

## Chapter 9



Standing on the road facing the shop was enough to make Temperance want to gag. She had no idea how she was going to go inside. Alastair leaned against the corner of the building. He had a grim expression on his face as he watched the wooden shop sign creak in the breeze.

They had been stationed at the corner of the street for over an hour. Temperance tapped her foot; the smell of their werewolf companion was unbearable.

“Can we go in yet?” she muttered.

“No,” Alastair snapped, rubbing his jaw. Temperance blushed, noticing how the slight haggard look made him even more attractive.

He narrowed his eyes. “Like I said five minutes ago, when we can go in, I’ll tell you.”

“But he’s giving me a headache,” she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut.

“You wanted to bring him,” Alastair shot back at her.

Taking a deep breath through her mouth, Temperance fixed her attention on the shop again. It had been built with blocks of white stone, one of numerous identical buildings along a winding street, bordered by an unending polished black railing. The werewolf hung back, his bright eyes mesmerised by the cars travelling along the road.

“Winthrop White,” Temperance stated after another few minutes, “is a shady man.”

“What do you mean by shady?”

“Alice’s Tea Shop,” she muttered, pointing at the shop sign. “Oh, it’s a tea shop all right, but it’s also where my mother buys her *special* herbs. He’s a menace.”

“Winthrop is important,” Alastair said, his words petering off as the man himself appeared.

His shop was below street level, like several others along the Georgian lane. Winthrop was climbing up the steps, fingers dancing along the black railing. He always wore old-fashioned flamboyant Edwardian suits in all the wrong colours. Today, it was a bright yellow dress jacket with gold trimming and a pair of forest green plaid trousers. Before he’d moved to Carwick he had worked in a travelling circus.

Despite this adventurous profession, he had settled down and opened his shop on Threadneedle Street, a very respectable address. The name of the shop was very misleading, it sounded quaint and touristy; it was anything but. It was full of people in search of very dubious, though still somehow legal, drugs. The place stank of incense and strange herbs. Her mother had been taking her there since she was a child. And she hated it.

The smell of the place had always sickened everyone in the family but Adora. Pratchett had visited the shop only three times in his life. Crispin also despised the place.

Winthrop stepped out onto the street and leaned against the gates. He was smoking, like always. Two people followed after him. They batted away the smoke. One of them started gagging and had to turn aside, taking huge wheezing gasps.

“Aren’t they...?”

“Police,” Alastair nodded.

Winthrop rested his elbows between the sharp points on the railing. He ran a hand through his blond hair and stared at the two officers. The one gagging pulled upright, he said something that made Winthrop laugh. The officer’s face was furious. His companion waved her hands trying to calm him then held out what looked like a picture to Winthrop. She jabbed at it making him take a closer look. He nodded, giving her a dashing smile.

The officer tapped her partner’s arm and the two of them marched away down the street. As the woman turned, Temperance thought she saw her eyes flash silver. She blinked; convinced it was a trick of the morning sunlight. She turned her attention back to Winthrop, who had finished his cigarette.

“Drug bust,” she stated in a firm voice. She thumped her fist into her other hand. “And rightly so!”

“Not this time,” Alastair whispered.

Temperance frowned; Winthrop never seemed to get in trouble, though he always attracted attention. He was overt in style and character, but still very difficult to read. It was all for show, he was handsome and a flirt. Adora and her Wiccans loved him. He exuded sex and charm.

It was unnatural.

“So, is he one of *you*, then? I should have known. He always looked baffled and offended when I never fell under his spell like everyone else! It was like something hadn’t worked properly.”

Winthrop stubbed out his cigarette with the heel of his golden shoes and returned to his shop.

“His people have powerful pheromones,” Alastair replied, drawing up to his full height and looking down at her. “But they only affect certain people. He doesn’t depend on them. He prides himself on not needing to. He’s considered very handsome.”

“Oh. So you do know what a handsome man looks like?”

“I assume. Women seem to like him, generally - you’re the exception I guess,” Alastair shrugged.

“Some women might think you’re handsome,” she said.

He rolled his shoulders. “Maybe.”

Temperance gave a snort of laughter that made the wizard look uncomfortable. “Why were the police visiting him if it wasn’t a drug issue?”

“The police work for Sebastian and the Assembly. They know exactly who Winthrop is.”

The werewolf crept closer to Temperance. She stepped away from the smell and heard him grunt. “Why would they talk to Winthrop?”

There was a break in the traffic. “Let’s go,” Alastair said, ignoring the question.

He reached out his hand; his cold fingers tightened over hers, pulling her up against him. She was glad that she had taken the plasters off of her hand that morning. Though there hadn’t been much of a wound left. She was surprised it had healed so quickly. It must not have been as deep as she’d thought. All that remained were slight discolorations.

The werewolf hopped along beside them, wary of the traffic heading their way. Temperance heard him growling. One red car slowed to let them pass, the werewolf reached out to push it away from them. Its tyres screeched against the tarmac, the metal bonnet buckled under his fingers. Temperance grabbed him and darted away, without glancing back at the shouting driver. The werewolf looked up at her, his golden eyes widening.

