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Surviving Frank

by

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Prologue

Frank was on his back in a Dumpster.

Pieces of cardboard, chunks of plastic, and trash bags filled to capacity pressed against him from all sides. A sliver of light slipped in through cracks in the warped lid, allowing him to see clearly. He panned his snout back and forth, sniffing through the layers of smells. The combination of rotting seafood and salt told him that he was near the waterfront, but he had no memory of how he had gotten there. The lack of a hangover indicated that he had not been drinking, at least not enough to end up in a Dumpster with a gap in his memory. The only other alternative that came to mind was that someone had knocked him out and tossed him there.

“Sonofabitch.”

A comforting nudge in his side told him that his revolver was still with him. At least he could blow something up if he needed to. He hauled himself out of the muck and pushed the Dumpster’s cover up. The fresh air was a blessing. He swung over the side and landed in a

crouch, ready for an attack from any direction.

Several chunks of rotten cabbage and a peach fell from his clothing. A sickening splat reached his ears as they hit the ground. He brushed the rest of the trash off of his matted fur and nearly gagged as his fingers slid into a putrefied tomato.

A quick check reassured him that he had shaken most of the trash from his body. Looking down at himself, a familiar pang struck him. If he had still been human, if his body wasn't covered in fur, it would have been a lot easier to clean up.

He wiped his hands on what had, until now, been his best corduroy bell-bottomed pants. As he examined his torn clothing, in the dim light of the coming dawn, he realized that they were stained with blood. A quick check of his furry body revealed no sign of injury. The blood was not his own. Its scent told him that it was from a human, yet as he sniffed the air, his snout going into overdrive, he did not detect anyone nearby.

He shrugged off the remains of his tweed suit jacket, revealing his fur-covered chest, and tried to remember what had happened. He had been in his Gremlin, heading home. He remembered receiving a call for assistance from two fellow police officers. Since he was close to their location, he had gone to help and discovered an abandoned squad car in front of a warehouse. A few frantic cries for help crackled over the radio and he could hear gunshots from somewhere inside the building. Something happened, then. Pain had lanced through his body, seeming to strike every inch of him at once. He had fallen to the ground and rolled onto his back. That was the last thing he could remember.

His whiskers quivered, sending a pinprick of pain up his snout. He had never had trouble

remembering things before, even when he drank heavily. Someone had hit him with something, perhaps the electrical shock of a Taser. That was the only explanation.

The thrumming of distant car engines caught his attention. The city was beginning to wake up. He sniffed the air, picked up his own scent, and followed it back.

At the alley's end, he emerged onto a broad street that separated several warehouses. Old railroad tracks cut down the center of the street. The empty squad car, its doors still open, its lights still flashing, was parked in front of the building. The officers, however, were nowhere within the range of his senses.

Frank felt oddly exposed without a partner to watch his back. Brent was dead, as were the partners who had come before him. Determined to never place another officer in danger, he had chosen to work alone. No one else needed to suffer because he was cursed.

A quick check of the car revealed that the radio had been smashed and the shotgun was missing. Frank rubbed the fur under his snout with the back of one hand. The motion did not calm his anxiety any more than rubbing his goatee had helped when he had been human.

He looked up at the warehouse. The large metal door stood open, beckoning him to enter. The two officers might be somewhere within that structure. He pulled his revolver free of its holster and climbed the stairs in two strides. Whoever had blind-sided him would not take him by surprise a second time. He found it curious, however, that they had allowed him to keep his weapon.

A trail of fresh blood led inside. Frank listened, his canine ears straining to hear any sound, but the building was silent. He sniffed the air again. The sudden, overwhelming smell of

perfume clouded his senses, preventing him from detecting anything else. He flattened his ears back against his head.

Damn them.

Whoever they were, they had hit on one of his weaknesses. He wondered why they had left him alive. Two answers came to mind. One, they had simply miscalculated, or two, they were playing some kind of game with him. Either way, they would pay. He pulled back the hammer on his revolver and proceeded inside.

* * * * *

The blood trail ended in a small office. Several chairs, the stuffing torn out of them, lay at odd angles around the room. A small wooden desk had been split in half, as if by a mighty karate chop. A tangle of electronic wires and circuit boards, attached by a thread to the body of a Mac Classic, hung from the single remaining fluorescent light above. The light fixture swung back and forth, causing shadows to dance around the room.

The scent of perfume was almost nonexistent here, allowing Frank to detect several layers of smells. The top layer was the iron stench of human blood. Beneath that, he detected the scent of lemon meringue pie. He felt the fur on his back rising, some of it poking through the holes in the tattered remnants of his shirt. He growled. Lemon meringue happened to be his favorite dessert. Something told him it was not coincidence.

A low moan, barely audible even to his superior hearing, emanated from the other side of a double door on the far side of the room. Every muscle in his body tensed. He slowly crept up to the door and kicked it open. Several piles of large, wooden storage crates formed a ring in the

center of the room. The two missing cops were there. One of them, a Hispanic perhaps in his mid-forties, hung from a metal support beam by his feet. His eyes were closed, but the moan was coming from him. His blue street uniform was smeared with white and yellow ooze. The second cop lay face down in the doorway. A large lump on the back of his head was visible where something had hit him. The smell of thick perfume hung in the air. Frank sneezed twice.

“Damn it!” Anger burned through him, riding on the coat-tails of the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He darted inside, his gun panning back and forth, ready to fire at the slightest provocation. He dove to the right, rolled, and came up on one knee. Nothing there. He launched himself from the ground, thankful for the strength his disease gave him, and landed on the top of the pile of boxes. Stretching his senses to the max, he scanned, smelled, listened, and felt for danger. The perfume prevented him from smelling just about anything, but his hearing detected no out-of-place sounds.

Jumping down, he went to the cop on the floor, rolled him over, and felt for a pulse. Alive. This cop was younger than the first, with short blond hair, a clean-shaven jaw, and a face that seemed somehow innocent. Frank recognized him as Officer Ryan, a beat cop from the North End.

