

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER SERIES #3



MANHATTAN MOON

JAE



CHAPTER 1

Shelby Carson hip-checked the car door closed and crossed the psych ER's parking lot. She breathed in the crisp fall air, preparing her sensitive nose for the smells that would hit her as soon as she entered Bayard Medical Center.

When she glanced up at the dark sky, she realized a full moon was shining down on her. "Oh, wonderful," she murmured. "A full moon on Halloween. Just what I need."

Contrary to popular belief, the moon had no effect on her fellow shape-shifters, but humans seemed to go crazy during a full moon.

The automatic doors of the back entrance whooshed open. Shelby strode down the hallway and had to unlock two sets of double doors before she reached the attending's on-call room. Wrinkling her nose at the smell of chips, stuffy air, and disinfectant, she squeezed past the desk and the narrow bed. With practiced movements, she slipped out of her street clothes and into a set of scrubs. She clipped her ID badge to the scrub shirt and the beeper to her waistband, then shoved a pen into the chest pocket, feeling like a knight getting ready for battle.

As she left the on-call room, the sounds and smells of the psych ER engulfed her. In one of the isolation rooms, someone shouted and banged on the door, and in the next room, an off-key voice sang

Broadway musicals. Sneakers squeaked on the linoleum as one of the nurses rushed down the corridor.

She straightened her shoulders and walked toward the triage area, weaving her way around gurneys and wheelchairs lined up in the corridor. The stench of sweat, cleaning agents, and metabolized alcohol made her wish for the stunted sense of smell her human colleagues possessed. Then she picked up the subtle scent of jasmine.

Shelby grinned. She would recognize that scent anywhere. *Nyla.*

Just inside the front door, Nyla Rozakis sat behind the triage desk. Shelby paused and drank in the sight of her.

In the midst of the typhoon that was the triage area, Nyla was an island of peace. She brushed back a midnight-black strand of hair that had escaped her French braid as she stood and rounded the desk. Her eyes, almost as dark as her hair, didn't seem to register the psych techs and security guards, who were wrestling to restrain a screaming man. She was focused solely on her own patient.

Nyla stooped down a little to address her patient, who was sitting in a wheelchair, and asked, "Do you know where you are?"

"In hell," the patient grumbled.

Wrong answer, buddy. Shelby suppressed a grin. *A psych ER is not a good place for sarcasm if you don't want to appear psychotic.*

"Can you tell me today's date?" Nyla asked.

The patient told her, and Nyla made a quick note in his chart without taking her gaze off the patient for more than a second.

"Do you have any weapons on you? Any sharp objects?"

The patient shook his head, but his hands went to his coat pockets.

Shelby tensed, ready to step in should he pull out a weapon.

But Nyla didn't need her help.

“Ben.” After a wave from Nyla, one of the security guards helped her search the patient’s pockets. They laid the contents of his pockets onto the triage desk: a lighter, a glass pipe, and—Shelby squinted—a pair of vampire fangs.

Humans. She grimaced.

When another nurse led the patient into an interview room, Nyla looked up. A welcoming smile dimpled her cheeks. “Hi, Dr. Carson.”

“Hello, Nyla.”

“I didn’t think you’d be working tonight,” Nyla said and went back to filling out the intake sheet. “I thought you volunteered to work Thanksgiving and Christmas?”

She knows my on-call schedule? Shelby held back a delighted grin. “I don’t mind covering the ER on holidays,” she said. “It isn’t worse than any other day.” Wrasa didn’t celebrate human holidays anyway, so she’d volunteered to work the night shift on Halloween when she’d seen that Nyla would also be on duty.

“Famous last words, Doctor.”

“Busy night, huh?” Shelby asked.

“Full moon on Halloween in New York City—if that’s not a recipe for madness, I don’t know what is. We have fifteen new admissions and eight still in triage. All isolation rooms are in use, and EMS keeps bringing in new patients.”

Before Shelby could think of a way to ask Nyla out for coffee later, loud grunts and moans from the waiting area interrupted them.

Shelby whirled around and took in the crowded waiting area. On one of the blue plastic chairs bolted to the wall sat a young woman clutching her belly. “Has she been cleared by the medical ER?” Shelby asked.

“Oh, yeah. Nothing physically wrong with her. She just thinks she’s giving birth.” Nyla stepped next to Shelby. Shoulder to shoulder, they gazed at the moaning patient.

Shelby wanted to moan too as she breathed in the intoxicating scent of jasmine. She tried to keep her voice light and professional. “Another baby Jesus?”

“No, this one thinks she’s giving birth to the child of a vampire slayer.”

“Vampire slayer?” Shelby arched her brows. Every time she thought she’d seen it all, a new patient surprised her. The psych ER patients weren’t short on creativity. “Didn’t anyone tell her that Buffy is a woman and can’t get her pregnant?”

Nyla’s dimples deepened. “Welcome to the twenty-first century, Dr. Carson. There are plenty of options for a lesbian who wants to get her partner pregnant.”

Shelby marveled at the casual remark. *Does she know I’m gay? Is she?* She had asked herself that question for months now, but her diagnostic skills failed when it came to figuring out Nyla’s sexual orientation.

When silence grew between them, Shelby finally said, “I better get to work. See you later. And please keep her,” she pointed at the grunting patient in the waiting area, “away from Mr. Fangs.” She peered up at the board that listed patients still waiting to be seen, then grabbed a chart from the rack and went to see her first patient of the night.



Hours later, Shelby dropped into a chair at the nurses’ station. “Frank, is Mr. Sheridan’s urine tox back?”

“Just got it.” The nurse slid a sheet of paper in front of her.

She initialed the lab report and took a look. “Just what I thought. Strung-out on meth. Put him in one of the observation rooms.” She turned back to the stack of files in front of her and then looked back up. “Oh, and would you get me the number of Mrs. Clayburn’s therapist, please?”

While she wrote a discharge order for another patient, she became aware of the tingling of her skin. Her body buzzed as if charged with electricity. That’s what the constant chaos of a night like this always did to her. Working in the psych ER was like diving into a hurricane: a maelstrom of loud, unpredictable action, the unpleasant smells of sweat, urine, and booze almost drowned out by the stench of fear and the heady tang of mania.

Every other Wrasa would hate her job. She was the only shape-shifter on staff and, as far as she knew, the only Wrasa emergency psychiatrist in the world. Few Wrasa could handle the constant adrenaline rush and still be able to focus on their job while fighting against the urge to shift.

But Shelby was different. For some reason, she had a very high threshold for changing into her coyote form. It had made her an outsider as a teenager and still caused her family to shake their heads in puzzlement and humiliation when she had problems shifting during the monthly family get-togethers in the forest, but it also enabled her to do her job. And Shelby loved her job. She was drawn to the fast pace and the challenge of helping so many different patients.

“Dr. Carson?”

Even before Shelby looked up, a hint of jasmine made a smile spread over her face.

Nyla stood before her, one shapely hip propped against the counter.

After watching her for months, she knew Nyla was a leaner, constantly leaning against something as if it grounded her in the middle of chaos. Her presence had the same effect on Shelby.

“Will you come look at a patient with me?” Nyla asked.

Shelby lifted one brow. It was an unusual request. Normally, the nurses did the initial evaluation without consulting one of the doctors. Only after reading Nyla’s report would Shelby or another psychiatrist talk to the patient. “Sure, but what’s so special about him? Is he one of our frequent fliers?”

“No, I’ve never seen him before, but I have a weird feeling about him, and I thought it might save us some time to talk to him together.”

Shelby had learned to trust the instincts of a good nurse. She got up without hesitation. “What’s his story?” she asked as they walked over to the triage area.

“He’s a twenty-two-year-old white male,” Nyla said. “The police brought him in for a pre-arraignment eval because he says he’s hearing voices.”

Voices? Shelby’s diagnostic mind came up with half a dozen possible causes for auditory hallucinations. Schizophrenia was high on her list, especially since the patient’s age was typical for a first psychotic break, but she also couldn’t rule out drugs. An interview would tell her more. “What are the charges?” she asked.

“Assault with a deadly weapon.” Nyla met Shelby’s questioning gaze. “He attacked his girlfriend with a scythe.”

“A scythe?” It never ceased to amaze Shelby how inventive humans were when it came to hurting each other.

