



RUBY CRUZ
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LYCAN MOON



LYCAN EVOLUTION

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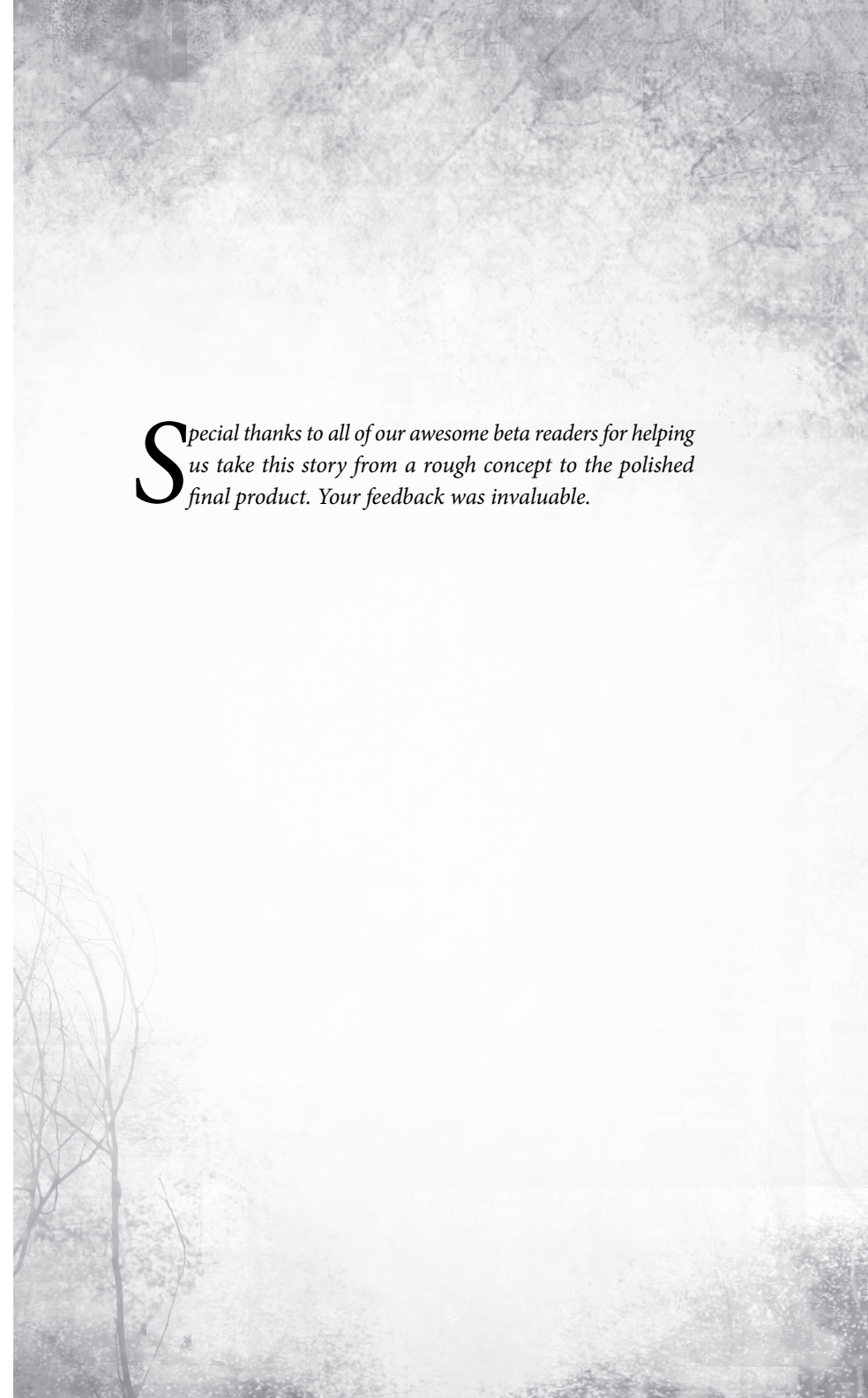
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PROLOGUE



JOHN SINCLAIR TOUCHED the pistol at his side, assuring himself of its presence for the umpteenth time. It was a quirk he'd picked up as a boy that even a lifetime of hunting hadn't been able to erase. Still there, as always, sitting snug in its weathered holster.

