

An Extract From:

Pure Magic

by

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Justin had not been looking for a church. Sanctuary ... that, maybe.

Not, God knew, from enemies. He had no enemies. Was it logical to want sanctuary from your friends? I heard what happened, Justin, I'm so sorry. How are you doing? Do you want to talk about it? He did not want to talk about it. Nothing would get better just because he talked about it.

Worst of all were the ones who tried to say something unique and creative, because whatever they said, it came out stupid or offensive. At least you're not too young, you'll get over this, you'll be fine.

Justin had wanted to shout, "Don't tell me I'll be fine!" He'd wanted to put that on a tee shirt, violent blood-red letters on a black shirt – maybe that would have gotten the idea through a few dense skulls. He wanted a tee shirt that said You can't help, so just shut the hell up. That would shock everyone who thought he was so even-tempered, such a nice guy.

But he wanted everyone to know what had happened. He wanted the world to stop. The clear sunlit beauty of the desert spring was an offense. He wanted to tear the blossoms off all the flowers.

He couldn't stay. Everyone had thought that after the funeral, he would go back to Roswell with his grandmother. But he couldn't. He couldn't bear her grief layered on top of his own. He'd left a note and his cellphone in the middle of his mother's desk, in her study, on top of a stack of ungraded tests that he supposed now some TA would have to grade, and cleared out the account that was supposed to be for college, and walked out.

And now he was here. Not anywhere in particular, because he had no idea where he was going. Just here, wherever here was: one nondescript town in a chain of nondescript towns, linked like gritty beads on the necklace of the train tracks. The train conductor had announced the town's name, but Justin couldn't remember it now. He didn't care. He hadn't cared, when he'd walked out, where he was going. Just away, out, gone. Out of the desert, north and east into a cold country where the gray weather knew how to echo loss. To this grimy street in this nameless industrial town with a cheap bar on one side of the street and a ridiculously gothic church on the other. Was it possible to want sanctuary from yourself?

Stopping, his hands jammed in his pockets and the collar of his jacket turned up against the chill, Justin looked up the church's wide, curving stairway. It led, in a smooth arc containing fourteen rises and thirteen runs, with a total rotation of ... just over a hundred and four degrees, up to a pair of great carved doors standing between panels of stained glass.

Justin had meant to go into the bar, get a burger or wings or something. A beer. They probably didn't card, in a place like that. A beer would be good.

But now there was this church. Somehow, despite its grimy surroundings, despite the smells of hot oil and stale beer emanating from the bar, the church contrived to look solid and honest and perfectly at home. A sudden sharp longing for the hot wind of the desert, for the homey scents of hot concrete and acrid mesquite, closed Justin's throat. His mother had always insisted he attend mass with her ... he hadn't minded.

So, yeah, maybe he was looking for sanctuary. Following a half-felt impulse, he put his foot on the first step.

Then someone opened the door from within, came out, closed the door behind him, and turned, with a jingle of keys, to lock it. Then he turned again, caught Justin's eye, and paused.

Justin, obscurely embarrassed, took his foot quickly off the step and pretended he had not meant to go up the stairs to those doors.

"Sorry!" said the man. He was a big man, comfortably heavy without actually being fat, with a round good-natured face and an easy smile. He was wearing ordinary clothes: a tan jacket and jeans. Justin wouldn't have realized he was actually a priest except for the white collar showing at his throat.

The priest said, "I lock up at six unless there's a late service. I don't like to, but I also don't like to find drunks in the sacristy when I come in in the morning! But I can leave it till later just this once, if you'd like to come in."

"No," Justin said hurriedly. "No, never mind. I mean, thanks anyway, but it doesn't matter."

"It's no bother," said the priest, and, looking at him closely, added, "Or come back to the rectory, if you like. I'm not much as a cook, but I was just going to heat up some baked beans, make toast, fry some ham. And there's a cake. I didn't make it, don't worry about that!"

Justin felt his face heat. "You rescue runaways? That your thing? Because I'm not --"

"I know!" the priest said quickly. "You don't look like you're down to your last dollar, son, but, see, you do look like you might do with an hour of friendly company over buttered toast and baked beans. You'd be doing me a favor, believe me! I hate eating alone. I was going to walk down to the art show they've got set up down by the river, but to tell you the truth, the blues they'll be playing, not my favorite. Do join me. I'll do the talking if you don't want to. You've probably noticed I don't mind the sound of my own voice. Good thing for a man in my line of work, don't you think? There's plenty of ham. Spiral cut," the priest added in a coaxing tone. "Honey baked. And the cake's coconut."