Nyla nodded. One corner of her mouth lifted in a sarcastic half-smile. “Apparently, they were at a Halloween party and he was dressed up as the Grim Reaper at the time.”

“The Grim Reaper.” Shelby shook her head. “Looks like I can add another famous patient to my list of references.” She unlocked a set of double doors and motioned for Nyla to step through first. They entered the triage area, which looked more like a police station than the entrance to the psych ER.

Two police officers stood around, trading war stories with the security guard, while two other officers guarded a struggling and shouting patient.

“That’s him,” Nyla said, pointing at the patient standing between the two officers. She glanced at her clipboard. “Joseph Linwood.”

Shelby wrinkled her nose at the smell of blood, alcohol, and smoke that clung to the man. She resisted the urge to step between him and Nyla. *She doesn’t need a shifting-handicapped coyote to protect her.*

“Officers,” she greeted his guards and nodded down at their weapons. “You guys shooting blanks?”

The officers glowered at her, but Nyla chuckled. “If you mean did we unload our weapons before coming in, yeah,” the taller officer said. He hiked his uniform pants up over his slight potbelly. “We know the rules.”

“Sorry,” Shelby said with a grin. “You know us shrinks. We have a weird sense of humor.”

“You can joke around all you want as long as you take this creep off our hands,” the officer said.

Shelby stepped closer to the patient, trying to catch a whiff of the man’s body chemistry. But the stench of violence and partying was too heavy for her to use her nose for diagnosing. “Let’s get him into an interview room.”

While the officers led the patient into the interview room, Shelby rearranged the chairs, positioning hers and Nyla's next to the door. *Just in case.*

Once the patient was seated, Shelby sat across from him. "If we take off the handcuffs, will you behave yourself?"

"Sure," the patient said. "The voices are quiet for now."

She motioned toward the handcuffs. "Let's take these off."

One of the officers stepped forward and removed the handcuffs.

Shelby leaned forward. "Mr. Linwood, my name is Dr. Carson. I'm one of the attending psychiatrists here."

"Then you can help me. I need help. I'm hearing voices, constantly. They're driving me crazy. You should probably admit me to the hospital. You can hold me for seventy-two hours, right?"

No psych history and he's that well-informed? Shelby glanced at Nyla. *She's right. Something about this guy is off.* "We can," she folded her hands on her lap, "but we rarely do. If you need help beyond just a night, we'd admit you to a unit upstairs or to a psychiatric hospital."

"Whatever." Linwood kicked out his heels, sprawling in his chair as if he intended to make himself at home. "I just think I need to be admitted. Maybe it can help stop those damn voices."

"So these voices, what are they saying?" Shelby asked.

"They're telling me to kill people. To kill myself." He swung his hands as if hitting someone with a club or a scythe.

Hmm. Unless he's faking it, he might be a danger to himself and to others. This was her number one criteria in deciding whether to admit a patient. When the police brought over prisoners, she didn't have to decide if they were mentally ill or might plead an insanity defense. For now, the police just needed her to decide whether the prisoner was stable enough for the arraignment.

“How long have you heard the voices?”

“Oh, I don’t know. For as long as I can remember. Started when I was just a little kid.” He indicated the size of a toddler.

Shelby met Nyla’s gaze. She bit her lip when she saw Nyla suppress a “gotcha” smile. They both knew that auditory hallucinations rarely started in childhood. *And if he has heard voices for so long, how come he never sought psychiatric help before? Why now that he’s been arrested?* Something wasn’t adding up here.

“So with hallucinations that severe, you probably see little green men too, right?” Shelby asked. She sent Nyla another quick glance, willing her not to react.

Nyla kept adding notes to the patient’s chart. Not even a muscle moved in her face.

Good. Play along.

“Yes, yes, I do!” Linwood looked at Shelby as if he were in awe of her professional insight. He sent her a smile. “How did you know?”

No blunted affect. This guy didn’t suffer from schizophrenia any more than she did. “Let’s just call it women’s intuition,” Shelby said.

A dimple appeared in Nyla’s cheek. She clicked off her pen.

“Okay, Mr. Linwood,” Shelby said. “Thanks for your patience. I think we can wrap up this interview now.” She got up but was careful not to turn her back to Joseph Linwood.

Eyes glinting, Linwood jumped up. “So you’re gonna admit me?”

“No.”

“No?” A scarlet color shot up his neck, and a vein began to pulse in his temple. “But I’m hearing voices!”

“Good for you, Mr. Linwood,” Shelby said. “It’s what we call having a conscience. Maybe these voices are now telling you that it’s not nice to lie to a psychiatrist to avoid prison.” She stretched out her arm, guiding Nyla out of the door.

“Bitch!” He tried to pick up his chair and throw it at them, but the chair on his side of the table was bolted to the floor.

The two police officers, who had waited right outside the room, rushed in and were on him before he could follow them.

Nyla glanced over at Shelby, merriment dancing in her dark eyes. “Little green men?”

“You ever heard of any truly psychotic patient who saw them?”

“No, but the night’s still young and it’s a full moon on Halloween. Anything can happen.”

Shelby grinned. *Anything?* She liked the sound of that. Maybe she’d find the courage to ask Nyla out before this crazy night was over.



The double doors crashed open, and two paramedics pushed a gurney into the psych ER.

Shelby barely glanced up from her discussion with one of the psych techs.

But then one of the patients in the triage area started screaming. “A werewolf! A werewolf! I knew it. They’ve come to kill us all.”

Shelby whirled around. Her heart pounded against her ribs.

The person on the stretcher was covered with a sheet, and one of the paramedics blocked Shelby’s view. All she could see was a bit of fur peeking out from beneath the sheet.

Fur?

It was light brown, streaked with a few ginger highlights. Shelby had seen that color before—it was the same as her own hair color and that of most coyote shifters.

Her heartbeat sped up at the thought of a Wrasa being wheeled into the ER, where someone would surely discover what he really

was. She tried to catch a whiff of his smell, but from this distance all she detected was a dizzying mix of sweat, fear, jasmine, and fish sticks that had been somebody's lunch.

Calm down. If this were one of us in coyote form, they would have taken him to the vet, not the psych ER. Besides, even in human form, Wrasa rarely suffered mental illnesses. Those who did were kept under close surveillance by their pack or pride.

She circled around and took a position next to Nyla, who was trying to take the fidgeting patient's blood pressure. But instead of encountering human skin, she found long fur. A bushy tail hung limply down the gurney.

This can't be true. Wide-eyed, Shelby stepped even closer. Then she let her gaze trail up his furry chest. Torn clothing covered the fur in some places as if the urge to shift had overcome him too fast to undress first.

Her own skin started to itch as her adrenaline level shot through the roof.

Her gaze traveled farther up. Shelby froze.

The patient's face was all human.

A mask, complete with wolfish ears and large fangs, dangled on an elastic band around his neck. Shelby inflated her cheeks and blew out a long stream of air. *It's just some dumb Halloween costume.*

Instantly, she vowed never to work the night shift on Halloween again.

When Nyla stripped off a glove that ended in fake claws, the patient pulled off the other one, then tried to get rid of the rest of his costume. "You wanna see more of my body, baby? Look, I have a perfect six-pack."

"No, thanks." Nyla helped the paramedics restrain his wandering hands. "Hairy chests aren't my thing."

Oh, really? Her comment caught Shelby's attention. Had she been in her coyote form, she would have swiveled her ears to hear every nuance of Nyla's tone.

"Why not?" the patient asked, his voice loud and enthusiastic. "I'm exactly what you're looking for. We must become one." He threw his head back and glanced over at Shelby and the EMTs as if they were his attentively listening audience. "We're all one. All of us. Only once you give away all your worldly possessions and accept that all people, all things in the universe, are connected, only then will you be enlightened as I am."

"Patient's name is Lee Bowdan, twenty-six years old," one of the paramedics said over the patient's non-stop rambling. "No known allergies and not on any meds. He also claims he doesn't have a psych history."

Nyla shot her a quick look, and Shelby answered by arching a skeptical brow. *Yeah, right. Hypersexuality, pressured speech, loose association... He's manic for sure.* But was it drug-induced or did he have a manic or bipolar disorder?

"NYPD called us with an EDP," the paramedic said, using the cop slang for an emotionally disturbed person. "He was standing in the middle of a Halloween party, trying to get people to throw away their wallets."

"It was for their own good," the patient shouted. "They need my guidance to realize they won't get to the heavenly spheres by clinging to money!"

