”

He tried not to show offense. “That’s ridiculous. In your *sleep*? I would never.”

She laughed at him. “Oh, okay, so, we’ve established you won’t kill me in my sleep. *That’s* promising.”

“The homeless shelter is preferable to my home?”

“Well...no offense, dude...Drake, I mean...but put yourself in my shoes.”

“I understand. But consider this, you could have pancakes every morning,” he coaxed, “and all the coffee you could drink. Until you get back on your feet.”

She shook her head, but looked tempted. “Jeez, I can’t believe I’m even considering this. If this was a horror movie, I’d be yelling at the screen. ‘Don’t do it, you dumb bitch!’”

“That’s nice. I would really enjoy your company. I live a...solitary life. It would be nice to have a...a friend over.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Well. I have to admit it’s the nicest offer I’ve gotten all year. But here’s the thing. I’m getting these ‘take-the-poor-waif-home-and- take-care-of-her’ vibes from you, but I’m not sure you get it. My family died when I was a toddler, and I left the foster home when I was ten. I’ve been on my own a long time. I can take care of myself.”

“Of course.”

“And the thing is, there’s nothing I’ll...uh...do for you. You know. In order to stay at your house.”

“No, I wouldn’t expect you to.” And, fortunately, she was a good two weeks from ovulation. He’d be nowhere near his change then. It could be problematic when a roommate’s cycle coincided with a male werewolf’s, but he didn’t have to worry about that, at least. “There aren’t any strings, Crescent.”

“Well.” She finished her coffee. “I can’t believe I’m saying this. But we’ll try it. For a while.”

“All right, then.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He’d never seen a smile before. Hers made him dizzy.

CHAPTER SIX

They walked in and she was instantly dazzled. Like the big colonial house hadn’t been impressive enough on the *outside*. “Wow! How many windows do you *have*?”

“I have no idea.”

“Right. Sorry. It’s so bright in here!” She was staring; she couldn’t help it. Her first, jumbled impression was lots of light, a soaring living room ceiling, a loft, and lots of hardwood flooring. “You don’t even need to turn any lights on during the day. Not that you would.”

He was hanging his greatcoat in the closet. “I like to feel the sun on my face,” he said simply.

“Did anyone ever tell you, you live in a pink house?”

“A few have mentioned it.” He shrugged. “What do I care?”

She laughed. “Is’pose . . . It’s just sort of funny. I mean, you’re this big, super-masculine guy, and your house is the color of a faded pink sweatshirt. It’s a little weird.”

He smiled. It was disconcerting—like he was looking *right at* her. But of course he wasn’t. He probably knew she was standing by the door because of her voice. “Super masculine?”

“Dude, you’re about the biggest, boldest guy I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you. And stop calling me dude.”

He was the sharpest “handicapped” person she’d ever seen. He paid for breakfast with cash. . . and she noticed the twenty-dollar bills were folded into triangles, and the ten was a rectangle. Of course. . . it made perfect sense. He couldn’t see the denominations, and the bills would all feel the same. Did he get them that way from the bank? Or did he have a helper to fold his money? Maybe she could fold his dough, earn her keep. . .

But it was just so weird, because he always seemed to know where she was—he caught her before she started to trip on the curb, for God’s sake.

“Why don’t I show you to your room?”

“Yeah,” she said, kicking off her sneakers and following him. “Why don’t you?”

She expected a simple guest room with a utilitarian twin bed and an empty bureau. Instead, he escorted her to paradise. The bed, a mahogany four-poster, was against the window, and sunlight was splashed all over the Shaker quilt. Through the open door on the opposite side of the room she could see a gleaming bathroom with tiles the color of the sea, and the bureau beside her was almost as tall as she was.

“Uh. . . you sure you don’t have a cot in the basement or something?” she asked nervously. The room was so clean, so beautiful, she was afraid to move, lest she destroy it all. “Or maybe a blanket I could spread out on the kitchen floor?”

“Nonsense. This is your room now, for as long as you like. I’ll leave you to get settled.” And, abruptly, he was gone.

“Get settled?” she asked the empty room. “How?” She hadn’t wanted him to see the shelter, so she had no extra clothes. Well, she’d sneak out tonight and go get them. And she’d find Moran and his little gang of retards, and give them a piece of her mind. Imagine, trying to rob *abundant* guy.

She wandered back out to the living room and eyed the loft.

Hmmm. . .

She noiselessly climbed the stairs, and had time to notice the loft was actually an office—desk, computer with big-ass speakers, bookshelves—before she clambered up onto the railing. This would be even easier—this was only one story. Less, actually. Just a few feet. Piece of cake. If she couldn’t fly here, she couldn’t fly anywhere.

“Something for lunch?” Drake called from the kitchen. Good, he was a couple of rooms away.

“I’m still stuffed from breakfast,” she called back, and dived off the railing.

She flopped over in mid-air, and had time to notice the living room doing a one-eighty around her, and then she fell into Drake’s arms.

“Wow!” she gasped. “How’d you do that? You were, like, fifty feet away!”

“Will you *stop* that?” he snapped. “Stop climbing things and leaping off of them, before you give me a heart attack.”

“But how’d you know I—?”

“Promise, Crescent. As long as you’re in this house, no more crazy jumps.”

“But I won’t be hurt,” she explained earnestly, resisting the urge to snuggle into his arms. He was holding her like she weighed as much as a bag of feathers, like it was nothing. And the way he was scowling down at her—it should have been scary, but instead, she wanted to smooth out the frown lines with her fingertips. “Really! I’m sure I can do it.”

“Not in my house,” he said firmly. “Now promise.”

