

CruX

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Jackson Holt makes a decent living as a private investigator in New Orleans, home of one of the largest underground supernatural populations in the United States. He and his partners have never met a case they couldn't crack...until a local bar owner asks him to do a little digging on her newest hire.

New Orleans is the fourth destination in as many months for Mackenzie Brooks, a woman on the run from a deranged stalker. After all, any man who shows up on her doorstep claiming to be her destined lover has more than a few screws loose. But crazy doesn't explain why he always finds her no matter how far she runs.

When her well-meaning boss puts a PI on her case, Mackenzie comes face to face with the incredible truth: magic is real, and whatever spell has kept her hidden and separate from the paranormal world is rapidly deteriorating.

With time running out, she has no choice but to trust Jackson as he struggles to uncover the truth of her past-and her destiny.

Prologue

She ran.

The earth flew under her feet, moving so fast it was nothing but a blur of greens and browns. Her ground-devouring lope felt effortless and, though the sun had long since set, she had no problem making out the landscape around her. Gentle rolling hills gave way to a flat, grassy plain on the left and a steep hill climbing into a dense forest on the right.

She altered her path, heading toward the hill and the safety of the woods. The woods offered protection from predators. The woods offered comfortable places to bed down, safe places to make a den. The woods offered prey.

She ran, but not because she had to. She ran because she loved to, loved feeling the wind rush past, the ground beneath her feet, the freedom of movement and speed.

She loved being *free*.

The loud report of a gun startled her, interrupting her long, smooth stride. Her ears twitched as the shots sounded again, coming from the direction of the flatlands behind her. She took off again, climbing the hill with ease.

The first strong tree she came to was her refuge, and she ascended into its lower branches with no difficulty. The leaves, aided by the darkness of night, would shield her from the interlopers and their weapons.

She flinched anyway when the gunshots rang out a third time, closer than ever before.

Closer. Always closer...

The shots faded, replaced by the sound of a wailing siren drifting through the thin walls, and Mackenzie Brooks shivered as she bolted upright in the bed, torn from her fitful dreams by the raucous noises outside. The air conditioning didn't work in the aging motel room, and it must have been eighty degrees outside, even though the sun had gone down hours ago. Still, goose bumps dotted her arms as she forced herself off the hard mattress and over to the window.

There wasn't much to see, just the cracked pavement of the parking lot and the garish neon sign belonging to the liquor store across the street. So far, Memphis had been ugly and

depressing. The only thing the city had going for it was that no one had tried to kidnap her since she'd arrived.

She let the curtain fall and moved back to the bed, rubbing her arms as she considered turning on the television. A brief attempt to find something to watch the night before had revealed only two working channels, but anything had to be better than pacing anxiously from the bed to the window and back for the rest of the night.

A nearby door slammed, the sudden crash enough to make her jump, and she stifled an embarrassing shriek. She sat frozen on the bed, her heart pounding in her chest until she heard the slurred, amused voices of people too far gone on drugs and alcohol to care if everyone else could hear them. It was a common occurrence in the dingy motel, as were the gunshots and the sirens. For someone who had grown up in midwestern suburbia, the motel was a place out of a nightmare.

Mackenzie took deep breaths as she rose and crossed the room, this time retrieving her large duffle bag from the floor and bringing it back to the bed. Inside an inner pocket she found the envelope containing her remaining cash. Her fingers trembled as she sorted through the bills, and she struggled to fight back tears when she realized how little was left. Not enough for a better motel, not even enough for more than another day or two in this one. Tomorrow she'd have to go out and find work, or find a way to leave town.

And she had to do it without running into Marcus or his thugs, all of whom seemed able to find her wherever she ran, no matter how carefully she hid. Everything bad that had happened to her in the past month could be traced back to the day Marcus had shown up on her doorstep with his killer good looks and his Hollywood smile, and proceeded to tear her life apart.

The sound of another door slamming shook Mackenzie out of her reverie. She shivered again and gritted her teeth to keep them from chattering as panic rose from nowhere. With it came the sudden certainty that she needed to get out of town. *Now.*

Mackenzie caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, saw her own face staring back at her wide-eyed and panicked. Somehow she knew she couldn't wait until the next day, couldn't waste time looking for a job. She couldn't stay a minute longer.

Listening to that inner prompting had kept her alive and ahead of Marcus. She rose from the bed and reached for her keys, then froze. They had to be tracking her somehow, and her car was the only thing she hadn't abandoned yet.

Leave it. Her motel wasn't far from the interstate, and there was a truck stop right down the road. Maybe, if she was lucky, one of the truckers would be willing to give her a ride, and she could lose Marcus and his goons for good. Wherever she ended up, it had to be better than the last three cities.

It *had* to be.

Chapter One

“Nicole Peyton, as I live and breathe.” Jackson Holt grabbed a stool and flashed the woman behind the bar a grin he knew matched his smooth drawl. “You get prettier every day.”

“Can it, Holt,” Nick shot back good-naturedly. “Save the flirtatious Georgia-boy act for someone who isn’t immune to your dubious charms.”

“Hey, there happen to be many, *many* women who find my charms enticing.”

“Mmm, yes.” She wiped a glass with a clean white towel and placed it in the plastic rack beside her. “But are they of sound mind, or just body?”

“Don’t much check their minds, usually,” he admitted with another grin.

“*Non compos mentis*, I tell you.” Nick fixed him with an admonishing glare. “And there you go again with the flirting. I asked you down so we could talk business.”

Jackson frowned. Nicole Peyton never wanted to talk business. Despite her family’s connections, she kept her nose clean and stayed out of trouble, choosing instead to focus her energies on running her small but popular bar. “You’re not in some kind of difficulty, are you, Nicky?”

The petite brunette waved a hand and crinkled her nose. “If that were the case, I wouldn’t waste time joking about your endless stream of hot, vapid blondes.” She held up a glass. “You working?”

“Yeah. Alec and I are on a case.”

