

## Searching for the Familiar

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Ruby was gone.

Winston leaned against the front counter of his magic shop, rattling the empty glass potion bottles. Behind him, the beaded curtains clinked, still moving from the violence of his panicked run through them.

He had searched every inch of the shop, called her name, looked beneath shelves and inside boxes. He picked up his coat, peered behind cabinets, and tossed aside piles of books.

Ruby, his familiar, was missing.

His hands shook, not sure what to do next. Ruby was a petite black cat, barely nineteen months old—a child really, a teenager, who thought she knew the world and didn't.

Had she slipped outside? It was March, cold, damp, drizzly March. Ruby loved her comfort. She hated getting her paws wet. She often asked him to carry her from the store to the car.

She would never go outside in this kind of weather, at least not voluntarily.

And that's what scared him.

He took a deep breath. He had to calm down. He had to go about this logically. Ruby was a familiar, and she had a distinct personality, but she was a cat. Perhaps something intrigued her enough to overcome her aversion to cold air and water-covered sidewalks. Maybe she had gone outside and he hadn't noticed.

But how? He'd been working in the back all morning, doing potions. He'd worked steadily and quietly, no radio, no stereo, nothing to accompany his work except his own breathing. He hadn't heard the bell over the door jingle. He hadn't felt the wall shake as it often did when the door closed.

Ruby had come in with him that morning, like she always did. She watched him mix for a while, and then she went through the beaded curtains to flop on the counter.

He hadn't seen her since.

“Ruby,” he said, “if you've somehow made yourself invisible, please, make yourself visible again.”

He knew that wasn't possible, but she was a familiar, and she was young. Maybe she'd learned new tricks and hadn't told him about them.

“Or speak to me. Please.” His mouth was dry. “This isn't funny and I'm really scared.”

There. He'd said it. He was scared. For Ruby, yes, because even though she was smart and funny and strong, she was still a 6 pound cat who had not spent much time outdoors. But he was also scared for himself.

Wizards needed their familiars to keep their spells pure. When he was a young wizard, fresh out of training, he'd thought he didn't need a familiar. He'd thought himself too good, too talented. Then he'd mixed an aphrodisiac for a young woman in San Francisco. She'd nearly died. Fortunately, her boyfriend hadn't tried it and managed to rush her to the emergency room.

She lived, but the cops were after Winston, thinking him a drug dealer. He'd left San Francisco so fast

that his head still spun thinking about it. He didn't stop running until he found Seavy Village and its gothic landscape.

At the cliffside house he rented and eventually bought, he found his first familiar, Buster. And when Buster died a few years ago, Ruby showed up.

Winston hadn't been alone since.

He had to think. He bowed his head and rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He was so terrible in emergencies—the kind of man who usually froze, thought too much, and acted way too late. He was behaving that way now.

Panicking would do him—would do Ruby—no good.

He needed to search for her and he had to have some questions answered. He also had to stay here, in case she turned up somehow. She'd expect him to be here.

She would also expect him to find her.

He raised his head. He couldn't do this alone.

Winston slipped behind the counter and picked up the phone. Only one other person in Seavy Village knew that Ruby was a familiar. One other person had ever heard Ruby talk, and that was a policeman. Officer Scott Park had been introduced to Ruby—the real Ruby—in the middle of a murder investigation the year before. Ruby convinced Park that magic existed and that Winston wasn't guilty of the crime, and she did it with her usual grace and finesse.

Winston's heart twisted. He clung to the phone as if it were a lifeline, dialing Park's number direct. The line rang, and for a moment, Winston was afraid Park wasn't there.

That would be odd, because Seavy Village was a small town with almost no crime. Everyone got traffic duty, of course, but Park usually avoided it. He handled the real crimes—the thefts, the rapes, the once-every-ten-years murder—and he usually solved them.

Then he picked up. “Park.”

“Scott.” Winston's voice didn't sound like his own. It sounded strangled and small, as diminished as he would be if Ruby didn't come back. “It's Winston.”

“Winston? What's wrong?”

“Ruby's missing.”

“What?”

He had Park's attention now. He could tell by the sharpness in Park's tone—all business.

“She was in the store, then she wasn't. No one came in and I didn't open the door. I don't know what to do, Scott. I know I have to look for her, but I also have to check on some magic things about familiars—”

“Can she just—?” Park lowered his voice, as if he were afraid someone would overhear him. “Can she just come and go on her own?”

“No,” Winston said. “She's a cat. In most things, she's just a little housecat.”

His eyes burned. She was all he had. Surely Park would understand that.

“Would she come to me?” Park asked.

“Of course,” Winston said.

“I’ll be right there,” Park said, and hung up.

Winston let out a small sigh. He wasn’t going to be alone with this after all. He had help.

He’d never really asked for help before.

