

Amira Press
HALLOWEEN
SPOOKTACULAR

PUPPY DOG
EYES

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Richardson



Puppy Dog Eyes

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“So, what are you wearing to the party this weekend?” she asked Scudder.

Her team partner didn’t look up from his computer monitor, simply shrugged. The slight gesture of his broad shoulders made her heart race.

“I don’t think I’m going, Tess,” he said.

Tessa Gilroy crossed her arms and leaned against her desk. “Scudder Harris, you’re not telling me you’re going to bail on the company Halloween shindig, are you?”

He shrugged again, and she wished he’d stop doing that. Or take his shirt off before he did. Damn, she bet he had a gorgeous chest...

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.” He finally leaned back in his chair and swiveled it to meet her gaze, which was deadly to her reserve. Dennis “Scudder” Harris had huge, sweet golden brown eyes that melted her insides and sent all the juices straight to her nether regions, and brilliant jet black hair that glinted with almost blue highlights when they sat outside and ate their lunch.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Why not what?”

“Why aren’t you going?”

He cocked his head. “Because I don’t know many of the people there, and I don’t have a costume.” Employees and their families from all of the regional offices were invited, several hundred people, most likely, would attend.

“It’ll be a full moon, beautiful night, perfect for a costume party. Come on, you have to go so I don’t have to go alone.”

At the mention of the full moon, a cloud crossed his face. “I’ll pass, sorry.”

She’d broken up with her skunk of a boyfriend a week before Scudder came to work for Callahan Consulting five months prior, and been assigned to her team. Team being a misnomer, because it was just the two of them. She knew Scudder was thirty-five, single, and straight, but beyond that, his life was a mystery. They talked about a lot of things, just not about him.

Her pouty face usually won him over. “Please?” She leaned forward, her arms on her desk, trying to entice him to look down her blouse.

He kindly laughed. “Tess, I’m sorry sweetie.”

She recognized the stubborn set of his jaw. Short of begging him to make wild monkey love to her on their shared office floor, she’d thrown just about every hint known to womankind at him that she wanted to go out with him. Well, except outright ask him, but he couldn’t be that thick, could he?

It wasn't like he didn't flirt back, because he did. One day in particular left her gasping for breath and heading to the bathroom to freshen up.

And he was gorgeous, six-two and solid, with a fluid, natural gait that left her panting after him when she watched the way his tight ass moved inside his khaki slacks.

"I'm going as a sexy witch," she purred. "You should see how low—and high—my costume is cut."

His eyes crinkled. "I'm sure it's very alluring, kiddo, but we need to get this project done or you won't be going to any party this weekend because we'll be working."

It was Thursday, meaning she had one more work day to convince him to take her to the annual corporate Halloween bash, held at the boss's large, private estate north of Tampa. She would go regardless, but she didn't want to go alone if she could talk Scudder into taking her.

At lunch he reached for his small cooler. "You eating with me today?"

She nodded. "Even though you're standing me up this weekend." Who was she kidding? They'd eaten together every day since they started working together.

He rolled his eyes, but smiled. "You're incorrigible, girl." He gently kicked their door shut and leaned over her desk. "Maybe I'd like to be alone with you, not with a loud, obnoxious group of drunks."

Her heart pounded as his eyes playfully narrowed. "Just because I don't want to go to a party with you doesn't mean I won't go out with you. All you have to do is ask."

Speech escaped her for a moment. "I...I thought you didn't want to go out with me."

He gently chucked her under the chin. "I just wanted to see how long it took you to come right out and say it." He straightened and walked to the door, opening it. She still sat at her desk, stunned.

"Well, are we eating lunch or not?"

She nodded, fumbled her lunch bag, and followed him out the door on feet that didn't seem to touch the floor.

* * * *

Tessa followed him to the elevator, unable to ask him more because three other people rode down to the lobby with them. But those huge, golden brown eyes stared at her, slightly crinkled in amusement at the edges, as if he knew exactly what state she was in.

Dammit! How did he *do* that to her? And why had he kept her in limbo all these months if he knew she liked him?

Their usual spot was vacant, and they sat on the low stone wall near a fountain in the park next to their office building in downtown Tampa.

“How about tonight?” he asked.

“Tonight what?”

“Are you backing out on me already?”

“Oh. Oh! Yes. Where do you want to go?”

He shrugged. God, he was gorgeous. “Where do you want to go?”

To bed with you, she thought. He looked at his lunch and smiled as she said, “Why don’t you pick?”

“Then why don’t I pick you up tonight at seven?” He met her eyes and she dumbly nodded.

His eyes crinkled again as he wolfed down his sandwich. God, the man could eat fast. As usual, she was still working on her sandwich by the time he’d finished his whole lunch.

He was an unusual man, with broad, strong hands, yet he could type twice as fast as she could, and more accurately. His first day in the office with her he’d spent sneezing, and at the end of the day she was embarrassed when he admitted it was her perfume. When she didn’t wear any the next day, he offered a sweet compromise, asked her to bring the bottle in the next morning.

