

Bad Moon Rising



Lila Bruce

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“There’s a damn good reason I haven’t seen any of these people in twenty years.”

“I’m pretty sure you said that six months ago when I reminded you about our high school reunion in the first place,” the disembodied voice laughed into my ear via the Bluetooth headset that my ex-girlfriend Natasha had gifted me for Christmas. The wireless earbuds fit snugly and were perfect for listening to music while I was writing, or for an audiobook on a lazy afternoon, or—as they currently were being used—for talking on the phone to my best friend since middle school, Gigi Bennett. They were the one good thing to come out of an otherwise disastrous relationship.

“Hmph,” I said, responding to her. “That doesn’t make it any less true.”

Not that I harbor any ill will toward any of my former classmates. You know, per se. I believe in leaving well enough alone and letting sleeping dogs lie because all that high school stuff is been there-done that, old news, water under the bridge...and any other clichés I can throw at it.

“Oh, Lauren, stop.”

As I steered my six year-old Toyota off the main highway and onto old County Route 5 that stormy Saturday afternoon, the nerves began to set in and I became filled with a nameless, free-floating kind of dread.

“Why in God’s name did I allow you to talk me into this weekend?” I said, scowling. “It’s got disaster plastered all over it.”

“Lauren, I know you’re an author, but that doesn’t mean you have to be so melodramatic about everything.”

“What I am is pissed, Gigi, for allowing you to trick me into going to this thing alone.”

“I did no such thing,” she snipped.

She most certainly had done such a thing. And the fact that she had a good excuse made no discernible difference to me at the moment.

Almost six months ago to the day, I had been happily occupied doing what I’d done most every Saturday night since the break-up with Natasha—binge-watching Netflix and

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downing a pint of Ben and Jerry's—when Gigi had called, ecstatic with the news that our twenty year high school reunion had been announced.

“It's going to be so great,” she'd squealed. “There's going to be a dinner and then a dance, and all the old gang from band will be there and...” Gigi continued in her high pitched tone, but, to be honest, I'd stopped really listening somewhere along the way, getting more caught up in a “Wayhaught” moment on *Wynonna Earp* than what she was droning on about. But then Gigi uttered a word that made me hit the pause button and sit straight up on the couch.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?”

“Well, of course, you're going with me, silly. Oh, and we're going to have go shopping and find something cute to wear for the dance. Maybe we can get together—”

“There is no ‘we,’” I'd said defiantly. “No shopping for anything cute to wear and most certainly, no dancing. Like who would I even dance with?”

“Well, who knows? Maybe Sha—”

“Oh no, we are not even going there,” I'd said, cutting her off before she could bring up the one person that she knew was off limits for conversation. “Just like I'm not going with you to this high school reunion. And to be honest, if there's even a one-percent chance that You-Know-Who is going to be there, I'm definitely out. Call some other friend and make them go.”

“Like I've got any other friends. And I was just kidding about Sha...about She-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named. I have it on good authority she won't be at the reunion.”

“Good authority, hmm?”

“Yes. There's a Facebook page for the reunion, and she marked herself as “unable to attend” on the invite. C'mon, Lauren, you have to come,” she'd pleaded, and then proceeded to spend the next thirty minutes outlining all the reasons that I had to accompany her until she'd finally worn me down.

Fast forward six months later—today to be precise—and Gigi had backed out at the last minute, but not before I was already well on my way to Woodcreek High. Had I not spent the better part of last month's royalty check on a new outfit to wear to this damn thing, I'd have turned the car around as soon as Gigi announced that she'd fallen victim to bad sushi and was too sick to go.

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Giant droplets of rain began to fall on the windshield of the Toyota, replacing the light drizzle that had followed me all the way down the interstate and into the small town that I had happily left behind a decade ago without so much a glance in the rearview mirror. I grimaced then, realizing that there wasn't an umbrella in the car. Maybe if I was lucky, the rain would stop before I reached the school.

"Look," Gigi's voice said through the Bluetooth, "it won't be that bad. Just go, enjoy the dinner, say hello to a few people, and then leave. Make the best of it."

Lightning streaked across the steely gray sky, followed almost immediately by a rumble of thunder. So much for luck.

"Make the best of it, huh?"

"Yes. Besides, you literally will never have to go to that place ever again after tonight. I heard that the school board approved funds in the budget for a new school, so the old one is going to be torn down."

I frowned, turning up the windshield wipers as the rain fell harder. "Man, it's way past time for that, isn't it? I mean, the school was old when we went there."

"It is. Woodcreek has been there since the 1960s. They're going to make it into an entirely modern campus," Gigi explained.

I had remembered that, although it wasn't something I'd thought about in years. In fact, I tried not to think at all about high school, especially the last year of high school, if I could help it.

"It's going to have computers for every student," she continued. "Smartboards in every classroom, the works. As a matter of fact, I've heard they've already started demolition of some of the buildings."

The rain was coming down in sheets now. I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as a gust of wind shook the Toyota. "Well, I've turned off the road and I think I see the lights just ahead, so I'll call you back after this thing is over."

"Okay, but at least *try* to have a good time."

Not likely. "You owe me big time for this, Gigi." Her silence on the other end of the phone made me realize that I probably was being a bit of a bitch about the whole thing. After all, I had agreed to go in the first place, and it wasn't Gigi's fault that she'd been

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served a bad spicy tuna roll at lunch. “But, I’ll try. Now go get some rest and try to feel better, and I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.”

We ended the call, and I drove slowly down the winding, tree-lined road that led to the school, barely able to follow the pavement through the torrential downpour. I’d made it maybe another fifty yards when there was a loud bang and my steering wheel immediately pulled sharply to the right.

“Oh shit!” I shouted and barely made it to the side of the narrow road, my car wobbling alarmingly from side to side. I flung open the door, biting back another curse against the stinging rain, and ran around to the front of the car. “Damn it!” My front tire was all but obliterated.

After a little deep breathing and a good deal more than a little cursing, I stomped around to the driver’s side of the car and slid back inside. I opened the center console and used the handful of McDonald’s napkins stored there to haphazardly wipe the water off my arms and face. The outfit that I had so painstakingly put together was done for—the silky cream blouse was now plastered against my skin in a soaking mess, mud covered the lower leg of my black slacks.

I sighed and fished my cell phone out of the cup holder. Searching through my contacts, I located the number for AAA and punched it in.

Nothing.

I stared down at my phone, finding to my horror that I had no bars. This day just kept getting better and better.

Realizing that my options were basically nil, I threw my phone and the car keys into my bag, straightened the purse strap across my shoulder, and stepped back out into the monsoon rain. Shivering against the cold rain, I trudged toward the lights of Woodcreek High.