Two Weeks Later

“What do you know about werewolves?” The captain shifted his bulk forward in his chair and looked up at him.

Ryan arched one eyebrow, but managed to stop himself from frowning. He had not expected that question and had no idea how it might affect the outcome of their meeting. He risked a glance at his open performance review where it lay next to his application for promotion on O’Leary’s desk. It offered no clues as to the origins of the bizarre question.

He searched his memory for his knowledge of werewolves. He decided a quick, high-level answer would be best. “Well, sir, the existence of werewolves was proven in the late eighteen hundreds. They are people who transform into half-man, half-wolf creatures in the light of the full moon. Some of them are good, some are evil, but all of them can be killed by silver. Grenades or other explosives would probably work too, but they are hardly practical.” He thought his response was pretty good, considering that it had been seven years since he had taken the undergraduate class on folklore and mythology.

O’Leary nodded and stood up. He towered a good six inches over Ryan, and even though he sported a considerable gut, his arms were still beefy, his chest broad with muscle. Ryan swallowed.

O’Leary looked towards the inner window of the small office. Ryan followed his gaze, but with the blinds drawn, he could see nothing. The captain paced back and forth, then stopped

to stare at a plaque on the far wall. From what Ryan knew, the bronze shield was an award to be proud of. He wondered what O'Leary had done to earn it, but was too far away to read the inscription.

O'Leary turned back to him. "What do you know about Frank T. Wolfe?"

There it was, the real question. Ryan was still in the running for promotion, and though he could not imagine why, it might just come down to his knowledge of Boston's finest, and only, werewolf detective. "I know what has been reported of his career by the local news channels."

O'Leary's face darkened.

Ryan hurried on, his mind racing, seeking a way to make up lost points. "Not that I believe everything I see on television. I know that he suffers from a unique form of the virus that causes a person to become a werewolf. This derivation of the original virus causes him to be stuck in his half-man, half-wolf state all the time. I also know that he was the first officer on the scene the night I was attacked in the warehouse."

O'Leary stopped pacing and leaned forward, his knuckles on the desk. "Yes, the warehouse. I'm going to level with you, Ryan."

"Okay." Ryan wondered why O'Leary had focused on the warehouse.

"There are a lot of more qualified applicants for this position."

Ryan sighed quietly. He wished O'Leary would hurry up and reject him so he could get the hell out of the office and back to his foot patrol.

“But for this opening,” O’Leary continued, “I need someone different. As you probably know, Frank recently lost his twelfth partner in six years. As with each of his former partners, the review board has cleared him of all charges.”

Ryan had not heard the outcome of the review board’s inquiry, but he was aware of the loss of another partner. Frank seemed to be cursed. Ryan had read about some of the werewolf’s former partners. One of them had been shot in the line of duty, another had died of cancer, and a third had been hit in the head by a falling anvil. Each death seemed unrelated and Frank had been absolved of any fault. Ryan was not sure where O’Leary was going with this.

“There are those of us who don’t buy it,” O’Leary said.

Ryan forced himself not to frown. “It, sir?”

O’Leary frowned. “You know what I’m talking about.”

So much for playing dumb. Ryan had always respected Frank as an officer. The werewolf boasted more arrests than anyone else in the history of the department. Unfortunately, Ryan saw where the conversation was leading. “You’re referring to the growing feeling, among some of the other officers, that Frank is somehow responsible for his partners’ deaths.”

O’Leary grunted his approval. “That’s right. Internal Affairs has asked me to select someone to be Frank’s new partner, someone who will be able to get to know Frank, watch him, learn his motivations, and then report back with evidence of his guilt. They believe that he is a menace to the city and to the department and needs to be contained.”

Ryan’s cheek twitched. They wanted a snitch, someone to spy on Frank, someone they could convince of Frank’s guilt, but who would appear to be innocent of any bias. They wanted

someone young and relatively unknown; in short, they wanted someone like him. He clasped his hands behind his back. “You want someone to help you bring Frank down.”

O’Leary’s eyes narrowed. “That’s right. This is a great opportunity for you, Ryan. If you don’t take it, it could be years before you get that promotion.”

Ryan managed to calm his cheek. If O’Leary had noticed, he did not seem to care. The captain had basically told him that he would never be promoted unless he played ball with them. It was blackmail, but he could never prove it. Help them destroy Frank’s career. He couldn’t do that because he did not believe any of their theories. Of course, if he said no, they would just find someone else, possibly someone who did believe it. If he was careful, he might be able to get the promotion and prove to them that Frank was innocent. It was a big risk. They could easily ruin his career. He silently cursed himself for choosing this moment to apply for a promotion. If Frank found out what was really going on, the wolf would surely kick his ass. If the other cops found out, they would never again accept him. Catch 22.

“Before I give you an answer, I have one question.” Ryan was pretty sure how O’Leary would react to the question, but he had to ask it, nonetheless. “What if you’re wrong? What if Frank really is innocent?”

O’Leary said nothing for a moment; he simply stood there, watching him. Finally, he clenched his hands into fists and slowly exhaled. “Frank is guilty.”

Ryan wondered how O’Leary had become so convinced of the wolf’s guilt. It was possible that he knew more than he was telling, but Ryan could not think of a reason why he would do that. It didn’t make any sense. Either way, Ryan had to at least be open to the

possibility that there was some truth to the captain's suspicions. If so, he could be placing himself in great danger by accepting the promotion. Regardless, he had no choice but to take the job. It was his, and Frank's, only chance.

He waited for more from O'Leary, but after several minutes, he realized that the captain had nothing else to say on the matter. O'Leary just stood there watching him, his eyebrows raised in expectation.

Ryan knew what he had to do. "Very well, sir. I accept."

O'Leary slowly smiled, then he straightened and held out his hand. Ryan gripped it, grimacing as O'Leary squeezed hard. "Good decision. Congratulations, Detective."

