

ROGUE

By
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ONE

“Catch and release, my ass!” Grunting, I shoved the stray face down over the trunk of Marc’s car, snatching back my free hand just in time to avoid his teeth as they snapped together. The bastard was half again my size, and thrashing like a...well, like a scared cat, determined to shred anything he could get his hands on—including me.

Several feet behind me, Marc watched, no doubt mentally noting every aspect of my performance so he could recreate it later for my father. So far, I hadn’t given him much good to report.

Beating prowlers senseless to teach them a lesson was one thing; I’d easily mastered most of the common scare tactics. But this whole chase-them-down-and-haul-them-out approach? That was bullshit. Complete and total idiocy. What was my father thinking?

The only stroke of luck I’d had all evening was that the stray had fled to a deserted make-out spot on the outskirts of Dumas, Arkansas. If he’d headed toward the town lights instead of away from them, I’d never have caught him. I wouldn’t even have tried. We couldn’t risk human passers-by seeing an average-sized young woman like me haul around a man who outweighed

me by at least forty pounds. And the truth was that if the stray had known how to fight, I probably couldn't have caught him.

Not that the capture had gone smoothly, even so. Marc had made no effort to help.

"Can you give me a hand, here?" I snapped at him over my shoulder, slamming the stray's head back down on the trunk as he twisted, trying to break free of my grasp.

Masculine laughter rang out from behind me, unaccompanied by footsteps. "You're doing just fine, kitten."

"Don't...fucking...call...me...that," I growled through clenched jaws. With my free hand, I seized one of the trespasser's flailing arms and pinned it to the small of his back. His other hand escaped me, clawing grooves into the paint. Not that it made any difference on Marc's oft-abused car.

Tossing a strand of straight black hair from my face, I kicked the intruder's feet apart. He slid part way down the car, and I winced as his nails screeched across the surface. "So, you're just going to stand there and watch?" I asked Marc, not daring to turn away from my prisoner to look at my maddeningly uninvolved partner.

"It's a solo catch-and-release. I'm here to supervise and observe only."

I grunted with the effort of holding the stray down. "Well, I hope you like the hands-off approach, because it's about to carry over into your personal life."

Marc laughed, unmoved by my threat. He knew I didn't mean it. Smug bastard.

Leaning forward, I draped myself across the intruder's back to hold him still. His heart pounded fiercely through the thin, shiny material of a red blouse I'd had no plans to fight in.

His free hand flailed, still out of reach. I squeezed the wrist I'd captured. His bones ground together. Howling in pain, he bucked beneath me. I held on, determined not to screw up my first solo capture. Not with Marc watching. He'd never let me live it down.

"Let me go, bitch," the stray growled, his words distorted with his face pressed into the car.

Behind me, Marc chuckled again. "I think he likes you, Faythe."

"Either help, or shut up." With my free hand, I dug into my back pocket for my new handcuffs, fresh out of the package and still shiny. It was time to break them in.

Metal clinked against metal as I opened the first cuff, and the stray's thrashing intensified. He threw his head back and tossed his free arm up at an awkward angle. His hand smashed into mine. My fist opened.

For one agonizing moment, the open half-circle of metal dangled from my index finger, the other end swinging like a pendulum. Then the cuff slipped from my grasp and landed across the toe of my prisoner's left shoe. Tightening my grip on his wrist, I bent to grab it, hauling him backward in the process. He kicked out. The cuff sailed beneath the car, skidding across the gravel of the deserted lot.

"Damn it!" So much for shiny and new. I jerked us both upright and slapped the back of the stray's head. He growled. Marc laughed. I barely held back a scream of frustration. This was not how my first catch-and-release was supposed to go.

Shoving aside my aggravation, I slammed the stray back down on the trunk, but it was too late to regain the upper hand. I'd screwed up, and he'd rediscovered his balls.

Grunting, the stray threw his elbow back, into my left side. Pain tore through my chest and abdomen. My breath escaped in a single, harsh puff. His arm slid through my fist, and I nearly lost my grip.

Screw this. He'd blown his shot at nice-and-easy, which only left quick-and-brutal—my favorite way to play.

I sucked in a deep breath. Fire raced up my newly bruised side. I shifted my weight onto my left leg and slammed my right knee into his groin.

The stray made a single, pain-filled gulping sound, as if he were swallowing his own tongue. For a moment, I heard only Marc's steady breathing at my back and the crickets chirruping all around us. Then my prisoner screamed. He hit notes that would have made Steven Tyler wince.

Satisfied that he couldn't stand, much less run, I let him go. He crumpled to the ground at my feet, shrieking like a little girl.