Another rumble of thunder sounded as I neared the bridge that marked the start of Woodcreek’s grounds. A sudden memory of Mr. Clark’s Phys Ed class hit me as I came closer to it. I’ve never been very athletic, and I’d hated every second of that class, including the mile run from the gym doors to the edge of the bridge that he would have us do at the start of each period.

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The bridge over the normally meandering little creek was all that lay between me and the school, so I started across and was immediately alarmed by a loud groaning noise. I paused by the guard rail and looked down at the creek—which was now a churning tempest of muddy water and broken tree branches, all battering against the rickety pilings of the old bridge.

“Jesus...” I quickly calculated my chances of making it the thirty or so feet across the bridge. It was probably closer back to my car, but what then? I had no cell service, no way to call for help, so it seemed to me that my best bet was to make a run for it. The irony.

I started out simply walking fast, my shoulders hunched against the pouring rain, but in only seconds, I heard a loud snapping sound, and then the bridge made an unsettling lurch. There was an anxious moment when I almost fell, but I was able to regain my balance and put on speed I didn't know I had. Frantically, I ran like the hounds of hell were behind me, and as I reached the other side, I literally felt the ground disappear beneath my feet. I flung myself forward and landed on the gravelly mud on the other side. The earth shook and a thunderous sound that I knew had nothing to do with the storm filled the air. Rising up on my hands and knees, my hair hanging down in a wet mess in front of my face, I looked back to the chasm where the bridge had stood only seconds before. Mud calved down from the side of either bank and into the roiling creek.

Still in shock at what had just happened, I stood and flexed my arms and then my legs, somewhat surprised to find that I was all in one piece and, other than the grimy mess my clothes had become, none the worse for wear.

The high pitched sound of shouting caught my attention, and I turned to see people spilling out of the side door of the school, perhaps alerted by the crashing sounds of the bridge collapsing. Although it had been years, a few of the faces now running in my direction were familiar. There was another rumble as the unstable ground sliding into the creek behind me sounded again. Deciding to go with the lesser of two evils, I began to make my way toward the lights of Woodcreek High.

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In retrospect, sitting mostly-naked in the girls' locker room listening to the senior class president lament about the breakup of her third marriage was not something I had on my High School Reunion Bingo Card, but then again, neither was nearly dying in a bridge collapse.

The last hour had been a blur. After everything that literally went down at the bridge, the thirty-five or so people already in attendance at the reunion had erupted from the school like a disturbed bed of fire ants. The women swarmed around and then all but carried me off into the school with war cries of 'getting me out those wet clothes,' while the men headed in the opposite direction, intent on investigating the cause of the collapse. It was quickly determined—not by me, mind you—that my mud-covered clothes were beyond saving, and I was stripped—not in a good way—and herded into the girls' locker room showers.

Now, after a surprisingly refreshing, if lukewarm, shower, I sat inside a cramped stall wrapped in a too-small white towel that smelled of commercial-grade bleach while the cheer squad was off combing the school, intent on finding me something suitable to wear.

"...and to think that someone could have been driving on that bridge when it just went down like that. I mean, it could have been *me!*"

Brittney Morrison was our senior class president, and she had been head of the cheer squad, as well as being elected prom queen, homecoming queen, and whatever other kind of queen there might have been at Woodcreek High. It was only natural then, that she had been elected to stay behind to keep an eye on me while the others were off on their odd sort of scavenger hunt.

"If I were you, I'd definitely consider filing a lawsuit against the school board for obvious poor upkeep of the facilities," Brittney said in a nasally voice from the other side of the stall door, her Louboutin's making a clacking sound on the concrete floor of the locker room as she paced back and forth. "I mean, I know that ruined outfit of yours couldn't have cost more than a few dollars, but you should be able to at least get something for mental anguish."

I mumbled noncommittally in response. At present, the only anguish I was feeling was over not having listened to my better judgement about coming to the reunion in the first place.

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“If you need a good lawyer, I can recommend the guy who did my divorce with Charles,” she continued. “He may be short, but he’s a son-of-a-bitch in the courtroom. Even with the prenup, he was able to get me the beach house in West Palm plus the alimony I deserved.”

The pacing came to an abrupt stop, and my head perked up at the sound of approaching voices. I could hear Brittney move toward the locker room entrance and then a muffled conversation. The clack of shoes whose price tag would cover my mortgage announced her return.

“Here you go,” she said, handing me a stack of clothes under the stall door. “The girls finally found you something that you might be able to squeeze into.”

I accepted the clothes, but any expression of thanks disappeared with the realization of what she’d just said and what I’d been handed. “I can’t wear this.”

“That’s pretty much all there is, sugar, and they had a hard time finding that. Suzie Miller—Suzie Anderson when we were in school—had it made to wear to the dance. Lucky for you, she’s packed on the pounds since we graduated, so it should fit. What with all this bad weather, she decided not to wear it in and was going to put it on later.”

Luck was not the word I would use, but my options appeared to be slim to none. I changed into the outfit and stepped outside the stall. Brittney was leaned over a cracked, white porcelain sink to reach the mirror that looked as old as the school itself. I watched, almost transfixed, as she ran a black eyeliner pencil along the edge of her lower eyelid. My own routine rarely went past a light application of foundation, so I had to admit I was pretty impressed by the show of watching Brittney reapply makeup that had been, according to her, ruined when she’d run out into the rain.

She dropped the eyeliner into her purse and fished out a tube of lipstick. The mammoth leather bag was easily three-times the size of the glorified clutch that I used. I didn’t recognize the branding on it, but I was sure that, like everything else about Brittney, it was couture and overpriced. Brittney surveyed herself in the mirror and, apparently satisfied that her make-up was now up to par, placed the lipstick back into the purse and then turned to face me.

Stared at me, actually. A little unnerved, I glanced around and caught my reflection in the full length mirror that made up one wall of the locker room. The outfit—and I use that

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term loosely—that Suzie Miller had drug up from apparently the fifth level of hell was a cheerleader’s uniform, circa 2000. Its bright red mini skirt fell somewhere around my mid-thigh, accentuating my ongoing relationship with Ben and Jerry. As if that weren’t bad enough, the skirt was paired with a white spandex tank top emblazoned with the school’s mascot—which happened to be a giant buck-toothed beaver.

“Where do I know you from?” Brittney asked, her tone almost accusatory, her eyes narrowing.

I mean, I know I always felt invisible walking through the halls of Woodcreek High, but seriously? Tearing my eyes away from my reflection and back to Brittney, I answered, “Um, from high school?”

“No, not that.” She pursed her lips. “I’ve seen you somewhere before, but I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“I don’t know, maybe—”

“*D’argent!*”

I jumped as Brittney screeched and then rushed to pick up her giant purse. She reached inside and, when it dawned on me what she was pulling out of its depths, all I could do was sigh.

