

Gift

It was a late summer night. Hot and sticky, like most summer nights in Baton Rouge. My family had retreated to an RV campsite on the city's edge, as they did every summer weekend. It was past midnight and I was wandering the woods alone. Nothing unusual about that. I suppose there should be something unusual about a six-year-old roaming the forest at night, but my parents had a vague idea of my whereabouts, and didn't care about the specifics. So long as I stayed out of trouble and didn't bother them, I could do as I liked.

Saturday nights at the campground were always the same. My parents and their friends would gather at one of the sites, start a bonfire, and drink and talk until morning. We kids were left to amuse ourselves. My older brothers were supposed to look after me but, as usual, they were with their friends, enjoying filched beer and cigarettes, and were quite happy to let me take off on my own, so long as I hightailed it back to the campsite when my parents finally whistled us in to bed.

I wandered the wooded paths for a while, but didn't expect to see anything. Not what I wanted to see, at least. I'd only seen it once, and when I had, I'd ran and not stopped until I was safe with my brothers. I'd cursed my cowardice a million times since then. All my nights of exploring, and when I finally found something worth seeing, I'd bolted like a baby. Each Saturday night after that, I screwed up my courage and ventured into the woods . . . and saw nothing more wondrous than fireflies.

Time was running out. Just yesterday, my brothers had said there were only two weeks of summer left, which meant only two more weekends at the campground. Tonight, I decided I'd take the next step. I'd go to the string of cabins along the front road, see if he was in his, maybe catch him heading into the woods.

As soon as I neared the edge of the woods, I saw him. A gray-haired man, sitting alone behind his cabin, smoking and staring out into the night. I watched from the forest, heart hammering. Finally, the man stubbed out his cigarette, got to his feet and turned to head into the cabin.

In that moment, I made a decision? a decision only a six-year-old child would even consider.

I stepped from the forest. The man stopped, but didn't turn around.

"Tired of hiding in the trees?" he said.

His voice was sharp with an accent I'd never heard in these parts. He turned then. His gaze traveled over me, eyes hooded to bored slits.

"Well? What do you want, boy?"

"I saw what you did."

His expression didn't change. "How nice for you."

I'd expected him to deny it, or at least play dumb, so when he didn't, I was left standing there, arguments jammed in my throat.

"I? I saw you do it," I said finally. "I saw what you turned into. I know what you are."

"So you said." He yawned and rolled his shoulders. "How fast can you run, boy? Hope it's not too fast, because, truth is, I'm not really in the mood?"

"I want to do it."

He stopped stretching. "You want . . .?"

I stepped closer. "I want to do it myself. If you help me, I won't tell on you."

"Tell??" He threw back his head and laughed, then looked down at me, lips still twitching in barely contained laughter. "And how do you think I'm supposed to help you? Wave my magic wand and poof, you're a?"

"You have to bite me." I pulled myself up as tall as I could. "I'm not stupid. I know how it works."

His gaze met mine and, for a second, he faltered. Then he shook his head sharply. "Well, boy, something tells me I'm going to wake up in that chair a few hours from now, and this will all be part of the strangest dream I've ever had, but sure, let's give it a whirl. If somehow I am awake, this is a hell of a lot easier than chasing you. Now, you just wait right here while I get ready, okay?"

I nodded.

"If you run away, I'll have to come after you. Neither of us wants that, right?"

I nodded.

"Good. Now, it'll sting some, but don't you worry. Before you know it, it'll all be over."

A final nod from me, and he disappeared into the forest.

Long minutes passed, and I began to worry that he'd cheated me. Then the brush rustled. From somewhere deep within me came the urge to bolt. I forced my feet to stay still, despising my weakness.

I turned slowly. I knew what to expect, but still didn't expect it.

Before me stood a wolf as tall as I. His eyes met mine, eyes that were unmistakably human. Those eyes and his monstrous size were the only things left of the man. The rest was wolf.

The test had come. I felt my body betray me, arm hairs prickle, legs tremble, a heavy weight bearing down in my groin as if I was seconds away from pissing myself. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to meet his gaze. He had to bite me. I knew what a werewolf was, and how you became one. My older brothers delighted in scaring me with monster stories, never guessing that I wasn't scared at all, that I listened to their tales and thought only of how lucky the monsters were, that they never had to cower under a bed or hide in a closet, listening to drunken curses and punches, and knowing if they were found, they'd be next. Monsters didn't fear. They were fear. Now I had a chance to try that for myself. So I took a deep breath, held out my arm and waited.

Something flickered in the wolf's eyes? surprise, shock, maybe even the barest hint of uncertainty. He growled. I didn't budge. He snapped at my arm, teeth sinking in. Pain ripped through it. I stumbled back, tripping over my feet and falling as he let go. Warm blood trickled down my arm and hot urine soaked my

jeans. I looked at my arm and saw blood flowing from twin gashes in the soft underside. I struggled to my feet. The wolf stared at me, as if confused. His tongue lolled out, blood-pink saliva dripping from its tip.

I met his eyes and grinned. I had done it. I•fd been bitten. The gift was mine.

He lowered his head, eyes never leaving mine. A low growl started in the pit of his stomach. He hunkered down. Then he sprang.

I should have died that moment. That was his plan, not to turn me into a werewolf, but to kill me, to put a quick and easy end to the minor inconvenience of my existence. So what happened? Was I so brave and strong and smart that I outmaneuvered my fate? Hardly. I tripped.

I saw him spring. As I stumbled back, my foot caught on a root and I twisted sideways. Instead of landing on top of me, the wolf crashed down beside me, fur brushing my arm.

Somehow, I managed to keep enough balance to come out of the tumble running. Instinctively, I ran for the front of the cabin, for the main road heading past the campground.

Before I•fd gone twenty feet, I heard a snort and knew the wolf had recovered from his fall. My throat dried up. My brain shut down. My legs seemed to move of their own accord, running so fast that slivers of pain shot through my calves and my lungs.

I raced for the road. I heard pounding, either the blood rushing in my ears or his paws on the hard-packed dirt?it didn•ft matter. I knew he was behind me.

I heard a scream. No, not a scream. The screech of tires and brakes. The flash of headlights. A car heading into the campground.

I tripped over on the curb and sprawled onto the road. Someone shouted. I lifted my head to see two men jump from the car, arms waving. The wolf hesitated, then turned and ran for the forest.

"What the hell was that?" one man yelled. "It was huge!"

"Forget it," the other said. "Go call an ambulance. The kid•fs bleeding."

I wobbled to my feet.

"Whoa. Hold on there, little guy."

I looked up, saw them approaching, two large faceless shadows. I bolted for the opposite side of the road, heading for the highway across the embankment. Behind me, the men shouted. Instead of following on foot, though, they ran back to their car. By the time they got the car turned around, I was long gone.

I don•ft remember what happened next. I assume there was a search for me, maybe my picture made it onto a milk carton somewhere. If so, I knew nothing of it and, in later years, never checked back to see how big a fuss my disappearance had caused. As for my parents, I•fm sure they played up the tragedy for all it was worth, but stopped searching the moment everyone else

stopped caring. If there was a search, I escaped simply by avoiding people, an aversion that became second nature after I was bitten.

