

Chapter 2

“You and Allen can finish up. I need to talk to the night manager.” Solomon said, as he calmly walked away. If I didn’t know what he was I would have suspected he was a man who had been through intensive meditation or mind altering drugs. Possibly both.

We needed to be out of the room by 10:30. At least that’s what Solomon said. And over the last few hours I became less likely to doubt anything the man said. Every word Solomon spoke was slow and measured. Every movement he made was careful and controlled. You had no other choice but to obey him.

I knew Allen had heard what Solomon said, so I wasn’t as nervous as I walked over to help him. We worked together to move the big table into a corner of the room. Then we started stacking the folding chairs in the corner.

Things had started to make more sense as the meeting went on. At the end I’d agreed to come here every week and meet with the group. I’d discuss my symptoms and how I was feeling. They’d help me out.

On the whole I felt better for coming... even if things hadn’t gone smoothly. Allen and I were going to have a hell of a time explaining our matching shiners to our boss.

“Allen?” I said carefully. My throat was still sore from yelling over the last two hours.

Allen paused, debating, before he finally gave a short “Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Well, you can try.” Allen told me.

I felt myself relax. I could hardly believe he was still talking to me. I wouldn’t if someone had called me what I called him.

“So what’s the question?” Allen asked.

Eddie had pulled a beat-up flask from his jacket as soon as the meeting had ended. He was taking swigs from it while he looked over old flyers on the bulletin board. He was eyeing our conversation, generally unconcerned.

“Is it ... always this easy?” I said, “To join up with a pack?”

“From what I’ve seen,” Allen said, “There’s a universal appeal about banding together to save your collective asses.”

“How do we know... you know... who we are? Or do we?”

“You’re going to have to repeat that Tom. I don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of understanding what you just said...”

“I mean, how do we figure out if someone else is... a werewolf?” I asked. I dropped my voice for the werewolf part, despite the fact that it wasn’t dangerous to be overheard. “I mean, is there something we can see, do our eyes glow red just before the moon changes us, or...” Allen started chuckling, “...what? What the hell?”

“No, no, I get it... just got the image of Johnny trying to tear some poor fools head off and apologizing as he did it.”

Solomon had mentioned Johnny, before the yelling had started. He was 17 and apparently very unsure of himself.

“Look, after the first outbreak, things will start to kick in.” Allen assured me, “Your nose will start perking up. Your eyes will start seeing things. It’s scary as hell at first, but once you get the hang of it, you can smell another one of ‘us’ from a mile away.” We walked over to Eddie who was still drinking and pretending to read. “Course, you can already do that with this mutt anyway. I pity what you’ll have to put up with when you turn, kid.”

“Mmm.” Eddie’s mouth was thankfully preoccupied by his hip flask.

“What happens when I... turn?” I asked.

“That’s a couple weeks away; I wouldn’t start worrying about it now, kid.” Allen said, wiping off his hands with a damp brown paper towel. The way he was standing, in an outfit that probably cost more than my rent, I could have sworn he was posing.

“But, what’s it going to be like? I mean, does it hurt the first time, or...”

“I said don’t worry none about it. Christ, kid, are you planning on getting an ulcer before you turn 30?” The accent was back. This wasn’t good.

“Allen, it doesn’t hurt for Tom to ask questions.” Solomon said, as he glided up.

“I just don’t like thinking before I hit the bars, boss, it upsets my stomach.”

“You gotta start drinking earlier in the day, then.” Eddie said, silently toasting him with the flask.

“Well, considering I hang out with you, maybe that’s the one good piece of advice to come out of your mouth in a long time.” Allen shot back.

Eddie gave a sarcastic, weary bow, before he staggered off to a corner of the room, humming something.

“You guys go out drinking?” I asked, “On a weekday?”

“We live reckless lives, we creatures of the night…” Allen paused for a second, shaking the row of folding chairs to ensure they were secure, “When you consider all this stress that’s going to be coming into your life, I’m surprised that you don’t want to try some of our short-lived nightlife.”

“Short-lived? What’s short lived?”

“Atlanta.” Eddie commented as he looked over a flyer for a Battered Women’s shelter that had closed down in 1985.

“What?” I asked.

“At-LAN-ta.” Eddie repeated, carefully enunciating in a southern accent.