Chiding himself for once again giving in to the old paranoia, he leveled his breathing, reached out with his senses. Something faint niggled at the far reaches of his perception – not quite tangible in his consciousness, but definitely there. A lesser hunter would have dismissed the feeling, but he knew from experience what that meant. This was no false alarm. A werewolf was somewhere nearby.

He'd been tracking this particular wolf for weeks, ever since that rich family on the Upper West side had gotten mauled to death. The police had fed the media some bullshit about the killings, but his connection on the force told him what he already knew. Wolf attack.

Goddamned whelps!

The victims had not only been mutilated beyond recognition, they'd been partially devoured – the bones gnawed on like a puppy's chew toy. He felt a small degree of sympathy

for both the ritzy couple and the servants who'd been killed in the attack, but at least they'd been found and laid to rest. The same couldn't be said of their grown son. He was missing, probably torn to shreds, and his bones either buried in the park or at the bottom of the Hudson.

Poor rich bastard.

The police were pinning the killing on the chauffeur, also missing. Though John agreed they were on the right track, he didn't think the chauffeur did it for the money as the papers were saying. He was betting the man was one of *them*, most likely the very same wolf he was hunting.

His cell phone vibrated once in his pocket, an incoming text, but he ignored it. His daughter, Rowan, was one of the few who had his number and the only one who ever used it, but if she'd been in trouble or had a lead, she'd have called. The girl was probably just bugging him, despite having been taught better, wondering if he'd found anything yet.

Though he knew it would piss her off, he powered down the device. Damned thing would tip off the wolf if it heard the buzzing. It was common knowledge in the Guild that whelps could hear a fly taking a shit from a hundred paces.

He didn't need her help anyway. He'd been hunting werewolves since well before she was born. Only reason he carried the piece of junk in the first place was because Rowan insisted on it.

Damn millennials and their smartphones.

He'd spent a lifetime learning to trust his instincts, look for real clues like the hunters before him – a tradition dating back hundreds of years.

According to the forensics report, the killer had left a faint blood trail leading two blocks east toward Central Park. Unsurprising. There had been other attacks, not to mention multiple disappearances, in that area in the past year. The police

thought they were random, unconnected, but he and Rowan suspected otherwise.

Who'd have ever thought Central Park West would be the home of a pack, or at least their hunting ground? Then again, this was New York City. Weird and this town went together like white on rice.

He scouted the neighborhood closest to the latest killing while Rowan patrolled a couple of blocks east, in and around the park entrance. She probably thought she'd gotten the more dangerous assignment, but his gut told him otherwise. If anything was going to happen beneath this month's full moon, it was going to be here. He'd have bet a month's worth of case files on it.

John reached out with his senses again, the tingling at the base of his neck stronger this time. The wolf was definitely near, probably trying to sniff him out. Let it try. He wasn't one of this area's hoity-toity easy marks. He'd been born and bred upstate, practically a hillbilly compared to these trust fund types. It was also where he'd been trained.

He knew exactly what would happen next. Werewolves were stupidly predictable – fierce, savage, and deadly as all hell, but not much smarter than actual wolves when in the grip of the moon. The whelp would lock on to his scent, then circle in closer, using the shadows until such time as it was certain of an easy kill. Then it would pounce. Pity, the only thing it would be eating this night would be a hollow-point silver bullet.

It would be another notch on his belt and a reminder for Rowan that she might be younger and faster, but it would be a cold day in Hell before she was bett...

He paused mid-step, suddenly on high alert. In the space of a second, his senses went from a dull tingle to practically screaming.

The hell?!

Before he could react, there came a sound from his left and the goddamned whelp came at him like a runaway freight train – fangs bared, ropes of saliva hanging from its massive mouth. Every instinct commanded him to run, but that would be fruitless. Besides, hunters never ran. They stayed and fought, even if it meant their death.

Sadly, it seemed death was the likely option. This wolf had caught him by surprise, seeming to opt for what amounted to a hit and run ambush, but that was impossible. Whelps weren't nearly that smart.

Unfortunately for John, his reaction time wasn't what it used to be – a combination of being caught off guard and his body being well past its prime. He yanked the gun from its holster, but his first shot was sloppy, unsteady. Nevertheless, the creature let out a yip of pain. For a brief moment, John held out hope, but he'd only grazed the beast's massive arm.

