



PARTY ANIMAL
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Party Animal
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Party Animal

Laura Haubaker

Gold sunlight sieved past the curtains, swimming through a coating of gray grime on the window. Outside, a small black bird twittered a noonday song...

Noon! Tyler jolted awake, tumbling from his beer stained couch in the process.

How could it be noon already? What was the last thing he remembered?

Curled up on the floor, Tyler squinted his eyes and furrowed his brow, deep in concentration. He vaguely recalled some girl named Gina, one of his future-sister-in-law's cousins, coercing him on top of the coffee table while she topped his head with a towering hat of whip cream... and something about smashing peanuts with his forehead... doing the moonwalk upside-down with his palms... breaking the glass in the bathroom window and scrambling on top of the roof, where he beat his fists against the shingles, pried a few off, jumped on all fours, and howled into the moonlight...

Looking down at his hands— short fingers with rubbery gray tips, palms covered over with a course coat of black hair— Tyler concluded that it had definitely been a killer party.

But, *Jesus Christ*, how could he have passed out and forgotten to change back? The moonset was long past, and he wouldn't be able to transform into human form until that night, provided it wasn't overcast.

The wedding ceremony was at one-thirty.

A deep swell of agitation and warning burst forth; Tyler felt a loud, resounding scream screech out from the back of his throat, and the white hair at the top of his head bristled back.

Any other morning, he would have been amused by his own stupidity and coasted through the rest of the day without a worry.

Not this day.

This was the day of his big brother, Jake's, wedding.

Tyler recalled his mother's words, after Jake informed her that his baby brother would be the best man...

"He'll screw it up, Jake. You know him. He drinks, he smokes, he parties, he fools around, and that's not including the whole *monkey* thing!"

The 'whole monkey thing' hadn't been an issue until Tyler's seventh grade year, when he hit puberty. Most kids at that age start sprouting bad cases of acne and obsessing about girls. Though Tyler suffered these consequences like all the rest, he had the added mortification of occasionally transforming into a White-Throated Capuchin Monkey every time he went out into the moonlight.

Before the changes, Tyler had been a studious, reserved child with toothpick legs and

emaciated shoulders; shy as a doe and quiet as a kitten. Then, during the weeks prior to his first full transformation, Tyler felt an uncontrollable urge to follow every whim that coursed through his head. He ate continuously, couldn't sit still for any prolonged period of time, and received his first detention after he answered a difficult algebra question correctly, sprung up from his desk, and ran circles around the classroom, arms flailing.

His mother, a Freudian, said he was going through a pleasing the id phase.

But Tyler sensed it was something more than that, and confessed to Jake that he thought he might be off his rocker. He felt strange prickling sensations beneath his skin, twitching muscles, and occasionally caught himself obsessively picking and combing his fingers through his hair.

To which Jake replied, good-naturally, "Then you're off your rocker" and gave him a cordial sock in the shoulder.

Tyler recalled the first time he transformed fully into a Ringtail. It had been New Year's Eve, and the flat country landscape was coated with a hardened layer of snow, frozen over with a blue coverlet of ice. The county hadn't seen temperatures so low in two decades.

Jake and his friends were having a basement party— eight ball, chips and salsa, videos, poker— and Tyler, woe-low-begotten-friendless-Tyler, was invited by Jake out of pure pity.

Tyler sat on the stoop outside of the house, feeling awkward and anti-social. There was a girl, Aubrine, a friend of Jake's whom Tyler crushed on shamelessly. He couldn't for the life of him say so much as two words to her.

Feeling wretchedly pitiful, Tyler let his head fall into his hands.

From behind a slim shutter of cloud, the moon peeped one eye out.

At the time, the sensation was horrific, small daggers nipping all along his back and neck, and the skin of his arms and legs stretching like hard rubber. At the time, Tyler thought he was having some kind of epileptic seizure, his nerves bursting and rearranging themselves in bits and pieces. He felt his feet curl and widen unnaturally within his shoes, the seams of the canvas popping from the pressure. He felt his sleeves and pants loosen and tangle around extremities that refused to fit in them correctly. The back of his jacket ripped clean down the center, and there was suddenly an aching pain in his tailbone.

He curled into a ball, his clothes suffocating him, shaking with pain and fear, and howled. With a massive burst of energy he ripped his attire off, tore free from the restraints, and felt a gust of frigid air coast along his naked body, carrying with it acute smells— frost, dead soil, car exhaust, gravel— that had gone unnoticed a few moments before.

He was vaguely aware that his balance and posture were completely out of kilter— and the ground was much closer than usual— but he was too panicked to care. Terrified out of his wits, he romped off the stoop, beyond the reach of the houselights, and into the shady darkness of the surrounding cornfields. There he remained, shivering, his tail (tail?) smacking the dried-out corn stalk stumps surrounding him.