Heavenly spheres? Shelby added schizophrenia to the list of possible diagnoses. But before she could find out more, she had to bring him into one of the interview rooms. "Let's go and talk about your fascinating ideas inside," she said. This was when most patients lost control and began fighting against the people who wanted to

help them. In some cases, they ended up medicated and restrained, so she wanted to get him inside as unobtrusively as possible.

Without pausing in his speech, the patient let himself be wheeled down the hall. He didn't seem to notice when the doors clicked shut behind him.

"Frank, can you help Mr. Bowdan change out of his costume and into one of our fashionable gowns?" Shelby asked one of the nurses.

When Frank and Mr. Bowdan disappeared into the bathroom, Shelby turned to Nyla.

"My money is on manic disorder with psychotic symptoms," Nyla said. "He probably went off his meds."

Wanna bet? Your money against one date, Shelby wanted to say, but of course she didn't. *Cowardly coyote*. "I'm not sure," she said instead. "My nose is telling me it might be drugs." Quite literally, but Nyla didn't need to know that. When she had stood next to the patient, she caught a whiff of mushrooms on his breath.

"You're thinking psilocybin?" Nyla asked.

Shelby nodded. "It's possible." The symptoms of a manic episode and the effect of psilocybin mushrooms sometimes appeared similar. "Can you make sure we get a urine sample from Mr. Bowdan?"

"Of course."

When Nyla turned to walk away, Shelby called after her, "And—"

"Make sure to keep him away from the vampire slayer mom and Mr. Fangs," Nyla said for her. Her laughter rippled over Shelby. "Will do."



Shelby closed the tiny fridge in the staff room and carried her ham-and-bacon sandwich to one of the tables. Next to her, the copier and the fax machine whirred, but Shelby ignored the familiar

sounds in the small room and focused on the conversation going on at one of the other tables.

Nyla sat with two of her colleagues, eating Chinese takeout. Her chopsticks moved in graceful arcs as she picked pieces of broccoli from her box and put them aside. Whenever they got Chinese takeout, Nyla ordered the Sesame Chicken and she always picked out the broccoli.

Others might have wondered why she didn't just order something else, but Shelby found Nyla's persistence endearing.

"Anyone ever have a patient with lycanthropy?" Julie, one of the third-year medical students, asked. "I read about it in one of my textbooks, and it sounds fascinating."

Shelby rolled her eyes. What was it with humans and their strange fascination with werewolves?

"I don't know about lycanthropy, but I once had a patient who came in growling and barking and bit one of the techs," Frank said.

Hmpf. No shape-shifter Shelby knew had ever bitten a human. In their animal form, Wrasa were more likely to run and hide if they encountered humans.

Julie laughed. "Did the tech by any chance develop a strange preference for raw meat and start howling at the moon?"

We don't howl at the moon. Shelby frowned down at her ham-and-bacon sandwich. *And we rarely eat raw meat.*

"Do they really think they can turn into wolves or other animals?" Julie asked. "You'd need to be pretty delusional to believe you can survive such a rearrangement of bones, joints, and organs."

"Maybe they read too much of that paranormal romance stuff like someone else I know," Frank said and flicked a bean sprout at her.

Julie threw her fortune cookie at him. “Hey, don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it. Some of those novels are really good.”

“Too stereotypical for me,” Frank said. “I mean, silver bullets, people who turn into wolves after being bitten... That just exceeds my imagination.”

Shelby secretly pumped her fist under the table. *Amen, brother.*

“Not all of them are like that,” Julie said. “The latest J.W. Price novel isn’t even about werewolves. Her main character is a tiger-shifter.”

Shelby suppressed a smile. Her colleagues couldn’t know that Ms. Price’s shape-shifters lived among them and weren’t just figments of a writer’s overactive imagination.

Her gaze traveled to Nyla, who sat digging in her box of Chinese takeout and said nothing.

Strange. Usually, Nyla joked around with the others. Like most of the staff in the psych ER, she used her sense of humor to ease the constant stress in their line of work. But now Nyla kept silent. She fiddled with her chopsticks but didn’t eat.

The urge to go over and ask if everything was okay made Shelby forget about her own food, but if she did that, she would have to admit that she had observed Nyla from across the room.

The staff room’s door opened.

“Dr. Carson?” one of the nurses called. “I have Mrs. Clayburn’s therapist on the phone for you. He said you tried to reach him.”

“I’ll be there in a second.” With one last glance at Nyla, Shelby laid down her sandwich and strode to the nurses’ station.



Shelby let the door of the on-call room click shut behind her and leaned against the wall for a moment. Through the room’s tiny

window, early-morning sunlight filtered in. Finally, the long and chaotic shift was over. The joking with her colleagues during sign-out had invigorated her for a while, but now exhaustion settled over her like a lead apron.

Stripping out of her scrub shirt, she crossed over to the narrow bed where she'd left her street clothes.

A knock on the door caught her with her Henley shirt partially on.

"Yes?" she called and tugged down the shirt.

The door opened, and Nyla stood in the doorway without entering. "I'm sorry to bother you. I know your shift is over and you have to be exhausted, but..."

"Oh, no, I'm not exhausted at all," Shelby said. She was never too tired to talk to Nyla. "Please come in."

Nyla still didn't enter. Her gaze was fixed on Shelby in a way that made her heart beat faster.

She followed Nyla's gaze down and realized that she hadn't buttoned her shirt. Her bra peeked out from beneath the shirt's placket. "Oh." Quickly, she fastened two of the buttons.

Nyla stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. Her gaze darted around, bouncing from the littered desk to the scrub shirt on the bed. She still didn't say anything.

Hurriedly, Shelby lifted the latest edition of *Journal of Psychiatry* from her desk chair. "Please, sit down."

When Nyla sat, Shelby perched on the edge of her bed. That left Nyla in the position of power and would hopefully make her feel more equal. She balanced her elbows on her knees and leaned forward, giving Nyla her full attention.

They gazed at each other across the corner of the desk.

Nyla licked her lips.

Why's she so nervous? A sudden thought made Shelby giddy. *Is she trying to ask me out?*

Still not saying anything, Nyla reached up with her right hand and massaged her left shoulder.

Shelby stifled the urge to get up and take over the massage. “Hey. You look exhausted. Everything all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Just pulled a double shift. Tina’s out sick.” At the last word, she painted quotation marks in the air with her index and middle fingers, which probably meant that Tina was out partying on Halloween.

Hmm. Then I doubt she's got romance on her mind. Shelby swallowed her disappointment. A hot shower and a bed were probably the only things Nyla wanted right now. So why was she here instead of going home now that her shift had ended? “How can I help?” Shelby asked. “Want me to talk to administration about your shift schedules?”

“Oh, no. That’s not why I’m... There’s something else I wanted to ask you.” In the silence of the on-call room, Nyla sucked in a breath. “Let’s say someone is seeing things that aren’t possible.”

“Is there another patient you want me to see? I can stay a bit longer if you want.”

“No. It’s more of a hypothetical situation.”

Hypothetical situation? Shelby struggled to keep her expression neutral. What was going on with Nyla? “So this hypothetical person... What kind of things is he or she seeing?”

Nyla looked down and studied her hands. “A werewolf,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. She looked up. “And I’m not talking about Mr. Bowdan. I really saw—” She stopped and pressed her hand against her lips as if she wanted to take back the words. “I mean the hypothetical person saw a man change into a wolf.”

This isn't a practical joke, is it? It wouldn't be the first time her colleagues tried to pull her leg, but Shelby sensed that this was different. The smell of Nyla's fear burned her nose. Shelby's heartbeat hammered in her ears. *Great Hunter, what's going on?* Had a Wrasa been stupid enough to shift right in front of Nyla? She rounded the desk with two steps and knelt next to Nyla. "Nyla. Look at me."

Slowly, Nyla raised her gaze from her hands. Her eyes were even darker than usual, obsidian with fear and doubt.

"What did you see?" Shelby asked.

Nyla hesitated.

Shelby squeezed her hand. Nyla's fingers were cold against her own warmer skin. And so very soft. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." The answer came without hesitation.

"Then tell me."