He fired again, but the monster was already on the move, dodging with preternatural speed until it was within reach of him.

With a roar of rage, the wolf rose to its full height, towering over him, and batted his weapon away before he could empty it into its muscular midsection.

Having no other recourse, John backpedaled down an alleyway, giving him time to draw his knife. The short blade glinted in the dull moonlight, but the beast seemingly took no notice of the new weapon. Its red eyes fixed on his as it charged.

There was no time to dodge. John took the full brunt of the wolf's weight. He landed on his back, the air knocked out of him. Before he could so much as suck in a full breath, the creature's jaws clamped down on his shoulder. His leather jacket might as well have been paper against its assault. Razor

sharp teeth tore through flesh and into bone, eliciting a tortured scream from the aged hunter.

John was certain he was about to be ripped to pieces, but then the weight on his torso suddenly withdrew, as did the teeth which had been tearing into his arm. When he opened his eyes, he saw the beast had actually retreated and was sitting – *sitting!* – staring at him, its head tilted to the side as if trying to comprehend what it was seeing.

He'd known many a hunter who had lost their nerve in the midst of battle, only to forfeit their life. That number included his wife, Moira, Rowan's mother, fool of a woman that she'd been. But he'd never heard of another hunter losing their mind like he apparently was. The thing almost looked like an oversized puppy, for Christ's sake.

And still it sat, staring at him, its eyes seemingly full of something that should have been alien to it – intelligence. No. That was impossible. Maybe the damned thing just hadn't liked the way he'd tasted.

Whatever the case, it was sitting there now, a perfect target. Sadly, John couldn't take advantage of the situation. His gun was nowhere to be seen.

Worse, he could feel the lethargy settling in, the first effect of a bite. Werewolf saliva had mild sedative properties – the Guild still had no idea how in the hell that had evolved – calming its prey and subduing it for the eventual feast, a situation not helped by the fact that he was bleeding badly.

He reached for his phone, but his fingers were already numb. The device clattered out of his grasp and onto the sidewalk, its screen dark and dead, like he soon would be. What a fool he'd been to suggest to Rowan that they split up and cover more ground, so he could keep the kill for himself, and then

to turn off the one thing that could have saved him. Now he was down, wounded, broken, and with hope quickly fading.

He could do nothing but wait, his body betraying him, his eyelids heavy. His consciousness waned as he anticipated the final attack, praying it was quick.

Rather than the sting of razor sharp teeth sinking into his throat, he heard a shout and felt a heavy thump on the ground beside him. Before he could so much as wonder what was happening, though, the darkness claimed him.

I



RO GLIMPSED THE first rays of sun through the trees as dawn broke. The night had been a bust. She hadn't heard from her father in hours and all her calls went straight to voicemail. The stubborn old man had probably turned his phone off, much as he did just about every hunt despite her protests to the contrary.

She'd found no sign of wolves during her patrol. The most excitement she'd had was when a drunk vagrant had bugged her for change, then had gotten violent when she told him to take a hike. She didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it certainly hadn't been a spinning kick to his face which had crushed his nose into pulp.

He's lucky it wasn't his balls.

She headed west out of the park and to where her dad was supposed to be patrolling. The ritzy brownstone where the Mason killings had occurred was only a few minutes' walk away. The street was relatively quiet. It was still too early for all except the most dedicated of athletes or employees.

She tried her dad's cell again with no success. Where the hell was he? She rounded the brownstone and checked the alley across the street. Nothing but the usual detritus. In a

similar fashion, she examined all the places her father might have found to hide out – recessed doorways, alleys, lower level landings, even shrubbery.

One early-riser stuck her head out the window and asked what she was doing. “My keys,” Ro answered easily. “My stupid boyfriend and I got in a fight and he threw them out the car window.”

The woman’s face softened ever so slightly. “Good luck with that,” she replied before closing the window with a definitive thump.

Ro continued her search, her unease growing with every passing minute. She swore to herself. If he’d gone off to grab some coffee, without bothering to tell her, she was going to suture his damn phone to his hand.

She finished searching the block, then widened her search parameter to the next one over. Roughly twenty minutes later, in a narrow alleyway that branched off to several gated gardens on either side, she found her first clue. Two shell casings from a .38, the same caliber her dad used. She examined the ground and walls flanking her and found a small spray of blood on the side of one building. Following it, she spied what appeared to be a larger pool further down the alley, near one of the gardens.