He’d waited out in the parking lot and asked for the bottle, then showed her how to spritz it and walk through the mist to get just enough on her.

Tess would never forget how cute he’d looked, his nose wrinkling slightly as if sniffing her, then his broad, beaming smile.

Jesus, I’d kill for him if he’d smile like that at me all the time.

“Much better. That’s more than enough to make you smell gorgeous, girl,” he’d said. And coming from him, it wasn’t the least bit arrogant or conceited or derogatory.

In fact, her heart had pleasantly fluttered at his words. “Where’d you learn that?” She never realized she used a lot, thought the small spritz she normally used wasn’t over the top.

“I have a pack of sisters,” he’d said with a grin. “Don’t worry,” he added, “you haven’t been blasting everyone out. I’m just overly sensitive, so don’t feel bad.”

That was her first experience with Scudder’s almost freaky skill of sensing her thoughts and moods, and it still surprised her every time he did it.

* * * *

The day crawled. When five o’clock rolled around, he walked her to her car. He already knew where she lived, having picked her up once or twice when her car was in for repairs. He leaned in close.

“I’ll see you at seven,” he murmured, and her lower belly contracted in a pleasant way at the near-growling timbre of his voice.

She quickly nodded and got into her car, speeding home to change. She showered and settled on a sundress and paced the living room for twenty minutes until he showed up right on time. He’d showered and changed into jeans and an ironed chambray shirt, casually gorgeous.

Hell, he’d be gorgeous no matter what he wore—or if he wore nothing at all.

Especially if he wore nothing at all.

When settled in his passenger seat—she was pleasantly surprised when he’d opened and held the car door for her—she took a moment to study him. “So why keep me panting after you all these months?”

He didn’t look away from the road, but his lips curled in a slight twist that melted her heart. “You’d just broken up with your boyfriend, if you’ll recall. I’m not the brightest bulb, but I know a rebound relationship is usually doomed to failure. Besides, we’d just started working together. I didn’t want to come on too strong.”

Their company had a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in regards to workplace dating. As long as everything personal stayed out of the workplace and there was no sexual harassment, they wouldn’t get in trouble.

At a red light he looked at her, fixing her with the full-on force of his big eyes. “I’m still not going to the party Saturday night, though,” he softly said. “It’s nothing personal, and it has nothing to do with you. Any other night, I could go. You should go, have a good time. The truth is, I have some family stuff to deal with for a couple of days . I’ll be back for work on Monday.”

That wasn’t quite the truth, and she sensed it, but she didn’t want to push the issue. He was taking her out tonight, and she was enjoying herself already.

Until they got to the restaurant. Scudder opened and held her car door, took her hand, and led her to the restaurant. Inside, he left her near the door and approached the hostess for a table when she heard a familiar, coarse voice.

“Tessa, you bitch. What the fuck you doin’ here?”

Her whole body stiffened, and Scudder whirled around, as if immediately on the defensive. She almost thought he snarled.

Then Scudder was at her side when Reuben, her ex, walked over. He’d apparently been in the restaurant’s bar and smelled like a brewery himself.

Instinctively she pressed closer to Scudder’s side, and despite her fear she felt calmed when he put his arm protectively around her. “You okay, Tess?” Scudder softly asked.

“My ex,” she whispered, and Scudder gently pushed her behind him.

“You have a problem?” Scudder said, drawing himself up to his full height. Reuben was five inches shorter than him, and definitely not in as good of shape.

“Yeah, I got a problem with that bitch.”

“Don’t call her that.” Scudder’s voice had definitely dropped to a low, warning growl. “You’ve got two seconds to turn around and walk away, buddy.”

Tessa peeked around Scudder’s side, her arms encircling his waist. Waves of defensive, protective anger washed off him, like heat shimmers on hot asphalt.

Fortunately, a manager interceded and escorted Reuben off the premises. Only when he was gone did Scudder’s posture relax, and he turned to her, his arms around her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and burst into tears.

* * * *

He’d never witnessed her black eyes, her days of coming to work wearing sunglasses inside all day, but he’d heard from a few people that her ex used her as a punching bag. Yet another reason he never tried to put a move on her, because he sensed her fragility, carefully hidden behind her bravado and playful teasing. There was no reason to rush things, because he smelled her only interest was in him.

How lucky for him he’d gone to work for Callahan Consulting and met her. He’d felt love at first sight, and knew he’d have to wait a long time before acting on it. Damn the timing of the party, why couldn’t they have it the week before Halloween? There was no way he could go, not on that night, not this soon, but he knew she was ready to take the next step after she’d ratcheted up the flirty banter over the past few weeks, and he didn’t want to totally disappoint her.

He pulled her into a quiet corner in the restaurant’s foyer. “Why don’t we go back to my place? I’ll cook you dinner. Would that be okay?”

