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Stray

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Extract

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One

The moment the door opened I knew an ass-kicking was inevitable. Whether I'd be giving it or receiving it was still a bit of a mystery.

The smell hit me as I left the air-conditioned comfort of the language building for the heat of another north-central Texas summer, tugging my backpack higher on my shoulder as I squinted into the sunset. A step behind me, my roommate, Sammi, was ranting about the guest lecturer's discriminatory view of women's contributions to nineteenth-century literature. I'd been about to play devil's advocate, just for the hell of it, when a shift in the evening breeze stopped me where I stood, on the top step of the narrow front porch.

My argument forgotten, I froze, scanning the

shadowy quad for the source of the unmistakable scent. Visually, nothing was out of the ordinary: just small groups of summer students talking on their way to and from the dorms. Human students. But what I smelled wasn't human. It wasn't even close.

Absorbed in her rant, Sammi didn't realize I'd stopped. She walked right into me, cursing loud enough to draw stares when her binder fell out of her hand and popped open on the ground, littering the steps with loose-leaf paper.

"I could use a little notice next time you plan on zoning out, Faythe," she snapped, bending to gather up her notes. Grunts and more colorful words issued from behind her, where our fellow grad students were stalled by our pedestrian traffic jam. Lit majors are not known for watching where they're going; most of us walk with our eyes in a book instead of on the path ahead.

"Sorry." I knelt to help her, snatching a sheet of paper from the concrete before the student behind me could stomp on it. Standing, I took the steps two at a time, following Sammi to a brick half wall jutting from the porch. Still talking, she set her binder on the ledge and began methodically reorganizing her notes, completely oblivious to the scent, as humans always were. I barely heard her incessant chatter as she worked.

My nostrils flared slightly to take in more of the smell as I turned my face into the breeze. *There*. Across the quad, in the alley between the physics building and Curry Hall.

My fist clenched around the strap of my backpack and my teeth ground together. He wasn't supposed to be here. *None* of them were supposed to be here. My father had promised.

I'd always known they were watching me, in spite of my father's agreement not to interfere in my life. On occasion, I'd spot a too-bright eye in the crowd at a football game, or notice a familiar profile in line at the food court. And rarely—only twice before in five years—I caught a distinctive scent on the air, like the taste of my childhood, sweet and familiar, but with a bitter aftertaste. The smell was faint and tauntingly intimate. And completely unwelcome.

They were subtle, all those glimpses, those hints that my life wasn't as private as we all pretended. Daddy's spies faded silently into crowds and shadows because they wanted to be seen no more than I wanted to see them.

But this one was different. He wanted me to see him. Even worse—he wasn't one of Daddy's.

"…that her ideas are somehow less important because she had ovaries instead of testes is beyond chauvinistic. It's barbaric. Someone should…Faythe?"

Sammi nudged me with her newly restored notebook. "You okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

No, I hadn't seen a ghost. I'd smelled a cat.

"I'm feeling a little sick to my stomach." I grimaced only long enough to be convincing. "I'm going to go lie down. Will you apologize to the group for me?"

She frowned. "Faythe, this was *your* idea."

"I know." I nodded, thinking of the four other M.A. candidates already gathered around their copies of *Love's Labours Lost* in the library. "Tell everyone I'll be there next week. I swear."

"Okay," she said with a shrug of her bare, freckled shoulders. "It's your grade." Seconds later, Sammi was just another denim-clad student on the sidewalk, completely oblivious to what lurked in the late-evening shadows thirty yards away.

I left the concrete path to cut across the quad, struggling to keep anger from showing on my face. Several feet from the sidewalk, I stepped on my shoelace, giving myself time to come up with a plan of action as I retied it. Kneeling, I kept one eye on the alley, watching for a glimpse of the trespasser. This wasn't supposed to happen. In my entire twenty-three years, I'd never heard of a stray getting this far into our territory without being caught. It simply wasn't possible.

Yet there he was, hiding just out of sight in the alley. Like a coward.

I could have called my father to report the intruder. I probably *should* have called him, so he could send the designated spy-of-the-day to take care of the problem. But calling would necessitate speaking to my father, which I made a point to avoid at all costs. My only other course of action was to scare the stray off on my own, then dutifully report the incident the next time I caught one of the guys watching me. No big deal. Strays were loners, and typically as skittish as deer when confronted. They always ran from Pride cats because we always worked in pairs, at the very least.

Except for me.

But the stray wouldn't know I had no backup. Hell, I probably *did* have backup. Thanks to my father's paranoia, I was never really alone. True, I hadn't actually *seen* whoever was on duty today, but that didn't mean anything. I couldn't always spot them, but they were always there.

Shoe tied, I stood, for once reassured by my father's overprotective measures. I tossed my bag over one shoulder and ambled toward the alley, doing my best to appear relaxed. As I walked, I searched the quad discreetly, looking for my hidden backup. Whoever he was, he'd finally learned how to hide. Perfect timing.

The sun slipped below the horizon as I approached the alley. In front of Curry Hall, an automatic streetlight flickered to life, buzzing softly. I stopped in the circle of soft yellow light cast on the sidewalk, gathering my nerve.