She knelt and dipped a finger in it. Still wet, but thick and congealed. A few hours old at least. Her heart racing, she stood and glanced around, looking for any further signs of what might have happened. If her father had wounded or killed a whelp, he wouldn’t have hesitated to contact her so as to brag. That he’d gone radio silent instead terrified her.

Ro stepped out of the alley and onto the sidewalk. She needed to be away from the shadows, out in the light and the warmth. She pulled out her phone and dialed a number she’d hoped never to call. A smooth voice answered. “Hey, babe. Calling to trade hunting stories?”

“No, Kane. I need your help. My father’s missing.”



Ro resented having to call in the other hunter, but she couldn't think of a better course of action in her current state of mind. She couldn't exactly go to the nearest police station and report her father missing. Even if she ignored the part about werewolves and fell back on his day job as a private eye, the cops would still want details as to what he was doing in a ritzy neighborhood all night. His normal clients weren't exactly the type to live in a place like that, something they could easily check. The blood evidence in the alley and the fact that he'd discharged his weapon would only further complicate matters. Even if he turned out to be okay, they'd still be finished in the city. The Guild would reassign them rather than potentially draw heat onto themselves.

Kane was a detective with the NYPD, an invaluable resource when it came to accessing police records in their search for possible werewolves and their victims, not to mention helping to keep the heat off of them. He'd been the one to tip them off about the increasing number of attacks on the Upper West Side, giving them copies of the police reports and crime scene photos.

The Guild had stationed him in the city just eighteen months ago, citing the need for an increased hunter presence in a major city of New York's size. Her father hadn't liked the other man from the start. "He's careless and full of himself," he'd grouched one morning after a particularly difficult kill. "The ignorant jackass nearly got us both slaughtered tonight."

But aside from searching all the nearby hospitals for her father, she had no other avenue to turn down. No one else in her life knew she was a werewolf hunter. To the world at

large, she was just another working class girl living an ordinary, paycheck-to-paycheck life.



Ro swallowed back the fear rising in her throat. If she dwelled on it too much, she was certain it would paralyze her. *He's probably just holed up somewhere catching some sleep*, she tried to reason. But he'd never abandoned her like this after a patrol.

She considered the possibilities.

If he was injured, he'd have definitely reached out to her. She had her nursing license and was more than capable of stitching up most non-fatal wounds incurred during a wolf fight. He would only have gone to a hospital if he'd been in dire need, and even then would have fought the effort ... unless he wasn't capable of doing so. That led to the worst case scenario – he'd either been wounded so badly as to have been dragged off by the wolf or...

A wave of nausea at the thought caused her stomach to roil. She grabbed hold of the coffee cup in front of her and held onto it as if for dear life until the sensation passed.

"You're looking good after a night out."

She looked up to find Kane standing over her in the upscale café, mere blocks away from where she'd found the blood. He had a smug grin on his face, but at least he'd come quickly – small favors and all of that.

Instead of taking a seat across from her in the booth, he slid in next to her and leaned in close. She cringed inwardly, though she knew this was the only way they could openly discuss what they needed to without being overheard.

"I found blood and casings, same as what my dad uses," she said in a low voice. "I haven't heard from him since two, and his phone is off."

"Let me guess, this happened a few blocks from the Mason house?" When she looked questioningly at him, he simply shrugged. "There's a couple of desk sergeants I keep well-greased. On the down low, of course. They keep their eyes open for me during the full moon. Don't worry. The calls that came in got filed as nothing more than kids with firecrackers."

Ro nodded robotically. "This happening near there. It can't be a coinci..." Her voice broke and she forced herself to take several deep breaths to calm down.

He put an arm around her and, despite her reservations, she found herself leaning into it. "Shh, Ro, relax. We'll find him."

"Kane, this is my dad. The only reason he wouldn't have shown up after a hunt..."

"Shh, I know." He blew out a breath, his tone becoming more businesslike. "You said you found blood?"

"Some splatter on one of the buildings near where I found the casings and then more on the ground several yards away."

"What does that tell you?"

"I'm thinking he grazed the whelp before ... whatever else happened."

"Are you sure the blood on the ground wasn't the wolf's?"

"If it was, my dad wouldn't be missing, he'd be here with us ordering a third helping of breakfast sausage."