“Or what?” She wasn’t being sarcastic. She was curious.

“Or I won’t put you down.”

Now she did smooth out the frown line over his eyebrow. Weirdly—but nicely—he leaned down and nuzzled her nose. She felt her nipples tighten and fought the urge to squirm in his arms.

“You’re just going to carry me around all day?” she teased.

He smiled down at her. “It wouldn’t be much of a hardship.”

“Okay, okay. I promise. No more jumping off stuff in your house.” *But I can’t promise I won’t jump anywhere else...*

“All right, then.” He set her on her feet, gave her a warning smack on the ass which stung like hell—

“Hey!”

—and walked back to the kitchen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He heard her as she tiptoed past his room. Actually, he heard her when she opened her eyes and sat up in bed. He knew from her smell she hadn't slept, and made sure he didn't either.

When she stole out of his house like a thief in reverse, he was right behind her.

* * * * *

Bags were always in short supply at the shelter, so she just gathered a few changes of clothes to her chest and stole back outside. Unfortunately, she caught Maria's eye on the way out. Well, it couldn't be helped. The woman gobbled speed like it was Tic-Tacs, and she never slept.

Crescent crept down the alley behind the shelter, thinking she still had time to catch the Red Line back to the bus stop near Drake's house, when she heard running footsteps and turned to see the Asshole Brigade.

"New crib?" Maria asked. She was one of those women who always smiled—who smiled when you knew they were screaming inside. "New man?"

"Yes, and no, and mind your own business."

"Hold up, Cress." That was Nick Moran, the leader of the incredibly lame group. "You got something for us?"

"It's Cress-*ent*, and no, I sure don't. What's wrong with you?" She shifted her weight and clutched her clothes a little tighter. She *did not* want to let these three put her in the middle of their nasty little circle. Her gut almost always led her right—why else was she staying with a stranger?—and maybe it did this time, too. Maybe when she fell in with these idiots, they didn't really know how bad it could get. Her gut was good, but it couldn't foresee the future. "Robbing a blind guy? Trying to, anyway. You couldn't even pull *that* off."

"Shut up," Nick said roughly. He was a tall, cadaverously thin man with the bare beginnings of a mustache, and a scar that bisected his left cheek. "We had it under control."

"Sure you did. 'Bye."

Jimmy, the other schmuck, clawed at her elbow and managed to grab it. "Whyn't you take us to his place?" he asked. His tone was reasonable, but she wasn't fooled. "Cute piece of ass like you, bet you've already got a key."

As a matter of fact, she did. As a further matter of fact, she certainly wasn't going to let *them* have it. "Forget it," she said, trying to pull away. "Fuck off, you three, before I lose my temper. I can't believe I ever felt sorry for you."

"Sorry for us?" Nick echoed, expression darkening. "Be sorry for you. Because when we get done, you won't be so pretty no more."

"It's *sany* more. For God's sake, Nick, you went to private school before your folks kicked you out."

Nick blushed—he hated being reminded he hadn't been born to the streets—but Marie's smile widened, if that was possible. Crescent observed that the woman had a nodding acquaintance at best with toothpaste. "We can do this the easy way—" she began.

"Oh, spare me your thug clichés." Crescent was more annoyed than frightened, which she supposed was something. She'd been a moron to come back here by herself—and for what? So Drake wouldn't see the shelter? Who cared what he thought? Big overprotective dope. And she wasn't going to be winning any College Bowls, either, unless she starting relying a little more heavily on instinct and less on pride.

Jimmy's other hand—the one not squeezing her elbow—darted forward like a pale spider and grabbed her nipple. Then he started to pinch. Hard. Crescent could drop her clothes all over the filthy alley floor, or she could stand there.

She stood there. Never in a thousand years would she show these three how much he was hurting her. "Cut the shit," she said through gritted teeth. "You think acting like bullying assholes is going to change my mind about you?" She looked at Nick, waiting for him to call off his dog.

Jimmy was giggling and Maria was grinning, and Crescent's eyes were watering, and she had just decided to drop her clothes and kick Jim in the 'nads when Jim was flying away from her, *literally* flying. He sailed through the air and crumpled to the street a good ten feet away.

She had a glimpse of big hands cupping the curve of Maria's skull, and Nick's, and then there was a *klonk* as their heads banged together. It sounded awfully like the time she dropped a cantaloupe on the floor.

And then Drake was towering over her. Scowling, as usual.

"Have I mentioned," she said, gaping up at him, "that for a blind guy, you get around pretty good?"

"Once or twice." He pushed her crossed arms down, and carefully raised her T-shirt, then eased her bra cup down so he could examine her nipple. This was startling, and quite nice. She reminded herself that he was a doctor, and hers was probably one of about six thousand nipples he saw in a year.

"It's pretty red," he said after a long moment. He was leaning so close, she could feel his breath on the swollen peak, and shifted her weight again. Suddenly her shorts felt too tight, in a pleasantly irritating way. "But I don't think it'll bruise."

"How—" Her mouth was suddenly very dry, and she coughed. "How do you know it's red?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he smoothed her hair away from her eyes. "If you steal out of my house in the middle of the night again," he said, quite pleasantly, "I'll beat you."

"No you won't."

He sighed. "No. I won't."

"Drake, seriously. Whyd'you care?"

He sighed again. "I care." Then he pulled her up on her tiptoes and kissed her with bruising strength.

She dropped her clothes. *Fuckit* .

Kissing Drake—well, being kissed by Drake—was an entirely novel experience. For one thing, the man didn't have an ounce of flab anywhere. For another, she had the distinct impression he could snap her spine like kindling. But this thought was as exciting as it was slightly scary.

