

Provenance

XI

When I woke, I was alone.

At least the printed blanket was fairly new and I didn't have to deal with flashbacks of Christine and her elegant lacy bra while I lay there on the futon. Small mercies.

It took me a minute to work my way up to getting up. I was warm and rested. Until I got up, I wouldn't have to deal with Jack or Thom or guilt. I would have laid there for a long time if my stomach hadn't gurgled loudly at me, demanding food. I pushed the blanket aside after a few more minutes savoring the coziness and went looking for Thom. As I crossed the room, I heard his voice, speaking lowly to someone I couldn't see. I walked as softly as I could, trying to get a peak at Thom and his visitor. I kind of thought it was the Latino werewolf, but I couldn't be sure. I had only heard the man speak once. I paused just inside the open doorway, then leaned my head around the corner. When Thom spotted me, the Latino man grunted and handed Thom a white envelope and headed back down the hill.

“Jack?” I asked.

Thom nodded and brushed past me, heading for the kitchen and the coffee pot. I followed, trying not to skid across the floor in my socks. Where were my shoes? I knew I had had them on when I fell asleep. Not important right now, I told myself as I walked into the wide, warm kitchen. Focus, Ada. The envelope was lying on the middle of the table, waiting for Thom to get done fiddling his mug and the steaming coffee machine. I left the envelope alone while I took a seat. I had learned my lesson before. I really needed to be sitting down when I did my little party trick. When I was as ready as I was going to get, I reached for the envelope. Thom didn't stop me. He just watched me over the rim of his mug as he got his daily dose.

“The police are going to come after me eventually, Thom,” I said dully.

“No, they're not.”

I stared at him in surprise. “Of course they are. There's a dead body back at Steppenwolf's. The cops just aren't going to ignore that.”

“There's no dead body,” Thom said, sipping at the hot coffee.

“What are you talking about? I crushed that guy's windpipe,” I croaked, forcing the words out bluntly. “You told me yourself that he was dead.”

“We take care of our own. Jack's not going to call the police, even if it was his cousin. He'd have to explain why he kidnapped you. I promise, he's not going to get the police involved.”

It didn't make me feel better. Even if the police weren't going to come after me, I knew that Jack sure as hell was. And he'd do worse to me than the cops ever would. I shuddered, then forced myself to stop thinking about what the psychopath might do to me. Even if I survived this, I was still going to have this on my conscience. Forever. It had been self-defense, but I was still responsible for the Tackler's death. Enough, I thought. One crisis at a time.

I nudged the envelope closer with my nails. Nothing yet. I set my hand on the front and instantly saw the face of the man who had bitten me. The Tackler. I yelped and snatched my hand away. Thom set down his mug and opened the white envelope. There was a letter and some thin blond threads. When I leaned in to take a closer look, I realized that it was human hair. At a guess, this was a lock of Nikki's hair. My hand hovered over them. I was afraid to touch them. What if I couldn't pick up anything from them? Or worse, what if I could?

Thom read the letter aloud. “Hi, Thom! I've got another one! Bet you know who. If you want her back unharmed, you'll have to meet my challenge. I'm going to take your pack, Thom. Don't doubt it for a second. You know how to get in touch. Don't keep me waiting. Sincerely, Jack Wolfram.” Thom tossed the letter down on the table. “Cocky fucker.”

“He's challenging you?”

“It's custom. A fight to the death and the winner takes the spoils,” Thom said starkly. “It's barbaric, but it's how things are done. It's how this thing between him and me got started. I turned him down when he challenged me at first.”

“That's why he took Becca?”

Thom nodded. “And I was too oblivious to see it at the time. He thinks he can force me into accepting.”

“Why don't you just fight him and get it over with? You can beat him, can't you?” I looked at Thom in a new light. Here I had been wracked up in guilt because of Dr. Jasper and Ralph, not wanting anyone else to suffer or worse, die, on my account. Thom, on the other hand, seemed to prefer to avenge whoever got killed because he refused to act.

Thom leveled his green gaze on me, not speaking for a minute. “To be honest, Ada. I don't know. At best, I have a fifty-fifty chance of being killed if I go up against him.”