She poured him a soda. “I need a favor.”

Jackson frowned again. Coming from anyone else, the words might be innocuous. But coming from Nick... “This isn’t going to be like the time during Mardi Gras when I had to explain to that cop why I was carrying a half-naked woman on my back, is it?”

She laughed and shook her head, sending her ponytail swaying. “No. Less nakedness, and hopefully no police involvement.”

“*Hopefully?* Now, that doesn’t sound too promising.”

Nick leaned forward, her brown eyes and expression serious. “I just hired a new girl, Mackenzie.”

“Did someone quit?” Curiosity quirked his brow. “It’s off-season.”

“No,” she admitted, shaking her head again. “Tourism is picking back up this year, but not that much yet. She seemed desperate, though, so I took pity on her. Then she asked me to pay her in cash. Daily.”

You didn’t have to be in his line of work for *that* to set off a cascade of warning bells. “You think she’s on the run?”

“Maybe, but I don’t really get a criminal vibe from her. It’s more like…” She trailed off and seemed to be searching for words. “Every time the door opens, she nearly jumps out of her skin. She’s skittish as hell.”

Jackson pondered her words. “As if she keeps expecting someone to walk through it.”

“Right.”

“Someone she doesn’t want to see.”

Nick nodded. “Exactly.”

He tapped a beer mat on the dark, polished wood of the bar. “Has she mentioned a boyfriend or husband? Any other kind of bad situation?”

Nick blew her bangs up and gave him an exasperated look. “Would I be offering to slash yours and Alec’s bar tab in half if she seemed willing to regale me with her life story?”

Now she had his full attention. “In half, you say?”

“Uh-huh. All you have to do is follow her home.” Nick bit her lip. “She told me she had a decent place to stay, but I don’t think I believe her. I just want to make sure.”

It seemed easy enough. *Too* easy, in fact. “What are you not telling me, Nicky?”

The pretty brunette pursed her lips and flashed him a sheepish look. “I think she might be a shapeshifter.”

Mackenzie had an excellent memory for faces and had developed an equally good memory for drinks. By the time the tall, well-tanned man slid onto a bar stool in front of her she’d already poured him a pint of the same beer he’d ordered the last two times. She tossed a coaster on the bar, set the beer in front of him and offered him an open, vaguely flirtatious smile. “I’d never forget a man who likes fine imported drafts, but I’ve forgotten your name again.”

“I’m Derek. Derek Gabriel.” The man grinned at her, the gesture transforming his face from rugged to handsome. It was nothing unusual for the bar; Mahalia’s always seemed to be full of attractive men. Even better, they tipped well, a fact that was refilling that envelope in her duffel bag more quickly than she’d dared to hope.

Mr. Imported Draft Beer—*Derek Gabriel*, she reminded herself—was no different. He seemed to enjoy flirting with her, though Mackenzie had already discerned he wasn't serious. It didn't take a genius to notice the way his eyes followed Nick whenever she was around.

Mackenzie shifted her gaze to her boss. Nick stood at the other end of the bar, holding a low conversation with a man Mackenzie hadn't seen before. Even if she hadn't had a good memory, his was a face she would've remembered, with a strong jaw, a tiny cleft in his chin and a mouth made to smile. He was laughing when she glanced at them, and she was struck by the bright blue of his eyes as they glinted with amusement. *Oh, I'd flirt with you, all right...if Nick wasn't busy doing it already.*

Derek had been joined by a short black woman, who eyed him with a no-nonsense gaze. He didn't notice. He was, predictably, watching Nick. The newcomer snorted in amusement. "He's about as subtle as a kid in a candy store, huh?"

Derek jerked his head back around and glared. "Shut up, Penny, and order a damn beer."

Penny's humor didn't fade as she slid onto the stool next to him, offering her hand to Mackenzie. "You must be the new girl. I'm Penny."

"Hi." The woman's grip was strong, her smile open and friendly. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Just a Coke, thanks. I've got to pick my kids up from soccer practice in a half hour."

"Poor kids," Derek grumbled, and Mackenzie could have sworn he was *blushing*. "Do they know their mom's a—"

"Oh, finish that sentence. I *dare* you."

Mackenzie laughed as she poured Penny's soda, mostly at the way Derek's mouth snapped shut. He stood almost a foot taller than Penny, but he didn't look like he was ready to take her dare.

The woman snorted again as she took her drink from Mackenzie. "You gotta watch the men around here, honey. They're all reasonably pleasant to look at, and it makes them uppity. Especially this one."

"Excuse me, I don't think—"

"He's in here all the time," Penny continued as if Derek hadn't spoken. "Rumor has it little Nicole might even be sweet on him. Or she hates his guts. No one can quite tell which."

Mackenzie glanced at Nick again, but her eyes were once more drawn to the man across the bar from her. Something about him appealed to her, something that made her wish life was normal enough for her to consider dating and men. The sudden longing for a life without fear overwhelmed her, and she braced her hands against the bar to hide their shaking.

Penny's sharp eyes saw far too much. Mackenzie could tell she was about to ask if she was all right, but Derek interrupted with another well-timed grumble of protest. "For your information, I was absolutely going to ask Mackenzie out before you came in here and cramped my style."

Mackenzie seized on his words and pulled her public persona back into place. No matter how scared she was, she couldn't afford to let it show. It made people ask questions, ones she could ill afford to answer. So she winked at Derek. "Maybe I would have said yes, but now I know better. I can't take the chance that you'll get me in trouble with my boss."

"Oh, but maybe I'd be worth it." Derek's waggled eyebrows were so absurdly overdone Mackenzie couldn't help but laugh. He obviously flirted for the same reason she did—because people expected it of him. It made it a lot less dangerous to play along.

She leaned across the counter and lowered her voice. "I think you're too much trouble for me to handle, Derek Gabriel. I'm going to listen to your friend's advice and steer clear."

"Anyone who gives pretty women advice to steer clear is *not* a friend," Derek replied stoutly, making a face at Penny.