Friendly company for an hour sounded unexpectedly good. The company of a priest who liked people but didn't know anything. That sounded ... like a not-terrible idea. And supper didn't actually sound bad, either. He gave the priest a narrow look. He seemed like a decent guy. Probably the man just genuinely liked people. Justin could usually tell. "Coconut, huh?"

“Beautiful thick frosting,” the priest assured him. “The rectory is just around here ...” he gestured to the right, where a narrow alley led back and around the church.

Justin took a step after him. “You invite everyone in for supper do you? Isn’t that kind of risky? Father,” he added belatedly.

The priest smiled back over his shoulder. “Mark. Father Mark. Yes, well, a nice young man like you, why not? Life’s too short to worry about every little thing, don’t you think? So tell me, are you on your way to someplace, or away from someplace? Don’t answer that if you don’t want to. Right, here we are.” He shoved open an unlocked door in a small brick-fronted house, indistinguishable from all the other buildings along this street except for the small stained glass panel set in the door and, beneath a shuttered window, an ugly concrete window box, empty of flowers in this chilly country where winter lingered into what ought by rights to have been spring.

The door opened right into the rectory kitchen. The smell of baking ham rolled out to meet Justin before he even set foot on the steps, overcoming his last reluctance, and he followed Father Mark up onto the narrow porch and into the house.

The kitchen was cramped, but bright and scrupulously clean and filled with good smells. The promised cake, one thin slice already missing, was four layers tall and frosted with great swoops of coconut icing. It stood on a platter in the middle of a butcher block counter that divided the kitchen from the small ... not really a dining room, Justin decided. The little odd-shaped nook was neither formal enough nor large enough to deserve the name. But there was room for three or four people to sit around the little table, if they were friendly. A barred window above the table looked out into the alley. Justin wondered who would put a window where it would look out into nothing but an alley, but maybe there was no better view anywhere in this city apartment. And the window did let in the light. The last rays of the setting sun turned the dingy brick of the opposite building a warmer shade of red and almost made the alley attractive, in a cramped sort of way.

“Silverware’s in that drawer, napkins over there, plates up there. You want coffee?” asked Father Mark. “Tea, milk – whole milk, two percent’s terrible stuff. Tastes like water.”

“Does it?” Justin’s mother had always bought two percent. Justin took silverware out of the drawer, mildly surprised to find it was real silver. His mother had said silver was her one totally unnecessary luxury. She’d said everyone was entitled to one totally unnecessary luxury ... he was struck with a sudden vivid memory of sitting with his mother at their huge dining room table with a can of polish and all the silver spread out between them. He had complained about having to polish it. He’d said it wasn’t his totally unnecessary luxury. His mother had said he didn’t have a luxury yet, so he might as well enjoy part ownership in hers.

He asked quickly, to block the memory, “If two percent tastes like water, what does skim milk taste like?”

“Diluted water,” the priest said promptly. “Here, let me just grab the can opener. You like canned beans, I hope. I love ’em. They’re sweet, sure, but baked beans are supposed to be sweet. Wish I had some nice crisp bacon to add to ’em, but who can think ahead that far? Good thing they’re tasty like this.”

Justin’s mother had always cooked beans from scratch. She’d made New England baked beans sometimes, but never too sweet. He couldn’t remember whether she’d added bacon to her beans. It seemed wrong that he couldn’t remember. He said, “Sure.”

Father Mark gave him a swift, assessing look, but said only, “Want to slice the bread? It’s good. Whole wheat this week. One of my parishioners bakes it for me. Wonderful woman. Bakes bread every Sunday, brings me three loaves before mass. Bakes for the bereaved, too.” He paused.

Justin looked at him.

“Bereavement does leave its mark on a person, I find,” the priest said gently. “It’s different for everyone, of course, but somehow there’s a look to it. You learn to spot it. Your father, was it? Mother? Girlfriend? Don’t answer if you don’t want to.” He turned away, busying himself with the ham rather than looking at Justin.

Justin didn’t intend to answer, but something about the Father Mark’s calm neutrality made it possible for him to say, “My mother. I never – I never knew my father. But my mother –” he stopped, and then couldn’t go on.