Her green eyes were full of fear, and she met his gaze and nodded. Still frightened, trembling, her heart raced like a rabbit fleeing for its life.

He put a protective arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “Let’s get out of here, sweetie,” he whispered. On the way to the car she studied the ground as they walked. Good thing, because it meant she didn’t see how he swiveled his head and flared his nostrils, looking for any sign of Reuben hanging around.

They made a quick stop at a Publix for groceries, and it didn’t take him long to pull her out of her funk. She was sweet and cute and God help that asshole if he had five minutes alone with him. He’d rip his throat out for hurting her. At five-six she was perfectly curvy and her shoulder-length, unruly brown curls begged for his fingers to tangle in them. Something caught in his throat when he imagined what she’d look like naked in his bed...

His jeans tightened as he tried to stifle the thought.

They had a good dinner and ended up on his couch in a passionate embrace he was reluctant to end. By eleven o'clock he knew he had to take her home or take her to bed, and he didn't want to rush that end of things.

He gave her one final, deep kiss before sitting up. "All good things come to those who wait, darlin', don't you know that?"

She stared at him from the couch, her cheeks flushed and her hair even more disheveled. "I don't want to wait, Scudder, I want you to make love to me."

He stood and caught her hand, pulling her up. "Not tonight, sweetie. Besides, I don't have any protection."

She tried to kiss him again and his resolve faltered as she ground her hips against him. "You don't need any," she said, her voice husky with desire. "I'm on the Pill."

"You don't know where I've been, sugar. Maybe the vet hasn't given me my shots and tags lately." That was a fib; he was clean, and her sweet, fresh, natural scent could only mean she was, too.

"You're a bad liar."

He grinned. She was already attuned to him in some ways. "Seriously. Let's take things slow." He pulled her to him. "We've had a great night, but we work together. Let's do this the right way so we don't screw things up."

* * * *

She rested her head against his strong chest, his arms protectively around her, and closed her eyes. He never wore cologne, and she'd toned it down even further over the months. He smelled, good, warm, strong. "Then you'd better get me home."

He kissed the top of her head. "How about I take you out tomorrow night for dinner?"

"Okay."

When she casually draped her arm between the seats during the ride home, he took her hand and gently squeezed. As much as she hated to admit it, he was right, but what a welcomed relief it was. Reuben had pushed quick and hard for a relationship and sex. In retrospect she understood why, because he was abusive.

Scudder was nothing like Reuben. When he stood between them in the restaurant, she instinctively knew Scudder would have protected her had Reuben tried anything.

Back at her house, Scudder opened the car door for her and walked her to her front porch. "Do you want me to go in with you and check it out?"

She shook her head. “I’ll drag you into bed.”

The moon wasn’t quite full yet, but it was more than bright enough to reveal his sweet smile. “Soon enough, Tess,” he whispered, brushing one last kiss across her lips. “Soon enough.”

* * * *

He waited until she was inside and had locked the door to return to his car, his nose working the air. There was something...wrong. He froze, listening, cocking his head, but after a moment he got in and drove a couple of blocks away to a Super Wal-Mart that was open twenty-four hours. He parked in the distance, near a shadowy stand of trees, on the edge of the lot.

It wasn’t a full moon, but it was close enough.

* * * *

Tess turned on all the lights in the house as she walked, checking the sliding glass doors and making sure all her blinds were drawn. Maybe she should have asked him to check the house. It had been a shock running into Reuben like that. A really bad shock.

Terrifying flashbacks had started her trembling, but Scudder’s gentle voice and strong touch had soon soothed them away. He wanted to take it slow—it was agonizing, but she would let him lead her now that she knew he liked her.

Her car alarm went off and she jumped, startled. Probably a stray cat. She grabbed her key ring and opened the front door, clicking the button on the remote. The alarm shut off, but there was a large, dark shape by the trunk. When she stepped closer, she realized it was Reuben.

“We’ve got unfinished business, bitch,” he said.

Her feet froze, old terrors immobilizing her. “Get out of here. I’ll call the cops. I have a restraining order against you.”

He took a step toward her, staggering slightly. He was really drunk. “Who cares?” He charged and she screamed, tried to turn to run, when a large shadow rounded the corner of her house and slammed into Reuben, knocking him to the ground.

A dog.

She raced for the house and slammed the front door behind her, locking it, and with trembling fingers dialed 911.

The dog’s vicious snarls and Reuben’s panicked screams for help drifted into the living room, but in less than five minutes she heard a siren and peeked out the front window. When the deputy arrived, the dog leapt off Reuben and trotted to her front porch, sitting there, staring at her through the window, its tail wagging.

It looked like a huge, jet black Lab.

She cautiously opened the front door and the dog wagged its tail harder, his whole butt wiggling, almost seeming to smile at her. Then it trotted over, turned, and sat facing the front walk.