Penny just rolled her eyes. "God save me from fools."

It was so fun, so *normal*. Joking, laughing... The yearning returned, stronger than ever. Mackenzie could make a life here, with people like this. She could—

She fought sudden tears, blinking them back as she hefted a nearby tub of dirty glasses. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything. Anything that *won't* get me fired."

Penny's laughter followed her. As handsome as he was, it wasn't Derek she found herself thinking of as she stood inside the doors, taking a moment to gather herself. The eyes she couldn't seem to get out of her head were the shockingly blue ones belonging to the stranger who'd been speaking with Nick.

Even though she knew dating was off-limits, she found herself oddly disappointed when she returned to the front several minutes later only to find him gone.

Chapter Two

A few months ago, Mackenzie wouldn't have noticed the man following her.

Of course, a few months ago, Mackenzie had never *been* followed before, not with any real dedication. From time to time a customer looking to score would wait for her outside the bar, but she'd had no trouble dissuading them from following her home.

Then Marcus had walked into her life, and a whole new world of paranoia opened up for her. She'd gotten very good at noticing a footstep where one shouldn't be, and even better at remembering faces she saw a bit too often to be coincidence.

It was a credit to her stalker's skill that she didn't notice him at first. She'd walked almost a quarter mile toward her motel before she realized anyone was following her at all, a fact which chilled her to the bone. It was so dark she couldn't see more than a vague outline—tall and lean, wearing nothing fancier than jeans and a T-shirt. That reassured her at first, since all of Marcus's men had all worn the same black slacks and button-down shirts, some sort of quasi-uniform straight from the pages of Creepy Insane Stalker Monthly.

Her relief faded when she walked another quarter mile and caught sight of him again. She *knew* she was being followed.

What she didn't know was why. The small container of pepper spray in her pocket gave her the courage to turn and face him, and she made no attempt to hide her suspicion. She didn't move, didn't speak, just stared challengingly at him and waited to see if he would step into the circle of light cast by the streetlight above.

He did. "Busted, huh?" he drawled, one hand rubbing at the strong line of his chin.

She started when she recognized the man from the bar, the handsome one who'd been talking to Nick. He was taller than she'd realized, with broad shoulders and an easy grace. Though it was blanched and yellowed by the harsh glare of the streetlight, she clearly remembered the sandy shade of his brown hair, and the startling blue of his eyes.

He was gorgeous, all right, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. Marcus had been gorgeous too. So she did her best to ignore his looks as she curled her fingers around the pepper spray in her pocket. "Why are you following me?"

He took a step closer. “Your boss asked me to. She was...well, I suppose ‘concerned’ is probably as good a word as any.”

Nervousness drove her back a few paces, and she immediately regretted showing fear. She straightened and struggled to reclaim her challenging expression. “Nick told you to follow me?”

His voice softened, turned almost gentle. “She was worried you didn’t have anyplace to go, and she said you’ve been acting jumpy. Like maybe you were in trouble?”

“I have a place to stay.” The response came too fast, too forced, and she almost cringed at how defensive she sounded. He didn’t look like the sort of man who would consider her motel an appropriate dwelling. *She* didn’t like it either, but it was all she could afford on her limited budget.

He was still watching her, so she moderated her tone. “It’s nice that you’re worried, but I’m fine. I promise.”

He stared at her as if considering the veracity of her words. “All right. But at least let me walk you home.” His lips curled into a charming smile that made her heart beat faster. “Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not in the best neighborhood at the moment.”

Mackenzie opened her mouth to turn down his offer. The last thing she needed right now was trouble, and the absolute best-case scenario involved him talking to Nick about how unsuitable her current living quarters were. But when her gaze found his again, the words died on her tongue.

She *should* say no, but she didn’t want to. Loneliness and fear had become so ingrained that she sometimes wondered if she remembered how to feel anything else. His presence would give her the illusion of companionship, for however short a time. Something about his eyes made her want to trust him, made her long to tell him everything that had happened. *Or maybe I just want to tell someone so I won’t have to be alone.*

She wasn’t ready to trust him with the truth, but she could let him walk her home. “What’s your name?”

He took another step forward and held out his hand. “I’m Jackson. Jackson Holt.”

If she wanted to shake his hand, she’d have to let go of the pepper spray in her pocket and give up the only chance she’d have of getting away if he tried to hurt her. She looked at his face, at his smile, but most of all at those astoundingly blue eyes.

She slowly uncurled her fingers. The pepper spray stayed in the pocket of her sweatshirt as she pulled out her hand and offered it to him. “I’m Mackenzie.”

Jackson tried not to let his dismay show as he accompanied Mackenzie farther from the bar and the French Quarter. Her walk home had brought them into one of the worst-damaged areas left over from Hurricane Katrina, and block after block revealed the same thing—rows of shotgun houses and closed businesses, gutted and awaiting restoration. They'd long since left the acceptable tourist spots behind, leading him to believe the curvy woman keeping her distance beside him either hadn't done her homework or was running short of cash.

He shook himself with a silent grumble. He just had to see her home, somehow manage to get himself home without getting rolled for his wallet and shot, and he could report his findings to Nick in the morning. His and Alec's bar tab would be cut in half, and he'd have done Nick a solid.

So what if his eyes kept flickering back to Mackenzie and her lustrous hair? She'd been wearing it in a twist when he'd seen her at Mahalia's, but the hairdo had given way to a sloppy ponytail. Though still pulled up, it was easy to see that, unbound, the shining mass would damn near reach her waist. He'd never been much for long hair, but it worked on her.

"So," he said, mostly to distract himself from wondering whether it was as soft as it looked. "Where are you from?" He couldn't detect much of an accent.

If he hadn't been watching her hair so closely, he wouldn't have seen her shoulders stiffen. Silence stretched out between them before she grudgingly replied, "I was born in Seattle."