“What about Atlanta?”

“Allen has more experience with night life than the rest of us. He believes Ohio is lacking.” Solomon said.

“All I know is that y’all drink hard and drink heavy around these parts, but you go to bed just after the bars close because you need to be up early in the morning.” Allen’s accent had snuck in like a ninja, slicing his Yankee to ribbons.

“I’d call that being responsible.” I told him.

“But I’d call it foolish.” Allen shot back.

“In any case, we should get going. I don’t want to hear this argument again while we’re all still sober.” Solomon said, glancing at Eddie nursing the dregs from his flask, “Well, the rest of us, anyway.”

“...do I need to go out with you guys?” I asked, with some hesitation.

“We’d like you to come with us, but no, it’s not required,” Solomon carefully told me. “Is there any reason why you can’t go?”

“I don’t drink during the week, and unlike Allen I’ve got a shift tomorrow.”

Eddie growled as he drank his last swallow.

“We’ll have you back in time for work,” Solomon said, ever calm. “Come to the bar with us. We’ve never had the good fortune of having a designated driver before.”

~+~

We took the All-American Bridge back. I had never liked driving over this thing. The way it arched across the little Cuyahoga Valley made my head spin. It was like crossing a sea on a ribbon of silk.

The two roads that ran across the bridge began crossing the void miles apart, and collided in midair halfway across. The giant concrete wishbone this formed gave the bridge the nickname “Y-Bridge”.

If you wanted to kill yourself dramatically in Akron, you jumped off where the two roads came together in the crotch of the Y. At least one person did it every year. There were dents in the support beams of warehouses just bellow us where little old ladies had left their mark on the world they were leaving behind.

I couldn’t help but think about all the dents bellow us that were once fathers and uncles and little old aunts. I hated crossing the thing.

So it was only natural that I freaked out when our tire blew.

By some stroke of luck, Allen had decided we were taking his car. If I had been driving we would have gone over the bridge. I screeched like a little girl who had just gotten goosed by a priest.

“Allen, I thought you just took this thing in for maintenance.” Solomon said, still relaxed in the passenger’s seat as the car seized up.

“It was probably just a nail or a piece of glass.” Allen said, more irritated than anything else. We pulled over as far as our shivering hunk of steel would take us and put on our blinkers.

“Can we hurry this up? The bar closes in an hour.” Eddie said, rubbing his temples.

“Heaven forbid we should see you sober.” Solomon smiled.

“You wouldn’t like me when I’m sober.” Eddie said as Allen got out.

I fought the urge to lock my door. I suddenly feared some piece of Uncle Teddy would make a sudden appearance. They had never found his right hand, and mom was too pissed off at the paving costs we had to pay to put up much of a fight to find it. I really hated driving over the Y-Bridge.

When someone knocked on Eddie's window, I jumped a mile and screamed in a key I hadn't hit since puberty.

"Jesus!" Eddie muttered and smacked me with the back of his hand.

The knock came again. It was Allen. His hand anyway, I recognized the cufflinks.

"WHAT?" Eddie barked.

"Eddie." Solomon said. It wasn't a request.

"Sorry." Eddie said, as he opened the door. "What?"

I suddenly heard a strange voice scream over the traffic.

I twisted around in my seat and saw, through the oncoming headlights, that Allen was holding someone. Eddie was out of the car in one fluid motion, just as the person slipped out of their coat and started running into oncoming traffic.

"Solomon?" I asked.

"Wait." Solomon said.

Then I heard the voice coming back. It was getting louder and louder over the waves of sound vibrating from the pounding traffic.

Someone was saying: "Sorry Eddie! Sorry Eddie!"

Then the entire car rocked as something slammed into the trunk.

"What the FUCK are you doing?!" Eddie was yelling, "Didn't I tell you what I was going to do to you if I caught you doing this again? Didn't I? WELL!?"

"Tom," Solomon said, carefully unbuckling his seatbelt, "Get out."

Eddie was holding a guy against Allen's trunk. He didn't look like he had a neck, but Eddie was holding him by something like it. Lying on his back, built with more shoulders than he needed, the guy looked like a helpless turtle. "Sorry Eddie! I'm real sorry Eddie!" he was babbling, scared out of his wits, "I didn't know it was you Eddie."