Kane pulled away. "Okay, I'll call the area hospitals, see if they've admitted any John Does. Any place nearby he might have gone to ground?"

She shook her head. "His office, maybe, but that's all the way over in Chinatown."

"Early morning meeting with a client?"

Ro laughed at the idea, though she didn't mean to. Her father's client list had been on a steady decline for years. It had reached the point where they were mostly living on her modest salary as a nurse. If he'd had such an important cus-

tomers to see, she had little doubt he'd have let her know well in advance. "Sorry, but no. I don't think so. Besides, I can't see him risking public transportation after a hunt. It's..." she lowered her voice, "dirty work, as you well know."

Kane smiled broadly, showing off his straight white teeth, something that Ro was certain he used as a disarming tactic, whether his quarry was a perp on the run or a woman overburdened by her bra and panties.

She quickly looked away and pretended to fish for something in her bag, surprised that the thought had even entered her mind. The stress of the morning, following a sleepless night spent hunting, must have been getting to her.

"Okay," Kane said, his tone suggesting that he wasn't fooled for a second, "but you should probably check his office anyway. I'll reach out to the Guild, see if they've heard from him. It's a long shot, but we should cover all the bases."

Ro turned back, hoping her cheeks weren't flushed. "I should probably head home just in case he shows up there."

"You do that. But before you go, I want to see the scene."

They took their coffees and she led him to the area. Pedestrian traffic had increased now that people were starting their work day. With a quick glance around, she ducked into the alley and showed him what she'd described.

Kane stared at the blood stain on the ground, his eyes narrowing when he looked up at Ro sharply. "His gun. Did you find it?"

"No. I'd have told you if I had."

"So he must've taken it wherever he went."

"Or somebody picked it up and took it."

Kane shook his head. "I doubt it. Doesn't fit the neighborhood. If someone had found it here, we'd have heard about it. So that tells me your dad has it with him, wherever he is, and you know as well as I do that if he's armed, he's probably fine."

Ro nodded, but internally she was at war. There were too many variables, too many questions. And she hated to admit that her father had far outlived the typical life expectancy for a hunter.

Oddly enough, it was that thought which calmed her more than any of Kane's words. She was a hunter of the Guild, too, fully trained and more than capable. She had a job to do, one that could very well serve her own needs this time.

Her eyes locked onto the blood stain on the ground. With a steadying breath, she resolved to hold onto hope, no matter how feeble.

If her father was alive, she'd find him. If he wasn't, she'd mourn him. But no matter the case, whoever was responsible would pay dearly for what they'd done.

2



THE FIGURE IN the cage began to stir. His hands reached up to clutch his aching skull. The change back was always like this: pounding headache and a sore body, coupled with no clue of what was going on. He groaned and attempted to pull himself into a sitting position then winced as he felt a twinge on his upper arm. He examined the area to see a line of pink scar tissue already fading. For the life of him, he couldn't remember how he'd gotten the wound, but that wasn't surprising. The fact that he had it at all couldn't be good.

His head felt like someone was using it for a bass drum. He had only a couple of vague memories of the night before – faded black and white images that were fuzzy like a poorly shot home video, but nothing that coalesced into anything immediately recognizable.

He blinked, clearing his vision, and realized the door to the cage looked wrong. It was warped, as if something had knocked it off its hinges. Pulling himself to unsteady feet, he inched closer and realized that the bars around it were actually bent outwards.

Holy shit. I escaped last night. Goddamnit! Even after all the precautions they'd taken, he'd broken out of the cage and ... done what?

He racked his brain but couldn't recall anything more than a few fuzzy memories of an alley. He swallowed, his throat dry, but then caught the distinct taste of blood. *Oh no! Did I hurt someone?*

Dean Mason swore silently, then banged on the cage door. "Coop! Where the hell are you, man? Let me out of this shithole!" After a few feeble hits, the door swung open freely. *The hell?*

He stepped out of the cage and saw a pile of neatly folded clothes on a nearby table. "Coop!" he called again, pulling a t-shirt over his head. He desperately needed a shower, but finding out what happened the previous night was a much higher priority.

Dean climbed the short flight of stairs to the main floor, and called his friend's name again. "In here," he heard from the direction of the living room.

When he reached the doorway, his intended greeting was cut short by the sight in front of him. "Who the hell is that?"

