

## *Provenance*

### VII

Back at my apartment, I hurriedly took my packed lunch and lunch time reading out of my backpack. I kept the essentials: wallet, cell phone, keys. I tossed the pack on to the bed, almost hitting Thom as he walked into my bedroom.

"I'm still not convinced that this is necessary. I mean, I have Ralph and Jeannie here with me," I said for the dozenth time.

Thom scrubbed a hand through his black hair, making it stick up all over his scalp. "Do I really need to explain this again? Jack knows where you live. He and his bully boys killed two of my friends this morning, plus Bruce. Do you really want to stay here?"

I grabbed a pair of jeans from my dresser and turned to face the tall wolf. "I can't really afford a motel, Thom."

"I already said that I would take care of it," he said. There was an edge in his voice that let me know that he was starting to lose patience with me. I was making his life difficult, and he wasn't happy about it. His tone told me that I need to fall into line.

"You shouldn't have to take care of me," I said, stuffing the jeans into the backpack. I had folded them up as tightly as I could, but they still took up an awful lot of room. This should all be over in a few days. If it didn't...No, I didn't want to think about that.

"And since I'm the one who got you into this situation I told you that I would take care of you until it was over," he said. Thom leaned against the door jamb and cracked a weary smile. "At least this way I don't have to pay you a consultant's fee."

I gave him a small smile of my own. "How would you tell your accountant about this?"

Thom's smile widened before it faded from his face. "I would pay you for your help anyway."

I started at Thom for a minute before I answered. "I'm not doing this for money." I paused. "I feel responsible for what happened to Dr. Jasper, and I want to help in any way I can."

"Fair enough," Thom said. "Do you want some help with this?" He gestured at the piles of unfolded t-shirts and lone shoes and socks.

"No, I want you to leave so that I can pack my underwear."

Thom gave me a frankly wolfish smile, then wandered back towards the living room. I packed in silence, taking enough clothes for a couple of days. Again, I had to fight down the thought of what

might happen if this business dragged on. I set three pairs of socks tumbling into the bag and picked a couple of t-shirts that I was pretty sure wouldn't wrinkle and rolled them up tightly. I just needed shampoo and toothpaste and a few other things and then I would be ready. For the first time, I was happy that my apartment didn't allow pets.

I quickly grabbed a few necessary things from my white-tiled bathroom and piled them up by the sink. Shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, hair brush, floss. That's all I needed, right? I caught sight of myself in the small mirror that hung over my sink. Someone short had lived here before me, and they had moved the mirror down to their eye level. I kept meaning to have the mirror raised, but I had never gotten around to it. I slouched down so that I could see my face. My skin was unnaturally pale. No surprise there. My blue-gray eyes were wide and worried. My wavy, shoulder length brown hair was messy as usual and I dragged my fingers through it a couple of times. It didn't really help. I leaned in and saw that the stress was raising a pimple on my thin chin. Crap.

I gathered up my toiletries and scooted out of the bathroom. I tossed the brushes and things into the pack, zipped up and flung the strap over my shoulder. Ready at last, I thought, and went to find Thom.

The werewolves were in the living room. Ralph and Jeannie were standing at my front window, watching the street. They were tense and ready for a fight. Thom was standing in front of one of my bookshelves, reading the spines. Once again, I was glad that I had hidden my trashy vampire and werewolf novels away on the shelves in my bedroom. (Could they be considered non-fiction now?) Maybe it was shallow, but I wanted visitors to think that I read nothing but the classics when they saw the shelves in my living room.

Thom heard me walked in and pointed a finger at one of the titles. "I like this one."

I looked at the little navy blue paperback. *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Hey, it was a classic, too. Sort of.

"Seriously?" I asked.

"It's good to know what's out there," Thom answered drolly.

I punched him on the arm. Well, I tried to punch him on the arm. He dodged so quickly I almost didn't see him move. Thom laughed at me and lifted the backpack off my shoulder.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Ralph and Jeannie led the way, acting like human—well, canine—shields. They scanned the yard and the street, looking for anything that didn't belong. No sign of Jack or his pack mates. As a group, we moved for Thom's car. Jeannie and her husband climbed into the back and Thom held the

passenger door open for me. He tossed the bag in and I made to sit down. Thom stopped me with a gentle hand on mine.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You're welcome,” I said, and leaned to get in the car.

Thom's hand tightened on mine and I stopped again. “No, I really mean it,” he said.

“I know you mean it.”

Thom lifted my hand and softly, he kissed my knuckles. I could feel the prickles of his stubble as he pressed his lips against my fingers. Then he pulled me against his body and hugged me tightly. After he had let me go and headed for the driver's side, I stood dumb for a moment before climbing in the car myself. What was *that* all about? I looked over at Thom, but his face was a blank. Ralph and his wife said nothing, but just sat in the back looking out of the windows, doing the bodyguard thing.