Ryan groaned inwardly.

Dirty Hairy

Ryan shifted his weight from the balls of his feet back to his heels and looked around the precinct. Everything was as it should be: dozens of cops running back and forth between cubicles, a hooker being booked over here, a felon being fingerprinted over there. It had barely been twenty-four hours since he had accepted O’Leary’s assignment and the promotion that came with it. Surprisingly, most of his fellow officers had taken his promotion in stride. Apparently, they were used to people being bumped in the chain of seniority.

“And another thing!” The captain’s voice drifted through the closed door of his office. Ryan strained to hear more, but could only catch bits and pieces. Looking through the windows, he saw O’Leary standing behind his desk, leaning forward with his knuckles on the blotter. Yesterday, Ryan had found the broad-shouldered man intimidating; however, with Frank towering over him, the captain seemed small.

The seven-and-a-half-foot-tall werewolf stood in front of the captain’s desk, his head lowered like an abashed schoolboy under O’Leary’s tirade. He seemed almost human at first glance, but the tufts of hair escaping from beneath the cuffs of his powder blue blazer, and his dog-like snout, told a different story. He looked exactly as Ryan remembered from the television, a huge half-man, half-wolf creature. With his size and obvious strength, he was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Ryan hoped that he could gain enough insight and evidence to prove to O’Leary that Frank was innocent of Internal Affairs’ suspicions. Somehow, he

would have to stay on the wolf's good side, get to know him, and become his friend.

“Twelve men! You lose one more partner and you're outta here, mister! Do you understand me?”

Ryan froze. He had given much thought to Frank's other partners over the past day. It was true that his first reaction was to assume Frank's innocence; however, he also had to entertain the possibility that Frank could actually be responsible for some of what O'Leary believed. At the very least, the guy was bad luck to be around. He would watch his back at all times.

“This case is damned important! Don't screw it up!” O'Leary turned towards his door. “Ryan! Get in here!”

Ryan straightened his Beretta 9mm pistol in its shoulder holster and entered the office, immediately locking eyes with his new partner. A frown creased Frank's wolf snout. Now that they were face-to-face, Ryan could see the broad tie hanging down over the wolf's fur-covered chest. It was neon green with bright orange fish all over it, reminding Ryan of something a clown might wear. With a row of razor sharp teeth, Frank could never be mistaken for a clown, however. Two shoulder holsters wrapped their way around his torso. The first contained the biggest pistol Ryan had ever seen, a revolver that had reputedly been designed by Frank to fire seventeen-and-a-half-millimeter explosive slugs. In the second, a long, steel club rested comfortably. Ryan swallowed. It probably wouldn't hurt for him to keep some silver bullets on hand. He wondered how many it would take to incapacitate the giant creature, or if the methods for taking out a normal werewolf even applied to him.

O’Leary gave him a once over and grunted. “Good to see you, Ryan.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ryan stood at parade rest.

O’Leary turned to Frank. “Hairy, this is your new partner. You can fill him in on the case later.”

Frank’s lips pulled back, revealing gleaming fangs. “You’re giving me a rookie? Captain, you know what happened to my last partners, and they were seasoned detectives. I’m bad luck. I need to work alone.” Frank’s voice was harsh, reminding Ryan of steel wool scraping against an iron frying pan, but he thought it had a ring of sincerity.

O’Leary slammed his fist on the desk. “We work in teams in this department. You will train him and, for your sake, you’d better keep him alive!”

Ryan resented the implication that he could not take care of himself. He did not need to be patronized, not even by someone with Frank’s reputation. “I can take care of myself, Captain.”

“We’ll see. Now get the hell out of my office.”

Ryan had to run to keep up with Frank as the werewolf strode past the cubicle farm in the middle of the precinct. Frank’s height allowed him to traverse the room in four steps. Ryan was impressed with his partner’s stride, but wasn’t sure that being so tall would be worth the hassle of having to duck or bang your head all the time. Frank looked as if he could play center for the Boston Celtics, assuming one could get past the fact that he resembled Chewbacca with a wolf’s head.

Ryan realized that all activity in the room had stopped and everyone within his line of sight had turned towards them, their expressions ranging from wide-eyed surprise to slack-jawed shock. This did not inspire Ryan's confidence in his recent pairing.

"Good luck, Ryan." The young officer who had spoken shook his head sadly.

Another officer waved to Frank, who by now was nearing the door. "Go easy on him, Hairy."

Ryan rushed after Frank, catching him outside at the top of the narrow stairs. He grabbed his right coat sleeve.

"Slow down, Hairy. Aren't you going to tell me what the . . ."

Frank shook him off with ease and turned to loom over him, his ears flat against his canine cranium. Ryan backed up a step and swallowed hard. The sheer magnitude of the giant wolf's presence turned his blood to ice.

"Let's get one thing straight, Rookie. My friends call me Hairy. You call me Frank, or Detective. You got that?"

Ryan swallowed. "Sure, Frank." He was relieved that his voice did not waver, and a little disappointed at Frank's attitude. Obviously, Frank was going out of his way to make him feel unwelcome, and that only added to the difficulty of his task. Somehow, he would have to gain Frank's trust. It made sense, really. Frank was probably feeling insecure after losing twelve partners. Poor bastard probably blamed himself. If he could just keep him talking, allow him to get to know him better, he was sure Frank would warm up to him.

“So, what’s our assignment?”

Frank turned away and lumbered towards the street. “In the car.”

Ryan followed him down the crowded sidewalk towards a row of brown, unmarked Ford LTDs. His heart sank as Frank headed straight for a 1976 purple and white Gremlin.

“This is about as undercover as you can get.” Ryan eyed the car with distrust.

“Forget the commentary and get in, it’s not locked.”

Of course. Why lock a Gremlin? Who would steal it? Ryan opened the passenger door and climbed inside. Frank squeezed into the vehicle, his bulk overflowing the driver’s seat, molding to the inside of the car like cranberry sauce in a can. The wolf reached under his jacket and removed a small figurine of Elvis. He stuck it into a holder on the dash, then turned on the police radio and eased the car into drive.