He pulled away and she stumbled forward. "Oh, no, don't stop," she gasped. "Kiss me some more—I'm not dizzy enough."

"I can't," he said, and she was delighted to see his breaths, too, were coming hard. "I don't want to take you in the alley like a—come on."

He grabbed her hand, hauled her out until they were under the streetlights, and flagged a cab. He practically threw her inside, then slammed the door and tersely told the driver his address.

"My clothes," she said, staring out the back window. "And after all the stupid trouble I went to..."

"I'll buy you a Gap store," he replied, and didn't let go of her hand until the cab pulled into his driveway.

Drake fumbled for his wallet, then grabbed a bunch of cash and threw it at the driver, dragging her out in the same instant. She heard the driver's gasp of surprise and appreciation, and then he was pulling out of the driveway and, in typical Boston driver fashion, pulling into traffic without looking.

She jumped into Drake's arms. He held her easily, his hands cupping her bottom, and she nibbled his lower lip. "I think you tipped him 'bout a thousand percent," she teased.

"Ask me if I give a fuck," he growled back. He shifted his grip, reached, and tore her shirt from the neck down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They didn't make it to the bedroom. They didn't even make it to the front steps. Instead, he took her in the lilac bushes, and to the end of her days she would associate that scent with Drake's urgency.

"This is insane," she panted, helping him tear out of his coat, his shirt, his pants. "We don't even know each other."

"I know you."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say." Except she felt as if she knew him, too. Independent and proud and kind and gentle, but a hard man when he had to be. A velvet fist when circumstances demanded it.

He tore her panties off and then gently parted her. She was slippery and he groaned when his fingers slid through her, into her, and while his fingers were busy stroking and parting the slick folds between her

legs, his thumb was on her clit, gently rubbing, and his lips were on her sore nipple, licking and kissing.

“Later,” she groaned. Oh, Christ, had she ever wanted anyone this badly? Had anyone? “Later for that stuff. Fuck me, before I go out of my mind.”

He left her nipple after one last kiss, then caught her hand, brought it between them, and let her fingers curl around his enormous length. He throbbed beneath her touch and she could feel his slippery tip. She ran her thumb over it and he shuddered in her arms.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“You’re so small, I don’t want to—”

“Yes.” She wriggled beneath him and licked her lower lip. “I’m small and you’re big, and it’s going to hurt just right. Now stop talking and...fuck...me.”

He obliged, parting her and surging forward, filling her up, forcing her to open for him, and still he came forward, pushing, thrusting, until she thought she would soon feel him in the back of her throat.

He withdrew, and in the waning light of the moon she could see the sweat on his brow, the way his eyes were shining, almost glinting, and then he surged forward, *shoved* forward, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and shrieked into the night air.

They rocked together in the grass, and when she put her hands on his taut butt, she could feel the muscles flexing as he worked over her, as he thrust and withdrew and pushed and surged. She opened her mouth for another yell—it was too sweetly divine to keep quiet—when his hand clamped over her mouth. She writhed in silence beneath him and, several seconds later, heard the couple walk by on the sidewalk a bare ten yards away.

“They’ll hear you,” he murmured in her ear, his voice so thick it was nearly unrecognizable. “They’ll come over her and see me fucking you in my side yard.”

The thought was so blatantly exciting she came at once, actually felt herself get wetter. He groaned in her ear, then bit her earlobe.

It went on like that for some time—she would never be able to guess how long they went at each other in the lilac bushes. Every once in a while his phenomenal hearing would pick up something and he’d cover her mouth again, without missing a stroke. But when he finally came, his shout was a roar that made her ears ring.

“Oh, Christ,” he gasped, collapsing over her.

“If anybody heard *that*, you’ll have some explaining to do, Doctor.” She tried to sound saucy, but mostly, she just wheezed.

“Umm.” He was kissing the side of her neck, wetsnuffly kisses that made her shiver and press closer to him. “Don’t leave in the middle of the night anymore.”

“All right, then. Think we can make it inside without showing the neighbors our bare butts?”

“We’re about to find out.”

CHAPTER NINE

“I think I got something caught on your bellybutton ring,” he said later, simply because it was much too soon to ask her to be his mate, and he had to say *something*.

“What can I say? Life with me is a constant adventure.” She yawned and flopped over on her back. “And, may I add, *not* bad for an old guy. Seriously. You must take, like, superGeritol, because...”

“Thank you so much,” he said wryly. They were in his bed, watching the stars through the skylight. “I was just about to compliment you on being adequate in bed despite an obvious lack of experience.”

She smacked him on the bicep. “Hey! And...ow...that was like slapping a rock. FYI, dude, I’ve got gobs of experience. There was that time in the movietheater...um...and once during a snowball fight a boy fell down on top of me...”

“Stop it, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Drake, what *is* it with you?” she asked abruptly. Her scent shift warned him—from playful soap bubbles to fresh green leaves—even if her tone hadn’t. “Seriously. I mean, you swoop down on me all Knight in Shining Armani, which is nice, if weird, and you don’t ask for anything at all, and you’re super nice, but you must want something.”

“Well,” he said, sliding his hand up her thigh.

“Oh, spare me. Like you were going to kick me out for not putting out...don’t think so. I mean, here we are, and frankly, most men—”

“Spare me your knowledge of most men.”

“Okay, okay. But seriously. What’s your deal?”

“It’s a double deal,” he said after a long pause. “And either one will, as you might say, freak you out in the extreme.”

“Oh, dude, I’d never say anything so lame...well, why don’t you try one, see how that goes.”

“Uh...”

“Come on, come on! Then I’ll tell you something about me. Something nobody else knows.”

