

Zoe Winters



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READERS: If you find any grammar flaws or typographical errors, or plot holes, or you know, anything stupid that I should have caught by now after 700 readings of the text, email me at: zoegrace25@gmail.com so I can fix it wherever possible. Thanks!

Chapter One

THE old-fashioned bell jingled over the doorway, and a gust of chill wind swept through Lawson's Bookshoppe. It was July. Greta shivered, knowing who it was even as her eyes remained focused on the counter she was cleaning. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Anthony. We're closing up early."

"We? You look quite alone. Where's your little redheaded friend? What's her name? Charlotte?" The vampire licked his lips.

"You know very well what her name is."

She was beginning to regret sending Charlee home early. The other clerk may have been only human, but Anthony Burgess often struck when people were alone and vulnerable. He'd always seemed amused when Charlee stood up to him, not knowing he could relieve her of her blood in seconds.

Greta focused on the counter as the Formica gave under the pressure of her hand. She met his eyes and tucked a strand of short dark hair behind her ear, grateful her kind couldn't be enthralled.

He wore the standard vampire uniform of basic black, his blond hair pulled back in a low ponytail. A long leather coat flowed out behind him as he strode toward her. All he needed now was menacing background music. Something dark and brooding.

Anthony removed a soft-covered book from the rack beside the checkout without looking at the title and placed it on the counter. His crystal blue eyes glowed and locked with Greta's dark brown. He inhaled deeply, not bothering to mask his enjoyment of her scent.

"When are you going to stop teasing me and let me have a taste?" He stared pointedly at her neck. "Coming up on twenty-eight aren't you? Special year. Moon's nearly full."

Greta's hand shook as she passed the scanner over the book's bar code. Therians, known to the mortals as Weres, celebrated their birthday not on the anniversary of their birth, but on the full moon closest to it. Twenty-eight wasn't a number to inspire ooohs and aaahs among the human set, but for a shapeshifter, the twenty-eighth birthday was bigger than the human twenty-one. It was a good drinking age for vamps anyway.

She took his money, made the change, and slipped the book into the opaque green shopping bag. Her eyes widened when she glimpsed the title. "You just bought a book on menstruation, Anthony. Were you aware?"

He shrugged and smiled, revealing the barest hint of fang. "I like blood." He scooped the bag up, gave her one last meaningful look, then drifted out of the store.

Greta locked the door behind him and pressed her forehead against the cool wood. She could do with fewer bloodsucking

patrons; they'd increased in number since the last full moon. With her birth moon coming up, she might as well have a neon *all you can eat* sign posted in the window.

It was thirty minutes before she gathered the nerve to venture into the parking lot.

Most of the lights in the lot had burnt out, and no one had bothered replacing them. With only one human employee and few after dark human patrons, it was deemed an unnecessary expense. The residents of Cary Town might not realize what was out there, but they were shy of the dark all the same.

Greta's boots clicked loudly on the asphalt, making stealth a physical impossibility. She might as well shout to the vamps from a megaphone. *Fresh meat, right here. Come and get it boys.*

If Anthony or any of his ilk were lurking, they didn't take the bait. Nothing black-clad or fanged emerged from the shadows. Anthony had gone home, or hunting, or whatever it was he did at night. For all she knew, he hung out at the all night grocery store scaring stock boys.

When she got home, her orange tabby was perched on the stoop, waiting to be let in.

"Hello, Mink." She bent to scratch the kitty behind her ears and went inside, stopping in the hallway where the answering machine light blinked.

"This is your mother. I need to see you. Be discreet." Click. Jaden was more abrupt than usual. *Be discreet.* Translation: *be in fur.* Something was going down at the Lawson estate. She glanced at the hall clock, 9:45, plenty of time for a shower.

It wasn't until Greta shut off the water that she remembered she hadn't done laundry. *Shit. No towels.* She closed her eyes and focused as images flowed over her mind. *Milk, mice, open fields, birds, blades of grass, hunting, moon.* Her senses heightened as she allowed the memories to bring forth the change. The room shrank and swirled around her. Her spirit jolted from her body, hovered for a moment, then was pulled back into her new compact form.

She stretched all the way down to the pads of her paws, then shook herself and licked her black fur down flat. There was going to be a hairball situation if she didn't do laundry soon. She hopped onto the pedestal sink, admiring herself in the mirror. She loved fur. It was so slimming.

While Greta preened, Mink sauntered into the room and hissed. Greta hissed back. The house cat liked the therian fine in her human form but became agitated whenever she shifted. Tough. It was Greta's apartment. When Mink could turn into a human and get a job, then she'd have a vote. Greta's poufy black tail curled under Mink's chin as she drifted past the tabby.

Simon's silver Lexus stood parked like a sentinel in her mother's driveway. It wasn't unusual for the tribe leader to be at the Lawson home, but seeing the car after the odd phone message made the hairs on the back of Greta's neck stand up.

She slipped through the plastic flap in the kitchen door and kept to the corners, slinking under the dilapidated furniture. Her nose twitched and she began to salivate as she caught the scent of a mouse. She forced herself to ignore it and edged closer to the

family room where Simon and her mother spoke in the hushed tones usually reserved for church and funerals.

“We don’t have to do this. Those are the old ways; surely we’re beyond that now.”

Simon allowed his hand to trail over Jaden’s ass. “You knew this was coming. Greta was marked for sacrifice the moment she came into the world in her fur. I told you not to get attached.”

On hearing her name, Greta scooted further under the chair. Therians were born in human form and died in their fur, not the other way around. Everybody knew that.

She’d read legends about therians born in their fur and having extra powers, but she’d always thought they were just stories. Surely she would have noticed if she’d developed more power suddenly.

Her mother’s voice rose, taking on a more desperate tone. “I thought you’d change your mind. I thought if you loved me, you wouldn’t take her. I should have followed my instincts and sent her far from here when she was still a baby.”

Simon laughed. “The border patrol would never have let you cross. They’re loyal to me. We have one shot and I won’t have you ruining it for the tribe, not like her mother tried to.”

Greta didn’t have time to process the revelation that her mother wasn’t her mother because Simon’s cell phone started pounding out a sappy eighties ballad. How he listened to that shit and maintained an interest in the opposite sex, remained one of the tribe’s greatest mysteries.

“I have to take this,” Simon said, retreating to the far end of the room.

Greta followed Jaden to the kitchen and waited while the older woman scribbled something on a slip of paper, rolled it up, and stuck it in Greta's mouth.

"Did you get all that?"

"Mrraar," she said around the paper.

"Go to this place. It's the only person in the city who can keep you safe."

Simon's voice grew louder as he approached the kitchen. Before he could see her, Greta leaped off the table and scurried out the cat door.

Humans had been busy the past several decades tearing down walls that trapped people in their homelands. The preternaturals, meanwhile, had been engaged in building them up. Normally it didn't bother her so much; but now she could palpably feel the invisible cage that kept her locked inside the walls of the city, making her world feel claustrophobic, where before it had been a cocoon of perceived safety.

There was one person she was close to who wasn't a member of the tribe. She ran three blocks, scratched on Charlee's door, and nearly jumped out of her fur when the dog barked. A tiny redheaded woman mumbled a few warnings to the dog and flipped on the porch light.

Greta tried to look unassuming and adorable. "Mrarr." "

"Awwww, aren't you the cutest!"

Score.

Charlee bent to scoop Greta up and shooed the dog out of the house. "Go play, Sammy."

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