His hands were rough to the touch, calloused. Far thinner than Alastair’s; she could feel the bones of his fingers. There was something in his eyes, behind the confused animal; Temperance wondered how long it had been since he’d felt another’s touch. They seemed to be pack animals, social, like normal wolves. And this man didn’t have anyone. She pitied him. She gritted her teeth, trying to ignore it.

Alastair dropped her hand and went down to Winthrop’s shop first. Temperance scanned the street. There were a few shoppers out, but it was never busy in the morning. Business didn’t pick up until around lunchtime.

It was one of the most popular shops on Threadneedle Street. Well known for its expensive and curious drinks. Adora usually couldn’t afford much more than a cup of tea and a scone. Winthrop White himself was good to her. But his kindness came at a price. He let her subsidise the costs of his herbs with her fortune-telling skills.

Temperance gripped the wrought iron railing. She was sure he had been the one in the greenhouse yesterday and the reason her mother had abandoned her precious tarot cards. Adora had a habit of leaving her *divining* things in a mess after Winthrop visited. As if she had somehow forgotten she had told anyone's fortune.

Temperance hesitated on the first step. The werewolf squeezed her hand and she looked up at him. He whined in the back of his throat. She stared at the entrance. She knew instinctively the moment she walked through the door that everything would change forever.

It opened and Alastair peered out at them. He clenched the doorknob. His black eyes narrowed on her, an urgent look on his face.

"Come on!" He glanced around, as if expecting Sebastian Bloodworth himself to pop up behind her. A gush of incense flooded out making Temperance cringe. Her eyes watered at the smell. She really hated the place.

The werewolf tightened his hold on her hand, pulling her down with him. Alastair watched, stepping aside to let them into the shop. He closed the door behind with a muffled click.

Temperance's eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim lighting. Winthrop's shop was notoriously dark; it was why he had so many chandeliers and lamps. The lights cast a warm glow over the floral patterned chairs, a mismatch of Victorian and Edwardian.

The tables were all polished wood, each with their own sterling silver cake and sandwich tiers. The lace cloths covering each surface were hand-embroidered, harking back to Threadneedle Street's past as a dressmaker's district. The shop itself was like an old fashioned Victorian sitting room. It was quaint and homely, yet it had a touch of erotic humour. There were lewd paintings hanging on the dull, tea coloured walls. They were bright and vivid by contrast, depicting alluring naked nymphs caught up in poses that always made Temperance avert her eyes.

The tea shop had a touch of Mother Earth to it as well. The women were busty and brazen, very much like Adora and her friends during their festivals. In fact, there was one painting that hung behind the counter at the back of the room; just above the stacks of old apothecary shelves that housed Winthrop's special herbs.

It was a familiar hill, silhouetted by the full moon, with beautiful young women dancing naked around a roaring fire. It had been a gift, given to Winthrop years ago by the Wiccans, depicting them all in their younger days.

Temperance rolled her eyes to the ceiling trying to look away from it. It was another reason she disliked Winthrop and his shop. He had no qualms about giving it pride of place where all the customers had to come to pay their bills.

Dropping her eyes to the front of the till she saw Winthrop sitting by the roaring fireplace. He tilted back in his chair, resting his feet on the low table in front of him. He was reading a newspaper, flicking through the pages in a lazy fashion.

"We're not open yet," he said, snapping the newspaper open wider and ignoring them.

Temperance glanced around noticing there was no one else in the shop. A short plump girl came out of the kitchen and walked behind the counter carrying several sprigs of herbs on a glass tray. When she noticed Alastair, her hands started to shake and she dropped everything.

Shattering glass made Winthrop jump.

"Damn it, Lucy!" he shouted, slamming his paper down in front of him. He had already turned as he stood to face her. The girl fell to her knees behind the counter in a splutter of apologies. Winthrop straightened up and a shudder ran through him.

"What is that smell?" he gasped, spinning around on his expensive golden shoes. He held a handkerchief to his nose, but it dropped away to reveal a scowl when he saw Alastair.

"Winthrop," the wizard said, with an ominous smile.

The other man slumped back into his chair. A bell rang furiously in the kitchen behind them. Winthrop raised a long elegant hand and clicked his fingers.

"Hurry up and get downstairs Lucy."

The girl placed the herbs on the counter and gathered up the last of the broken glass. "Yes sir," she mumbled, turning to go back into the kitchen.

Before she could, Winthrop clicked his fingers again. "Get me a smoke before you go - box seven, shelf five."

The girl struggled up onto a rickety footstool. She reached into the box and pulled out a finely rolled cigarette. She handed it across the counter into Winthrop's waiting hands, then scurried away.

Winthrop lit it up and indicated to the seat opposite. "Sit, Mr Byron," he drawled in his nonplussed manner. He loosened the tie at his neck, opening two buttons before leaning into Alastair. "What have you been up to?"