“You mean besides the fact that you have smelly feet?”

“Draaaaaaaaaaaaaake!”

“All right, don’t yowl. Okay. Well. Here it is, then.”

She propped her chin up on her fist and waited.

He coughed.

She kept waiting.

“Well. Ah. You see, it’s difficult to just—you know—blurt it out like this—”

“Are you hoping I’ll die of old age so you won’t have to say it?”

“Fine,*fine*,” he practically snapped. “I’m a werewolf.”

Silence.

“I know,” he continued, emboldened when she didn’t run screaming from the room. He patted her thigh tentatively. “It’s startling, but you don’t have to be afraid, because I’d never hurt you or eat you—ah, that is to say, outside the bedroom I would never eat you, and—”

“Oh, Christ! That!” She batted his hand away. “I knew about *that* ! You were supposed to tell me something I didn’t know.”

He actually shook his head to check his hearing. No, there was her heartbeat, *lub-dub, lub -dub*, and her breaths, and the hum of electricity, and the cool clink of the freezer making an ice cube... everything was working fine. “What?”

She lunged upward, hopped off the bed, and started pacing back and forth. Moonlight splashed her as she stomped; an enraged goddess etched in cream. “Well, what else would it be? You’re super-strong, super-fast, you’re blind but you get around better than I do... plus, you’re *adoctor*, for God’s sake. How could you be such a good doctor without, I dunno, super everything else? It was either that or I figured you were an alien. But after just now—the bushes, you know—I figured you probably weren’t an alien. Besides, this wolf stops me from throwing myself off the roof, and then you just *happen* to show up a few hours later?”

He blinked at her. “Oh. I must say this is very anticlimactic.”

“Serves you right for assuming I was a dumb-ass.”

“I did not! No one’s ever guessed before. And I’ve had... ah... lady friends who have hung around quite a bit longer than you have.”

“Oh, that.” She waved ‘lady friends who have hung around’ away. “Well, that’s the thing about me—the secret thing—I was gonna tell you. I can tell things about people. That’s why I came home with you. I didn’t just think you wouldn’t hurt me, *Iknew* you wouldn’t. It’s like I can get into a person’s head and tell exactly what they’re feeling.”

“Empathic, hmm? That’s interesting. Well, Crescent, for heaven’s sakes, why do you keep giving that gang of yours a second chance?”

“I think they might be a little crazy,” she replied matter-of-factly. “When we meet up, they never *feel* like they’re going to hurt me. Then they get mad, and... anyway, obviously my radar isn’t 100% right all the time. Close enough for jazz, though.”

“And this fixation with flying?”

“Dude, I totally can! I know it! *You* just have to stop getting in the way when I jump off of things.”

Empathy... flight fixation... and her build, small and speedy... but surprisingly heavy for her height... could it be? He had assumed they were legend. Rather like werewolves.

“Crescent,” he said abruptly, “have you ever had an X-ray?”

Startled by the abrupt subject change, she blinked at him like a blonde doe. “Uh... not in the last few hours.”

“And you never knew your family?”

“Nope.”

“Hmmm.”

“Have I mentioned you’re sexy when you go all ‘pondering physician-esque’?”

“No,” he said, pouncing on her and bearing her back on the bed like a cat with a new toy. “You haven’t. Please elaborate.”

“Nah... I’ve had enough of talking.” She grabbed his ears and pulled him down for a kiss. He could feel her tongue dancing in his mouth and suddenly everything was much louder, much clearer. It was amazing to make love with a woman and be able to see her, really see her. He couldn’t get enough.

He broke the kiss, having forgotten about her origins and regained new interest in her breasts, which were small, like winter apples. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and tongued it gently. She squirmed beside him and wriggled closer. He slipped his hand between her thighs and slid his fingers through her curls, still damp from their lovemaking. In fact, she was deliciously hot and sticky down there.

He slid his fingers through her slick folds, found her clit, pressed lightly, then rubbed the tender area around it, and dipped a finger inside her. He licked her cleavage, tasting her sweat and trying to resist the urge to give her a good nip, a mark that would last for days. His mark.

“Oh, Christ,” she gasped. “How do you do that? I thought we were done, but I could fuck you to death right now.”

“There are worse ways to go,” he teased, but his tongue felt too thick in his mouth, and now there were two fingers inside her.

Quick as a fish, she slid away from him, shoved him over on his back, and straddled him. “Stop me if you’ve heard this, like, a hundred times before, but you’re really good—”

“I’ve heard it be—ouch!” She’d reached back to cup his testicles, and her grip had tightened. “Never mind.”

“Good dog.” She giggled.

“I really don’t think *you* should mock *my* origins,” he said, but talking was getting much harder, as she had wrapped her fingers around his cock and was squeezing, then releasing, then squeezing. “After all, you—uh—what were we talking about?”

Now her hand was sliding up and down with delicious, if agonizing, slowness. “Origins,” she prompted helpfully.

“Right. *You* descended from apes. And that’s—actually—that’s quite fine—really—ah—you’re not going to stop, are you?”

“Fraidso, big guy.” She must have taken pity at his horrified expression, because she shifted her hips and then he was sliding up inside her. “Why should you have all the—all the—fun?” She’d been riding him while talking, lifting up and then slamming back down. Now she was just as breathless as he, thank goodness, and oh Christ, she was so sweet and it felt so good, it felt *amazing*. Her hands were clutching his shoulders as she pumped and pumped, and he grabbed her knees and spread her thighs wider on the down stroke. Her eyes rolled up in her head and he felt her uterus contracting around his cock as she came.

