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### *III - Old crime*

The whole room was packed. This came as somewhat of a surprise to Gabrielle, who had attended a number of pre-election political debates before the last election. Those had been well attended but nowhere near this. One would have to use a sizable shoehorn or a couple of large crowbars to fit in even a small fur and the noise level was quite amazing.

Her direct opponent was talking to someone on his staff. Gabrielle didn't know much about him yet, except that he seemed to be financially well set and that he had a sizable and apparently very professional staff to help him get elected.

He looked to be in his early to mid forties, he was feline and he wore a wedding band. He was well built and he was a former soldier. Her staff had dug up that much at least. But why he was trying to get elected in the Castro no one seemed to understand. He wasn't gay, nor was he known to have any relations in his immediate family who were, and these days, that almost disqualified a candidate from getting elected in that particular district.

On the other paw, he wasn't known to be anti-gay either. Few Californian politicians really were anymore. There were no votes in it.

The debate-leader grabbed the microphone and welcomed everyone and proceeded to introduce Gabrielle first, since she was the incumbent, and then went on to introduce her opponent.

Jason F. Hartwood.

Gabrielle already knew what the F stood for. Felix. Not the most imaginative of names for a feline, but that was hardly his fault.

She extended a paw and the feline took it and gave her a firm pawshake. His smile seemed genuine enough, but Gabrielle wasn't fooled by it. She knew how glib one occasionally had to be for the benefit of the cameras.

Still, things were underway. There were other candidates, but none that stood any realistic chance of winning and this first debate was set up between the two of them because they represented the two major political parties.

Taking her seat, Gabrielle waited while the debate-leader explained to the audience what would happen over the next couple of hours. She listened with only half an ear. The rest of her attention was focused on Jason Hartwood.

###

It was a day like many others for Steve. He was done with morning practice and had the afternoon off and he had decided to spend the day on the phone with his family. He worried deeply about his adoptive father and his state of mind.

He tied his shoelaces and slipped his arms into his jacket. He looked good in suits, but he didn't like the feeling of the shirt being buttoned all the way up to his throat. It made him feel like he was slowly strangling, and he agreed with his adoptive mother, who had always maintained that neck-ties were overrated and that they did, in fact, look utterly stupid on most furs. There was, of course, the occasional exception to that rule. Leo Leon, the father of his girlfriend, managed to make a simple tie look like a statement of power and elegance, for instance. But he too hated wearing them and rarely did so.

Kalen managed to make it look like a noose, forced around his neck. He, on the other paw, had to wear a tie every day because of the dress-code of his ballclub.

Steve just left the top two buttons of his shirt open. It was a timeless look that would appear more disheveled if the rest of his clothes hadn't been expensive, tailor-made things. As it was, it gave him a somewhat relaxed air and he rather liked that. It stood in contrast to his image on the football field and that was exactly the point. His opponents were scared to death of him, but he didn't want anyone to be frightened of him as a private fur.

It was a promise he'd made to himself long ago and one he intended to keep.

"A buck for your thoughts?" a voice said and Steve looked up.

A female wolf in her late twenties was looking straight at him. She was holding a notepad in one paw and a pencil in another and Steve shook his head and got to his feet. He was in no mood to talk to a reporter right now. Besides, he didn't particularly like the idea that she had somehow managed to get all the way into the locker room.

"Who are you and what are you doing in here?" he asked.

The reporter smiled and jotted down a couple of notes. Steve was already starting to feel a sense of antipathy but he kept his mouth shut, waiting for her answer.

"Jessica Greystone, Sports of Today magazine," she said. "Come on, Steve ... how about an exclusive? I mean, you're the big star around these parts."

Steve adjusted his jacket a little. He knew the magazine the reporter said she represented. It was the equivalent of the National Enquirer. Whatever he said was sure to be twisted and turned, and the team had a policy in place against talking to anyone representing that rag for that very reason.