“Do you think we need this kind of attention?!” Eddie asked, pointing at Allen, “How were you going to explain carrying a strip if someone stopped you?!”

Allen was holding the handle of a strange device. It looked like the tread to an old army tank. Except on one side of the belt each joint in the tread had an impressive spike attached to it. The entire contraption was covered with rust and strange red stains.

Then I looked at our car. The back two tires were completely shredded.

“...do they need Madres for, Carl?” Solomon was asking as my ears drifted back to the conversation. Solomon hadn’t lost his calm, but there was something in his voice that suddenly made all the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“The s-suppliers,” Carl stammered, “They’ve been s-sending unhealthy ones. The Convention is in three months. The price the families offer for a clean wet-nurse is... tempting....”

“As our Beta said, this is not the way to do it. Whatever their needs, your masters know what happens when these... situations come to light.”

”Helena said that she would help you. She told me, don’t worry, that she would never let your pack get in harms way.”

“Then she should have told us herself.” Solomon said, firm as steel.

Eddie’s grip on the man tightened. As his eyes strained against his skull, what was left of his voice went up several octaves. “You can talk to her! Her family is meeting at some steakhouse a few blocks from here! You can go there right now and ask her!”

Solomon looked patiently conflicted. “Eddie?”

“It’s not unusual, boss.” Eddie said, holding his grip but not relaxing it. “And the Convention is getting pretty close.”

Red and blue lights flickered to life behind us.

“Anyone know what we’re going to tell them this time?” Allen asked. He turned his back to the squawking cop car, hiding the strip with his body

“That depends on what Carl can offer us,” Solomon said. His gray eyes were as focused as a pinpoint of light under a magnifying glass.

Carl’s shaking hand reached into his coat and pulled out a business card. The paper it was printed on was so rich and red even I could see it clearly in the dark.

Solomon took it, distastefully with two fingers. He showed it to Eddie.

“Big City Chophouse.” Eddie said, appraisingly shifting his cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other. “It’s off of East Market. They’ve used it before.”

“Then Carl was hauling some scrap metal to a recycling station. These things happen.”

Carl gasped gratefully as Eddie let go of his throat.

Allen’s shoulders started moving against the light of the cop car and I could hear faint squealing sounds with each shift of his shoulders.

I looked down and saw he was quickly warping the sharp rusty metal into an indefinable shape. He tore the blades off in pieces, dropping them on the asphalt next to the car. He was using nothing to destroy the strip but his own bare hands.

“Close your mouth kid,” Eddie muttered around his cigarette, “The cops’ll get suspicious.”

“I can take care of it boss.” Allen said, “It’s my car anyway.”

“Thirty minutes.” Solomon said, never a question.

“Or less,” Allen agreed.

Solomon passed by Carl and stared him down. “Or less.”

“Yes Solomon.” Carl whimpered.

We walked away, and I heard Carl and Allen making excuses behind us.

“Can we just walk away from the scene of an accident?” I asked.

“I always think they have the Convention in April.” Solomon confessed, more to Eddie than me.

“These things sneak up on a person, boss.” Eddie admitted.

“Three months is a bit early to celebrate the Convention’s approach.”

“This isn’t the main event. It’s a cocktail hour.” Eddie explained, “They do strategizing at these things. The bastards like to know who they’re going to screw over and how before the fact.”

“Eternal life and they waste it on games like this...” Solomon said, with clear distaste. “When we go in I expect you to behave yourself.”

“Geez, boss... You think I’m going to screw up three months of clean living in one night?”

“I can understand a beer or two, but nothing else.”

“Yeah boss.” Eddie grumbled, as he moodily lit a new cigarette with the half-dead butt of his current one.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Eddie fell back a couple of paces and got me in a headlock. Cigarette smoke hit me smack in the face, making me sputter and cough.

“We’re crashing a bloodsucker’s ball.” Eddie said, pulling me along, “Solomon needs some answers about what happened back there.”

“Vampires?” I asked between hacks, “You mean...” I coughed hard enough to taste the pizza I had for lunch. “Real ones?”

Eddie gave a hacking snort that might have been a laugh.

“Isn’t that-“ - a wheezing fit- “-dangerous?”

“Nah. More like perfect timing.” Eddie said, “You’re going to get introduced in style, kid.”