

Moon of a Divided Heart

I'd made all the preparations. Stephanie had four days off (one of the few perks of working for Amtrak), we had reservations at Chez Jacques, and the emerald engagement ring rested in its velvet box in my pocket. I fought the urge to rehearse some grand speech that would no doubt come out stilted and corny like the guys getting on their knees in those 1940s movies. No, better to stay in the moment and say something honest like, "Stephanie, this past year of living together has been the best in my life. Will you marry me?"

Traffic on the I-8 slowed as soon as I got to Hotel Circle. I tuned the radio to "All Things Considered" and settled in for a long wait. The sun had set by the time I got home but we still had twenty minutes to get to the restaurant. I pulled into the parking spot, grabbed my laptop from the backseat, and dashed toward the courtyard. Only then did I notice the full moon rising over the eucalyptus trees by the fence. Damn! Why hadn't I realized it? Up the stairs two at a time. I burst into our second-story apartment just as Stephanie began the change. Already thick, black fur covered her skin and her body's altered shape was stretching her clothes to the point of ripping.

The conventional wisdom about werewolves simply isn't true. Stephanie doesn't change into a snarling, vicious beast but into an affectionate Newfoundland dog with floppy ears and warm, friendly eyes. Werewolves transform into larger breeds, because a one-hundred-thirty-pound human turning into a Chihuahua would violate the conservation of mass. Then there's the myth about becoming a werewolf when one bites you. First of all, Stephanie would never bite anyone, though she drools like Victoria Falls in her dog state. Secondly, this doesn't explain how her father Max, who doubles as a two-hundred-pound mastiff, passed the condition to Stephanie but not her six sisters. Finally, there's that hokum about killing werewolves with a silver bullet. Anybody who points a gun at my Steph is in for a serious ass kicking! Enough said?

"Come on, Steph. Get off the couch."

Steph, her metamorphosis complete, whined and complied. I helped her out of her torn running shorts and halter-top. Honestly, I don't know why she puts on lingerie on the nights of her change. Perhaps she finds the thought of me unhooking the bra from a dog's torso amusing.

"Woof!" Steph stretched out her front paws to lower her head and shoulders below the level of her hips.

"Quiet! You want the manager to hear?"

"Woof!"

I reached for her nose to hold her jaws shut, but she danced out of my grasp and began romping around the apartment. You'd be surprised how fast a big dog can move, but agility was never Steph's strong suit. She bounded toward the couch, turned, and cleared a pile of *New Yorkers* from the end table with her tail. I dove to catch a half-full glass of red wine before it ruined the carpet but could only watch in horror as momentum carried Steph's massive body into the TV stand. The TV tipped off its support and tumbled to the floor with a heart-wrenching crunch. The downstairs neighbor began banging on the ceiling with a broom handle.

"Bad dog!"

Hanging her head, Steph crawled away. She returned moments later with a chew toy, dropped the rubber mouse at my feet, and gazed at me with sorrowful eyes.

“Don’t give me that look!”

Steph pushed the toy mouse closer to my feet with her nose.

“Oh, all right.” I bent and reached for the toy.

Steph snatched it with her teeth for a game of tug-of-war. I played a few minutes for form’s sake but had little motivation to hold on to the slobbery mouse. After Steph’s victory I wiped my damp hand on my pants and felt the outline of the velvet box through the fabric. Was it too late for a refund? I mean, after she changes back to human and wants to be romantic, it’s hard to forget cleaning Steph’s messes off the sidewalk with a plastic bag the night before. And what if, like her dad, she starts spending more than a few nights a month as a dog? What if she stays that way forever? The glass inside the broken TV rattled as I lifted it off the carpet and set it back on its stand. I sat down to read. Steph collapsed on the carpet with a snort and rested her chin on my foot. She started growling before I made it through two pages of *Pride of Baghdad*. Someone knocked on the door.

“Just a minute!”

I dragged Steph into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. What I wouldn’t give for a good choke chain at times! I opened the front door and found my apartment manager standing on the welcome mat.

“Ah, Mrs. McGarrigle, how are you, tonight?”

“Mr. Thomson in number twelve complained about the noise,” she said. Mrs. McGarrigle was a shrewish, gray-haired woman with a face like a hatchet and a personality to match. To my knowledge, no one in the apartment complex knew her first name.

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. The TV fell off its stand.”

“He said he heard barking.”

“I was watching *101 Dalmatians*, not the Glenn Close version but the original animation. Have you seen it?”

Cruella’s eyes shifted. I followed her gaze to the pink rubber mouse lying on the carpet.

“Stephanie’s niece.” I leaned closer. “Teething.”

“You are aware that your lease forbids pets and that violations are grounds for eviction.”

I nodded. Steph started scratching at the bedroom door.

“What a friend we have in Jesus!” I belted out to cover the noise. “It’s 7:15, time for my nightly hymns,” I explained. “All our sins and griefs to bear!”

The scowling Mrs. McGarrigle turned on her heels and walked away. I sang a few more verses for good measure before releasing Steph from the bedroom and returning to my graphic novel. Steph ambled up to me and stood panting with breath that could knock down a charging rhino.

“What do you want?”

I stared into her dark, brown eyes. Was my Stephanie in there or did the change transform her mind into a dog’s too? I’d never learned the answer because Stephanie forgot everything that happened in her altered state on her return to human form. I got her a dog biscuit and read until 9:30 when Steph scratched at the door. She gnawed my

sleeves at batted my hand with her paw as I put on her collar and attached the leash. I peeked to make sure no one was looking and snuck her through the parking lot and out the side gate to the wooded area on the edge of the canyon.