He went around the counter, and pulled open the shop’s front door. The bell jangled, just like it was supposed to. Still, he slipped outside, pulling the door closed behind him.

A rainstorm had blown in from the ocean. The rain slanted sideways in the wind, cold and harsh. Ruby wouldn’t be here, not voluntarily. He called her name, crouched and looked up the sidewalk, under awnings, on the concrete entrances of nearby stores. But he didn’t see a slight black cat huddling against the wood doors, trying to keep dry.

Then he made himself look in the street. His shop was off Highway 101 on a side street that rarely got traffic. Still, tourists drove by very fast, forgetting that speed limits applied even when someone was on vacation.

No black cat lay injured on the road. No black cat lay against the sewer grate. No black cat had died in front of his store that morning.

Winston went back inside the store. He was soaked through and he’d only been in the rain a few minutes. He shook himself off, then went into the back and grabbed a towel, wiping his face and hands.

Ruby’s food dish sat in the bathroom, the Fancy Feast Turkey and Giblets mush still sitting in the bowl. She usually ate her morning treat right away, even though she complained that it wasn’t people food. She had taken a bite that morning, and told him she would come back later for the rest—after it had a moment to settle.

She hadn’t been back.

The bell above the door jingled. He tossed the towel on the sink and went out front.

Scott Park stood in the center of the store, looking official. He was a freckle-faced redhead who looked younger than he was. For once, his Seavy Village Police Uniform was pressed. He must have just gotten it from the dry cleaner.

“Winston,” he said. “Has she shown up?”

Winston shook his head. The panic that had threatened to overwhelm him since he knew she was gone surfaced again. He pushed it down.

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know.” But Winston told him the entire series of events, from the lack of a jingle on the door to the uneaten cat food. “Scott, she’s ten percent familiar and ninety percent cat. I’m really worried about her.”

“Hmm,” Park said.

He went back to the door, examined it, then let himself out. He stood in the rain for a moment, looking up and down the street, then he pulled the door open. As he did, he reached for the bell, but he wasn't quick enough. It jingled.

“Well,” he said, “that blows that theory.”

Winston understood immediately. Park thought someone might have snuck in, made sure the bell didn't ring, and then left with Ruby.

Park was peering up at the bell. “No one tampered with this, right?”

Winston shrugged.

“You heard all the customers come in and out the last few days?”

“There haven't been any customers the last few days,” Winston said. His business was mainly mail order. He kept the storefront so that he had a place to go every day. “And no one could have come in the back without me seeing him.”

Park nodded. “All right then. Do you have a picture of Ruby?”

Winston had to think. He hadn't done any of the normal cat owner things. She didn't wear a collar (“C'mon, big boy,” she'd said when he had tried to put one on her. “What do you think I am, stupid? I'd find a way to call you if I got lost.”) and she didn't have a little chip in her shoulder. She was fixed, even though she'd been mad at him for a month for that. (“I'm a big girl,” she'd said as he drove her to the vet. “I know better than to let every Tom, Dick, and Harry—” [and then she'd chuckled at her own puns] “—have his way with me. A litter of kittens is something I don't want.”)

“Winston?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was thinking.”

Park raised his eyebrows, as if he expected some sort of answer from Winston.

“You know, Ruby told me once she'd call me if she got lost.”

“Does she know how to dial?”

Winston nodded. “I made her memorize the numbers. She can push the buttons with her paw. We tested it.”

Park looked stunned for a moment, then he shook his head. “Let's call her fifty percent familiar and fifty percent cat, shall we? I'm not used to a feline phoning home.”

“She hasn't done that yet.”

“But she might. Have you checked the house?”

“She knows where I am. She has this number too.”

Park was still shaking his head. “So, do you have that photo?”

“Let me see.” Winston went through the beaded curtains. He pulled open a drawer, found old Polaroids he'd taken of his house for insurance purposes.

The cat in most of them was Buster. He'd been a marvelous cat, so very different from Ruby. Ruby was flash and sarcasm, mixed with some incredible gentleness. Buster had been stronger, quieter, and tougher. Exactly what Winston had needed in the old days.

It took some digging before he found a photograph of Ruby. She was sitting near the fireplace—her favorite perch in the house—and she had her “where's the tuna?” expression on her face. Her golden eyes looked at him through the photo, so alive, so vibrant.

“Ruby,” he whispered and resisted the urge to clutch the photo to his chest. Instead, he took it to Park.

Park glanced at it. “Doesn't really do her justice.”

“Nothing does,” Winston said.

“Okay. I'm taking this around. I'll even make a sign for you and we'll post it. I hope someone just picked her up and brought her inside a store, but I'll check. I have a few ideas. What will you be doing?”

Winston bit his lower lip. He always felt uncomfortable talking about magic to anyone, even someone who knew it existed, like Park.

“I'm going to call an old friend.”

“Here in town?”