From within the house he heard the count-down, the clink of dishware, smelled alcohol and fried food, his stomach churning. Aubrine, his crush, stumbled out the door on the arm of some dude; they both picked up Tyler's torn garments and burst out laughing, waving the fabric around their heads like banners as they returned to the heat of the party. Tyler watched as, one by one, the party guests left, filtered to their cars, drove away into the night...

Until there was only Jake, a lone, lean figure in jeans and jacket, staring out at the dark

horizon and yelling his name.

“Ty! Hey Ty, where are you!”

The voice broke with fear and worry.

Tyler was torn. He wanted nothing more than to stay in hiding, numb and frozen to the bones. He would rather die of hypothermia than face *anyone* in his current, humiliated state.

But it was the panic in Jake’s voice, the genuine terror of an elder brother whose smaller, meeker sibling— with the exception of a few tattered clothes— is no where to be found, that finally coaxed Tyler from the shadows.

It is a powerful bond, the bond of family. It is what allows a brother to see past the monkey suit, completely black save the white fur sprouting from his crown all the way down to his neck, and a small pink face with two watery, black marble eyes... and *know*. This was his younger brother: the look of shame and confusion in the eyes, the hunched, hesitant approach, the expression of appeal, a need for help.

And, like any good big brother, the very first thing Jake did was burst out laughing.

The second thing he did was pick up his small, shivering monkey brother, who didn’t weigh much more than six pounds, and take him into the warmth of the house.

The third thing he did was snap a Polaroid, in case the whole shebang turned out to be a one-time fluke.

A one-time fluke it was not.

From that day on, if ever Tyler stumbled out into the moonlight, he would feel the prickling, the pain, the pull, the *need* to transform. He spent a full year imprisoning himself indoors after sundown, the shades drawn against the night.

Then, in eighth grade, a sleepover party was thrown for the middle school graduates, which Tyler could not squirm out of. He entertained the notion that the gymnasium’s fluorescent lights would somehow protect him from the culpable moon, or— even better— that it would be overcast outside. It was a fool’s hope; as night fell and silver blue moonlight cascaded through the gymnasium windows, in front of all of his peers in their sleeping bags, Tyler became a monkey.

He learned that night how popular monkeys are at parties, and never looked back.

But this wasn’t a party. This was a wedding. His brother’s wedding...

... and Tyler was the best man.

Aside from the few cousins who showed up to last night’s shin-dig, nobody on the bride’s side knew about the best man’s peculiar condition. Tyler’s mother had made sure of that.

Tyler catapulted himself to his bedroom. He pushed over the various boxes and magazines, clothes, rotting fruit, tins of nuts, bottles and cans... then heave-hoed himself onto the bed. He bounced a few times, eyed the ceiling fan with a look of longing, then plucked up his suit jacket from its crumpled position at the foot of the bed.

It took some concentration, but he fished one finger into the right pocket, pinched it with his opposable digit, and pulled out the list:

BEST MAN'S DUTIES

- 1) Throw bachelor party (done, Tyler thought, and it was kickin').
- 2) Attend rehearsal and rehearsal dinner (done and done... though he had showed up a tidge-bit late for the rehearsal, and the dinner was dull as death).
- 3) Help the groom dress before the ceremony (Hmm...)
- 4) Hold the rings until the ring-exchange (Hmmm...)
- 5) Pay the officiant (Tyler wondered how the priest would react).
- 6) At the reception, sit on groom's left-hand side (he could certainly manage that... maybe...)
- 7) Dance with the maid of honor (she was a prig and would never do it).
- 8) Make the Best Man's Speech (this was impossible. His monkey vocal chords were incapable of speech).
- 9) See the bride and groom off, make sure they arrive at the airport (Tyler thanked God that Jake reminded him to pay the limo driver in advance).
- 10) Collect the gifts and transport them to bride and groom's house with maid of honor (by then it would be night, and—hopefully— Tyler would be human again).

Tyler dropped the list and watched it flutter down to the floor, where it found a place atop a pile of old magazines. He found himself staring at the nightstand; next to his alarm clock nestled the two rings. He had put them there because he knew he would instinctively reach for the snooze when the alarm went off, and therefore not overlook them.

Unfortunately, he had completely forgotten to set the alarm.

He hadn't even slept in his bed.

And then, of course, there was the fact that he was a monkey.

Staring at the identical bands, gold and engraved in Latin, he wondered if it would be simpler to not show up to the wedding at all. He'd done that before; this wasn't the first time he had forgotten to turn back to his human self after a night of partying. Normally, he would skip class, not show up to work, and spend the entire day at leisure, waiting for moonrise.