For the first hundred feet, neither of them said anything. Ryan just watched, wondering how he could break the ice without pissing Frank off. Clearly, his new partner wasn’t any more comfortable with their pairing than he. Keeping Frank’s notoriously bad temper in mind, Ryan thought caution was the best approach.

“What the hell are you staring at, Rookie?”

Ryan looked back at the road. “My name is Ryan, I’d appreciate it if you used it.”

“No problem, Rookie.”

Ryan had been a cop for two years. He was not a rookie, but in the interest of getting along, he decided to let it go and focus on his mission.

Frank cranked the wheel to the left. The Gremlin swerved, narrowly avoiding a bike messenger. “Moron.”

Ryan let out his breath, realizing only then that he had been holding it. Biking on the streets of Boston was insane. He had no idea how so many people did it.

Frank looked at him for a moment, and then returned his attention to the road. “Listen, Rookie, I’m going to be straight with you. I don’t know what you had to do to get this promotion, or why you’d want it, but don’t get used to it. One way or another, I’m going to convince O’Leary that I need to work alone. This partnership will be brief.”

Ryan could not look Frank in the face. He knew that Frank could do nothing to change O’Leary’s mind. They were in this together, whether he liked it or not. Frank was on thin ice and, although he didn’t know it, his job was in Ryan’s hands. “Interesting.”

Frank did not turn this time. “What?”

Ryan remembered his psychology classes vividly, and had used what he had learned frequently over the years. “I’m your thirteenth partner in six years, correct?”

Frank shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

Ryan rubbed his jaw. “It’s only natural, given that so many people around you have died or been injured, that you would be afraid to let anyone get close to you.” It still astounded him that Frank could have lost so many partners in such a short time without being the cause of their deaths.

Frank’s eyes narrowed. “Jesus Christ, Ryan, are you going to ask me on a date?” He

jerked the wheel to the left, casually cutting across on coming traffic and onto a side street.

Ryan smiled, noting as he did so that Frank's snout dipped. He had done pretty well reading the wolf's expressions up to this point, but he wasn't totally sure what this one meant. The book he had recently read on wolves had not shown anything like this. In a human, he would take it to mean sarcasm, something that made perfect sense. He had gotten so tied up in Frank's appearance that he had forgotten he had once been human.

"Frank, you don't need to do that."

"What the hell are you talking about now?" The volume of Frank's voice raised a notch.

Ryan's seatbelt locked, pinning him in place as Frank maneuvered back onto a main street. He forced himself to remain focused, sure that he was making headway. He clasped his hands in front of him, forming a church steeple with his two index fingers and tapping his chin. "You don't need to push me away to keep me safe. I can take care of myself."

Frank spit out the window. "If you follow your psychology play book, the next question should be, 'Tell me about your mother.'"

Ryan pulled his hands apart and held them up, palms facing his partner. This wasn't going to be easy. "Hey, sorry, I'm just trying to help."

"I don't need your help, so cut out the psychobabble shit right now. I'm a cop, not some confused divorcee."

Ryan was getting a reaction and learning a lot about Frank. He decided to continue his questioning. "Did you trust your other partners?"

“How many more of these touchy-feely questions are you going to ask me? Why don’t you take off the sensitive guy hat and ask me something relevant?”

Ryan sighed inwardly. He had not imagined that Frank would be so put off having him as a partner, nor had he anticipated such a frosty reception. Frank was not giving an inch, despite his best attempts to delve beneath the surface. Ryan took a deep breath. He prided himself on being likeable and on his ability to be friends with a broad variety of people; Frank would be no different. It might take awhile, but sooner or later he would accept him. Of course, the more he got to know the werewolf, the more he began to separate fact from fiction.

He decided to leave it alone. “Okay, what’s our assignment?”

“We’re investigating a murder.” Frank blurted it out almost before he had even finished asking the question, perhaps a reaction of relief.

Ryan looked up at the roof. “We’re homicide detectives investigating a murder. That’s very helpful.” He tried, unsuccessfully, to tone down the sarcasm in his voice.

“Are you joking?” Frank’s catcher’s-mitt-sized hands opened and closed on the green shag steering wheel cover. As if in response, the orange fuzzy dice dangling from the rearview mirror shook.

“Who me? Of course not.” Ryan spoke in his most casual tone, trying to put Frank at ease. “But details would help.”

“All right. A scientist has been killed.”

Ryan focused on the crime at hand and ran through his own personal investigative

checklist. “Someone out at M.I.T.?”

“Not at M.I.T, but you could say that he worked for the government.” Frank was not going to make this easy.

Here we go, twenty questions. “Okay, a government contractor. Are we talking about a biologist or a chemist?” With the seatbelt loose again, Ryan was able to turn slightly to look at his partner better.

“I choose D, none of the above.” Frank maneuvered the car into the left lane, sliding between two SUVs with barely an inch between bumpers. The man driving a blue Ford Seascape behind them honked his horn, a pathetic sounding whine, but enough to get their attention. Frank raised his right hand so that it could easily be seen by the man, curled his fingers into a fist, and extended his middle finger.

Ryan looked back for the man’s reaction, but the driver of the other car did not seem to care or notice. “Was that necessary?”

“He honked and I responded accordingly. This is Boston. Any other reaction would be seen as a sign of weakness.”

“Right.” Boston drivers. Learning to drive in the city had been quite a challenge when he had first moved there. After two years, the natives still scared him on the road. Judging by Frank’s obvious skill, however, he decided he was in good hands. He forced himself to relax. “So, when was this guy killed?”

“This morning.”

After a moment of silence, it became clear to Ryan that the wolf had told him all he was going to. “That’s it?”

Frank looked at him sidelong, and Ryan could swear that he was watching the road out of his left eye, and boring into him with the right. “Yep. You’re a cop, you’ll figure it out.”