“Oh, God!” she cried at the ceiling.

“Too bad,” he panted. He grabbed her hips and lifted, released, lifted, released. She shuddered all over and he felt her clench again. “It’s going to be a while for me, dear. That whole middle-aged thing, you know. Hope you’ve buckled in for a long ride.”

She wriggled, trying to lift herself off him, but he held on because he needed her right where she was, and because he knew she wasn’t truly worried. He used her roughly, because he knew she wanted him to do so, but also because he needed to be a little rough—needed to make an impression on her mind, if not her body. He wasn’t sure if that was a werewolf thing, or strictly a male prerogative.

When she was clawing at his shoulders and begging him, when she was very nearly sore from coming, he finally let himself go. Shooting off inside her was like a dream, the best he ever had.

She collapsed over him, panting. He stroked her back, savoring the fine sheen of sweat he found there.

“Oh, dude,” she said at last. “A girl could fall in love.”

He snorted, and then they laughed together, like mates.

“Drake. Seriously. How many T-shirts do you think I need?”

“But they’re *reso* versatile,” the Gap saleswoman piped up.

“Not to mention fragile,” Drake whispered in her ear, and was gratified to see her blush.

“You go away,” she ordered the woman, smiling. “You’re helping him spend way too much money as it is. And you—put that down. Khaki—yech.”

“But this is the Gap,” the saleswoman said (“Ask me how to save 15%” was emblazoned in hysterical red ink on her lapel button), obediently retreating.

“What, so I have to wear the uniform, too? Keep going.”

“I’m offering you any woman’s dream,” he said, “and you’re still making mischief.”

“A) Chauvinist much? Any woman’s dream? Shopping at Faneuil Hall? And B) put those *down* . I already picked out pants.”

“You’ll need more than two pairs.”

“Not according to some,” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“Hmm,” he said, advancing on her, momentarily slowed by a whirl of khaki as she threw the pants at him.

“Forget it, pal. Neither the time nor the place. Excuse me,” she added, bumping into a silver, headless mannequin. “Oh, gross! I hate when I think they’re people.”

“That’s some empathy you’ve got at work there,” he commented.

“Off my case, Dr. Furball . What, you never ever made a mistake?”

He thought hard. “Nothing springs to mind.”

She let out a yelp of anger and he could tell she was sorry she had nothing in her arms to toss at him any longer. “Dude, I hate to point this out, but you can’t see. You must have screwed up something. Clashing tie, maybe?”

He tossed her a blouse the color of her eyes and said in a low voice, although the saleswoman was across the store, “Homo saps are more handicapped than I, dear.”

“Oh, sure, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind, and all that.”

“Essentially.”

“We’re not that bad.”

He shrugged. "I can smell an iron deficiency. I can hear a heart murmur without a stethoscope."

"Well, I can tell this blouse doesn't go with those pants, so put it right back on the rack, pal. God, aren't you bored? These are all for me and I'm just about bored out of my tits."

He grinned. "Thanks for the visual. I'll make a note to catalog order for you from now on."

"Well, thank you. Not that you need to keep buying me clothes."

Want to bet? "I suppose taking you to Anne Klein to look at dresses would be a complete waste of time?"

"Barf out! Jeez, look how late it's getting! The sun's actually gone down. God, how long have we been doing this?"

"Since supper. Stop complaining, we're almost done."

"Well, I'd like to see you make me," she said pertly.

"Done and done. If you're quite—" He paused suddenly. Was that a whiff of Pack? It sure was. Hmm, two in one week. It wasn't often he ran into one a year. That was interesting. Now what to do about it?

"Dick, I swear to fucking God, if you don't stop bitching I'm going to pull out your eyeballs and shove them down your pants." The voice was strident, loud, and female.

"That could be fun," a low-pitched male voice he didn't recognize said cheerfully. "And who's bitching? I just got up. What are we doing here? I didn't know you liked the Gap, m'dear."

"I fucking well hate it and you damn know it. But they're having a sale and I can stock up. I fucking hate shopping!"

"A woman after my own heart," Crescent muttered, holding up a sleeveless sweater. It was touching her, so he could see it was the color of mucous. Everything else was the usual gray blur... but that scent... *heknew* that scent...

Drake moved to get a closer look. It couldn't be. And with a man? No. It had been too many years; he was mistaken. Still, no one else he knew packed that many 'fucks' into everyday language.

He stepped around the stack of red miniskirts, nostrils flared. Yes. It was she. "Janet Lupo?"

He heard her drop the pile of clothing, and could smell her shock. Despite her completely flabbergasted expression, he could tell by her scent that she was looking good—great, in fact. Very healthy, with a vitality about her that had been lacking in the girl he'd once known.

Interestingly, he had no sense of the man with her except as a bundle of formidable power. No real scent at all, but tall. Very strange.

"Fuck a duck," Janet said.

"Hello, Janet. It's nice to—"

Drake had an impression of blurred motion, and then he went sailing through the window front and bounced onto the cobblestones. Broken glass rained down everywhere.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Crescent worked very hard on not shrieking. It wasn't easy. There they'd been, minding their own business, when this bitch came out of nowhere and threw Drake through a window—*through* the damn window!—and now the two of them were rolling in the street like a couple of alley cats—or wolves, probably; wolves would be more accurate, and the place was emptying pretty quick as the stampede started, and Drake was down, was on his back, and—

“*Getoff!*” Crescent leapt forward, but a brick fell on her shoulder and yanked her back.

“I wouldn't,” the blonde hottie said mildly. He was a yummy one, all right, and towered over her almost as much as Drake did. Skinny drink of water, though. She observed that the brick was his hand. Strong drink of water, too. “I think it's a family thing. Better let them—ow.”

