

Provenance

III

The last few hours of the day dragged on. I only managed to get a few more books into the catalog before I decided that it was close enough to five for me to stop. Julia wished me a good evening, and I mumbled something back as I shrugged my jacket on. As I walked home, I kept checking over my shoulder, as if Thom was going to jump out from behind a tree and...do what? Thom had seemed like a genuinely nice guy, if a little confusing and unnaturally persistent. But Jasper had talked about him like he was some kind of thug. And there was the fact that Thom was crazy enough to believe what I told him about the card. The man had just as many strikes against him as he had points in his favor.

I made it home without spotting Thom and I started to relax a bit. Once Jasper passed on that newspaper article, Thom would be out of our lives. I would do my best to avoid Jasper in the future and pretend that none of this had ever happened. Good plan, I thought as I pushed open my dark faux oak door.

Which, of course, is why Thom knocked on the door five minutes after I arrived. I had jinxed myself and the karma gods were all having a good laugh at my expense. Damn it. Thom held a black hoodie out to me and wordlessly asked me to take a look at it.

“Where did this come from?”

“I found it,” he growled. He was still holding out the hoodie, but I didn't take it. Thom pushed his way in. “Why are you making this so hard?” he asked.

“I'm not trying to make it hard. I want to know what's going on. Why don't you take this to the cops? If Becca is dead—”

“She is dead,” Thom said baldly. “I was too late. I saw the notice.”

“I'm sorry, Thom. I really am.” I realized too late that I had given the would-be revenger an opening.

“So help me find the bastard who's responsible, Ada. Look at this. Work your magic on it. It belonged to my sister.”

“Where did you find it?” I asked. I backed down the short hallway and into the living room. After a moment of deliberation, I headed for the couch. I was going to cave in, I just knew it, and I didn't want to bounce my head off of the floorboards if I passed out again.

“Right outside Woodland Park Zoo, in Seattle. It was near where her body was found, by the wolf enclosure.” His mouth twisted as he said the words. “The police didn't find it.”

“How did you find it then?”

Thom shrugged. “Followed my nose.”

“That's the second time I've heard that. What does it mean?”

“It's not important. You're stalling, aren't you, Ada?”

“Yes.” I admitted. “Give me a minute to get settled.” I sat down on the couch and tried to get comfortable, pushing a couple of bright red pillows behind my head. I shoved the coffee table away with my feet. I had a really bad feeling about this. Wouldn't you? “All right. I'm ready.”

Thom laid the black knit on my lap and sat down on the table, watching me intently. Sucking in a fortifying breath, I laid my hands on the hoodie and braced myself. First, there was a dizzying montage of trees and branches flying past as the hoodie was thrown through the air. A pair of hands...with claws? No, that couldn't be right. A pair of hands were using the hoodie to wipe off a dark, thick liquid. Blood? The hands were rough and covered with tangles of wiry red hair, with long and dirty fingernails. Curly copper hair hung to his shoulders, and he had soft blue eyes. If I were a different kind of girl, I would have said they were dreamy. The man was dressed in dirty jeans, and his chest was bare. More the dark liquid was spattered on his chest, drying on the bright, wiry hairs. It was blood, I decided.

There was a woman lying on the ground a few feet away. She had worn the hoodie before the blue-eyed man had taken it from her body. Becca. Her blond hair had leaves and twigs tangled up in the lank strands, and her clear green eyes had gone cloudy in death. Her throat was a red mess, as if an animal had gotten to her and attacked. I didn't even want to speculate what kind of animal it had been.

I saw, in reverse, the chase through the woods that surrounded the zoo. Becca ran gracefully, swiftly. She leapt over bushes and fallen trees like a deer. I thought she was going to make it, and get away. But then she turned to look over her shoulder, crashed into a tree, and went sprawling. She lost her rhythm and started bouncing and ricocheting off of tree trunks and stumbling on rocks that jutted up out of the moss and decaying leaves. Her paranoia was starting to rub off on me, and I imagined that there was more than one person chasing her. I thought that I saw men out of the corners of my eyes, running between the pines and aspens and birches.

