

## Gob smacked

You can get used to anything, if you put your mind to it.

I suppose people wonder how long it takes to get used to having your boyfriend in a wheelchair, but when said boyfriend looks like Jonny Telfer, it takes no time at all. Bit more of a challenge coming to terms with his potentially larcenous habits, but he's explained all about the so-called robbery. How the investment company had stitched his old man up to the tune of three and a half million so getting a hundred grand back was peanuts compared to what they'd got away with. All his investments since then have been totally above board—that money was just some seeding capital. I didn't accept his hard luck story overnight but eventually I came around to realising he had a moral right to the money.

I'm not certain I've managed to square my conscience entirely with him springing me from the police interview room, although I'm naturally grateful. They had nothing on me, for a start, apart from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Right place and right time for Jonny, of course, although he'd kept me in the dark about what he was up to. They've given up trying to run me to ground—last thing I heard the two officers (and the guy at the desk) had been transferred to traffic division. You see, nobody really believed their account of what went on and for some reason (my guess is a Jonny Telfer related reason) their CCTV was on the blink that day.

So nobody saw the living, breathing armoured tank that bulldozed Mrs Zanderson's favourite boy to freedom.

That's the bit about Jonny that *does* take some adjusting to. I watched werewolf films when I was younger and they left me pretty cold although some of the blokes who shifted were pretty hot. But wolves are handsome creatures, full of restrained power with a streak of danger thrown in. Glyptodonts ain't. I mean, they've got the power—have you seen that wrecking ball of a tail?—but at the end of the day they're just overgrown armadillos. And armadillos don't have quite the cachet of alpha male pack leaders, do they?

But, as I said, you can get used to anything, if the incentive is there, and Jonny's a pretty good incentive. So the fact he changes into a giant armadillo every full moon is something to be worked through and round; so long as he stays indoors he doesn't become that large—let's not get into the science of it because no matter how often he tries to explain it I still don't get it—and, anyway, we want to keep a low profile. (See previous reference to adventures in the cop shop.)

Keeping a low profile isn't as hard as you'd think. We've found a nice place in West Wales near St Bride's, which some might term back of beyond, but so long as Jonny's got the internet and I can get out fishing, we're happy. I gave up the taxi driving; being Jonny's personal chauffeur is fine. So long as he doesn't make me wear a peaked cap.

So all in all, life is good. Except for last Friday. Last Friday was a complete and utter disaster. You probably don't need me to tell you it was full moon night, so we'd planned a quiet evening in, riding the shifting storm and planning a dirty great cooked breakfast the next morning, because Jonny's usually ravenous. I noticed that some of the local wild animals were getting a bit edgy, but he assured me that's normal. They can sense the change he's about to make and it freaks some of them out. Not all, apparently; Jonny says he's had a nice romp through the woods with a badger or two who didn't mind the old carapace.

Friday they weren't happy, though.

“There’s a fox out there getting distinctly fractious,” I said, as I finished the washing up.

“He’s not happy about you.”

“May not be me,” Jonny replied, carefully drying a plate. “I’m not the only shifter in the world. Or in the UK. Or in Wales, I bet.”

I should have realised that for myself, but it hadn’t occurred to me.

“All of them glypotodonts?” I asked.

“Doubt it, or else people would know about them. Bit hard to hide. Not like a wolf that might get away with being a large Alsatian.” He wiped another plate, as nonchalantly as if we were discussing the cricket scores. “Did you know there’s a secret Facebook group for shifters?”

I flicked some bubbles at him. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“God’s honest truth. I can show you on my laptop.”

“Shifterholics anonymous?”

“Don’t be a pillock. It’s not like we can give up changing. It’s more of a support group.”

I nodded. If you changed into a strange creature once a month I guess you’d appreciate a sympathetic ear. “What sort of animals are they?”

“What sort of animals do you want? Wolves, bears, even sloths and one that reckons he’s a jackalope, whatever that is.” Jonny put the last bit of cutlery away. “If you can get yourself to the Isle of Wight tonight you might find out.”

I put the back of my hand to my head, dramatically. “Alas, my private jet’s in having its MOT.”

Jonny sniggered. “Well, you won’t have to go far tonight for entertainment. It isn’t just the fox who can smell something in the air. I can detect it, too. Don’t ask me how, but I know there’s another shifter around. Perhaps it’s a werepuffin that’ll come dive bombing you when you put the bins out.”

“Now who’s being a pillock?” Although I made sure I’d put the bins out before it got dark.

Jonny had got me worried about what could come rummaging in them later.

We were just getting into preparation mode—luckily, it being June, we had extra time to get ready for the moon’s rays to strike—when a cry of “Shit!” came from the loo.