Of those first few weeks, all I remember is the pain. Pain and hunger. My mind retreated to some dark hole in my psyche, emerging now and then to spout ribbons of gibberish, then muttering away into silence. The world turned to permanent shadows, even while the Louisiana sun parboiled my skin. Ordinary shapes contorted into funhouse mirror reflections. Alley cats grew to the size of ponies, with gaping mouths and fangs that threatened to swallow me whole. Children's laughter twisted into the taunting laughs of the old werewolf. I had only to hear a human voice and I'd run scuttling to the shadows. And still the hunger grew.

Survival

As a human child, I'd already begun learning to fend for myself. With my transformation came the boost I needed to survive. A six-year-old child can't live on his own, but a half-grown wolf already has the tools and the instincts he needs. Instinct made me avoid humans and other potential predators. Common sense told me to take shelter from the elements. My sense of smell sharpened and tuned to the scent of food, leading me to trash bins and Dumpsters and road-kill.

I never went home. Never tried to. I could say that I'd forgotten where home was or that I was afraid of how my family would react, but that's a lie. I chose not to return.

I don't remember the first time I changed into a wolf. One night, I passed out, and awoke to find my body covered in yellow fur. My brain was beyond reacting. It took this in stride, as it had everything else in my new life. I got to my feet and went in search of food.

As a wolf, I learned to hunt . . . or at least to scavenge. If I managed to kill the odd mouse or sparrow, it was more dumb luck than skill. Even that added food wasn't enough to feed the fire in my gut.

One day, as the hunger threatened to gnaw through my stomach, I realized I had to find something larger than a mouse or half-eaten hamburger. I left my bed of matted newspapers and went hunting.

The city was in the midst of an mid-autumn heat wave. The midday sun shoved through the buildings and trees, and broiled the pavement into a stinking stream of asphalt. Every living thing with a brain had taken shelter, leaving me hunting for food in a scorched wasteland.

Fortune let me stumble onto a cat napping beneath a bush. The cat jerked awake and stared at me in heat-stupid confusion. I flung myself forward . . . and leapt clear over the cat, which quickly regained its senses and ran away. I got to my feet and went in search of new prey, but it was no use. Fortune, thoroughly disgusted with my ineptitude, left to find a worthier recipient.

I wandered through the alleyways, eating from the open trash-cans, and drooling at the ones sealed tight. In this weather, most people covered their cans, so easy pickings were rare. Finally, after what seemed like hours of searching, a smell hit me, the stink of dirt and decay, but underlain with something that cut short my retreat. The smell of death. Of fresh meat.

I followed the stench, rounded a corner and came upon a pile of rags shoved under a concrete step. The smell overpowered my senses, making my eyes water, and prodding me to turn tail and run for cleaner air. But the lingering scent of meat kept my paws riveted to the pavement. Buried somewhere under those

rags was food, and I damned well wasn't leaving until I found it.

I eased forward until I was under the step. Then I grabbed the first layer of cloth between my teeth and tugged. A filth-crusted blanket pulled away from the heap beneath, and the heap became a man. A dead man. A derelict. I don't know what had killed him. Maybe the heat. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was dead, and I was starving.

With the added strength of a full belly, I was able to roam farther in search of food. After a couple of days I came to the bayou, and soon made it my home. My den was probably a cubbyhole in some hillock or outcropping of rock. I remember it only as a montage of senses, someplace warm, dry and safe. I was comfortable there, away from people. I quickly learned to hunt rats and birds. While they didn't always fill my stomach, they kept me from starving, and that was enough.

One evening, I found myself back in the city. I don't remember how or why I arrived there. Maybe somehow I knew that on that day I had to be in Baton Rouge, at that hour I had to be in that particular park, at that moment I had to be beside that pathway, waiting. My life pivoted on this point as much as it had the day I'd confronted the old werewolf.

I was in wolf form. This wasn't intentional?it was no longer a matter of intention, if it ever had been. I vacillated between forms endlessly, falling asleep human, waking a wolf, hunting as wolf, eating as human. I'd stopped noticing the difference. The agony of the change became part of my life, like the ache in my gut.

That evening, I lay hidden in a stand of flowering bushes, watching the passersby. When the scent first wafted past, my hazy brain recognized it as familiar, bringing to mind an image of the old werewolf who'd bitten me.

A growl escaped before I could choke it back. The sound was soft, barely louder than the rustle of dry leaves, and nobody noticed. Nobody except one man, dark haired man, maybe as old as my father, and about the same size, average height and broad shouldered. He was strolling through the park gardens with a young woman. When I growled, he turned and scanned the area.

I pushed back into the bush. He caught the movement. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. He said something to the woman, the sound reaching me only as garbled noise. Leaving her behind, he started toward the bush, his long strides devouring the ground between us.

As he approached from upwind, I caught a whiff of scent. It was the same smell that had made me growl, the smell that had reminded me of the old werewolf. But this obviously wasn't the same man. My muddled brain struggled to make sense of it. Finally, some deeper instinct solved the riddle, and I realized that what I'd recognized was the common scent of a werewolf.

As my brain hit the answer, it freed my legs. I tore back out of the bush and didn't stop running until I reached my den in the bayou.

The next morning I crept from my den in human form, groggy, shivering and eager to find a warm place in the sun, so I could go back to sleep. The mornings and evenings had grown too chilly for human form. I didn't wear clothing. The impulse to cover myself had died long ago under the sheer impracticality of finding my clothes each time I Changed.

I stumbled out, still half-asleep, heading for a trail that would take me to a warm clearing. Like any wolf, I had my favorite trails, paths through the swamp that I'd walked along so many times that they reeked of my scent. It was a matter of habit and safety, sticking to what I knew. All the trails led, in some convoluted way, back to my den.

I'd walked about five feet when something grabbed me around the neck and hoisted me into the air. The panic came slowly, formless, my sleepy brain still trying to decide whether this was another of my nightmares. When I realized it wasn't, I twisted and kicked, but my feet struck only air.

A man laughed. The grip on my neck tightened. I struggled harder, twisting and flailing. My leg struck the man in the chest, and he cuffed my ear so hard my vision clouded. The trees swayed. When the spinning stopped, I resisted the impulse to fight. Resistance only makes them hit harder. A lesson long learned, though often challenged.

As I went limp, I caught a whiff of scent. Werewolf scent. It was him. The one from the park. He'd used my trails to track me to my den. Instinctively I started struggling. Again he struck me, and the world toppled into momentary darkness.

He said something, a volley of words that made as little sense to me as the chirping of the birds overhead. I'd long since lost the ability to understand human speech. When I didn't respond, he shook me and repeated himself. His words sounded clipped, impatient. Still dangling me by the neck, he swung me around to face him, then lifted one brow and said something. When I didn't react, he laughed and tossed me to the ground.

I hit the dirt hard, my head striking a half-buried rock. When I opened my eyes, he was crouched with his head inside my den. I tried to growl, but the sound came out strangled and ridiculous. He swiveled on his heels, looked at me and laughed. He said something, then went back to investigating my den. After a few minutes, he got to his feet, grimaced and wiped his hands on his pants. Then, without so much as a glance in my direction, he left.

I lay on the grass, listening as the thud of his footsteps retreated through the trees. When the sound stopped, I lifted my head, then gritted my teeth and tried to stand. The pain forced me back down. I lay there, panting and trying to focus. I had to get up, get away. He might come back. My heart hammered so hard it drowned out the birds in the trees. I stretched my legs and rolled onto my stomach. Waves of agony pulsed through my skull. I closed my eyes and concentrated, got to my knees, started to rise, then passed out.