Reuben was still screaming as the deputy handcuffed him, so he couldn't be hurt too badly. After another deputy arrived and they locked Reuben in the backseat of one of the cruisers, the deputies took her statement. Lucky for Reuben, he didn't have a mark on him, but apparently he'd wet his pants as the dog had grabbed his throat and held on without breaking the skin.

Tess idly stroked the dog's head, and it nosed her hand. "Is that your dog, ma'am?" the deputy asked.

She shook her head. "No, I've never seen him before, but I'm damn sure glad he showed up." She had a horrifying thought. "You won't take him, will you?"

"Not if you don't want us to. He didn't bite him." The deputy looked at the dog. "He's a good-looking dog, doesn't look like a stray. I suggest getting him to the vet tomorrow if you can't find his owner, get him his shots. That way, no one can say anything."

She nodded, and when the deputies finally left, she stopped at the open door.

"Want to come in, boy?" She assumed he was a boy, but she hadn't examined him.

He padded through her front door, huge club-like tail happily wagging. God, he had to be over a hundred pounds!

She poured him a bowl of water and he eagerly lapped it up. Kneeling next to him, she ran her fingers through his fur, checking him. Yep, a boy, and he didn't have a collar. He also didn't appear to have any fleas or ticks, thank God, and he seemed pretty clean.

Cupping his large head in her hands, she looked into his huge, golden brown eyes. Something about him calmed her, made her feel protected, beyond what he'd done for her. Surely he belonged to someone to be in such good shape.

"Thank you, boy."

He nuzzled her cheek and licked her face.

After that scare, she let him curl up on her bed. Putting her arm around him felt right. He smelled good, too, almost...familiar?

She fell asleep and dreamed of her dinner with Scudder, wishing she could be curled around him.

* * * *

Around five o'clock, before false dawn even touched the sky, she was gently nosed awake by the Lab. He stared at her, licking her cheek, softly whining.

The events of the night flooded back and she looked at her overnight guest. “Hey, boy.” She stroked his head and laughed when he rolled onto his back so she could scratch his belly. “I hope you’re homeless, because I’ll adopt you if you are. If not, I owe your owners a huge thank you.”

He sat up and whined again, looked toward the bedroom door.

“You gotta go out?”

He jumped off the bed and paced halfway to the door and stopped.

“Okay, hold on.”

He patiently waited for her at the front door. She opened the door and before he went outside, he turned. She knelt down and he licked her, nuzzling her neck. His breath brushed her cheek. When she met his eyes, she realized he was leaving. She didn’t know how, but she sensed it.

Great, now I’m talking to dogs. I need a life.

The dog panted, almost smiling, and licked her one last time before bounding out the door and around the corner of her house.

Tess tried to go back to sleep but it eluded her. She took a long shower, thinking about the feel of Scudder’s arms and lips—

Why didn’t I call him?

She thought about it. Why *hadn’t* she? He should have been her first call after the deputies got there, but...

That dog had saved her.

She hoped the Lab was okay, and if he was homeless, she hoped he’d come back.

* * * *

Scudder dropped his keys on the table by his front door and scrubbed his face with his hands. At least he’d gotten a little sleep. It wasn’t worth trying to go to bed now, he needed to get a shower and get to work.

He left early enough to stop through the golden arches and pick up coffee and breakfast for both of them. She arrived at work ten minutes after he did, and they ate on the hood of his car.

“You aren’t going to believe what happened last night after you left,” she said.

“What?” He hoped she wasn’t totally attuned to him yet, couldn’t tell how badly he was lying.

She told the story and he nodded and looked shocked in the appropriate places.

“I should have stuck around, Tess. I’m sorry.”

Tessa shook her head. “No, it’s okay. You had no way of knowing.”

“I wish you’d called me.”

She looked down. “I’m sorry I didn’t, it’s just...” She met his eyes. “This is going to sound really weird, and I don’t want it to come out sounding the wrong way, but that dog was just so comforting, I didn’t even think about calling you.”

He smiled, amused. “So you’re saying I need to run around on all fours and get a flea collar?”

Tessa laughed, but knew his feelings weren’t hurt. “I think what’s weirder is you *do* understand what I mean.”

He caressed her cheek. “Buy him some beef jerky as a reward in case he comes back. The real stuff, not the crap for dogs.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.”

* * * *

Working was hard for her, because every time she looked up she caught Scudder’s eye and smiled. She wanted to lock their door and crawl into his lap and kiss him. By the time lunch rolled around she was more than ready to go. They lucked out in the elevator, having it all to themselves and stealing a quick kiss on the ride down.

“So I’ll pick you up tonight at seven, and we’ll go somewhere your ex won’t be, right?”

She laughed. “Right.”

He apparently caught a whiff of her thought and gently encouraged her. “What is it, Tess?”

“Thank you for last night, for standing up to him for me.” Her eyes finally found his. “No one’s ever stood up for me like that in my whole life, and now in one night, two guys protect me.”

“Two?”

“You and my mystery dog.”

