

From *Dark Wild Night*

© 2015 Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings

Dark WILD NIGHT

Oliver

“WHEN DID YOU know, Oliver?”

I look up across the table and grin. “Know what, Harlow?”

“Don’t be cute.” She glances to the side to make sure Lola is still at the bar. “When did you know that the movie was optioned *and* green-lit in one swoop?”

She looks back and forth between Joe and me, waiting, but Joe bends to take an enormous bite of his burger, leaving me to answer.

“Today,” I hedge. It’s a bullshit answer because even Lola only found out this morning. Harlow wants me to report down to the hour.

Harlow narrows her eyes at me but tucks her smart reply away when Lola returns, carrying a tray of shots. She glances over at me and gives me her secret little grin. I’m not even sure she knows she does it. It starts with her lips turning up at the corners, eyes turning down just slightly, and then she blinks slowly, like she’s just captured me in a photograph. And if she had, the image would show a man who is deeply, bloody lovesick.

There’s a scene in *Amazing Spider-Man 2*, when Mary Jane Watson is first introduced. Her face is obscured from both the reader and Peter Parker, and up until this point, Peter has only known her as the girl his aunt wants him to ask out on a date, “that nice Watson girl next door.”

Peter isn’t interested. If his aunt likes her, Mary Jane is *not* his type.

Then in issue 42 her face is revealed and Peter realizes just how amazing she is. It’s a gut-punch moment: Peter’s been an idiot.

This is as good an analogy as any to describe my relationship with Lorelei Castle. I was married to Lola for exactly thirteen and a half hours, and if I were a smarter man, maybe I would have taken the chance while I had it, instead of assuming—just because she was wearing a short dress and getting drunk in Vegas—that she wasn’t my type.

But a few hours later, we were *all* drunk . . . and impulsively all married. While our friends defiled hotel rooms—and each other—Lola and I walked for miles, talking about everything.

It's easy to share confidences with strangers, and even easier when drunk, so by the middle of the night I felt quite intimate with her. Somewhere the Strip turned dark, hinting at the seedy underbelly the city has to offer, and Lola stopped to look up at me. The tiny diamond Marilyn piercing in her lip caught the light, and I grew mesmerized by the soft pink of her mouth, long since rubbed free of lipstick. I'd lost my buzz, was already thinking about how we'd deal with the annulments the next day, and she quietly asked if I wanted to get a room somewhere. Together.

But . . . I didn't. I didn't, because by the time she made it an option, I knew she wasn't one-night-stand material. Lola was the kind of girl I could lose my mind for.

Only, as soon as she returned to San Diego her life exploded in a hurricane. First, her graphic novel *Razor Fish* was published and quickly stamped onto every top-ten list on the comic scene. And then it went mainstream, showing up in major retailers, with the *New York Times* calling it "the next major action franchise." The rights to her book have just sold to a major motion picture studio, and today she met the executives putting millions into the project.

I'm not sure she even has a millisecond of time to think about romance, but it's fine; I think about it enough for the both of us.

"I don't know who started the tradition that the birthday girl cuts her own cake," Lola says, sliding a shot glass of questionably green alcohol in front of me, "or this new version where the girl whose movie is being made buys the shots. But I'm not a fan."

"No," Mia objects, "it's that the girl who is about to run off to Hollywood buys the shots."

"As penance," Harlow says. "In advance."

Everyone turns to give their best skeptical look to Harlow. Compared to the rest of us, Harlow's entire existence is rooted in Hollywood. Raised by an actress mother and Oscar-winning cinematographer father, and married to a man who is about to be a break-out Adventure Channel star, I'm pretty sure we're all thinking the same thing: if Hollywood entrenchment determines who is footing the bill, Harlow should be buying the shots.

As if sensing this, she waves her hand saying, "Shut up. I'll buy the next round."

Everyone raises their shot glass to the middle, and Harlow delivers the toast: "To the baddest badass that ever lived:

Lorelei Louise Castle. Go fucking conquer, girl."

"Hear, hear," I say, and Lola catches my eye, giving me her secret grin one more time.

We clink our glasses—Harlow, Mia, Joe, Lola, London, and I—and tilt back our shots before giving in to an oddly synchronized shudder.

Lola's roommate, London, gags. "Green chartreuse." She coughs, and her blond hair is piled in a messy bun on top of her head; it bobs precariously as she shakes her head. "Should be outlawed."

“It’s God *awful*,” I agree.

“I had the bartender make up something called Celebration,” Lola says with a grimace, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Sorry. I feel like I need a shower now.”

Mia coughs. “That guy must equate celebration with pain.” She steals my beer and takes a swig before turning back to Lola. I so rarely get to hang out with Mia without Ansel attached to some part of her; it’s actually quite nice to get her alone and excited to socialize. She’s sweetly delicate, in the way a little sister might be. “So let’s hear it, Miss Fancy. Tell us about this morning.”

Lola sighs, sipping her water before giving a wide-eyed, awestruck shrug. “Honestly, what is this life, you guys?”

I lean back against the booth and listen fondly as Lola recounts much of what I’ve already heard. In truth, I imagine I could hear it a hundred times and it would never really sink in; I can’t imagine how it must feel for *her*.