She'd never hit anyone in the face before, and was disappointed. Blondie just sort of shook it off and rubbed his jaw. “Now don't *you* start. There's only one woman permitted to smack me around, and she's currently rolling in a mud puddle with your friend.”

Show him your necklace.

Obedying the inner voice that was never, ever wrong—but which didn't speak up nearly often enough—she fumbled for one of the three necklaces around her neck, broke the chain, and thrust it at him. To her amazement, he stumbled backward and threw a hand over his face. Just like in the movies!

“Now you're just being mean,” he said reprovingly, groping for her. “Put that cross away before you hurt someone. Like me!”

She ignored him, turned her back, stuffed the cross in her pocket, grabbed the cow around the waist, and pulled. “*Getoff,*” she huffed. Grabbing her lover's attacker was not unlike trying to stop an army tank—the woman absolutely did not budge. But she shrugged—nearly dislodging Crescent—and punched Drake in the eye for good measure.

“Your monkey's bothering me,” she told him, and punched him again.

“Crescent, *don't,*” Drake said sharply. There was a rill of blood trickling down his chin, but other than that he looked unharmed. Anybody else would be spurting blood from about six different arteries after sailing through a plate glass window—thank goodness for werewolf constitution! “Get back. Get out of the way. Don't worry about me.”

“Yeah, short stuff.” Bam! Another punch. “He’ll be just fine. Why don’t you go get a Frappuccino?”

She ignored them, and stubbornly tugged again.

“Crescent, *get away from here* . In a minute I’m going to forget to be a gentlemen—Goddammit, Janet, if you hit my jaw again I’ll put you over my knee!”

“It’s a date, gorgeous.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Crescent tried a new grip and pulled harder. “Nobody’s getting spanked but me.”

“Really?” Hottie said from behind her.

“I said get off him!” She suddenly felt her forearm clutched in an unbelievably strong grip, and then she was sailing over the woman’s head, only to hit the sidewalk ass-first. The shock went all the way up her spine and she yelped.

“Unwise,” Drake said, shrugging out of his coat.

“Oh, please. Nothing personal, Blind Man’s Bluff, but you’re fucked. Can’t have anybody ratting me out to Mikey Boss Man, so sorry, sit still and die now, okay?”

“I’ll pass. And I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really, Janet. Can’t you two solve this a little more amicably than introducing death into the equation?”

“Pipe down, Dick, no one hit your buzzer.”

Crescent bounced up from the pavement. All three of them looked surprised to see her still in the game. “*Isaid* ,” she growled, “keep your hands off my man, bitch!” Then she punched the cow in the jaw.

This was infinitely more gratifying than when she’d hit ElHottie . The woman rolled away from Drake like a bowling ball and slammed up against the Gap’s front door, cupping her hands beneath her chin to catch the blood, and Crescent felt the shock of the blow race all the way up to her shoulder.

The woman spit a tooth into her palm. “Hey, that actually hurt, you little cunt!”

“*Nowthat* ’s interesting,” ElHottie said approvingly. He was the most detached man she’d ever met. What a weirdo! “You don’t *smell* like a meat-eater.”

“Crescent!” Drake was utterly shocked. It was almost worth getting jumped, just to see the look on his face. “How did you manage that?”

“Do we have to talk about it now? Or do I have to keep kicking the shit out of what’s-her-cow?”

“Hey, hey,” what’s-her-cow said warningly. “Watch the language.”

“You have a problem with *cow* ? You put your hands on him again, I’ll kick your ass up so high people will think you have a second head. *Cow* .”

“Says the midget.” But the woman’s lips were twitching—like Drake’s did when he was amused, and trying not to show it.

“You know what they say. All cow and no cow makes cow a cow-cow.”

The woman reddened. . . then laughed reluctantly.

“For heaven’s sake, Janet,” Drake was saying, limping over to her and helping her out of the dirt. “What’s the problem? I haven’t seen you in—what? Fifteen years? And you attack me?”

“I don’t suppose we could talk about this over a drink,” Hottie commented. He grinned, and Crescent nearly screamed. He had about a thousand teeth, and they all looked very sharp. “So to speak.”

* * * * *

“—so now we’re sort of. . . uh. . . in love and stuff. And I’m not going back,” Janet added defiantly.

“You don’t have to sell me on the advantages of going rogue,” Drake said.

“What, so, you’d get in trouble with your boss? The—whatd’you call him? Pack Leader?” Crescent dumped a third packet of sugar into her coffee. “What’s he care?”

“He probably wouldn’t,” Janet replied after a long pause. “But it’s not worth it to me. The risk, I mean. He could order me to stay on theCape and I—I would have to obey, or disobey.”

They were sitting in the corner of the Starbuck’s onPark Street , speaking in low voices. Although Crescent wasn’t sure why they bothered. This wasBoston , after all. Nobody gave a shit.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about me. You’re only the second Pack member I’ve run into in the last year,” Drake said. “And even if I were to run into Michael—which isn’t likely—I certainly wouldn’t mention you.”

“Well, thanks. I guess I shouldn’t have. . . Uh.” Janet coughed. “You know. Kicked the shit out of you without asking questions first.”

“That’s all right,” he said kindly, ignoring Crescent and Richard’s snickers.

“You might think about moving,” Crescent suggested. “If your boss and all his lackey werewolves live on theCape . I mean, you’re only ninety miles away. If you lived in—Idunno ,Argentina ? That would be better.”

“Our home is here,” Janet said stubbornly. “Besides, we’re all over the world. Might as well stake out a small claim and defend it here as well as anywhere else.”