* * * *

He loved her smile, craved making her laugh. She was more relaxed today than he’d ever seen her despite the evening’s events. After lunch was over he reluctantly returned to the office. He wanted to sit there in the park with her all day.

A little after two, Ron Osborne stuck his head in their doorway. “What are you guys dressing up as for the bash?”

“I’m going as a witch, but Scudder’s ducking out.”

Scudder didn’t like the way Ron’s eye gleamed at that news. “Really? Why not?”

Scudder fought to control his voice; even Ron’s scent had changed. “I have a prior obligation.”

Ron’s gaze focused on Tess. Scudder knew Ron was attracted to her, but the few times he’d tried to connect with her, Scudder had successfully interceded so she never knew about it. The guy was a slimy asshole.

And Scudder didn’t share well with others.

“I’m going as a witch,” Tessa said, casting a glance at Scudder. “And not the Good Witch, either.”

Dammit! She was trying to make him jealous and it was working far more than she knew. Fortunately, she couldn’t see how he tightly gripped the arms of his chair to keep from jumping up and shoving Ron out the door and slamming it in his face.

“Do you need a ride to the party? I don’t mind.” Ron asked.

Tessa glanced at Scudder, and perhaps his poorly-hidden scowl clued her in. “No, that’s okay.”

“Oh, all right. See you there.”

Ron left, but Tessa’s eyes were locked on Scudder’s. “You’re jealous,” she whispered, her delicious lips curling into a sexy smile. “You’re jealous of him.”

He rolled his chair across the office, open door be damned, and crooked his finger at her.

When she leaned in, he brushed his lips across hers. “You don’t want Ron, do you?” he whispered.

She gasped and shook her head. No, she wanted only him, her scent told him that much. If he locked the office door, she’d be in his arms in a heartbeat.

Scudder smiled. “I know I have no right to be jealous at this point, but I’ll be honest that I don’t share well with other men. I’m not jealous of friends, but that man wants to be far more than a friend to you.”

She sat back, startled. “Ron? No.”

Scudder nodded.

Tessa was quiet the rest of the afternoon, but he felt her eyes on his back.

* * * *

He picked her up, and this time their dinner wasn't interrupted. They had a fun time, and he reluctantly took her home around eleven.

"Do you want to come in?" she whispered.

He kissed her, his tongue gently stroking hers. "Want to, yes. Should—no. Not yet." He stepped back. "I'll leave early tomorrow morning, won't be back until late Sunday. I'll see you Monday morning, okay?"

She nodded, her disappointment strong and sharp in the air. His heart ached that he couldn't stay, not yet.

He stepped forward one more time and kissed her again. "Just remember," he whispered, "I don't share well. Have fun tomorrow night, but stay safe."

She nodded and finally went inside and locked the door.

He drove to a friend's house nearby, where he'd arranged to leave his car for the weekend, took a few moments to get what he needed, and then made his preparations. No matter what, she couldn't go to that party alone, not with Ron there.

He smelled *wrong*.

* * * *

She watched his taillights drive down her street. God, she missed him already. Walking into the bedroom, she started undressing for bed. She went to get a glass of water in the kitchen and spied the grocery bag on the counter. She'd stopped on her way home from work and picked up two large bags of beef jerky, the good stuff for humans. Probably wouldn't ever see the dog again, but at least it would keep. *Who knows—*

The scratch on the door startled her. Cautiously, she crept to her front window and looked out, spotted a black, furry butt and a wagging tail at her front door.

Her heart jumped—for a dog? What was *wrong* with her?

But she threw open the door and sank to her knees, burying her head in his fur.

"Hey, fella! I'm so glad you came back." He licked her cheeks and nuzzled her neck, happily whining. She stood to let him in and noticed the small plastic sack on the porch next to him. "What's this?"

His soft woof made her laugh. He pounced on it, snagged the handles, and dragged it inside.

After closing and locking her front door, she sat on the floor and went through the bag, puzzled. A leather leash and matching studded collar, a sleeveless leather doggy jacket, and a...hat? He would look like a biker.

Tessa looked at the Lab and his lolling tongue and happy panting made her laugh. “You brought your own Halloween costume?”

He barked, his tail wagging harder.

Her boss was an avid animal lover, and well-behaved dogs were always welcomed at his big company parties. It was a family affair, not just for adults, and he usually had games for kids as well as dogs.

This was creepy though. Someone must have set her up. Dogs didn’t pack their own costumes. It had to be some sort of joke.

She cupped his large head in her palms. “You are a mystery, aren’t you?”

He softly woofed and licked her nose.

* * * *

He slept in bed with her again that night, and he loved the beef jerky. This time he didn’t wake her up early, and when she let him out to go to the bathroom in the morning, something in his demeanor told her he wouldn’t run away.

“You need a name,” she said, studying him. “I can’t just keep calling you boy.” She looked into his eyes and then it hit her. “My boyfriend’s first name is Dennis. You remind me a lot of him, you’ve got the same eyes and hair. I’ll call you Den. You like that?”

