

Shifted First Chapter

Chapter One

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of a black sea of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. – The Call of Cthulhu by H.P. Lovecraft

“Ruby! It’s him!”

Ruby Parsons peered around her iPad at her roommate Claire, who bounced excitedly on the opposite end of the couch. “And who would *he* be?”

“Listen to this *Daveslist* “Near Misses” ad:

H.P. Lovecraft: Stand-Up Comedian – m4w (Annex Theater) - Seattle

Tuesday night, after the show, you and I flirted while in line for the bathroom. We agreed that even if the staff had to clean up a blood sacrifice, the place was still nicer than the streets below.

You smiled at me as you took off, but there was no chance for me to get your name.

Buy you a drink sometime? We might as well enjoy ourselves before Cthulhu rises...”

Ruby scrambled across the couch and stuffed herself into the crack between Claire and the cushioned back for a look at the ad.

“It’s Cthulhu! Your Lovecraftian lobster,” Claire said, handing over the iPad for her to see.

“You have got to quit watching *Friends* reruns.” Ruby read the ad. Her heart hammered in her chest, and a blush of heat covered her face and neck. It was him. Too many exact details not to be. Still. A classified ad? In “Near Misses”? It was so...seedy. Wasn’t it? What kind of people posted ads like that, or worse...responded to them? “Listen, I met the guy for like thirty seconds in line for the bathroom.”

“And then reread *The Call of Cthulhu* even though you practically have the thing memorized and went on and on and on about him and his hipster beardedness for weeks. Weeks!” Claire snatched her iPad out of Ruby’s hands then launched off the couch and into the swinging papasan chair. She began typing furiously on the tablet.

“What are you doing?” Ruby asked, concerned.

“Answering him, of course.”

“No!” Ruby raced across the tiny apartment to try to retrieve the iPad before the damage could be done, but Claire gave the chair a hard spin and kept typing. “Stop! Seriously, what if he’s a serial killer?”

“He’s not a serial killer. He likes comedians. And *reads*. Serial killers don’t do either of those things.”

“You don’t know that. Claire—”

“Done!” Claire extended a foot from the Tilt-A-Whirl and anchored herself to the floor. The chair came to an abrupt stop then twisted around the opposite direction, uncoiling.

Ruby snatched the iPad from her roommate’s hands before Claire could get her bearings and read the screen: *Yes! I can’t believe you found me. Would LOVE to meet you for coffee, a drink, a show...whatever!*

Ruby sighed. At least Claire had logged in under her own *Daveslist* account and not Ruby’s. Not that it really mattered. This was Seattle. Every other twenty-something guy with a beard in town was a software engineer or a hacker it seemed. Nothing digital was sacred anymore.

God. What if he replies?

“I can’t believe you did that.” Ruby handed back the tablet and sank to the floor, half-scared but half-excited. She’d never have had the guts to reply herself. Growing up in the Midwest, she’d still not shed her childhood lessons, long instilled by her farmer parents.

Don’t talk to strangers was probably number one. *Don’t talk to strange men on the Internet* was definitely a close second. Moving to the very liberal city of Seattle for college and then going to work for Google didn’t mean she’d thrown all of her morals and teaching out the windows, however.

Claire, on the other hand...

The iPad chirped with a notification. They both jumped then raced to see.

Friday night? The Annex? Weird and Awesome show? Seemed fitting. Since finding you there...and now here is both Weird and AWESOME! Say yes. I’ll be there. Waiting for you. In the front row. All hopeful-like. I’m not a serial killer.

Claire’s eyebrows nearly leaped off her face in her glorious satisfaction. “I. Told. You. So! Not a serial killer!”

Ruby rolled her eyes; her heart stampeded in her chest now. “Of course he’d say that. They all say that.”

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

“I’ve never seen that show. Have you?” Claire asked, her voice echoing down the long hallway of Ruby’s consciousness as she tried to hear her over the crashing surf of blood pounding in her ears.

“You’re going to go, right? I mean. What are the chances? First of him placing an ad to find you. Of us seeing the ad and of him responding so quickly? It’s meant to be, Ruby. Seriously, this is cosmic karma or something. Yeah. You’re totally going.” Claire waved a hand in Ruby’s face, snapping her back to the room. “Right?”

“I...it’s...what if...”

“Stop right there. If you don’t meet him and at least give this guy a chance, you’ll never forgive yourself. Here’s a what-if for you. What if he’s THE ONE? What if he’s your one and only chance at love, and you let him pass by not once but twice? Most people don’t get a second chance, Ruby. Hell, I’m still waiting for a first chance. If you don’t go, I will.”

“You don’t even know Lovecraft!”

“Nope, but I can fake it. Heck, I might even read one of those stories. A short one. A really short one. How long are those stories anyway? That looks like a pretty thick book.”

Ruby followed Claire’s gaze to the bookshelf then made haste to grab the volume before it fell into the wrong hands.

“No need. I’ll go.” Ruby swallowed hard around the painful lump of anxiety growing in her throat.

“Yay! And whew! I was worried there for a minute. I mean, I haven’t cracked open a book since college.”

“Yeah. That’s what you should be worried about, being forced to read. Good luck finding another roommate after they discover my dismembered body in the Sound.”

“You don’t think I’d let you go alone, do you? I’m sure I can scrounge up someone to go with me. We’ll sit in the back. Throw popcorn at your head. Bail you out if things seem to be going horribly wrong.”