Crescent noticed thehottie —Richard—hadn’t touched his frozen coffee. “Aren’t you thirsty?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why aren’t you—”

“So what’s your story,blondie ?” Janet asked. “Getting smacked by you was like getting smacked by a two-by-four. What do you have for bone marrow, steel ball bearings?”

Crescent blinked at the interruption. “Well, I think I—”

“—might be part fey.” Drake finished for her.

Richard’s eyebrows arched. “Really? I thought your kind died out years ago.”

“It’s fairy, not fey, and most of us have—at least, I’ve never been able to find anybody else like me. And Drake, how the hell did you know that? I never got around to telling you!”

“I guessed yesterday,” he explained, “and when you smacked Janet I knew for sure.”

“Whoa, back up.” Janet put her palms out like a traffic cop. “You’re a fairy? Like Tinkerbelle? With wings and shit?”

“Do you see any wings?” she snapped.

“Jeez, nobody told me fairies had such rotten tempers,” Janet muttered.

“She’s just mad because I figured it out,” Drake said with annoying smugness. “She was saving it for a surprise.”

“You’re so insufferable!”

“Yes.”

“It runs in the family,” Janet added with a grin. “The men especially.*So* annoying.”

“Oh, yes,” Richard said. “*Male*werewolves are the annoying ones.”

“You shut up. Listen, I always heard fairies were these little delicate things. You hit like a bulldozer. I’m gonna have to wait for that tooth to grow back, which sucks.”

“Dense bones,” Drake said.

“Difficult to break,” Richard added. “I ran into one of your kind about seventy years ago, and he nearly killed me. He was quite old even then, dear, so don’t get your hopes up. I’m sure he’s dust by now.”

“Oh,” Crescent said faintly.

“Don’t sound so disappointed. He was a nasty old man.”

“This explains your fixation with flying,” Drake said, thinking out loud.

“Dense bones,*and* she can fly?” Janet snorted into her Caramel MochaFrappuccchino . “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“You ever see an airplane take off?” Crescent asked. “You look at it and wonder how something that

heavy can ever get off the earth...and then it goes...and you're left on the ground."

"Well, of course you can't fly with all those accessories." Whip-quick, Richard flicked his spoon at his whipped cream, and a dollop appeared as if by magic on the end of Janet's nose. "But you knew that."

"What?"

"Dammit, Dick! Quit throwing whipped cream on me; you *know* I hate it."

"What?" Crescent nearly yelled.

Richard looked startled. "All your piercings. You probably set off metal detectors in airports. And of course your kind can't tolerate certain metals."

Drake's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. Crescent knew exactly how he felt. How had she never thought of this before?

"What are you guys talking about?" Janet had finally gotten the last of the whipped cream off her nose. "Drake, you look like you just crapped your pants."

"I—um—I want to fly, but I can't. But I never made the connection—"

"What are you guys talking about?" Janet practically yelled.

"Fairies have a legendary fear of metal, especially iron," Richard explained. "In Crescent's case, I would guess that translates into being unable to get off the—what are you doing?"

Tearing out all her goddamned earrings and rings, that's what she was doing. Between her ears, nose, and belly button, she had over a dozen.

"I guess we're done talking," Janet commented when Crescent stood up so quickly, her chair fell over.

"There's a back door behind the second coffee machine," Drake said, "but I'm not sure now is the appropriate—Crescent?"

She ran for the door and it was right where he told her it would be. She was through it in a flash and bounding up one, two, three flights of stairs, and praise all the gods, the door to the roof was propped open and then she was out in the open.

She dove off the roof. At the last moment, she closed her eyes—she'd been disappointed too many times not to feel a twinge of anxiety. She knew she wouldn't break any bones, but landing hurt, all the same.

Except she wasn't landing.

She cracked open one eye and saw Janet, Richard, and Drake standing on the roof, looking at her. Except they were upside down.

Correction:*she* was upside down. In mid-air.

"There we go," Richard said cheerfully. "Problem solved."

“Uh.” She could feel the grin split her face. “Can somebody reach my foot? I have no idea how to get down.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Now, it’s none of my business,” Janet began with, for her, heartening tentativeness.

“Oh, here we go.”

“She’s a little young for you, don’t you think?”

“I have to take relationship advice from a woman who hangs out with a dead guy?”

“Figured it out, did you?”

“Took me a while. He doesn’t really have a scent, you know? In fact, he smells more like you than anything else.”

They were back at Drake’s house, and the sun would be up soon. Crescent’s feet hadn’t touched the ground in three hours. Richard was amusing himself by bouncing her off the roof, seeing how high she would go. His personal best was sixteen feet. Drake and Janet were sitting cross-legged near the edge of the roof, watching.

“She’s one of a kind.”

“No shit. But she’s a little—uh—that is to say—you think she’s in it for the long haul?”

Crescent shrieked with joy as Richard bounced her on the balls of her feet and she shot into the air again.

“I have no idea,” he said.

“It’s just—you know, I didn’t really know what I was missing until Dick kidnapped me—”

“What?”

“Long story. Anyway, you’re a pretty good guy. I mean, I always liked you. It’d be nice if you could finally settle down.”

“Why, Janet, I never dreamed this tender side of you existed.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“And it’s kind of you not to mention my grossly debilitating handicap.”

“What? Oh, that. I’m not being *nice*. I just keep forgetting. I mean, you don’t act like a blind guy.”

“How exactly does a blind guy act?”

“How the hell should I know? So anyway, back to Blondie. You just, like, saw her and knew? Well, I know you didn’t *see* her...”

“Actually,” he said suddenly, “I did. See her, I mean. I can.”