An older man lay stretched on the couch, seemingly unconscious. Cooper Maddox – Dean's friend, confidante, and former bodyguard – was fervently attempting to staunch the blood flowing freely from a gaping wound on the old man's right shoulder. "No fucking clue," he replied without looking up. "Some guy you bit last night. He's alive ... for the moment, at least."

"Fuck. Oh, fuck." Dean raised his hands to his head and began to pace. "I knew this would happen. You should just kill me like I told you to. My life isn't worth this shit."

"Table it for now. I don't have time for your goddamned martyr complex," Coop barked. "I need some help here. Get me that saline there and hand me more gauze." Dean stood

where he was a moment longer, then moved to do as he was told. "I'm going to try to suture the wound, but the edges are pretty ragged."

Dean handed him the supplies. "Did you talk to him? Does he remember what happened?"

"Oh, he remembers, all right. Wasn't coherent enough to tell me his name, but immediately started raving about god-damned werewolves. Go figure. He seemed far more annoyed than freaked out. Hold that saline while I stick the IV in."

"Gotcha," Dean replied. "So, what? He some kind of nutcase?"

"I wish. Look on the table. Found that not too far away from where I picked you both up."

Dean glanced over and saw a pistol. His mind immediately raced back to the wound on his arm and a hazy memory played out in his mind. "He shot me."

"Don't be a big baby. He grazed you. You probably barely felt it. The wound was already healing by the time I tranqed your ass. Just for the record, you're damned lucky he wasn't a better shot."

"Why? You know I heal..."

"It was loaded with silver bullets."

Dean's heart stuttered. "Holy shit. Are you telling me he's a hunter?" When he'd first been told about werewolf hunters, he'd thought it a load of bullshit. A ghost story to get him to stick with the pack. Now, he was forced to wonder whether there was some truth to Strike's warning.

"Either that or a rich crackpot and, judging by the way this guy smells, I'm not betting on that latter. Good thing I found you when I did. Otherwise, he might have done more than give you a flesh wound."

"Where'd you find us?"

Coop looked him in the eye, but not entirely without sympathy. "Where do you think?"

Dean sighed. He'd gone home again, or tried to anyway. Tears threatened to well up in his eyes at the painful memory, but before it could take hold his head throbbed again, perhaps mercifully so. "Christ. How much did you tranq me with? My head hurts like a son of a bitch."

"Enough to take down a charging rhino. Serves you right for breaking out. You scared the shit out of me. Thought I was a goner, but you high-tailed it out the front door like your ass was on fire."

"You know I can't help myself."

Coop shrugged as he continued to work on staunching the blood still flowing from the old man's wound. "Whatever the case, we need to do more. That cage is shot. It wouldn't hold a puppy right now. I can try to patch it up for next month, but we need to find somewhere we can properly secure – preferably further away from ... well, you know. I think you're drawn there."

Dean backed up and leaned against the wall. "Not sure I want to leave."

"I don't think we have a choice. You got lucky with this guy, in more ways than one. You could've easily killed someone during your little escapade."

"Don't remind me. You know Strike has me on a short leash." Coop chuckled, which caused Dean to frown. "Not funny, asshole. Besides, he's the one who offered us this safe house."

"For a hefty fee," Coop countered acidly. "I'm serious, man. We can't stay here."

Dean sighed with resignation. "I know. I ... have something in mind, but it's gonna take time to get the funds together, especially with that asshole bleeding me dry." He stepped forward again and glanced down at their patient, wincing at the amount of blood as Coop attempted to stitch it closed. "Can I do anything else?"

“Besides shutting up and letting me work? Not really. But don’t think I’m not pissed at you for this.

“Sorry about last night.”

“Not just last night. This whole fucked up mess,” his friend said softly, the bitterness evident in his voice.

“This isn’t your fight. You know that, right? You can bail at any time.” As Dean said the words, his heart sank at the possibility of losing the only friend he had left, but still he continued. “I won’t hold it against you.”

“Yeah, I could,” Coop replied, standing up to survey the work he’d done. He nodded to himself, then turned to face Dean. “I meant what I said about being pissed, but I’ll get over it. As for leaving your useless butt high and dry, well, I may be an asshole, but I’m not a fucking asshole.”



Dean allowed himself the luxury of a hot shower and clean clothes before returning to the living room. Their so-called guest was still unconscious, but his wound had finally stopped bleeding, a fact Coop deemed a near miracle.

