

Provenance

VI

Ralph and Jeannie introduced themselves early the next morning, but after that I didn't see hide nor hair of them. I didn't worry too much. I knew they were there, and they both looked capable. Thom had mentioned that Ralph was scary looking, but I hadn't imagined the sheer size of the man. Ralph was *huge*. And bald. And tattooed almost everywhere. He could have been the original Hell's Angel, battered and looking like he could beat the crap out of anyone. Jeannie was his wife, and she looked just as tough, but in a thin, whipcord way. Ralph would just beat you up, but Jeannie looked like she would be creative about it. She gave me the willies.

I made it through Saturday and Sunday, just hanging around the apartment. I had errands, but they could wait. I had toilet paper and food. The bills were paid. I didn't have any overdue books or movies. I didn't want to go out more than I had to, even with my furry guardian angels. I didn't want to tempt fate.

On Monday morning, I had to work up the courage to go to work. I was ready to go, showered, dressed, lunch packed. But I just sat on the couch with my backpack between my knees, staring at the clock. The minutes were ticking past, but I couldn't make myself get up and head out. Loud knocking on the door almost made me jump out of my skin. I peered through the spy hole and spotted Jeannie's tough face and spiky purple hair. I cracked open the door.

"You going to work?" she asked. Her voice sounded as though she smoked ten packs a day. Rough, low, and dry. She was more than a match for her mountain of a husband.

"Yes," I said.

"You better get going then. Aren't you gonna be late?"

I nodded.

"Don't worry about Jack." Jeannie spat his name like it was the filthiest word in her vocabulary. "We won't let him touch you. We'll be with you every step of the way. Ain't that right, Ralph?"

Ralph appeared out of the man-sized rhododendron bushes and orange-leaved birches that lined the boundary between this lot and the next. He might be a giant, but the man (or should I call him a wolf?) moved without so much as making the dead leaves crackle. His scraggly beard had leaves stuck in it and Jeannie made a sound when she saw him. Heat rose off the top of his bald head in waves.

"You look like a barbarian," she said.

Ralph shrugged and looked down at me. “Ready?” he asked.

I nodded again and we headed down towards the university. We made the fifteen minute walk in peace. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but I felt terribly conspicuous as I walked with my two bodyguards. I felt like I was leading a biker parade with them trailing after me. I knew I wouldn't have been able to sleep at all this weekend if they hadn't been watching over me. I was grateful to Thom for sending them.

When I rounded the last corner, my heart sank in a sudden flood of adrenaline and fear. Two police cars and an ambulance were parked in front of the library. Their lights were flashing urgently, and I could see students pausing to stare and wonder. I hitched my backpack higher up on my shoulders and hurried towards the library. When we hit the doors, I turned to face my bodyguards.

“I think I'll be okay in the library. There's people all over the place, and I don't think Jack would try anything.” If they came in with me, I had no idea what I would say to people to explain why I was being shadowed by two people who wouldn't have looked out of place on Court TV. Behind the defendant's table. In orange jumpsuits.

Ralph looked concerned. It was a curious expression on a man who could crush us ordinary mortals without breaking a sweat. “We're supposed to keep an eye on you. Thom said.”

“Can't you just hang around outside, like you did this weekend?”

“But we can't see you through the windows here,” he said.

“You could see me through the windows?”

Jeannie jumped up and smacked Ralph on the back of the head. “Only a little,” he said. “And not in the bathroom. We just looked in every now and then to make sure that everything was okay.”

Jeannie looked like she was going to punch him. I turned on my heel and marched into the building. Wisely, the werewolves didn't follow me. When I got past the security gates, I started looking for a clump of librarians. I had to find out why the police were here and gossiping librarians were my best bet for information. Make a note, kids.

I found Julia and a couple of the reference librarians standing by the circulation desk. Audrey and Jan, the head of Special Collections, had horrified looks on their faces. They were pale and silent in the small, talkative crowd. The other librarians were chatting animatedly to each other, but those two weren't responding much, even to direct questions. Julia waved me over.

“Did you just get in?” she asked. She was so eager that I knew the news was going to spill out of her mouth any second.

I gave her an outlet. “Yeah, I did. What's going on? What's with the police and the ambulance?”

Julia jerked her chin in Jan's direction. "When Jan came in, she found Bruce—Dr. Jasper—*dead*. In the stacks. Down in the archives." She paused to take in my reaction. "It was awful! She called the cops. They're down there now, trying to find out what happened to the poor, poor man. The Director says that we're going to be closed today. Maybe tomorrow, too."