Ryan frowned. He had hoped that they would be able to work as partners right off the bat, and that meant a free exchange of information. “You really have exceptional communication skills, Frank.”

“Yeah, that’s what my ex-girlfriend tells me.”

Ryan’s breath caught in his throat. “Girlfriend?” Surely, no woman would want to . . . he shook his head. He did not even want to think about it.

“I wasn’t always a wolf.” His eyes grew distant.

Ryan decided that it was unwise to press the issue. Clearly, there were things in his partner’s past that didn’t need to be discussed.

After a few minutes, Frank nodded gruffly. “At least you know when to shut up.”

Score one point. Ryan opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment Frank jerked the wheel to the right. The Gremlin blasted across two lanes, causing several cars to swerve out of the way, then slowed to a stop. Ryan turned. They had arrived in front of the library. He had visited the building several times, but it never failed to impress him. Made out of large slabs of granite, it looked more like a castle than a library. A series of wide stone steps led toward the front entrance, meeting ten fluted columns modeled after the Corinthian arches of ancient

Greece. Above the columns, the words “Boston Public Library” were etched into the stone. The three metal doors at the top of the stairs stood closed.

Dozens of Bostonians darted across the cement plaza at a frantic pace. They moved with unknown purpose and intent, but with determination, as they continued past the library. Scattered performers milled about, trying to sell themselves and their meager talents. Ryan wondered if Frank planned to return a library book on the way to their destination or if the scientist had been murdered there. There were no other policemen in sight, leading him to believe the former.

Frank waved towards the building. “Here we are.”

“What, at the library?”

“That’s right. Come on.” Before Ryan could respond, Frank popped open the door and practically burst from the car as if, without the door to hold him in, he could not remain in the driver’s seat. The car shook so much in the process that Ryan wondered if parts might start falling off it. Taking a deep breath, he climbed out and strode after his partner.

“Is this where the scientist was murdered?” Ryan sidestepped to avoid a juggling mime. It made a certain amount of sense that a scientist would be in a library, but it was a rather public place for a murder.

“Yes.”

That was all the information Frank seemed willing to give, so Ryan let it go, instead bracing himself for the chaos usually found at the scene of a murder. No doubt there would be people crying, photographers, and cops everywhere. He had only worked crime scenes as a beat

cop, which meant standing in front of a police line managing the crowds. Now he was a detective, and regardless of the reasons for his promotion, he was determined to do the best that he could; he would cut through the confusion and dig for clues.

Frank took the worn steps two at a time. Ryan hurried after him. They passed through the heavy oak doors, walked beneath a great stone arch, and entered the lobby. Ryan saw no books, only a wide chamber walled with smooth marble. Several very old paintings lined each wall. Another broad stairway led upward, curling to the right and the left as it neared the far wall. Two massive stone lions, guardians of the chamber and all that lay beyond, stood proudly on pillars to each side of the top of the stairs.

* * * * *

The doors to the antiquated elevator slid open, revealing the faded, worn surface of the second floor. Ryan followed Frank through several great hallways flanked by more statues and paintings, finally stopping near a cluster of study tables in the center of a small clearing formed by a dozen bookcases. The scene was a lot calmer than Ryan had expected.

Two men and three women observed from the other side of the room. Near the group, one of the bookcases lay against another at a forty-five degree angle. He did not recognize any of the civilians, but the cop had a familiar face. He had to stifle a chuckle as he recognized Sergeant Briggs. Briggs was one of those self-important cops who always seemed to think of himself as a Marine rather than a civilian law enforcement officer. Physically fit and standing tall, he wore his dark hair in a crew cut. As with every other time Ryan had seen him, a pair of mirrored sunglasses hid his eyes, making him look like a bug. Ryan had never thought he was a

particularly good cop and found it a little surprising that he was the only officer present.

Briggs straightened as they approached and looked up at Frank. “Hello, sir.” His voice was so crisp Ryan thought he might salute. Thankfully, he didn’t.

Frank’s ears flattened back. “Briggs, cut out the ‘sir’ shit right now. What’ve we got?”

“Er, right, Hairy, sorry.” Briggs stepped aside, allowing Ryan to see the fallen bookcase clearly.

A chalk outline wound its way from the floor, over a broken bench, and back down to the book-strewn floor. Ryan wondered why Frank and O’Leary had gotten them there so late if they were in charge of the investigation. For the moment he did not voice his concerns. If either the wolf or the captain were testing him somehow, the best thing he could do would be to play along, perform exceptionally, and prove himself to both of them. Once he had done that, Frank’s walls would come down and they could truly become partners, and O’Leary might be more forthcoming with information.

Frank smirked, as if sensing his thoughts. “All right, Rookie. Work your magic.”

“Right.” Ryan pulled a small notebook and pencil from his coat and stepped forward. For the moment, he ignored the odd assortment of witnesses. He knelt down, careful not to disturb anything, and peered under the damaged bookcase.

The blood droplets spattering the floor concentrated in a small pool where the victim’s head would have been. Although Ryan had come a long way from the days where the sight of blood made him vomit, he still felt a rumble in his stomach. He tore his eyes away, looking instead at the books scattered about. Their titles told an interesting story. He jotted them down,

then got down onto his side and pressed his cheek to the ground.

He heard someone come up behind him, but did not turn. It was Frank, judging by the faint dog smell. “Listening for trains?”

“Very funny.” Ryan reached under the upright shelf and used his pen to remove a small silvery bullet casing. He stood up, slipped the casing into a clear evidence bag, and handed it to Briggs.

Briggs brought it close to his sunglasses for inspection. “Looks like someone got a shot off in the struggle.”

Ryan tilted his head to one side. “The question is, why knock the shelf over when you’ve got a gun that you clearly aren’t afraid to use?”

Frank shifted his bulk, turning to face them. “Because they missed. The coroner didn’t find any bullets or holes in the body.”