The car pulled smoothly away from the curb and I had to suppress the urge to look back at my apartment. I had lived there for five years and I knew that I was going to see it again. But I didn't like the feeling of having been chased out of my own home. It was just one more blow that day. The adrenaline was leaving my system, and I was starting to feel worn out. I slumped down in the seat and watched the houses go by. This time, there was no Bob Marley to sooth my nerves.

The houses were dark. Everyone was at work at this time of the day. Tonight, the lights and the TVs would go on as people settled in for the evening. Just thinking about how blue and white glow of TVs shone through the windows made me think of our Friday night again, and our visit to Dr. Jasper's house. I pushed the thought away. I knew that if I kept thinking about it, I would start to think “What if I had done this?” or “What if I had done that?” It was far too late to change anything.

A tap on my shoulder almost made me jump out of my skin. Jeannie was leaning forward and holding out a scrap of cloth.

“I found this next to Ed,” she said simply.

“Hang on a minute,” I said. I reached in my coat pocket and pulled out my gloves. I slid them on and took the cloth.

“Why do you wear gloves?” Ralph asked.

“Because I can't control what happens when I touch something. I just start to see things,” I said. “I need to psych myself up first.”

The scrap looked like part of a t-shirt. Thankfully, there wasn't any blood on it. On the down side, there wasn't anything on it that would tell me anything. It was just a torn bit of cloth from a red t-shirt.

“Was Ed or Kyle wearing red?” I asked. I knew what the answer would be, but I didn't want to make a fool out of myself for nothing.

“No,” Jeannie answered.

I was going to have to use my party trick. I set the bit of cotton in my lap and took off my gloves. Thom looked over curiously, then put his eyes back on the road.

“I got you a room at a place over in Arlington. It's going to take a while to get there,” Thom said. “You have time.”

I nodded and focused on the t-shirt again. I set one hand cautiously on it. Instantly, I saw women's hands. Jeannie, unless Thom painted his fingernails black, too. Damp rhododendron leaves. Ed's (or Kyle's) body lying on the wet ground. Bleeding. Fists and fingers curved to claw at flesh. Lots of movement. More thick, waxy green leaves as the men who had ambushed our wolves lay in wait. A dark car. No light. They must have gotten into position the night before.

The view shifted once more and I saw a smoky, dim bar. In the corner, serious men were drinking in silence. Women laughed and flirted and drank pony-necked beers. The two men tried to chat up a blond and a redhead without much success. Beer pitchers. Loud rock music. I tried to look for a sign that would tell me the name of the bar. I willed the men to look at the neon sign that hung over the barman's head and reflected red on the wall of bottles behind the man. I could just catch the edge of it. There...almost got it...then my focus shifted again and I swore angrily. I saw the outside of the bar. Steppenwolf's. I had no idea where that was.

I didn't get much after that. This must have been a new shirt, because so few memories had soaked into it since the owner had bought it. Like I said, the more emotion, the more I get. For the first time, I was frustrated with my party trick. But at least this time, I didn't faint. Small mercies.

“Anything?” Jeannie prompted?

“A bar. Steppenwolf's. Have you heard of it?”

“Oh yes,” Thom said. “We've heard of it.”

“Werewolf bar?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“Why Steppenwolf's?” I just had to know.

“Because they haven't actually read the book,” Thom answered. “I asked the owner once. He swore up and down that the book was the only famous book about werewolves.”

“It isn't?” Could have fooled me, I thought.

Ralph laughed and I thought I heard a creaky chuckle from Jeannie.

“Nope. Life and hope and tragedy and despair,” Thom said. “You know, the usual.”

After that, we all fell silent. Thom merged on to I-5 and headed south towards Arlington. The only other traffic was a few semis and logging trucks. The wide freeway felt almost deserted at a quarter to noon. The lanes would fill up in a little while as people rushed out of their offices to try and catch a quick bite to eat. The trees that lined the freeway made walls of solid green as we whipped past. Rhododendron bushes and other underbrush curled around the bases of the trees, growing so thickly that you couldn't see more than a yard or two into the forest. No flowers anymore. It was too cold for them now. When we hit Arlington, Thom told me to put my gloves back on and handed me some hand written notes and had me talk to him to the motel. He had picked a nice chain.

“I never asked you, Thom. What do you do for work?”

“Architect, believe it or not,” he said, and swung neatly into an open space.

Jeannie and Ralph piled out of the car and headed for the lobby. After we checked in, Thom handed me the plastic key card to my room. I noticed that he tucked another plastic card into his back pocket. For a wild moment, I thought he was planning on sharing a room with me. No, surely not, I told myself. We barely know each other. I shifted my bag up higher on my shoulder and headed outside to find my room. I had 117. Ground floor. No stairs. Keen. My canine bodyguards walked behind me. I hoped they had their own room, too. Ralph was nice enough, but I didn't know if I could sleep in the same room as him. And his purple haired wife scared me even more.