A few months ago, as part of the publicity junket for my latest novel, my publisher arranged for me to be interviewed by the fashion magazine *D’argent*. It may sound a little snobby, but I was fairly certain the Venn diagram of people who read my cozy mystery series revolving around a retired librarian and those who read a magazine devoted to haute couture to be two distinct circles, with zero overlap. As Brittney reached inside her giant purse and pulled out the magazine, I realized I was wrong.

“You’re her, aren’t you?” she said, flipping to page sixty-three excitedly. “I knew you looked familiar.”

“Well...”

“This is so awesome. I’ve got to get your autograph,” Brittney said, and then hurriedly reached again for her purse, knocking it off its precarious perch on the sink as she did. The contents hit the locker room floor with a crash, sending what had to be twenty pounds of frou-frou scattering.

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I knelt to help Brittney collect it all, grimacing as I felt the mini skirt rise even farther up my thighs as I did so.

“I had no idea you were somebody,” Brittney said, throwing handfuls of pens, brushes, and lipsticks into the purse.

Brittney wasn't the first person to equate celebrity, even if minor, with some sort of self-worth. Hell, even I was shocked that something I once did in my off-time while working at the Atlanta Public Library now generated a comfortable income. Most people just weren't so, well, obvious about it.

“It's not that big of a deal, really,” I said, handing her a hairbrush and the eyeliner pencil she'd been using earlier. I glanced around the floor, looking for anything else that may have fallen out, and saw a small vial that had rolled toward the mirror. It was a stretch to reach for it without showing Brittney all my goods, but I managed. Noticing that Brittney had stood, I followed suit and was about to hand the vial to her when the writing on its label caught my eye.

The vial itself was small, reminding me of the sort that I'd seen essential oils come in, except rather than a lid, it had a tiny little cork. The label was dark with age and across the front, written in calligraphic script, was the word *Renâitre*.

“Thanks for helping clean all this up.”

“The calligraphy on that is beautiful.” Intrigued, I squinted as I tried to read the label.

“It is.” Brittney nodded. “I picked it up while I was in New Orleans this week visiting some sorority sisters. It means ‘beauty.’”

I didn't know what that word meant, but I knew it didn't say ‘beauty.’ Turning the vial to read the script on the back, I frowned. The lettering was small, but I was able to decipher a few of the words: *aconitum*, *lune*, and *la chienne*. The last two were French, but the first looked to be Latin. “No, I don't think...”

Ignoring me, Brittney continued her story. “A couple of us went down to the French Quarter to pick up some beignets, and while we were walking around, I stopped in a chintzy little shop that sells candles and potions.” She scrunched her nose. “The place stunk to high heaven, like someone had tried to cover up the smell of body odor and feet with incense. Horrible, and I told the owner as much, but—and I know this probably

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sounds silly—since the divorce is final and I’ll be going back on the market, so to speak—I picked up this rejuvenation potion. I mean, what could it hurt, right?”

I looked Brittney. I mean *really* looked at her. The years since high school had not been kind to Brittney. She was a small-boned woman, like a bird, but unfortunately, the avian similarities didn’t end there. Her nose was also long and beaky—sharp-angled. In addition, her hair was perfectly coiffed, if an improbable shade of platinum, and her clothes were expensive and high-fashion, but made for a much taller woman, so she looked a little like she was playing dress-up in someone else’s clothes. Her skin was still like porcelain, though a few fine cracks had begun to mar the surface of her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

“Interesting.” A rejuvenation potion? I had to admit, that was a new one on me. “But, you know, I’m not sure that’s what this says. See, I took French in college and this label—”

Brittney interrupted me to continue on with her diatribe, “It only works when taken under the light of a full moon. Isn’t that funny?” She walked over to the window of the locker room and peered out. “It looks like the rain has finally ended, so as soon as those clouds are gone, tonight’s the night. It’s a full moon, you know. Or, at least it will be if this storm will pass over.” She turned back to look at me. “Isn’t it exciting? You know, to be honest, at first I was just looking for one of those hex candles to use against my ex, Charles. I found one that was supposed to cause baldness, but when I went to pay for it, they didn’t take credit cards.” Brittney rolled her eyes. “I mean, can you imagine, in this day and time?”

I don’t think that was a real question, because she continued on without pausing. “Anyway, after telling the wrinkled-up hag in no uncertain terms what I thought about her, her shop, and her ridiculous credit policy and why I simply had to have the candle, the ugly old crone pursed her lips and said she had just the thing for a woman like me. Much better than the candle, she said, and pointed me to this potion. Even gave it to me for free.” She smirked as she took the vial from my hands and dropped it back into her purse. “I guess sometimes it pays to be honest and upfront with people.”

“Brittney, did you get this label translated? Because this doesn’t sound like—”

“I heard the crash victim was in here?”

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We both jumped, startled by the voice that had snuck up on us from behind.

“There was no crash,” I said, self-consciously pulling down on the hem of the mini skirt as I turned to face its source. “Not really, it was a...”

Whatever I might have said next was lost as I came face to face with two decades of regret. Shay Covington had been an eighteen year-old kid when I saw her last.

She definitely wasn't a kid anymore.

I found myself looking up into dark sapphire blue eyes that held an expression somewhere between intrigued, disbelieving, and a little bit annoyed. If I was writing one of my novels, I'd have described those eyes as stormy.

The face that went along with them was way more attractive than I remembered from high school, with high cheekbones and just a hint of a sexy dimple in her chin. Her hair was stylishly short, the shade of the chocolate doughnuts I'd had for breakfast that morning. She was taller than I remembered. Slender, but with curves in all the right places. Damn, but she was gorgeous.

Neither of us spoke, just stood there looking at one another. I mean, what do you say to someone who broke your heart and then walked away? Even if it had been twenty years ago that I did that to her.

“Any news on the bridge, Sheriff?”

“Sherriff?” I frowned, looking to Brittney and then back to Shay.

Shay's gaze fell on the giant beaver that adorned my chest. I felt my cheeks begin to burn as she arched a single eyebrow.

“The bridge is done for,” she answered Brittney, keeping her eyes trained on me and my beaver. I saw a muscle in her jaw flex. “Are you okay? You weren't hurt or anything?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I'm okay.” Physically anyway.

Shay looked as if she wanted to say something else, then turned to face Brittney. “The other road leading out is blocked by a bunch of construction equipment. I called down to the station and have dispatch working on rounding up someone with a key to move it, so we can all get out of here.”

“And in the meantime?” I asked.