Tyler's mother would certainly prefer he steer clear of the ceremony that day.

Tyler could hear her voice in his head, when she discovered he didn't possess the capability to show up to his own brother's wedding.

"What did you expect, Jake? He's an irresponsible hoodlum..."

No. Tyler made up his mind. Jake had done his brotherly duty and made Tyler the best man, despite all of the mountains of evidence that indicated Tyler would make a circus of the ceremony.

Whatever the outcome, Tyler would go through with it.

Getting to the church was easy. Across the street was the Pinkert house. There lived an eleven-year-old girl named Jess who thought Tyler was the single coolest person in the world,

and she owned a fifteen-speed bicycle with a basket. Jess jumped at any chance to be seen cruisin' the streets of the neighborhood with a cute little Capuchin monkey in tow. The other times Tyler forgot to transform back, he would often waste an hour or two of his free day biking with her to the local ice-cream shop or some other adolescent hangout to be ogled by her friends. "See that monkey," she would proclaim proudly, "that's my neighbor, Ty."

Tyler grabbed the wedding rings in one palm, stuffed them into his mouth, and launched himself out his bedroom window. He ricocheted between his building and the apartment directly next-door until he reached the ally below. Once across the street, he wrapped two little paws around the Pinkert's porch column, shimmied to the underside of the porch roof, dangled by his prehensile tail, stretched out one long arm, and rang the doorbell.

Mr. Pinkert, bald and bearded, opened the door. He took one look at the upside down primate swaying in front of his door and called over his shoulder, "Jess! It's for you!"

Five minutes later, Tyler was cruising down Lambart Avenue, wind whipping his arm and facial fur, eyes squinted and lips pursed skywards. Jess, teeth newly confined to neon blue braces and wearing her customary single braid and pink helmet, pumped the pedals behind him. Through a series of barks, whistles, and sweeping arm gestures, he gave her directions to the church.

The two wedding rings knocked against his teeth at every turn.

They arrived with a whole half hour to spare.

The announcement sign sprouting from the lawn screamed in big white letters:

Thompson-Archer wedding, 1:30 today.

Tyler smacked a palm against his lips and blew Jess a kiss as he steered himself to the building's back entrance. He heard her laughing with glee as she pedaled off down the road, braid flailing like a kite tail.

Tyler stared at the church's back entrance with a calculating eye: a wood door and frame, no porch railings, aluminum siding, a cement stoop, a mail drop box to the left of the door, and a heavy bronze knob. No brick— which was easy to climb— anywhere in sight.

He mapped out an entrance path. Then, reaching his left arm up, he grabbed hold of the mail drop box located next to the door and from there— with all the ease of a skilled rock climber— found purchase for his nimble fingers in the indentation of the doorframe. With his left hand now free (and with the assistance of his left foot) he managed to wrangle the knob into a clockwise turn, a tricky maneuver he had perfected during his freshman year of college. He kept the door open with his foot and felt around the inside wall with his arm for something to hold on to. He found a coat hook and swung himself in.

Inside it was dark and cool, a back storeroom. Tyler could smell the cleaning supplies— hidden out of sight— and opened his jowls, gagging from the fumes. He dropped to the floor and felt with his tongue to make sure the rings were still pocketed in his mouth.

He felt a sudden, animalistic urge to curl up in the corner and preen himself. He could feel tiny little nubs, possible insects that had latched onto his fur during the bike ride over. He would rather lose himself to the intricate art of grooming than face his brother, the wedding guests, and— worst of all— his mother.

Grimacing, Tyler stood upright and thumped an arm over his head. He reminded himself

that he needed to be responsible (though as the hours ticked by, the Ringtail was finding less and less meaning in that word) and walked two-legged down the hallway, his long tail curled behind him for balance.

On his way to the groom's dressing room, he ran into a flower girl en route to the bathroom, who took one look at him, screamed, threw down her basket of petals and flailed off in the opposite direction. Obviously, she was from the brides' side.

With all the self-control Tyler could muster, he rapped on the dressing room door.

Jake opened it and stared at the empty space some five feet above Tyler's head.

Tyler yanked on his pant leg, and Jake looked down at the small, black and white primate crouched glumly at his feet.

"Oh... Ty..." Jake's hand rose and massaged his temple. He stepped aside and held open the door so Tyler could totter into the room, hands clasped limply in front of him, before any other unsuspecting members of the wedding party came into view.

The door clicked shut and Jake leaned against it, arms crossed. He had on his white dress shirt and vest (dark red, to go with his fiancé's desired color scheme), but his tux jacket was draped over a chair in the corner and his tie was undone and flopped over his shoulders. He had obviously saved the final tux preparations for the arrival of his best man.

