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Rogue

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Extract

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"An anonymous call?" Marc said, his brow furrowed. "That's…unusual. What time did it come in?"

"Shortly after seven." Thanks to my werecat's enhanced hearing, my father's voice was easily audible, even though I was several feet from the phone.

I pressed the button on the side of my watch, illuminating the face. It was just after ten. The message was three hours old.

"Where did the call come from?" Marc asked.

Over the phone, my father cleared his throat. "A phone booth in southern Arkansas. You and Faythe are closest, so keep your eyes open, because whoever made the call could still be around." Silence settled in over the line for a moment. "I need you to identify the corpse and take care of the body."

Marc glanced at me, and I shook my head. *Hell no.* We'd already detoured from a much-anticipated weekend road trip to take care of some random trespasser, and were just about to take care of each other. That was enough for one night. The body could rot, for all I cared.

Except that we couldn't really let it rot. At least, not where a human could find it. Humans tended to get uptight and curious around corpses, and were generally adamant about pinning down the source of the problem. Which, of course, was us. Well, not my Pride specifically, but likely a member of our species. So, Marc and I would take care of the body, whether we wanted to or not. For the good of the Pride. Because that was our job.

Marc frowned at me, and I nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, we'll take care of it as soon as we get rid of the stray in the backseat," he said.

"Did she do it on her own?" my father asked, and I ground my teeth together. I couldn't help it. I'd called to report the intruder like a good girl, and was rewarded with an order to take him unassisted. It was my father's idea of a test.

Most aspects of my training didn't agree with me. There wasn't as much bossing around as I'd hoped for, and there was way too much following orders. Fortunately, there was also ample opportunity to vent my frustration in the guise of protecting and defending our property boundaries. That part wasn't too bad.

"Let's just say your daughter has one heck of a right hook," Marc said, laughter bubbling up behind his words.

"I'm not surprised." Our esteemed Alpha gave Marc directions to the exposed corpse as we settled into the car, and by the time we turned left out of the empty lot, he'd hung up the phone.

"So, what are we supposed to do with the body?" I asked, pretty sure I already knew the answer.

"Bury it. Unless you'd rather take it to school for show-and-tell?"

"Smart-ass," I snapped. Burial was what I'd expected. Un-

fortunately, we hadn't come prepared with a backhoe. Or a coffin. All we had was an emergency kit and a couple of shovels Marc kept in the trunk, for just such an occasion.

Huffing in irritation, I glanced at my clothes, selected with our weekend getaway in mind. But our trip had been canceled. There would be no quiet dinner in a nice restaurant with cloth napkins. No popcorn in the dark theater. No private hotel room, far from the inescapable eyes and ears of our fellow werecats.

Instead, we'd be working. All night. For no overtime.

Most of my friends had returned to school the week before and had probably spent their night gathered around textbooks and boxes of pizza. I, on the other hand, had chased down a trespasser, in three-inch heels, and would soon be digging a grave by hand in the middle of the night.

I felt my mood darken just thinking of school, and of not being there. Of not completing my master's degree, or even using my brand new BA in the foreseeable future. But I'd bargained with my father for the next two years and three months of my life, to be spent serving the Pride and training for a future I wasn't even sure I wanted.

"Definitely a broken neck."

"Hmm?" I murmured, staring hard at the line of trees twenty feet to the east. If I focused on them, on the way the moon cast ever-shifting shadows of the branches as they swayed in the early-morning breeze, I wouldn't have to look at the corpse. And I *really* didn't want to look at the corpse.

We'd found him just where the informant had said we would, in an empty field about half an hour south of Little Rock, near a tiny rural town called White Hall, which boasted some six thousand residents. From what little I could see of it in the

dark, White Hall seemed like a decent place to grow up. A place that did *not* deserve a middle-of-the-night visit from us.

Marc turned his flashlight to my face, and I winced, squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden glare. "Pay attention, Faythe," he snapped, his earlier playfulness gone. He was all business now, kneeling next to the dead man who lay facedown in the grass. "I said it's definitely a broken neck. Come feel this."

"No thanks." I shoved his flashlight aside and blinked impatiently, waiting for the floating circles of light to fade from my vision. "I can see it fine from here."

