

## *Provenance*

### V

Thom parked neatly at the curb in front of my apartment and followed me up the stairs to the door.

“I'm going to call in a couple of guys to keep an eye on you, too. Can I borrow your phone?”

“Sure.”

I had no objections. I knew full well what I was up against, and I wanted all the help I could get.

The warm air inside felt good. I felt hopeful that my goosebumps would eventually go away. Someday. I walked over to where my coat hung draped over a chair and fished my cell phone out of the pocket. I held it out, and Thom grabbed it. Flipping it open, he dialed a number from memory. I left him to it, and wandered into the kitchen. After all the excitement and worry, I was finally starting to feel hungry. I stuck my head into the freezer and pulled out a couple of salmon steaks that I'd been saving. They were fast and I was hungry. I bet Thom was, too. Would Miss Post say that I owed Thom dinner for saving my life? And, if so, what do you feed a werewolf? Shrugging, I threw the fish into the oven to bake, and I started some water boiling for rice.

I leaned back against the counter and tried to take stock. But every time I tried to come up with any kind of plan, it would collapse. No police. Jasper's got some form of testosterone poisoning, so no help there. Thom was after revenge. And Jack was probably going to kill me. I rubbed my hands against my arms, feeling cold again. I gave up trying to plan and poured myself a coke.

Thom stuck his long nose around the corner. “Is there enough for me?” he asked.

“I hope so.”

“Salmon?”

“You're the one with the magic nose,” I pointed out.

Thom smiled and came into the kitchen. He held my phone out to me and I set it on the counter.

“I've got some people coming in to watch out for you. Ralph and Jeannie. Married couple. They're good people. They'll be here as soon as they can.”

“Ralph the werewolf?”

“Yup. He's a nice guy. Little scary looking, but nice.”

“I'm sure he is, but Ralph?”

“What's wrong with Ralph?”

“I don't know, I was expecting something a little less, I don't know, ordinary.”

“Sorry to disappoint. Besides, it's the vampires that have the really weird names,” he said. I spat coke across the room, and Thom started laughing. “I was kidding,” he said quickly.

I punched him in the arm, nearly bruising my knuckles. The man was a brick wall. “There are vampires? What else is out there?”

“Well, I've never actually seen one, but it stands to reason. If people like me exist, why not a vampire?”

“God,” I breathed.

“Him, too, probably,” Thom said. “Your water is boiling.”

I glared at the wolf and dumped some rice into the water. I gave it a quick stir, then slapped a lid on it and pushed it off the heat. I peeked at the fish to check its progress. Yes, I was stalling, but my mind had just been blown. I wasn't sure how much more of these revelations I could take.

I changed the subject. “Do you think Jasper is going to be all right?”

“I really, really hope so. He's a good guy when he's not being an idiot. And he really has been a big help. I called Ed—yes, his name is Ed, get over it—and his brother and told them to get over there as fast as they could. Our town, Canaan, isn't that far away. Should be about an hour, hour and a half, before they arrive.”

“So we just have to hope that he'll be all right until then?” I wasn't sure I was happy about that.

“You heard the man, didn't you? He doesn't want me around. Plus, Jack's already come after you. I'm more worried that he'll take another shot at you than that he'll go after Jasper.”

“There's a comforting thought,” I said.

We fell silent. Thom seemed to have sunk in thought. I watched the fish bake and threw a couple of tablespoons of butter into the steaming rice. I was dithering again, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I got a couple of plates down and handed them to Thom.

“Set the table, please?”

Thom grunted and pushed off the counter. I handed him a couple of forks and sent him out of the room. When the fish was cooked through, I pulled it out and put it on my good plate, the big one with the red flowers and vines on it. I dumped the rice into a nice wooden bowl and stuck a serving spoon in it. What was I doing? This was not a date. But I left the food as it was and brought it out to the table. I was going to have to wash these dishes now, anyway. Might as well use them.