“No, no.” Winston wasn't explaining this well. “I want to know how much time I have. I might try a locate spell, but I don't dare try without knowing whether or not my familiar must be here.”

“Locate?”

“It's a little sophisticated for me, but it should be able to give me Ruby's location.”

Park nodded. “I was wondering why you weren't casting some kind of spell. I guess I know now, huh?”

That and the fact that Winston's magic was very small. He was stretching things when he said that a locate spell was very sophisticated for him. It was a degree of difficulty above most spells he tried. He used to think his magic would grow, but over time he learned that what he had was all he'd ever have. Enough to make one-time potions and do a few tiny spells. But never anything else.

“Please find her, Scott,” Winston said.

“I'll do what I can,” Park said, and left, Ruby's photograph in his pocket.

Winston watched him through the shopfront windows. Park was calling Ruby's name as he walked down the street. He looked concerned, as if he had forgotten to tell Winston something.

Winston didn't want to know. He was extra vigilant most of the time. He knew that black cats were often targets of teenagers, particularly at Halloween. But this was March. Surely no one would take her for violent purposes. Not out of a store on a weekday morning.

He picked up the phone a second time, and dialed slowly, heart pounding. He hadn't spoken to his mentor in six years. Gerry Bellier was a bona fide wizard of the first order. He could cast a spell that could destroy a city, if he chose to do, or he could make the wind blow in the opposite direction. He was so powerful that he forgot that others rarely had that kind of ability.

Bellier had hated having Winston as an apprentice. He'd thought Winston's small talent not worth his time

at all. But he was a conscientious teacher, answering questions, helping where needed.

And he was a good man. Fortunately. With all that power, he could have harmed anything and anyone who crossed his path. But, so far as Winston knew, Bellier had never used his power to hurt a living creature.

Someone picked up the phone on the other end. "Gerald Bellier."

The voice made Winston stand straighter. Just the sound of it reminded him what a failure he was at everything he tried. "Gerry," he said. "It's Winston. I'm sorry to bother you, but I have an important question."

Bellier sighed. "Can it wait? I have a lecture in fifteen minutes, and I'm revising my notes."

"I'm sorry, no," Winston said. "My familiar has disappeared."

"Hold on," Bellier said. "I'm switching phones."

He hung up, but the connection remained. After a moment, he picked up. In the background, Winston could hear piano music—a CD of some sort. Obviously Bellier had moved into his office.

"What kind of familiar is it?" Bellier asked without preamble.

"She's a cat," Winston said. "Ruby."

"How long has she been gone?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you about. How long are my powers—such as they are—still fresh? I want to try a locate—?"

"Technical questions in a minute, Winston," Bellier said. "Answer me first. How long has she been gone?"

"I don't know exactly. I opened the store at 10. It's—" he looked at the clock he kept beside the cash register—"11:30 now. She was with me for the first half hour the store was open."

"An hour." Bellier let out a small breath.

It seemed like longer. It seemed like she had been gone for weeks. But Winston didn't know how to communicate that to Bellier. Bellier, who was so in control of everything.

"There may be time then."

"Time for what?" Winston asked.

"Look, I'm going to cancel my lecture and come up there. You're in what—Astoria? Seaside?"

"Seavy Village," he said.

"Where the hell's that?"

"Central Oregon Coast," Winston said. "Between Yachats and—"

"It doesn't matter," Bellier said. "I'll be there in fifteen."

Winston could hear Bellier start to put the receiver down. "Wait! Wait! What's going on?"

He heard another rustle, then Bellier brought the phone back to his ear. "Talking won't help her, Winston. We have a limited time."

"Please," Winston said. "She's all I have. Tell me what's going on."

Bellier sighed. "You don't follow the trades, do you?"

There was no point in following the trade publications. Winston wasn't that powerful, and he really didn't feel like part of the main circle of wizards. He didn't belong.

But Bellier knew that. The question had been rhetorical. He continued. "Familiars are being kidnapped all over the West Coast. Kidnapped and, well—" His confident voice actually broke. "I lost Harris to this."

Harris was his pot-bellied pig. Bellier doted on Harris, even though he was the meanest pig Winston had ever seen.

"But I hadn't had Harris with me that day. He'd been gone at least 12 hours when I found out. We have a chance with your Ruby. I'll be there soon."

And then he hung up.

Kidnapped. Winston pulled the phone to his chest. How? Why? Why would anyone take familiars?

Familiars only worked with their chosen masters. Their powers were no good to any other wizard. Even if the original master died, the familiar could not help a new master. The familiar and the wizard were bonded for life—usually the familiar's life, but not always.

Winston was shaking. If they didn't find Ruby soon, she'd be dead. And, from the undertone of anger in Bellier's voice, the death wouldn't be a pretty one.

He knew better than to call Bellier back. Bellier would be here shortly, and then Winston could ask him all the questions he needed to.

