

CHAPTER 1

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 returned, floating, neck wobbling as it looked around for the first time. The mother bent her neck to lick the 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. Small herds of baby giraffes meandered about the living room, passing through walls and attempting to eat the potted plants perched 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? Or have you acquired any 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 try not to make any judgments, ma’am. What about your neighbors?”

“Well, I tried asking around, but apparently they’ve all got 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, besides the neighbors, is there anywhere else they could have come from? Have you received any packages or gifts that might contain giraffe remains?”

“No-one sends me anything. It’s not in my house! There are absolutely no dead giraffes in my home. Only the ghosts. And my late husband and I built this place, so don’t you ask about previous owners: there weren’t any. I’ve *never* had this problem before.”

“I apologize, but I have to check every possibility.” Kit scribbled in their notebook. “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 harm to you or your home?”

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 just need to 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, but I promise we will work to resolve this case as soon as possible.”

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

“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 is 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 we can.”

“I’d certainly hope so.”

“Have a nice day.”

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

Kit left the house. Soft gray clouds sat still across the sky, though a faint breeze blew through the streets as they headed down the cracked sidewalk. The road was empty, save for a rusted car parked along a faded fire lane, missing its tires. Buildings like old faces lined the path, dusty and creaking in their age, shattered windows for eye sockets. Plastic bag confetti shredded across a chain link fence rustled to the tune of dry grass, while 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 up at Kit as they passed through the door. His long ears flicked as a fly circled his head.

“Busy today?” asked Kit.

“Nah...” he said. “Place was empty. Just some guy yelling about his lights blinking on and off. Sounded like he was doing it himself.” His face was still when he spoke, besides the constant twitching of his whiskers. Communication between witches was like that. Thought-based, silent, a thin tug of a magical thread pulling at their brain. Kit spoke the words aloud anyway, as it felt wrong otherwise.

“Well, it could be worse,” they said.

“Sure. It can always be worse.” He returned his attention to the magazine.

Kit continued on, ascending the staircase at the end of the room and walking down the hallway at the top. It ended at a sturdy wooden door with a polished silver nameplate that read: *Lyn Walker, Private Investigator.*

Kit gave a light knock. “Hi Lyn, it’s Kit.”

“Come in,” came Lyn’s voice.

Lyn Walker, human like Kit but far older, 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 bony index fingers clacked across a keyboard as she squinted at the small screen of her computer. Her thin and dusty blond hair

streaked with red dye was pulled from her face by several crooked bobby pins, and she wore her typical brown coat and sheepskin boots that were much too warm for her windowless office.

Kit waited, but she did not look up. “Just finished up with Walbelt.”

“What’s up with her?” asked Lyn, still typing.

“Here.” Kit held out their notes.

She glanced at them. “Handwriting’s illegible. Read ’em to me. Wait, hang on a sec; let me get a doc open... Okay, go.” Lyn transcribed their notes as Kit read them aloud, then finally looked up when they stopped. “That’s all?”

“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.”

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

“What? Why? You can’t promise things like that. We have much more serious cases that need solving. Walbelt can live with a few giraffes, can’t she?”

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

Lyn’s eyes rolled a dramatic arc. “Fine, I’ll send Eric or somebody over there tomorrow, maybe. Someone a bit tougher. Taller, anyway.” She drummed her fingers on the edge of her keyboard, then paused. “There was something I was going to— Oh! Kitty, I’ve told you about Texas Gay before, haven’t I? At least, I believe that’s the name they’re still going by.”

Kit’s chest prickled. “Uh... The mobster?”

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

“To *Texas Gay*?”

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

They blinked. “Uh, since when do we do deliveries for the mob? Or do *anything* for them?”

“For a while now. I usually handle it myself. I mean, why turn down business? They pay better than anyone.”

“Yes, but they’re—” Kit could not quite think of an appropriately terrible adjective, but it didn’t matter. Of course Lyn already knew who they were. Of course she had to know the idea of working with them was ridiculous. The mob itself was bad enough, but Texas Gay? The *leader*? “W-Well, why am I doing this one? Why not you?”

“I’ve got something else that needs finishing. And my knees have been shit these days. It’s a long walk over there.”

“But... but why *me*?”

She shrugged. “You’re trustworthy. Nonthreatening. Somebody Texas might like.”

“What do you mean by that?”

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

“I...” They swallowed. This was worse than a nightmare, but there was no winning in a disagreement with Lyn. “I guess so.”

“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. “I... I’ll be in at seven.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kitty. 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.”