“Keep an eye on him while I get cleaned up.”

“And what do I tell him if he wakes up?”

“Hell’s if I know. You’re the one who bit him.”

“Well, why did you have to bring him back here, anyway?”

“It was that or leave him in the alley to either bleed to death or tell the friendly ambulance driver all about werewolves. Neither seemed a good option to me.” When Dean had no response, Coop blew out a breath. “Listen, man, I’m beat. I’m gonna take a shower and get some sleep. Don’t do anything stupid in the meantime.”

After Coop left the room, Dean buried his head in his hands. His friend was right. This whole convoluted mess was

his fault. If he hadn't been such an asshole, if he'd been less of a self-centered douchebag, if he'd learned to be a boring, upstanding citizen like his parents had wanted him to be, none of this would have happened.

He remembered the night this all began. Even though not that much time had passed, it felt like a different life altogether.



Dean had been high as a kite when he'd sauntered into the club some six months earlier, a babe with killer cleavage and an ass to match on his arm. He'd met her at a downtown bar earlier that evening where they'd shared a line or two. He tried to remember her name, but couldn't quite place it. He'd been way too fucked-up for unimportant shit like that.

What mattered was that she was a prime piece of ass who'd given him a blowjob good enough to eat through the haze of even top notch Bolivian coke. His intent had been to sample her wares again before the night was through, but there was plenty of time for a quick pit stop before then.

The dance floor thumped with some shitty electro-pop, but he hadn't cared about either the music or the dancing. They'd already used up his small stash of blow, but his date had assured him some premium shit could be had there.

That sounded perfect to him, a chance to obliterate any memory of the fight he'd had with his parents earlier in the day. He wanted to venture out on his own, start a company, and stop riding on the coattails of his dad's success. He was nearly thirty and still living off his parents' good graces, for God's sake. It was pathetic. Even though he'd proven himself more than competent in running the research division, his colleagues still treated him like a fucking trust fund baby –

barely concealing their whispers of nepotism when he entered the room.

Cocksucking morons, he hazily thought as he settled into his booth and shot back a mouthful of Johnnie Walker. They wouldn't have known brilliance if it took a shit on their overpriced diplomas. He'd been near the top of his class at MIT, had a PhD in biomedical engineering, but the idiots he worked with still thought he did nothing but suck off his parents' teat. Even three sheets to the wind, he could've run circles around them in either the lab or the boardroom.

After his second shot, he settled back and draped his arm around ... Darla, yeah that was it. "Darling Darla," he quipped as if to prove to her he'd been paying attention. They finished a few more shots, then he noted the place wasn't nearly as packed as he'd originally thought. "You sure you have a contact here? Place looks sorta dead to me."

"You just wait, handsome. Things are just getting started." She leaned in and slipped her tongue into his mouth, wrestling with his. A moment later, he crunched down on something bitter – a pill of some sort.

He pulled away, a frown forming. "Did you slip me something?"

"Relax, lover. Just a little taste of things to come."

That brought the smile back to his face. "Oh? Gonna roll me in the alley and take my wallet?"

She grabbed hold of his crotch as she began nibbling on his earlobe. "Mmm, not your wallet I'm after." Her tongue darted in and out of his ear, warm and wet. "You're a yummy one. Did you know that?"

Whatever he'd just swallowed was forgotten almost instantly in his need to finish what she'd started. "Why don't we go somewhere more private?"

“I thought you’d never ask.” She slipped out of the booth and took his hand. He had to pause to adjust his pants before following her through the small crowd of undulating dancers to a door at the back of the room.

A small warning siren had gone off in his head, a vague feeling that something wasn’t quite right, but his brain wasn’t in control at that moment. She pushed open the door and led him into a darkened space beyond.

He could barely see anything, the only illumination coming from a few low-wattage bulbs hanging from the ceiling. A strange odor hung in the air, like incense mixed with something musky, but any questions he might have had were silenced once Darla closed the door. She pushed him against the wall and began grinding her body against his with an intensity that nearly drove him mad.

Whatever she’d slipped him had his head already spinning, but damn if it didn’t make what she was doing to him feel ten times as good.

He reached down to unzip his pants, but a hand grabbed hold of his wrist and stopped him.

In the space of a heartbeat, he realized it wasn’t hers.