But Winston felt the clock ticking. Every second lost might mean the permanent loss of Ruby. So he made one more call.

This time, the phone was answered on the first ring.

"Spellbound," a woman's voice said.

"Agatha?" he asked.

"I'll get her," the voice said, and put him on hold. Muzak played in the background.

Winston leaned against his counter, feeling as if the world had passed him by. When had the trade magazine for wizards become big enough to have a staff, let alone a phone system that played Muzak and put people on hold? The last time he had spoken to Agatha Ritchie, she had been answering her own phone and putting people on hold by setting the receiver down while she searched through the piles of papers on her desk.

"Agatha Ritchie."

At least she sounded the same. Her voice was deep and throaty, with a trace of an English accent. She had been a friend in his San Francisco days—more than a friend for a while—and he still missed her.

“Agatha,” he said. “It’s Winston.”

“Winston!” She sounded delighted. “How long has it been?”

“I don’t know,” he said, although he did. “Listen, I’ve got a situation here. My familiar’s missing. I spoke to Gerry and he said that there’s been a rash of these things. He’s coming here, but I thought maybe you could tell me more.”

“Oh, god, Winston, I’m sorry.” As if Ruby were already dead. “You’re not going to like what I have to tell you. The way they found those familiars—”

“That’s not what I want to know,” he said quickly. “I want to know if there are any leads, any ideas as to why this is happening.”

The bell over the door jingled and Park came back in. His uniform was soaked. He shook off the water like a dog who’d run through a sprinkler.

“No one knows,” Agatha said. “The disappearances are all unusual, as if there’s been some magic involved, but other than that, there’s no indication it’s one of us.”

“Because we know there’s no point in stealing someone else’s familiar,” Winston said.

“We don’t know that,” she said. “There is a theory that the familiars are the true magicians and we are their pawns, here to do their bidding.”

Ruby would like that idea. She would probably agree with it.

“Winston,” Park said.

Winston held up his hand, silently asking Park to wait.

“If that’s true,” Agatha was saying, “then there is a chance that they might confer their powers onto someone new if coerced.”

“Do you believe it?”

“What I believe doesn’t matter. It’s what these kidnappers believe that matters. When did you lose your familiar?”

“This morning.”

“Then there’s some time yet.”

“That’s what Gerry said.”

Agatha made a dismissive sound. She’d never liked Bellier.

“What else is there?” Winston asked. “Have the police found anything?”

“There hasn’t been police involvement,” she said as if he were a bit dense. “They’d see this as an animal cruelty case. In most states, that’s a misdemeanor, not worth their time.”

Park was watching him closely.

“So no one has looked at the evidence or anything?” Winston asked.



“Just our folks, and I have to tell you, Winston, the usual stuff doesn't work.”

“What usual stuff?”

“Locate spells, all of that. These creeps have figured out ways to block that. They seem to expect a magical response to what they've done.”

“How were the others found then?” Winston asked.

Park came closer. He was frowning.

“Accidentally. All of the cases were reported. When the animals were found—and believe me, it was always dramatic—then the wizards were called.”

“This isn't good, Agatha, is it?” Winston asked, hoping somehow she'd tell him otherwise.

“No, it isn't, Winston. I'm sorry.” She paused, as if she were going to add something else and then thought the better of it. “Let me know how it turns out.”

“I will,” he said, and hung up. Then he turned to Park. “You didn't find her.”

Park shook his head. “What's all that about?”

Winston told him.

Park closed his eyes. “I liked that little cat.”

Winston felt himself bristle at the past tense. “She's not dead yet,” he said, and wondered if he was the only one who believed it.

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Bellier arrived ten minutes later in a puff of blue smoke. He was shorter than Winston remembered, and heavier too. His bald head glistened in the store's fluorescent light.

He looked around and said, “This is your place, Winston?” as if he couldn't believe someone would be here voluntarily.

Park was gaping at him. Apparently the police officer had never seen anyone simply appear out of thin air before.

“We don't have a lot of time,” Winston said, amazed he could sound so forceful with his mentor. “We need to get right on it.”

Bellier nodded. He was wearing a charcoal gray silk suit and wingtips. His hands had been manicured. He'd obviously gotten a lot of money somewhere, somehow.

“I'm Scott Park.” Park took a step forward, his hand out. Bellier looked at it as if it were covered with worms.

“You've broken the code of silence?” Bellier asked Winston, as if Park weren't even there.

“Technically no. Someone else told Scott about us.” Winston wasn't about to confess that Ruby had been that someone else. “It won't hurt you to say hello to him, Gerry. He's my friend and he's helping.”

Park had withdrawn his hand. His arms were crossed now and he was watching Bellier as if Bellier were

about to break the law. "Where's your familiar?"