“Hmm. Supper first, do you good to get yourself on the outside of some of this ham. You can tell me about it – or not, up to you – after cake and coffee. Toaster’s right over there, butter in the fridge. My mother, now, she passed away nine, ten years ago. Cancer, poor woman. We all knew her time was limited, but even when you know it’s coming, it’s somehow still a shock. And then when the struggle’s over for the dying, it’s just starting for the bereaved, isn’t it? You think you’re going to get used to it, you know, but you don’t, exactly. But –”

Justin had been listening, half hypnotized, to this easy flow of talk. He hadn’t even begun to decide whether he found Father Mark’s words offensive or comforting, or to decide whether he might actually stay in this warm, plain, cramped kitchen that was nothing at all like his mother’s kitchen, let this priest talk to him, maybe even answer. The first batch of toast popped out of the toaster and Father Mark was just saying something about butter ... and something hit the door, shattering the little pane of stained glass and shaking the whole door in its frame. Justin turned, butter knife in one hand. Father Mark turned, too, holding the little pan of baked beans he had just been putting on the stove, his round face blank and startled.

Then another blow broke open the door and flung the shattered remnants of wood and glass into the kitchen, and a monster shouldered its way through the doorway.

In that first instant, Justin thought it was a bear. It was huge like a bear, with a massive head. It had a shaggy pelt and heavy shoulders and powerful limbs, and when it reared upright, it lifted paws armed with long black claws that might have been a

bear's. But it wasn't a bear. The fluid way it moved made it look almost like a big cat, a lion or something, but it sure wasn't a cat. It looked a little like a dog, a mastiff maybe, but too big and not right. Its glowing orange eyes weren't like the eyes of any natural animal, and its fangs, showing as it snarled, were black as obsidian. It wasn't anything Justin had ever seen, or even imagined. He threw the toast at it, and then, more sensibly, the toaster, which slammed into its face and made it flinch and roar. But the roar wasn't any sound an animal might have made: it was almost like a laugh and almost like a curse, and it held intelligence as well as fury and hatred.

The monster came down to all fours and lunged forward, reducing the counter to splinters with the swift blow of one foot, sending the cake to smash in coconut-cream ruins against the opposite wall.

Father Mark threw the pot of baked beans at the monster. He was shouting something, cursing – no, praying. The monster turned aside in its rush at Justin to slash at the priest, and Justin took the one step necessary and stabbed at it with the butter knife, only then realizing he might have grabbed the much longer and sharper bread knife instead, but it was too late. The monster snarled and whirled back toward him and Justin flung himself back, crashed into the table, and fell. He rolled to get under the table, and a second monster forced its way through the broken doorway, and a third behind that one, which was such total overkill it almost seemed funny – someone was shouting and someone was screaming and the monsters were snarling, vicious high-pitched ripping snarls like nothing on earth –

Yet another monster flung itself through the window above the table, hurling the bars aside in twisted ruin as glass exploded across the kitchen. It landed on the table, leaped to the floor, and instantly tore savage black claws through the throat and then the belly of the one reaching for Justin. Black blood sprayed everywhere, so hot it scalded Justin's arm and hands where it splattered his skin, and then red blood, and somehow when the dead monster hit the floor, it had the head and forearm of a man, obscenely attached to the body of a shaggy bear-like monster. Even human, the face of the dead man was contorted in a snarl appallingly like the expression of the monster. As Justin stared, the body twisted, and the rest of the arm and half the chest shifted jerkily to human form, then part of the pelvis and the other arm.

Above him, the monsters were fighting. Werewolves, he realized at last. He knew they had to be werewolves, instantly recalled flashes of every horrible werewolf killing reported in the past couple years, didn't want to think what it would be like to be torn apart, ripped up, eaten. They didn't really look much like wolves, though the one that had come in through the window, smaller and more graceful than the others, looked more like a wolf than a bear. It didn't seem upset to find itself facing two more werewolves, both larger than itself. It blocked a powerful slashing blow from one of its opponents, knocked Father Mark down and fortunately out of the way, somehow sidestepped a rush from the other monster – it didn't seem possible for it to evade that attack, not penned up in this tiny kitchen, but between one step and the next, it shifted into human form. A monster had crashed through the window, but it was a slim human youth who slid underneath a sledgehammer blow that should have taken his head off, then instantly exploded back into his massive werewolf form to return the attack.

Suddenly the two larger monsters were crowding back toward the shattered doorway. The smaller one tore claws across one enemy's back, simultaneously crushing its neck between powerful jaws, and that one collapsed in a fountain of black blood, its body jerking and twisting back into human shape. But the other flung itself sideways, hit the table, and went out the window while the splintered table collapsed on top of Justin.

There was a sudden profound silence.

The smaller werewolf – smaller was a relative term for a creature so much bigger and heavier than a man – turned its heavy, blunt-muzzled head to stare straight at Justin. Its eyes, brilliant yellow, looked like they were literally lit from within by leaping flames. Justin dragged himself out from under the broken table, pushed himself back along the wall away from the bodies, and tried to get to his feet. It took him two tries.

