



Last
Ride

dina james

Last Ride

by Dina James

© 2015 Dina James
All Rights Reserved

For Judy

The harsh scent of filtered air assaulted his every sense. He wrinkled his nose at the rush of conditioned breeze that greeted him as the glass doors of the lobby slid open. It made his skin crawl, and he shrugged his shoulders in an attempt to dispel it. The eyes of the pretty brunette at the reception desk widened as he approached. He smiled and leaned against the counter.

“Howdy,” he said. “Might’n you be able to tell me what room Ms. Judy Bagshaw is in?”

“A-are you family?” the receptionist asked.

“If I ain’t, I oughtta be.” He nodded to the computer in front of her. “Billy Cardoza.”

She punched a few buttons on the keyboard and nodded. “You’re on the list. Oh.”

““Oh?” What’s ‘oh?’ I don’t like the sound of ‘oh,’” he said, peering over the counter at the computer screen.

The receptionist looked up at him, sympathy clear on her face. “Ms. Bagshaw is in the critical care unit.”

“Hell, darlin’, I knew that. ‘S why I’m here! Point me the way, would ya? Get all turned about in place like this. More of an outdoor guy.”

She laughed a little. “Yeah, I can see that. Down that hall, through the emergency room lobby. You’ll see a set of double doors. Tell the desk there who you’ve come to see and they’ll buzz you in.”

“Much obliged,” he said, touching a finger to an invisible hat.

“Uh, you won’t be allowed to take those in with you,” she said, nodding to the huge bouquet of fresh-cut flowers in his arms. “They aren’t allowed in...in her ward. Hospital policy, sorry. They’re beautiful.”

“Now they’re yours,” Billy said, holding the flowers over the counter.

“Oh, I can’t-”

He smiled again. “Sure you can, darlin’. Anyone says anything about it, you just say they’re from your boyfriend.” He winked at her.

“I don’t have-”

He arched a brow at her and cocked his head. She looked at the flowers, then back up at him. He grinned. Robin always said she couldn’t resist his smile. “Lady-killer,” she called it. It had the desired effect and the receptionist took the bouquet. “Atta girl!”

She blushed and smiled. “Thanks. They’re beautiful.”

“Glad you like ‘em. Was worried they might not be pretty enough. There anything else I can’t take in there?”

“Pretty much everything,” she said. “No cell phone, food, or drinks.”

“Don’t got none of those on me right now. Thanks, darlin’.” He nodded to the flowers. “You enjoy them.”

“I will. Thanks...Mr. Cardoza.”

He rolled his eyes. “None of that, now. Name’s Billy.”

“Skyla.”

He grinned again. “Know a Skyla. Hell of a gal. Nice to meet another’n. You take care now.” He knocked on the counter and headed down the hall she pointed out. It took every ounce of will he possessed not to bury his nose in the crook of his elbow as he passed through the emergency room lobby to the double doors. No matter how much time he spent among them, he would never get used to the stench of human sweat. It was even worse when mixed with blood and...other uniquely human odors. Indoor plumbing was the best thing to ever happen to this realm. He reached the desk and after a few moments of checking him in, he walked through the doors with a paper sticker that read “VISITOR” across the top in big green letters stuck to his faded blue t-shirt. He smiled at a nurse behind the rounded countertop in the center of the dim room.

“Ms. Bagshaw is in room seven,” said the nurse, pointing to a curtained area behind another sliding glass door that was cracked partly open.

“Appreciation.” He peered around the curtain and grinned at the sleeping woman in the bed behind it. He found a chair in the corner and slid it beside the bed-rail. He reached for the woman’s hand and clasped it gently before he brought it to his lips. He kissed the knuckles and smiled. “Come on, you. Didn’t come all this way to watch you nap.”

“You bring Rox?” she said in a faint voice without opening her eyes.

“Sure did. Parked her just where you said.”

“I want to see her. Help me up.”

“Won’t they get mad at you, leavin’ your bed?”

The woman opened her eyes and stared at him.

Billy held up his hands and stood. “They got their hands full with you, for sure. Come on, then.” He slid his hands under her shoulders and knees. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He lifted her without effort, but stopped before he straightened. “Gonna be a puzzle, with all these tubes and wires everywhere, Jude.” The woman let out a frustrated sigh and nodded. He laid her back down as gently as he picked her up. He looked around the room. “Here, let’s move this pole over here. It’s got wheels. We’ll move this machine...looks like somethin’ I hook an engine up to in those damned computerized motors...over closer to the window. Give you a little more room on that. There’s still that thing attached to your face, though.”

Judy hooked her thumbs under the oxygen line and slid the cannula over her head. “I can live without that oxygen for a few minutes. I want to

see her.”

“All right, but just a minute, now. Ain’t come all this way just to get thrown out in five.”

She nodded and held her arms out again. Billy sighed and scooped her up. He carried her to the window, easily supporting her with one arm as he used the other to brush the blinds aside. He nodded to a lamppost in the corner of a partially-filled parking lot. “There she is.”

Judy brought her hands to her mouth for a moment. She blinked as she stared out the window at Billy’s blue 1966 Mustang Fastback.