When I came to, I'd changed into a wolf. I couldn't remember what happened or why I was lying outside my den. The sunlight jabbed needles through my eyes. It hurt to blink, to turn my head, to move. As I stumbled forward, my legs tangled and I fell headfirst to the ground, muzzle bulldozing through the dirt, nostrils filling. For a second, I couldn't breathe. Mindless panic sent me flying to my feet. Excruciating pain forced me back to the ground.

Lifting my head, I saw my den. It wavered, mirage-like, just feet from my nose. I crawled forward, belly to the ground. Time crawled even slower. Only the promise of my den kept me moving. Finally, I was there. Forcing myself to my feet, I made that last step. Then, just as I was about to lurch onto my bed of leaves and rags, the scent hit me. His scent.

I backed away, my legs shaking. For the first time in years, old emotions?human emotions?surfaced. Frustration. Humiliation. Rage. Hate. Impotent, overwhelming hate. I threw back my head and howled my anguish to the rising moon.

I spent days lying outside my den. My brain prodded me to find shelter, but my throbbing head wouldn't let me move. The den was soiled for me now. Cold nights, bitter rain, the fear of predators, nothing would make me take that final step inside. Sleep brought no relief from the pain or the cold. I was too terrified to close my eyes, certain he'd come back. Once or twice, the hunger and exhaustion became too much and I passed out. More than once, I thought he'd returned. I saw him there, looming over me, but just as my teeth were about to graze his throat, he'd vanish into mocking laughter.

One day, I awoke and found the strength to stand. I stumbled to the swamp and drank the fetid water, coughing half of it back up again. Next, my nose led me to the decaying carcass of a nutria and I ate. And life continued.

Days, maybe weeks later, I was sunning myself on a rock by the bayou, enjoying one of the last rare bouts of heat as autumn slid into winter. A cloud kidnapped my sunlight, and I shifted my position. As I moved, I caught sight of something. It was him?the werewolf who'd beaten me?standing downwind less than twenty feet away. My heart jammed in my throat.

He leaned against a tree, arms crossed. When I moved, his arms fell to his sides and his lips curved in a crooked, almost hesitant, half-smile, nothing like the arrogant grin of my nightmares. Also, I remembered him as shorter, more muscular. Older, too. This man looked barely out of his teens. But the dark hair and the shape of his face matched my memories exactly.

I began to wonder if I'd fallen asleep and was dreaming. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. Everything was as it should be. Everything except the intruder. I shaded my eyes from the sun to get a better look.

Yes, this man definitely resembled the werewolf who'd invaded my den. Therefore it must be him. So why was I sitting here? Was I eager for another beating? My gaze slid from side to side, evaluating my escape options. The man was still watching me. Watching, but making no move to approach.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he didn't see me. I focused on his eyes. They were black and slightly slanted over high cheekbones. When I saw them, I knew this wasn't the man who'd violated my den. I had looked into the other man's eyes and I would never forget them.

The stranger said something. The inflection reminded me of the other man, but the timbre was different, deep and low. He tilted his head and smiled, even more hesitant this time. He spoke again. I barely heard him. My attention was focused on his body, waiting for the first twitch of movement. I was in human form, completely vulnerable.

After a short silence, the man resumed talking, his voice low and soothing, the sentences stretching into a monologue. Then his left leg moved ever so slightly. I tensed. He stepped forward, moving slowly, still talking. I inched backward. My toes brushed water and I froze. I looked from side to side. The bayou surrounded me, blocking off all escape.

The man continued his approach. I began to shake. He stopped, now only five feet away, then dropped to one knee. I watched his hands. He lifted them and turned them, palms toward me. Bending down more, he tried to make eye contact. His shoe slipped in the mud. At the sudden movement I panicked. I leapt at him. He yanked back, fast, but not fast enough. My long nails raked down his forearm, three rivulets of blood springing up.

He inhaled sharply. I fell back, shielding my head, waiting for the retaliatory blow. Everything in my early life had conditioned me to recognize this simple cause and effect. I cowered, head under my arm, eyes clenched tight. Nothing happened. My heart thudded. I knew this trick. He was waiting. The second I exposed myself, the blow would come, a cuff across the head or shoulders that I'd feel for days. I opened one eye, keeping my arm over my head. He crouched on his heels, tying a handkerchief around the wound with one hand. When he noticed me watching, he managed a pained half-smile. Then, still crouching, he eased backward and stood.

I closed my eyes, tensed and waited. When I peeked again, he was gone.

Domestication

Only a few hours passed before he returned. The day was darkening and I'd begun to hunt. I'd changed to a wolf, possibly in a subconscious reaction to the fear, taking on a form where I would be better able to fight him if he returned.

I was chasing a mouse when I heard a noise behind me and turned to see the man step into the clearing. He smiled. I wheeled and ran.

I ran full out until I was certain he wasn't following. Once I was sure I'd lost him, I turned around and went back to find him.

I crept through the undergrowth, ears perked. As I approached the clearing, I slowed, crawling along the ground, ready to bolt at the first sign that he saw me. I slunk into a thicket bordering the clearing. Then I closed my eyes and inhaled. He was there. I listened, but heard nothing. I crouched, sniffing and listening, every muscle poised for flight. After a few minutes, I worked up the nerve to peer through the weeds. He sat on the grass, leaning against a tree, legs outstretched, arms crossed and eyes shut, as if dozing. I stopped, confused. I'd seen humans do a lot of strange things, but settling down for a nap in the middle of the bayou was not one of them.

I pushed my muzzle out farther to sniff again. Not a leaf rustled, but somehow he seemed to hear the movement. His eyes snapped open. I jerked back into the thicket. He laughed. No, not a laugh really? a deep chuckle that rippled through the night air. I heard a rustle and peeked out to see him rooting around in a paper bag. He pulled something out and threw it. Although I was over thirty feet away, it sailed through the thicket and landed squarely at my feet. I bent to sniff it. A piece of cooked meat. I gulped it before I could have second thoughts. A second piece flew into the thicket with equally perfect aim. I ate that one, and the next, and the next. He threw each to my feet, not trying to entice me out of my hiding spot.

At last, the meat stopped coming. I waited patiently. Nothing happened. I poked my head out of the thicket and looked at him. He said something, turned

the bag upside down and shook it. My nose twitched, catching the lingering hints of meat in the air. My stomach growled. He got to his feet. I darted back into the thicket. Minutes passed. When I peeked out again, he was still by the tree, standing now, hands in pockets. He murmured something under his breath, turned and vanished into the forest. Once he was gone, I crept to the crumpled bag and tore it apart, frustrated by the scent of meat permeating the paper. I licked the scraps, but only got enough of a taste to make my stomach start growling again. Reluctantly, I left the bag in tatters and went to hunt.

I barely had time to pick up another mouse trail when a sharp crack of undergrowth startled me. I spun to see a form emerge from the trees. Though it was in the shadows, I could see the outline of a large dog. I was about to bolt when it stepped into the moonlight. It was a wolf, a tall, rangy black wolf. My leg muscles seized, riveting me to the ground. Instead of walking toward me, though, the wolf loped to the east, circling me while coming closer. There was something in his mouth, but he was too far away for me to see it. Then, a light breeze blew through the trees and his scent fluttered down to me. With a start, I recognized the smell. It was the man from the clearing. I don't know why it surprised me to realize he was a werewolf, but it did.