“Well, that's certainly one way to do it.” Marc stepped up to my side. He looked a little pale, and not just from the moonlight.

I smoothed more hair back from my face, eyeing the pathetic form on the gravel. “Give me your damn cuffs,” I snapped at Marc, not the least bit ashamed of myself for dropping my opponent with a knee to the groin.

Marc pulled his own handcuffs from his back pocket. “Remind me not to piss you off,” he said, dropping them into my open palm.

“You still need to be reminded?” Kneeling, I pulled the stray's arms behind his back and cuffed them. He was still whimpering when I hauled him up by his elbow and half-dragged him to the passenger side of the car. At the door, I spun him around to face me. “What's your name?”

Instead of answering, he leered at the low neckline of my blouse. It wasn't the smartest or most original response, but it was a definite improvement over the guy who'd tried to take a taste. Still, I was in no mood to be ogled. At least, not by him.

I let my fist fly, and my knuckles smashed into his ribcage. His eyes went wide, and his jaw clenched on an oof of pain. A slow smile spread across my face. I love cheap therapy, and throwing punches was the least expensive way I'd found to deal with not-so-repressed anger.

"This is the last time I'll ask," I warned, focusing on his closed eyelids. "Then I'll just knock you out and call you Tom Doe. Your choice. Now, what's your fucking name?"

His eyes popped opened, staring into mine as if to determine how serious my threat was. Whatever he saw must have convinced him. "Dan Painter," he said, the end of his own name clipped short in anger.

"Mr. Painter." I nodded, satisfied that he was telling the truth, based on his expression and the steady, if quick beat of his pulse. "To what do we owe the displeasure of your visit?"

His eyebrows rose in confusion as his mouth screwed into a frown.

I rolled my eyes. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The wrinkles in his forehead smoothed out as comprehension spread across his face. "Just doin' my civic duty," he insisted. "Chasing a piece of ass, not that it matters now. Bitch gave me the slip."

"Civic duty, huh? We must have gone to two different high-schools, 'cause my civics teacher never mentioned a citizen's obligation to stalk innocent women. Across territorial boundaries."

Painter scowled at me, refusing to further explain himself.

Marc stepped forward. “That must have been some piece of ass, to tempt you into south-central territory.”

Groaning inwardly, I held my tongue. It would have been poor form to yell at my partner in front of the prisoner. Again.

“You got no idea.” The stray looked at Marc over my shoulder. “Or maybe you do.” His eyes slid back to me, and I ground my teeth as his gaze traveled down my blouse and snug black slacks. “This one’s kind of plain in the face, but she’s got it where it counts, huh?”

I felt Marc tense just behind me, and heard his knuckles pop. He was forming a fist. But he was too late.

“Consider this your only warning to stay out of our territory.” My fist flew in a beautiful right hook. My knuckles slammed into the stray’s left cheek. His head snapped back and to the side. And for the second time in four minutes, he collapsed—this time unconscious.

Already flexing my bruised hand, I stepped back and let him fall. What did I care if he scraped his face on the gravel? He was lucky I hadn’t broken his cheekbone. At least, I didn’t think I’d broken anything. Except possibly my own knuckles.

Behind me, Marc made a soft whistling sound, clearly impressed. “That’s not standard procedure,” he said, his tone entirely too reasonable as he leaned over the stray’s body to open the back passenger side door.

“Yeah, well, I’m not your standard enforcer.” The rest of my father’s employees had more respect for the rules than I had. They also had much more testosterone and two fewer ovaries. None of them really knew what to do with me.

Marc grinned, pulling my injured hand into the light from the car's interior bulb. "I won't argue with that." He tilted my wrist for a better view, and I winced. "It's not broken. We'll stop for some ice on the way to the free zone."

"And some coffee," I insisted, already dreading the hour-long drive east to the Arkansas-Mississippi border, where we would release Dan Painter in the free zone on the other side of the Mississippi River. "I need coffee."

"Of course." Bending, Marc grabbed the stray's shirt in his left hand, and the waist of his jeans in the other. With hardly a grunt of effort, he picked up the unconscious werecat and tossed him headfirst onto the back seat. "That was one hell of a right hook." Marc produced a roll of duck tape, apparently from thin air. He tore off a long strip and wound it around Mr. Painter's ankles, binding them tightly together, then bent the stray's legs at the knees to get his feet into the car. "I don't remember your father teaching you that."

"He didn't."

Marc slammed the door and arched one eyebrow at me in question.

Smiling, I knelt to look beneath the car. "Ultimate Fighting Championship."