"Earlier, when I got takeout from that Chinese place across the street..." Nyla squeezed her eyes shut. "Something rustled in the bushes next to the parking lot. When I glanced over, I saw a man ripping off his clothes and dropping to his hands and knees. He groaned and obviously was in a great deal of pain. I wanted to go over and help, but he changed into a wolf before my eyes." A shiver shook her. She opened her eyes and glanced at Shelby. "Am I going crazy?"

Shelby clenched her teeth. *When I find the damn stupid Wrasa who did this to her, I'm gonna have his pelt.* "No." Her voice boomed through the small room, louder than she had intended.

When Nyla stared at her, she softened her voice. "No, I'm sure you're perfectly fine. You're the most normal person I know."

She desperately needed to convince Nyla of that—not just for her peace of mind. If Nyla told others about her encounter with the wolf-shifter, the Saru might hear about it. The Wrasa's elite soldiers

still liked to shoot first and ask questions later if a human knew too much about the shifters' secret existence.

"Maybe what you saw was just a large dog," Shelby said. "Or even a coyote. You know there were a few of them running around in Central Park a few months ago."

At least, that was what they'd made the media believe. Only a handful of Wrasa knew that it had been a couple of Ashawe teenagers losing control of their newfound ability to transform into coyotes.

A mix of hope and doubt shone in the dark eyes.

She wants to believe me, even if her eyes told her something different.

"That still doesn't explain how a man changed into a canine," Nyla said.

"Let's look at this logically, okay?" She stroked her thumb across the back of Nyla's palm.

"Okay."

"Then tell me, nurse," Shelby made her voice playful, "what are the most common causes of visual hallucinations?"

A half-smile crept onto Nyla's lips. "Well, I'm fairly sure we can rule out dementia and brain damage."

"So," Shelby said, "what other things can cause hallucinations?"

"Drug intoxication or withdrawal."

"Are you taking any drugs?" Shelby asked.

Smiling, Nyla said, "Not counting the two gallons of coffee I drank to make it through this shift, no."

"Next cause."

"Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders," Nyla said. She tried to sound textbook-like, but fear flickered in her eyes.

Shelby pulled the desk chair around so that Nyla was now facing her directly. "Psychotic patients with visual hallucinations

usually have more severe disorders than patients without visual hallucinations, right?”

Nyla nodded.

“Then it’s pretty unlikely that a person with isolated visual hallucinations and no other symptoms suffers from schizophrenia, don’t you agree?”

“Yes.” The answer sounded like a relieved sigh.

“What else is there?” Shelby asked.

Nyla thought for a moment, then answered, “High fever.”

With the hand that wasn’t holding Nyla’s, Shelby reached up and gently cupped Nyla’s cheek.

Nyla leaned into the contact, and Shelby let her hand linger before she withdrew it. She cleared her throat. “You don’t feel overly warm. What else?”

“Prolonged visual deprivation.”

“You been blindfolded for any length of time lately?” Shelby asked with a playful wink.

Nyla’s dimples appeared for the first time since she had entered the on-call room. “Do you ask all of your patients such indelicate questions, Doctor?”

“Of course. Right out of the textbook. Are you avoiding the answer, nurse?”

A gentle nudge made Nyla chuckle. “I think we can rule out visual deprivation too.”

“Any other possible causes come to mind?”

“Extreme stress or sleep deprivation,” Nyla answered.

Shelby cocked her head. “Oh, you mean like working a double shift in a psych ER on Halloween during a full moon in The City That Never Sleeps?”

Now serious, all hints of a smile gone, Nyla stared at her. “You think that’s it? Just stress and lack of sleep?”

“During my residency, when I was working crazy hours, I once thought I’d seen a grizzly in my rocking chair.” The so-called grizzly had been her roommate, a bear-shifter, and she had turned Shelby’s beloved rocking chair into a pile of firewood when she sat down in it. But, of course, Nyla didn’t need to know those details.

Nyla rubbed both hands over her face, hiding her expression. “God.” She groaned into her palms. “I feel so foolish. I never should’ve bothered you with this.”

“Hey.” Gently, Shelby pulled Nyla’s hands away from her face and made eye contact. “You were worried about your mental health. You of all people should know that’s never foolish.”

When Nyla pushed back the desk chair to get up, Shelby stood and took a step back, giving Nyla room to stand too.

“Thank you, Dr. Carson.” The intense gaze of Nyla’s dark eyes conveyed her gratitude even better than her words could.

“You’re very welcome. I’m glad I could help. And since we’re both no longer on duty, please, call me Shelby.” She had wanted to make that suggestion for months now, but since nurses didn’t usually call doctors by their first names, she hadn’t known how to suggest a more informal greeting.

Nyla hesitated but then nodded. “Shelby.”

A pleasant shiver raced through Shelby at the sound of her name on Nyla’s lips.

With one more nod and smile, Nyla turned and walked to the door.

This is your chance. Ask her now! Her thoughts ping-ponged through her mind, and she desperately searched for the right words. *Come on. Emergency psychiatrists are supposed to be so good at*

persuading others, chatting people up, improvising to get people to do what they want.

But when it came to Nyla, her professional skills meant nothing. Nyla reached out for the doorknob. She opened the door.

“Nyla,” Shelby called just as Nyla crossed the threshold.

“Yes?” One foot already out the door, Nyla looked back over her shoulder.

Shelby said the next best thing that came to mind. “You really should relax more, take more time away from work.”

One dark eyebrow crept up Nyla’s forehead. “I think the pot is calling the kettle black. Aren’t you the one who volunteered to work Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas?” She didn’t sound accusing, just amused.

“Guess we both need to have some fun away from work.” Shelby clutched her hands behind her back. “We could go for a coffee sometime. Together, I mean.”

“You don’t drink coffee.”

Damn. Caught. She blinked, but then a pleased smile darted across her face. *She noticed that I don’t drink coffee!* Quickly, she thought of something else humans usually considered fun and relaxing. “Then maybe we could go see a movie or something.”

Nyla tilted her head and studied her. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Shelby straightened to her full five feet six inches. *Now or never.* “Yes, I am.”

“Just when I thought nothing else could surprise me on a night like this,” Nyla mumbled.

“I know it might not be such a good idea,” Shelby said. “I mean, we work together. I’m a doctor, and you’re a nurse.” *Not to mention I’m a Wrasa and you are an unsuspecting human.* “I know theoretically

I'm your boss, above you in the hospital hierarchy, and our bosses frown on that kind of relationship." She knew she was rambling, but she couldn't stop herself, too afraid that Nyla would clearly voice a "no" should silence descend on them. "Chances are you're not even gay, and you're free to tell me to take a hike, but—"

Nyla took a step back into the room. "Yes."

Shelby froze, mouth half open. "You want me to take a hike?"

"I mean yes, I'll go out on a date with you." A broad smile brought out Nyla's dimples. "With Shelby, not Dr. Carson."

Suddenly, Shelby felt like a manic person on meth. She wanted to shout out her joy but instead simply asked, "When?"

Nyla laughed. "Not today. I need eight hours of sleep, or I'm afraid I'll see you turn into a frog should I kiss you goodnight." A touch of red colored her olive complexion at her daring words.

Heat pulsed through Shelby at the mention of kissing. "How about tomorrow?" Her voice was trembling with eagerness.

"On one condition," Nyla said and lifted her index finger.

Anything. Shelby gave an enthusiastic nod, prompting Nyla to state her condition.

"Let's make the movie we see a romance, nothing with vampires or werewolves."

Shelby grabbed her jacket and followed Nyla to the door. "No werewolves," she promised. "A good romance is just what I want too."

CHAPTER 2

Shelby waited until her cousin had finally caught her up on what was happening with all the cousins, uncles, and aunts. She switched the phone to the other side, scratched behind her free ear, and said, “Um, Jocelyn?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s assume for a moment that someone wanted to go on a date with a human.” Since she couldn’t tell Jocelyn that she was planning on going out with a human, she would use a hypothetical situation, as Nyla had. Maybe Jocelyn could give her some advice on what to bring on a date. She was a psychologist who had studied human behavior after all. Shelby was pretty sure a human woman wouldn’t find a few pounds of roast very romantic.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jocelyn’s voice roared through the phone.

Coyote shit. Shelby lifted her shoulders to protect her sensitive ears from her cousin’s howling. It seemed hypothetical situations didn’t work any better for her than they had for Nyla. “What makes you think I’m talking about myself?”

Jocelyn snorted. “Oh, I don’t know. Probably because every time I ask about your work, you start going on and on about that nurse.”