Ryan frowned and felt his cheek twitch. “Why didn’t you tell me that?” He forced himself to relax and the twitching stopped. Fortunately, the others did not seem to notice.

“I wanted to see how you work.”

Frank’s furry face was unreadable, but Ryan was sure he was laughing inside. It proved that Frank was indeed testing him. He had to act a little surprised, however. He didn’t want the wolf to think the test was tainted with any kind of foreknowledge. “What?” Ryan raised his hands in the air to add a little to the drama. “Okay, then is there any point to our being here?”

Frank shrugged. “Sure. Yeah, I was curious to see what conclusions you would draw

from the evidence on hand. It's always possible that a second pair of eyes can turn something up that everyone else, including Forensics, missed." The tone of his voice made it clear that he did not think Ryan could possibly find anything.

Ryan breathed out slowly. Focus on the test. He was determined to show Frank just how valuable he could be. "Fair enough. Let's see what I can come up with."

One of Frank's eyebrows rose slightly, but he said nothing.

Ryan made his way across the room, navigating the piles of books, to the five civilians. The first, an older woman whose black hair had turned mostly to gray, stepped forward. She planted her scarecrow-like figure in front of him and glared. Ryan spied a nameplate on her chest. It read: "Bonnie Fargo, Leader." The woman, perhaps in her mid-sixties, wore a simple brown wool dress, which gave her the look of a housewife from the 1950s. Yet something in her dark eyes told Ryan that she was far more sophisticated than that: there was hardness there, and an inner strength, as if a fire burned just beneath the surface. Ryan wasn't sure what it meant, but she was clearly someone to be cautious around.

Turning away from her, he cataloged the others. Each wore a nametag, but their attire contrasted with Ms. Fargo's to a drastic degree. A young man with spiked green hair spoke in hushed tones to a girl wearing a nose ring and earring connected by a chain. Next to them, an obese man with fake "Spock" ears intently ignored a ghostly pale woman to his left. The woman's long raven hair and blood red lipstick gave her a decidedly vampish look. All in all, they made a strange bunch. He had never seen such a group in any library he had ever been in, including his few visits there.

He turned his attention back to the matriarch of the group. “Ms. Fargo? My name is Detective Ryan.”

“I don’t care who you are, Detective. The fact is we’ve been standing around here for over an hour waiting for you boys to get here, so I’d appreciate it if you’d hurry up. I don’t see the need for us to still be here. We’ve already given our statements to Sergeant Briggs and his men. We’ve certainly—”

“Please, Ma’am,” Ryan interrupted, trying his best to look sympathetic, “this will only take a minute.” He flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. “Could you tell me what happened?”

Ms. Fargo placed her hands on her hips and continued to glare at him. Finally, she smoothed her dress and sighed. “Oh, very well. It happened around a quarter to nine this morning. I was up here checking the stacks, in preparation for our nine o’clock opening, when I heard the shouting.”

“Shouting? Could you tell what they were saying? And how many there were?”

She frowned in annoyance. “There were two of them. John—”

“John? Is that the dead man’s name?”

“Yes. I heard him tell someone that the library was not open yet and that they would have to leave immediately. There was the sound of a soda can opening, a brief struggle, and then an earth-shattering crash. When I got here, it was too late.”

“Why was John in the library?” Ryan noticed Frank’s heavy breathing right behind him, but forced himself to remain focused on Fargo.

“He worked for the library, of course.” Fargo raised her chin in disdain.

“Was this a second job for him?” Ryan did not understand her reaction. She seemed indignant.

“Of course not. He’s worked here full time for over two years.”

Ryan scratched his head. “I don’t understand. I was under the impression that he was a scientist of some kind.”

Frank leaned closer, bringing his snout to Ryan’s ear. “A library scientist.”

“The guy was a librarian?” Ryan immediately regretted his response as Fargo’s eyes sent daggers in his direction.

“No, Mr. Ryan, a library scientist. He held a master’s degree in the field, as do most of my staff.”

Ryan was not sure whether he wanted to scream in anger at being misled, or to howl with laughter. The others didn’t look as if they had masters’ degrees in anything other than counter-culture fashion. “I see. Did this ‘scientist’ have any enemies?”

“Enemies? Are you suggesting that John may have known his killer?” Fargo arched one eyebrow.

“I’m just covering all the bases, Ms. Fargo. I’d appreciate it if you’d answer the question.” Ryan allowed a touch of annoyance to tinge his voice.

Fargo chewed on her lower lip, as if the action aided her thought process. After a moment, she shook her head. “The answer is no, unless you consider Ben, or the Artiste.” Fargo

paused, confusion opening small fissures in her stoic demeanor.

“The Artiste?” Ryan asked.

The kid with the spiked hair stepped forward briskly, bringing his feet together so that he lined up perfectly next to Fargo. He pivoted to face her. Apparently, Fargo ran a tight ship.

“I think her name is Violet, Ms. Fargo.” Ryan noticed sweat beading on the kid’s forehead, as if he found Fargo truly terrifying.

“Yes, that’s it, she calls herself the Artiste. Thank you, Martin.” She dismissed him with a casual wave and turned back to Ryan. “Violet.”

“And Ben?” Ryan jotted down the names, along with questions to himself that revolved around Fargo’s militaristic control over her employees. He wondered if Briggs had been assigned there because of his own militaristic tendencies.

“Ben is an old bum who finds his way into the library sometimes. He likes to sleep here, especially in the winter, but I haven’t seen him for almost a month.” She kept her voice and expression neutral, making it impossible for Ryan to tell how she felt about the bum.

“Then why did you bring him up?”

Her eyes narrowed and she studied him for a moment before answering. “John was the one I normally chose to remove Ben from the premises. If I’m not mistaken, the last time he escorted him out, Ben fell down the stairs.”

“It doesn’t sound like a reason for murder, but you never know. I’ve heard of stranger things. What can you tell me about Violet?”