The question was designed to put Bellier off balance. Winston instantly wanted to apologize, but he didn't.

"Safe," Bellier said. "You don't think I'd bring him here, do you?"

"Please," Winston said. "Let's find Ruby."

"Give me something of hers, and I'll get to the locate spell," Bellier said.

"Agatha said that won't work."

"Agatha? You spoke to her?"

Winston nodded.

"Well, she's not an expert on anything except publishing these days." Bellier looked at the beaded curtain with distaste. "I suppose your supplies are back there?"

"There's not much," Winston said. "I don't have your abilities."

"I'll see what I can find." He pushed his way through the curtain and disappeared into the back. After a moment, he called, "The food bowl is hers, I take it?"

"Yes." Winston stared at the curtains, but he couldn't bring himself to go through them. He didn't want to see the contempt Bellier had for Winston's workspace, for Winston's world.

"If it's not going to work, then why's he doing it?" Park asked.

"I guess for the same reason we've been searching for her," Winston said. "We have to do something."

Bellier pulled the beaded curtain aside. "You call this a workstation, Winston? Where are your real supplies?"

"This is what I have," he said.

"This is going to be harder than I thought," Bellier said and disappeared into the back again.

Winston flushed.

"Why do you let him talk to you that way?" Park asked.

"He's my mentor. He trained me."

"Is he still training you?"

Winston shook his head.

"Then you should tell him to treat you with more respect. You're a good guy, Winston, and you're bright. You don't deserve to be talked to that way—"

Something exploded in the back. Winston winced.

"Never mind!" Bellier shouted. "It's not a problem."

“Seems to me,” Park said, softer this time, “that he's only going to get in the way.”

“No one's tried this early before,” Winston said. Then he frowned. No one had tried real police methods either. And he had a real life policeman—one who had been trained in Seattle, one who knew how to investigate difficult cases.

“I suppose I should go back out there,” Park said. “I'm not doing Ruby any good sitting in here.”

Winston caught his arm. “Scott, if you were investigating this as a non-magic case, what would you do?”

“Nothing, Winston. We don't look for lost pets.”

“What if it's a kid?”

Park tilted his head back, as if he hadn't thought of this. “And this was a pattern?”

Winston nodded.

Park tapped his chin. He walked around the store, looking at it as if he'd never seen it before.

Another explosion echoed in the back. “I'm fixing it!” Bellier shouted. “Why don't you label your potions?”

“Do you need to help him?” Park asked.

“He'll figure it out,” Winston said, feeling as if he were rebelling against Bellier for the first time in his life.

Park continued to walk the store. Then he looked at Winston. “I need some answers.”

“Okay.”

“No, from your friend in there.”

Winston took a deep breath. “Go ask him.”

Park slid around the counter, and pulled the beaded curtain back. Smoke wafted out of the back. “Excuse me,” Park said as he disappeared into the darkness.

“I'm not to be disturbed,” Bellier said.

Winston straightened his shoulders and joined the other two. The back was a mess. All of his carefully measured vials were scattered around the room, and the potions he'd been working on were stacked in a corner. There were two smoking holes in the floor.

“I'll fix it,” Bellier said, although there was no apology in his voice. More of a dismissive tone, as if it weren't his fault.

“I have some questions to ask,” Park said.

“I don't explain magic,” Bellier said.

“I'm not asking for an explanation,” Park said.

“He wants to know some things about the kidnappings,” Winston said.

“You told him that too?” Bellier frowned at him.

“He's helping us search for Ruby.”

“As if his help will matter,” Bellier said.

Park's skin flushed the same color red as his hair, but he didn't say anything.

“It matters to me,” Winston said. “We have to do all we can. It'll only take a minute, Gerry.”

Bellier looked up. “Then you get me some garlic while I'm wasting my time with him.”

Winston walked to his ruined worktable, avoiding the holes in the floor, and reached into his supplies. He found the garlic without any trouble at all.

“When the bodies were discovered,” Park said, his tone all business, “how far away from their original homes were they?”

“Not far,” Bellier said.

“How far? Same city? Same state? Same block?”

“Same city,” Bellier said. “A mile or two at most. That's one of the many things that makes these events so upsetting. Not that you could understand—”

“Were they found in a house or a yard or a wooded area?”

“I don't know,” Bellier said.

“What about Harris?” Winston asked. His stomach was churning. He should have thought of these questions.

“Harris—” And to Winston's surprise, Bellier's voice broke again. “Harris was found in the basement of a nearby house.”

“A rental?” Park asked.

“How should I know?”

“Think!” Winston snapped.

Bellier looked at him as if he had grown fangs. Then he tilted his head sideways, in the position he always used when he was considering things. “I believe it was a rental. And it smelled odd as well. Not just because of—Harris—but because someone had tried to create magic.”

“Create magic?” Park asked.

“The non-magical,” Winston said. “Some of them believe they can do spells.”

