

Provenance

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Canaan was a small suburb to the northwest of the Bellingham, just as advertised. It was so close to the border that you could probably see the Canadian Rockies on clear days. Other than the fact that it was populated mostly by werewolves, there wasn't much to write home about Canaan, Washington. Houses, some stores, a lone movie theater. I amused myself by playing Spot the Wolf as we rolled through town. Thom headed for the outskirts of the little town, the real boonies. Within minutes we were back among the trees and rhododendrons and berry brambles.

The car turned down a driveway that I didn't see until we were right on it and crunched up a pot-holed gravel driveway. The driveway twisted and turned and I didn't see the house until we were almost on top of it. It was a small ranch house, painted tastefully in green and white. A redwood porch ran the length of the front. A tall woman with iron gray hair was standing on the porch, arms crossed over her denim shirt. There was no one else around.

“Your mom?” I asked.

Thom nodded and got out of the car. I followed reluctantly. I had a feeling that this woman was going to blast me for being so stupid and getting Thom and his people into a fight at Steppenwolf's. Thom's mother looked fierce and I knew that she was a werewolf, too. The woman could have been a Valkyrie. I finally saw where Becca had gotten her sharp foxy nose. The green eyes must have come from their father, because Thom's mother had eyes so dark a brown that they were almost black. The Latino wolf and the muscular guy headed wordlessly for a row of pickups and sedans near the tree line. Thom and I marched up the porch steps and Thom's mother wordlessly led us into the house.

I looked around curiously, taking in the photos of unsmiling men and women that hung on the walls of the hallway. Curiously, there were no pictures of children. There wasn't so much as a Polaroid of young Thom or Becca. The house was clean and tidy enough that you could probably do surgery on the dining table; I'd be willing to bet that Thom's mother dusted the tops of the furniture where no one would be able to see anyway. The walls were covered in a delicate looking white on white wallpaper, and the furniture was all in dark, smooth wood. The chairs and things were upholstered in shades of green and white and gray. It was elegant, but far too fancy to relax in. It was hard to imagine Thom as a child running around in this house, because this was definitely a home for adults. The living room just confirmed my suspicions. The light, sage colored couch was too firm and forced you to sit upright,

whether you wanted to or not. I perched on the edge of a cushion and tried not to count the minutes before I could take another Vicodin.

Thom sat next to me, but didn't look at me. I felt like I was in front of a tribunal, waiting to be judged for my crimes. I prayed again that no one else had been seriously hurt. I hoped God heard my little agnostic soul and listened to me for a change. What would happen when the police found out? I could just feel the situation metastasizing into a disaster.

“Mom, this is Ada. Ada, this is my mother, Geneva Vilkas.”

“It's nice to meet you, Geneva,” I said, trying to look like I wasn't a moron who kept needing to be rescued.

“I prefer Mrs. Vilkas,” the iron haired woman said, sitting down on a stiff dark green armchair. She sounded angry enough to spit nails. Her brown-black eyes were narrow with fury.

“All right, Mrs. Vilkas. I'm Ada Wright.”

“I know who you are. Are you done bleeding or should I go get a tarp?” she asked, eyeing my shirt.

“Mother, be nice. She's the one who helped us track down where they kept Becca.”

“And then was idiotic enough to get herself kidnapped and need to be rescued. How is Ralph, by the way?” The woman was ice. The snow queen herself.

“He'll be fine. He just needed some stitches,” Thom reported.

“Nikki is missing,” Geneva said. The change of subject was so abrupt that it might have given me mental whiplash.

“Nikki?”

“No one's seen her since Thursday.”

“Thursday?” Thom repeated.

“Yes, Thomas,” his mother said coldly. “I asked her mother. The cow said that she hadn't see her daughter since Thursday, once she dried out enough to answer my questions. She only remembered because they watched 'My Name is Earl' together,” she added disgustedly.

“And you think Jack has her?”

“He was seen with her in town. At Lupe's.”

“Jesus, didn't she know about Becca?” Thom launched himself off the couch and started pacing.

“Apparently not. You kept it quiet enough, Thom,” his mother replied.

“Did she leave anything behind? Anything she might have gotten from him?” I asked.

“Why? Are you going to work your magic on it?” Geneva retorted.

“Yes, if you'll let me.”

“You'll have to go ask her mother. Nancy Cartland. Thom knows where she lives.”

Thom grunted in acquiescence.

“Thom, I hate to interrupt, but do you have anything I can change into?” I pulled the cold, still damp cloth away from my chest with my fingertips. The white cotton crackled dully with the movement.

“I'll get you something,” Geneva said, then fled the room so quickly you would have thought her chair had burst into flames.

“Do you live with your mother?” I asked. Please say no, I thought. Please say no.