"Yes, but you can't *feel* it."

I glanced down to see Marc's fist around a handful of the corpse's hair, using it to rotate the poor man's head, which obviously provided no resistance. "The bones kind of…*crunch,* when you turn his neck. That means his vertebrae are fractured."

"Fascinating. Really." I swallowed thickly, and Marc continued to twist the man's neck, his ear aimed at the ground. Maybe he could actually hear the bones grinding together. *Ewwwww.* "Could you stop that, please? Leave the poor man alone."

"Sorry." He dropped the head, and it hit the grass with a nauseatingly solid thunk. "It's weird, though. Not a bite or fresh claw mark anywhere."

"How do you know? You've only seen his neck." With a resigned sigh, I stared down at the body, scenes from the latest *CSI* rerun flashing through my mind. "Shouldn't we turn him over, or check for wounds beneath his clothes, or something like that? What if he was killed somewhere else, then moved here to keep us from finding the real crime scene?"

"Crime scene?" Marc laughed, and I gritted my teeth, uneasy with the fact that he was so comfortable around

corpses. "You watch too much TV," he said, refocusing the light on the werecat's neck.

Only it wasn't just any werecat. It was a stray—a human initiated into our secret existence by violence rather than by birth. At least he *had* been a stray. Now he was dead, and his social standing no longer mattered.

Lucky bastard.

"It's research." I dragged my gaze from the corpse to Marc's face. His gold-flecked brown eyes glittered in the moonlight.

"Whatever." Marc shrugged, and the flashlight's beam swung off into the grass. "My point is that he wasn't bitten or clawed. I don't smell blood."

Pushing damp strands of hair from my face, I sniffed the air, flushing in annoyance when I realized he was right; if there had been any blood present, fresh or old, we would have smelled it. And if there was no blood, there had been no fight. No werecat—even one in human form—would fail to draw blood with a bite or scratch.

How was I sure the murderer was a werecat? Simple. No human had the strength to break a man's neck one-handed, and judging from the bruises on the back of the dead guy's neck, that was exactly what had happened to him. Sure, in theory it could have been a bruin, or one of the other shape-shifter species, but the chances of that were almost nil. What few other breeds existed weren't interested in us, and the feeling was mutual.

"Oh," I said, glancing again at the trees as I conceded his point. What else could I say? Marc was the expert on dead bodies, and in spite of having…um…*made* one a few months earlier, I knew almost nothing about murder victims. And I liked it that way.

Marc sighed. "Fine. If it'll make you happy, I'll check for other wounds." With an Oscar-worthy grunt of effort, he tugged up on the dead guy's T-shirt, exposing a tangle of old scars reaching toward his spine from both sides of his chest.

I frowned at the long-healed marks. "You're right. I admit it. There's no reason to undress him."

Marc shot me a cocky smile and lowered the poor man's shirt.

Biting my lip in frustration, I glanced at my watch, pressing the button on the side to illuminate the face with a soft green glow. Almost one in the morning. *Great.* I should have been curled up next to Marc in bed, exhausted but satisfied. Instead, I was digging unmarked graves by moonlight, exhausted but creeped-the-fuck-out.

We'd dropped off the unconscious Dan Painter in a thick stand of trees just east of the Mississippi River and north of Arkansas City, still bound and now gagged, to teach him a lesson. Then we'd backtracked two hours northwest, on a predominantly two-lane highway. Or rather, *Marc* had backtracked. I'd recited the prologue to *Canterbury Tales* in my head. In Middle English. Backward. Marc had his special skills, and I had mine. Of course, his came in far handier than mine in our line of work. Bad guys were hardly ever intimidated by a stirring recitation from *Hamlet.*

Gritting my teeth, I clung to the last of my dwindling supply of willpower and gave up all hope of seeing my bed before dawn. If I was going to be awake all night, I might as well get something done.

"Okay, a broken neck, but no other obvious wounds," I said, tugging on the hem of my snug white T-shirt.

Of course, if I'd known I would be handling a corpse, I would have worn something…darker. Or disposable. As it

was, I considered myself fortunate to be wearing jeans and a T. If not for the bag I'd packed for our weekend getaway, I'd be digging in expensive black slacks and a red silk blouse.