We ate in silence. I could tell that Thom was making an effort not to gobble his food. It really had been a long day for him. I picked at my fish for a while before I gave up and pushed it across to

him. He forked it neatly and dumped it on top of his plate.

“Thanks for making dinner,” he said between mouthfuls of salmon and rice.

“No problem. Thanks for saving my life,” I replied.

“You're welcome.”

Emily Post would have been proud of us. My mouth quirked in a smile at the thought of her writing a book of manners for the supernatural community. I could just picture it: When your life had been saved by a werewolf, be sure to thank him or her with a nice meaty meal. A gift of some kind would not be unwelcome. The thoughts amused me while I watched Thom eat. His shaggy head was bent low over his plate, hair dry at last. His wide shoulders were hunched as he shoveled food into his mouth. He really was wolfing it down. I snorted involuntarily.

Thom looked up at me, fork paused between his plate and his face. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

I smiled. “I just thought that you were, uh, really enjoying your dinner.”

“No, you weren't. You were thinking that I was wolfing it down. I've heard that one before.”

“Mind reader, huh?”

“No, just observant.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn't mean to insult you.”

“Don't worry about it,” he said around another mouthful. “This is good, by the way.”

“You're welcome.” I paused. “Are you really going to kill Jack's pack?”

“Yes. Why? Do you think I should let them live, after what they did?” He stared at me, deep anger suddenly burning in his eyes, turning the green almost black.

“No, I guess don't.” But that didn't really mean that I wanted them to die, right?

“Do you think I should go to the police? Because let me tell you, there's no way in hell that the police can deal with this crew. I mean, cops are just keeping up with the *human* criminal. They aren't equipped to deal with people like Jack.”

“You mean with werewolves.”

“I mean werewolves. Do you really think that you could even convince a cop that werewolves exist?”

“I guess not,” I conceded.

Thom set down his fork and grasped my hand. He squeezed just enough to let me know he meant it and then let go. “The police are not prepared to deal with people like us.”

“Werewolves,” I repeated.

“You still don't believe do you? Not really,” Thom asked. “Do you need to see my arm again?” He reached for the cuff of his sweatshirt.

“No!”

“Then believe me when I tell you that, if we went to the police, we'd just get them killed. Horribly.” Thom shoved a big bite of fish into his mouth and chewed determinedly.

“What about silver bullets?” I asked.

“What about them?”

“Do they work?”

“Yes, they work. Do you have some?”

“No.”

“Do you know where to get any?”

“No, and I don't own a gun.”

“Then why are you asking?”

“No knowledge is ever wasted.”

Thom snorted and bits of rice flew across the table. The werewolf started chuckling, then laughing. I looked at the specks of rice, feeling embarrassed and annoyed.

“Did they teach you that in school?” he asked at last. “God,” he said, wiping his eyes. He started to scoop up the rice.

“Well, it's true,” I said. “Now that I know I'm living in a world with werewolves in it, I want to know how you defend myself.”

Thom gave me a level look. “You mean, you want to know how to kill werewolves.”

“I guess.”

“Do you want to kill me?”

“No, of course not,” I said, surprised.

“Well, that's something,” he said. “Aside from the meal, I was starting to think that you hated me. For bringing all this into your life.”

“I don't hate you.”

“But you don't like me.”

“I wouldn't say that either,” I admitted. “You're growing on me. Like a fungus.”

Thom laughed again, and polished off his dinner. He stacked up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. I heard the stoneware hit the sink with a dull rattle. Then I heard water running and

Thom asked where the soap was. I followed him into the kitchen and found the dish soap for him. We washed up together, falling into a rhythm. Dip, scrub, dry, stack. By unspoken agreement, we ended up on the couch and watched the late show to wait for the last ounces of adrenaline to work their way out of our systems.

We didn't talk again.

I don't know when I fell asleep. One minute I was awake and watching Letterman tease his guest, and the next I was completely out. The sun hadn't yet come up when I woke. I was in my own bed. I reached out, and found a still warm dip in my bed.

Thom was gone. Again.