

Kelley Armstrong

BARGAIN

From hell

Mr Sugar

Sor,

I vend you half the
Kidme I took from one woman
I massaged it for her tother piece
I tied and ate it as very nice I
may send you a study key that
took it out to a what
longer.

Signed



where
can
trick.

Bargain

“The guy’s name is David Hargrave,” Roy said, spooning whipped cream off his mocha coffee, and slurping it between words. “Killed three chicks in Tennessee. Definitely a were. If his Pack’s not hunting for him now, they will be soon.”

Xavier looked to his left, where a table of college kids pecked at their laptops while sipping three dollar double espressos. On their right, middle aged business women sniped about their coworkers as they downed nonfat lattes.

He sighed. There was something so wrong about conducting criminal business in a Starbucks.

“So . . .” Roy continued. “Is that good? We golden?”

“Golden?”

“Yeah, you know. Square. Even Steven. Chit paid in full.”

Xavier took a swig of coffee. Tasted like it’d been brewed in a dirty ashtray. He pushed it aside and looked at Roy. “What do you think?”

Roy quailed under Xavier's stare. There was something to be said for working with guys who were scared of you. Unfortunately, for Xavier, most of those guys were the type who called meetings in Starbucks.

As his mentor had once said, "Kid, there are guys who can scare the shit outta folks with one mean look, and guys who couldn't if they were carrying a machete in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. We're type two. Born grifters, but lousy thugs."

True, but there were some people Xavier could still intimidate, though he suspected it had more to do with the scar on his face than anything in his eyes. There was something menacing about facial scars, like wearing a T-shirt that read: "I was in a to-the-death prison knife fight and all I got was this lousy scar." If the true story behind the scar leaked . . . well, let's just say Xavier's days of scaring even whipped-cream slurping toadies like Roy were over.

"I need you to do one more thing for me," Xavier said. "Then we're square."

Roy deflated, as if this was the answer he'd been expecting, but had remained optimistic.

Xavier continued. "First, spook Hargrave into thinking the cops are on his trail. Second—"

"You said *one* more thing."

"They're connected. Second, when Hargrave bolts, follow him and find out where he holes up. Third—"

Roy opened his mouth. Xavier fixed him with a look, turning so his scar was on full display. Roy shut his mouth.

"Third, keep an eye on him. Probably for a few weeks."

"A few—?"

“Could be a couple of months. I’ll give you two fifty a week in expenses. You lose Hargrave, you still owe me, plus you have to pay back those expenses. But if he’s still there when I need him, your debt is repaid, and I might even have a couple small jobs for you.”

Roy perked up. “Okay. Sure. So how do I spook him? Swipe a cop uniform and ring his doorbell?”

“Not unless you want a good look at your own innards. He’s a were. You don’t engage. Get a uniform and let him see you poking through his trash. Or wear a suit, go to his neighbors, ask questions about him. Do whatever it takes to make Hargrave think the cops are hours from showing up with an arrest warrant.”

Heading back to his car, Xavier walked past several sky-high office towers. The streets were filled with men and women in suits, skirts and preppy “business casual,” scurrying between buildings, chasing the next meeting, the next offer, the next client, loyal worker drones buzzing from hive to hive in service of their queen—the company bottom dollar.

If his folks had their way, he’d be with those drones right now. While other parents envisioned medical degrees and law licenses and PhDs for their kids, his had dreamed of four MBAs on the wall, one for each child. They’d managed three out of four, but hadn’t stopped pursuing that perfect score until Xavier hit his mid-thirties. Then they seemed to come to their senses and decide that, since he showed no inclination to move home or ask them for loans, they should be happy with that seventy-five percent success rate.

With good humor, Xavier bore his siblings jibes about their drifter baby brother, knowing they were, in some ways, envious. In truth, his way of making a living wasn’t much different

from theirs: the meetings, the schmoozing, wooing new clients, keeping old ones happy, constantly networking and expanding his contacts, then managing the projects he had, reaping the most profit out of each. Tough work. But, unlike his siblings, he didn't have any office to report to, no nine-to-five hours to keep, no boss to answer.

The current project he was working on was one of his most intricate yet, with a sweet payoff that was all but guaranteed. All he had to do was find the right combination of events to set it in motion.

It had started a few months ago, when he'd run into trouble with a Cabal. He tried to avoid that. Any grifter with an ounce of self-preservation did. He worked hard to stay on their good side or, better yet, stay off their radar altogether. But every now and then, it happened. You pulled a job for some guy and the next thing you know, there's a squadron of Cabal goons clomping up your apartment stairs.

As Xavier had been slipping out the window, a thought had struck him. It'd been a long time since he'd talked to Elena Michaels. Too long.

There were times when a werewolf ally would come in handy, and that had been one of them. The last time he'd seen Elena, he'd told her she owed him a favor. Yet, having never gotten her agreement on the matter, he knew better than to push it. Instead, he'd use the reminder as an opening, a way to get her to listen to his bargain.

He only hoped that, after three years, she still remembered that he'd helped her . . . and she'd forgotten that he was partly responsible for getting her into trouble in the first place.

Elena would make a powerful addition to his contact list. And if she and her psycho boyfriend ever had a falling out, Xavier would be there to offer whatever comfort he could. Anything for a friend.

The honk of a passing car startled him from some pleasant thoughts on *that* potential bonus. Business before pleasure. Business-wise, a werewolf would be handy. A Pack werewolf would be very handy. A Pack werewolf who also served as a council delegate? Well, it just didn't get any better than that, especially now that that Cabal rich kid who fancied himself a crusader—Lucas Cortez—had married a council delegate. Next time a Cabal gave him trouble, he could just cry to the council about the injustice of it all. Elena might be too savvy to fall for that, but Cortez was another story. Idealists were always so gullible.

