

WHEN DEAD DOGS WAKE

M.J. Shoemaker

CHAPTER ONE

The giraffe was giving birth in the living room. The baby, blue and translucent, fell head-first from six feet in the air and passed straight through the wooden floor with a soft *whoosh*.

Moments later, it floated back up, neck wobbling as it looked around for the first time. The mother bent her neck to lick her fragile newborn as it struggled to stand on thin, shaky legs.

“*That’s* what I’ve been havin’ to watch these past three weeks,” said Ms. Walbelt. The reptile-woman’s arms were crossed before her scrawny chest, and her forked tongue flicked in irritation. “Every single day that damned giraffe shoots out another baby! I can’t *stand* it anymore. I mean, look at these things!” She gestured at the room with a thin, clawed hand.

Kit nodded as they took in the scene. A herd of baby ghost giraffes was meandering about the living room, passing through walls and attempting to eat the potted plants in the window. “This is a bit strange,” they said. “Do you have any idea where they might have come from? Are you a hunter, by any chance? Acquired bones or taxidermy recently?”

She frowned. “Of course not! Do I look like a big game hunter to you? You think I’d like to be surrounded by death?”

“I do not make judgments, ma’am... What about your neighbors?”

“Well, I tried speaking to them about it, but apparently they have better things to do than listen to an old woman.” She couldn’t roll her eyes, but she looked as if she wanted to. “Perhaps they’d listen to you?”

“Perhaps. So, you don’t have any idea at the moment as to where these ghosts came from, other than the neighbors? Have you received any packages or gifts that might have contained giraffe remains?”

“No-one sends me anything. It’s not in my house! There are no dead giraffes in my home. Only ghosts. And my late husband and I built this place, so don’t you ask about previous owners. There weren’t any.”

“I apologize, but I have to check every possibility.” Kit scribbled down a few notes. “So, let me see if I have everything correct. The mother giraffe appeared exactly three weeks ago around noon. It is the only adult, as far as you know. It gives birth around 3 o’clock every day in the living room. And you don’t know why it’s here. You are fairly certain there are no remains in your home—”

“*Entirely* certain.”

“...Entirely certain. But you suspect one of the neighbors.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“And have the giraffes caused any physical harm to you or your house?”

Ms. Walbelt glanced at one of the babies, which was attempting to bite a wall. “No, thank the gods, so far they only pass through things. Though I swear I felt one lick me once.” She shuddered. “But I am sure you see how annoying and distracting they are. I can’t even *read* in peace! And if I go to my bedroom, they try to follow me.”

“Of course. I completely understand your frustration, Ms. Walbelt.”

“Well, then, will you go speak to the neighbors now?”

“I have to speak with Inspector Walker first, and she will determine the next step.”

“What?” She threw her arms up. “Are you serious? You need to just speak to the neighbors! I’m *sure* it’s one of them! It has to be!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Walbelt. I only have permission to interview you at the moment.”

She hissed, long tail curling behind her. “Okay, well, how long will the investigation take? I’d like these things gone as soon as possible.”

“It shouldn’t take more than a few days, I would say.”

“A few more days, a few more giraffes...” She shook her head. “Fine. Do you have all the information you need?”

“I believe so, unless there’s anything you’d like to add?”

“Nah. That’s all.”

“Alright. Well, thank you, Ms. Walbelt. We will try to settle this as soon as possible.”

“I’d certainly hope so.”

“Have a nice day.”

She snorted and turned to watch two baby giraffes gallop away through a wall.

Kit left the house and started down the sidewalk. Soft gray clouds sat still across the sky, though a faint cool breeze blew through the streets, which were empty, save for a rusted car without tires parked along a faded fire lane. A plastic bag shredded across a chain link fence rustled like grass, and a fat, brown pigeon flew from its perch on a power line in a clattering of wings.

After a number of twists and turns and strolls through narrow alleyways, Kit arrived at a plain beige building nestled between a florist and a blackened structure that once held a liquor store. They entered.

A rabbit, Reginald, sat behind the front desk, looking sideways at a magazine half-hidden under the counter. He glanced at Kit as they passed, but immediately turned his attention back to his 'work.' His long ears flicked as a fly circled his head.