"If you represent Sports of Today, you already know that you're not welcome here. Please ... leave," he said.

For some reason, the reporter looked like she was disappointed with how he phrased that, more than what he was telling her. "Come on ... Steve, give me a break," she tried.

"My family and my close friends call me Steve. You're neither. It's "Mr. Wulf" to you, Ma'am. I ask you again, politely, to please leave the premises. You're not allowed to be here."

"My press credentials say otherwise," she tried.

Steve shook his head. "No they don't."

And on that note, he turned around and left the locker room. He had barely turned and started down the hallway before he heard the reporter behind him, following him and he clenched his eyes shut and took a couple of deep breaths. He just wanted to get home and call his father. Not waste his time on a sensationalist reporter from the lowest rung of the gutter-press.

"Hey Steve ... who's the babe?" a voice asked from up ahead and Steve opened his eyes. One of his team-mates approached him. A burly, square-jawed bear who played linebacker.

"She's not a babe, Dorian. And I urge you to keep your mouth shut. She's from Sports of Today."

"Sheeeet ... " Dorian responded and looked honestly surprised. "Thanks for the warning. Look missy, you're not allowed to be here. Take a hike!"

"Already tried that," Steve chuckled.

"Ahh ... well, I suppose there's nothing for it then," Dorian said and smiled crookedly. Then he took a quick step forward and swung an arm around the midsection of the reporter and lifted her up over his shoulder. "I'll deposit her outside the fence. And inform the coach that I did so, of course."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Jessica Greystone flailed some but there was no way she was getting out of Dorian's hold. "I'm not done yet!" she shouted as she was carried off. "I'll get that interview! You just wait and see!"

Steve smirked crookedly. "You'll get a restraining order first, Miss Greystone. Goodbye," he said and left the tunnel, heading towards his car.

Time to go home and make that phonecall.

###

The debate had gotten off to a good start. It was clear to Gabrielle that she had a massive advantage over Jason Hartwood already. The voters knew her already, and she represented their ideals far better than he did. But she was pleasantly surprised at the civility which her opponent displayed. He was unfailingly polite and completely factual in his statements. He simply presented a case that didn't appeal to the average voter in the Castro.

Still, he had an air of someone who was certain to win and Gabrielle had spent enough time on the city council by now to know when someone had an ace up their sleeve.

Jason Hartwood had the ace of spades up his sleeve ...

At least in his own mind. She just wanted to know what it was.

Finally, he cleared his throat and took the microphone.

"I think we've pretty much covered the basics by now, wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Ryder?" he asked.

Gabrielle nodded. "I think so. The voters already know what I stand for, and you've presented your platform in some detail. So ... I take it you wish to move on to the part of the program where the audience asks questions?" she said and smiled.

"Not quite. If you'll just bear with me, I have one more thing I need to present before we continue. It concerns you, Mrs. Ryder. Or rather, it concerns your past," the feline said. He didn't look smug. Just ... very serious.

Gabrielle grinned crookedly and looked towards the audience. "I don't think there's a fur in the crowd who doesn't know what I used to do for a living. It's a matter not only of public record, but pride for me."

Jason Hartwood patiently waited for the laughter to die down. He didn't look offended or even angry at the witty rebuttal. Instead, he simply adjusted his tie and riffled through his papers.

Finally, he held some of them aloft.

"This has nothing to do with your acting career, Mrs. Ryder. This has to do with your father," he said.

Gabrielle felt like someone had instantly exchanged the blood in her veins for ice-water. What was this all about? Why did her long-dead father get dragged into this??

"Unless you're talking about original sin, I don't see what his criminal activities have to do with my line of work. It's hardly a secret that my father was a genuine A-grade scumbag, Mr. Hartwood. I've never defended him or his actions in public."

"That is true," Jason Hartwood said and stood up. "That is very true. But you *did* benefit from those actions."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to protest. But she never got a chance to speak up. The feline shook his head a little and held up the papers again, turning to face the audience.