He barked and happily wagged his tail.

Her new friend held still while she dressed him. Everything fit, and he drooled a little when she leaned forward in her costume, exposing cleavage.

Tessa laughed and patted his head. “That’s against the law in all fifty states and the District of Columbia,” she laughed. It was strange...he wasn’t like any other dog she’d ever owned. It was like he *really* understood every word she said.

They left for the party, and his leash manners were perfect. But when Ron walked up to her at the party, Den placed himself between them, leaning against her shins, blocking her with his huge body.

Ron looked at him and smiled. When he reached out to pet him, Tessa felt rather than heard the low growl rumble through Den’s chest.

“I wouldn’t do that, Ron. He doesn’t like it when men get close to me. He’s very protective.”

* * * *

Scudder watched Ron through narrowed eyes. He smelled even more wrong now. He had something in store for Tessa tonight. He wasn’t sure what, but the scent of treachery was undeniable.

Ron stepped back. “He’s a very big dog.”

Tessa stroked the Lab’s head. “Yes, he is.”

“How long have you had him?”

“Not long.”

Good girl, Scudder thought. He smelled her hesitation, probably remembering their office discussion. She was withdrawing, trying to distance herself from Ron.

Carefully, he shifted his weight against her legs so she was forced to take a step back.

Ron wasn’t giving up. “Listen, Tess, why don’t you and I go out to eat later, after this is over?”

“No, it’ll be too late—”

“Then how about tomorrow night?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’ve got plans already.”

Scudder shifted his weight again, and she took another step back. Her scent had changed, shifting from anxiety to fear, probably an engrained reaction from the years of abuse she suffered at Reuben’s hands.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking at her empty glass. “What are you drinking? I’ll go get you another one.”

“Okay, thank you.” Her relief at his departure was Scudder’s alarm. He wanted to drag her out of there, because now he knew. Her sexy, low-cut costume dress had caught not only his eye, but Ron’s as well, and the man fully intended to fuck her. The unmistakable odor of rut surrounded him like a thick cloak.

Scudder carefully pulled on the leash and got nowhere. Then he gently took her hand in his mouth and tried to lead her away, but Ron was too fast. He returned and handed her a new glass and Scudder knew, from the drink’s odor and from the predatory gleam in Ron’s eye, that he’d drugged it.

Dammit!

Scudder waited until she tried to drink to bolt, yanking on the leash and causing her to spill part of it, but he thought she might have still sipped some.

“Den, no! Don’t do that!” She dropped the slack in the leash and stepped on it, freeing her hand so she could drink without him pulling on her. He didn’t want to hurt or scare her, but Ron’s eyes had narrowed to a reptilian stare. Scudder knew whatever he’d used would work fast; there were plenty of secluded, wooded areas around the property he could drag her to and rape her.

Scudder whined, pawing at her, trying to get her to dump it, but she shook him off and took a few sips.

Then she met his eyes and he tried sending her a silent plea.

Tess, baby, don't drink it!

* * * *

Den went crazy. Even when she dropped the leash and stood on it, it was like he didn't want her drinking.

"Den, what has gotten into you?" She took a couple of quick sips and then the dog caught her eye. About that same time a really bad feeling swept over her, a horrible sensation of fear.

There was something in her drink.

Her eyes flicked to Ron, then back to Den who was begging her with his eyes.

She put the drink down and that's when she felt the first weird sensation. "Den, car. Now. Let's go, boy."

Ron moved to catch her arm and suddenly, Den was between them, silently baring his teeth.

"Are you okay, Tessa?" Ron asked.

It was an act, and she knew it. *Dammit, I should have listened to Scudder in the office!*

"I'm fine, but I have to get home, I forgot to give Den his medication."

The Lab caught her hand in his mouth and gently led her around to the front of the house to where the cars were parked. She was having trouble focusing now, even walking was difficult. Whatever Ron had doped her with, it was strong and quick. She was afraid to pass out for fear of Ron doing something.

Ron still followed a few paces behind. "Tessa, why don't you let me drive you home?"

"No, I'm okay."

Den whined, trying to move her along faster. "Okay, boy," she whispered. "I know, I'm sorry."

Ron kept up, but his voice had changed pitch, and even she recognized it. "Tessa, I will drive you home."

They were now hidden from the other partygoers by a thick stand of trees. Den whirled and snarled, curling his lips and baring his teeth. *Like hell you will.*

She gasped. That had to be an effect of whatever Ron doped her with. Dogs couldn't talk.

Ron stopped and held up his hands. Trembling, she finally got her finger on the remote and managed to unlock the car. Den stood to the side while she carefully slid behind the wheel. There was a quick movement, and then Den was barking at Ron, who'd tried to rush the car when the dog's back was turned.

Ron backed up, an angry look on his face. "Don't you dare drive, Tessa. You need to be taken home. I'll take you."