“What about Becca and Nikki? Becca is dead and Nikki might be killed because you won't accept the challenge,” I said.

Thom slammed his fist down on the table with a crash. “Are you taking his side? Do you want me to die? Don't you dare lay Becca and Nikki on me. Jack's not playing by the rules! I don't have to accept,” Thom bellowed.

I withered a bit in the force of his anger, but I had to say it. “I am not taking his side. But I can't help but think that, if no one accepted challenges, then nothing would ever change.”

“You have no idea what a challenge is. All you've done so far is work your little party trick and gotten yourself into a blood feud with Jack. What do you know about what I face if I accept? I might *die*, Ada.”

“Jack wants to kill me, too, Thom.” I felt my skin flush with anger when he dismissed my gift. “You don't know what happens to me when I use my gift, Thom.”

“So now it's a gift?” Thom smirked.

I ignored him. “I watch things through people's eyes. I feel what they feel—their fear, their desperation, their anger. You have no idea. Do you know what I'm afraid of when I touch things, Thom? Do you want to know? I'm afraid that when I touch something, when I connect with the owner, that I might not be able to come back. I might get stuck. Worse, I'm afraid that I might lose my sanity. What do you think is worse? Owning up to your responsibilities and possibly dying? Or losing your mind trying to help someone *and* getting killed by a whacked out werewolf?” I spat. I glared at him with all the ire I was feeling. If there were any justice in the world, he would have melted on the spot.

“My father died in a challenge. Did you know that?”

“No. But who did you challenge to take over this pack?”

Blood rushed to Thom's face. “No one. My mother stepped aside after the old pack leader—the guy who killed my father—died in a car accident. She picked me to lead.”

“Is that normal?”

“What do you know about what's normal for a werewolf pack, hmm?” he asked coldly. “I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's just work on getting Nikki back. Do you think you can get anything from her hair?”

“To be honest, I don't know.” I wasn't happy with Thom. Really, really not happy. But I wasn't going to sulk and endanger the poor woman's life. “I'll try.”

“Thank you. You know I appreciate this, right?”

“I know.”

I saw a bit of Thom's old smile when he said it, but he was still full of anger and embarrassment. I had a sneaking suspicion that he was trying to placate me. Things had been said that

could not be unsaid. In spite of his kindness last night, I knew I couldn't trust him anymore. Sure, he had rescued me from Jack, but I couldn't ever be sure that he would help me if it meant that he might die. How far did his survival instinct go?

I looked down at Nikki's blond hair, but didn't touch it. At that moment, I was much more interested in what I had learned about Thom and his pack than the hair. This revelation had thrown a huge monkey wrench into the works. As far as I could determine, no one was in the right. Thom was shirking his responsibilities as a pack leader, then scrambling to clean up the mess it left. And Jack was just a psychopath. It was no longer a question of who was right and who was wrong. It was about who was less wrong. All right, Ada, time to focus.

I used the edge of my hand to scoot the hair closer to where I sat. It took some serious effort to psych myself up, but I got there at last. I laid my hand down on the hair and sucked in a breath. For a moment, I thought that it wouldn't work, that maybe my gift only worked on inanimate objects. But apparently it works on things that are dead, too.

It started with the *snick* of scissors and a gasp of surprise. Nikki. I was seeing the scene through her eyes. No doubt about it. We were surrounded by familiar faces, but they were the wrong familiar faces. I saw the Tackler. The man who had held me pinned in the back of their car. Other faces that I had seen in the fight at Steppenwolf's. And there was Jack, grinning widely but with absolutely no humor in his face. His expression was chilling, terrifying. Clearly, someone had told him what had happened to his cousin. I was a dead woman.

We tried to look past the assembled pack members, but there were so many people around us that it was hard to get a look at our surroundings. I thought I saw concrete block walls, painted white. Maybe they were keeping Nikki in the office at the bar. No windows, but no desk. I could feel cold concrete sucking the warmth out of our legs. Maybe another basement like where they had held Becca. I needed more information.

Fingers snapped underneath our nose, making us jump.

"Pay attention, Nikki dear. Jesus, Cody, how much of that stuff did you give her?" Jack asked a chubby man with a patchy beard and smudged glasses.