Before the wizard could draw a breath to answer, Winthrop had straightened away from him. His piercing blue eyes pinned Temperance where she stood. Knowing now what he was, she tightened her hold on the werewolf's hand. The man beside her gave her, what she thought, was a reassuring squeeze.

"What is Temperance doing here with you?"

Alastair jerked back in his seat to stare at her. Clearly he hadn't thought they'd be on a first-name basis. "You know her?"

Winthrop smiled but didn't answer him. "How is your mother Temperance? Did she have a busy night?"

"You should know," she muttered, trying to break eye contact and failing.

Winthrop did it for her. His eyes lingered on the werewolf for a second, and then with a sideways tilt of his head, his attention was back on Alastair.

"Adora's very useful around the winter solstice. I wonder, is Temperance as well? Is that why you two are on the run together? Did she help you kill that werewolf lupa and condemn poor Cyprian?"

There was a moment where the air felt frigid. The werewolf growled low in his throat. Then Alastair slammed his fist down on the table. A crack ripped through the wood.

"Don't push me," he warned. "Temperance has nothing to do with this. Cyprian was killed by werewolves after he came back from dealing with a criminal for the Assembly."

Winthrop leaned back. He puffed out a swirl of bluish-coloured smoke. Temperance gagged on the smell. Alastair batted it away. The werewolf however gave a loud snapping bark and dropped to his knees.

Winthrop rested his elbow on the table, drawing in another mouthful of smoke. He blew it out on top of the werewolf who curled against the carpet, unable to get up.

"What are you doing?" Temperance shouted, dropping down beside him.

"Werewolf repellent," Winthrop explained. "I always smoke for a reason littlest Levinthal." He stubbed out the offending cigarette.

"Did it help you with the police?" she wondered, staring at the last bit of smoke.

"They're very easy to repel, that lot. They think they can put a spin on anyone," Winthrop laughed. He turned back to Alastair. "They were looking for you and lovely Temperance here; never mentioned your wolf friend though. Why are *you* with a wolf Alastair?"

"He helped us," the wizard conceded after a pause.

Winthrop raised an eyebrow. "Why is Sebastian *really* looking for you?"

"He thinks I killed that lupa, but I didn't. I need to find out what's really going on. I need you to let me..."

"Yes," Winthrop said, batting his words aside. "You want to go down below and find out what's going on. So, now Temperance is in on a secret she should never have known about?"

“It was an accident,” Alastair stated. “The werewolves attacked us, we had to run. She saw everything.”

“Little Alice here is taking a trip down the rabbit-hole with you then,” Winthrop mused. He pointed at Alastair. “That dolt Seth was the one that sent the police out to me specifically. I think he thought I was the weak link. That I would let you pass through my humble abode. Seth says to stay away from you, Alastair Byron.”

“And what do you say?” the wizard asked.

There was a tense moment.

“Seth isn’t the boss of me,” Winthrop scoffed. He leaned back and folded his arms. “You know I don’t like the wizards; if you’re on their bad side, I think I could start to like you a little. If Lucy and I get caught, we’ll say you overpowered us.”

“It was easily done,” Alastair said, with a bright smile.

Winthrop snorted.

Temperance helped the werewolf to his feet. “What about cleaning him up?”

“He is rather *aromatic*. Think he’ll turn into prince charming? But you’ve already got Alastair, how cruel you are! You have become very devious Temperance - a stunning enchantress.” He leaned forward on the table as she stood. His eyes were hypnotic; there was a faint smell about him, roses and lilies. It was a perfume he always seemed to wear.

He kept his gaze trained on her face for several seconds. He always did this. Now she knew it was his pheromones he was testing.

Frustrated, Temperance snapped, “What?”

Winthrop gave a curious smile, sitting back in his chair. “Oh, you make my old, old heart beat faster.”

Alastair stood up. His eyes were very cold when he looked at Winthrop. “Be careful who you play games with.” His words made the werewolf straighten up beside Temperance.

Winthrop grimaced. “The Harpies Bathhouse; go there to fix up the wolf. But set up a meeting with *him* quickly, Alastair. Don’t waste too much time. Seth will be down in a shot if he thinks you made it past one of us.”

He waved them through to a door that led into a basement area. Temperance was surprised to realise he had one, considering he was at the very bottom of the building as it was. Winthrop closed the door

behind them, leaving Alastair to haul open a trapdoor in the floor.

“Where are we going?” Temperance asked. “Who’s down there?”

“More like what,” Alastair said. He was crouched by the open hatch, staring down into the darkness. He held out his hand to her. “You can go first.”

“What?”

“I’ll be right behind you, I have to make sure he goes down too,” he nodded over at the werewolf. The man stood silently watching them, his golden eyes trained on Alastair’s hand where he held Temperance.

The wizard flicked his wrist, spinning her into him. He lowered her onto what seemed like a normal ladder. “Keep a good hold of your bag.”

She clutched the strap on her shoulder.

“I have to climb -”

She never got to finish her sentence.

The air pressure increased and she was sucked downward.

A loud scream tore from her throat.