It wasn't really an answer. "Washington's nice," he said easily. "I'm from Georgia myself. Went to college in Florida, moved here. I wanted to stay in the South, and New Orleans seemed like a logical choice. It's a good place for people like us."

She glanced at him, her expression confused. "People like us? Are you a bartender?"

He searched her eyes for signs of recognition or evasiveness, but they were clear, guileless. *Interesting*. "Free spirits," he explained.

"Ah." She slipped her hands back into the pockets of her sweatshirt. August in New Orleans was anything but cold, even after dark, and the sweatshirt looked out of place. So did the way she curled in on herself as if cold or, more likely, scared.

Odd. If she was a shapeshifter, like Nick thought, it didn't make sense for her to seem so frightened. Shifters could generally fend for themselves pretty well, no matter the circumstances.

He recalled his conversation with Nick. "I get the vague sense that she's like me, but different," she'd said.

Her words had prompted a snort from him. "That's not very helpful, Peyton. Can you be more specific?"

"A shifter," she'd said finally, "but not a wolf. Maybe something else."

Something else. Even in a city like New Orleans, which was full of supernaturals mostly trying to live quiet lives of peace and secrecy, it was all but impossible to find a shifter who wasn't a wolf. Through birth or transformation, their ranks had grown, while other breeds' numbers had dwindled. Still, if Nick sensed magic within Mackenzie, he trusted her instincts.

So why hadn't she looked the slightest bit nervous or intrigued when he'd made the comment about people like them?

Jackson briefly considered casting his seeing spell on her to determine her true nature, but dismissed the idea. If she had any magical heritage at all, she'd know he'd done *something*, if not exactly what, and he might find himself in somewhat of a pickle.

Despite his musings, he didn't drop his easy, crooked grin, didn't betray the thoughts whirling madly through his head. His placid exterior was part of what made him very, very good at his job. It had kept him alive on more than one occasion.

Mackenzie remained silent until she stopped in front of a building with a visible flood line etched three feet high on the ground floor wall. It looked as though it shouldn't have been in use anymore. The lights on the sign had blown out but, squinting, he could make out what had once been a sign for a motel before graffiti, vandalism and storm damage had taken their toll.

A small alley lay between the building and the one next to it, obviously leading back to the parking lot and rooms. It was there that she hesitated, glancing into the dimly lit alley with a self-conscious grimace that told him more clearly than words she was aware how bad it looked. Her eyes didn't quite meet his as she cleared her throat. "This is my place."

"Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me." Jackson didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Mackenzie flinched and shot him a mortified look. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I just... Damn, Kenzie." The nickname rolled off his tongue, unbidden. "If I leave you here, Nick'll skin me alive." *And I won't sleep a wink for worrying.*

"I've been here four nights already," she said, averting her eyes. "I've been fine."

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. "Just because you've been fine so far doesn't mean you're going to stay that way." He tapped his chin. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to stay somewhere else tonight?"

If anything, she looked even more uncomfortable. "I know you're trying to help, but it's late and I wouldn't have any idea where to go. I've already paid for tonight."

"There's a small apartment above the bar. It's where Mahalia lived when she owned the place. You could stay there."

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought Nick owned the bar. How can you offer to let me stay there?" She probably didn't even realize that she'd taken a step back from him, but Jackson noticed.

He kept his voice soothing. “Nick is my best friend. She wouldn’t want you to be here, that’s for damn sure. I think she’d want you to stay there until you find a better place.”

The fight seemed to melt out of her, leaving her looking exhausted. She finally met his eyes, and gave him a tired, self-conscious smile. “Honestly? I don’t think I’m up to walking all the way back there tonight.”

“So I’ll call a cab. Hell, I’ll call my partner if I have to. He won’t like having his tired old ass dragged out of bed, but I’ll do it.”

Mackenzie stared at him for a long time, studying his face as if she could read his intentions. Then she nodded once. “If you don’t mind calling a cab, I can go and get my bag.”

There was no way in hell he was letting her go to her room alone. “I don’t really want to wait here by myself. Would it be all right if I came and waited outside the door?”

“Okay.” She tilted her head toward the dark driveway. “It’s back this way.”

Jackson already had his phone out. He dialed information absently, the bulk of his attention focused on every noise in the dim alley. As confident as he was in his ability to take care of himself and Mackenzie, he didn’t relish the thought of getting caught off his guard. But they reached the top of the rickety staircase without incident.

A man stood by the landing, leaning against the wall next to a defaced sign entreating the guests not to smoke. He had a cigarette in his mouth, but pulled it out to leer at Mackenzie when she walked by. He caught sight of Jackson and the expression faded, replaced by surprise and then wary resentment.

Mackenzie appeared to ignore him, but Jackson could see how tight her shoulders were as she walked to the second door and slipped a key out of her pocket.

“Evening,” Jackson said with a nod, taking care to follow Mackenzie closely.

The man glared at Jackson and ground out his cigarette on the sign next to his head. His dark gaze slid to Mackenzie, who struggled to work the rusty key into the lock with hands that shook.

Jackson answered the man’s glare with a bland look and stepped forward. “Let me.” He reached around and took the key from her trembling hand. The lock yielded easily. “I’ll be right here.”

She was close enough for him to feel her shiver before she slipped away, still moving with that surprising grace though obviously exhausted and terrified.

Jackson spoke into his cell phone, asking to be connected to the first cab-company listing. The sooner he got Mackenzie out of here, the better.

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Mackenzie was fumbling through her bag for her envelope of cash when she looked up to see Jackson pass several folded bills through the cab's window. The cabbie handed him a slip of paper in return and pulled away, leaving Mackenzie on the sidewalk with the money in her hand.

She stepped forward and held it out. "Here. I was going to pay for the cab."

He shook his head. "Got a receipt. It's a tax-deductible business expense."

"Oh." Even if it was just his way of making her feel better about accepting his charity, she was too tired to argue. She shoved the money back into her duffel bag and swung the strap onto her shoulder. "So where do I need to go?"