Shelby furrowed her brow. She had always thought she had successfully avoided mentioning Nyla too often.

“Be careful, Shelby. If the pack finds out that your wonderful nurse is human and not a Wrasa...”

Shelby wasn't afraid. Not for herself at least. But if she imagined the council members setting their sights on Nyla... She shivered. As a pup, she had heard stories about what happened to humans who found out about the Wrasa's secret existence. In the past, the council had killed humans to silence them. Shelby swallowed. Maybe it wasn't such a bright idea after all to go out with Nyla. “She's not my nurse,” she protested weakly.

“Even if no one finds out,” Jocelyn said, ignoring Shelby's objection, “what do you want with a human?” She made the word sound as if she had just spat out a foul-tasting bite of food. “It has no future.”

“Why not? Griffin Westmore and Jorie Price are very happy together,” Shelby said.

Jocelyn snorted. “They're the exception. You can't compare that nurse to a dreamseer like Ms. Price. She will never really know you. She'll never understand what it means to be part of a pack or what it's like to live as a hidden minority. And she'll never be able to share the magic of a transformation with you.”

Now it was Shelby's turn to snort. “Do you know how long it's been since I last shifted shape? You know for me it's not an effortless, joyful thing that I can share with a mate at the drop of a hat.”

Silence spread between them, as if Jocelyn was searching for comforting words or a logical retort but couldn't find any. “Still,” she finally said, “you're one of us. Not one of them.”

Us. Them. Shelby stared at the floor. Why did everything have to be so complicated? Why couldn't she just go out with this enchanting

woman with the beautiful smile without it turning into a political act?

“I have an idea. I’ll bring one of my colleagues to our next family gathering. She’s a lesbian. And a Wrasa. Okay?”

“Sure,” Shelby said without enthusiasm.

Jocelyn started singing the colleague’s praises, but Shelby hardly listened. Even though she was a Wrasa, this woman couldn’t understand her any better than Nyla. No one could. For other Wrasa, shifting shape was as effortless and natural as breathing. And Jocelyn’s colleague wouldn’t smell half as good as Nyla. Shelby was sure of that. She bit her lip until she tasted blood. “Ouch.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. Please don’t tell my parents about the stupid thing I almost did, okay?” She didn’t want to disappoint her family again.

“Don’t worry. You never told anyone about what happened to the neighbor’s rabbit, and I won’t tell anyone that you are tail over claws in love with a human.”

Not even the memory of Mrs. Gaines’s rabbit could make Shelby smile right now. Her thoughts were elsewhere. *Oh, Great Hunter, how will I tell Nyla that going out isn’t such a good idea without hurting her?*



Shelby lifted her nose and deeply breathed in the scent of jasmine. She remembered too late that she had wanted to avoid Nyla and the conversation they needed to have.

“Hey.” Nyla leaned her hip against the table next to Shelby and reached for a paper cup.

Despite her sadness, Shelby had to smile as she saw the posture that was so typical for Nyla. “Hi.”

Nyla poured herself a coffee and dropped a lump of sugar into the cup. Then another one. And finally a third one. With apparent fascination, she stared at the whirlpool her stirring created.

Shelby watched her out of the corner of her eye. Was Nyla deep in thought, or was she just as nervous as Shelby and had trouble looking her in the eyes?

Tell her now that you can't go see the movie with her. Don't string her along. Shelby gave herself a mental kick. "Nyla?"

"Yes?" Nyla looked up. The expression in her dark eyes was as open as that of a pup that rolled on her back in front of the pack's alpha, trusting that her defenselessness wouldn't be exploited.

Shelby's tongue seemed to stick to the roof of her mouth. She stared at the paper cup so she wouldn't have to look into Nyla's eyes.

"A bit too much sugar. I know," Nyla said. "But it's three more hours until the end of the shift, and I have to stay awake somehow. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Shelby furrowed her brow. The thought that Nyla had tossed and turned the whole night made her wish she had been there to hold her. "I hope you're not still worried about losing your mind." A growl rose up in her chest as she thought about the Wrasa who had turned into a wolf or a coyote in front of Nyla.

"Oh, no. No, that's not it. I was just..."

The scent of jasmine got stronger and mixed with a hint of salt.

Shelby looked up as Nyla hesitated. Even though she was about to cancel their date, she suddenly felt queasy. "You changed your mind and don't want to go out with me?"

"No, no. No, really. That's not it. I'm really nervous." Nyla straightened her shoulders. "It's been a while since I dated. But I wouldn't cancel our date for the world."

Shelby beamed. “Me neith...” She stopped and bit her tongue. Then she sighed and said, “Me neither.” *The heck with it. It’s only one date, and the council will never find out. It’s not as if I wanted to drag her to my den and raise a litter of pups with her. One date, and that’s it.*



Shelby’s senses were working overtime as she got out of the car and crossed the street. Nyla’s neighborhood in Brooklyn smelled better than a steakhouse. Someone was frying lamb meat. Shelby’s mouth watered.

She followed her nose to the driveway of a small house that looked as if it had seen better days. The once probably yellow color had weathered to a grayish beige, and the gutters had gotten rusty. Well-groomed flower beds lined the path, though, and a comfortable-looking bench invited visitors to sit on the small porch.

Shelby craned her neck to check the street number, which was half covered by ivy. *Number twenty-one.* The heavenly scents were definitely coming from Nyla’s house.

Had Nyla made dinner even though they wanted to go out? Or did she live with someone? The thought made her frown.

She paused in front of the door and breathed in through her nose. In addition to the enchanting scents of lamb, coriander, garlic, and mint, she caught a whiff of jasmine. Her heart beat faster.

Then her nose identified another smell. Dog hair.

Oh, no. Please let that be the neighbor’s dog.

Before she finished the thought, a dog started barking inside the house. It barked and growled as if a dangerous predator had entered its territory.

Strictly speaking, that was exactly what had happened. The dog couldn’t know that Shelby was a harmless member of her species.

Before Shelby could work up the courage to ring the bell, the door was opened.

Nyla stood in the doorway, a barking black-and-brown rat in her arms.

Shelby blinked and stared. *Wow.*

So far, she had seen Nyla only at work, where she wore her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Now her hair was down and fell in wild waves onto her back. A hint of eyeliner emphasized her eyes and made them look even bigger and darker. The shapeless hospital scrubs Nyla usually wore to work definitely didn't do Nyla's sensuous build justice. The jeans and tight sweater she wore now showed off every curve.

It took some effort not to slobber—and this time it had nothing to do with the scent of the lamb meat.

The dog's barking ripped Shelby from her thoughts.

Nyla stood without moving and stared back.

"Uh, here." She handed Nyla a bouquet of red roses. In all the books about human mating behavior that she had read, the date always brought flowers, never meat, as it was custom with the Wrasa. Shelby didn't understand what was so romantic about slowly wilting flowers, but for Nyla's sake, she had adapted to human traditions.

The dog tried to bite Shelby's hand.

Only Shelby's fast Wrasa reactions saved her from being bitten.

The overgrown rat growled.

Shelby nearly bared her teeth and growled back.

"Goliath!" Nyla gave the dog an admonishing tap on the nose. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's going on with him today. He's usually the friendliest dog on earth."

Shelby grinned. "Must be the effects of the full moon."

The appearance of Nyla's dimples when she smiled made Shelby's knees weaken. "Would you like to come in while I bring Goliath upstairs and put the flowers in water?"

"I'd love to." Truth be told, she had offered to pick Nyla up because she was curious about her den...her house.

Goliath's growling filled the silence between them as Nyla led her into the house.

"Goliath, stop it!" Nyla said.

The rat shut up but continued to stare at Shelby.

They walked past furniture, oil paintings, and a fireplace, but Shelby ignored the visual impressions and focused on the scents surrounding her. They told their own stories.

On a bookshelf, a bottle filled with sand smelled of salt water and ocean breeze. The smell of old paper wafted up from a chest of drawers, as if it held letters and photo albums. The scents of half a dozen herbs clung to the cozy breakfast nook. Everything was permeated by the warm scent of jasmine.

Nyla's house smelled like a home. A sudden longing for her mother's kitchen filled Shelby, but she shoved back that feeling. It had been a long time since she had felt at home in her parents' house—if it had ever really been a true home for her.