Staying upwind, he moved a few steps closer. Then he drew back his head and threw whatever was in his mouth. His aim and distance weren't nearly as good as when he'd been a man and whatever he'd thrown landed about five feet northwest of me. I stayed still, watching. He backed up, then laid down, putting his muzzle on his paws. Now a second smell shifted to me in the wind. Rabbit. Freshly killed rabbit. My stomach overrode my fear and I raced forward, finding the rabbit where he'd thrown it. It was larger than anything I could ever catch. The throat had been ripped open, but he hadn't fed. I lowered my head and ate.

When I finished eating, my brain reminded me that I should escape, but the warning was buried under the weight of the food in my belly. With the black wolf still lying less than ten feet away, I stretched out and fell asleep.

The next morning he was gone. He reappeared around noon, in human form, again bearing food. I ate it, then crept back into the woods. He didn't follow. That night, he returned with more food.

With that, a pattern was established. Each day, he brought food, he talked to me, sometimes changed form and hunted for me, but always kept his distance, never following when I grew nervous or bored and wandered away. Gradually his patience wore down my fear. Although I still didn't trust him, I learned to tolerate his presence?especially since it was always paired with generous helpings of food.

About ten days later, after lunch, while he dozed against a tree, I screwed up the courage to approach him. I was in wolf form and he wasn't, which fortified my nerve. I circled around behind the tree, then crept forward, ears perked and straining for any change in his breathing. Finally, I was behind the tree. I craned my neck and sniffed the back of his shoulder. He didn't move. Inching forward, I sniffed his arm and shirt sleeve, then his side and hip. He had a rich natural smell mingled with a myriad of human smells?soap, fabric, car exhaust, processed food and scores more. I sniffed him thoroughly

and was about to retreat when I noticed a bag at his side. He'd already fed me and the empty food bag was lying in the middle of the clearing. I eyed the new bag. Something bulged within it. More food? Was he holding out on me? Gingerly, I snagged the corner of the paper bag with my teeth, then dragged it to a safer spot behind the tree. It didn't smell like food. But it had to be. What else was a bag for?

Grabbing one corner, I jerked my head up and dumped the bag. A shower of fabric fell to the ground. I tossed the bag aside and pounced on the fabric before it could escape. I snuffled through the pile. As the fabric spread out, it revealed its true nature. Clothing. A small pair of jeans, a shirt and sneakers. I tore through the clothing looking for the hidden food. It wasn't there. Behind me, the bag tumbled away in the breeze. I raced after it and caught it just as a gust of wind was lifting it into the air. Tipping it onto its side, I thrust my head inside, hoping to find the missing food. There was nothing there, not even the tempting scent of meat soaked into the paper. I pulled back. The bag stayed on my head, stuck behind my ears. I shook myself. It stayed on. I tried backing away from it and tripped, tumbling head over ass to the ground. It was then that I heard it. Laughter. Not a dry chuckle or a quiet laugh, but a tremendous whoop of choking laughter. I caught the bag under my paw and yanked my head out. He stood there, arms crossed over his chest, trying to stop himself from laughing and failing miserably. I glared at him, salvaged my last shreds of dignity and stalked off into the woods.

The next day he brought extra food, so I decided, after much contemplation, to forgive him.

Each day following, the clothes reappeared in a fresh bag. I ignored them. On the third day, I was in human form when he brought my lunch. He fed me just enough to stop the gnawing in my gut, then produced the bag of clothing. Lifting each piece, he pointed at the corresponding article of clothing on his own body, then pantomimed putting it on. I fixed him with a cool stare and curled my lip. I knew perfectly well what clothing was and what was supposed to be done with it. I wasn't an idiot. And I certainly wasn't stupid enough to put them on, which seemed to be the end goal of this little demonstration.

I laid down in my patch of sunlight and closed my eyes. Then I heard the crinkle of paper and a smell I knew all too well. Food. I opened one eye. The man held out both hands, a cooked hamburger patty in one and the shirt in the other. He arched one eyebrow. I closed my eyes. The scent of the meat wafted over. My mouth watered. I peeked again. The hamburger was still there. So was the shirt. With an annoyed growl, I got to my feet, marched over, grabbed the shirt and tugged it on, first trying to pull the armhole over my head, but eventually remembering the proper sequence. Then I held out my hand. He gave me the meat patty. I ate it, yanked off the shirt and threw it back. Unperturbed, he reached down for the jeans and a second meat patty and we started again.

By the third day of playing this game, I surrendered. It was an uneven match. His patience seemed endless. Mine wore out in five seconds. Besides, I was curious to see what this clothing business portended. I put on the whole outfit, then followed him out of the bayou. On the edge of the woods was a parking lot for weekend fishermen. He walked over to the only car in the lot, opened the passenger door and turned to say something to me. The tail end of his words floated into the night as I plunged back into the forest.

The next day, he brought fresh clothes. He also brought extra food, so once again, I forgave him. To show that I didn't bear a grudge, I even played the clothing game again. This time, once I was dressed, he led me not to the parking lot, but on a longer walk, right to the outskirts of the city. Backing onto the bayou was a rundown motel. He walked to the door closest to the woods and opened it. I tensed, ready to bolt. Instead of calling to me, though, he just walked inside, leaving the door open.

I hovered on the forest's edge for at least thirty minutes. When he didn't reappear, I crept forward. A car roared into the parking lot. I dove for cover behind a bush. Two people stumbled from the car, voices too loud, laughter too harsh. Drunk. I knew what that sounded like.

I watched them go into a room farther down, then slunk out from the bush and started toward the open door again. When I got close, I circled wide, keeping my distance. A blast of hot air billowed from the room. I paused, letting it chase some of the night chill from my bones. Then I scooted around to the far side and peered through the open doorway. The man was inside, lying on a bed, ankles crossed, reading a newspaper. He glanced around the edge at me, nodded and kept reading. I inched toward the door, testing how close I'd need to get to feel that glorious warmth again. I was just close enough to feel the tugging tendrils of heat when the newspaper crackled. My nerve snapped and I bolted for the safety of the woods.

I didn't go back to my den though. It was getting late and morning would be coming. Morning meant breakfast. I dimly remembered breakfast. Maybe if I stuck around, I'd get more than the two meals a day he'd been providing so far. So, I crawled under a bush and fell asleep.

Late that night, I woke up shivering. Louisiana was suffering through a cold snap that winter and even the clothing the man had provided didn't help much. I remembered that burst of heat from the motel room. For a long time, I lay there, shivering, fear warring with discomfort. Finally, I leapt up and dashed for the motel. The door was still open. Inside, the man was asleep on the bed. I curled up in the doorway and went to sleep.

And so, I let myself be domesticated. In the end, like any stray, I was conquered by the promise of continued food and shelter. Trust would take longer.

For at least a week, I slept in the doorway, not letting him close the door no matter how cold the night got. One day, another man came by. While I hid in the bushes outside, the other man yelled at my man, motioning at the door. Money changed hands and the other man left. That was the first of many such exchanges I'd see in my life?cash buying tolerance for my idiosyncrasies.