He nodded to the Spanish-style brick building that housed the bar. "There's a staircase around back that leads to the apartment. Come on. I'll show you."

He led her around the corner and up the sturdy, wrought-iron stairs. "Wait here," he said on the landing. "I need to see if I can find the key." He fumbled around the doorjamb before kneeling and lifting a potted fern. "Here we go." His broad shoulders blocked her view as he opened the door with a click. He stepped back and gestured her in.

For a moment Mackenzie stood on the landing and watched him, fear and paranoia battling with the desperate need to sleep in a safe place. The bar was located in a quieter part of the Quarter, and most of the surrounding buildings housed residences or businesses that had long since closed for the day; walking into the apartment would put her at Jackson's mercy. It was unlikely anyone would come to her aid if she called for help.

Then again, no one would have *cared* if she'd called for help at the motel. If Jackson had wanted to hurt her, he'd had ample opportunity. She didn't know if he made her feel safe or if she just didn't have the energy to care anymore, but she nodded and walked into the apartment.

The small entry gave way to a kitchen and living area, everything decorated in bright, welcoming colors. After a string of motels that had started at cheap and nosedived to trashy, the sight brought tears to her eyes.

Jackson stood there, one hand on the edge of the open door. "I hope you're not hungry. There probably isn't any food in the fridge, though you might be able to find something in the pantry." He scratched the back of his head and furrowed his brow. "You could always order in. The phone should be in working order."

"I'm fine," she said quietly, hoping he wouldn't hear the slight tremor in her voice. She moved slowly into the living room, dropping the bag by the side of the couch. She surreptitiously wiped her eyes, turned and sat. "Are you sure Nick isn't going to mind?"

He shook his head and spoke, his voice low. “Nick won’t mind. She’ll be glad you stayed someplace safe.” His grin was encouraging. “Hey, you’re not likely to be late for work tomorrow.”

His smile was as irresistible as his eyes, and she found herself wishing she had an excuse to get him to stay a while longer.

Don’t be stupid, she reminded herself sharply as she pulled her gaze from his. *Now is not the time for distractions*. She couldn’t get involved with him. At best, it would make it hard to move on when she needed to. And if Marcus showed up while they were together...

He was too nice a man to get tangled up in her problems, so she met his eyes again and tried to show gratitude in her expression without letting anything else creep in. “Thank you, Jackson. It—it’s really nice that you and Nick are helping me out. I promise I’ll find someplace else to stay.”

“Sure,” he said easily, rocking the door back and forth absently. “I’ll call Nick in the morning and tell her you’re here, so don’t worry about that. Bolt the door behind me. Sleep well, Mackenzie.” He disappeared, and the door closed with a gentle click.

Mackenzie let out the breath she’d been holding. Exhaustion dragged at her as she made her way to the door to lock the deadbolt and back to the couch, and she sank back into the plush cushion with a soft sigh. *I’ll just sit here a few minutes...*

In moments, she was curled comfortably on her side, her head resting on a bright blue cushion. For the first time since Marcus had found her over a month ago, she drifted to sleep feeling safe, comfortable, and almost hopeful.

Jackson leaned against the lamp post and scratched his arm as he looked at the second-floor windows of Mahalia’s old apartment. The lights hadn’t gone off, but he hoped Mackenzie was getting some rest, anyway. She’d almost fallen asleep in the taxi back from her crappy motel, even though it was obvious she was fresh out of trust for strangers.

A handful of people walked past, almost knocking into him, and Jackson stepped back automatically, his mind on the woman upstairs. She’d been so skittish he hadn’t wanted her to look out and see him on the street, so he’d thrown up a quick shield, something to shadow him from most people’s sight. It was a trick Mahalia herself had taught him, back before she’d decided to retire to Boca Raton and make him learn all his magic the hard way, from dusty old books that tended to fall apart on him and make his eyes water.

There was no doubt in his mind Mackenzie was on the run from something, though he’d bet anyone a hundred bucks it was *someone*. An old boyfriend, perhaps, or a husband. Some overprotective, possessive asshole, maybe even an abusive one. His fists clenched at the thought.

Surely if she was a shapeshifter, as Nick had suggested, she could have taken care of such a situation. Or maybe the hypothetical guy was just as strong, or stronger. It made sense.

Except that she really had seemed clueless when he'd tossed out that line about people like them. That part didn't make so much sense. He resolved to ask Alec to take a look at Mackenzie. His partner was fifteen years older than Nick, and his shapeshifter instincts were more refined. He should be able to settle the question.

What wouldn't be so easy to settle was why Jackson could still remember the striking cobalt shade of her eyes, or the way she moved like the same gravity that affected everyone else couldn't quite reach her.

He scratched his head and huffed in disgust. He was standing under a streetlight, waxing poetic about the shade of a stranger's eyes. Add a show tune or two, and his already bizarre life was headed straight for the theatre of the absurd.

Chapter Three

Jackson growled and balanced a coffee tray and a paper bag in one hand as he tugged open the office door. “Morning,” he said dourly as he walked in and dropped the bag on the small table that held the cold, empty coffee maker. “I stopped by Café du Monde on the way in and bought beignets.”

The young woman behind the receptionist’s desk looked him over before raising an eyebrow. “I thought Alec was the one staking out crazy husband dude. Did something go down last night that you both needed to handle?”

“No, Katherine.” He placed a coffee cup on her desk and laid the tray on his own. “I was working on something else.”

“What were you—” Her words cut off as the door opened again and Jackson’s partner shoved through it, looking even less cheerful than Jackson felt.

Alec also held a coffee tray and paper bag, which he raised as the door swung shut. “I stopped by Café du Monde and got...” His gaze fell on the bag beside the coffee maker and jumped to Jackson. “Shit, what the hell happened to you?”

“He was working on something else,” Kat supplied helpfully, an amused glint in her light blue eyes. The look she flashed Jackson was downright mischievous. “So Alec doesn’t know about this mysterious other job?”