Darla backed away from him, grinning, her teeth looking long and white even in the dim light.

“What the fuck?”

More hands reached out from the darkness and he suddenly realized they weren’t alone.

He was grabbed and dragged down the hall, his body too numb to put up much of a fight. Another door was kicked open, and someone shoved him into a chair sitting in the middle of a small dank room that smelled of rotting meat. The stench, combined with the drugs already coursing through his system, made him want to puke his guts out.

"This him, *Darling Darla*?" an unfamiliar male voice mocked. Dean couldn't make out much in the dim light, but he could see there were three of them in total. "You definitely picked a pretty one this time."

"Almost a shame to turn him."

"Yeah, almost. Good girl. Now get the fuck out of here and go wait in my room." There came the sound of a hand slapping against flesh, then a thin man stepped forward. He was all wiry muscle, his arms covered in a combination of scars and tattoos that seemed to run together to form intricate patterns of ink and flesh. He leaned down and stared at Dean, his eyes tinged red as a weasel's. "Thanks for getting her primed for me, buddy. Real good of you."

"What the hell's going on?" Dean asked.

"You'll find out soon enough, Mr. Mason."

"Huh? How the fuck do you know my name?"

"Who do you think told Darla to bring you here? You should be honored. Not everyone gets this rare opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Dean slurred. "For what?"

"To become a part of the pack, of course."



The memory faded as the old man stirred from his place on the couch.

I didn't have any choice, Dean mused as he continued to stare at the man – his victim. He unconsciously rubbed his left arm, touching the months' old scar that always seemed to tingle at the approach and wane of the full moon. Soon enough, this poor bastard would be resigned to the same fate as him, becoming little more than a slave to the moon as it brought out the beast inside of him.

Or maybe not.

A memory stirred in the back of his mind, a conversation he'd had with Strike – the leader of his pack and the one who'd bitten him. The fucker had been giving him the rundown on hunters, trying to scare him into sticking around, giving him some bullshit speech about strength in numbers. Dean hadn't been paying much attention, but something Strike had told him came screaming back into his brain.

If he recalled correctly, Strike had said something about hunters being immune to the curse, just one of the unique qualities that made them extremely dangerous. Dean had blown it off as bullshit at the time, but what if it hadn't been a lie?

He hadn't believed hunters existed at all, but the man lying before him proved otherwise. If so, then who was to say the rest of Strike's story hadn't been true as well?

Even if this man was immune, though, Dean had no clue how it worked. Strike's speech hadn't been nearly that detailed. But maybe it didn't matter. He was a skilled biochemist, after all. He'd worked alongside some of the best scientists in the country at his father's company. Where there was immunity, there was the potential for a vaccine, and along with that came the hope of a cure.

Holy shit! Could it be possible?

Strike had assured him there was no going back, but did that even mean anything? The guy hadn't exactly struck Dean as Mensa material. The asshole was probably lucky to be able to measure out the drugs he sold to help front his little lycanthrope night club.

He thought back to what he'd told Coop, about how he wanted to end this hell of an existence. But what if there was a light at the end of the tunnel that didn't involve his death? What if he could be human again? He could never make up for what had happened to his parents, but he would happily devote the rest of his life to trying.

For perhaps the first time since he'd been bitten, the haze of depression around him began to clear.

His attention focused more sharply on the older man, his gaze zeroing in on the large wad of gauze at his shoulder. It was soaked through with blood ... hunter blood, perhaps the key to his redemption.

As the thoughts and possibilities swirled through Dean's mind, he pushed aside the guilt about his escape the previous night. No time for that. There was work to be done if he was to save this hunter's life and, in return, possibly his own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ruby Cruz is an author with varied interests in post-apocalyptic fiction, urban, fantasy, and romance. A night shift nurse by trade, she spends her non-work hours caring for her husband, two young daughters, and rambunctious dog, all while ignoring/despising any form of housework. In her non-existent free time, she foregoes sleep to type maniacally on a laptop and hope that whatever she writes is comprehensible and enjoyable to readers.

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Rick Gualtieri lives alone in central New Jersey with only his wife, three kids, and countless pets to both keep him company and constantly plot against him. When he's not busy mon-key-clicking out words, he can typically be found jealously guarding his collection of vintage Transformers from all who would seek to defile them.

Defilers beware!

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