While Shelby waited in the living room, Nyla brought the yapping rat upstairs and then went to the room where all the enticing scents were coming from.

"Red roses?" asked a female voice. Thanks to her Wrasa hearing, Shelby could hear her through the closed door. "I thought this was your first date?"

"It is," Nyla said.

Uh-oh. Maybe she shouldn't have taken advice about human courtship from romance novels. She had forgotten that the color of

roses held a meaning to humans. She sighed. Bringing roast to a date was definitely less complicated.

“Be careful, dear, or you’ll end up like me. Your grandfather proposed even before we finished our first date.”

A sound indicated that Nyla kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “And you said yes.”

“Of course I did. I couldn’t pass up a tasty morsel like your grandfather.”

Shelby started coughing as she tried to suppress her laughter.

“Will you introduce me to your date?” Nyla’s grandmother asked.

“And get a remake of ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding’ that ends with you shoving food down her throat until she pukes?” Nyla snorted. “No, thanks.”

“Nonsense,” the old lady said. “It’s not my fault if you bring home anorexic young things with sensitive stomachs. Come on. Introduce us.”

That answered one of Shelby’s questions. Nyla was out to her family, and they accepted her sexual orientation. Shelby knew that wasn’t a given with humans.

The kitchen door opened.

Shelby straightened, expecting to face a silver-haired Greek matriarch in a head scarf and a black dress. Instead, Nyla’s grandmother wiped her hands on her jeans and tugged on her pink T-shirt before she shook Shelby’s hand. “You must be Shelby. Nice to meet you. I’m Katerina Rozakis, Nyla’s grandmother.”

Behind her grandmother’s back, Nyla pointed at the door and mouthed, “Let’s go.”

But her grandmother had already taken Shelby’s arm and was pulling her toward the couch.

Shelby sent Nyla a helpless glance over her shoulder.

“Tell me a little about yourself,” Mrs. Rozakis said. “You’re a doctor, right?”

“She’s a doctor who will be late for the movie if we don’t get going,” Nyla said. She bent and kissed her grandmother’s forehead. Then she pulled Shelby up from the couch and dragged her to the door.

Shelby’s fingers tingled where Nyla touched her. She waved in Mrs. Rozakis’s direction before the door closed behind them.

“Oh my God.” Nyla covered her eyes with her free hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Gently, Shelby pulled Nyla’s hand from her face and looked into her eyes. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

“Believe me, if we stayed for two more minutes, you’d change your mind. My grandmother would have force-fed you while she questioned you about your finances, potential STDs, and your intentions toward me.”

Shelby chuckled. A Greek grandmother didn’t scare her. Whenever she had gone out with a Wrasa woman, she had been sniffed out by the woman’s whole pack. And they hadn’t offered her food. “No problem,” Shelby said. “I have nothing to hide.” At least not when it came to her finances, STDs, and her intentions toward Nyla. She sighed.

“You okay?” Nyla asked.

“Oh, sure. I’m great.” She led Nyla to her Toyota and opened the passenger door for her. “So your grandmother lives with you?” Shelby asked after she got in on the driver’s side.

Nyla nodded. “When my grandfather died three years ago, she fell into a depression. Cooking and keeping house for me gave her a new purpose.”

Why hadn't Nyla's parents taken in her grandmother? Shelby didn't want to appear too nosy, so she didn't ask. She started the car and weaved through the slow-moving traffic. "Which movie do you want to see?"

"How about 'Just One Day'? Have you heard of it?"

Shelby shook her head. Like many Wrasa, she considered movies and television a strange invention whose attraction she had never fully understood.

"It's about the daughter of a millionaire. She falls in love with her father's chauffeur, but of course her parents don't want her to get involved with a guy who doesn't have a cent to his name."

Of course. It's always the same. Parents had very specific expectations of the person their children should or shouldn't end up with. That was one thing that Wrasa and humans had in common. Shelby sighed again.

Hesitantly, Nyla laid her hand on Shelby's knee. "Are you really okay?"

The hand on her knee made Shelby flinch. Her knee hit the steering wheel.

Nyla withdrew her hand.

Shelby bit her lip. *Get yourself together. You just get this one date with her, so enjoy it while it lasts.* She wanted to reach for Nyla's hand and put it back on her knee, but she didn't dare. "Really, everything's great. I'm just..." She combed a strand of hair behind her ear and peeked over at Nyla, who tilted her head and listened. "...well, a little out of practice. This is my first date in five years."

"Wow. Five years?"

"Almost six."

For a few moments, Nyla said nothing. Then she shook her head. "But why didn't you date for so long? I mean, you've got a great sense

of humor, you're good-looking and more down-to-earth than any other doctor I know."

Shelby laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should."

When they stopped at a red light, Shelby looked over at Nyla.

Their gazes met. Nyla's dark eyes revealed her feelings more clearly than Shelby was used to from Wrasa women. Did Nyla already feel more for her than affection between colleagues? The drivers behind them started a chorus of horns.

"Yeah, yeah. Chill out." Shaking her head, Shelby drove through the intersection. It was a mystery to her how other Wrasa managed not to freak out and shift in the crazy New York traffic.

"So why haven't you dated in over five years?" Nyla asked. With a fleeting touch to Shelby's knee, she added, "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Shelby couldn't tell her the whole truth, but she didn't want to answer Nyla's sincere question with silence. "It's okay. I guess I just gave up looking for the perfect woman or starting relationships that were doomed from the beginning." *Then what are you doing going out on a date with a human?* Shelby shoved the thought away. She didn't want to think about tomorrow. Today belonged to Nyla and her.

"I know what you mean," Nyla said. "My ex-girlfriend was a vegetarian who hated dogs and couldn't understand why I wouldn't just leave behind my family to move to France with her."

But at least the dog hater and Nyla had belonged to the same species. Shelby suppressed another sigh and focused on finding a parking space within a few blocks of the movie theater.



“Oooh, popcorn!” Nyla jumped up and down like a little girl. “Do you want some?”

Unlike lamb meat, buttery pieces of corn weren't on Shelby's list of favorite dishes, but she had to laugh at Nyla's childlike enthusiasm. “No, thanks. Why don't you get the popcorn while I go to...” At the last second, she stopped herself from saying “to the little coyotes' room.” “To the little psychiatrists' room,” she said hurriedly and waved in the direction of the restrooms. At least in the ladies' room, she could keep away from the crowd in the theater lobby.

“Okay.” Nyla walked away with a smile.

Shelby watched her until she disappeared in the crowd in front of the concession stand. She turned and shook herself. Now that Nyla's presence no longer distracted her, she realized how uncomfortable it was for her to be stuck among so many humans. The stink of burned butter, sweat, and spilled soda hung in the air. At least she wouldn't run into other Wrasa here. No Wrasa would go to the movies on his or her own free will.

No Wrasa?

Her nose said something else. The scent of pines, mandarins, cream, and fresh air drifted over—and the cold sweat of a Wrasa fighting against the urge to shift.

She knew those smells. *Isn't that...?* Shelby turned.

On the other side of the hall, in a quiet corner, stood her neighbors, an elderly couple of fox-shifters. Lennard's nostrils flared as if he was struggling not to breathe through his nose. He repeatedly scratched first his left forearm, then the right one. His gaze darted back and forth and finally zeroed in on the emergency exit. When a human searching for a movie guide came too close, Lennard whirled around and growled.

Great Hunter, why is he doing this to himself?

“Oh, Shelby, hi!” Clara, Lennard’s wife, waved excitedly. “Lennard, look who’s here!” She patted his arm and turned toward Shelby. “Are you here to see the movie? It’s supposed to be very romantic. Right, Lennard?”

Lennard nodded with a pained, but lenient smile.

After avoiding two human teenagers who nearly crashed into her, Shelby joined her neighbors in the corner. As always when she met the couple, she had to smile about their mate scent. Clara’s scent of cream mixed with Lennard’s mandarin and created something that smelled of cheesecake. Even as a pup, Shelby had been fascinated by the body chemistry of the Wrasa that joined two people’s individual scents into a more complex mate scent when they started a lifelong relationship.

“I didn’t know you also like movies,” Clara said.

“Um, I...” As inconspicuously as possible, Shelby peeked over her shoulder. She hoped Nyla wouldn’t be back before Clara and Lennard had left. If her neighbors saw her with a human, they would ask questions that Shelby couldn’t answer. “No, I don’t really like movies, I just...”

