

CRIMSON SNOW

BY L. G. ROLLINS

Sitting in a sticky pub on the seedy side of London made Doctor Elise Hopkins fully aware of just how acute her sense of smell had become.

It wasn't helping her overly sensitive stomach, either. Her mother never once warned her of all the small but incredibly difficult phenomenons which were part of life when a woman was increasing.

Nathaniel, her husband for the past year and a half, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her in close to him. "We don't have to do this," he whispered low.

Easy for him to say. Elise kept her voice equally soft. "I need more test subjects. I'm absolutely useless as a research doctor if I have nothing to research."

Though she was determined to see this through, there was no denying that this pub was far and beyond anything she was used to. Instead of clean tables filled with Bunsen burners and glass tubes, the wooden table tops of this place sported more dirt than grain. Instead of well-educated discussions regarding America's most recent attempts at flying jackets, Elise's face burned with the lewd comments pressing in around her.

Another unfortunate symptom when one was increasing, Elise was fairly more emotional as of late. She had endured many insults and derogatory comments in her line of work, and all with professional competency. However, earlier that day, when Nathaniel had suggested he go to this meeting without her, frustration had bubbled up unlike any she'd ever felt before. She very nearly cried.

Nathaniel leaned in close enough that she could feel his warm breath against her neck. "We have a roaring fire and some mistletoe at home. Why not research that?"

She couldn't help but smile—still, she also blushed. "Nathaniel, stop that. People will stare."

"The *only* good thing about being in a place like this is I can kiss you and no one will think twice." He cupped her chin with a finger and turned her face to him. "Consider this helping us to blend in." He kissed her softly on the mouth.

Elise's face heated again, but less from embarrassment and more from the excited tingles erupting across her lips. "We'll 'blend in' when we get back home."

He kissed her once more on the side of her head and leaned back in his chair, though his arm didn't drop away from around her shoulders. "I'll hold you to it."

It was sweet the way he was masking his own discomfort at having her here by pretending to

blend in. She was not so naive to have missed the long stares her direction. Nor was she unaware that the only women who came in this pub were the kind willing to sell themselves for a few pounds.

Nathaniel's kisses were his way of showing support, love, or concern. But, tonight, they also showed the other men in the pub they were to keep their hands off her, and Elise appreciated it.

"What do you think of those three?" Nathaniel nodded to his left while his gaze fell back to the table. They hadn't ordered anything to eat or drink, which probably looked strange to others and upset the pub's owner, but Elise's stomach had been too finicky with even the safest and best prepared meals. She couldn't eat in a place like this and expect to keep it down.

Elise scanned the room the direction Nathaniel had indicated. Three men were strolling toward a table in the back corner, one barely lit.

The one at the front of the group seemed middle aged with dark, shaggy hair. Directly behind him was a young man, probably no more than twenty. He sported a cocky grin and a small limp. The third man, following along in the rear, was the oldest of the group. Graying at the temples he repeatedly glanced over his shoulder with eyes framed by wrinkles.

Elise took in a deep breath. "That's them." The time had come.

In the past year, her research into werewolves had proved wildly successful. She was making large strides toward better understanding why some individuals became werewolves and others did not. But everything would come to a grinding halt soon, if she didn't find more werewolves willing to be her test subjects.

Elise and Nathaniel stood. Her heart pounded against her rib cage as they approached the isolated table where the three sat.

"Good evening gentlemen," she said.

They only laughed.

"Ain't no gentlemen here," said the middle-aged man.

"No fourth chair, neither," said the youngest. "Guess you'll just have to sit on me lap."

She didn't bother giving him a reply, but she could feel Nathaniel's dark glare and, guessing from the angle at which his shoulder pressed against hers, his other arm was pulled back, hand by his pistol.

Elise often wondered if it was fate that had made her fall in love with a precautionary husband, or just her own subconscious knowing she would need it. Either way, she always felt safe when he was near, no matter what they faced.

"I am Doctor Hopkins. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

No recognition lit their faces.

The youngest waved a grease-stained hand. "Don't matter if I've heard of you before or not. I'm not particular like that."

“My maiden name was Doctor Sterling.”

The table stilled. The men’s faces went taunt and they glanced at one another.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of me now.” Pleasure at her name alone being able to elicit such an expression made her lip tick up in a partial smile. She tapped the feeling down immediately. Gracious, she was all sorts of crazed emotions these days.

“Excuse us, ma’am.” The middle-aged man stood, directing for the others to follow suit with a flick of his hand. “We was just takin’ our leave.”