She forced her eyes to focus on Ron. "What'd you dope me with, asshole?" Den put his front feet on her lap, and she sensed he wanted her to unclip his leash. She finally managed it.

"You're imagining things, Tessa," Ron lied. She heard it in his voice. He darted for the car again and Den was on him, jumping up and bouncing off his chest, knocking the man down and growling at him.

Stay. Away. From. My. Mate. Den didn't do any damage, but ripped at Ron's Joker outfit, forcing the man into a hasty retreat.

She should get the car doors locked and call 911. That was definitely a hallucination. Imagining a dog talking was a really bad side effect.

"Den, come." He wheeled around and leapt through the open driver door. She pulled it shut and slammed the lock button just as Ron ran up again and yanked on the door handle, beating on the window.

"Tessa! You'll regret this, goddammit!"

She fumbled the key into the ignition and managed to start it. Thank God it was an automatic transmission. Fortunately, she'd parked on the far end of the field and there were no cars in her way. She drove down the winding driveway, out of sight of the house, and when her vision tripled she knew she had to pull over.

She sobbed, putting the car into park. "I can't, Den. I've got to call someone. God, I wish I'd stayed home." She felt close to passing out.

Her head was too heavy to hold up, and she closed her eyes, praying Ron hadn't followed her.

It had to be an effect of the drug that as she finally passed out, she swore she heard Scudder's voice call her name, felt his hand caress her cheek...

* * * *

She heard sirens, barking, agitated voices. Her eyelids barely budged.

Tessa heard the door locks disengage, and she tried to swipe at the button to lock them again, but felt Den's paw on her arm.

Then a strange voice. “Ma’am? Are you okay...?”

* * * *

Lights...movement...strange voices...

What felt like days later, she finally opened her eyes and realized she was in the hospital. Her boss and a deputy stood to the side—

“Den?”

“He’s okay, Tessa. My wife has him. Damndest thing, they said he unlocked your car doors when the EMTs showed up.”

She licked her lips and relaxed. “Ron doped my drink.”

“We know. One of the bartenders saw him do it, and they tried to get help, but you’d disappeared by then. Then when the 911 call came in, the responders found you in the driveway. Why did you try to drive?”

“Ron was chasing me, I wanted to get away from him, but I didn’t call 911.”

“No, some guy did, from your phone.”

That broke through the leftover haze. “What?”

The deputy nodded. “That’s right, ma’am. We don’t know who he was, because when we got there, it was just you and your dog locked in the car.”

She laid back and closed her eyes. She was too tired to figure this out now.

“What did he dope me with?”

“Ketamine. He admitted it after we searched his car and found more. You’re very lucky.”

She closed her eyes. “Den tried to warn me.”

“Ma’am?”

“My dog. He tried to warn me. He kept Ron away from me when I went to the car.”

* * * *

It was late the next afternoon when she was discharged. Her boss picked her up and took her back to his house to pick up her car and Den. The Lab happily barked and rushed out the front door, practically tackling her, vigorously licking her face, his tail wagging fast and furious.

She hugged him, burying her face in his fur. “You can’t leave me, boy. That’s twice you’ve saved me.” She cupped his head in her palms. “You’re staying with me, got it?”

He softly chuffed.

Her boss had bought a huge bag of dog food for the Lab and sent it home with her. When she tried to give him some, he turned his nose up at it and stared at the remaining bag of beef jerky on the counter.

She laughed and fed him the whole bag. “You earned it. I should feed you filet mignon, you big stud.”

He softly chuffed in agreement.

She tried to call Scudder and reached his voice mail. She left a brief and hopefully not too worrisome message before curling up in bed with Den. It was still daylight out, but she was exhausted.

Wrapping her fingers in his thick fur, she held onto his collar and buried her face against his neck. “I love you. God, I should have listened to Scudder, he was right.” She gently nudged the dog. “You’re not allowed to growl at him, hear me? You’re named after him, and I love him. Got it?”

His tail thumped.

* * * *

She awoke sometime after two a.m.. Den had rolled over in bed, but she still had her fingers around his collar. She opened her eyes and realized she was face to face with him, his huge, golden brown eyes staring into hers.

Just like Scudder’s, she thought, then froze.

The dog watched her with awareness, his eyes narrowing slightly.

The things she thought she heard before she passed out, that was her imagination, right?

No.

She gasped.

Den’s eyes followed hers, locked in an intense gaze, her fingers still tangled through his jet black fur—

She sat up. Den didn’t move, just watched her with those huge, golden brown eyes.

“Oh. My. God.”

He slowly sat up, his eyes never leaving hers.

She ran her hands over his fur, then cupped his face again. Okay, she was going to blame this on a bad side effect of what Ron had doped her with.

Den softly chuffed and gently pushed his nose against her hand.

Full moon.

She scrambled across the bed away from him, staring.

Tess, please.

His eyes pleaded with her.

“They said a man called 911.”

The dog nodded, and she drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them to her. “So this is what it feels like when you lose your mind?”