I nodded, feeling sick. I knew I had gone pale and I really wanted to sit down. I headed over to the new book area and sank into one of the uncomfortable, mass produced chairs. The gray upholstery was rough under my fingertips as I gripped the seat before I could stop myself. Flashes of jeans and trousers and backpacks and jackets and skirts. Nothing horrible, for a change. I couldn't think of any words strong enough to express how guilty and shocked I felt. My heart might explode with emotion. Julia came over and pulled another chair over so that she could sit next to me.

"They think he was murdered," she said, as if I hadn't just walked off on her. "Jan said that there was blood everywhere. She's sure that someone killed him. It was no accident, she said."

I made a noise. A sob, probably. Julia patted my shoulder roughly, as if she had only seen it done on TV and didn't understand how the whole comforting thing worked.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you knew him," Julia said.

"I just talked to him on Friday," I whispered.

Julia nodded, putting on a sympathetic face. "I'm sorry, Ada."

"So he was murdered?" I prompted. Julia would tell me everything she knew if I let her.

Julia nodded, even more vigorously this time. "Yeah, she said they had a terrible mess to clean up down there."

"Did he suffer?" I asked. God, I hope not, I thought. Having met Jack, however briefly, I didn't think that a quiet death was very likely. I didn't need the DSM-IV to tell me that there was something pathological about Jack and his creepy blue eyes. How did I know it was Jack? I didn't need to be Miss Marple to figure it out. "When did it happen?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard much about the...you know, *event*. But I think the cops said that I must have happened sometime this morning. Jan said that Dr. Jasper—Bruce—usually came in before anyone else and left late. She thinks that whoever did it must have followed him in when he got here."

"God," I breathed.

The elevator doors across from the circulation desk slid open with a thump, and a gurney rolled out. Two EMTs and three cops followed it. There were touches of dark brown blood on the sheet that covered Dr. Jasper, just where his face and throat would be. Fucking animals, I thought. Anger rushed through me, displacing my horror and sadness. I wanted to find Jack, right now, and tear him apart like

he had done to the old librarian. Then I remembered the feeling of Jack's long fingers squeezing the back of my neck and the fight went right out of me, leaving as quickly as it had come. I sagged back into the chair, suddenly tired.

The EMTs pushed Dr. Jasper out of the main library doors and down the concrete walkway to their ambulance. The cops walked towards the librarians at the desk, pulling out their notebooks and pens. They pulled Jan away from the group first. Another officer pulled Audrey away. Julia wandered back over to the circ desk, hoping to catch more news. I stayed where I was, rooted to the cheap gray chair. I jumped when my boss, Glenn, popped up by my elbow.

“Sorry, Ada. Are you okay?” he asked gently. His eyebrows were raised in concern.

I smiled weakly. “Sure, I'll be okay. It's just a shock. I mean, nothing like this has ever happened before, has it?”

Glenn shook his head. “No.” He paused, looking over at the crowd of police and librarians. “Listen, I just talked to Sue. She says that once the police are done, we're going to shut down the library for today for sure. Depending on what the police say, we may be closed down a couple more days.”

“You'll let me know when we're open again, right?”

“Yes. Hey, why don't you take off now? You just got here, so you...” He trailed off.

“Didn't see anything?” I suggested, feeling sick all over again.

“Uh, yeah. Why don't you go home? You don't look so good.”

I'll just bet I didn't. I probably looked like death on toast. Small wonder, considering my emotional state. Not to mention my complicity in all this. “Okay. I'll see you tomorrow. Or in a couple of days. Whenever we open back up. Let me know, okay?”

It took a lot of effort, but I managed to get out of the chair. The police were busy interviewing Jan and Audrey, and they didn't notice me leave. Outside, I saw the EMTs shut the rear doors of the white ambulance. One of them walked to the cabin and hauled himself into the driver's seat. The lights winked off. There were no sirens. No need to hurry on this one. The ambulance pulled away after a few minutes and disappeared around the corner.

I jumped for the second time that morning when Jeannie and Ralph materialized at my elbows. One more thing for the mental list: learn to pay more attention to my surroundings so that people don't sneak up on me anymore. At least the werewolves didn't try to touch me. I know that I would have screamed.

“Was that Bruce?” Jeannie asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Did they find anyone else?” I could hear her sniffing the air.

“Anyone else?” I said.

“Yeah, any other bodies,” she clarified.

“No. At least, I didn't hear that they found anyone else. Why?”

“Ed and Kyle were supposed to be watching him,” she said. Ralph growled, low in his throat.

“You smell anything, Ralph?”

The huge, tattooed man stuck his nose in the air, nostrils flaring widely. “This way,” he said, taking off for the rear of the library.