He found he was still clutching his stupid butter knife, but couldn't bring himself to throw it down, even though he knew what a pathetic excuse for a weapon it was. A butter knife, for Christ's sake! He couldn't understand why the monster had not yet attacked him. Certainly not because he had the stupid knife. He couldn't understand why it hadn't killed Father Mark, who was half-lying on the floor, one hand to his head, looking every bit as dazed and shocked as Justin felt. Father Mark was hardly a yard from the werewolf, but the monster did not look at the priest. Its attention seemed fixed on Justin, who swallowed hard and stood still. He was sure that if he ran, it would be on him. Although maybe he could draw it away from Father Mark –

To his shock, a young man stepped through the ruined doorway, glanced around, and came in, striding indifferently past the bodies and the spattered blood.

He was dark and heavy-set, not too tall, probably a few years older than Justin, really kind of ordinary looking. He wore black jeans, a plain black tee shirt, blunt-toed black boots, and a heavy glower. He ignored the bodies and Father Mark with a complete lack of interest and showed no alarm at the werewolf that, having killed or chased off the others, still remained in the kitchen. But he raised his eyebrows when he looked at Justin. His disapproving expression deepened.

The werewolf reared up, straightening and dwindling as it – he – took on his human form. He was young, about the same age as the other young man, but other than that they looked nothing at all alike. The werewolf turned into a young man with short-cropped pale hair, icy blue eyes, and a narrow, bony face.

There were none of the agonizing contortions the movies always showed for the change of werewolf to human or back the other way, only one moment a monster stood there and the next a young man. He stood with a kind of relaxed attentiveness, as though he wouldn't have been surprised at all if more werewolves had suddenly leaped through the window and attacked, but also as though he wasn't in the least alarmed at the prospect. He ignored Father Mark, glanced at Justin with swift interest, and said to his companion, "And where were you, Ethan?"

The dark young man shrugged. "There were two more strays. Five strays, can you believe that? In a town this size?" He looked personally offended, though at what

exactly Justin couldn't guess. He added in a disgusted tone, "About time we got around to this sweep. I took care of mine. I notice one of yours got away."

The one who had just changed gave his companion a long look, and Ethan, shrugging, looked away. At Justin. He looked him up and down and said, "And what are you? Besides the lure that brought all those little strays together. You're sure unexpected."

Justin stared at him, too baffled to say anything. He thought he should have a thousand questions, but couldn't frame a single one. Even if he had dared to ask it, which didn't seem likely.

"I'll take care of the one that ran," said the fair young man. He, too, gave Justin a quick assessing look, though at least he didn't look actually unfriendly. Then he said to Ethan, "You can stay here. I'm sure you'll be fine. After all, he's pure. Plus he has a silver knife."

There was mockery in his tone, but his look at Justin was almost ... wary. Which didn't make sense. Justin looked down at the butter knife in his hand. His fingers hurt from gripping it so hard. Silver. A silver knife. Blunt as it was, maybe it had been a good choice after all, against werewolves. He tried to imagine defending himself or Father Mark against werewolves with nothing but a silver butter knife. The idea was ludicrous. But he didn't put the knife down, either.

"A pure boy," said Ethan, his tone contemptuous ... but there was something else in his tone besides scorn, something harder to read, and his glance at Justin was not scornful at all, but wary, maybe even hostile.

"Oh, I can think of one or two possible advantages," the other young man said, with a touch of malice. "Aren't you looking forward to introducing this one to Keziah?"

Ethan laughed, though a little grudgingly. "Well," he said, and shrugged. "Well ... yeah, I'd pay money to see that. You can perform the introductions, how about that? I'll just make popcorn and sell tickets."

The fair young man grinned, a swift glint of dangerous humor. "Right. So keep him safe, then. I'll be back soon enough, but there may be more."

Ethan made a scornful sound. "There's not a stray left anywhere in this city who'd be stupid enough to come here tonight. We might as well have put a sign up: Ezekiel is here. Yeah, they'll stay clear. We ought to track the rest of 'em down, but I guess we have more important things to do, now." He glanced at Justin again, frowning as though he might say something else. But he didn't. He only stepped over the body nearest the door as though he hardly noticed it, picked up a chair that had been knocked over in the fight, spun it around, and dropped into it, crossing his arms over his broad chest and scowling impartially at the whole room and everyone in it.

The other one – Ezekiel – stepped up on the wreckage of the table, which didn't look as though it should hold his weight but did, and from there, with a complete disregard for the broken glass, onto the windowsill. Then he leaped out into the dusk. Although

it was a young man who had stepped up on the table, it was a huge werewolf who leaped through the window and disappeared into the evening.

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