"I hope you had a good time," Jake finally said.

Tyler responded to this by staring wide-eyed at his brother, brows up. He flittered the corners of his mouth back, showing off a glimpse of his teeth and his four elongated, fang-like canines.

Jake, who had learned over the years to read his brother's various monkey expressions, knew this translated to something along the lines of, "I'm sorry" or, "My bad" while simultaneously placing Jake in a position of dominance.

Jake heaved a sigh. "You forgot the rings..."

Without altering his position or facial expression in the slightest, Tyler looped his tongue through both bands and pushed them through his mouth, where they dangled over his lower lip.

"What d'ya want me to do about this? You think you can go through with the ceremony?"

Tyler blew a shot of air out his nose and purred in the back of his throat, ceding judgment to Jake, the dominant male at the moment.

Jake paced in front of the dressing room mirror, running his hand through his hair and biting his lip.

Tyler was momentarily distracted by his own reflection, and he cocked his head to the side, watching the Ringtail in the mirror do the same.

Finally, Jake said, "Shoot, Ty. You're my brother. I know Mom'll have a fit, but I want you to be my best man. And if you're a monkey, well..." he cast a glance at Tyler, who was now crouched directly in front of the mirror, thumping his palm against the glass, "... then you're a monkey."

Tyler expressed his overwhelming gratitude by shimmying up his brother's leg, crouching on his shoulder, and sucking fondly on his earlobe.

It was an interesting ceremony.

The runner down the aisle was deep red, as were the bushels of roses draped between the pews. It was a large chapel, with bright stained glass windows that prised light against the dark wood of the front altar. The grandparents snapped pictures. The groomsmen wore black tuxes. The bridesmaids wore fluffy red gowns. The best man was a monkey in a bow tie.

Jake asked one of the ushers to announce to the packed house of friends and relatives that the best man, though he may be a White-Throated Capuchin, was still Jake's brother and should be treated as such. From the bride's side came murmurs and unsure laughter, while groans exhaled from the groom's side.

Tyler's mother broke out in a furious sweat, leapt from her seat at the front pew, and grabbed her steadfast elder son by the collar.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, thinking no one could hear.

Every ear in the chapel was tuned in to the conversation. The acoustics were fantastic.

Tyler catapulted up onto Jake's shoulder, where he crouched and stared at his mother. He was in full monkey mode now. This woman, who at first brushed off his metamorphosis as an id-appeasing phase and ever since had made Tyler's life a living hell, would now make a stand to preserve the dignity of the ceremony. Tyler bared his "silent scream face," the acknowledgment of a predatory threat.

His mother snatched her hand away and pursed her lips at her youngest son, shaking her head. She opened her mouth to begin a barrage of verbal abuse...

Jake interrupted. "Enough's enough, Mom. I'm not going to let Tyler miss out on my wedding, just because you don't like it. So what if he's a monkey? Cousin Genie's a flake, Nana's senile, and Uncle Merl is a drunk..."

From the back pew, Uncle Merl raised a flask in salute.

Jake went on, "... nobody's perfect. Tyler turns into a monkey every once in a while, and he is entirely okay with it. So we should be to."

There passed a moment of shocked silence. Ice could've formed from the glare scything out of their mother's hostile eyes.

Tyler decided to break the silence by leaping with joy from his perch on his brother's shoulder, hooting and yanking Jake's hair. Jake's eyes goggled, and he calmed Tyler down by reaching into his pocket and producing an open bag of peanuts.

With one hand pinched around Jake's ear, Tyler dipped a delicate paw into the bag and scooped a nut into his mouth.

The tension in the air shattered, and every wedding guest broke out in laughter.

Red faced, Tyler's mother took her seat.

Because Tyler was too small to be seen from the floor, he was allowed a perch on the delicate wood railing that barricaded the front altar from the rows of pews. There he stood, his head darting this way and that with every noise that reverberated around the cathedral-like roof. With the eyes of the entire church on him, acknowledging him in Ringtail form, Tyler felt wonderfully weightless. It was the same feeling he had during his wild parties, when he could let loose, be himself, and not worry eye about the critical eye of naysayers.

Chomping thoughtfully on the peanuts, Tyler grinned.

The flower girl, who had finally recovered enough to take her place in the processional, took one look at those giant canines and bolted.

The bride's veiled face appeared from around the corner of the entrance. She shooed her hands forward in a gesture that asked, "Can we get started now?" and the organ struck up 'Pachelbel's Canon.'

The ceremony commenced.

Raucous applause sounded when the officiant asked, "Do you have the rings?" and Tyler produced them from his mouth.

Animals have that kind of effect on people.

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