After a few days, with the right amount of food for coaxing, the man convinced me to come inside the room. He left the door open, so this seemed safe.

By the bed was a huge mirror with a web of tiny cracks down one side. I glanced into it by accident and startled myself so badly I dove under the bed, provoking a spate of laughter from the man. Pretending that I'd simply fallen

under the bed, I pulled myself back up and looked straight into the mirror. Staring back at me was a puny runt of a kid. Disgust filled me. If I'd seen myself somewhere else, my first reaction would have been "easy pickings." Definitely not the dangerous predator I liked to imagine myself. I was skinny and filthy, from my ragged mop of curls to my bare feet with gnarled toenails. Scabs and bruises covered my face and bare arms. The clothing? my third set so far? was already torn and dirty. I glared at my reflection, sniffed and stalked from the room.

When I came back that night, the man had covered the mirror with a sheet. The next day, he introduced me to soap, shampoo, scissors and nail clippers, along with a huge bowl of steaming jambalaya. I deigned to let him do what he wanted with the soap and scissors while I ate. When he finished, he smiled and made a move to pull the sheet from the mirror. My growl stopped him. As long as I was in the room, that sheet was staying up. No amount of personal grooming was going to make me anything but a scrawny little kid and I preferred to keep my illusions unshattered.

During this time at the motel, I was also reintroduced to language. Since it was more a matter of remembering than learning, it didn't take long for me to pick up the basics. Soon, I knew enough nouns and verbs to understand the gist of simple sentences. Saying the words was harder. After two years of being asked to do nothing more than growl and yip, my voice-box complained at the strain of speech. I preferred to listen and spoke only grudgingly. During one of our first lessons, I volunteered to speak just once and only because I recognized the information was too important to withhold.

We were sitting on the floor near the door, before the time when I'd come farther into the room. The man was pointing to furniture and naming it. When I refused to repeat the words, he changed tactics and would instead say a word and I'd point to the appropriate object. After exhausting every item in sight, he started opening drawers, looking for more things. I pointed at him. He paused and lifted his eyebrows. I jabbed my finger toward him, rolling my eyes when he didn't catch on immediately. After a second, he pointed at himself and said "Jeremy" hesitantly, as if unsure this was what I wanted. I recognized the word as a name and nodded. He smiled. Then he pointed at me. I opened my mouth and nothing came out. A surge of panic raced through me. I couldn't remember the answer. Quickly, he turned and started naming the items in the room, trying to change the subject. It didn't help. My brain spun frantically. I had to know this. I had to. Finally, the answer bubbled up from my subconscious and came out before I even realized I was speaking.

"Clayton," I said. I jabbed my chest. "Clayton."

He stopped. A slow smile spread across his face, lighting up his eyes. He reached out, as if to touch me, then caught himself and pulled back.

"Clayton," he said.

I nodded. He smiled again, hesitated, then resumed checking the drawers for more items to name.

While the motel room seemed like a perfectly good shelter to me, it eventually became apparent that it wasn't Jeremy's home. His home was far away, and he

planned to take me there. Figuring this out was a long, involved process. While I knew perfectly well what a house was, the concept of home was too abstract. For me, home meant shelter and shelter could mean a house, den, bush or any convenient place. Since this motel was as convenient as any, I couldn't understand why Jeremy wanted us to go somewhere else. On the other hand, since I felt no particular tie to this motel room or this city or this bayou, I had no compunctions about leaving. I'd follow the supplier of food and provider of shelter wherever he wished to take me.

However, there was one problem to be overcome. Wherever Jeremy wanted to take me wasn't accessible by foot and, so long as I refused to be shut into a room, much less a car, we couldn't go. So, Jeremy continued working with me, building up trust.

To pass the time, he also coached me on other things that I deemed a complete waste of brain space, useless skills like table manners and rules of public behavior. Stand up straight. Speak clearly. Don't eat with your hands. Don't growl at people. Don't piss on the furniture. And above all, don't sniff anything.

Jeremy didn't work miracles with me. In the end, I think he decided that if he waited until I was fit to be seen in public, we might celebrate the coming of the next millennium in that motel room. So, one day, he decided I was good enough for my first foray into the human world.

Identity

Before we left the motel, Jeremy had spent a lot of time making phone calls. Not that I understood what he was doing. For whatever reason, I had holes in my memory such that I'd know perfectly well what a car or money was for, but objects like telephones and toilets were unfathomable mysteries. So, at the time, it seemed to me that Jeremy was spending a lot of time with a piece of plastic pressed against his ear, talking to himself. Which was fine by me. We all have our eccentricities. Jeremy liked talking to plastic; I liked hunting and eating the rats that ventured into the motel room. Or, at least I did like hunting and eating the rats, until Jeremy caught me, and promptly kiboshed that hobby. Some of us are less tolerant of eccentricities than others.

After much plastic-talking one morning, Jeremy announced our first mutual voyage into the human world. The only part I understood was "car" and "out", but I got the idea. I was okay with the going-out part. It was the complex pre-ritual that I objected to—the new clothes, the dressing, the hand washing, the face scrubbing and the hair combing. As I endured this torture, I decided there wouldn't be many more of these "goings-out" in the future if I had any say in the matter.

The car ride itself was uneventful. I clung to the door handle, closed my eyes, screamed now and then, but only sent Jeremy swerving into opposing traffic once.

Past the busy downtown district, Jeremy turned onto a sideroad, then slowed. After consulting a piece of paper, he turned down a wide alley, navigated trash bins and parked outside a battered metal door.

Before we could walk to the door, a thickset man opened it. The man said something. Jeremy replied. The man laughed and motioned us through the door. As we passed him, I edged closer to Jeremy so I wouldn't risk brushing against the stranger.

We walked into a windowless room. Across the room, under a blinking light-bulb, was a massive desk. Along the far wall, a row of machinery whirred

and chirped and emitted waves of some noxious stink. Behind us, the metal door clanged shut. I jumped, grabbed a fistful of Jeremy's trousers, sticking so close he nearly tripped over me. He steered us toward the desk.

The machinery gave a thunk and went silent. A second man stepped out from the bowels of the beast and shouted something at Jeremy. Despite his raised voice, he was smiling. He walked toward us, smiling and shouting.

This was my first real lesson in human interaction. Although Jeremy had tried to teach me how to act in public, I'd absorbed the rules without understanding the logic behind them, like a child learning complex algebraic formulae. Now, watching him, I began to pick up tips, though not necessarily the ones he meant to impart.

He smiled when the other men smiled and laughed when they laughed, but no hint of humor warmed his eyes. He shook their hands and accepted a backslap from the first man, but initiated no physical contact and, whenever possible, kept his distance. He clearly didn't want to be here. So why was he? Because these men had something Jeremy wanted. Papers. A small stack of papers, different sizes, different shades of white and cream, each covered with squiggles that smelled faintly of the black liquid that coated the machinery.

As Jeremy examined the papers, I clung to his leg. At a sound from behind us, I turned to see three boys played in the corner, hidden in the shadows, their smell swallowed by the stink of the machines. All three were laughing at me, not with the good-humored chuckles of the two men, but with the acid laughter of derision, the kind that seeps under your skin and burns holes in your dignity. The largest caught my eye and stuck his thumb in his mouth, making a show of crying. The other two howled with silent laughter. I turned away.