“She’s a different story. As I said, she’s an artist, an impressionist, I think. She’s one of our regular customers, though for some reason she only comes in when John is working and only deals directly with him.” Again she paused. “At least until recently.”

“Until recently?” Ryan tapped his pencil on the notebook.

“Well, she’s been a regular for quite some time now and as I said, was always very interested in John. For a while, I would see her in here at least three or four times a week, but the frequency of her visits has decreased lately. Last Tuesday she got into an argument with John over something. I only caught the end, but I very clearly heard her call John a moron and tell him to stay away from her. Then she stormed out and hasn’t been back since.”

Ryan jotted the details into his notebook. “It sounds to me as if they may have had a relationship of some kind, possibly romantic.”

Fargo squared her shoulders. “Well, I’m quite sure I don’t know about that.” Ryan got the impression that she did actually know something but didn’t want to talk about it.

“They dated.” The girl with the connected nose ring and earring stepped forward, lining up on Fargo’s left.

Fargo frowned, turning her burning gaze on the girl. “What do you know, Mia?”

“They dated for six months. John didn’t like to share his personal life with any of us, but I’m sure that he was in love with her.” She tugged gently at her chain. “I don’t know what happened, but one day he was happy, the next he was devastated because she had broken up with him. To make it worse, she would still come into the library, almost like she wanted to rub it in his face or something.”

“Interesting.” Ryan turned to the other scientists, noting their different styles of clothing, from the studded leather of “Spike” and “Nose-ring,” to the blue Star Trek uniform of “Spock,” to the jet black dress of the vampire woman. They were not normal people. He had no idea what that meant to the case, but he jotted it down just the same. “Can any of you add anything? Does anyone know why they broke up or what their fight was about?”

They looked nervously at each other, then back to him. “No, sir.” They spoke in unison. Ryan thought that had to be rehearsed and was sure that Fargo had something to do with it. He turned back to her.

“Just one more question, Ms. Fargo. I’ve been here before, but I’ve never seen your staff dressed like this. Is there something I’m missing?”

Fargo’s expression might have been stone for all it told him. “Mr. Ryan, it is a tradition here at the Boston Public Library to have one day of each month dedicated to self-expression through dress. It lets my people enjoy a little freedom.”

A very little. Ryan thought she ran this place like a boot camp. “Of course.”

Frank tapped him on the shoulder. “All right Rookie, let’s hear it.”

Ryan turned to look up at the wolf. “It?”

“Yeah. Tell me what, in your expert opinion, happened here.”

Ryan pointed to the chalk outline. “Well, I’ll need to interview this Ben and definitely Violet, but for the moment, I’d say the librarian caught the murderer here before hours. The murderer panicked, perhaps thinking him to be a cop, and tried to shoot him. Obviously, the can

of soda that Ms. Fargo heard was the silencer of a nine millimeter semi-automatic pistol.”

“Why do you say that?” Briggs detached himself from the bookcase on which he’d been leaning.

“The casing I found is from a nine millimeter and the fact that there’s a casing at all proves that it’s an automatic. Revolvers don’t throw cartridges.”

The Marine wannabe reached up to press his sunglasses back into place. “Good point.”

Frank nodded sagely. “Not bad, so far. While you’re on a roll, can you tell me who the murderer is and why he was here?”

Ryan crouched next to the outline, careful not to move the books that lay scattered around it. “I’m not sure. We need to get Ballistics down here to find the bullet, have the lab boys check for fingerprints on the books and shelves, though I don’t think we’ll find any of use.”

Briggs opened his mouth to speak, stopped, looked at Frank, and then continued. “You’re right. The lab already checked the place for prints and came up empty.”

“What about the bullet?” If all of these things had been checked already, they should have told him. At least it proved to Ryan that his reasoning and analytical skills were sound. He had to be making a dent in Frank’s testing scheme.

“They found that, too.” Frank nodded to Briggs, then motioned to the outline with a wave of one hand. “What else can you tell me?”

Ryan shook his head in frustration, took a deep breath, and nodded. Everything he said had to be adding to the points he’d earned in Frank’s mind. “I think someone’s planning an

assassination.”

Frank’s eyes widened. “What makes you say that?”

“Look at the titles of some of these books. *Abraham Lincoln and the Final Curtain*, *Improving Your Rifle Marksmanship*, and *The Life and Times of Lee Harvey Oswald*. Don’t you think that’s a giveaway?”

“I think, Rookie, that your imagination has gotten the better of you. Those books just fell from the shelves.”

“Fell from the shelves?” Ryan motioned around them. “This is the cooking section.” Frank had been right there with him through every one of his observations and for a few brief moments he had thought they were on the same page, but this—

Frank reached down and forcefully hauled him to his feet. For a moment, Ryan thought he was going to get violent. He wasn’t sure what he could do against the werewolf, but he balled his right hand into a fist just the same. Frank released him immediately and dropped his arms to his sides. The wolf watched Fargo for a reaction. He’s trying to confuse her. He thinks she might be involved, Ryan thought.

“Listen, Rookie. These books were obviously misfiled here.”

Ryan decided to remain silent and let Frank play out his hand.

Fargo cleared her throat. “Excuse me, Detective, but my staff and I are well trained. We do not ‘misfile’ books.”

A strange gleam appeared in Frank’s eyes as he turned to her. “Really, Ms. Fargo?”

Ryan was not sure if it meant mischief or mayhem, but he was glad to have Frank's attention diverted somewhere else.

Fargo nodded. "Really."

Frank scratched the fur under his chin. "And I suppose that you don't bring food into the library either?"

"Of course not!"

"Interesting." Frank walked over to the chalk outline, dropped down to all fours, and, like a beagle sniffing a scent, pressed his snout to the ground and began to comb the area.

"I hate when he does this." Briggs' voice was barely a whisper.