"This is a print of Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third's financial records," he began.

Gabrielle was amazed he could say the name with a straight face, but she was horrified at where this was going. "His records? What do they have to do with me??" she asked.

Jason Hartwood didn't lose a beat. "More precisely," he clarified, "a print of some of the very last financial records of Mrs. Ryder's father's criminal career. It is horrific reading, I can assure you all of that. Money laundering, drug profits, bribery ... and a strange post right here, near the middle of the page. A payout for Mrs. Ryder ... a check, it seems ... for nearly eight million dollars."

The room exploded.

And Gabrielle's world shook in its foundations.

###

Kalen looked at his videophone. He wanted to call, but he had to wait another little while. But waiting to make this call was like watching a kettle, waiting for it to boil. It wouldn't until the point where one gave up, got up and turned around and then it would happily bubble along.

He was certain the universe conspired against him in such situations, and right now, the universe was conspiring to make the clock move more slowly. A second into a minute, a minute into eons.

Sighing, he got to his hooves and went to the kitchen to get a cup of tea. He just wanted to call Vishalya, but given the massive time difference between India and Florida, he had no choice but to wait.

It was nearing ten in the evening ... which meant that it was nearing eight in the morning for Vishalya. He didn't want to call before that. He knew she got up at seven at the latest ... she had told him that much ... but she needed to get clean, get dressed, get something to eat and so on. Usually, eight was about right. Her father would be off for work by then, as would her brother and she'd be left at home with her mother and the servants.

The mere notion ...

Vishalya's family was wealthy enough to have servants in the house.

Not just a cleaning-lady who would come by every day but a butler, two full time maids, a cook and two gardeners. And probably a few more that he just hadn't heard about yet.

Smiling to himself, Kalen wondered if he could ever live with the knowledge that someone came into his bedroom every day to clean it. He wasn't sure he could. The thought seemed rather uncomfortable, at least. It felt like an invasion into something

intensely private. But then again, it was probably just a matter of getting used to it. Whether he *wanted* to get used to it at all was a different story.

Picking up his tea, he thought about Vishalya for a while. About her smile. Her sense of humor. That fantastic accent of hers. She had that peculiar, melodic way of speaking English so common in India and he greatly enjoyed listening to her voice.

Then again, he'd probably had enjoyed listening to her voice even if she had spoken complete gobbledygook.

He tried to think back on previous relationships. Or more precisely, he'd only ever really been in one other. He and Dina had started dating during that fateful summer, years ago where they had driven across the United States, but while it had been great ... it hadn't lasted. He still wasn't sure why, either, but it just didn't work out. As far as he knew, Dina found it difficult to explain exactly why it didn't last, too. But they had both figured it out at the same time. That they were simply not going to work as a couple and that it was not worth risking their friendship over it. It hadn't been ugly; they hadn't argued and they hadn't seen other furs in secret. They just ... outgrew it.

Both of them.

Dina was still one of his best friends. That would never change, either.

His phone rang and he rushed back to the living room to pick it up. He more or less expected it to be Vishalya, calling him rather than the other way around but the number flashing across the screen belonged to his mothers. Slightly surprised that one of them would call this late at night, he sat down and pulled his keyboard closer. He could send a text-message to Vishalya to let her know he hadn't forgotten but that he had an incoming call to take care of before he could call her.

He answered while still typing that message.

Gabrielle appeared on the screen. She looked punch drunk and she had puffy eyes. A deep worry immediately gripped Kalen and he sat up straight.

"Mom? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Hey Kale ... I just really needed a friendly face right now."

"Isn't Yohni there?" Kalen asked. He normally always called both his mothers "mom", but to avoid confusion, he'd use their names when speaking to the other one of the two.

Gabrielle nodded. "Oh, she's here. She's pissed off to the nth degree though, and I'm not much better."