Kit ascended the staircase at the end of the room and walked down the hallway at the top, which stopped at a sturdy wooden door with a silver nameplate that read: Lyn Walker, Private Investigator.

Kit knocked on the door. "Hi Lyn, it's Kit."

"Come in," came Lyn's voice.

She was at her desk, crammed in among bookshelves, filing cabinets, stacks of boxes and papers, fake plants, and all sorts of unidentifiable objects she'd acquired over the years. Her index fingers clacked across a keyboard as she squinted at the small screen of her computer. Her thin red and blond streaked hair was pinned out of her face with several crooked bobby pins, and she wore her typical brown coat, skirt, and sheepskin boots that were much too warm for her stuffy, windowless office.

Kit waited a moment, but she did not look up. "Just finished up with Walbelt."

"What's up with Walbelt?" asked Lyn, still typing.

"Here." Kit held out their notes.

"You know I can't read your handwriting, Kitty."

"Oh, sorry. Would you like me to read them to you?"

"Yes. Wait, hang on a sec, let me get a doc open... Okay, go."

Lyn transcribed their notes as Kit read them aloud. There was not much to read, and she finally looked up at them when they stopped.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“She didn’t have much to say.”

“Hm. Well, this doesn’t seem like a *terribly* serious case, so... probably put it off until next week or so.”

“Oh, uh, actually, I told her it’d be done in a few days.”

“What? *Why*? You can’t promise things like that! We’ve more serious cases that need doing. Walbelt can live with a few giraffes, can’t she?”

Kit scratched their arm. “More than a few... More like, over twenty.”

Lyn rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll send Eric or somebody over there tomorrow, maybe. Someone a bit tougher. Taller, anyway.” She typed a bit more, then paused. “There was something I was going to... Oh! Kitty, you’ve heard of T.G. before, haven’t you? At least, I believe that’s what they’re still going by.”

Kit’s chest prickled. “Uh... You don’t mean the leader of the gang, do you?”

“Yes, them.” She nodded. “Someone was in here today. He needs a package delivered to them tomorrow.”

“To T.G.?”

“Yes. He needed it delivered by a neutral third party. Think you could handle it?”

They blinked. “*Me*? *Why*? And since when do we do deliveries for the gang?”

“Since always. I usually handle it myself.”

“Why?”

“Why turn down business? They pay better than anyone.”

“Yes, but they’re—” Kit could not quite think of an adjective to describe the horrible things they’d heard. ‘Dangerous’ did not feel quite strong enough. But Lyn surely knew this — she had been the first to tell them about the gang, after all. “Well, why am I doing this one? Why not you?”

“I’ve got something else I need to finish tomorrow. And my knees are shit. It’s a long walk over there.”

“But... but why *me*?”

She shrugged. “You’re trustworthy. Nonthreatening. Seem like somebody T.G. would like.”

“What? What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t matter.” Lyn clicked her fingernails on the desk. “You gonna deliver the package or not?”

“I...” They swallowed. There was not much of a point in disagreeing with Lyn. “I suppose I will.”

“Great. I’ll need you in extra early tomorrow. Around seven o’clock?”

“All I’m doing is delivering the package, right? Nothing else?”

“Just the package.”

“Okay.” Kit rubbed their forehead. “O-okay, I’ll be in at seven.”

“You’ll be *fine*, Kitty. Nothing to worry about. They’re fine folks.” The expression on her face suggested otherwise, but she waved her hand. “Hey, why don’t you take the rest of today off? There’s not much left for you here.”

“Really? Uh, thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Kit shuffled out of the room and headed back down to the first floor. Reginald looked up at them again.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked, face unmoving, other than the constant twitching of his whiskers. As a rabbit, he spoke through magic.

“Lyn let me off early,” said Kit.

“Puh! *Lucky.*”

“Was it busy today?”

“Nah... Place was empty. Just some guy yelling about his lights blinking on and off. Sounded like he was doing it himself.” His ear flicked.

“Well, it could be worse...”

Reginald stared at them. “Ominous. I don’t want to know.”

“Alright. See you tomorrow, Reginald.”