Frank's technique seemed odd to Ryan as well, but the wolf's sense of smell was renowned throughout the department, not to mention the city, and he had solved a number of cases using it. Ryan watched closely, eager to learn more about the crime and about Frank's abilities.

The werewolf deftly avoided disturbing the crime scene, easily navigating through the maze of books and bench fragments. He moved behind the overturned case. Although Ryan could still see Frank's broad back, he could not see what his partner was doing, especially when, for a brief moment, Frank reached under some debris. He retrieved an item, pocketing it too quickly for Ryan to see, then rejoined them.

Frank lips quivered. "No food, huh?"

Fargo crossed her arms. "That is correct."

“Then how do you explain this?” Frank removed a calzone from under his jacket, and brought it so close to her nose that it was almost touching her. Ryan hoped that was as far as he would go.

Fargo backed off a step, her face reddening while her mouth worked to speak.

“Obviously, the murderer brought that in here.”

Frank threw back his head and howled. “You want me to believe that a murderer snuck into the library and just happened to bring along a calzone? And if my nose is right, it’s a fresh calzone, made shortly before the time of the murder.”

“What are you suggesting, Detective?” Fargo’s voice shook.

Frank drew closer, but this time Fargo did not back down, even when he began sniffing her chest. Ryan slapped his forehead. If O’Leary wanted proof that Frank was a menace, this was surely a beginning. He would have Frank’s ass for this, and possibly his too.

The other librarians fidgeted. Spike and the vampire woman actually moved towards Frank. Ryan decided it was time to support his partner’s play. He intercepted the two scientists before they could reach the wolf.

“Folks, Frank is a trained professional and this is police business. Please, stay out of it.”

The vampire woman looked at Spike, shrugged, and they both stepped back.

“How dare you, you hairy beast! This is harassment!” Turning, Ryan saw that Frank was still sniffing Fargo’s clothing.

Frank drew back, eyeing her up and down, and frowned. “Don’t flatter yourself.” He

spun on one heel, presenting his back to her as he crossed the room to where the other librarians waited. He continued his sniffing routine on each of them. Ryan prayed that Frank would not start sniffing them the way dogs sniff each other.

“Detective Ryan, I demand that you stop him immediately! This is outrageous!” Ryan agreed with Fargo’s sentiments, but he had to let Frank finish whatever it was that he was doing, even if that meant giving him the rope with which to hang himself.

“I’ll tell you what’s outrageous.” Frank grabbed Spock, pulling him forward to stand in front of her.

“Hey, that hurts!” Spock’s voice was a pathetic whine.

Ryan hoped, for Frank’s sake, that the kid was exaggerating the pain. If Frank hurt him, it would be proof that he was a menace.

Frank released him but continued to loom like a dark storm cloud. “Do you want to tell her about this?” He pointed to a stain on Spock’s uniform.

Ryan frowned. So the kid had eaten in the library, big deal. He hoped that Frank was playing games to draw out more information from Spock.

“Um, well . . .”

“Spit it out!”

Spock recoiled from Frank’s breath. “Okay, okay! The calzone is mine.”

Fargo rounded on him. “What are you saying, Burt?” Ryan did not think he would want to be on the receiving end of that baleful gaze.

“I was eating in the library.” Spock suddenly broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. “I’m sorry, really, Ms. Fargo. I didn’t mean it.”

Fargo motioned to the other scientists who immediately responded by grabbing the hapless Vulcan. “Take him away.” Her eyes grew dark. “I’ll deal with him later.”

They nodded, and with Spike taking the lead, headed for the elevator. “Now, Frank.” Fargo’s tone had softened considerably.

Ryan still did not understand what the big deal was, but it was possible that Frank knew she would react this way, knew that she took her job so seriously that he could get one up on her.

Frank smiled ear to ear. “Yes?”

Fargo tried to smile, but the expression looked foreign on her. “What does this unfortunate incident have to do with the murder?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to prove a point.”

Ryan almost laughed. Frank had gone through all that just to prove a point? He didn’t believe that for a second. He wasn’t sure if Frank and Fargo had tangled before, but they were involved in a battle of wits now. He thought Frank might be throwing her off balance, hoping that she’d let some useful information slip. Even though she seemed odd, Ryan did not think she was hiding anything. At least, not anything case-related.

Fargo’s smile vanished and her jaw tensed. “You had no right to search us in this manner. You can’t just come waltzing in here and start sniffing people! That’s an invasion of privacy, and it’s a physical assault on our persons. Your supervisor will hear of this!”

Ryan's cheek twitched. On the job for a few hours, and Frank had gotten into trouble already. Perhaps Frank was just harassing the woman because he was out of control. He did not want O'Leary or Internal Affairs to be right. He wanted to believe that Frank was a good cop, worthy of his reputation. Now, he wasn't so sure. Looking at his partner, he did not think Frank was concerned by Fargo's threats; in fact, he seemed almost amused.

"It's not harassment to use a tool, and that's exactly what my snout is in this case, a crime fighting tool."

"Ridiculous, you furry beast! I'll see to it that you walk a beat for the rest of your career!"

"I don't think you want to do that, Ms. Fargo. I don't think your superiors would be too happy about this calzone incident. They may begin to wonder whether you've been doing your job. I mean, a calzone and a murder in your library."

Fargo's face reddened and her whole body shook until Ryan thought her head would explode. After a moment, she nodded solemnly. "Very well. You win, Detective . . . this time."

Ryan crossed his arms. He wondered what had caused them to butt heads before. There had to be a limit to the number of crimes that would bring them into contact with each other, but they did appear to know each other. He cleared his throat, determined to cut through the tension.

"What about the murder, Frank?" He did not think Frank would answer, especially after doing battle with Fargo, but he was curious what Frank would reveal in front of her.

"It's quite simple, really." He rubbed his furry snout with one hand, and then tweaked his whiskers. "What we have here is a case of overdue library books."

“What?” Ryan did a double-take.

“Someone snuck in here to return library books, someone who wasn’t prepared to pay any late fees . . .”