Lola, who by her own admission spends more time talking to the people in her head than to the people all around her, is truly brilliant. As much as possible, I try to temper my reactions to her work, because I know in part it’s carried by my affection for her. And anyway, it’s not like I can blab on to her constantly about how the creator is a fucking genius, and one of the smartest, sexiest people I know. But I do emphasize however often I can to customers that the book itself is fresh and unlike anything I’ve ever read before, and yet it *feels* familiar.

Razor Fish makes me feel that same buzz I felt as a kid picking up my first comic from the local newsagent. I’d been obsessed with the strength, the battles, the power of a story told in words and color. At age eleven, I was the tallest, skinniest kid in Year Seven—our first year of high school—and aptly nicknamed Stickboy by the class bullies. Even when my mates caught up by Year Eleven, the name still stuck. But by then, I’d towered over the other boys for so long and had begun cycling everywhere. I wasn’t skinny anymore—I was strong, and dominating in school sports. Stickboy was the name of a superhero, not a coward.

I look at Lola and marvel over how similar we are—lonely childhoods turning us into introverted yet ambitious adults—and how central comics have been to both our lives.

But while she’s still floating on the cloud of her new venture, reeling about the surreal offices, laughing about the stiff beginning to the meeting and the explosion of Austin into the room, I need the edge rubbed off a bit, and pick up my beer, taking a sip. I need to file down my senses enough to let some of this process. Truly, Lola’s life is about to change. What has up to this point been mostly a passion for her is quickly becoming a business—which will bring tensions and problems that I can relate to perhaps more than she realizes. Besides, Lola is wildly talented, but she’s still sheltered: Hollywood can make dreams happen, but it can also be harsh and ruthless. I want to push back the uneasy reflex that wants to fuss a bit over her, that *worries*, that thinks this is going to break her or, at the very least, dull a brilliantly creative piece of her—the part that created all of this in the first place—and I’m not sure it’s worth sacrificing for a slice of the life-dream real estate.

It makes me want to protect her, to tell her to listen to those voices inside her head, because to Lola those voices are more real to her than the majority of those in her life, and have been for much of her life since childhood. It was the same way with me. I grew up with no siblings, and absentee parents. My grandparents took custody of me when I was a kid, but I was eight and more interested in Superman and Batman than I was in what Gran had watched on tele that day or the people who came through my granddad's shop.

Just as she's getting to the end—to where the logistical details started to feel as though they were raining down, and it all became more blurry and jargon-filled—her phone lights up on the table and she glances down and then shoves back in the booth, eyes bolting to mine. "It's *Austin*."

That she looks to me right now—not Harlow, London, or Mia—makes my heart light up; a sparking flare thrown into the cavern of my chest.

"Answer it," I urge, nodding to the phone.

She fumbles, nearly knocking it off the table, before answering at the last minute with a rushed "Hello?"

I don't have the benefit of hearing the other side of the conversation so I'm not sure what makes her blush and smile before saying, "Hi, Austin. Sorry, no. I just almost didn't get to the phone on time."

She listens intently, and we all *stare* intently, getting only one side of the exchange: "I'm still a little shell-shocked," she tells him, "but I am okay . . ." She lifts her eyes to scan the table, saying, "Yes, out with some friends . . . just a neighborhood bar . . . in San Diego!" She laughs. "That's a crazy long drive, Austin!"

The fuck?

I look up at Harlow, who turns to me at the same time, seems to be thinking the same thing. He's not driving down here, is he? I glance at my watch; it's nearly ten, and would take two hours.

"I'm excited, too," she's saying, and reaches up to play with her earring. "Well, I've never written a script before so my goal here is just to be useful. . . ." She giggles at his reply.

Giggles.

My eyes snap to Harlow's again.

Lola giggles with *us*. She does not giggle with people she met only hours ago. Unless that person is me, in Vegas—and I fucking prefer to think that situation is unique.

"I can't wait to hear them . . . no I won't, opinions are good . . . I know, sorry. It's loud here. . . . Okay, I will." She nods. "I will! I promise!" Another fucking giggle. "Okay . . . Okay. Bye."

She hits end on the call and exhales, before sliding her eyes up to me. "That was Austin."

I laugh, saying, "So I heard." Even with an awkward, foreign object suddenly lodged in my chest I can appreciate how exciting this must be, to be so immediately comfortable with the person at the helm of the most important creative work in her life so far.

“He’s not driving down from L.A., is he?” London asks with—if I’m not mistaken—a hint of suspicion in her voice.

I have always liked London.

“No, no,” Lola says, grinning down at the table. “He just joked about it.”

For a few moments we all just sit there, staring at her.

Harlow is the first to break. “Well, why the fuck *did* he call?”

Lola looks up, surprised. “Oh. Um, he just wanted to know that I was okay after the meeting . . . and that he was putting together some thoughts on translating the first bit into a film.”

“The first bit?” I repeat.

She shakes her head in a staccato, overwhelmed gesture and a strand of her long, straight hair catches against her lipstick. I can’t help it; I reach forward to pull it away. But she does, too, and her fingers get there before mine.