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“In the meantime, we’ll just do what we came here to do, right?” Brittney smiled. “Eat, drink, and have a good time. As a matter of fact...” She craned her neck to peer out the window again. “Oh, look, the rain has finally cleared up.” The glow of the full moon outside illuminated her face in the uncertain light of the old locker room and then, smiling, she reached into her purse and pulled out the rejuvenation potion. She uncorked the little bottle and then held it in front of her like a shot of whiskey. “Tonight is as good a night as any to start my new life. Cheers,” she said and then downed the contents in one big gulp.

“God, what a fabulous buffet.”

Gripping a cold drink in one hand and a heavy plate of food in the other, I turned to glance at the man who had fallen in step beside me, and it was like looking at one of those hidden image posters, where if you squint your eyes and angle the page, you can suddenly see little 3-D images of animals and things popping out at you.

In this case, it was the facial features of the boy who used to sit behind me in homeroom. His name was Gordon Moran, and back in school, he was tall, skinny, and played on the basketball team. Now he was pushing two hundred and seventy-five pounds, and I could barely make out the familiar brown eyes and pug nose in the ruddy folds of flesh that made up his face.

The bulk of the reunion was being held in the gymnasium, which had been setup to house the long buffet line and a dozen or so round tables on one half of the gym floor, and a dance area on the other. Already that evening, I’d passed several people whose names were familiar, but like Gordon, were not recognizable twenty years on from high school.

“Oh, hi, Gordon. Uh, yeah, I guess so,” I replied, although I hadn’t gotten much from it myself. A small portion of salad, a little rice, and a roll were all that filled my plate. Even if I had an appetite after everything that happened at the bridge, the fish had looked too dry, the roast beef too rare. “It’s good to see you again, by the way.”

He took a quick look at my name tag. “Hi, um, Laura. How’ve you been doing?”

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“It’s Lauren. Lauren Brooks? We were in homeroom together.”

“Okay, yeah. Sure, I remember you now. You were a cheerleader,” he said, scrutinizing the “Woodcreek Beavers” on my chest.

If this was the “seeing old friends will be so great” portion of the evening that Gigi had promised, it was off to a less than stellar start. I had decidedly *not* been a cheerleader, or anything approximating popular. But, considering there was currently no way out of the school, I decided I should try to just go with the flow. I nodded my head accordingly.

Gordon continued to ogle my chest to the point that I was becoming uncomfortable. “I can’t help but notice you look a little...nippy.” He gave a leery smile and then continued, “If you’re interested, I’ve got a flask of the good stuff—not that watered down swill they have at the cash bar—in my coat pocket. Maybe we can find someplace a little more quiet and get you warmed up?”

High school me would have been shocked by his words and probably ran away crying. But, time changes more than just your dress size. “How about you go fuck yourself, Gordon.”

A shocked look swept across his face, quickly changing to one of anger. “Bitch,” he snapped, and brushed by me so fast he sent me reeling backwards, and I almost lost my own plate of food.

I immediately felt a steadying hand on my shoulder. “Still making friends and influencing people, I see,” Shay said, her lips twitching as she moved to stand beside me.

I cursed the blush that I could feel forming on my cheeks. “No, it’s not like that. He said...I was just...oh forget it. I don’t know why I’m trying to explain myself to you.”

“Why start now, huh?” she said and gave me a wink as she continued on to a nearby table. A damn wink, and that was all it took to make my knees go a weak and make me feel like a teenager again.

In that instant, I was transported back two decades, overtaken by memories of the last time I had spoken with Shay in high school. It had been in this very gym, at the Senior Formal. Shay and I had ridden to the dance with Gigi and her boyfriend at the time, Paul. Or maybe his name was Peter? Back in those days Gigi changed boyfriends like most people did their shoes.

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Officially, Shay and I had gone stag to the dance, but unofficially... Unofficially, we'd danced all the fast songs together and then stole away to the empty equipment room adjacent to the gym and danced the slow ones where no one could see us. It was there that we'd had that last argument, and there that Shay made the ultimatum, one that we both knew she didn't mean. I'd taken her up on it anyway and walked out without a look back.

But now, standing in that same gym surrounded by many of the same people that had been at that same dance, I found myself wondering how different the past twenty years would have been if I hadn't walked away that night. Or if I hadn't avoided any thought or conversation about Shay in the time since. After all, I'd spoken with her twice now, and the world was still turning.

Without making the conscious thought to do so, I walked to the table where Shay was sitting and pulled up a chair next her. She quirked an eyebrow at me, but otherwise said nothing and continued eating.

There was a loud clinking sound and our attention was drawn to the head table, where it was coming from.

"Excuse me everyone, but I want to thank you all for coming tonight," Brittney was saying, tapping a spoon on her glass. She looked a little sweaty, which I thought was odd. If anything, the old gym where the buffet and tables had been set up was chilly. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, and I wondered if she'd already had a bit too much to drink. Those eyes were glittering and she was smiling a little too broadly. She was almost...manic looking.

"Help yourself to the buffet, and even though the mashed potatoes are lumpy and the roast beef is a bit underdone, it's all good! It should remind us all of those horrible lunches they used to serve us here." She started laughing a little hysterically, though no one else was giving her more than polite smiles. You know, those little embarrassed half smiles you get sometimes when you're making a fool of yourself, but nobody's about to tell you.

She picked up what looked to be a rib bone and suddenly bit down on it. The bloody juices ran down her chin and onto her neck. "Delicious!" she cried and began to cram more and more of the undercooked meat in her mouth. I could have sworn she was

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making little “Num, num,” sounds as she ate, and when her nearest table mate held out a napkin to her, she turned her head and growled at her. Honest to God *growled*, and the poor woman jumped to her feet and stumbled back from the table.

She suddenly seemed to come back to herself and looked up at the rest of us watching her. “Go ahead,” she yelled, waving a rib at us. “Eat!”

I took a bite of the tasteless salad and washed it down with a sip of too-sweet tea. It was now or never. “Look, Shay,” I said, shifting in the chair to face her. “I’m sorry if that came out bitchy back there. I didn’t mean it that way. It’s, uh, really nice to see you again.”

“You too, Lauren.” Her eyes softened a bit as she looked at me. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“I am,” I nodded. “And it sounds like you are, too...Sheriff.”

Shay gave a little shrug. “It’s a job.”

“I had no idea you were in law enforcement.”

“For a while now,” Shay said and then took a sip of her drink. “I joined the Marines after high school and did a few tours. After I got out, I came home and more or less fell into a job at the sheriff’s department, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“Wow, a lot more interesting than my life.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You write books, now, right? That’s not exactly a nine-to-five job, is it?”

“You know that I’m an author?”

Shay nodded.

I wanted to ask if she’d read any of my books, but was afraid that she’d say yes. I don’t know why, but I was suddenly embarrassed by the fact that she might have.

Shay swirled around the tea inside her glass and took another sip. “So I couldn’t help but overhear part of what you said back there. You’re still a Brooks?”