"Not that much, I swear. It should've worn off by now," the man said, sweating heavily.

"Well, you're the expert on this. Aren't you, Cody?"

The fat man's face flushed red at the insult and he retreated into the room, out of our sight. We took a risk and looked around the room again, trying to get a clue where we were. A hand cracked across our cheek. Jack, trying to get our attention again. We rubbed our cheek and tried to choke back

sudden tears of pain.

“That's better. Try and stay with me this time, sweetheart.” Jack said. “Now, then. If Thom is a good boy and listens to me, you'll be out of here soon. If he doesn't...” He trailed off, still grinning his creepy little grin. “Here are the rules. You just sit tight. Don't touch the door. Don't try and talk your way out. Simple, huh? C'mon, guys. We have to—”

I lost my connection and drifted for a bit before I realized that we were in a car. There were hands clamped down on our arms. Two men up front, one man on each side holding us down. Too dark to make out details. The headlights of the car made two converging tunnels of light ahead, but all we could see were the painted lines and dashes of the road. No other cars out. The forest at the edges of the freeway (was that the I-5?) were pitch dark. No signs coming up to tell me how far we were from anywhere. I felt terribly, terribly drowsy. Confused. Fuzzy. Did they give Nikki a rufie? Rohypnol? Was this what it felt like?

“Give her another hit, Cody,” said a voice I didn't recognize. “I think it's wearing off already.”

Water with something gritty and bitter in it trickled in through our lips, over my tongue. We spluttered and gagged, but someone kept pouring it into our mouth until we started to drift off again. We kept our eyes open as long as we could. I thought I saw a sign for Seattle, but that didn't help. All the signs around here had Seattle listed somewhere on them. All roads lead to Seattle. We were starting to feel distinctly giddy. We giggled.

“What's funny?” someone asked, poking us in the belly.

“Pillsbury!” we whispered, then we passed out again.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was staring up at the ceiling of Thom's cabin. The beams needed a good dusting, I decided. Thom's worried face hove into view above me and I had to force my eyes to refocus. I tried to get my arms underneath me, but I was surprised to discover that I didn't have the strength to lift myself.

“Give me a minute,” I croaked. “And something to drink.” I could still taste whatever they had drugged Nikki with on my tongue.

Thom scuttled out of view. A faucet turned on somewhere as he got me a glass of water. I got my elbows under myself and pushed up in a position that was close to, but not quite, sitting. I scooted up to a table leg and made it the rest of the way. Thom's stone flag floor was *freezing* and my butt was starting to go numb, even through the thick denim of my jeans. When I got my water, I sucked it down, swishing to get rid of the taste of what I was pretty sure was Rohypnol. I wasn't a pharmacist, but what else could it have been?

When I got a grip on myself, something occurred to me. The closer an object was to a person, the longer it had been with them or if it was actually a part of them—the more it seemed like I experienced things through their perspective. I felt what they felt and I saw what they saw. I shivered again and wrapped my arms tightly around myself, drawing my knees up and hugging them. I really had felt drugged, and I had felt her pain when Jack had slapped us—*her*. Jack had slapped her. I hadn't been anywhere near where he was keeping her. Must keep that distinct. I hadn't actually been there.

I told Thom what I had seen. Even though he was clearly disappointed, Thom covered it well. Somewhere between here and Seattle gave us nothing useful to go on.

“Give me her hair again, Thom,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“No, but what else are we going to do? This time, though, we're going to do it somewhere that I won't come to on the floor again. I've hit my head enough for a while.”

I got to my feet while Thom scooped up a handful of Nikki's hair. We trooped back into the living room and I laid down on the dark red futon. As I had done at my apartment, I pushed the coffee table—with its sharp corners—away and tucked a pillow under my head, trying to ignore the objects' histories.

“Don't let me fall to the floor, okay?” I asked.

Thom nodded and gave me the hair again. Again, I saw everything through Nikki's eyes. I was still started by the slap, but it didn't hurt as much now that I was trying to keep some distance between us. I didn't quite feel like Nikki and I were the same person, this time. I was profoundly thankful for that. But it took all the concentration that I had. I had never really worried before that performing my party trick might drive me crazy. It can't be healthy to think that you're another person, right? What if, the more I did this, the worse it got? The harder it got to keep some distance? I promised myself that I was going to do some serious research on my gift once this was all over. Assuming I got out of this alive.