“Please,” Elise stepped directly in front of him, blocking his exit. “I mean you no harm.” Imagine a woman like her having to reassure three grown men—three werewolves no less—that she meant them no harm. If they chose to, any one of them could choke her with ease.

Again the men’s eyes gave away their nervousness, jumping from one corner of the crowded pub to the other. They were surrounded by witnesses. Granted, Elise didn’t actually think anyone here would go to the authorities. But if anyone here suspected these men’s true nature, their lives would be over just the same.

“Sit down and let’s talk,” she said.

Nathaniel pulled over two chairs from a table not far away. Elise sat in one and he took the other.

“No one can overhear us,” she said decisively.

“Let’s go,” the graying man spoke for the first time. His voice scratched, probably from years of breathing in smoke. Pulling on that and adding to it the younger man’s grease-stained hands, Elise surmised these men worked in a factory.

The oldest and the youngest were a lot alike in other ways, too. Like the way they were both quick to smile at the lewd. Looking at them was like looking at book ends. One at the beginning of adulthood and one at the end, but nothing in the years between had made them all that different.

“I want to hear what she has to say,” responded the middle-aged man retaking his chair. At his command the other two sat.

So the middle-aged man was the leader. Seeing how the other two deferred to him, Elise had half suspected as much. Now she was quite certain; and that meant she only needed to convince him.

Elise faced the leader. “I’m running another experiment.”

“Like your last one?”

“This one is much smaller in scope. But could prove equally as illuminating. I only need some hair samples.” She’d first gotten the idea when she received Rowley’s letter four months prior. Rowley asked if there was any way, using chemistry, to know what was making a person sick. She instantly wrote him back: send her some hair samples and she could run tests.

Why had she never thought to do the same for her test subjects? It was an unforgivable lapse in

judgment on her part, one that she was not fully ready to forgive herself for.

“Hair samples?” the middle-aged man visibly grimaced.

Elise tried to keep her tone casual—she was asking only for a bit of hair, not that she pull their teeth out. “Some before the full moon and a little during. That is all.”

The middle-aged man shook his head. “I don’t believe we’re interest—”

“You will be well paid, of course.” She turned toward the other two. “Anyone willing to participate will be.”

The lightness in the young man’s expression slipped away leaving his face hard. He glanced at the leader, giving the man a knowing look. “There’s only one thing I want,” the young man said.

The leader gave a single subtle nod. “Alright. You’ve intrigued us. But we can’t talk here.” His voice dropped even lower as he placed a few coins on the table top, by their mugs. “Best go out back.”

The three stood and moved down a small hallway at the back of the pub.

Nathaniel turned to her, head already shaking his adamant disagreement.

She squeezed his hand. “I have to try,” she whispered.

“Fine,” he said in a burst of frustration. No matter his worry, he never stifled her. “But stay close.”

As if she was planning on wandering. “Always.”

Elise followed the three men with Nathaniel directly behind her. They passed through a door which creaked terribly and out into the cold night. Light snow fell around them, biting Elise’s cheeks and nose.

A single gas burning lamp hung above the door, casting no more than a pitiful circle of semi-light.

“Alright.” The leader crossed his arms. “Talk.”

Nathaniel stood so close behind her, she could feel the tense muscles across his chest. They were wholly alone and with three werewolves. Misgivings flipped her stomach over. The quicker she could end this meeting the better.

“I just need a few samples—”

“We get that part. But what’s this about doing so during the full moon? You plan to snip our hair while we hang?”

“Of course not. I have worked with over a dozen werewolves during my career. I know how to keep your secret safe.” She used to be able to say that not one werewolf had ever been harmed. But that was before William and Antsy had tried to kill her by forcing themselves to shift into werewolves in front of witnesses.

The memory made her chest hurt and her eyes sting. Gracious, now was not the time to be

reduced to blabbering. She hadn't cried over the loss of her friend in at least three months—she was finally finding peace and felt she had begun to move on. What a wretched time to backtrack.

Elise forced her voice to remain steady. "During the full moon, I have a place you can stay. You will be safe there."

"Safe? There's only one place we'll ever be safe," the leader argued. The other two stood silently with arms crossed, seemingly willing to let him speak for them. "But we'll get to that in a moment."

Elise paused—what did he mean by "only one place they'd be safe"?

"I'll have some food ready for after you shift," she continued. "It will have just enough laudanum to ease you into a comfortable sleep."