“No. This is just a good place to meet without letting the whole world know about it. God, what was Nikki thinking?”

“I daresay that Jack is charming when he tries,” I said.

“Nikki's smarter than that.”

“Then may be he slipped her a rufie.”

“What?”

“A rufie. Maybe he drugged her,” I offered. All those hours watching CSI weren't wasted after all.

“Maybe.”

Geneva came back and tossed a black t-shirt over to me. I caught it involuntarily and had a sudden flash of a lacy red bra and pouty red lips. I dropped the shirt and jumped to my feet.

“Who did that belong to?” I asked, startled.

“Does it matter?” Geneva said. “I think it belongs to Christine. Thom's girlfriend.”

“We broke up,” Thom said quickly. He picked up the shirt and looked at me. “Do you think one of mine would bother you?”

“I don't know. Maybe if it was a new shirt? Sorry about that. I was just surprised to see your girlfriend's rack,” I said, trying to get the image of Christine out of my head.

Thom barked a laugh and left the room. Unfortunately, this left me alone with Geneva until he got back. I knew better than to try and get her to like me now. When she wasn't studiously ignoring me, Geneva seemed like she was trying to glare me to death. Her face was so much like Becca's that I was surprised not to see those vivid green eyes looking out at me. I avoided Geneva's flat black stare and tried not to move my shoulder too much.

“Ada? I found something for you!” Thom called and I left the room so fast I might have left a

vapor trail.

Thom was in what must have been his old bedroom, on the southern end of the house. Normally, your old bedroom at your parents' house would have posters of the band's you loved while you were hormonal and spotty. There'd be old awards for sports you played in high school or when you got straight A's. But Thom's room had none of that. The white on white walls were bare except for the odd print. I couldn't even spot nail holes or old scotch tape on them. The room was as impersonal as the rest of the house, and I wondered if Geneva had gone through it like a tornado when Thom moved away. It could have been a hotel bedroom. The only thing that had any personality was a patched blue and brown hiking backpack, Thom's overnight bag, lying in a heap on the bed's plain white duvet.

"It's a new one," Thom said when he tossed me a white UW t-shirt.

Catching it with my good left arm, I got a few pleasant flashes of Thom's naked chest when I touched it, but I could live with it.

"Do we have to stay here?" I asked.

"No, I have my own place, but it's a little hard to get to. Do you mind hiking a ways?"

"I can't just stay in a motel?"

Thom's eyebrows rose. "After what happened last time? I don't think so. I'm not trusting you out of my sight until this is over."

My face flushed hot with embarrassment. I shooed Thom out of the room and finally peeled off my bloody shirt. I set it carefully on the floor and looked for a mirror. No joy. I was going to have to wait to see what kind of shape my shoulder was in. Judging by how it felt, I was going to have some nasty scars. I started to pull the t-shirt on, and managed to get it over one arm. But I couldn't lift my injured right shoulder enough to get it all the way on, no matter how much I gritted my teeth. In the end, I had to call Thom back in to help me. He stuck his lean face in, eyes screwed comically shut.

"Just don't stare at my boobs, okay?" I asked. "I'm only asking you to do this because I can't."

Thom grinned at me and came back into the room. As gently as he could, he tugged the shirt into place and lifted my arm through the arm hole. I blacked out for a moment anyway and Thom had to hold me up until the blood returned to my brain.

"Thank you."

"No problem. I enjoyed it," Thom said.

"I asked you not to stare at my chest, Thom!"

"Even if I were blind, I'd still try to stare at your boobs. Couldn't help myself." Then he laughed and I felt the urge to punch him.

Men suck.

After that, Thom scooped up his belongings and shoved them back into the backpack. He lent me an old denim jacket from the closet. Geneva must have missed it during her blitz. We bundled my ruined shirt in a plastic bag and chucked it in the garbage on our way out through the sliding glass door at the back of the house. Before long, we were walking swiftly away from the green and white ranch house. I couldn't fault Thom for not saying good bye to his mom. If I never saw that harpy again it would be too soon.

At the tree line, Thom found a well-worn path leading into the underbrush. Without hesitation, Thom marched down it.

"I feel like Little Red Riding Hood," I said, making Thom laugh again.

"That makes me the Big Bad Wolf, doesn't it?"

"Yup."

Thom laughed again, and the sound of his deep laughter rang through the trees. Birds took off in panic at the loud noise. With luck, Thom wouldn't yell at me too much when he finally remembered the trouble I had gotten him and his pack into. Oh, and that little matter of murdering Jack's cousin. I felt sick all over again at the memory. I could hear it again, that sick crunching noise as I threw my elbow into the man's neck with every ounce of strength I had. I had looked back before I took off, but...No, even if I had known what was happening, I still would have run for it. If Jack or his people had gotten a hold of me in that parking lot, they would have torn me to pieces.