“Can they?” Park asked.

“Small ones,” Bellier said. “Ones that even our Winston would consider easy.”

Winston felt his cheeks grow warm.

“Like preventing a bell from jingling?” Park asked.

Bellier snorted. “You, Officer Park, could do that now. I could show you how. It's more of a parlor trick

than a spell.”

Park glanced at Winston, almost in apology. Then he asked, “What else? Do you know how many people were involved?”

“I couldn't control Harris,” Bellier said, “and he and I were friends. It would take at least three people to hold him, and they would have to be strong.”

“There are no spells to control animals?” Park asked.

“Not familiars,” Winston said.

“And not that anyone without magical ability could do,” Bellier said, “no matter how many books they read.”

“Except on solstice,” Winston said.

“Even then,” Bellier said.

Winston leaned against his shaky desk. “Agatha said that the locate spells didn't work.”

“It was the time limit,” Bellier said.

“What if it wasn't?” Winston said. “What if they did some kind of magical blocking spell?”

“They'd have to be awfully sophisticated,” Bellier said.

“They're stealing familiars,” Winston said. “That's sophisticated. How do they even know who has familiars? As opposed to pets, I mean. Not too many people know about me.”

Bellier's shoulders slumped. It was as if the state he had worked himself into when he discovered that Ruby was gone had evaporated. “I had just assumed they would know. But you're right. You've been hidden all these years. To the uninformed, your mail order business looks like some herbal supplement company.”

Winston started. He hadn't expected Bellier to know anything about Winston's business.

“They shouldn't have found you.”

“But they did,” Park said. “Your customers all know about Ruby.”

“I haven't had customers for almost a week,” Winston said.

“Someone else told them,” Bellier said. “They must have figured you were easy pickings, being up here by yourself.”

Winston felt a shiver go through him. Someone had targeted him. Him and Ruby, just because they were here. Alone.

Although they had gone after Bellier too. He was visible in his Southern California offices, with his speeches and his classes. Maybe that made him vulnerable as well.

“If they're using a magical block spell, I can't find them with a locate,” Bellier said. “They'll be counting on that spell coming their way.”

“Well,” Park said. “It looks like we need to do some footwork. They'll be in a vacation rental along the

coast, but there are hundreds of those, and dozens of real estate agencies that handle them. I'll get some of the officers to work this—”

“Wait,” Winston said. “We can't locate Ruby through their block spell, but can we locate their block spell? It can't be a very strong one, not if they're not really magical.”

Bellier looked at Winston in surprise. “Of course, we can. Brilliant, Winston. That'll make this much quicker.”

“How much quicker?” Park asked. “Because I can get my guys on this right away.”

Bellier snatched the garlic from Winston's hand. “We'll be there in a minute or two, if Winston helps me with the ingredients.”

“Any magic I do might curdle,” Winston said.

“You have twenty-four hours after your familiar leaves,” Bellier said. “More if she's still alive. You should know that. Didn't you bury a familiar?”

Winston felt panic rise. “Yes, but I figured any spells I did then were allowed because it was a special circumstance.”

“Well, so's this,” Bellier said. He searched the shelf of potions. “Where's the rubbing alcohol?”

Winston got that out of the bathroom cabinet. Then he got the other ingredients before Bellier asked for them. Bellier mixed everything together in a clean marble bowl. Park watched as if he were studying the spell himself.

When it was done, Bellier recited an incantation in Latin—probably to show off—and then a window opened where Winston's desk was.

A weather-beaten house at the end of gravel road. The house overlooked the ocean. Three large trucks were parked in front of the house, obscuring the address, but the street sign was clear. Southwest Jetty Road.

“I'm on it,” Park said and started out the back door.

“Wait!” Winston said.

“Let him go,” Bellier said. “We should do this ourselves.”

But Park stopped. “Do what?”

“We're going—right, Gerry?” Winston said.

Bellier frowned, but it too seemed to be for show. “I suppose you want him to come along.”

“Yes,” Winston said.

“All right then,” Bellier said, and with a snap of his fingers, everything vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Winston hated the way the world went white in a transport spell. He knew it meant that for a moment he did not exist anywhere on Earth. And he despised that.

Then he felt wood beneath his feet. The smell of the ocean was strong, and he was getting wet. The horizontal rain was pelting his shirt, making him very cold.

He stood on the old house's porch. Bellier and Park were beside him. Park was so pale that his freckles looked like dots made by Magic Markers.

“What now?” he whispered, looking at Bellier.

Winston reached for the door. The knob turned. As he eased it open, he heard a familiar voice.

“...stupid plan. Magic is like life, buddy. You can cut me open and try to absorb my life force, but when it's all said and done, I'm dead and you've got no more life than you did before. Same with magic...”

Ruby. She was alive, and lecturing someone who was thinking of killing her.