"Bah, we ain't no house wife. Laudanum wouldn't be strong enough to—"

"I have done this before, I assure you." Elise was done with this meeting. With the icy cold. With the nausea rolling about her stomach. With the creeping sensation that they were not safe here. She would tell these men the facts, let them decide, and then she was leaving.

"You will be put to sleep and then I'll only snip a bit of hair. You'll awake the next morning, back to your normal self, and be free to go."

The leader tapped his chin with a finger. Oh, if only he would agree—and quickly. Then she could go home, where it was warm and safe and she was free to burst into either tears or giggles or hiccups or whatever this feeling inside her was threatening to become.

"What kind of payment did you have in mind?" he asked. At least he was considering it.

"Thirty-five shillings a piece."

Jaws dropped all around. It was nearly two weeks' worth of pay for men like these. But, Elise had learned early on in her research, money talked far louder than her pontificating on how their willingness to participate could change lives. She was asking them to risk being found out, and that came with a high price.

"Moreover," she continued in their silence. "If you would like the use of my space for the remaining two nights of the full moon, that could be arranged. It is a place to go where I can guarantee you will neither be found nor exposed."

Almost two weeks' worth of pay plus one full moon of not having to worry about being caught. She was offering a lot; hopefully it would be enough.

The leader glanced first at the younger man—who shook his head, lips turned down—and then to the graying man—who appeared too deep in thought to respond. The leader turned back to Elise.

"That is very generous of you, doctor. However, there's really only one form of payment we're interested in."

"What is that?"

He glanced down both sides of the dark alley they were in. “We want you to get us aboard the *Gearhound*.”

“Excuse me?” she sputtered.

Behind her, Nathaniel tensed yet more. What had happened aboard Nathaniel’s submarine was no secret, not among the upper class, not among the lower class. During the past year, fewer and fewer werewolf attacks had been reported. Elise had even met with a man who discreetly sold items which made life easier for werewolves, and he had commented that “business was slowing down”.

It seemed Nathaniel’s guess was right—werewolves from all over were seeking refuge on the submarine.

“I am sorry,” Elise said. “I have no contact with those now aboard the *Gearhound*. I cannot help you there, however—”

He held up a hand, stopping her. “Then we aren’t interested.”

More emotions that Elise was used to coping with swelled up inside her. “Aren’t interested?” That was it; Elise was fed-up with all the self-serving people she dealt with daily—werewolf or no—who didn’t care that they could be helping others.

“Aren’t interested in providing the very science needed to save others like you? Aren’t interested in making a difference the world over?” Her eyes burned—good heavens she was beginning to cry. She never cried, not over anything.

“Elise.” Nathaniel’s tone held a hint of warning and he pulled gently against her elbow.

He was probably right; there was no convincing these men now. But she couldn’t stop from pushing just a bit harder.

“You aren’t even interested in easy money and one month of safety? What kind of blackguard doesn’t even want that?”

The leader’s expression darkened. “This one.”

He wrapped a hand around Elise’s throat. The young man tackled Nathaniel, and they both tumbled into the snow. Elise couldn’t turn to see what was happening. The man’s hand tightened around her throat, and a panicked heat burned against her skin. Elise beat against the man, scratching his arm and shoulder, but unable to reach his face.

Nathaniel’s gun went off. There was a *ping* as the bullet ricocheted further down the alley.

The leader threw Elise against the building wall. With his other hand, he drew a knife. Orange lamp light glinted off the hard blade as several snow flakes landed upon it.

Elise stared up at the weapon. This was it; she was nowhere near strong enough to overpower a normal man, let alone a werewolf.

Her arm instinctively wrapped around her middle. But she hadn’t given birth yet. This baby need their chance to breathe—to hear the waves splash against the harbor, to revel in plopping small

lemon drops into heated potassium chlorate.

The gray haired man walked up behind the leader. He scowled down at Elise—then the creases on his forehead deepened and his murderous expression changed, angling closer toward pained regret.

His hand tightened into a fist, and he punched the leader deep in the stomach.

The leader grunted, let go of Elise, and stumbled backward, kicking up snow. The gray haired man stepped between him and Elise, dropping into a protective stance.

The leader shook his head. Swearing loudly, he tackled the graying man.

Elise pushed off the wall behind her and hurried over to where Nathaniel was wrestling with the youngest man. A dark stain covered most of the up-churned snow. She reached for the young man, but paused—she needed a weapon, something to fight back with.