“That would be the least you could do.” Ruby ran her hand across the leather book cover of *H.P. Lovecraft: The Complete Fiction*. “I’m going to go read.”

“Alrighty then, homework it is! Good night, Ruby. And yes, I’ll be maid of honor at your wedding. You won’t regret this.”

“Famous last words.”

Ethan Lane couldn’t believe his luck. He paced the floor of his Arts and Crafts style living room and looked out onto the Sound. Not only had she seen his lame ad, but she’d responded. He’d never placed a “Near Misses” ad. Ever. But he couldn’t get the cute brunette off his mind. Being a writer in Seattle was so cliché, it was painful sometimes and lonely. He couldn’t contain his literary geekiness, and when he’d seen the flyer for the Lovecraft comedy show? He’d buy that ticket all day, every day. He hadn’t

been able to talk any of his friends into going to the show, so he'd gone alone and met Ruby. One more gin and tonic, and he'd have gotten her number. Of course, too many more gin and tonics and he'd have had to take a cab instead of driving himself all the way across town, over the ferry and home to Bainbridge. What a mess that would have become. On a full moon, no less. He'd been right to forgo the liquid courage. *Drink Responsibly* and all that.

Remembering that night brought a smile to his face. He watched the surf pound against the shore below. He was a lucky, lucky man. His writing had made him quiet successful. Rather, his pen name, Robin Woodring, was successful. If his people knew how he was really making his living, he'd be disowned or worse. While his writing hadn't exactly been a secret, his accomplishment had. They all assumed he was a day trader and his writing was a quirky hobby. He tipped a tumbler of bourbon to his lips and let the amber liquid slide on in. His mind scrambled through the jumble of possibilities and potential pitfalls of what he'd done. He wondered if she'd show up Friday. Her reply seemed jubilant enough and hopeful.

His insides twisted.

She'd gotten all of his juvenile Lovecraft jokes in the three or four minutes they'd waited outside the only theater bathroom for the previous occupant to vacate. Finally, she'd gone in and while he waited his turn outside the door, trying to find some witty, non-creepy way to ask for her number, he'd lost his nerve. Or more, his sanity had returned. There was a reason shifters didn't date the normals.

Actually, there were *a lot* of reasons.

God, he was playing with fire. He scratched at his beard. He shaved daily, yet by this time every day he sported a beard that would take six months for a normal to grow. Sometimes he trimmed it during the day. Luckily, Seattle was a big city, and he could usually spread his service needs around so he didn't see the same vendors twice in one day, causing them to wonder why he'd been clean-shaven for the morning meeting and looked like Teen Wolf by five o'clock drinks. Not a problem with the clan, but it made it nearly impossible to maintain outside friendships, let alone a relationship. He shuddered.

What the hell was he thinking? He'd met her late, so beard it would have to be, to make sure she recognized him. But then what? Luckily, the problem was contained to his face. Unless he let it go too long then it became a problem...everywhere. And quickly. If he didn't shave every day, his face and chest would be full-on Sasquatch by the end of the week. And the moon! God, the full moon would only hasten the effect.

Sweat began to bead along his spine and lower back. He paced faster.

He could cancel. Just not show up Friday night. She didn't know his name. Or anything about him. There was no way for her to track him down. This was stupid. Hazardous. Reckless.

But the optimism swirling around his heart called it something else...hope.

None of the females of his clan had lit up that spark of hope in him like she had in the few minutes he'd spent with her. What if she was the one?

The One!

The cycle could be broken. He could be normal. Well, more normal. And the shifting would be limited. Shifting once a month and freedom from daily shaving would be life changing. Or so he'd been told. Only a few had actually broken free of their nature. And were promptly excommunicated for their efforts.

The shift suppression shots he took each month helped, but they weren't foolproof. Mating with a normal would mean their children wouldn't carry the gene to initiate the magic necessary for the shift. And it was some sort of magic. An ancient magic remembered and recorded by shamans around the globe.

The only way Sasquatches could procreate was to, well, procreate while in their Sasquatch form. And the females? They had to stay in Sasquatch form for the nine months it took to gestate. It was brutal. Most of the males stayed with the females to protect them during that time. It was a dangerous and terrifying ordeal for Sasquatch families. And one he didn't have any plans to propagate. He wasn't ashamed of his heritage, but, in the twenty-first century, with a security camera on every corner and a cell phone in every hand, living as a Sasquatch was becoming riskier.

It was only a matter of time before they were outed once and for all. His clan had lived in the Pacific Northwest for centuries. The Lummi Indians called them *Ts'mekwes* and had helped them to keep their secret for uncountable moons. They were practically rock stars on the reservation, and many of them lived there. Hell, *most* of them lived there or across the border in Canada. Others returned for solace or when the moon called them. So far, any indiscretions had been covered up, glossed over, or worked into cable documentaries no one really took seriously except the die-hard hunters. The clan scanned the Bigfoot Field Department's online boards and sighting reports with a fine-tooth comb, searching for infractions of clan members near and far and making sure to discount any actual sightings. It didn't take much to turn a confirmation into a hoax. Still, some of the Bigfoot Field Department faithful were getting craftier. For the most part, everyone agreed, those BFD people were crazy.

Nearly as crazy as he was for trying this, but he longed for a normal life.

Yeah, playing with fire.

And nothing stinks more than a burning Sasquatch.