I dashed to the door, worried that the shifting had started early. “Are you okay? What’s up?”

“I’m bleeding soaking. Tap’s leaking again.”

The bungalow we’d bought was brilliantly adapted, but whoever had put in the toilet must have been having an off day, because the posh taps had started to spray at odd angles whenever the fancy took them. The local plumber, Dai the ballcock, was less than impressed with the original work. He was going to put new ones in but until they arrived from the supplier we had to make do with a holding job, one which he was sure wouldn’t hold too well.

“I’ll be back to do it now, next week,” he’d promised, “as soon as the parts are in. Let me know if it goes tits up in the meantime.”

“Shall I get onto Dai?” I asked, phone in hand as Jonny emerged.

“Only if he can get here quick, or we’ll scare the crap out of him. Otherwise we’ll have to isolate the supply.”

“You ring him.” I thrust the phone over. “I’ll turn the supply off at the mains.” That was one advantage of a pressure driven, non-header tank system.

“Dai’s not there,” Jonny said, as I eventually returned to the lounge. I’d been filling up the kettle and some jugs so we had a water store, then I’d checked all the other taps inside and

outside the house, because I wouldn't have been able to settle otherwise. "His appendix has burst, so he's in the hospital."

"Bugger that. On all counts." Nobody would wish appendix problems on a pal, especially a good plumber, given they're as rare as hens' teeth.

"Luckily he's got a mate covering for him, doing any urgent jobs. Darren. That's who the call rolled over to."

"That's fortunate. Can he come out?"

"Yep, although he says he's short of time so he'll take a look and if he can't fix or isolate it easily he'll have to come back tomorrow." Jonny grinned. "Just as well he's got a date or whatever tonight."

"Can you imagine him backing out of the loo and finding half a ton of armadillo sitting watching the day-night cricket on telly through the lounge door because it didn't make it out of the hallway before it shifted?" Just as well I can administer CPR. "Here, is it usual for plumbers to employ a locum?"

"I wondered that. Crossed my mind it was a set up—one of those two police officers setting up a sting—so I made small talk. Seems he's a pal of Dai's, down here on holiday. He's offered to cover any emergencies." Jonny wrinkled his pert little nose. "Seems like he's the real deal, but we'd better be on our guard."

Ten minutes later, he was pulling up onto the drive. As I opened the front door I had the odd qualm because he turned out to be driving a normal car rather than his plumber's van, but if he was here on holiday he wouldn't have brought the whole kit and caboodle, would he? I supposed he'd have had to borrow Dai's wrench and packing tape and whatever other arcane things these guys are possessed of, because surely he wouldn't have taken those with him for a week of sea, sand and sunburn.

Nice looking lad, though. Well toned, cheeky face. Pinged my gaydar but I've been known to be wrong. Pinged Jonny's gaydar, too, he told me later, but he's bloody hopeless at knowing. Anyhow, Darren was all smiles and concern and didn't seem at all perturbed by the fact we were two blokes sharing the same house, although he was edgy about the time, glancing at his watch every couple of minutes. I reckoned he had a hot date with a hunky lock forward in Haverfordwest and was itching to get there.

He had a look at the tap, said it was beyond hope, but reckoned he could isolate it so we could at least have water to the rest of the house. There was a small valve, although some clown had located it round the back of the outflow pipe and right at floor height, so you had to be a contortionist to get there. Gave us an opportunity to feast our eyes on his anatomy, though.

Jonny was starting to get a bit agitated the longer things went on, so the pair of them were looking at their watches like me when I took my A levels and was willing time to slow down so I could get a bit more stuff onto the paper.

Eventually Darren gave a jubilant, "Done it!" Unfortunately, he lifted his head a bit too quickly in his triumph and cracked it on the sink.

Just as well I can deal with unconsciousness as well as give CPR.

"Shall I ring 999?" Jonny asked.

"Not yet," I said, checking our casualty over. Which would have been an added bonus if the situation hadn't been so nasty. "I think he's just knocked out."

He was breathing steadily enough, so I eased him into the recovery position, at which point he was starting to come round.

“What happened?” He said, groggily, before lifting his arm and nearly cracking that on the toilet bowl.

“Steady on. You whacked the back of your head and were knocked out for a moment. Wait until you feel a bit steadier before you try to sit up.”

“Billy...” Jonny tapped his watch.

“Maybe you can go and put the kettle on? I’ll make us all a cup of tea.” Given that Darren couldn’t see my face, I made all sorts of antic expressions, in the direction of the lounge.

“Could you just go and check whether I left my laptop on? I think it was overheating.”