Behind the four story library, there was a small decorative wooded area. It had started out decades ago as a project by the agriculture students, but I had no idea who tended it now. Probably no one, since it was wildly overgrown. The bushes and trees needed pruning. The path had shrunk as grasses and weeds broken down the flagstones. It was only a few feet wide now. Ralph inhaled mightily again, and took off down the walkway. I tried to follow, but Jeannie caught my arm, stopping me dead in my tracks without flexing a muscle.

“If Ralph smells blood, I can just about guarantee that you don't want to see what he finds,” she said. Her nostrils were open wide, too, as she tried to catch whatever Ralph was tracking.

I heard the gigantic werewolf wade into the brush, snapping branches left and right. Even now and then, Ralph would pause and reorient his nose. He called to Jeannie when he located the source of the blood scent.

“Stay put,” she ordered, then headed down the path after her husband.

Like hell, I'm staying put, I thought, and followed her.

Ralph had found them underneath an ancient pink-flowered rhododendron. Their throats were gone, just gone. Only an anatomist would be able to put the brothers' necks back together again. They were covered in scratches and bite marks—human and animal. It looked like they hadn't had a chance. They must have been ambushed. Ralph threw back his head and Jeannie reached up quickly to clamp a hand over his mouth, muffling the howl that he wanted to let loose. With her other hand, she dug a black cell phone out of the pocket of her patched denim jacket. She flipped it open and dialed a number with her thumb.

“Thom? You better get over to the university library,” she began. “Yeah, they're gone. *Someone* got to them. I don't see that our guys took anyone with them, but those fucking mongrels may have taken the bodies.” Jeannie glanced over at me. “Yeah, she's fine. Looking right at her. You want us to

wait here? We're right behind the library.” Jeannie grunted at whatever Thom had said and flipped phone closed.

“I know you wanted to go right home, Ada, but Thom wants us to wait here.” I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off. “We're not going to split up. Not after this.” She looked up at Ralph. “If I take my hand away, are you going to howl?” she asked him.

Ralph shook his head, and Jeannie removed her hand. Ralph's shoulders were hunched, as though someone had hit him across the back with a two by four. His vitality had just leaked out of him. After a minute, he stood up from where he knelt by the bodies. Jeannie wrapped her wiry arms around his middle and hugged him tightly. He hugged her back, and dropped a soft kiss on her spiky head. I looked away, embarrassed. I felt responsible for what had happened, even though I hadn't been close to either of the scenes. If only I had tried harder to warn Dr. Jasper. If only I had stayed with him in spite of his dismissal. If only, if only. I forced myself to stop that line of thought. What could I do, here and now, that would change anything?

Nothing, I answered myself. Not a thing.

Ralph and Jeannie didn't make me jump when they walked back to me. Ralph laid a heavy arm over my shoulder, and gave me a little hug.

“Did you know them?” I asked, looking up into his broad bearded face. The dead leaves were gone, but he didn't look like any less of a barbarian. A makeover and a three piece suit couldn't make him look like less of a barbarian. I guess some people are always going to look like Visigoths no matter how far away from the Dark Ages we were.

“Yeah, we were friends for a long time. We were pups together,” he said. Jeannie leaned her head against his chest, and he hugged her with his other arm.

I slid out from under the arm he had draped around me. It didn't feel right. I felt like an intruder on their grief. Looking at the pair of werewolves and their sorrow, I understood why Thom had used the word family. They weren't just a pack. They were as close to each other as any flesh and blood family. I spotted a stone bench a few feet behind us and I moved to sit down on it. The cold concrete cut right through my gray slacks, and I felt my thighs start to go numb. I shrugged out of my backpack and set it on the ground. My coat did its best to keep the chill off, but it wasn't much of a match for the breeze that was starting to pick up. I shoved my hands deep into my coat pockets and hunched over against the wind to wait for Thom.

Thom must have been staying someplace near by, because he met us in the wood a scant ten minutes after Jeannie made her call. He didn't ask any questions when he arrived, just followed Ralph

as the large man made for the rhododendron bush again. They knelt in the soggy leaves and looked at Ed and Kyle.

“This morning?” Thom asked at last.

Ralph nodded.

“You guys call anyone?”

“Just you,” Jeannie answered.

“We have to call the police,” Thom said.

“But—” Jeannie started.

Thom cut her off. “We're not in Canaan. We're not in our territory. We have to call the cops.”

“But, Thom, they're pack,” Jeannie said, looking aghast. “We take care of our own.”