“I am.”

“Funny, I’d have thought you’d be married and have a couple kids by now. Unless...”

“No.” I shook my head. “No marriage, no divorce. No kids.” It felt strange to be sitting there having a normal conversation like we were two old friends catching up. But

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then, in a way, I guess we were. “No girlfriend, at least not currently.” I studied her face as I added that last, but she made no reaction. “And you?”

“None of the above.” Her lips curved ever so slightly into a smile. “But, I guess you could say I’m married to the job. That’s what my last girlfriend said, anyway.” She leaned in closer. “Look, I was wondering—”

Whatever it was would remain a mystery because a loud screeching sound interrupted her. Frowning, I looked in the direction of the noise to see Brittney standing on the dance floor, holding a microphone that was blaring out feedback.

“Welcome Class of 2000!” she called out. “Are you having a good time?” A cacophony of hoots and hollers answered her. She grinned at the response and then said, “Let’s get this party started!” Brittney turned and gave the deejay working the dance a thumbs up signal and he nodded.

“Good evening, Woodcreek Beavers Class of 2000! Your class president has asked me to put together a little montage of tunes from the years ‘96 to 2000 for you this evening. But, since it’s October, how about a few Halloween songs to get us in the mood!”

“Well,” Shay said, pushing back from the table. “I’m going to take that as my cue to go check and see if we’ve made any progress with finding the construction foreman, so we can get those machines moved off the road.”

I nodded and then watched as she made her way towards the exit. Once she was out of sight, I sat back in the chair and pressed both hands to my hot cheeks as if to clear my thoughts. I’d hoped not to ever see Shay Covington again, but now that I had and we’d shared an actual conversation like two grown adults...a part of me wanted more.

The lights in the gym dimmed, and the deejay began to play the first song he’d chosen for his montage of Halloween songs. It was *Monster Mash*, and I turned around in the chair so that I faced the dance floor. A few couples had ventured out to dance, but not many. Looking around the room, I saw that most people were standing around and watching as if trying to decide whether they wanted to join in. A handful of others, like me, sat at the tables, seeming content to observe.

The song changed to *Ghostbusters*, and I saw Brittney and what looked to be several members of the cheer squad spill out onto the dance floor. The women were all laughing and singing, except for Brittney, who seemed to have another piece of the roast in her

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hand. Brittney pushed the huge bite in her mouth and then, as I watched, she wiped her greasy hands down the sides of her expensive designer dress and then joined the dancers. She began to gyrate to the music, doing a sort of demented looking version of the Dougie. She was sweating so much now that her hair was hanging down in wet tendrils around her face. I couldn't help but wonder if she was just drunk, or having some sort of reaction to that concoction she'd drunk back in the locker room.

"Now for another Halloween classic," the deejay said. "This one is an oldie but a goody, folks. Let's get down to *Werewolves of London*."

Apparently, most people were as clueless as I was about the song, but it turned out to be not too bad. An old rock song that had a catchy beat and a recurring lyric in the chorus—"Aaoooooo, Werewolves of London. Aaoooooo!"

This was repeated several times, and a few people started laughing and getting into the spirit of it, throwing back their head and letting the "Aaooooos" go loud and long. And that included Brittney.

I'd been a little worried about her all evening, with the wild way she was acting, but now I became truly alarmed. She planted her feet, threw back her head, and howled so long and so loud it made goosebumps pop out on my skin and a chill race up my back. Her voice had become deeper, too, and her eyes in the dim light of the dance floor looked almost feral.

I could tell that I wasn't the only one worried about her. One of the cheerleaders—I'm pretty sure it was Suzie Miller—went over to her and took her arm, speaking softly to her. Brittney yanked her arm roughly away and snarled at Suzie, but Suzie was made of sterner stuff and she came back and touched her again.

With a savage growl, Brittney whirled around on her, and with one swipe of a hand suddenly tipped with long, lethal looking claws, she took off Suzie's head. Blood spurted halfway across the room, and Suzie's lifeless body dropped to the floor. For one long second, there was absolute silence.

Then the screaming started.

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I've written the word "petrified" probably a thousand times over the years in my mystery novels. Usually when a character is being confronted by a killer or stumbles across a dead body. For example, the line in my bestseller, *Murder By The Book*—"Mrs. Butterfield was petrified by the sight of the lifeless corpse lying in front of the card catalog." Anyway, I never truly appreciated the word until the moment I saw Brittney Morrison's face push outward and form into an honest-to-God snout.

I was frozen, stuck to the chair unable to move, barely able to breathe, watching Brittney's transformation in fascinated horror. Her body had begun twitching and parts of it were bulging and twisting in ways that should not have been possible. Her arms and legs were breaking too, with loud cracks, and Brittney screamed in agony as the bones apparently reformed themselves into the shape of some kind of huge animal. Her hands became massive paws, tipped by lethal looking claws, and her hips had broken and reformed into big haunches. Wolf-like ears poked up out of her blond coiffure and her designer dress hung around her in tatters. But her feet, though hairy and misshapen, were still somehow stuffed into those red Louboutin heels.

All I could think at that moment was that her feet had be killing her.

Brittney stumbled around the dance floor in those shoes, swiping at anyone unfortunate enough to get near her in their effort to flee the room. It was total chaos, with everyone screaming and the deejay's equipment—he had been one of the first ones out the door after he got a load of Brittney—still blasting "Werewolves of London." From time to time, Brittney would put back her head and sing out along with it—"Aaoooooo!"

Gordon Moran had been caught on the far side of the room, and I watched in horror as he tried to sprint past Brittney. She spotted him, though, and leaped after him, landing on his back and taking him to the floor. Brittney leaned over him, jerked his head so hard to the right that it must have broken his neck before she bit down violently on his throat, shaking her head in an attempt to to rip it out. Blood spewed out of him as she held on with her teeth and tossed his body back and forth, moving him around like a rag doll.

I screamed—I couldn't help it—and she turned those beady eyes toward me. She licked the blood off her lips, the movement revealing long white teeth dripping with saliva. I slowly rose to my feet and began edging toward the exit, trying to keep my eyes trained on hers. A thought, more a memory, of watching some Discovery Channel show

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about nature struck me—that I shouldn't rush as predators always chase running prey. I didn't know what exactly Brittney had become, but she looked pretty damned predatory to me.

Suddenly a shot rang out, and both of us turned to see Shay standing in the doorway with a gun pointed at Brittney.

"Come toward me, Lauren. Slowly," she cautioned. "Just don't panic."

I was long past panic. I began to move, my heart pounding in my chest. Brittney's head turned away from Shay to watch me, a low growl starting up in her chest.

"Keep coming," Shay said softly, waving me forward. "Don't stop."