“Eh? Oh, right.” The penny dropped. “Kettle and laptop it is. But no tea for me—I’m going to dry off then I may try to get forty winks. Didn’t sleep well with the thunder last night.”

“Okay, no worries.” I shooed him off before his overegging of the explanation pudding became suspicious. I turned back to my patient. “Let me check your head for bleeding. I don’t think the skin got broken.”

“It’s fine, I’m sure.” Darren rubbed the sore spot. “Shit!”

“Let me check, okay? You’re such a wimp.” I gingerly pulled back his hair but all I could see was a large, red lump that appeared to be growing before my eyes. “I don’t think you’ve got a cracked skull, but if I were you I’d have it looked at.”

“No! No look I don’t want to end up in a ward next to Dai. He talks the hind legs off a donkey.”

I grinned—Dai would have talked the hind legs off a T. Rex—although I suspect he was more worried about missing his date than listening to a gabbling Welshman. “Fair point.” I led him to the kitchen, hovering at his elbow because he wasn’t too steady on his pins. I perched him on a chair then got to work with the teapot.

“You may not want to hear this, but you look like shit.” I waggled a mug. “Milk? Sugar?”

“In reverse order, no, yes and thanks a bunch.”

If he could answer things in reverse he couldn’t be that bad, although that wobbly progress through the house still concerned me. “I’ll run you down to Casualty; shouldn’t take long to be seen on a Tuesday night. I can get you back here or wherever you need to be. I know you’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Yeah, home. Holiday flat, I mean.”

I guessed he must be meeting his hot date there. “Takeaway and a bottle of beer?”

“Eh?”

I gave him his mug of tea. “I sort of assumed you were meeting up with somebody. You said you were short on time.”

“I was. I am.” He fished out his phone. “I think I’d better cancel my—um—mate, though. I’ll just get some kip.”

“Don’t be so hasty. You might want somebody around for the next few hours. In case there’s a delayed reaction.”

“Stop fussing. I’ve had worse than this.”

I bit back my reply. I’d done my best and if he ended up passing out and cracking his skull on something in his flat and being found dead three days later I wouldn’t have it on my conscience.

Only I would.

What could I actually do, though, if the guy wouldn’t let me take him in for a check over? I couldn’t suggest he stayed here for us to keep an eye on him because it was going to be

damned awkward not letting him in the lounge or explaining where Jonny had got to. And what those strange noises he was bound to hear were.

We drank our tea over a constrained conversation in which he seemed to be trying to prove he was okay by using long plumbing-related words, most of which I didn't understand. By the time I'd decided I'd probably over-reacted and he'd be fine to go we'd both drained our mugs dry, so he hopped off his chair. And straight onto the floor. Well, not quite straight, as he'd managed to stay upright for a good two seconds before his knees buckled.

"I'm calling an ambulance." I fished out my phone but before I could unlock it, he'd grabbed my trouser leg.

"No, please. I hate hospitals. Shit scared of the places. They always want to poke and prod you."

I could sympathise with that—Jonny would too, because he'd had his fill of the places. But there's being scared and being stupid. "What if I call the local GP out? Or at least get some advice over the phone?"

He glanced at his watch again, clearly shocked at how late it had got. "There won't be any GPs on duty now. Anyway, they'll probably just say 'keep it until it gets better'."

"Or until you die." I had to be blunt. I contemplated knocking him out again and bodily dragging him into the car and off to casualty, but he wasn't small and Jonny was soon going to be no help, even if simply on a door opening front. We weren't too far from moonrise.

Darren glanced at his watch, shrugged, and said, "Probably too late anyway."

"Sorry? Too late for what?"

"To get home. To get somewhere safe."

For a horrible moment I wondered if he was talking about Jonny. Did he know about the shifting and had he been determined to get out of the bungalow before anything happened?

"You're safe here," I promised him. I held out a hand, getting him onto his feet and into the chair again. "You can lie down in the spare room until you feel better. And if you feel worse, I'll ring 999."

He snorted. "You're a Christian, but it wasn't my safety I was thinking of." He looked around him then lowered his voice. "Do you know what tonight is?"

"Tuesday."

"Apart from that."

I swallowed hard. "Full moon?"

"Got it in one. Do you believe in shape shifters?"

I swallowed even harder. "I understand there can be such things."

"You'd better believe there are. And some of them are pretty nasty."

I must have subconsciously edged back, because he laughed and held up a hand.

"Not me. I wouldn't hurt anyone, not consciously, anyway. I just sometimes forget myself, so when I'm home I lock myself away until it's all done." He paused, puzzled. "This doesn't seem to be a great shock to you. Don't tell me you're a shifter yourself?"