“We can't move them now. Too risky. Besides, what do you think the police will do if they find out about this? And that we *didn't* tell them about it? This is too big to handle by ourselves, now,” Thom pulled out his phone, walked a little ways away, and made the call. When he hung up at last, he came back to us.

“When asked, we came when Ada called us. We're her friends and she called us to walk her home, since she was really upset about what happened at the library. Any questions? No? Good. We're going to sit tight until the cops get here.” His voice was staccato, the words coming out like bullets. He was absolutely furious. It was written in every tense line of his body. Jack had gotten to him again, and killed his guys. Jeannie didn't look very happy about this either, and Ralph had his worried face on again.

Thom took my hand and led me back to the bench. Ralph and Jeannie fell in behind us. Thom asked me what I knew about Jasper, and I told him what Julia had volunteered. He absorbed the information without reaction. I knew that if Jack were standing in front of him right now, nothing would stop Thom from killing the man.

“What can I do?” I asked, at last. We had only minutes before the police would show, if that.

Thom squeezed my hand. “We know who did it. I just don't know where they are.”

“Maybe they left something behind? Something that I could use to get a fix on them?” I volunteered. At this moment, I wasn't afraid to use my knack. Anything—not matter how terrifying it might be—was better than just sitting there helpless and useless.

“Ralph! Jeannie!” Thom barked. The big man lifted his head, like a dog coming to attention when its master called. Jeannie's eyes locked on to Thom's face. The sudden determination in her eyes was frightening. “I need you guys to sniff out anything Jack's pack members left behind. We don't have

long,” he added.

The pair nodded and headed for the scene. Thom gave my hand a last squeeze and put his own nose to work. They cast their heads back and forth, inhaling scents at every step. It was absolutely eerie to watch humans use their noses the way the rest of use used our eyes. The werewolves' sharp noses, I knew, would tell the story more completely than the broken branches and other visual evidence did. I saw Jeannie grab something from under a bush just as I heard sirens. She sidled over to me. Ralph and Thom put some important distance between themselves and the bushes. We were inundated with police within seconds, it seemed. Three patrol cars. Six officers in uniform. I glanced over at Jeannie. Her hands were in her pockets and she had plastered an innocent but concerned face on. After a brief conference, one of the cops, a rangy man with gray hair and a bushy gray mustache, took the lead.

“Thom Vilkas?” The man mangled the last name. His sharp eyes zeroed in on Ralph. But then, Ralph would have looked suspicious anywhere.

Thom took a step forward. “That's me.”

“Let's see what we have here,” the tall officer said.

Thom led him to where Ralph had found Ed and Kyle. I was impressed with his composure as he answered the officer's questions and told him our story. Before long, the remaining cops separated us and started interviewing us. I ended up talking to a short, round woman with mounds of brown curls spilling out from under her brimmed hat. She took a matronly attitude with me, and I appreciated it. I would have cracked like *crème brûlée* if anyone had questioned me too hard. My nerves were on edge, and I didn't know what I would have said if the cop, Officer Miller, had started poking at the story Thom had given us. I just wanted to go home and hide.

Eventually, the police turned Jeannie, Thom, and I loose. We watched Ralph being cautiously grilled. I willed him to stick to the story and not slip up. On my left, Jeannie started to gnaw on her nails, watching her husband trying not to inadvertently incriminate himself. She didn't seem to notice what she was doing until I pulled her hand away from her mouth.

“It's going to be okay. We haven't done anything wrong,” I said. She nodded unhappily, staring at her husband.

The EMTs finally arrived and took the bodies away. Draped in their white sheets, the two brothers looked just like Dr. Jasper's body and I quailed at the thought of the old librarian. I had a wild thought that he was going to haunt me and I had a very hard time getting rid of the thought. I couldn't just dismiss it as pure wild fantasy any more. Not after learning that there were werewolves running around in the world. If there were people who could do what Jasper and I could do and if there were

werewolves, why couldn't there be ghosts? I shivered. Thom must have felt me move, because he wrapped his long left arm around me and tucked my head gently into his chest, ignoring the history I picked up from his jacket.

I inhaled his smell deeply, trying to center myself. He smelled like deodorant and store-brand shampoo and, ever so faintly, of dog. No, I was wrong, it was a wilder smell than a dog. A wolf. I put my arm around him and clung for a moment before pushing him away. If they could stand on their own two feet, so could I. I may not have been a wolf, but I abilities. I wasn't totally helpless. I had a gift. A knack. I would help Thom and his pack hunt down Jack and kill him.

I know that it was just a week ago that I was trying to convince Thom that this was all a matter for the police, that he couldn't just kill people to satisfy his need for vengeance.

I had learned a lot in the last week.