The dog chuffed again and laid down, belly crawling across the bed to her, softly whining.

You're not crazy, Tess.

“Oh my God!”

Those huge, golden brown eyes. How could she have missed it? She'd never seen anyone or anything with eyes like that before, and then to have a dog show up with Scudder's eyes and hair...

“If you're really him, then change back!”

The dog jumped off the bed and went to the window, his front paws up on the sill, nosing through the blinds. Apparently satisfied, he returned to the bed and sat in front of her and nuzzled her hand. Once she had her hand on his collar, he looked her in the eye.

His face shifted, changed. Suddenly, Scudder was crouched on the bed in front of her, and she had her fingers tightly hooked through the collar around his neck.

Tessa's eyes widened in shock, and she finally sat back, releasing the collar. Then she realized he was naked.

Shock took a momentary backseat to desire, because he was extremely well-endowed. Then back to shock.

“You...what...no...”

He nodded, not speaking, fixing her with those sweet golden brown eyes. After a few minutes, he unfastened the collar and dropped it to the bed. “I'm sorry, Tess,” he whispered. “It's not like I could just tell you.”

She stared.

After another silent minute, he carefully shifted position so he sat cross-legged on the bed and made no attempt to cover himself. “I couldn’t very well order you not to go to the party. I damn sure didn’t want you there alone with Ron,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

None of the words she tried to form would come out as anything other than a random, jumbled series of vowels and consonants that made no sense.

* * * *

He slowly reached out and took her hand. She stared at it, but didn’t pull away. “Please, Tess,” he whispered.

After an agonizingly long time, she met his eyes again.

He leaned forward and kissed her, and as if a spell was broken she was in his arms, greedily kissing him back.

There was no way he could resist her now, not after what happened and what she knew. He took his time making slow, sweet love to her, enjoying her scent on his skin, making her moan with pleasure.

After, as they lay entwined on her bed, she whispered, “You called 911.”

“Yes. It took every ounce of strength and control I had to shift back long enough to do it. That’s why I couldn’t leave your boss’s house once they took me back there. It was daytime, and I was just too drained to shift again. I had to rest. I figured it was best to wait for you.”

“So, am I going to turn into one too?”

He laughed and rolled over on top of her. “It doesn’t work like that. I was born this way.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You called me your mate!” She playfully shoved him.

“Yeah, well you called me your boyfriend. You said you loved me.”

She blushed. “I thought I was talking to a dog.”

“You were talking about me.” He nuzzled her nose with his. “I love you too, Tess. I was afraid to tell you. I’m sorry you had to find out like this. I’m sorry I couldn’t—”

She kissed him hard. “I should have listened to you about Ron. You saved me.”

He stroked her cheek. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “This is going to take some getting used to .”

His golden brown eyes never left hers. "I know. This is the other reason I wanted to take it slow."

"I thought people like you turned into vicious werewolves."

"That's a myth. Shifters change into lots of things, not just wolves." He laced his fingers through hers, kissing her hand. "I hate to interrupt this, but do you feel like going to work?"

"We need to. We've got a lot of stuff to do."

He sat up and pulled her to him, kissing her again. "Then you need to take me to my car so I can get my clothes."

A sly, playful grin slid across her lips. "What if I want to keep you naked?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You can have me naked all you want, sweetie, but we don't want to get fired, and spending all day in bed doesn't pay our bills." He nuzzled her neck. "You can have me every night if you want me."

Warm, erotic heat flooded her. He was so much more than she ever dreamed he'd be, and not just the weird shifting stuff, either. "Promise?" she whispered.

He nodded. "I promise."

It was still dark, and he wrapped a large beach towel around his waist for the walk to her car. He gave her directions, and in a few minutes he'd retrieved his clothes and car and followed her back to her place.

"I need a shower," he said, stretching. Dawn painted the sky as he carried his overnight bag inside her house.

"Want some help?"

He caught her around the waist and pulled her to him, kissing her throat. "Do you even need to ask?" he growled.

Scudder drove them to work, and they even managed to make it on time. The corporate grapevine went into overdrive and all morning people dropped by their office to see how she was doing and offer their support and sympathies.

Including two men who Scudder instinctively sensed were off. This time, Tessa deferred to his judgment, allowing him to scowl and run them off with grumpy warnings that they were buried in work with no time to chat.

But she smiled, and at lunch she closed and locked the door.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She crawled into his lap for a long, deep kiss. "That."

* * * *

After two weeks, she moved in with Scudder. By the next Halloween party—fortunately during a waning quarter moon—they were sporting wedding bands. For their party costumes, she went dressed as Little Red Riding Hood while Scudder went dressed as a biker.

Complete with a studded, leather collar.

About the Author

Lesli Richardson is a snarky, stubborn Taurus freelance writer. A native, life-long Floridian (endangered species), she's (as of now) never seen real snow. She lives in southwest Florida with her husband, son, and a houseful of neurotic, misfit animals of various species.