He nodded. "Impressive."

"I thought so." On my hands and knees in the gravel, I felt around beneath the car, searching for my handcuffs. I'd lost my first pair diving into the Red River in pursuit of a harmless but repeat offender a month earlier. If I came back without the new set, my father would have my hide. Or dock my paycheck.

My fingers scraped a clump of coarse grass growing through the rocks and skimmed over the rounded end of a broken bottle.

"Need some help?" Marc reached down to run one hand slowly over my hip.

I grinned at him over my shoulder. “You’re not going to find anything there.”

“That’s what you think.” His hand slid up my side as my fingers brushed a smooth arc of metal. I grabbed the cuff and backed out from under the car, and Marc pulled me to my feet. He turned me around to face him as I slid the cuff into my back pocket, then he pressed me against the side of the car. “Let’s take a break,” he whispered, leaning in to brush my neck with his lips.

Overhead, the full moon shined in his dark curls, and they shone as if they were wet.

“Like you’ve been working,” I said, but my hand reached automatically for his arm. My fingers brushed the lines of his triceps, my nails skimming the surface of his skin, raising goose bumps. I loved drawing a reaction from him. It gave me a sense of power, of control. And yet the feeling was mutual; I couldn’t say no to him, and he knew it.

“So why don’t you put me to work?” he purred against my ear, pressing closer to me. His fingers edged between me and the car, moving slowly to cup my rear, his grip firm and strong.

I leaned forward to give him better access. “Do we have time?”

“All the time in the world. Unless you have a curfew I don’t know about.”

“I’m grown, remember?”

“Oh, I remember.” His tongue trailed lightly down the side of my neck, hesitating slightly at the four crescent-shaped scars, leaving a warm, hot trail to be caressed by the warm September breeze. “You’re very, very grown.” His tongue resumed its course, flicking over my collarbone before diving into my cleavage. The sweet spot, he called it. With good reason.

“What about our unwilling guest?” My fingers trailed over his chest, feeling the hard planes through his tee-shirt.

“He can find his own date.” Marc’s words were muffled against my skin, his breath hot on the upper curve of my breast.

“I’m serious.” I pulled him back to eye level. “What if he wakes up?”

“He’ll be jealous.” Marc leaned in to kiss me, but I put a hand on his chest. Breathing an impatient sigh, he glanced through the car window over my shoulder, then back up to meet my eyes. “He’s out cold. Besides, we never have any privacy at the ranch anyway, so what does it matter?”

Privacy. It had become our most precious commodity, and the supply was never enough to meet the demand in a house full of propriety-challenged werecats—noisy, over-grown children with supernatural hearing and no lives of their own. Marc was right: middle-of-nowhere Arkansas was about as private as we were going to get. Ever. For the rest of what passed for our lives.

I nodded, sliding my hands slowly beneath the front of his shirt. “Okay, but you better have a blanket in there.” I tossed my head toward the trunk. “‘Cause I’m not lying down on this gravel.”

He frowned, and his nose met mine as he bent down for one more kiss. “Who said anything about lying—” His cell phone rang out from his hip pocket, just as his lips brushed mine. “—down.”

I smiled, not a bit surprised. Timing was everything, and in that regard, my father was a force to be reckoned with.

Marc stepped back, pulling the phone from his pocket, and my hands fell from his chest to rest on my hips. “Damn it, Greg,” he muttered, glancing at the backlit screen.

“Tell him what we were about to do, and he’ll probably leave us alone,” I said, pulling open the front passenger-side door. Unlike most fathers, mine was...enthusiastic about my relationship with my boyfriend. So was my mother. They loved Marc like a son, and would have

done anything to make an honest couple of us, including gluing the ring to my finger. It was kind of creepy, if I stopped to think about it for too long.

“That’s not a conversation I particularly enjoy having with your father.” Marc scowled as the phone continued to ring. “And if I get one more tip from Michael, I’m going to throw him right through the living room window, even if he is your brother.”

I flinched. “He didn’t.”

Marc raised his eyebrows.

Damn. He did. Marc wouldn’t have to kill Michael; I’d do it myself. I just could not make people understand that my private life was exactly that: private.

Smiling now, Marc pressed the ON button and held his phone to his ear. “Hi Greg. What’s wrong?”

My father’s reply came through loud and clear. “I just checked my messages and found something interesting. An anonymous call about a dead cat. I hope you have your shovel.”

Of course Marc had his shovel. Because what better way was there to end a date than by burying a corpse in the middle of the night?

It’s official. My job sucks.

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