“For real? Not just make a picture from how she smells?”

“For real. I can see her perfectly. But only her. Everything else is the same. For example, I know your height and weight from your voice, and how you sound when you walk, but I don’t know whatcolor your eyes are. Hers are beautiful,” he added dreamily.

“Wow. That’s the weirdest shit I ever heard. And I live with a vampire.” Janet rested her chin on her knees for a moment. “I don’t know dick about fairies. Except I remember this story from when I was a kid—you remember Sarah Storyteller? Michael’s grandma?”

“Sure. She used to read to all of us on the grounds, under those trees by the pond.”

“Right. Well, there was this one story—about fairies? They were little and invisible. They’d only appear if you caught them. And if you caught them, they’d grant wishes. So maybe Crescent appeared to you. You know, maybe that’s why you can see her.”

“Or maybe,” he said slowly, “she granted my wish.”

“You wished you could see? Not that I could blame you, you poor handicapped freak of—”

“Oh, quit that. No, I never really minded not seeing, but I always wondered what my mate’s face would look like. What her hair would look like, thecolor of her eyes...like that.”

“Hum. Well. You can see her. Only her. So...maybe she *is* in it for the long haul.”

“There’s that tender side again. My, Richard has been *quite* the good influence.”

“Oh, shut up. So, what are you going to do?”

He sighed and shifted his weight. “Hope she flies back to me, I suppose.”

“Lame.”

“Mature.”

“I kicked your ass all over Faneuil Hall, you know.”

“Then my girl kicked *your* ass.”

“Oh, shut up.”

* * * * *

Janet and Richard left, but Crescent refused. He'd tried to explain why she should go, but she wasn't having it. “What, is this that dumb ‘if-you-love-something-let-it-go-if-it-comes-back-blah-blah-blah’ thing? Because that sucks. You said I could stay as long as I wanted, you *welsher* .”

He tried to disguise his joy. “Crescent, there's something you should know—”

“Later. God, I'm *starving* . Listen, I'm going to run up ahead and see if those guys are serving breakfast yet.”

“It's four o'clock in the morning.”

“*I know* , that's why I want to *check* . Be right back.”

He shook his head as she hurried away, then realized they were quite close to the shelter where she'd been living. Foolish to be concerned—she was a tough one to hurt, after all—but he decided to catch up with her anyway.

That was the last rational thought he had for a while. Stupid, really—the punk shaking Crescent like a maraca looked far worse for the wear. An obvious beta type—he needed to be led. And, in abandonment, couldn't take care of himself. He certainly wasn't worth getting worked up over. He supposed Nick and what's-her-name had gone on to greener pastures...or easier marks.

“Jimmy, you idiot,” Crescent was saying, prying his fingers off her arm, “will you give it up? Grabbing me is not going to fix your life. Now buzz off.”

“It's all your fault,” Jimmy was insisting. “Nick and Maria took off because of you.”

“My ass! They took off because you can't walk ten feet down here anymore without tripping over a cop. Too bad they didn't bring you with, huh, Jimbo ?”

Jimmy's eyes flashed murky murder and Drake moved quickly, spinning him away from Crescent. “Just once I'd like to take a walk with you without your being assaulted,” he muttered, carefully examining her arm.

“What can I say, I've got a dark past. He's harmless. Let's go eat.”

He ignored her. Then he whirled and grabbed Jimmy by the throat, lifting him in the air as easily as a mother picked up her toddler.

“Did you really,” he began. He was so angry it was hard to talk. He wanted to growl and bite. “Did you *really* think you could put your hands on my mate and live to see the sun come up?”

“Whoa!” Crescent said, tugging on his arm. Before them, the punk squeaked and kicked, his face

turning an interesting shade of purple. “Let go, Drake. He’s just an asshole.”

He was shaking the man—really just an overgrown boy, but surely old enough to know better—like a dog shakes a rag doll. “Did you really?” he said again. “*Didyou?*”

“Drake! You are freaking me out, dude!”

You’re a doctor.

She’ll have bruises. He actually marked her—marked her with his filthy hands!

But you’re a doctor.

“Drake, will you put him down already? He’s passed out, for Christ’s sake. And I really don’t want to finish the day at the Cop Shop.”

He growled, then flung the man away. They both watched the unconscious tough sail through the air and then hit the street like a sack of sand. Jimmy groaned, but didn’t regain consciousness.

“Jeez, overprotective much?” But she was smiling. “Remind me to never tell you about my years on the streets.”

“You*will* tell me.”

“Later. When that vein in your forehead isn’t throbbing. Yuck, by the way.”

“He touched you. He should never have done that.”

“Yes, and I think he gets that now! Your mate?” she added, teasing. “Is that what I am?”

He put his arms around her. “Yes. That’s what you are.”

“Well, all right. Let’s go eat.”

“If I have to look at another pancake, I may well vomit.”

“Dude, it’s fine. I’ll get waffles,” she added with a wicked grin, and stretched up, and kissed him.

“I have to tell you something. No waffles. I’ve put this off long enough—”

“What, no waffles, like,*ever*?”

“Crescent... this may be hard to believe...”

She kissed him again. “Your intolerance of starchy foods?”

“Be serious. I’m talking about—”

“The fact that you can see me?”

He blinked. “Well...yes. You’re not surprised.”

“Of course not.” She smiled at him and he swore he could almost see her glowing. “I granted your wish. Apparently it’s what we do.”

“News to me! What exactly did I wish for? To have you in my life, or to see you?”

“I don’t know, but it’s kind of nice that you got it all in one package, isn’t it?”

He supposed it was.

THE END

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