"Not me, it's J—" I stopped, annoyed with myself. "Just that I know someone who is. So it's no real surprise." Like I said at the start, you can get your mind round anything. "What animal do you become?"

He shuddered. "Like they say on Facebook, it's complicated. It used to be a wolf. Bog standard. But I had—I guess you'd call it an experience. I was out for a run, in wolf form not just down to the gym, minding my own business and only annoying the rabbits, when this

dirty great brute jumped me. Gave me a hell of a bite to my flank—I've still got the scars—and since then I've taken to changing to...oh hell, this is so embarrassing.”

Not as embarrassing as an overgrown armadillo, I thought. “What animal is it?”

“A bloody great ram. Like the sort you see leading out a regimental band.”

I thought that was a goat, but I let the point pass. Maybe it's hard to tell what you really are from the inside. “A ram? Blimey. I bet that's impressive.”

“So I'm told.” A slight flush ran over his cheeks, which I guessed was embarrassment rather than a medical development. “You might not want me in your spare room, any more than they'd want me at the hospital. Can get a bit—rough.”

“So why did you come down here on holiday if you know it would be full moon this week?”

“Because I thought I'd be running over the hills, for once. Having a whale of a time—tup of a time—rather than hiding away until it's all done.” He fingered his skull then grimaced.

“Didn't count on *this* happening.”

“Hell, yes. You wouldn't want to get into a butting competition out in some field miles from anywhere.” I scratched my head; how was I going to be able to cope with two shifters? And did rams fight glyptodonts and who would win?

“Have you got a cellar? Or an outhouse or something? I don't think I'm going to be too excitable tonight, not with this head.”

“I could give you some co-codamol—try to knock you out. Does that work with rams?”

“Couldn't tell you. We could give it a try, though.” He drew his car keys out of his pocket.

“I've got a bale of hay in the boot of the car, if you could fetch it. Give me something to snuggle onto.”

“Righty ho.”

I've been in some daft scrapes in my life, but fetching hay for a were-ram who's waiting in my kitchen with possible concussion, while dropping in en route to explain what the fuck's going on to a soon-to-be-glyptodont takes the biscuit. Actually it takes the whole crate of custard creams. Jonny just shrugged and said it would make for an interesting conversation over breakfast and how mentioning mint sauce at any point might not be a good idea.

I left him to get into his shell while I got the garage—luckily, like most folk, we don't keep the car in there as it would restrict Jonny's access—comfy. I found an old plant container shaped like a shallow trough and put water in it (co-codamol can make you pretty thirsty), then went back to my patient.

Darren was starting to look a touch fuzzy, although that might have been my imagination, so I fetched him a dose of painkiller, watched while he swallowed it, then got him into the garage and settled him for the night. Not that I was going to get a lot of rest, what with keeping one eye on Jonny and the other on our guest, although I'd be observing him through the garage window. Big butch things, rams. Any sign he wasn't well and I'd be getting out the vet—no playing at James Herriott for me.

I woke on the hallway floor at seven thirty in the morning with loud music coming from the kitchen and the smell of bacon drifting through the door. Somebody must have thrown a blanket over me in the night—don't think I got it myself, but I don't remember much past three am—and I had a cushion for a pillow.

“Only seventeeeeeen, dah daah dah daah dah dum.”

I stuck my head round the door. “Oi, Agnetha and Annafrieda, can you keep it down?”

“Sorry.” Jonny, who was in charge of the teapot while Darren had the frying pan, didn’t look sorry at all. “We were making you breakfast. Seeing as you did such a great job last night. I’ve explained to Darren, by the way. He’s well impressed.”

“Never met a wereglyptodont before. Food’s up,” he continued blithely. I sat down at the table and waited for my plate to be filled. My life of weirdness didn’t seem to be getting any less weird any time soon, as proved by the subsequent conversation comparing their experiences. I was grateful that Jonny had found someone who “got it” but some of the detail wasn’t suitable for the breakfast table.

“Can you two leave this for when I’m not around, please?”

“Sorry, mate.” Darren raised an apologetic hand. “Got carried away. I’ll change the subject.”

“Not to Dai’s appendectomy, either.”

We chatted general plumbing things, like the botch job that had been done with the taps and other domestic disasters we had known.

“Houses are just money pits, sometimes.” Darren said.

“Yep.” Jonny stabbed a final bit of bacon. “And the workmen are the worst. You have to watch these plumbers or you end up fleeced.”

I groaned, slapped Jonny’s shoulder and staggered off to bed.

For Darren’s real story, as opposed to this AU version, see Elin Gregory’s *Sheep’s Clothing*.