Winston's knees went weak with relief. He started to go inside, but Park grabbed his arm and held him back. Park put a finger to his lips, then pulled his service revolver. He went inside first, just like they did in the movies—gun sweeping the room before him, body following.

Bellier recited a protect spell and expanded it to all three of them, but he did it so quietly that Winston doubted Park noticed. Then Bellier went inside.

“...you may get some residual power, but it'll last an hour, maybe a day. And even then it won't do you any good. That book you're using was written by someone without magic...”

Winston entered last. Ruby's voice was the guide. It was strong and firm, and had no fear in it at all.

“...if all you want is power, then you should talk to my boss. He makes potions for everything. We can give you that little bit of charisma you're missing, or that girlfriend you want, or that huge boost of intelligence you need, fella...”

Great. She was insulting them. They'd kill her just to shut her up.

“...I can make sure it won't cost you a dime. It would certainly be easier than...”

The living room of the house smelled moldy and damp. The furniture was old, stuff that the owners obviously didn't care about. Three suitcases sat near the door and a briefcase lay open on the dining room table.

“...You do know that magical power is based on size. I'm petite. I'm not that powerful, and even if your goofy idea works, which it won't, I won't be able to help you much...”

Park glanced at the briefcase, then caught Bellier's eye. Bellier came over and looked, then shook his head.

Winston didn't care what was in the briefcase. All he wanted was Ruby.

“...so it would be best if you just let me go. No one'll believe me about this whole thing, and my boss probably doesn't even know I'm gone yet...”

Her voice quavered on that last. She believed it.

Winston entered a narrow hallway. He saw them, five large men huddled around a full-sized bed. They were all looking down, probably at Ruby. One of the men held a knife. Another held a large book.

They were all so much bigger than he was.

But Bellier had put a protect spell around him. They were non-magical. They couldn't hurt him.

Winston walked into the room, squaring his shoulders and looking as tough as he could. As he got closer to the bed, he could see Ruby in the center of it. Her forepaws had been bound with duct tape. So had her hind legs.

“That's my cat,” he said, making sure his voice carried. “You have no right to her.”

“Winston.” Ruby's head swiveled toward him. He saw relief in her golden eyes. Relief and fear mixed.

He shoved two of the men aside, and reached for her.

“Winston!” she shouted, looking over his shoulder.

He ignored her cry of fear. Instead, he grabbed her, cradling her against him. The man with the knife slashed at him, and Winston turned away, deflecting the blade.

He hadn't realized the flaw in his plan until now. He was under a protect spell, but Ruby wasn't.

“No one move.” Park stood in the door, his gun trained on the room. He looked menacing.

“I can arrange that,” Bellier said and snapped his fingers.

The men around Winston froze in place. Bellier walked toward them, his mouth set, eyes narrowed.

“It wouldn't take much, Winston.” Bellier stopped in front of the first man. He was a beefy man, with powerful shoulders and muscular arms. “A few simple spells. We could take away his power of speech forever.”

Ruby squirmed in Winston's arms. She knew, as he did, that the men, even though they couldn't move, could hear and see everything.

“Or,” Bellier said, moving to the next man, “we could take away his ability to reason. Of course, we would leave the memory of how his brain had worked before. That would frustrate him.”

“Boss?” Ruby whispered. “Who's that?”

Winston held her close. She felt so small and frail against him. “His name's Gerry Bellier,” Winston said. “They killed his familiar.”

At his words, he felt the tension in the room rise, even though the men couldn't move. Park was still watching from the door.

“Or we could end their lives,” Bellier said. “Slowly. In just the way they ended Harris's.”

He looked at Winston. He was actually considering it.

“We can't,” Winston said. “You know that, Gerry. You're the one who taught me that. It's so easy to let the power go to our heads. Even for the wrong cause. Causing bodily harm—”

“An eye for an eye is allowed.” Bellier's voice was soft.

“Let Scott take care of it now,” Winston said. “He's the police.”



Bellier walked around the man with the knife. That man was still gripping the knife as if he were going to use it, as if he were in the middle of a downward blow against Winston.

“What would you do, Officer?” Bellier asked Scott. “What would you arrest them for?”

Park shot Winston an apologetic glance. “Animal cruelty. And even that won't be bad, unless some of the other cases were in the state.”

“Not good enough,” Bellier said. “Today they attempted murder against this beautiful creature.”

He reached for Ruby. She cringed against Winston. He kept her out of Bellier's grasp.

“And they committed murder, all in the name of magic.” Bellier put his hand on the knife-wielder's shoulder. “So you thought you could get magic by stealing it. Isn't that right, Miss Ruby?”

Ruby swallowed hard. “That's what they told me.”

“They're fools, and they destroyed marvelous creatures in their quest,” Bellier said. “You've met Ruby, Officer Park. My Harris was just as special. So were the others. That's murder.”