Brittney—the thing that Brittney had become—lurched toward me, and Shay fired off another shot, this one striking the creature. Brittney staggered back, clutching one giant paw to her chest. She threw her head back and howled again, and I took the opportunity to run a few steps across the floor toward Shay. Alerted by my movement, Brittney—seemingly unfazed by the gunshot after that initial recoil—turned back in my direction and moved forward. I could see by the tensing of her muscles that she was about to spring.

"Come any closer and I'll blow your fucking head off," Shay said, her voice firm, with no compromise in it. "Don't think I won't."

There must have been some semblance of humanity and self-preservation left in Brittney, because she stopped coming toward me and just growled at us both instead. I could feel the growl as much as I heard it.

I'd made it to Shay by that time, and she took my arm and pulled me behind her, then started backing out the gym doors. We got outside just as Brittney made a forward leap and Shay slammed the doors and held them shut as two of the men who were married to a couple of the cheerleaders pushed a piece of rebar they must have picked up from the new construction through the door handles.

Shay turned to me and before I could stop myself, I launched my body into her arms and just hung on while I tried to catch my breath. "You saved me. I thought she was going to..."

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“Shh, it’s okay now.” Shay hugged me back, and I could have sworn I felt a soft kiss on my hair before she pushed me gently away. “Now, does someone want to tell me what the hell that thing is and where it came from?”

Her question was punctuated by the sound of the creature—I no longer thought of it as Brittney—hitting the door with its body over and over again, trying to force it open.

“How about I tell you any place but here?”

“You’re right. That’s not going to hold it long,” Shay said grimly. She looked around at our former classmates who had made it also and were now surrounding us, looking to Shay for direction. “Does anyone have cell service?” Several heads shook and there were a few no’s. Shay blew out a breath. “That’s what I was afraid of. I haven’t had service since I got here. I think the storm must have knocked out a tower.”

“Well,” I said, a little hysterically, “this night just keeps getting better and better.”

There was another crash and this time the metal doors shook and began to buckle.

Shay eyed the door and then looked back at me. “I need to get back outside. When I heard the screaming I just grabbed my service weapon and ran inside. My radio is still out in the car. That’s going to be our only way to get help out here.”

Shay began pulling me by the hand down the corridor, and what was left of the class of 2000 followed in our wake. There were only about fifteen people by this time. I knew at least two of our number were dead, the rest had scattered, hopefully to a safer place.

“Should we head out to the cars, too?” one of the guys called out. I recognized him as a former football player, now bald as an onion and sporting a beer belly.

“That’s not going to hold it for long.” The crashing of the creature’s body against the doors reverberated down the dimly lit hall. “It’ll either get through those doors or find another way out. You’re safer finding a room with no windows and barricading yourselves in.”

“I’m staying with you,” I said firmly.

Shay stopped in mid-step. “Lauren...” she warned.

“I’m not arguing, Shay. You saw as well as I did that your bullets barely slowed it down. You’ll need someone to watch your back.”

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The look that Shay gave me could be called skeptical at best. “We don’t have time to argue,” she said, shaking her head. She motioned for me to follow as the others headed off in the other direction. “Just keep up.”

“That thing was Brittney?”

“Yes.”

“Brittney Morrison is... You’re telling me that Brittney turned into that...that...that wolf-thing?”

“Yes,” I repeated, glancing back over my shoulder toward the direction of the gym. The overhead lights were automatic, turning on as we stepped under them, turning off as we made our way farther down the hallway. Goosebumps pricked up as I looked into the near pitch black that followed us.

“How?”

“I don’t know. It was just like one minute she was dancing and then the next she...” I struggled to find the right words. “Changed.”

Shay shook her head, her face expressionless. “I’d say you’d hit the hunch punch Gordon Moran was pimping out, but...after what I just saw back there...”

At the mention of Gordon’s name, I shuddered. “She killed him,” I said, my voice hollow. “And Suzie Miller.” I closed my eyes and shuddered again, trying to push the sight of Suzie’s head bouncing across the gym floor out of my mind.

“Hey...” Shay placed a hand on my shoulder. I looked up and found myself staring into her blue eyes. “Don’t think about that right now. Try to focus, okay?”

I swallowed and then nodded. I mean, I had more or less forced her into letting me tag along. I couldn’t punk out now.

We reached the door leading to the parking lot and Shay signaled for me to be quiet as she peered out the window that made up the upper portion of the door.

“Okay. It looks like the coast is clear. My car is parked right over there,” she said, pointing out the window. “I’m going to run out and get the radio. You stay here.”

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“No, I told you before, you need someone to watch your back in case that creature has broken out of the gym.”

“Watch my back and do what, Lauren? What are you going to do if it shows up? Ask to do its nails?”

“Nobody likes a smart ass, Shay,” I snapped back. “You don’t have eyes in the back of your head. If that things shows up, then...I’ll scream or shout or do something to distract it long enough for you—for both us—to get away.”

“Lauren...”

“Don’t ‘Lauren’ me. I’m not going to just leave you alone out there.”

Shay cut her eyes back toward the window. “Never stopped you before.” She’d muttered the words under her breath. It was low, but with no other sound in the hallway, I had no problem hearing what she’d said, and it sent a surge of anger through me.

“Really, Shay? We’re all about to get eaten by a goddamned werewolf and you want to bring up something that happened twenty years ago?”

Shay turned back to face me, but whatever she said next was lost to me because at that exact moment a beam of moonlight shone through the window and I knew what had happened to Brittney. Well, maybe not what, but how.

“The potion...” My voice was an incredulous whisper.

Shay frowned. “What potion, what are you talking about?”

It all suddenly made some crazy sort of sense. “Back in the locker room,” I said. “Brittney showed me a beauty potion she said she’d gotten from like a witch or something in New Orleans. But the words on the vial were wrong. I told her that I didn’t think it was what she thought it was, but she drank it anyway. And she was supposed to take it under the light of a full moon.”

“Well,” Shay’s frown deepened, “I have to admit that does sound like some Lon Cheney shit. It’s as good an explanation as any, I guess.”

There was a loud crash and the sound of breaking glass.

We exchanged glances and then Shay gave a determined nod.

“We’ve wasted enough time.” She reached out and pressed the gun into my hand. “Stay by the door. If you see the wolf, point and shoot. Got it?”

All I could do was nod.

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“Keep shooting until it goes down.”

Shay pushed the door open warily and stepped outside, darting a glance right and left. The rain had subsided and a wispy fog had set in. The gravel parking lot was dark except for the glow of the full moon overhead. It was, in a word, spooky as shit.

I gripped the pistol Shay had given me, surprised by its weight. I’d never held a real gun before and a small part of me wondered if I’d be able to shoot if it came down to it.