Before she could come up with an excuse, Nyla appeared next to her. “Ah, there you are. I also got us some nachos. I didn’t know what you... Oh, hi.” Only now did she seem to realize that Shelby wasn’t alone and two strangers were staring at her. She sent Shelby a questioning gaze.

Sweat trickled down Shelby’s forehead. Her forearms tingled. If things continued like this, she would soon join Lennard in fighting the urge to shift. “Um, this is Lennard and Clara, my neighbors. And this is Nyla, a colleague of mine.” She emphasized the “colleague,” hoping to make her neighbors think that Nyla was nothing more than an acquaintance.

Nyla's normally warm, sensuous scent changed abruptly.

For a moment, the image of a jasmine shrub shaking in the wind appeared before Shelby's mental eye. She bit her lip. Her remark had hurt Nyla. She promised herself she would make up for it during the rest of the evening. As soon as Lennard and Clara were out of sight.

Clara's smile disappeared, and Lennard fixed Nyla with a narrow-eyed stare.

"Hi." Apparently, Nyla had gotten over her hurt feelings. She beamed at the couple as if she had been introduced to the president and the first lady. "Are you also going to see 'Just One Day'?"

Clara nodded but didn't seem eager to start a conversation with a human.

"I hear the movie runs over two hours," Nyla said.

"Two hours?" Lennard's eyes widened. He ducked his head, looking like a fox that had been snared by a hunter's trap and knew there was no escape. "I better go and get us some snacks, then."

"There's no time," Clara said and patted his arm. "They'll open the doors in a minute."

Lennard's shoulders drooped.

"Why don't you take the nachos?" Nyla offered him the plastic tray.

Clara and Lennard stared at her. "No," Clara said. "You got them for yourself."

"It seems I bit off more than I can chew. Shelby and I won't be able to eat all of this." Nyla held out the nacho tray again.

"Hey, if he doesn't want the damn nachos, I'll take them," a teenager shouted.

Growling, Lennard wrenched the nachos out of Nyla's hand. "Thanks. How much do we owe you?"

“Nothing.” Nyla grinned, undeterred by his bad manners. “Just don’t call for a nurse if the nachos give you heartburn.”

Wrasa didn’t get heartburn, but Nyla couldn’t know that.

Lennard shoved the first nacho into his mouth and already looked a bit less grumpy. “Don’t worry. We won’t.”

Before the doors to the movie theater opened, Nyla had pulled Clara into a conversation about the best movies of all times. Lennard had stopped observing Nyla as if she were his mortal enemy and directed his attention toward the nachos.

Shelby watched Nyla with a smile. In the hospital, she had often seen Nyla chatting up a scared patient. She had a talent for making them forget about their sterile surroundings within a few seconds. It seemed Nyla’s charm had a similar effect on Wrasa. *Oh, yes. Just look at yourself.*

Too bad that their noses would constantly remind Wrasa that Nyla was human and not someone they would ever trust.

The heavy doors opened.

A pack of teenagers shoved past them to get into the movie theater.

“Let’s go in,” Nyla said.

Shelby was in no hurry to enter the stuffy room, but she followed Nyla without hesitation.

As they climbed the stairs, Nyla stumbled.

Shelby hurried to catch up with her and reached for her hand to guide her safely to her seat. Then she realized that Lennard and Clara could see them. Quickly, she let go of Nyla’s hand.

“It’s okay,” Nyla said and reached for her hand.

Shelby closed her trembling fingers more tightly around Nyla’s. Her neck itched as if she could sense Lennard’s and Clara’s gazes on her. She dropped into a seat next to Nyla and slid down a little so that

her neighbors, who sat behind them, couldn't see her so well. Only now did she realize that Nyla had chosen seats for couples. Their seats weren't separated by armrests. She grimaced. *Shelby Carson, this date really wasn't the most brilliant idea you ever had.*

Under the pretense of scratching her shoulder, she turned her head and peeked at the row behind them.

Lennard's fox eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness while Clara's eyes were hidden behind special glasses that allowed Wrasa to watch movies produced for human eyesight.

Quickly, she turned back around.

Nyla leaned toward her. "You okay?"

Shelby nodded.

"Are you uncomfortable with this?" Nyla indicated their seats.

What should she answer? If she said yes, Nyla would think Shelby didn't want her close. But if she said no, Nyla might cuddle up to her during the romantic scenes and she would no longer be able to make Lennard and Clara believe that Nyla was just an acquaintance. "Um, well..."

Nyla moved back and put some space between them. "You're not out, are you?"

"Yes, I am. It's just..."

"Sssh," someone hissed.

Oh, come on. They were just showing commercials right now. *Humans. They don't really want to see commercials, do they?* She turned back toward Nyla. "I'm as out as anyone can be," she whispered. "But it's complicated."

Two humans turned toward her. "Sssh!"

Shelby looked at Nyla and rolled her eyes.

Nyla answered with a smile that seemed a little sad and didn't dimple her cheeks. Almost inaudibly, she whispered, "Later."

Glad that her attempts to explain had been postponed, Shelby glanced at the movie screen.

After a few more commercials, they showed a movie trailer and then the opening credits started to roll. The bright, constantly changing lights hurt Shelby's eyes, and she couldn't perceive colors the same way humans did. But Shelby didn't mind. She wasn't here to see the movie anyway. Instead, she leaned back and watched Nyla.

If the giant cup had been filled with meat instead of popcorn, a Wrasa would have emptied it within a minute. But Nyla took her time. During every interesting verbal exchange on the screen, her hand lingered over the cup. Only when the next scene started did she reach for a handful of the sticky treat and eat it slowly, one kernel after the other.

Nyla seemed to sense Shelby's gaze on her. She turned her head and gave Shelby a questioning gaze.

Shelby smiled at her.

Nyla's teeth glowed in the dark as she returned the smile and held out the popcorn cup.

Shelby's ears started to burn. To accept food from Nyla's plate—or popcorn from her cup—practically meant getting engaged for a Wrasa. Of course Nyla couldn't know that. She was just offering popcorn, not her eternal love. Lennard was still watching them with his sharp fox eyes, so Shelby shook her head. "No, thanks. I'm not a big fan of popcorn."

Half an hour later, Nyla set the empty cup on the floor and licked a bit of butter from her index finger.

Reflexively, Shelby licked her lips. Then she wrenched her gaze away from Nyla's hands and watched the hazy figures on the big screen.

Dramatic music, much too loud for Shelby's ears, boomed through the loudspeakers as a misunderstanding seemingly separated the two lovers forever and the movie's heroine was about to marry another man.

"No, no, no, don't do that, you fool," Nyla whispered. "Have some trust in your relationship."

Shelby turned her head and looked at her.

As if spellbound, Nyla stared at the movie screen.

Would Nyla still think like that and try to trust her if she told her who and what she really was?

Instantly, Shelby called herself to order. *Are you out of your mind? How can you even consider breaking the First Law by revealing our existence? Pull yourself together!*

Even though the chauffeur and the millionaire's daughter finally ended up together, going to the movies was a depressing experience for Shelby. The evening had made one thing clear: for her and Nyla, there would be no happy ending.

When the final credits started, Shelby jumped up from her seat and tugged Nyla along by the hand. If they hurried, they would make it out of the movie theater before Lennard and Clara caught up with them.

"What's the rush?" Nyla asked with a startled laugh as Shelby rushed down the stairs.

"Um, no, I just want to get rid of the trash before we leave." Shelby held up the empty popcorn cup. When they reached the door, she glanced back over her shoulder and suppressed a triumphant smile.

Lennard had to remain in his seat because Clara apparently wanted to watch the closing credits.

Shelby steered them toward the nearest exit.

“Can you hold this for a minute?” Nyla handed over her purse. “I have to go to the ladies’ room before we head back. I won’t be long.”

With the purse in her hands, Shelby stood and stared at Nyla’s retreating back. *Oh, shit.* Now she had lost her head start and might run into Clara and Lennard again. She tried to hide behind a column with movie posters. *Hurry up, Nyla.*

The scent of cheesecake drifted over.

She hunched her shoulders and turned.

Lennard and Clara were standing in front of her. “You are such a nice girl,” Clara said with a disapproving frown. “I really don’t understand why you associate with humans.”

Shelby started to sweat. A lump formed in her throat, and she nearly couldn’t get out her answer. “I don’t. Nyla is just...”