Jackson dropped into his leather chair, his elbows hitting the desk as he rubbed his eyes. “I was doing Nick Peyton a favor. Well, not exactly. She’s cutting our bar tab in half as payment.”

“In half? Must have been quite a favor.” Alec dumped a second cup of coffee on Kat’s desk and sank into his own chair with an inhuman grace Jackson found particularly offensive, considering the fact that Alec had not only also been up all night, but had more than ten years on him to begin with.

“Mmm. She hired someone new, but the woman’s been acting kind of squirrely, so Nick wanted me to make sure she had a decent place to stay. Turned out, she had a room in some condemned roach motel upriver.”

“Where’s she staying now?”

Jackson hesitated. Alec had been his partner for five years, and the man was bound to take his next revelation the wrong way. “I took her back to Mahalia’s and let her into the apartment upstairs.”

Alec’s eyebrows rose, but it was Kat who spoke. “And since Café du Monde was on your way into work, that must mean you stayed there.” There was *far* too much amusement in her voice.

“Yeah, I stayed there,” he replied irritably. “Outside, in the company of my favorite streetlamp, which is why I look like sun-dried crap, and not like some guy who got lucky last night. So shut up already.”

“Did you figure out why she’s so squirrely?” Alec shot Kat a quelling look Jackson probably wasn’t supposed to see.

“Nope. I’ve got a good idea, though.” Jackson flipped through his address cards and picked up the phone.

Alec took another sip of his coffee. “Gonna share?”

“Uh-uh.”

Blissful silence filled the office for a full five seconds before Alec snorted in exasperation. “Jesus. You’ve got the hots for her, don’t you?”

Jackson shot him an exasperated look of his own and put down the phone. “Not everything in my life is about sex, Jacobson. I just figure it’s none of your damn business, that’s all.”

“If you’re doing a job, it’s my business. You were supposed to be sleeping last night so one of us would be ready to deal with the fallout on the Smith case this morning. Now *your* personal business is screwing up *my* professional business.”

“*Is* there fallout to deal with?”

Alec pulled a slim camera from his jacket pocket and held it up. “As soon as Kat pulls the pictures off of here, you can see how much. The man’s not subtle. I’m not surprised his wife figured out exactly what he was up to.”

Jackson was glad he’d already called Nick to update her on Mackenzie’s status and whereabouts. “Let me guess. Cocktail waitress? Exotic dancer?”

“Secretary. It’s always the secretary.” Alec turned his dark gaze on Kat and flashed her a wicked smile. “Why is that, Kat?”

Jackson watched in amusement as Kat snatched the camera from Alec’s hand with a dangerous look. “Don’t ask me. I wouldn’t get mixed up with you if you paid me. Oh wait, you do.” She handled the camera with speed and familiarity, her fingers flying over the buttons. She plugged a cord from her computer into the side of the camera and pulled her keyboard toward

her. “Now, *Jackson*, on the other hand... I’d get mixed up with him for sure. Especially if he made me Italian food.”

Alec scowled. “You are too popular with the ladies for your own damn good, Holt.”

“Don’t I know it.” He thought about Mackenzie and how she hadn’t seemed the slightest bit interested in him. “Then again, maybe not.”

Alec looked like he was going to say something, but Kat let out a sudden choked noise and pushed her chair back from her desk. “Holy crap, Alec. I’m never giving you the camera with the good zoom lens again.”

The pictures on her computer were gritty and explicit enough to leave no doubt about their client’s husband’s extramarital activities. His lurid affair with his secretary was splashed over Kat’s flat-screen monitor. In detail. Maybe *too much* detail.

Alec laughed. “Didn’t have to zoom much. They were right next to the window, and I can move pretty quietly when I want to.”

Jackson leaned over Kat’s shoulder. “Looks like our society matron could have been absolutely right to be concerned about that huge life-insurance policy.” He whistled and accidentally nudged Kat’s purse aside, revealing a copy of the *Delta Examiner*, a regional tabloid newspaper. “Oh, *Kat*. Alec, look what *Kat*’s reading.”

She tried to snatch away the tabloid, but Alec’s shapeshifter reflexes made him impossibly fast, even when he was exhausted. He grabbed the paper and frowned. “Oh, hell. You’d better have a good excuse for this, Katherine Gabriel, or I may fire your ass.”

“It’s funny,” she retorted, her cheeks bright red. “I like reading the stories about the so-called supernatural conspiracy. This one has an article about a secret cabal of psychics who control the government.” She sniffed. “No one invited *me* to join.”

Jackson laughed. “Maybe they don’t need any soft-hearted empaths.” He looked at the paper over Alec’s shoulder. “Yep, there’s your nemesis. C.E. Miller, the great paranormal whistle-blower.”

Alec’s scowl deepened as he flipped open the tabloid to the page listed and skimmed the article. “It’s not funny. We survive by flying beneath the radar. Whoever this clown is, he’s fucking shit up for everyone. Every damn week he manages to latch on to the latest gossip in the supernatural world and spew it over the pages of this rag. He *has* to be one of us, or he wouldn’t always know what’s going on.”

“Right.” Jackson walked over to the table and opened a bag of beignets. “Cause everyone believes that stuff. Especially the thing about that secret cabal of psychics.” He took a bite of the fried dough, careful not to inhale any powdered sugar. “Someone get this guy a Pulitzer, already.”

Looking disgusted, Alec tossed the paper back on Kat's desk. "Some day, when I've got some free time, I'm going to track that man down and have words with him. If he just wants money, he could write the same UFO and Bigfoot shit as everyone else. He doesn't have to publish stuff that's real."

Jackson brought Kat a beignet on a napkin. "Suppose you're right, Alec, and he's one of us. He could belong to one of the factions that *wants* exposure, even if it's dangerous."

"All the more reason for me to track him down," Alec said darkly. He sank into his chair with a glance at Jackson. "Is this job we're doing for Nick going to keep you busy today? I can go talk to the husband, but I'll need to bring Kat with me to work her mojo."