I didn’t have long to wonder.

Shay had just made it to her car when we heard the sound of footsteps crunching in the gravel. We both froze, and I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

The footsteps drew closer and then a figure appeared out of the fog. It was the deejay. He staggered toward us, one hand to his throat and the other extended out in front of him. Blood stained his shirt.

Two more steps forward and then he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. The hand he’d held to himself dropped down to reveal a gaping hole where his throat should have been. He took one more step and then collapsed in a heap on the gravel.

“Lauren, run!” Shay shouted as a roar rang out. I had maybe a second to comprehend and then the werewolf erupted from the fog. She pounced toward Shay, who made a zig-zag move and somehow managed to get out of her way. Shay sprinted back toward the school and safety, but the wolf was quick to change direction and give chase. The ground was still wet from the earlier rain, and I saw Shay approach a muddy patch, but was powerless to stop her. Shay hit the mud and slid, falling hard onto the gravel lot. The wolf drew up to its full height and growled, ready to move in for the kill. Shay was on her back now, scrambling backwards in a futile effort to escape. The wolf snarled, moonlight reflecting off her giant, dripping teeth.

I pulled the trigger and the sound of the gunshot cut through the air, echoing in my ears. I don’t know if the first shot hit or not—I doubted it—but the big shaggy head lifted and the thing roared at me. I fired again and saw the wolf reel backward. I shot again and then once more, both times striking the creature. She stumbled forward and fell face down in the mud.

Shay sprang to her feet and ran back to the school. I could see the werewolf beginning to twitch, trying to rise, and took that as my cue as well. I hit the door just in front of

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Shay, holding it open long enough for her to follow me in. We ran down the hallway, acutely aware of the roaring just outside the school. Shay started trying classroom doors, but the first three were locked. The fourth door was open and we scurried inside. It was a chemistry room and we ran toward one of the lab stations, crouching behind it in an effort to hide.

Just then there was the loud sound of metal being ripped apart, a crash as the door to the outside was flung open, and a howl that echoed chillingly down the empty corridor.

Both of us were breathing so hard, I began to be afraid the wolf would hear us right away. I could hear her coming, the Louboutins still on Brittney's misshapen feet echoing down the empty hallway as she lumbered along. Every so often the clacking would stop, replaced by the sound of a rattled door.

I turned to look at Shay and found her staring back at me. There must be something about facing imminent death together that bonds people because I was filled with regrets for all the time we'd wasted. She must have been feeling the same because she gripped my hand and pulled it close to her.

"I'm sorry I didn't go after you when you ran away from me," Shay whispered softly.

"No, I never should have left. I was such an idiot."

"It wasn't fair of me to pressure you to come out to your parents and your friends when you just weren't ready yet. I'm sorry, Lauren. If I had it to do over again..."

"I know." I shook my head, tears filling my eyes as I gently caressed her cheek. I wished...so many things, but I could hear the sound of those heels just outside the door. We were out of time.

The handle clattered and then the door burst open. I peeked around the table leg and saw the monstrous creature framed in the doorway, the moonlight filtering through the windows in the hall outlining her perfectly. She took a shuffling step inside and then suddenly her ears pricked up. My heart dropped as I thought she'd seen us, but then the wolf turned and suddenly sprinted from the room. There was shouting down the hallway and then a blood curdling scream as she no doubt ripped apart another victim.

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We stayed where we were, still holding onto each other as we waited for the grisly sounds to stop. Finally, we heard the clacking noises continue on down the hall and I was able to take a deep breath for the first time in what felt like ages.

“I have to find a way to stop this thing,” Shay said, her eyes grim. “Give me the gun.”

“Here.” I passed it over to her, but shook my head. “Not that it’s going to do any good. The bullets barely slowed it down.” I frowned. “Why not, do you think?”

Shay shrugged one shoulder. “I have no idea. Unless it’s like the movies and you need a silver bullet to stop a werewolf.”

“I don’t suppose you have any on you?”

“Sorry, I left them at home on the kitchen table next to my wooden stake and bottle of holy water.”

I grinned and then found myself pushing back a hysterical laugh. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to lose it. “Well, maybe if not silver bullets, we can find something made of silver to use against her. Maybe a knife from the Home Ec room, or something in the trophy case by the auditorium.”

“I doubt there’s actual silver-silverware in Home Ec,” Shay said skeptically. “There may be some silver medals in the school trophy case, but unless you’ve got something that can melt down silver hidden in that mini-skirt, I doubt any of those will be very much help.”

“Look here, Shay Covington, I did not come here tonight to die, and I most certainly have no intention of going out wearing a cheerleader’s uniform.”

Shay raked her eyes over me and then grinned. “I don’t know, I think you look kinda cute.” She stood and held out a hand out to me. “But you’re right, we can’t just cower here until she finds us again.”

I took her hand and rose to my feet. On sudden impulse, I tightened my grip and pulled her to me for a kiss. Her lips were warm as she returned the kiss and drew me into her arms. She pushed my hair back and, staring into my eyes, grazed her knuckles along the edge of my cheek. A shiver swept through me. “And to think I almost stayed home tonight,” Shay murmured.

“Look at all the fun you’d have missed.”

Shay smiled and kissed my forehead. “C’mon, let’s go hunt a werewolf.”

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“There’s no way this *Scooby Doo* shit is going to work.”

“Of course it will. Why wouldn’t it work?”

“It’s not going to work.” I watched as Shay used the butt of the gun to hammer a small silver plaque around the end of one of the rebars we’d picked up on the way back into the gym. “This is just a mistake. We should just try to get out of here and go hide in the woods until help arrives.”

“And do what? Hope that wolf-thing doesn’t find its way into town and wreak havoc there?” Shay gave the plaque a final hammer and then held the make-shift spear she’d created at arm’s length, surveying her work. “It’s not a mistake.” Shay smiled over at me. “Besides, this was your idea in the first place.”

Actually, my idea had centered primarily around the concept of me not dying. Shay, too, for that matter. Looking at the assorted plaques and second place medals we’d salvaged from the display case by the gymnasium’s entrance stacked up beside a handful of long metal rebars on the deejay’s table, any confidence I may have felt going into this little endeavor was quickly vanishing. Not even the fireman’s ax we’d found in a glass case by the gym fire extinguisher made me feel any better.

“And you would listen to me why?” I picked up one of the plaques and held it up in front of me. “This one looks like silver-plate at best.” I dropped the plaque and grabbed one of the medals. “And this? Look how thick it is. What are we supposed to do, shove it down her throat?”

Shay covered her hand around mine holding the medal. “Lauren,” she said softly, “it’ll be okay. Just let me handle everything.” She took the medal and tossed it in the air like a coin. “I’m a Marine, remember?”