Steph squatted almost immediately. I turned away and examined an old, gnarled juniper. With its mass of dead branches that lay like Carol Kane's frizzy hair atop its listing trunk, the tree could have inspired a thousand classical Chinese poets. I recited a few lines from Tu Fu's "Ballad of the Army Carts" from memory. Lost in contemplation I must have loosened my grip on the leash, because Steph broke free and dashed down the sloping canyon wall.

"Steph, come back here!"

Tongue lolling out of her mouth, she looked back with an expression of pure joy and loped up the other side to the street beyond.

"Damn it! I don't have time for this. I have to work, tomorrow."

I descended into the canyon, made my way through the brush, and climbed to the neighborhood on the other side. Fortunately, the street lamps lit the scene with enough mercury-vapor glow for me to make out Steph's receding form. Careful not to run and turn this into a game, I tracked her past a house with a torn sofa on the porch and down a side street. I walked by more homes and an apartment building with techno music coming out of one of the windows. I froze in front of an auto shop. There, horror of horrors, I found her. Lit by spotlights she and another dog were coupling. Having climbed onto her back, the German shepherd clung to her with his front legs while pumping his hips for all he was worth. Of course, she couldn't help it, but the hurt cut to my spleen.

"Steph! How could you?"

She stared at me with uncomprehending eyes.

"Get away from there!"

Boiling with rage, I shoved the other dog aside and dragged Steph toward home. I was so furious that I didn't check the courtyard for witnesses. Once inside I slammed the door and went to bed without checking her fur for burrs.

Around daybreak Stephanie, now in human form, climbed into bed. She draped an arm around me and snuggled close pressing her warm flesh against my back. She was always randy after a transformation. As her fingers toyed with the elastic on my boxer shorts, I tossed off the blanket and sat up.

"Is something the matter?" She raised herself on to one elbow. The sheet fell away from her olive-skinned torso exposing her pear-sized breasts.

"No, nothing," was all I could force out of my tightened chest. She was such a beauty with her raven hair and thin lips that curved in a perpetual smile, but I couldn't bear to look. I turned and fumbled into the pants I'd left on the chair the night before. "I have an early meeting this morning."

I got to the office before my coworkers, placed the Yellow Pages on my desk, and opened it to the section on marriage and family therapists. Three were within a few miles of home. Would they believe I was jealous of a German shepherd? If they did would they report Stephanie's condition to her employer? Even though the change happened at precisely predicable times, Amtrak wouldn't let someone who had blackouts continue driving their locomotives. I put the phone book back on the shelf and stared at the blank computer screen while the others arrived. Only one person could help me.

“Stan.” I rested a hand against the doorframe of my supervisor’s office. “I’m not feeling well, today. Is it all right if I go home?”

Stephanie’s parents had moved to a small house in Normal Heights after the girls went off to college. I parked on the street in front of it, entered through the gate in the chain-link fence, followed the walkway to the red concrete porch, and rang the bell. A dog barked from inside the house. Stephanie’s mother answered.

“Kyle, I was expecting you.” She held the door for me. “Come in.”

A mastiff waited in the hallway.

“Hello, Max.” I scratched Stephanie’s father behind the ear and followed Mrs. Peterson into the living room.

She wore faded jeans and a tight pullover that showed off a figure that was mostly unchanged since her days as a campus protestor in the sixties. With her full breasts, dark eyes, and shoulder-length black hair she radiated a mature beauty that even eighteen-year-olds would find hard to resist.

“Would you like some tea?”

“All right.” I sat on an Early-American armchair with a white doily draped over its back.

Stephanie’s mother returned with a porcelain tea service that was decorated with tiny flowers.

“Milk?”

I nodded. She poured the milk into my cup before adding the tea and handing it to me. I carried the delicate cup to my chair and sat balancing the saucer on my lap. Mrs. Peterson took the seat across the coffee table. Max sat on his haunches and stared at her as if expecting a treat.

“How do you manage?” I stammered.

“It was hard at first. We dated for almost six months before I found out. Max’s family had money so he could rent a house instead of living in a college dorm.” Mrs. Peterson sipped her tea and left a lipstick smudge on the rim of the cup. “I guess living with a werewolf is like anything else. You get used to it.”

“But one minute he could be discussing Mendelssohn and a few hours later eating garbage off the sidewalk.”

“I have to accept him the way he is.” She patted her husband on the head. “Isn’t that right, Max?”

The mastiff thumped his tail on the floor.

“The hardest part for me is...” I swallowed to get the words out. “I’m afraid she won’t be there for me when I need her.”

“Their mental state is what it is, even if it’s not what you want it to be at the time. But though their brains change with the transformation, their love for you remains the same.” She placed a card on the table. “POW – Partners of Werewolves. It’s our support group. Only you can decide if you can commit to a life with Stephanie, Kyle. Whatever you choose, I’ll help however I can.”

Max lay down and rested his chin on his paw. The whites of his eyes made tiny crescent moons as he kept his gaze on his companion of thirty years. This look did more to make up my mind than all Mrs. Peterson’s talk of heroic love. Stephanie and I would have to get a house with a fenced yard but the housing bubble was going to burst and it

was time to get out of that apartment complex, anyway. I excused myself and walked keys-in-hand to my car. Traffic was light this time of day. I'd be home in a half hour. That would give Stephanie and me plenty of time to celebrate before dark.

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