The grim expression on Lennard’s face made her shut up. “Have you lived among humans for so long that you’ve forgotten we Wrasa can smell a lie?”

Shelby snapped her mouth shut. She threw a glance over her shoulder, hoping Nyla would take her time. “Please don’t call the Saru.” She reached for Clara’s hand. “Please. I haven’t told Nyla what I really am. She thinks I’m just a nice colleague.”

Lennard fixed his watchful fox gaze on her. “A colleague with whom she shared her popcorn and held hands with?”

Cold sweat broke out all over Shelby’s body. What could she say to that?

Clara squeezed her hand. “In movies, I find forbidden love so romantic, but in real life... You are a promising young woman. Don’t destroy your life by getting involved with a human.”

“Nyla and I... We’re not together,” Shelby stammered. It was the only thing she could say without lying.

“Then make sure it stays that way,” Lennard said.

The door to the ladies' room opened and Nyla joined them. "Hi again. How did you like the movie? The ending was great, wasn't it?"

For a few moments, Clara and Lennard kept their gazes fixed on Shelby. Then they turned toward Nyla.

"Bah, Hollywood kitsch," Lennard mumbled. "Some couples are not meant to get together. They've got to accept that." He looked directly into Shelby's eyes.

Shelby gnashed her teeth but nodded obediently. She had no choice. Dejected, she left the movie theater and led Nyla back to the car.



"Here we are," Shelby said as she stopped the car in Nyla's driveway and turned off the engine.

"Yes."

They looked at each other and then stared through windshield into the darkness beyond.

"The movie was really good," Nyla said.

"Yes, it was." Since she hadn't paid attention to the movie, Shelby didn't know what else to say. *One problem solved. Nyla won't ask for a second date. That's for sure. You bored her to death, acted really squirrely all night, and made her think you're deeply closeted.*

Nyla unbuckled her seatbelt. The metallic click sounded much too loud in the silence between them. She glanced at Shelby, then at the passenger door.

In a second, she would leave. Everything in Shelby demanded she find a way to make Nyla stay, even though she knew there was no hope for them.

Nyla leaned to the side and opened the door.

"Wait!" Shelby nearly got tangled up in the seatbelt as she unfastened it. "I mean, wait a minute. I'll walk you to the door." She finally managed to free herself of the seatbelt and hastened around

the car. When she stood in front of Nyla, she didn't know what to do. She stuffed her hands into her pants pockets and shuffled her feet while she studied the gravel in Nyla's driveway.

Nyla closed the passenger door.

The loud sound made Shelby flinch. She followed Nyla to the house without saying anything.

Key in hand, Nyla paused in front of the door. The metal jingled as she spun the key between her fingers. "It was a really nice evening," Nyla said.

Shelby stared at her in disbelief. She didn't need to use her nose to know that Nyla was lying or at least not telling the whole truth. It hadn't been the fun, relaxed evening she had hoped for.

"Okay," Nyla said as Shelby continued to stare at her, "we had a few awkward moments. But I like you, Shelby. There's no reason for you to be so nervous."

What was she supposed to say to that? She couldn't tell Nyla what had made her act like a criminal on the run all night.

"Maybe we can repeat it some time," Nyla said. "This time without the nervousness."

Shelby nodded, even knowing it was not a good idea. Something burned behind her breastbone. Did Wrasa suffer from heartburn after all?

"Good night, then," Nyla said but made no move to unlock her front door.

"Good night." Shelby didn't move either. She stared at Nyla's sensuous lips. Should she kiss Nyla? For the first and only time. Or would it just make things worse? Did Nyla even want to be kissed?

Her scent seemed to indicate that she was interested, but Shelby didn't trust her senses. Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Just do it. For once in her life, she would do something just because she wanted it instead of desperately fighting for the respect of her pack and her fellow Wrasa and never really getting it. She took a tiny step forward.

Did Nyla lean toward her?

Shelby wasn't sure. She took another step.

Goliath started barking inside the house.

"Hey, what's going on?" Mrs. Rozakis called.

The light on the porch flared.

Blinded, Shelby pulled back.

Nyla searched for the right key and pushed it into the keyhole. "We'll see each other Monday, right?"

Shelby suppressed a sigh. "Sure. See you Monday." When they would just be colleagues, nothing more. "I think we both have the early shift." She fished her car key out of her pants pocket.

Nyla still hadn't unlocked the door. She looked at Shelby. "See you Monday. And please drive carefully."

"I will." After a few more seconds of hesitation, Shelby gave herself a mental shove, turned, and walked toward her car.

After opening the car door, she turned once more.

Nyla stood in the doorway and lifted one hand to wave.

Shelby forced a smile and returned the gesture. She dropped into the driver's seat. When she looked through the windshield, Nyla was gone. The door was closed and the light on the porch had been turned off. Only a tiny ray of light fell through the crack beneath the door.

Reproachfully, Shelby stared up at the waning moon. She wanted to lift her head and howl until every coyote in the neighborhood joined her lament. Instead she leaned her forehead against the steering wheel and closed her eyes.

A knock on the window next to her made her jump. Her head smashed against the steering wheel. “Ouch.” Rubbing her forehead, she looked up.

Nyla stood next to the car. Her face was pale in the moonlight and looked almost too beautiful to be real.

For a moment, Shelby thought she was dreaming. Then she hurriedly got out of the car. “Did you forget something?” She glanced at the passenger seat, searching for Nyla’s purse or another object Nyla might have left behind.

“No.” Nyla combed through her locks with both hands. “Yes. Shelby, I...” She stopped and leaned toward Shelby.

Shelby’s breath caught. Had Nyla come back to...?

Her soft lips brushed Shelby’s, then backed away.

More, more! Shelby wrapped both arms around Nyla and pulled her closer to kiss her again. The touch of Nyla’s lips made her whole body tingle in a way that she normally only experienced in the seconds before a transformation. Her nostrils quivered as she greedily sucked in Nyla’s scent. She kissed Nyla’s full lower lip, breathed kisses along the heart-shaped line of her upper lip, and nibbled gently on the corner of her mouth.

Warm breath washed over Shelby’s lips, and then Nyla’s tongue teased her mouth.

With one hand on Nyla’s neck, Shelby pulled her closer and opened her mouth.

Yapping sounds made them jerk back.

“Goliath, be quiet!” Nyla wagged her index finger at the dog.

It took a few moments before Shelby’s vision cleared. Everything around her felt strange and surreal. Everything but Nyla’s taste on her lips. Growling almost inaudibly, she stared down at the dog.

Goliath bared his teeth as if he wanted to rip Shelby’s throat out.

Shelby fixed him with a warning glare. *You better watch out, rat. If I manage to shift into a coyote for a change, I’ll eat a little thing like you as an appetizer.*

Nyla picked up the dog. From his elevated position in her arms, he continued barking at Shelby.

“Goliath, sssh.” Nyla lifted the tiny dog until she could look into his eyes. “What’s wrong with you? Shelby isn’t hurting me. We just...” In the moonlight, her face turned a bright pink color.

Despite her growling rival, Shelby had to smile. *We just kissed.*

Nyla finally ignored the dog and glanced at Shelby.

They stared at each other without saying a word.

Every single cell in Shelby’s body screamed at her to pull Nyla into her arms again, to breathe in her jasmine scent, and—

“Nyla?” Mrs. Rozakis called from the porch. “What are you doing out there?”

Nyla groaned. “As if one chaperone weren’t enough,” she murmured. Then she called toward the house: “I’m saying good night to Shelby.”

With her sensitive Wrasa hearing, Shelby heard Mrs. Rozakis mumble, “That’s what they call it nowadays.”

“So,” Nyla said and looked into Shelby’s eyes. “Good night, then.” She caressed Shelby’s hand with two of her fingers.

Only now did Shelby realize that she was clutching the frame of the open car door. She let go and touched Nyla’s fingertips with her own. “Good night.”

Nyla hesitated, then leaned forward and brushed her lips against Shelby’s in a quick kiss. Before Shelby could return the kiss, Nyla turned and walked away.

Shelby watched her until she reached the house. Long after the door had closed behind Nyla and the lights in the house had gone out, she stood in Nyla’s driveway and traced her lips with trembling fingers. *What in the Great Hunter’s name am I supposed to do now?*

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

MANHATTAN MOON

BY JAE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com