Jeremy reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wad of money. He counted off most of the wad and handed it to the machinery man. I glanced back toward the boys. The leader stood, staring at Jeremy's back with narrowed eyes. I followed his gaze and saw half a bill sticking out of Jeremy's rear pocket.

The boy sauntered out into the open. He walked past us and retrieved a soda bottle from the desk. On the return trip, he ambled to the right, bringing him closer to us. I tensed. As the boy passed, his hand darted toward Jeremy. My reaction was purely instinctive, devoid of forethought or reasoning. I saw what I perceived as an attack on my master and reacted.

I launched myself at the boy, hitting him full in the chest and sending us both soaring across the room. We crashed through a stack of boxes. I closed my eyes, but kept my hold on him, fists clenching his shirtfront. We slammed onto the floor. I landed on his chest and righted myself, pinning him down. The boy started to scream, not a yell of pain but a high-pitched shriek of panic that reminded me of a rabbit's death throes, which reminded me that I was hungry.

Jeremy grabbed me by the shoulders and ripped me off my prey. The door-opener man scooped up the boy by the scruff of his neck and shook him, shouting at him. The boy's screams died to whimpers. The man let him go and the boy slunk back into the shadows.

Jeremy said something. The door-opener man laughed and shook his head. Keeping a tight grip on me, Jeremy went back to the desk and picked up his papers. A few more words were exchanged, but Jeremy's pleasantries had turned brittle. He put a quick end to the conversation and escorted me out, not releasing his grip until I was safely locked in the car.

As the car navigated the city streets, the only sound was the rumble of the engine. Jeremy kept his eyes on the road. His face was impassive. He started heading down the road toward the motel. Suddenly the car skidded to a halt.

Without a word, Jeremy swung around in a tight U-turn, ignoring a cacophony of horn blasts. At the next light, he veered north, heading out of the city. I gripped the sides of my seat, scarcely daring to breathe. I knew what was coming. Not a beating? Jeremy had never so much as raised a threatening hand to me. Worse than a beating. He was taking me back to the bayou.

The meeting with the men had been a test. I'd failed. Now, I was going back. No more regular meals. No more warm place to sleep. He was sending me back.

I sank into my seat and slowed my breathing, as if by being small and silent I might convince Jeremy that I'd be no trouble if he kept me. The car continued to zoom away from the city. I closed my eyes. I felt the car turn again. Then again. Any second now it would screech to a stop, the door would open and I'd be flung out to fend for myself.

The car turned again and slowed. I clenched my teeth and scrunched my eyelids shut even tighter. Something roared above the car. I crammed my hands against my ears. The car stopped. The door opened. Smells wafted in. Strange smells, mechanical smells. Not the bayou? Then where? Someplace worse? At least I knew the bayou.

"Clayton?"

I took my hands from my ears, but kept my eyes squeezed shut. The vinyl seat squeaked as Jeremy moved closer. His hand went to my shoulder, his touch tentative.

"Clayton?"

I didn't budge. He sighed. I opened one eye. He was twisted around in the driver's seat, facing me, fingers still resting on my shoulder. He didn't look angry. It was hard to tell with Jeremy. Anger was the slightest tightening of the lips. Happiness was the faintest ghost of a crooked smile. Worry was the barest gathering of the eyebrows. That's what it looked like now. Worry, not anger. I opened the other eye and looked around. Airplanes. That was the first thing I saw. Three airplanes behind a fence about a quarter-mile away. Following my gaze, Jeremy smiled.

"Yes?" he said. "Go?" He pointed to an airplane taking off. "Home?"

It was a last-minute, now-or-never, bite-the-bullet decision. Rather than return to the motel, he'd decided to take me straight home. It could have been an act of incredible bravery and determination. Or it could have been sheer desperation, fear that if he didn't act now, things might never get any better. The truth probably lies between the two.

Once we were inside, we had to wait in a line of people. I clung to Jeremy's pantleg, shuddering each time some stranger brushed past me.

Finally, we approached the counter. Jeremy talked to a young woman, bestowing a generous portion of smiles on her. She bent down and said something to me. I

only stared at her. Jeremy said something and she tsk-tsked sympathetically. Jeremy handed her some papers from his pocket, then the papers he'd bought from the man. The woman leafed through the papers, smiling and nodding. Then she handed them back to Jeremy along with some more papers and we left the line.

Jeremy bought some candy bars, drinks and other unidentifiable things at a small shop in the airport. Then he took me to a phone booth. While he talked to the plastic thing, I downed two candy bars and a carton of milk. When he finished his phone call, he led me into another area and we sat down.

I finished a third candy bar, then noticed the papers still in Jeremy's hand. I pointed at them. He lifted an eyebrow. I reached for the papers and grunted. Another raised brow. I grumbled, but gave in.

"See," I said. "Want see."

He nodded, cleaned the chocolate off my fingers, then handed me the top paper. I saw only several lines of typed text. I couldn't understand the squiggles, but if I could, I would have read in them my future. My name: Clayton Danvers. My date of birth: January 15, 1962, making the day Jeremy found me my seventh birthday. And, if I'd been able to read the other papers he had bought for me, I would have learned that I was orphaned and under the guardianship of my cousin, Jeremy Malcolm Edward Danvers. And my home? A house in the state of New York, near the town of Bear Valley. 13876 Wilton Grove Lane or, as Jeremy's great-great-grandfather had named it, Stonehaven.

Stonehaven

I don't remember much of the airplane ride. I slept through it, which probably had something to do with the chalky taste in the second milk carton Jeremy gave me on the plane. We arrived in New York later that day. Outside the airport, a string of cars idled by the sidewalk. Jeremy led me to one, opened the back door, and nudged me inside. Then he crawled in behind me. Just as I was wondering how he planned to drive from the rear seat, I noticed a man sitting up front. Jeremy said something to him. The man nodded, and the car broke ranks with its brethren.

As we drove, Jeremy pointed out sites of interest, which didn't really interest me. I pretended to be paying attention, partly because it seemed to be what he wanted and partly because it helped me forget we were sitting very close to a stranger, but mostly because I just liked listening to Jeremy talk. When we pulled away from the city, Jeremy's travelogue slowed, until finally he turned to stare out the window and seemed to forget I was there at all.

I leaned over to see what held his attention beyond the window. When I didn't notice anything, I looked up at Jeremy and followed his gaze. But he wasn't really staring at anything. His eyes were unfocused, black mirrors that reflected nothing. Tension vibrated from his body. More than tension. Unease. Worry. Fear. The last startled me. Fear? What did Jeremy have to fear? He was an adult, a werewolf, my protector. He took away fear?he wasn't supposed to feel it.

Jeremy's anxiety fed my own subconscious worries, and I reacted with the only defense mechanism I had. I started to Change. I felt the tingling in my fingers, then the throbbing in my skull, and finally the first licks of white hot pain. Yet I didn't make a sound. I accepted it. If you grow up with pain, it becomes a fact of your existence.

As my heart rate accelerated, my breathing kept pace. Jeremy turned. His eyes were still blank. Then they focused, looked at my hands and snapped wide. He

let out an oath and grabbed the driver's shoulder. The car veered. The driver snapped something. Jeremy's reply was apologetic. He said something else, forced calm. The driver pulled the car to the side of the road. Jeremy swung open my door, grabbed me around the chest and bent my head down toward the gravel, as if I were vomiting. I barely noticed. The Change had spread to my arms and legs. My clothing began to rip. Jeremy coughed, barely fast enough to cover the sound, then hoisted me from the car, jogged down the ditch and laid me at the bottom.