“Unfortunately,” Park said, “no one can prosecute it that way.”

“Can we leave?” Ruby asked Winston. “My paws hurt, but I don't want you to use that knife to get this stuff off.”

Winston turned. The knife still hung there, glistening in the gray light coming in through the windows.

“But you can still get them for attempted murder,” Winston said.

“What do you mean?” Park took a step inside the room.

“They tried to kill me,” Winston said. “They stole my cat and when I came to get her, with you at my side, they tried to kill me.”

Bellier clasped his hands behind his back. “Will that work, Officer Park? Or must I imprison them myself for the next fifty years?”

Park's gaze went from the knife to Winston to Ruby and then back again. “Tell you what,” he said to Bellier. “If we can't successfully prosecute these guys, I'll make sure you get a chance at them.”

Bellier smiled. “It's a deal.”

“But you'll have to give us a statement—leaving out the magic,” Park said. “Can you do that?”

“Of course,” Bellier said. “I give statements leaving out magic all the time.”

“Let me get some back-up here,” Park said. “Is there anyway to cuff these guys when you unfreeze them?”

“Sure,” Bellier said.

“Big guy,” Ruby said, using her pet name for Winston. “Please. Can we leave?”

“Can we?” Winston asked Park.

“It would be better if you were here when the other cops arrive,” Park said. “It'll make the court case

easier.”

“Here.” Bellier touched the duct tape. It unwrapped itself from Ruby's paws. “Is that better, dear?”

“Why do you think you have the right to call me dear?” she asked.

Bellier looked at Winston. “She has guts.”

“Yes,” Winston said. “One of us needs them.”

“Don't let him con you. You have guts.” Ruby shook her front paws. She was lying in his arms like a baby. “Can we at least leave the room? These guys are creeping me out.”

“Sure,” Winston said.

He took her into the hallway and down the hall. Then he put her on his shoulder and she nuzzled against his neck. He was shaking all over and so was she.

“I didn't think you knew I was gone,” she said.

“I figured it out.”

“I thought they were going to kill me and there was nothing I could do. I didn't think you could do anything either. They'd bought some spells from some guy in Ohio. Potions, like magic blockers and silencers. That's how they got around the bell.”

Winston nodded, not trusting his voice. He didn't think they'd find her alive. He hadn't realized it until now, but he had been afraid she was dead from the moment she disappeared.

“It's all in that briefcase,” she said. “They kept reading the spells from the book and reading them wrong. I was so scared.”

She had to have been scared. She'd never admitted weakness before.

“I don't like this,” she said. “I want to go home. Can we close the store and stay home this week?”

“Sure,” he said.

“And I'm not going to leave your side. Ever. I don't care if you don't like that.”

“I like it,” he said.

She pushed against his ear, her nose cold against his skin. “You figured out I was missing and you got help?”

“Yes.”

“Both Scott and the scary guy?”

“Yes.”

“All the other familiars died?”

“Yes,” he said, wishing she hadn't heard that.

She sighed and snuggled even closer. “You're amazing.”

“Me?”

Her paws were kneading his shoulder. He wondered if she even knew she was doing it. She rarely had kitten moments any more.

“Yes, you,” she said. “All these other big powerful wizards, they lost their familiars. But you acted fast. You rescued me.”

He leaned his head against her smaller one. “You’re all I have, Ruby.”

“I’m going to let you believe that,” she said, “only because it benefits me.”

She lifted her head and pushed on his shoulder, looking around the room.

“Say,” she said, “do you think they have some tuna around here?”

And that was the first time since he’d found her that he knew she’d be all right. That they’d both be all right.

After the police talked to them—to him, actually, since only Park knew that Ruby could speak—and after Bellier left, they would be able to go back to their small, comfortable lives.

Winston would have to learn a few new spells, beef up their own security, and find a way to protect Ruby even when she was alone. He’d also have to start following the trades so that he wouldn’t be surprised again.

But those were small changes. Easy changes. Changes that he didn’t mind, considering how close he had come to losing it all.

“Well?” she asked. “You think they got tuna?”

“No,” he said. “And even if they do, you don’t want to eat it.”

“Good point,” she said. “You know, things are easier for cats. We’d kill the s.o.b.s, or run them off, or something. This legal stuff is goofy.”

“We’ve had this discussion before, Ruby,” he said gently.

“And we’ll have it again,” she said.

Then they looked at each other. She bumped her head against his chin, and he ran his hand down the soft fur of her back.

Yes, they’d have the discussion again. They’d have a lot of discussions again, thanks to the help from Park and Bellier—and to his own quick thinking.

Ruby was right. He had succeeded where greater wizards had failed. Even though he didn’t have an arsenal of spells like Bellier or a gun like Park, he’d managed to save his Ruby.

And that was all that mattered.