Jackson almost told him that, technically, he was finished with his favor for Nick. "Actually, yeah. I'm going to check some things out. Why don't you give me a call when you're done with the husband? I need you and Kat to take a gander at Nick's new employee, if that's all right."

Kat made a face. "God, just promise me it's the last time I have to see that slimeball husband. I always feel like I need a shower after reading him."

Jackson started flipping through a stack of mail. "Alec won't make you go back, Kat," he promised absently. "No more gold-digging, slimeball husbands for at least a week."

She shuddered. "I am *never* getting married. Never."

Though the sentiment wasn't far from his own feelings on the subject, Jackson thought about his parents and their nearly thirty-five years of wedded bliss. "Find the right guy, Kat, and you won't have to worry about him wanting to bump you off for money."

"Plus I'd have to actually have a lot of money first," She pulled her chair back to her desk. The phone rang, and she wrinkled her nose as she slipped on her headset. "Holt and Jacobson Investigations. How can I help you?"

Jackson threw away half the stack of mail and tossed some of the remaining correspondence on Alec's desk. "Will you be finished with the husband by around two this afternoon?"

Alec scratched at the side of his beard as he stared past Jackson in thought. "Should be. Depends on what Kat gets from him, though. You want us to swing by Mahalia's when we get done?"

"That'd work. I can't quite figure this one out."

"Yeah, me either," Alec commiserated. "Of course, that could be because you haven't told me a damn thing aside from the fact that Nick hired some hot chick who was staying in a crap motel."

Jackson blinked and flushed. How could he have forgotten to share with Alec the most important fact of all? “Nick thinks she’s a shapeshifter, but not a wolf. I can’t get a bead on her.”

“Apparently,” Alec drawled dryly. “She’s scrambled your brains but good, man. I can come by and take a look, and Kat will be able to give you an idea of what shape she’s in emotionally.”

Jackson focused on his planner. “I’ve got to meet an informant in about fifteen minutes. Give me a call when you’re headed to Mahalia’s.” He grabbed his cell phone and coffee. “Be careful with the husband. They freak out sometimes when they know they’re busted.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of Kat.”

Jackson paused by her desk, held up the tabloid and grinned mischievously. “By the way? Last week, Miller wrote an article about the vampire underground here in the Big Easy. So cheer up. He’s not right about *everything*.”

Alec just snorted. “Thank God. If this town had vampires, I might throw myself in the damn Mississippi.”

A gentle knock woke Mackenzie, jerking her rather unpleasantly from a dream about Jackson and his strong arms. Fear froze her in place for one endless moment while she stared at the door and imagined all of the ways Marcus could have found her. Blood pounded in her ears as panic shot through her, leaving nothing behind it but the desperate need to escape.

The knock sounded again, louder this time, and she heard a friendly female voice on the other side of the door. “Mackenzie? It’s Nick.”

Feeling foolish, Mackenzie rose from the couch and crossed the living room. When she pulled the door open, she found her boss on the other side, looking so harmless it made her panic seem absurd. She stepped back so Nick could come inside. “Did—did Jackson call you? He told me it would be okay for me to stay here for the night.”

“Yeah, he called me this morning.” She lifted a heavy-looking paper sack. “I brought some things. Can I come in?”

“Of course. But you didn’t need to bring me anything. Really, Nick, it’s enough that you let me stay here last night.”

“Oh, it isn’t much.” Nick dropped the sack on the counter and started to unload it. “Just a few staples. Did you sleep well?”

Mackenzie’s eyes darted guiltily to the couch and back. “I did. It’s a beautiful apartment. But I told Jackson I’d find someplace else to stay tonight, so you really don’t have to—” She watched helplessly as Nick pulled milk out of the bag and set it in the fridge. “I can’t pay you enough to stay here.”

Nick wrinkled her nose and straightened her red tank top. “Don’t worry about that. The place is just sitting here, empty.”

It was the same easy, casual way Jackson had offered help, and it was too good to be true. “Nick, I’m serious. You’ve already done so much.”

The short woman heaved a sigh and pulled a bag of coffee out of the grocery sack. She seemed pensive as she rinsed the carafe from the coffee maker. “Okay, fair enough. How about if I don’t pay you? You can work for tips and stay here, keep an eye on the place.”

Mackenzie finally asked the one question she’d been wondering since Jackson had taken an interest in her welfare the night before. “Why?”

Nick leaned against the cabinets and tapped manicured nails on the countertop. “Honestly? You seem like you need help. If I have the means to provide it but choose not to, what does that say about me?” She pulled a charm-style keychain from her pocket and held it out. On the ring was a single key. “Let me do this. That way, I won’t feel like a complete drain on society.”

The simple honesty of the statement soothed Mackenzie’s suspicions like nothing else had. She walked into the kitchen and accepted the key. “Okay. I’ll work for tips and keep an eye on the place.” It was more than she’d been paying for the cheap hotel, but not nearly as much as she should have paid. Nick had to have known the bulk of Mackenzie’s income came from tips, anyway, and losing her hourly wage wouldn’t make much of a difference.

“All right, then.” Nick opened a cabinet and pulled out two oversized mugs. “Want a café au lait?”

“Sure.” Mackenzie retrieved the milk from the fridge, noting that Nick had also brought vegetables, fruit and cheese. “Is Jackson an investigator or something? He’s pretty good at following people without getting noticed.” She tried to sound subtle, but had a feeling she’d failed.

Nick’s grin confirmed her suspicions. “Yeah, he’s a private investigator. He and his partner, Alec, spend a lot of time at the bar. Jackson was close to the lady who owned it before me.” She bit her lip, suddenly looking contrite. “I’m sorry I had him follow you, but I didn’t really believe you when you said you had a place to stay. It was wrong of me, but I was worried.”