First, though, he needed to get Elena on board with an initial bargain. She'd be expecting a scam, so he needed as square a deal as he could make it, one tilted in her favor, but not so much that she'd be suspicious. She'd see that he could be trusted—and useful—and a professional relationship would be born.

Hargrave was step one. Find a man-killing mutt before the Pack did, and hustle him out of town. Now he had something to offer Elena. For step two, though, he needed to ask her for something in return, to make it a fair trade, setting the right tone for the relationship. Nothing too tough, just some simple job he might hear about and think "Hey, Elena would be perfect for this." A job suited to a werewolf.

Time to start looking.

A week later, Xavier was in his apartment kitchen, listening through his answering machine messages. After three days away, they'd started piling up. Amazing how fast the system worked. Put a "job wanted" call out on the grapevine, offer a finder's fee, and in they pour.

He'd had to be careful with the specifications. It would be easy to say "Give me a job that needs a werewolf," but then he'd have twice as many messages from contacts wanting an introduction to this new "employee" of his. Instead, he'd asked for jobs suited to a supernaturally strong, gifted fighter.

The vagueness hadn't worked as well as he'd hoped. The first message was from a witch he hadn't worked with in years, trying to feel him out about this new guy, guessing he was a Ferratus half-demon—a type as rare as werewolves. Three more messages were in the same vein, including one very irate call from a business partner accusing Xavier of holding out on him with this new employee. Xavier sighed. Feathers would need to be smoothed—reassurances given, gifts sent, promises made. Some days, this really wasn't any different from running a business.

The other calls were the same sort he'd been getting all week. Muscle jobs: working someone over, scaring someone, guarding someone. Petty thug stuff. Elena would hang up on him the minute he suggested any of those.

So far the only possibility he had lacked the finesse he'd been hoping for, but did have a payoff Elena might appreciate. This one was also about thuggery—catching one, not being one, stopping a Ferratus half-demon who'd been shaking down the owners of some black market spellcaster shops.

The idea of muscling muscle to protect the weak and innocent would appeal to Elena's council delegate sensibilities . . . so long as she didn't figure out what these "innocents" did for a living. He could play dumb if she found out, but Xavier hated scamming Elena. Not so much a matter of respect as self-preservation.

He'd give it a few more days.

Three days later, when no better opportunity presented itself, he knew he had to use the Ferratus job. Roy wouldn't guard Hargrave forever.

So it was time to contact Elena. He remembered enough of her bio details from the compound records that he could probably track down a phone number. But he wouldn't. Better—and safer—to maintain the polite fiction that he didn't know where she lived. So he called Robert Vasic. Vasic was no longer the council's half-demon delegate—having passed the job on to his stepson—but every half-demon Xavier knew still dealt with the old man, and ignored the kid.

Two days passed with no return call from Vasic. Xavier was seriously considering the possibility that he'd have to call Elena directly. Or maybe there was still a backdoor route: the witch who'd married Lucas Cortez. It'd be easy to get a message—if not to her directly—to her crusading hubby, a plan that had the added advantage of giving him an excuse to make that initial contact with the kid.

Speaking of kids, wasn't that witch the same one who'd taken custody of Savannah—the little girl from the compound? Not a little girl anymore, he imagined. She'd been a good kid, and he hated to “use” her, but that could make contact with Cortez even easier.

“—werewolf.”

Xavier started, coming back to planet Earth. He was sharing a bottle of Jack Daniels with Tommy, a thief and fellow Evanidus half-demon, holed up in a smoky, dark bar—a proper place for a criminal meeting.

“You avoiding the question?” Tommy asked.

“What?”

“I was talking about that job-wanted ad you put on the grapevine. When I heard it, my first thought was ‘Holy shit, Xav’s got himself a werewolf’.”

Xavier snorted a laugh. “Don’t I wish. It was just a regular job for a guy who likes to work with his fists.”

“Too bad, ’cause if you did have a werewolf on the payroll, I’d know the perfect job for him.”

Xavier hooded his eyes before he glanced up from his drink, trying not to look too interested. “Yeah?”

“Jack the Ripper’s From Hell letter.”

“Huh?”

“Jack the Ripper. The guy who killed—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know who he is.” Xavier refilled his glass, taking his time. “So what’s this letter?”

“One of a bunch the guy supposedly sent. It was stolen from the police files years ago. Been missing ever since. There’s a guy—some human—who want it. Willing to pay big bucks, too.”

A human client? Xavier didn't do much work for humans, but every so often a job came along on the human side, and a supernatural contact of his would hear about it and realize it was custom-made for their kind.

"So what's this job got to do with werewolves?" Xavier asked. "Finding the letter? They can't track something like that."

"They don't need to. It's never been lost—not to our side anyway. It's in a private collection. Some sorcerer in Canada—Toronto, I think."

Toronto? Wasn't Elena from Toronto? Xavier downed his whiskey, hoping the sting of it wiped away any gleam in his eye.

"So why would you need a werewolf to get it?"

Tommy told him.

"Huh." Xavier filled his glass again, gaze down.

Tommy knocked Xavier's elbow, nearly making him spill the bottle. "You *do* know a werewolf, don't you?"

"No, but I think I might know another way around the job. You want in? Five percent finder's fee?"

"Fifteen."

"Ten . . . and you give me all the details you know, and tell me where I can get the rest."

By the time Xavier left the bar, he was flying high on whiskey and success.

A job in Elena's hometown, stealing a letter that was already stolen property, and therefore wouldn't offend her council delegate sensibilities. She wasn't a thief, but he'd give her

everything she needed, to make this job as danger-free as possible. Something this simple, what could go wrong? He'd give her a serial killing werewolf, and she'd steal the From Hell letter for him. An easy job, low risk and high profit for both of them.

The perfect bargain.