Outside, Kit paused by the florist. The owner, Dolores, was holding a big bundle of flowers arranged in a basket. She was a large, tan woman with dark curly hair that sat atop her head like a cloud. She waved when she saw them.

“Hello, Kit! Hang on a moment, I’ve got something to show you.” Dolores set the basket down and hopped into the store. She returned with a red vase holding a cluster of many-petaled white flowers with dark blue and pale pink patterns in the center.

“Oh!” said Kit. “They’re beautiful!” They bent their head. “And they smell lovely.”

“Don’t they?” Dolores beamed. “New breed! I’m still testin’ them out and tweakin’ a few things, but so far I’ve gotten them to stay bright and fresh for six months without water!”

“Wow! When do you think you’ll start selling them?”

“Not quite sure yet. Maybe in a couple months or so.” She looked down at the flowers, and then back up at Kit. “Would you like them?”

“How much?”

“Oh, no, no.” She shook her head. “No money.”

They smiled. “But I can’t take them for free. Look how pretty they are!”

“I’m *giving* them to you, silly!” She laughed. “And anyway, these are just the test flowers. I couldn’t charge you for them! Here.” She placed the vase in their hands.

“Oh, well, thank you, Dolores. I’m sure Ryen will love them, too.”

“Of course, and I hope he does! How is he, by the way? And how are you? Work okay?”

“Ryen’s doing well, still playing at bars and things. I suppose I’m alright, too. Work is... well, stressful.” They shrugged and gave a small laugh. “But it always is. How are you? Business is going well?”

“It’s alright. A little slow, but I’ve been able to spend more time on developing new plants, so... good and bad, you know. But anyway, speaking of work, I’ve got to finish up a basket for somebody right now, but it was great talking with you, Kit.”

“You, too! Bye, Dolores. I’ll let you know how the flowers do.”

It was a long walk home. It always was. Unlike most witches, Kit lived outside the magical neighborhood — which was not, in fact, a single neighborhood, but a wide scattering of buildings at the edge of the city. Kit could, of course, have chosen to live closer, but despite the walk, their apartment was a million times better than anything they’d find in the neighborhood, and they had to admit it was nice to get away from all magic-related things at the end of the day. Like shedding a heavy coat. They’d be hard-pressed, too, to find a better roommate than Ryen.

Their apartment sat within a tall red brick building with purplish-green vines winding up the sides. Kit passed through the double doors, the empty lobby, and up two flights of stairs. Upon reaching a door that read 202 in large orange letters, they unlocked it and entered.

Ryen was sitting on the couch, guitar in his lap. His long hair lay loose instead of up in his usual ponytail, and his glasses were slipping down his big, freckled nose. He looked up at the sound of the door. "Hey, you're home early."

"I am," said Kit. "There wasn't much to do today, I guess. But look, I got flowers!" They held up the vase.

"I see that! From Dolores?"

Kit nodded as they crossed the room. "Supposedly they'll last for months without water." They set the vase in the center of their little kitchen table.

"Nice. How was work?"

"Uh, I don't know..." They scratched the back of their neck. "Oh, well, a ghost giraffe was giving birth in some lady's living room. That was kind of weird."

"Sounds weird." He paused. "Somethin' bothering you, Kit?"

They pulled at their jacket sleeve. "Mm. No, just, uh, a bit of work stress. Have a big assignment tomorrow, that's all."

"Ah." He plucked a few strings on his guitar. "Somethin' exciting?"

"In a way, I guess."

"I wish I had a job as interestin' as yours." He played a short tune, paused, then played it again slightly different. "Somethin' with magic and all that. I'd like to be able to see a ghost giraffe. Or any ghost, really."

"It's not as great as it sounds."

“I dunno. It’s probably more interesting than my job.” His guitar made an ugly *twang*.

“Ooh, yikes.”

“How *is* your work going?”

“Mm... s’alright, I guess. Gonna be playin’ at a bar downtown on Friday. And a wedding reception on Saturday.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “They’re payin’ pretty well, at least. Better than *last* time, anyway.” He rolled his eyes.

Kit nodded. “Good.” They watched Ryen fiddle with his guitar for a bit, then turned toward the kitchen. They hadn’t eaten all day.