“It was a little startling.” As if the sheer panic that had gripped her the night before could be considered “a little” anything. “He was a perfect gentleman, though, once he stopped stalking me in the shadows and all.”

“He usually is.” Nick eyed Mackenzie shrewdly. “Quite the looker too, hmm?”

Mackenzie felt the corner of her mouth quirk up, and was almost surprised she could still smile. It was real, not one of the fake ones she plastered on while working. “You seem to have a lot of lookers hanging out in your bar.”

Nick hooted as she filled a small pan with milk and set it on the range over gentle heat. “That’s an understatement. My bar is chock-full of hot men, that’s what it is. I should start advertising that way.”

“The women would never leave.” Mackenzie relaxed more and found herself praying the car she’d abandoned outside of Memphis held the key to how Marcus had been tracking her. Maybe the nightmare would be over for a while. She could catch her breath and try to make sense of the shambles of her life.

More than that, Mackenzie wondered if this was the kind of place she could stay. It was easy to imagine being friends with Nick, working at the bar, maybe even finding a place where she could get a job giving dance lessons again. *And maybe get to know Jackson...*

Nick filled two of the mugs half full of coffee and slowly added the heated milk. “Mahalia’s could be the first official New Orleans meat market. Wouldn’t my father just love that?”

Mackenzie reached out for the mug that Nick proffered. “Your father doesn’t like you owning a bar?” Mackenzie’s father had paid for her to go to bartending school, reasoning that anyone with a fine arts degree in dance should have something to fall back on. Her parents hadn’t been wild about her career choice, but they’d been supportive.

Nick snorted and shook her head. “He thinks I should be heading museum committees in Manhattan and looking for the perfect society husband, not running a watering hole in the French Quarter.”

“That must be rough.” She said it because she wasn’t sure what else *to* say. Growing up in suburban South Dakota had hardly prepared her to discuss the foibles of high society, which was obviously where Nick had come from. Somehow Mackenzie doubted that the way her adoptive parents had spoiled her growing up would be considered ostentatious by a woman whose destiny had included museum committees.

Nick just waved a hand as she carried her mug to the small round table in the middle of the bright yellow kitchen. “It isn’t rough, and if I ever say it is, smack me. When you’ve had everything you’ve ever wanted, whining about your life is just bratty.”

“Hey, it’s still hard. My parents weren’t exactly thrilled when their daughter decided she wanted to study dance instead of engineering like her father. But they still helped me find the money to do it.” And somewhere in the apartment she’d abandoned was a picture of her parents at her graduation, her mother already frail from the cancer that would kill her two months later but beaming with so much pride.

Nick's mouth curved into a slight frown. "They're not around anymore?"

"No. They were older when they adopted me. My dad was almost forty-five already. My mom was younger, but when she got sick the stress was horrible on both of them..." Mackenzie let her voice trail off and shrugged one shoulder. "She got to see me graduate, though. Then she made my dad pay for bartending school so I'd have a way to eat while I tried to make a living dancing. And my dad came to every dance audition I had until the day he died."

"They sound wonderful."

"They were." And the thought of how desperately she could have used her mother's unwavering affection and her father's pragmatic good sense over the past month was going to reduce her to tears if she didn't change the subject. "I was really lucky. Even when they didn't agree with me, they always supported me."

"Who needs parental support when you have a bar full good-looking men?" Nick proved herself plenty intuitive with a swift subject change. "Speaking of... What did you think of Jackson? Besides being blown over by his keen investigative skills, that is?"

"He was nice." She dropped into the chair across from Nick and tucked her feet under her. "Like I said, a perfect gentleman. Don't meet a lot of those these days."

Nick nodded too casually and played with the end of her ponytail. "I try not to keep them around if they don't have any manners. But Jackson's a good egg. His partner is too, though not nearly as...affable." She sipped her coffee. "I let them run up a huge tab at the bar. That way, whenever I need something, they have to pony up 'cause they owe me. It's Machiavellian, isn't it?"

Mackenzie laughed. It seemed like it had been forever since she'd laughed as easily as she had in the last few days. "It's brilliant, if you ask me. You can never have too many hot men owing you favors."

"That's what I'm saying." Nick tilted her head. "I heard you made quite an impression on Derek Gabriel."

Uh-oh. Mackenzie shook her head. "He was just trying to annoy his friend. Penny, I think?"

Nick shrugged, but her cheeks colored. "Hey, Gabriel's not bad, either. If you like him, you should go out with him."

Well, that answered the question of how Nick felt about Derek. After the past month, it seemed almost surreal to be sharing coffee with another woman and talking about men, but something about it felt *normal*, too. "I'm not really in a place where I should be going out with people." *Don't you forget that, Mackenzie Brooks.*

“You may feel differently after a couple of weeks.” The look in Nick’s dark eyes was sharp and assessing. “I’ve got to get downstairs and do some inventory. Can you come down around two?”

“Sure. Thanks, Nick. For everything.”

Nick took her mug to the sink to rinse it. “You’re welcome, Mackenzie. See you in a bit.” She crossed the room to the door and smiled before stepping through. The door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving Mackenzie alone with her thoughts.

She finished her coffee and rinsed her cup before giving in to curiosity and peering into the bag Nick had left on the counter. Several bottles sat inside, along with a new toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste. She pulled them out one at a time, admiring Nick’s expensive taste in shampoo and conditioner. The body wash was labeled “Summer Rain” and smelled fresh and wonderful. There was even a tiny container of bubble bath.

She lifted out a pink loofah and imagined taking her first bath in over a month. Not a quick shower in a dingy hotel room but a real bath, with hot water and privacy and no bugs crawling over the floor or strangers banging on the walls.

She gathered the toiletries and wandered back to the bathroom. It was bright and clean, and it looked like heaven. After closing the door, Mackenzie turned on the tub and resolved that, if nothing else, she was going to spend the rest of the morning in mindless luxury.

Maybe, if she was lucky, she could drift back to sleep and dream of Jackson Holt and his beautiful eyes again.

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