When I found my room, Thom left to go “take care of something,” and Ralph and Jeannie told me that they would be in the next room if I needed anything. Arlington was miles from Augusta, and Jack would have to be a super-wolf to track a car going seventy-five on the freeway. Relax, Wright, I told myself as I flopped down on the stiff queen bed. Grabbing the remote, I flipped on the TV and watched the news for a bit. I wished that I had thought to pack something to read. In the end, it didn't take long for the day to catch up with me and I conked out during a re-run of Judge Judy.

When I woke up, it was full dark outside. I had a sour taste in my mouth and my stomach urgently informed me that it wanted food. Now. I turned the TV off, cutting off Alex Trebek in mid-sentence, and headed outside. I spotted a sandwich shop across the street and headed for it. I would be back in ten minutes, tops. Nothing to worry about. No need to bother the bodyguards. I scanned the parking lot for Jack and anyone else who might be a wolf in their spare time. No one around, just a couple of cars in the lot. I pulled on a pair of brown leather gloves and quickly crossed the street and popped into the shop, which turned out to be a local place so closely modeled on Subway that I expected them to be sued at any moment for trademark infringement.

I was tackled almost as soon as I walked out of the store with my ham and cheese on white. A man in his mid-twenties took me to the ground, landing on me painfully. His shoulder ground into my ribs, forcing the air out of my lungs. The man growled a quick “Don't scream!” into my ear, then dragged me up off the asphalt. He pulled me towards a dusty white hatchback and pushed me into the open back door. Another man grabbed my arm and kept me from jumping right back out. The man who tackled me headed for the driver's side door.

“Got her?” the Tackler asked his accomplice. Sweat was beginning to make his red curls stick to his forehead.

The man who held my upper arm in an iron grip grunted in the affirmative. I wriggled, trying to pull myself free. The man's grasp tightened until my fingers started to go numb. When I settled back down, he eased up a little and blood rushed back into my hands, making them tingle and itch. I forced myself to sit still and not twitch at the uncomfortable sensations. The Tackler pulled out of the lot in a hurry and headed for the freeway.

God damn it. “How did you find me?” I asked.

“Vilkas doesn't check his rear view mirror as often as he should,” the Tackler said with a snide tone. “We followed you guys. All the way from Augusta.”

The man who held my arm told the Tackler curtly to shut up.

I could feel absolute panic starting to well up, but I tried to talk myself to thinking tactically anyway. Anything I could use as a weapon? No. Odds of getting out of this guy's grip? Just about zero. I was screwed. My only shot would be to run for it whenever we stopped somewhere, if we did stop anywhere nearby. I had a brief memory of Becca running through the woods with Jack's pack on her trail. Not useful, I told myself. I looked around the car again, trying to find something that I could hit my kidnappers with. Nothing. The back of the car was clean as a rental. There wasn't even a window scraper or a garbage bin on the floor.

Wait a minute. Werewolves were supposed to be allergic to silver, right? The whole silver bullet thing? And old Jasper had believed in the myth enough to talk an SCA blacksmith into making him that silver knife. My necklace was made of silver. I think. Crap, it had been a present at a long ago Christmas; I couldn't remember if it was real or plated or some other metal entirely. Well, it was all I had. I was going to have to take the chance. I surreptitiously reached my gloved hand up under my hair and started fiddling with the clasp, the thin leather of my gloves making hard to me to get a grip on the tiny fastening. The man holding my arm was staring out the window. The Tackler was watching the road ahead. I managed to undo the clasp and bunched the necklace up in my fist.

I waited until the Tackler was pulling out of a stop sign, then threw the silver chain at his face. It hit him the corner of his eye. “What the fuck...?” he said, swerving wildly.

The car started to fish tail in the puddles from the morning's drizzle and the Tackler struggled to get control of the car. The guy holding my arm had to let go to brace himself. I reached for the door and unlocked it. Sucking in a fortifying breath, I shoved the door open and launched myself out of the car. The white hatchback slammed to stop. I picked myself up off the pavement and ran back towards the motel with every ounce of speed that I could muster. For the second time that day, I was tackled and fell sprawling to the ground. The two men landed on my back and knocked all the wind out of my lungs. Again. This time, they weren't at all gentle about it. I was still gasping desperately for air when they picked me up and stuffed me back into the car.

“What did you do that for?” the Tackler asked. “What did you hit me with?”

“Silver necklace,” I said, feeling clever even though I hadn't gotten far.

The man in the back seat laughed. And laughed. He didn't stop laughing for a good couple of minutes, and even had to wipe a tear or two out of his eye.

“Silver doesn't do anything to us. That's just a myth,” he said, still snickering. “We're indestructible, girlie.”

I glanced at the Tackler. There wasn't a mark on him. Shit.

The Tackler put the car into gear and drove towards the freeway again. Before long, we were cruising down the road towards Seattle. I tried to figure out where we were headed, but the Tackler wasn't talking to me anymore. He just stared out at the road and watched for speed traps, blasting past the road signs so fast that I couldn't read them.