Thom had said that the hike was "a ways." A ways turned out to be a euphemism for "You'll be hiking uphill until your lungs explode and you want to puke everything you've eaten for a week." I didn't throw up, but it was a near thing. I was seriously considering turning back and trying to beg Geneva for a bed for the night when Thom's cabin magically appeared at the end of the trail. I felt even more solidarity with Red Riding Hood when I saw it. It looked as cozy as Grandmother's cabin. The log cabin was neat and well-maintained, with a healthy stack of firewood piled up against its side. It even had a mossy shingled roof with a jaunty metal chimney peeking out at the apex.

"How long has this been here?" I asked, panting heavily, resisting the urge to collapse in a heap.

"Long time. My dad left it to me when he died." Thom shrugged his bag higher on his bag and headed for the door.

Thom fiddled with the lock for a minute, then pushed open the solid pine door. I found the living room and made a controlled fall onto the futon cushion, hands carefully draped over my stomach. I focused on breathing for the next few minutes, until my lungs no longer screamed at me.

When I opened my eyes again, I looked around curiously. In comparison to the bloodless neatness of his mother's house, Thom's place was riotous with color and memories. Color photos of Thom and Becca and their friends were all over the walls, fighting for space with Pacific Northwestern landscapes. Unlike the photos at Geneva's, everyone in these pictures were smiling. I swiveled my head to look around a little more. All the furniture was mismatched. The futon was dark red suede. The easy chairs were blue and brown. None of the wood trim was varnished in the same veneer. One looked like white pine. Another was done in oak. The coffee table was a deep cherry color. A messy pile of news magazines and newspapers covered most of the table top. A lone coffee cup with a happy face on it stuck out of the detritus. Above all, Thom's house was homey and warm. It felt like people really lived here. More than that, they enjoyed living here.

A gentle cough got my attention. Thom was holding out a glass of ice water.

"You don't hike much, do you?" he asked.

"Librarian," I retorted and started to guzzle down the water, wincing as I got the glass's entire history. My gloves had disappeared in the day's fun and games, and I had no idea where my backpack had gone. "I'm supposed to be recuperating, you know."

"Yes. About that...can I look at the mark?"

"Why?"

"I want to see if you might be infected," Thom said evenly.

"Oh, the doctor did a really good job cleaning it out. No bacteria in there," I said between gulps.

"I'm not talking about bacteria."

"Then what are you—Oh. You mean the werewolf thing."

"Yes, the werewolf thing. Let me see." Thom took my water away and sat down next to me on the futon cushion.

The hike (read that as *march*) up the hill had pulled on the stitches slightly and I was bleeding again, just a little. The cotton of the t-shirt was stuck to a few places where the wounds had clotted again. Thom was as gentle as he could be when he peeled it back. I tried to twist my neck to see, but it was just out of sight. I felt a finger softly trace some of the tooth marks. The Tackler had done good work when he had gnawed on me. The doctor had told me that I was lucky that I hadn't lost any muscle mass. I would play the piano again, he had joked. I just had to learn how to play in the first place.

I was startled to feel Thom's warm lips kiss my wounds. He kissed all of them, then worked his way up my neck and to my jaw. His hands were busy, too, caressing my arms, clasping my hands, soothing away my tension. I turned to kiss him. All the fight, all the anxiety, all the weariness leaked

out of me and I leaned into him. The kiss was over much too soon. Thom pulled away and scooted back, putting breathing space between us.

“I shouldn't be doing this—” we said together. I laughed, and Thom smiled sadly at me. But I could see a wolfish twinkle in his dark green eyes.

“I really am sorry, Thom, for everything that happened today.”

“I know you are. Um, I can't tell for sure if you're infected. Looking at what that bastard did to you, I'd say you have a pretty good chance of it.”

“What happens if I am?” What if I really was infected? At this point, tired as I was, I was willing to accept it as just another weird thing in my increasingly weird life.

“We'll worry about it in a week, when the moon is full.”

“So that part's true? The bit about the silver isn't,” I said.

“How do you know that? I've seen someone shot by a silver bullet. It was not pretty.”

I told him what I had done with my necklace, making him smile for a moment before his face wrinkled up in serious thought again.

“Probably just plated silver,” he said. Then he leaned in for another kiss.

I put a hand on his chest, stopping him. “We really shouldn't,” I said.

“Don't you want to?” Thom asked, kissing my lightly along the jaw.

“Stop, Thom.” Stop before I cave in and kiss you back, I corrected silently.

Thom backed off, giving me space to breath. He was gentlemanly enough, but we didn't speak the rest of the night. When I curled up on the red suede futon, he found a blanket to drape across me. After a few muzzy memories stored in the thick polar tech fabric blurred through my mind I relaxed. I was asleep within seconds.