The scuffle between the gray haired man and the leader grew louder. Elise looked around her. A long, well worn beam of wood rested against the building.

Elise grabbed it and heaved it high. Aiming for the young man's head, she brought it crashing down.

He didn't so much as shutter. Instead he paused, his forearm pinned down against Nathaniel's throat, and turned, scowling at her. Nathaniel threw his elbow up and it cracked against the young man's chin.

His eyes blurred over as he teetered slightly. Nathaniel shoved him off and then punched the young man soundly across the face.

Nathaniel rolled to his feet, took Elise's hand, and together they bolted. Sweat trickled down her neck as they approached their carriage. She should not be this winded having run so short a time, but she didn't dare slow down, no matter how desperate for air she felt.

A gun shot echoed from the alley way, then a second.

Elise paused, her eyes going to Nathaniel. His expression echoed her own uncertainty—which of the werewolves found the gun first. His lips hardened into a thin line. Elise knew her husband well enough to interpret that look as well: they weren't going to stay here long enough to find out.

Nathaniel threw open the carriage door and all but tossed her inside.

"Please wait!"

Elise spun around and looked over Nathaniel's shoulder.

The graying man stood by the corner of the pub, breathing heavily, hands up in capitulation, Nathaniel's gun dangling off a couple of his fingers.

Nathaniel moved directly in front of Elise, his body shielding hers.

"Please," he said again, his tone pleading even as he breathed in large gulps of air. "I want in."

The graying man twisted the gun in his own hand until he held the barrel. Taking a cautious step

forward, he offered the gun, handle first.

Nathaniel seemed unwilling to move, but then took one long step forward and swooped the gun out of the man's hand. He flipped the firearm around and aimed it directly at the graying man's head.

Elise slipped a hand under his arm and rested it against her husband's chest. She, too, wanted nothing more than to dash away home. But she got into werewolf research, not because it was easy, but because it was worth all the risks.

"We wouldn't have escaped without him," she said to Nathaniel.

Nathaniel scowled, then slowly stepped to the side. Elise lowered herself down from the carriage.

With arms still up, the graying man took a few steps closer. "I want to help you find a solution." He glanced around, much as he had when he first entered the pub. One of his hands fell directly into a beam of soft light—the callouses along his knuckles were small and appeared shallow; his first shift hadn't been long ago then.

"When I first . . . When it first happened I figured God was punishin' me for my life of thievery and self-indulgence," he explained. "But then, what you said about helping science, about helping others like me."

He shrugged. "Maybe this change in me is really a chance to make amends."

Nervous uncertainty still goosepimpled her skin, but he seemed in earnest.

The graying man bowed his head, then nodded toward the back alley from which they'd all just come. "I don't want to be like that anymore."

Elise watched him carefully. But he remained silent, head bowed, as though awaiting judgment. Nathaniel's gun was still trained on him. He must know they could shoot him without fearing repercussion of the law. Or they could simply turn him in. Either would result in his life ending very abruptly.

The only conclusion Elise could come to was he truly wanted to turn over a new leaf, do something good with his life, and help with her research.

"Very well." Elise tried to keep her voice steady, but it shook slightly. "Meet me at my laboratory tomorrow evening." She gave him quick instructions. The night's chill was forcing its way past the coat Nathaniel had bought her earlier in the season and making her shiver. Or perhaps it was just the panic wearing off. "Go around to the back. There's a small servant door. Knock three times."

He nodded politely, then turned and disappeared in the soft snow fall.

Without a word between them, Elise and Nathaniel ducked back inside the carriage and they set off for home.

After a moment, Elise felt the tension of their near-disastrous encounter leave her in a sudden whoosh.

“Oh, gears above,” she whispered, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes once more.

Nathaniel wrapped both arms around her, pulling her close to him. “It’s a good thing your husband isn’t of an overly-protective nature, or you just might give him a heart attack.”

“It’s a good thing my husband is always by my side.” She snuggled in against his warmth. “Look on the bright side, I have a test subject again.”

“I am looking on the bright side, we’re all safe.”

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “I think I’m ready to research that mistletoe now.”

“Oh,” he said, pulling back, one eyebrow raised. “That’s all it takes?” He gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “I guess I’ll have to set up run-ins with vagabonds more often.”

She laughed softly—they really shouldn’t be joking about the horrible thing that almost happened. But perhaps that was a side-effect of believing you were about to be murdered. Gallows humor, or something like that.

“Happy Christmas,” she said.

He kissed her soundly. “Happy Christmas, my love.”