I quickly drop my hand and feel the way Harlow turns to me, but I can’t look away from Lola, who is staring up at me, eyes full of silent frenzy.

“Holy shit, Oliver.”

Beside us, London picks up her phone. “I’m going to google this Austin Adams character.” I’ve always *really* liked her.

“The first bit?” I repeat to Lola, more gently.

“He was saying the studio sees *three* films,” she practically squeaks. “And he has some ideas he wants to talk to me about.” Harlow swears, Mia squeals, Joe grins widely at her, but Lola covers her face with a tiny shriek of panic.

“Holy shit!” London yells. “This guy is *hot*!” She turns her phone out for us to see.

Okay, maybe I don’t like London as much as I thought I did.

Ignoring her, I remind Lola, “This is good,” as I gently coax her arms down. Unable to help it, I add, “He wants to talk to you about it now? Do you have to go to L.A. again tomorrow?”

She shakes her head. “I think by phone at some point? I mean, I can barely imagine cowriting one script, let alone three,” she says, and then presses her fingertips to her lips.

“Collaboration is what this one is all about,” I remind her. “Isn’t that what Austin told you earlier today?” Seeing her grow more worried helps me keep my own trepidation at bay. “Maybe in the second and third films you can drive even more of the process, but this is great, right?”

She nods urgently, soaking up my confidence, but then her shoulders slump and she gives a small, self-deprecating laugh. “I don’t know how to do this.”

I feel her hand come over mine, shaking and clammy.

“This requires more alcohol!” Harlow says, triumphantly unfazed, and in my peripheral vision I see her getting up for more shots.

Joe reaches over, rubbing the back of Lola's neck. "Lola, you're a star in the middle of a pile of gravel. You're going to reign."

I nod, agreeing with him. "You've got this. No one knows this story better than you. You're there to guide it. They are the experts on the film side."

She exhales, forming her soft lips into a sweet O and holding on to my gaze like it's keeping her from melting down. Does she know how I want to be her courage?

"Okay," she says, repeating, "Okay."

EVENTUALLY WE MANAGE to polish off five shots each and have moved on from the insanity of Lola's day to a raucous debate over how the world is going to end. As usual, we have Joe to thank for it, but Lola is rosy and dissolving into her adorable snickery giggles with every impassioned suggestion— zombies, electromagnetic pulse, alien invasions—and at least seems completely, *happily* distracted.

"I'm telling you, it's going to be the fucking livestock," Joe tells us, barely missing Harlow's wineglass when he sweeps his hand in a total-destruction gesture. "Some sort of cow or swine flu. Maybe some bird thing."

"Rabies," Mia says, nodding in drunken slowness.

"No, not *rabies*," he says, shaking his head. "Something we don't even know yet."

"You're a ray of sunshine." London pokes him in the shoulder and he turns to look at her.

"It's a matter of fact," he says. "Fucking chickens are going to be our ruination."

Lola finger-shoots herself in the head and pretends to collapse onto me, convulsing in fake death. Her hair sweeps across my arm, my skin bare beyond the short sleeve of my T-shirt, and for the first time I don't fight the urge to touch it. I cup my hand over her scalp and slide it down, dragging my fingers through her hair.

She tilts her head and looks up at me. "Oliver *must* be drunk," she announces in a slur, though it seems I'm the only one who hears her.

"Why's that?" I ask. My smile down at her is a subconscious thing; instinct in response to her proximity.

"Because you're touching me," she says a little more quietly.

I lean back a little to see her face better. "I touch you plenty."

She shakes her head and it's slow and lolling against my arm, finally thumping back against the booth. "Like a buddy. That was like a lover."

My blood turns to mercury. If only she knew. "Was it?"

"Mm-hmm." She looks tired, eyelids heavily demanding rest.

"Sorry then, Lola Love," I say, brushing her bangs to the side of her forehead.

She shakes her head dramatically, one side completely to the other. "Don't be. You're my hero."

I laugh, but she sits up in a surprising burst of movement and says, “I’m serious. What would I do without you right now?” She points to Harlow. “*She’s* married.” She points to Mia. “*She’s* married, too.”

Apparently having tuned in, London leans forward. “*I’m* not married.”

“No,” Lola says, giving her an enormous, drunken grin. “But you’re always surfing. Or bartending. Or busy rejecting men.”

Joe nods, and London slaps his chest playfully.

“So, Oliver is my hero,” she says, turning back to me.

“My rock. My sounding rod.” Her eyebrows come together.

“Lightning rod?”

“Sounding board,” I whisper.

“Right.” She snaps. “*That.*” Lola lowers her voice and leans in close. So close my heart is a stuttering, wild thing in my throat. “Don’t you ever leave me.”

“I won’t,” I tell her. Fuck. I couldn’t. I want to wrap her up and carry her around, protecting her from all of the insincere, greedy people she’s destined to meet.

“*Don’t,*” she says, holding a weaving, threatening, drunken finger in my face.

I lean in, biting the tip, and her eyes go wide. “I *won’t,*” I say around it, and fuck if I don’t want to lean in farther and nip her lips, too.