"Christ almighty, you look like someone just gave you an eviction notice or something, Mom ... what happened?" Kalen asked, more and more worried with each passing moment.

Gabrielle covered her face with her paws, briefly. "Tonight was the first debate of my re-election campaign. You know that, right?"

"Yeah? I take it ... it didn't go as planned?"

"Understatement of the millennium, Kale."

Kalen nodded and listened as his mother explained what had happened. His eyes kept growing wider and wider, but he listened to it all. He wanted to help.

He just wasn't quite sure how.

###

Yashvir Singh opened the door to his office and let his guest enter. He bowed respectfully and closed the door behind the fur who had just entered.

His guest was in his late fifties and powerfully built. A canid with hard eyes and a face that looked like he hadn't discovered how to smile yet. He was wearing a suit, well tailored and cut in a traditional, Indian style. He didn't even turn to look at Yashvir as he entered, and he sat down without being bidden.

Yashvir didn't complain. This meeting was of paramount importance to his future and he knew exactly how much was riding on the success of what happened here.

"Mr. Sharma, I am grateful that you have taken the time ... " he began.

The canid made a paw-gesture and cut him off. He didn't speak for quite a while, though. He simply observed Yashvir for a long, long moment. Then finally he folded his paws in his lap and leaned back slightly.

Yashvir could already feel himself starting to sweat nervously.

"You *should* be grateful," the canid said, matter-of-factly. "You ... whose family name isn't even Hindu, and yet you have aspirations in politics."

Nodding, Yashvir had expected this. "That, at least is easily explained," he said, feeling on secure ground.

"Then by all means ... " Mr. Sharma said.

"It goes back to the 1830's. An ancestor of mine who fought for the British colonial rule saved a group of Sikh's during the repression of the Thuggee. Apparently he was a good soldier but not terribly bright, so when he returned to camp with the Sikhs, they kept saying "Singh" ... and he simply adopted it as his name. I guess he liked the sound of it."

Mr. Sharma nodded, slowly. "So one of your ancestors fought for the British and helped quell a Hindu group, although admittedly not one we would support in any way if it still existed."

Yashvir nodded. "It happened almost two hundred years ago. Hardly something you can blame me for, and besides, the Thuggee were a bunch of murderers even at the best of times."

Mr. Sharma nodded, slowly and tapped his thumbs together. "You speak your mind. That is a good quality," he said. "You are right of course. I can hardly blame your ancestor's deeds on you. Besides, the Sikhs call all true warriors "Singh". I suppose you are right. He simply took it as an honorific and it stuck. Very well, but you understand, of course, why I had to ask?"

"Naturally," Yashvir said and shrugged it off. "There's no room for a Sikh-sympathizer in the BJP."

"Exactly. You might have to add a proper Hindu name to yours, Mr. Singh, before running on our slate."

"That is not a problem."

"Then there is the question of payment."

Yashvir nodded. "I have no problem with that either. My family is financially secure, after all."

"So is mine, Mr. Singh. I have no interest in your money," Mr. Sharma said, matter-of-factly.

Yashvir blinked but gestured for his guest to continue. "Please, do explain what you mean then."

"I have a son ... his name is Arjun. He's lazy and sadly, he's as dumb as a brick, but he is still my son. In fact, he's about your age."

"I've met him a few times, though not recently."

Mr. Sharma nodded slowly. "I believe he would benefit from marriage. However, the females he usually associates himself with ... are not suitable."

Yashvir could see where this was going and he had no objections so far. "So you wish for him to be married into a good family where he would learn some ... values."

"Indeed. I am certain you could find a job for him in your family business as well. Teach him the value of a good day's work, well done. And your sister has the right age."

"And this is your price?"

"It is," Mr. Sharma said, once again tapping his thumbs together.

"No price at all then," Yashvir chuckled. "I would be honored if my sister were to marry into your esteemed family, Mr. Sharma."