"So, we're probably looking for another stray," I continued, brushing imaginary grave dirt from my shirt. "Maybe one with a grudge, or a history of violent behavior?" I could feel the fine layer of grit all over me, like a ghostly dusting of death, somehow itching and burning *beneath* my skin.

Or maybe I was overreacting.

Marc shrugged, oblivious to my discomfort as his face smoothed into an unreadable expression. "That describes nearly every stray I've ever met. But it doesn't matter, 'cause we're not looking for anyone. We're here to dispose of the body, not investigate the murder."

I nodded and glanced away. I'd known better. The Territorial Council, nominally led by my father, would never tie up its resources investigating the murder of a single stray. They would almost certainly view the dead cat as one less flea in their collective fur.

"It doesn't matter what he was doing here, or who killed him," Marc whispered, kneeling next to the body. "No one gives a damn."

He would never have voiced such a concern to anyone else, and my heart ached for him, knowing what it had probably cost him to say it in front of me. I knew he cared not because he'd known the stray, but because he *hadn't.* Because no one had. And because, like the dead cat we'd come to bury, Marc was a stray. He was facing what I knew to be one of his worst fears: a quick burial in the middle of the night, without a single friend to remember him kindly.

As long as I was alive, that would never happen to Marc.

He had me, my whole family, and our entire Pride to miss and remember him. Yet the injustice of a secret burial for the anonymous cat still bothered him. Righteous anger burned bright in his eyes when he looked up at me, and there was nothing I could do to put out the flames.

Marc glanced away from my sympathetic look, but before he turned back to the body, his expression hardened into its usual business face, cold and unreadable. It was a defense mechanism I had yet to master.

He pulled a brown leather wallet from the stray's back pocket and thumbed through the contents: two credit cards, a few folded receipts, a single wrinkled twenty, and at least two dozen crisp new one-dollar bills. Marc slid a driver's license from its plastic cover and passed it up to me without even glancing at it.

I looked at the photo, and immediately wished I hadn't. Until I saw his face, Bradley Moore had just been a body, a nameless corpse to be disposed of quickly, so I could get on with my night.

But now that I'd seen his license, I knew that Moore lived in Cleveland, Mississippi, and was licensed to drive a motorcycle. He'd just celebrated his thirty-fourth birthday, was six foot two and a half, and weighed two hundred and twelve pounds. And he had the most beautiful, hypnotic bluish-gray eyes I'd ever seen.

"Do you smell that?" Marc asked.

"Smell what?" I slipped the license into my front pocket and knelt beside him, eager to forget Mr. Moore's haunting eyes.

"The killer, I assume. I smell another cat on him. On his clothes, and here, on his neck." He bent to sniff where he'd indicated, and my stomach churned. I understood his sym-

pathy for the unknown stray; I really did. And after seeing Moore's face, I couldn't help but share it. But three months earlier, I'd had to rip out a tomcat's throat in order to free myself and Abby, my kidnapped cousin. And impractical as it might sound, considering my line of work, I'd had no plans to ever again share such intimate contact with a corpse.

I could handle wrapping the cadaver in plastic and dumping it in a hole in the ground, though that might have been easier if I'd never learned the victim's name. But sniffing a corpse's neck went way past my definition of decorous behavior. It was macabre, and disturbing.

"I can smell it from here," I said. Marc hadn't asked me to come closer, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"Does it smell like a stray to you?"

I inhaled deeply, mentally sorting through the smells I already knew. The strongest was Marc. Musky and masculine, his scent was as familiar as my own. It was also *blended* with mine, the result of every kiss and embrace we'd shared since my last shower. Which we'd also shared, come to think of it.

Next, I filtered out the scents from the field around us, so pervasive I barely noticed them without conscious effort. I identified trees, grass, dirt, fresh dew, and several small rodents, mostly rabbits and mice.

On the body itself were several more scents, including Mr. Moore's cologne, the oppressive stench of cigarette smoke, and a strong, minty breath spray. What was left after I'd sorted out all of those smells was the one Marc meant. It came from the stray, but was not his personal scent. It was something else. Something definitely feline, and rich, and pungent. Almost spicy…

Shock jolted up my spine, cold and numbing. Terror ripped

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