“Fight many werewolves in the Marines, did you?”

Shay rolled her eyes. “You just stay in this spot, and when I give the word, start playing the music. That’ll draw her back in here.”

Skeptical didn’t begin to cover what I was feeling right then. “And where will you be, Corporal Covington?”

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“Actually, I ETS’d as a Gunnery Sergeant.” She grinned. “But, I will be right over there at the equipment room, not twenty feet away. Once she walks past me, I’ll use what bullets we have left to knock her down. Once she’s down I’ll use this—” Shay held up the make-shift spear. “—and then, if needed, finish the job with the ax.”

I had to admit that, as werewolf-killing ideas went, it wasn’t all that bad. Once everything was set, Shay headed off to the equipment room. I grabbed a rebar and then put one of the silver medals around my neck—it wasn’t much, but it made me feel a little safer—before walking over to the deejay’s machine. I wasn’t entirely sure what the proper name for it was, or even how to work it—the black box was a confusing array of buttons and dials. I decided to try the one marked “play” and then gave a startled jump when music blasted through the speaker to my right. The song playing was, somewhat appropriately, CCR’s *Bad Moon Rising*.

The doors to the gym flung open just as John Fogerty heard the hurricanes a’blowing.

The creature that had once been Brittney lunged through the doorway. She gave a quick look around the gym, sniffing the air with her impossibly elongated snout as she did so. She froze suddenly and then cocked her head in my direction. She stood for a moment as if taking my measure and then began to advance. The wolf moved slowly across the gym floor, the click-clack of her shoes reverberating throughout the near-empty room. Her eyes were focused on me, but I got the sense that she was being cautious in her approach, making me wonder if she somehow sensed the trap that Shay had laid for her.

I made a quick glance to the equipment room without trying to be obvious about it. Shay looked back at me through the door’s window, giving me a reassuring nod. I gripped the rebar in anticipation, trying to resist the primal urge to flee the approaching monster. As she drew near, I could see her muscles ripple with each step. Her muzzle was stained red with blood and her eyes seemed to glow under the florescent lights. I knew then that any semblance of Brittney was gone.

Then, as happens with the best laid plans, everything went to hell.

The creature passed Shay’s “go” point, but instead of seeing Shay burst out of the equipment room guns blazing, I heard a thud. The wolf must have heard it, too, because we both looked in the direction of the equipment room to see Shay banging against the

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door with her shoulder. Shay threw herself against the door again in a futile attempt to open it.

Shay and the wolf both seemed to realize she was trapped behind the locked door at the same moment. The creature turned back to look at me and hunched down as she continued her slow approach, what I could swear was a smile crossing her monstrous face. Shay looked at me through the window and yelled—rather unnecessarily—for me to run.

I picked up two of the silver medals by their ribbons, swung them once over my head, and then threw the pair in the direction of the wolf. Both pieces of metal hit the creature, one in the face and one on the shoulder, and she staggered back, screaming. I caught a glimpse of bubbling flesh on the wolf's shoulder just before I turned and ran.

I've never been a fast runner, but there's something about running for your life that brings out the Olympic sprinter in you. The only sounds I could hear as I moved were the sound of my heart beating and, in the near distance, thousand dollar Louboutins loping across the hardwood floor of the gym. I dove into the first doorway I passed—the girls' locker room.

I realized my mistake too late. There was only one way in and out of the locker room and I had no time to go anywhere else. I sprinted toward the stalls, the only enclosed area in the room. Just as I reached the door of the first stall, I heard the click-clack of the wolf's high heeled shoes.

I turned to face the creature.

The wolf's left cheek where the silver medal had made contact was...melted. There's no other word to describe it. Flesh dripped down over one snarling lip like hot wax spilled from a candle. I tripped backwards, but was stopped by the stall door. There was nowhere left to run and we both knew it. She took another slow step forward, seeming to almost be reveling in the moment of victory.

Crack.

The sound seemed so odd and out of place that we both looked down toward the source to see a Louboutin heel stuck in one of the restroom's grated drains. The wolf moved her foot and, when she did, the heel of the shoe snapped off. The creature that had been Brittney howled in anger.

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I ducked as she swung one of her massive paws at me and sprinted to the other side of the restroom. The creature growled and then pounced. I gripped the rebar and shoved it at her as she sprung, striking her in the chest. Unlike Shay's, this one had no silver on it, and it did little more than deflect her charge. Redirected, the wolf crashed into the porcelain sink that Brittney had used earlier in the evening, and then headfirst into the mirror.

Shrieking, the wolf fell to her knees, pieces of glass sticking out of various parts of her face. The fur boiled around each shard. I remembered reading once that they used some form of silver in old mirrors and apparently it was true. She cried out, an eerie wailing noise, as she pulled at the glass, trying to dislodge it.

I staggered back and she caught notice of me again. Growling, she rose to her feet and poised to lunge.

“Lauren, duck!”

I moved, almost instinctively, to Shay's voice, diving over the locker room bench just as the first gunshot rang out. It was followed quickly by three more. The wolf reeled back with each shot, and, before she could recover, Shay threw the spear. It split through the wolf's chest and, howling, she crumpled to the floor.

Shay was upon her in seconds, swinging the ax down onto the creature again and again. Finally, the ax made a clang as it struck the concrete floor and the wolf's head rolled under the sink.

I stood there shaking for a moment and then turned to Shay, who opened her arms to me. I stepped into the hug without hesitation. It was over.

“You killed it,” I said softly, nuzzling her neck. “Oh, thank God.”

“Are you okay?” Shay asked. I pulled back to look at her and nodded.

“I think I'm going to be.”

She smiled, and, in that moment, her blood-spattered face was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen.

“Me too,” she said. “Now let's go find my radio and round up the survivors. After we tell our story and I make some kind of report that won't get me sent to a psych ward, you can come with me back to my place and...talk about things.”

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“We do have a lot of catching up to do.” Feeling a draft of cool air on my thighs, I added, “I’d like to get out of this outfit, too.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Shay said as we walked back toward the gym, giving me what could only be described as a wolfish grin. I made one last glance at the creature. Blood bubbled out of its headless shoulders, pooling on the locker room floor. I turned my attention back to Shay and smiled, taking the hand that she offered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lila Bruce grew up in a military family and traveled extensively as a child, living everywhere from Maine to Mississippi, Germany to Georgia, and a few parts in between. She loves to read and write w/l/w romances, consume unhealthy amounts of coffee, and has always been a sucker for a happy ending. Lila currently resides in the hills of North Georgia with her wife and their clowder of cats.

Lila is a 2016 Rainbow Award Winner (Love Bites), 2017 Lambda Literary Award Finalist (Little Lies), and a 2020 Goldie Award Finalist (Chasing Shadows).

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