“Oh... Thanks.” It would have been the end of their workday anyway, but they didn’t say so. Instead, they shuffled from the room and headed back down to the first floor, then out the door.

Outside, Kit stopped by the florist. It was a cute little shop overflowing with more greenery than should have been possible. Though bouquets were the shop’s specialty, there was a good selection of live plants for sale as well. Strong young trees and vigorous vines, ferns, succulents and cacti, and a number of other things Kit couldn’t name. The owner of the shop, Dolores, was holding a big bundle of blooming color arranged in a woven basket. She was a short and heavy-set woman with a deep tan and dark curly hair like a cloud above her head. She waved when she saw them.

“Hello, Kit! Hang on, do you have a sec? I’ve got something to show you.”

“Oh, sure!” Kit nodded. “I have time.”

Dolores set the basket down and stepped inside the store, then reemerged with a round purple vase holding a cluster of many-petaled white flowers. Intricate patterns of blue and pink wove their way across the blossoms with a slight, magical shimmer.

“Oh, those are beautiful,” said Kit, looking them over. “And they smell lovely.”

“Aren’t they?” Dolores beamed. “I’m still testing them out and tweakin’ a few things, but so far I’ve gotten them to stay bright and fresh for months. As a potted plant, they’re a bit too large, but I’ve been looking to make a smaller version.”

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

“Not quite sure yet. Maybe in a few weeks or so.” She looked down at the flowers, then back up at Kit. “These are for you, by the way.”

“How much?”

“No, no.” She shook her head, laughing. “They’re a gift!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. These are just some of the test flowers, anyway. I couldn’t charge you for them. Here.” She pushed the vase in their hands, then placed her own hands on her hips. “So, how is work? How are you?”

“Ah, I suppose I’m alright.”

“You suppose?”

“Well, you know, work is stressful and all that.” They scratched the back of their neck, holding the vase in their other arm.

“Oh? Did you have a bad case or something?”

“No-o.” They paused. “I mean, today was fine. Just some ghosts. But I have a case tomorrow, and it’s—” They tried to think of a vague explanation. “It’s in a bad part of town.” Not wrong. “It’s not a dangerous case, I don’t think, but, you know, it’s an extra thing to think about and—”

“No, no, I get it.” She nodded. “You feel like you’ve got to watch your back on top of your other duties. Anyone goin’ with you?”

They shook their head. “Just me. B-But it’s not that big of a deal. I’m just going to try to get it done as quick as possible. It’s extra stress, but I can deal with it.”

“Alright. But you know you don’t have to take on every case Lyn hands you, right? You can tell her if you don’t feel able. You’re not her only employee.”

Kit nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, of course. Um, so, how’s your work? Business is going well?”

Dolores gave them a look, but didn’t press the topic. “Well enough. It’s been a little slow, but I’ve had more time to develop my plants, so... good and bad.” She glanced over Kit’s shoulder. “But speaking of, looks like I’ve got a customer. Shoot, and I’ve gotta finish up a basket for somebody.”

“Oh! Okay, well, I’ll get going then.”

“You don’t have to—”

“No, it’s alright.” They smiled. “We can talk another time. I don’t want to keep you from your work.”

“Alright. Well, it was nice talking with you Kit. Stay safe!”

“I will. I’ll see you later, then. And I’ll let you know how the flowers do!” They waved goodbye and slipped around an elderly elf inspecting a vase of tulips behind them.

The walk home was a long one, made a bit awkward by the vase. Kit’s apartment had been chosen long before they’d joined Lyn’s agency, back when they were still unsuccessfully submitting job applications to cafes downtown. They could’ve moved closer, probably, but despite the walk, their apartment was still a million times better than anything near the office. And, anyway, it was nice to get away from work at the end of the day. Far, far away.

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

Quiet and empty apartment, same as always. Stiff gray carpet, off-white walls, the absolute bare minimum of furniture: couch, coffee table, dinner table, and chairs all lucky finds from the roadside. They’d had a roommate up until recently — an acquaintance from high school

— but he'd moved out to live with his girlfriend's family and had taken all the decorations with him. Kit hadn't yet found a replacement roommate, but had to admit they hadn't looked very hard. They'd have to, eventually, but for now they enjoyed the silence and extra space.

Kit placed the vase of flowers on the shelf by the window in the little bedroom, which was only a little less plain than the rest of the apartment. They set their bag at the foot of their small but cozy twin bed and returned to the main room in search of something to eat. Their last meal had been breakfast, and it was nearly time for dinner.