The stray was probably just curious, and would likely run as soon as he knew I'd seen him. But if he didn't, I'd have to scare him off through other, more hands-on means. Unlike most of my fellow tabby cats, I knew how to fight; my father had made sure of that. Unfortunately, I'd never made the jump from theory to practice, except against my brothers. Sure, I could hold my own with them, but I hadn't sparred in years, and this didn't feel like a very good time to test skills still unproven in the real world.

It's not too late to call in the cavalry, I thought, patting the slim cell phone in my pocket. Except that it *was*. Every time I spoke to my father, he came up with a new excuse to call me home. This time he wouldn't even need to make one up. I'd have to handle the problem myself.

My resolve as stiff as my spine, I stepped out of the light and into the darkness.

Heart pounding, I entered the alley, tightening my grip on my bag as if it were the handle of a sword. Or maybe the corner of a security blanket. I sniffed the air. He was still there; I could smell

him. But now that I was closer to the source, I detected something strange in his scent—something even more out of place than the odor of a stray deep inside my Pride's territory. Whoever this trespasser was, he wasn't local. There was a distinctive foreign nuance to his scent. Exotic. Spicy, compared to the blandly familiar base scent of my fellow American cats.

My pulse throbbed in my throat. *Foreign. Shit*. I was in over my head.

I was digging in my pocket for my phone when something clattered to the ground farther down the alley. I froze, straining to see in the dark, but with my human eyes, it was a lost cause. Without Shifting, I couldn't make out anything but vague outlines and deep shadows. Unfortunately, Shifting wasn't an option at that moment. It would take too long, and I'd be defenseless during the transition.

Human form it is.

I glanced quickly behind me, looking for signs of life from the quad. It was empty now, as far as I could tell. There were no potential witnesses; everyone with half a brain was either studying or partying. So why was I playing hide-and-seek after dark with an unidentified stray?

My muscles tense and my ears on alert, I started down the alley. Four steps later, I stepped through a

broken tennis racket and stumbled into a rusty Dumpster. My bag thumped to the ground as my head hit the side of the trash receptacle, ringing it like an oversize gong.

Smooth, Faythe, I thought, the metallic thrum still echoing in my ears.

I bent over to pick up my bag, and a darting motion up ahead caught my eye. The stray—in human form, thankfully—ran from the mouth of the alley into the parking lot behind Curry Hall, his feet unnaturally silent on the asphalt. Pale moonlight shined on a head full of dark, glossy curls as he ran.

Instinct overrode my fear and caution. Adrenaline flooded my veins. I tossed my bag over my shoulder and sprinted down the center of the alley. The stray had fled, as I'd hoped he would, and the feline part of my brain demanded I follow. When mice run, cats give chase.

At the end of the alley, I paused, staring at the parking lot. It was empty, but for an old, busted up Lincoln with a rusty headlight. The stray was gone. How the hell had he gotten away so fast?

A prickly feeling started at the base of my neck, raising tiny hairs the length of my spine. Every security light in the lot was unlit. They were supposed to be automatic, like the ones in the quad. Without the familiar buzz and the reassuring flood

of incandescent light, the parking lot was an unbroken sea of dark asphalt, eerily quiet and disturbingly calm.

My heart pounding, I stepped out of the alley, half expecting to be struck by lightning or hit by a runaway train. Nothing happened, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. I took another step, my eyes wide to let in all of the available light. Still nothing happened.

I was feeling foolish now, chasing a stranger down a dark alley at night, like some bimbo from a bad horror film. In the movies, this was where things always went wrong. A hairy hand would reach out of the shadows and grab the curious-but-brainless heroine around the throat, laughing sadistically while she wasted her last breath on a scream.

The difference between the movies and reality was that in real life, I *was* the hairy monster, and the only screaming I ever did was in rage. I was about as likely to cry for help as I was to spontaneously combust. If this particular bad guy hadn't figured that out yet, he was in for a very big surprise.

Emboldened by my own mental pep talk, I took another step.

The distinctive foreign scent washed over me, and my pulse jumped, but I never saw the kick coming.

Suddenly I was staring at the ground, doubled over from the pain in my stomach and fighting for the strength to suck in my next breath.

My bag fell to the ground at my feet. A pair of black, army-style boots stepped into sight, and the smell of stray intensified. I looked up just in time to register dark eyes and a creepy smile before his right fist shot out toward me. My arms flew up to block the blow, but his other arm was already flying. His left fist slammed into the right side of my chest.

Fresh pain burst to life in my rib cage, radiating in a widening circle. One hand pressed to my side, I struggled to stand up straight, panicked when I couldn't.

An ugly cackling laugh clawed my inner chalkboard and pissed me off. This was *my* campus, and *my* Pride's territory. *He* was the outsider, and it was time he learned how Pride cats dealt with intruders.

He pulled his fist back for another blow, but this time I was ready. Ignoring the pain in my side, I lunged to my right, reaching for a handful of his hair. My fingers tangled in a thick clump of curls. I shoved his head down and brought my knee up. The two connected. Bone crunched. Something warm and wet soaked through my jeans. The scent of fresh blood saturated the air, and I smiled.

Ah, memories…

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