He held her tight against his chest and rested his forehead against hers. A sharp beep made him jump, and he smiled sheepishly as the curtain across the door was pulled back to reveal a nurse. The woman’s mouth dropped open.

“She just wanted to see out the window,” he said before the nurse spoke. “I was helping.”

“You can’t just take - move -”

“I know, I know,” he said, carrying Judy back to the bed. “Wasn’t hurting her. Wouldn’t dare!”

The nurse glared at him. He stayed out of the way as the woman bustled about, pointedly putting things back the way they had been. He kept quiet until she finished.

“Visiting hours are over in ten minutes. None too soon, if you ask me. Taking her out of bed-”

“Sorry! I didn’t mean-”

Judy spoke as loud as she could manage. “It’s all right, Billy. She knows you didn’t mean any harm.”

The nurse shook her head. “Judy, you know you shouldn’t be up. If you’re going to call people in just to help you move, I’m going to have to speak to the desk about your visitors.” She looked at Billy. “Ten more minutes.”

He nodded and the nurse left the room. Judy looked at him. “You can do it, can’t you?”

“Yeah, but gonna be tricky. Look what just moving you did.”

Judy waved her hand and wrinkled her nose. “We’ll just have to be quick.”

“Jude...this ain’t really my thing. I mean...broad daylight’s fine for just me, but...and you bein’ sick an’ all....”

She met his eyes. “You really think I’d do better staying here? Like this?” She swept a hand over her body.

He shook his head. “I ain’t sayin’ tubes and wires are a good thing, but this is an Enclave for humans...what they do here...take care of you when

you're all banged up."

"It has to be now, Billy. He said it has to be now."

Billy snorted. "Don't see why he don't come get you himself. He too big and fancy for that? Gotta get a dog to fetch and carry?"

"You're not a dog, hon, as you've said a hundred times before. And you know he would if he could. It's got nothing to do with being high and mighty."

"Boy's got a stick so far up his a--"

"Now, Billy."

He growled and reached for her hand. "You're sure? Really, really, really sure? You know there ain't no undoin' this."

Judy nodded.

"Remember I asked when you're cursin' me for being your delivery boy."

She smiled at him. "I will. And thank you."

"Still think this is nuts, but hey...I owe you more than one, and fair's fair..." He heaved a reluctant sigh and closed his eyes for a long moment. When he opened them again, the room shimmered, wavy and distorted. He again scooped Judy up in his arms and held her tight against his chest as he walked through the wall, the tubes and wires limp against the bed she no longer occupied. Slowly, as though he were wading in neck-deep water, he walked toward his Mustang, now the only car in the lot, black, and covered in spikes and chains. He slid Judy across the driver's seat to the passenger side and got behind the wheel. He started the engine and drove slowly through the portal in the middle of the lot.

The car exited the portal into night. Stars blanketed the sky, bright in spite of the full moon above them. Billy stopped the car and looked over at his long-time friend. He reached for her shoulder and shook it gently. "Hey...we're here."

"Mmm," Judy mumbled. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. "Faster than I thought. Harder, too." She whimpered softly and closed her eyes again. Her head lolled to the side as she fell unconscious.

"Be easier soon, darlin'." He got out of the car and went around to gather her into his massive arms. He carried her to the stone archway illuminated by the Mustang's headlights. He looked around, taking a long sniff of the cold night air. "Ain't nobody here, Jude."

"Nearly ninety years in this realm and you still have not learned to speak the language properly, William," came a deep voice tinged with amusement. "I thought your people had keen eyesight."

"Smell better than we see, bloodsucker," Billy said.

"Come now. There's no need for insult."

“You’re the only one of your kind that don’t smell like shit, Carillon. Don’t see how you do it.”

“I shall take that as a compliment. I shall also take your burden, if you are ready to be relieved of it.”

“She ain’t no burden, she’s my friend, and I’ll thank you to remember that when you....”

The vampire waited.

“...when you...”

“Turn her?”

Billy nodded. “Don’t agree with it. Don’t want her doing it. But...Syd said he’d take her, if...but he can’t, ‘cause...so it’s got to be...someone else....”

“She can join the Cardozians when she’s fledged. You’ll see her again. She’ll be sheltered well among the Destrati.”

Billy sniffed and looked up at the vampire. “You the one gonna do it, Kyle? Make my girl into a...soulless...bloodsucking....”

Kyle shook his head. “I am not...I am capable of much, but never that. I don’t know whom will take on the responsibility of her, but it will be someone worthy. I give you my word.”

Billy laughed and wiped his cheek on his shoulder. “Must be crazy, takin’ heart from the word of a vamp.”

“You are kin to them. One should think that would give it some weight.” Kyle stepped in front of him and held his arms out.

Billy passed Judy over gently and caught her hand up. He kissed it softly and ran a hand through her hair. “Take care, Jude. See you.” He looked at Kyle and nodded.

Kyle inclined his head and disappeared.

Billy walked slowly back to his car and slid behind the wheel. “Well, baby...we got to take her for one last ride, like she wanted. She always loved you more than me.” He looked out the windshield. He kissed his fingertips and turned them toward the stone archway, then started the engine and turned the car around.