We were lost. We had no idea where we were going. We didn't dare to hope that someone would find us and stop the hunt. We saw nowhere to hide, nowhere that would be safe. Our arms hurt from hitting trees, and we knew that our face was covered in scratches. Terror and adrenaline were

flooding our veins, making it hard to think and plan. We couldn't keep this pace up for long. We were going to make a mistake. And then it would be all over.

The next thing I knew, Thom was prying my hands away from the black, bloody material of the hoodie. I was lying on my couch. Safe. At home. There was no one chasing me. I felt like I really had been running, instead of lying down. My lungs burned as I tried to get more oxygen into my system. Pressing a couple of fingers into my neck revealed that my heart was pounding like a sprinter's. The muscles of my upper arms were sore and I could feel phantom bruises. I resisted the urge to push up my sleeves and check.

“What the hell just happened to me?” I gasped. When I looked at them, I could see dried flakes of blood on my hands, transferred from the hoodie. I fastidiously brushed them off.

Thom was leaning over me. He looked worried, and I wondered briefly what this latest episode had looked like from the outside. This little adventure had been like nothing I had ever experienced. I had never relived a memory like that. It was like Becca and I had been the same person for a little while, and that I was the one who was being chased through the woods. Whenever I had touched something with a history before, I only saw images, flashes. I had always been a detached observer. But then, I had never held something that had belonged to a murder victim before.

Thom's shaggy head was bent, and his shoulders were slumped. He was the picture of grief. “She wore this all the time. It was her favorite,” he whispered.

That's when I punched him. With as much strength as I could muster, I hit him in the jaw, making his head rock back and his teeth clack painfully together.

“What did you do that for?” he yelled, jumping to his feet.

“Jesus Christ, why didn't you tell me that before I touched it?”

“Tell you what?” I must have hit him harder than I thought. A thin line of blood trickled down his chin from where his lip had split against his sharp white teeth.

Sitting up, I knocked the hoodie to the floor. “I am never going to do this again. You couldn't pay me enough.”

“What didn't I tell you, Ada? Why did you hit me?”

“I'm guessing that was her favorite jacket?”

“Yes.”

“She wore it all the time?”

“Yes. So?” Thom looked bewildered. Gently, he scooped the hoodie up and started to fold it.

“You have no idea what just happened do you?”

“Neither do you,” he retorted. “Why don't you tell me instead of being bitchy about it?”

“Whatever I see gets, sort of, intensified when there's a lot of emotion involved.”

“I don't understand. You knew that she wore it when she died.”

I sighed. “What I mean is that, because she wore this all the time—” I gestured “—it was like I connected with her. When I touched it, it felt like we were both being chased.”

“She was chased? Tell me what happened,” Thom ordered. His hands twitched as if to grab mine, but I pulled away from him.

“If I do, will you promise to leave me alone?”

“Yes,” he said quickly.

“Becca was chased through the woods near the zoo by a guy with red hair—”

“Blue eyes?”

I nodded.

“That was Jack.” I could tell that he was resisting the urge to add some creative epithet to the name.

“Who?”

“Jack. Her *boyfriend*,” he snarled.

“I didn't actually see *it* happen, you know. I just saw the chase and the guy's face.”

“Was anyone else there?”

“I don't think so. It was a little confusing.”

“It's really important. Did you see anyone else there?”

“I thought I saw other men in the woods, but I could just be imagining it,” I admitted. “It was very, very intense.”

“Do you get anything when you touch people?” he asked quietly.

“No.” My heart and breathing were finally getting back to their normal rates. I was still tense, but at least I no longer felt like I was going to pass out.

Thom set aside the hoodie and sat down next to me on the couch. He didn't look at me, and I felt him looking around at the bookshelves and pictures on the walls. At least I didn't have dirty laundry lying around or dishes on the coffee table. Slowly, Thom reached out and took my hand. The long, pale fingers curled around my own, warming them. Still not speaking, he raised my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles.

“Thank you,” he said at last. “You'll never know how much I appreciate this.”

I pulled my hand out of his grip. “Are you going to keep your promise?”

Thom flashed me a wolfish glance. “Sure.”

“I’d like you to go now.”