At least on this attempt, I was rewarded with something new. We—she—was alone, lying on the floor in the room with white-painted walls. There was no one around. Was this before Jack and his gang turned up to give Nikki their warning or after? No matter. Time to focus. I willed Nikki to open her eyes a bit wider, but she was clearly still under the influence of the rufie. It was a struggle for her to open them at all. I looked around the room. No bulletin boards. There wasn't so much as a matchbook with Jack's Secret Hideout and an address printed on it lying on the floor. There was an old, ripped up couch in the corner. God, they couldn't even carry Nikki over to the couch? Those double-dyed

bastards.

Nikki lost her grip on consciousness once more and I was cut loose. This time, I got a little glimpse of a dark hallway. We could have been anywhere. Someone really, really big had Nikki slung over their shoulder and was carrying her like a sack of potatoes. Nothing useful again, and the impressions only lasted a few seconds before Nikki faded out again.

This time, I came to of my own volition. I had the feeling that I wasn't going to get anything more from this bit of hair no matter how hard I tried. I would just end up in the car again, or maybe in Lupe's bar where Jack originally slipped Nikki the rufie. Any further back than that and I would be spying on Nikki's personal life. The thought of looking over Nikki's shoulders (or through her eyes) beyond that point made me feel a little dirty, like I was reading her diary or something equally invasive. I relaxed my grip on the blond hairs and sat up against the pillows.

"Anything?" Thom said softly. That's right, Thom, keep the little psychic happy so she'll keep performing for you.

"Not really. Just the room again. Nothing to tell me where they're keeping her. I'm sorry, Thom. I really am."

"Well, it's not like you can do anything else, is there?" Thom said.

He probably didn't mean it the way it sounded, but the words hit me as hard as Jack's hand had hit Nikki. I had done my best, wasn't that enough? I should feel at least obligated to try and help Thom, after all, he and his pack had rescued me from the bar. But, surprisingly enough, I didn't want to go out of my way to help him anymore. At heart, this man was a coward. His inaction had led to his sister's death and the kidnapping of a pack member. Nope, I didn't feel anything for this man except exasperation and, maybe, pity. I'd help, but I needed to start looking out for my own skin.

"No, there *isn't* anything else that I can do. But I tried, all right?" I said testily. "I'm lucky I didn't knock myself out on your floor before. I could have gotten a concussion."

"Ada..." Thom began, but I wasn't listening.

"I want to go home," I said steadily.

"Too dangerous." Thom's voice was flat, emotionless. I wasn't going to give him a chance to talk himself out of trouble.

"Just to pick up some more clothes. I left everything at the motel. Did you grab my backpack?"

"No, I forgot it. But can't you just borrow more clothes?"

"I don't want to see somebody's girlfriend again," I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. I failed. "And I don't want to wear any more of your clothes. Take me home, Thom."

“Fine. I’ll drive you.”

“If you’re busy, you can send someone else,” I offered.

“No, I’ll drive you. It’s fine.”

“I’ll still help you, if I can. Nikki doesn’t deserve this.”

A little more hemming and hawing on the shaggy haired werewolf’s part and we were out the door and headed back down the trail. Thom led me to his car and we started the long drive back to Augusta. We didn’t speak the entire way. I guess that we were too wrapped up in thinking about what was going to happen next to try and make up. That was my theory anyway. Or maybe we just didn’t know how to act around one another after this morning’s argument. I hadn’t had many friends, or even acquaintances. I spent too much time worrying about hiding my little gift that my relationships didn’t last long. So I didn’t really know the post-fight protocol. We had gone and hurt each other’s feelings irreparably. And I had learned that Thom had done things that were, in my book of personal ethics, unforgivable. I glanced over at him a couple of times during that drive, but his face was closed to me. Thom was thinking and planning so hard that you’d think smoke would start to pour out of his ears like in the old Looney Tunes cartoons. Or was it Tex Avery? I couldn’t remember.