"Stay," he said. "Yes?"

I could barely understand him, much less reply. Jeremy bent over me. He stroked my head, whispered something, then scrambled up the embankment to the car.

Seconds later, Jeremy returned. The Change was almost done. I lay on my side, panting. He crouched beside me and gently removed the clothing tangled around my arms and legs. Once I'd caught my breath, I clambered to my feet and started investigating my surroundings.

A trickle of icy water ran along the bottom of the ditch. I lapped a mouthful, then looked back at Jeremy. He was still in human form. I ran over to him and whimpered. He patted my head, brushed his bangs back with a sigh, then got to his feet.

Lifting me in both arms, he carried me to the other side of the ditch, away from the road. The car and driver were long gone. Jeremy stood there a moment, then started walking in the direction the car had been traveling. I sat on my haunches and watched. He went a few steps, then turned, and waved me forward. I didn't understand. He called my name. I yipped back. He whistled. I threw back my head and howled. Apparently, still not the right response, as he threw up his hands and walked away. I watched him until he was nearly out of sight, then ran to catch up.

It must have been a long walk, but I didn't notice. I had fun bounding through the frost-covered tall grass, hearing it crackle as I trampled it. Once, I found a hole in a fence and sent a herd of sheep stampeding for cover. Great fun. Jeremy didn't agree and hoisted me back over the fence by the scruff of my neck. I didn't mind. It was a glorious day, sunny and bright and cold. My breath snorted out in billows of smoke, like the man at the warehouse, except my smoke smelled of nothing but crisp, clean air. For a while, I amused myself by running ahead, hiding in the brush, then leaping out and snapping at Jeremy's hands as he passed. Great fun. Jeremy even seemed to agree, at least he did until I got carried away and took a chunk out of his finger.

The road was quiet. When the rare car did drive by, Jeremy didn't seem concerned. We were on the opposite side of the ditch, and anyone passing would only see a man out walking a boisterous dog. Of course, I didn't look like any dog. I looked like a young, yellow-haired wolf. But no one expects to see a man walking a wolf, so no one sees it.

Finally, Jeremy stopped. He picked me up and carried me over the ditch, across the road and down a long driveway. I burrowed my cold nose against his neck and licked him. He chuckled, the vibration coursing through me. The fear was gone. His strides lengthened and he picked up his pace, as if eager to reach our destination. When we were far enough from the road, he put me back on the ground. I yawned and trotted after him.

We'd barely gone twenty paces when the Change started again. This time, Jeremy noticed it immediately, seeming to sense it. He led me behind a massive

pine tree, then waited until I'd finished, then draped his jacket over me as I rested a few minutes to recuperate.

Instead of going back to the driveway, Jeremy led me across the treed front lawn. We wove through another row of evergreens. Suddenly, the house appeared before us, as if a magician had yanked off the covering sheet and shouted "Ta-da!" A two-and-a-half story stone wall spread as far as I could see. If it wasn't for the windows and gardens and front porch, I'd have mistaken it for some other kind of building. I'd never seen a house this big.

When I stopped gawking, I noticed Jeremy watching me. He was smiling, not the forced smile he used with humans, but the crooked smile that crept up to his eyes.

"Welcome home," he said. "Welcome to Stonehaven."

As Jeremy pushed open the front door, his manner changed again. Tense now. Careful. He stepped into the hall, gaze darting from side to side. His nostrils flared, testing the air. I saw a flicker of movement from the shadowy hall. Jeremy saw it too. He backpedaled out the door. A figure raced down the hall and barreled into Jeremy, plowing him backward and toppling them both off the porch and onto the grass.

I saw only a blur of motion. Again, I didn't think. Letting Jeremy's jacket fall from my shoulders, I launched myself onto the attacker's back and sank my teeth into his shoulder. The man yowled, reared up and reached back. One large hand grabbed me, lifted me into the air and swung me overhead. As I inhaled, I smelled what I'd come to recognize as the underlying scent of a werewolf.

When I came down, I found myself looking into large brown eyes. I twisted, but couldn't get free. One glance at the man told me I wasn't getting free until he decided to set me free. He was at least a head shorter than Jeremy but twice as wide, all the extra weight in muscle. Despite his size, I couldn't resist one last-ditch effort. I pulled back my foot and kicked him in the chest, hard enough to send shock waves of pain through my foot. The man grunted, then started to laugh.

"Big balls for such a little scrap," he said.

"Serves you right."

That was Jeremy. Twisting my head, I saw him sitting on the grass, retying one shoe. He didn't seem the least bit perturbed about my predicament. The man set me down. I growled at him, then lunged to hide behind Jeremy.

"Bully," Jeremy said, tucking in his shirt tails.

"That's the boy?" the man asked.

"I should hope so. I'd hate to think there was more than one." Jeremy got to his feet and pulled me up by my hand. He pushed me forward. "This is Clayton. Clayton, meet Tonio?Antonio."

The man grinned, flashing white teeth. He extended his hand. I backed up.

"He doesn't do physical contact," Jeremy said.

"I see." Antonio flashed another grin and looked me over. "Wild looking little thing, isn't he? Clothing might help. I trust he was wearing some on the plane?"

"Don't ask. We'd better get inside before he freezes." Jeremy prodded me toward the door, then stopped. "He's not back yet, is he?"

"House was locked tight when I got here. I was waiting for your call. You should have phoned from the airport."

"No need."

Jeremy led me into the house. The hall floor was cold stone, marble actually, though I wouldn't know that. I hightailed it through an adjoining door to a carpeted room. A long wooden table gleamed beneath a glass candelabra. What caught my attention, though, were the plates and silverware set out at each place. Jeremy stood in the doorway. I reached over and tugged at his shirt.

"Yes?"

I pointed at the place settings and grunted.

"Can he talk?" Antonio asked.

"Can, but won't. Tell me what you want, Clayton."

I growled, stamped my foot and gestured at the dining room table. Antonio laughed.

"Don't encourage him," Jeremy said. "Talk, Clayton. Say what you want."

I growled again, but gave in. "Food. Want food."

"Ah, yes. Of course." To Antonio, "He likes food."

Antonio grinned. "A boy after my own heart. Come on then, scrap. Let's raid the pantry."

Some time later we were in another room, still eating. I'd refused to go with Antonio alone, so the three of us had gone to the kitchen, where I'd discovered heaven in the form of a massive refrigerator, deep freezer and two fully stocked closets of food. Antonio had fixed the meal, piling mounds of cold cuts, breads and cheeses onto a platter so big I could have curled up on it and gone to sleep. To this, he'd added a second platter of salads, fruits and desserts. I decided this was someone I could allow myself to tolerate.

Instead of returning to the dining room, we'd gone to another room of equal size. This one held several large padded chairs and a couch. A stone fireplace filled one wall. Jeremy had lit the fire earlier and I was lying beside it now, basking in the heat and stuffing myself with food. Paradise.

Jeremy and Antonio sat in the chairs. At first, I'd stuck close to Jeremy. But Antonio kept hogging the food, inching the platters over to his side of the coffee table. I'd followed the food and ended up lying on the rug by the fireplace. I was wearing a shirt of Jeremy's, which came down to my knees, and a thick pair of woolen socks. I'd just as soon have gone naked, but

Jeremy had a thing about clothes, so I humored him.