The canid cleared his throat and straightened in his seat. "As you should be. I don't particularly approve of mixed-species marriages, but it is commonplace and it will help send a message to the moderates. In any case, my son is presently studying down south in Chennai. When he comes home, we should see to the wedding. I take it there will be no problems with your sister?"

"None at all," Yashvir said and smiled.

Mr. Sharma nodded again and got up. "Then I will be in touch. I could see you become quite a factor in the party, Mr. Singh. You are clearly willing to make the necessary sacrifices."

With that, he left.

Yashvir closed the door after his guest had gone and turned around, leaning back against the door and sighing. Vishalya would not be pleased ... but this was not her decision to make. He needed his father's approval, though. However, he had a plan for that as well.

###

Frances looked at her brother as she turned a corner. She was behind the steering wheel of a rented car, and she was slowly driving through Columbus, taking longer than she strictly speaking needed to. She had needed to, as she had been talking to her brother pretty much since they left their father's house, and they weren't done yet. They were both deeply worried. Their father was a shadow of himself. The loss of their mother had been a dreadful blow to them all, but their father was practically debilitated from grief.

She wept several times a day. She knew her brother did too. It would be weeks before either of them would be back to some semblance of normalcy, that much she was certain of ... but she was beginning to doubt if their father would fully recover at all.

Alright, it was all still a very fresh, open sore ... but she had never seen him so incapable of even the simplest things.

It was like someone had turned off the proverbial light in Esteban Lopez' life, and Frances had no idea whether the switch still worked, even if she could find it.

Charles rubbed the corners of his eyes and looked at his sister with a sigh. "We have to give him all the time and help he needs."

"That goes without saying," she replied and turned another corner. There was a school up ahead and she pulled onto the parking lot. It was late, and there were few other cars out on the street. She left the engine running but she didn't feel like driving any further for the moment. Putting her paws on the steering wheel she looked out of the window at the lights of the city around them.

"Do you remember the first time we came here? To Columbus I mean?" she asked.

"I don't think I'll ever forget," her brother answered and tried to smile. "What a summer that was."

"I feel wrong going back home already, Charlie. He's not ready to be on his own yet!" Frances burst out. "I want to call my boss and tell her I'm not coming back to work for another month but ... I can't!"

"Same thing goes for me. At least we got a few more days than Steve. But Mom wouldn't want us to linger on like that either. I mean ... seriously, Frankie ... can you imagine the scolding we'd get if she knew how much we're letting this cripple us?"

"Dear God ... she'd give us "The Look", wouldn't she?"

Charles snorted back a laugh. "Yeah. Yeah ... she would at that."

"And then she'd get civilized on us. And tell us exactly how foolish we were, and how ..."  
"Frances began, but her voice broke.

Charles reached over and pulled his sister's head down on his shoulder, running his finger's through her hair. "It's okay. I feel the same way but the point is ... she wouldn't want us to fall to pieces."

"I know," Frances sniffled and tried to wipe her eyes. "But I miss her, dammit!"

"We all do. But you know, I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Why don't we catch a plane home tomorrow morning instead of the late one? If my boss fires me because of one day, he can kiss my furry ass, and I'll find myself a new job in an afternoon or two. And the same goes for you and you know it!"

"Sure? You want to go back to Dad?" Frances asked and pulled herself upright in her seat again.

Charles shook his head. "I actually thought of dropping by Zig Zag's and James' place and asking them if they'd be kind enough to provide us with a cup of tea or somesuch."

"Charlie ... it's almost eleven P.M.!"

"Right now, it could be three in the morning. I need some proper Zig Zag'ian advice! She knows dad as well as any fur out there and she's always got good advice to offer. I know it's late but ... I think we both need it."

Frances nodded and cleared her throat. As she pulled out of the school parking lot, she knew her brother was right, and Zig Zag had never closed her door to them. Besides, she knew the skunk didn't go to bed until well past midnight on most nights.

And they really did need some advice.