The two men were talking. I wasn't paying much attention. Occasionally I caught words like "boy" or "child", so I knew they were talking about me. To understand them, I'd have to concentrate and at that moment, all my concentration was required for the arduous task of filling my belly. Once that Herculean chore was accomplished, I stretched out and listened to them talk. I wasn't always sure what they were saying or what they meant, but I listened anyway.

"Are his Changes lunar?" Antonio asked.

Jeremy shook his head. "Emotion-based sometimes. Other times . . . I don't know. They're frequent. Too frequent. Usually two, three times a day."

"Ouch. Poor kid. He's so small. How old do you figure?"

"I guessed seven for his birth certificate. He's probably closer to eight, like Nicky, but with the developmental delays, it seemed safer to go with seven."

"How long ago do you think he was bitten?"

"I don't want to think about it." Jeremy sipped his drink. "He's worse than I expected. I'm not sure . . . I wasn't really prepared for this."

"Second thoughts?"

Jeremy put his glass down. "No. Of course not. I'm just questioning my own . . ." He stopped. Shrugged. "Ah, well. He's stuck with me now."

"It'll be fine. He seems bright enough. He'll learn fast. And he's a handsome boy. Those big blue eyes. Those blond curls. People see that, they'll expect a little angel. That'll help."

"You think so?" Jeremy looked up, hopeful.

"Sure. Don't worry about it. In a few months, he'll be a normal boy."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Temper

Over the next few weeks, my language recognition skills went into overdrive. I learned best the way most children learn: eavesdropping. Antonio left the day after we'd arrived, but he returned the next weekend, and the weekend after that. Days of listening to Jeremy and Antonio helped me far more than Jeremy's lessons could. That's not to say that my verbal skills kept apace. I talked when I had to, but I didn't really see the point. My needs were simple, so there wasn't much I had to communicate. Gesturing and grunting seemed far more efficient than speech. Jeremy disagreed.

By the end of the second week at Stonehaven, he wasn't even content with mere words anymore. He wanted sentences. Whole sentences. The nerve. And, in forcing me to speak when I didn't want to, we both learned one more thing about me. I had a bit of a temper.

"Out."

Jeremy glanced over his newspaper and lifted one eyebrow. I was learning to hate that particular facial gesture.

"Out."

Antonio lay on the floor, surrounded by papers, writing in a ledger book. He looked up. "I think he wants to go outside. Why don't we?"

"I know perfectly well what he wants. And he knows how to ask for it."

"Want out." I planted myself in front of Jeremy and pushed down his newspaper.

Jeremy shook the newspaper from my hand. "Ask for it properly, Clayton. A full sentence. I want to go out. Please would be nice."

I growled and stamped my foot. Jeremy turned the page.

"Want?"

"No, Clayton."

I grabbed the newspaper and ripped it from his hands.

"I want to go out! Now!"

Jeremy plucked the torn paper from my hands, folded it and laid it aside. "You don't speak to me that way, Clayton. Go upstairs, please. You can come down for dinner."

I didn't budge. I wanted to go out. It was a simple request. All Jeremy had to do was give me permission. I could open the door and let myself out. I knew the boundaries: the broken statue, the bronze urn, the kitchen window and the back door.

For weeks, he'd given me what I wanted when I wanted it. Now, all of a sudden, these simple wishes were granted only when I complied to outrageous demands like having to speak in full sentences. The unfairness of it raged through me.

I grabbed the newspaper and ripped it in half. Jeremy ignored me and reached for his coffee mug. I knocked it from his hand as it touched his lips. It smashed into the wall, shards flying in all directions.

"Clayton!" Antonio leapt to his feet.

Jeremy put out a hand to stop him. His face stayed impassive, which infuriated me more. I flung myself in his face.

"Out!" I screamed, spraying spittle flying. "Want out nowwww!"

I threw back my head and howled. I grabbed the nearest thing to me, which happened to be an end table, and flung it again against the brick fireplace. It smashed into sticks and splinters. I swung back to face Jeremy. He arched one eyebrow.

"Done?"

I snarled and stormed from the room. I strode to the back door, touched the handle, then stopped.

I couldn't do it. My fingers refused to turn the door handle. I could not disobey Jeremy. It was like a subconscious override that shut down my synapses.

With a snarl, I spun from the door and stomped up the stairs, making as much noise as a sixty pound body can make.

I ran into the first room on the right, an empty guest room, and threw myself onto the bed. Burying my head under the pillow, I gulped stale air and felt the rage dissipated. On its heels came horror. Somewhere deep in the recesses of my damaged memory, I knew that you never lashed out at an adult. You did not argue. You did not shout. And you absolutely did not break things. To do so was dangerous . . . painful. It was an old lesson, etched in my brain, yet one I'd never been able to follow. Now, I had a reason to follow it. I had a home. Shelter and food. Someone to protect me. Yet I seemed hell-bent on screwing it up.

I pulled the pillow around my ears and sobbed, dry heaving sobs that racked my body until I was too exhausted to move. Then I lay there, feeling sorry for myself. After a while, I heard footsteps on the stairs. I lifted the pillow a bit and listened. The footfalls sounded too heavy for Jeremy, but I still peered out hopefully. When Antonio rounded the doorway, I yanked the pillow down over my head and flipped over, turning my back to him.

"Good, you picked the old room," he said. "Nothing valuable to break."

"Go away."

"What's that? A complete sentence? Short, but grammatically complete. Very good." He thudded onto the foot of the bed. "That's a wicked temper you've got there. Great pitching arm, though. When you grow up, Jeremy can send you down to try out for the Yankees."

I lifted the corner of the pillow. "Send me away?"

"No, no." Antonio shook his head and pulled the pillow away. "I was joking. Teasing." He studied my face for some sign that I understood him. "Jeremy's not sending you anywhere."

I relaxed. "He come? Up?"

"Afraid not, scrap. That's why I'm here. I figured you might need some help."

"Not come up?"

"No. He'll call you for dinner, like he said, but he won't come up after you. Here's what I'd suggest. You go downstairs and apologize. Understand?"

I shook my head.

"Go downstairs. To Jeremy. Tell him you're sorry. Say 'I'm sorry, Jeremy.' A complete sentence. Understand?"

I nodded. It sounded too easy. I should have known there was a catch.

I followed Antonio downstairs and did exactly as he said. I found Jeremy in the study, walked up to him and said "I'm sorry, Jeremy." He nodded and let me help him wash the coffee off the wall. And so, I was forgiven. As easy as that. No lecture. No icy silence. No grudges held. Yet there was something in his eyes that stung worse than all the beatings in the world. Disappointment. No apologies, however heartfelt, could erase that.

The next day, I was in the kitchen with Antonio. He'd shanghaied me on a "special mission." He was baking a cake and swore he needed my help. I suspected Jeremy needed a break more than Antonio needed the help.

"Now, you can't tell Jeremy about the cake," Antonio said, bending down and pulling a bowl from the cupboard.

"Why?"

"Because it's a surprise. It's for his birthday."

My blank look made him gasp in mock horror.

"You don't know what a birthday is? It means our Jeremy's getting older. Tomorrow he will be a very ancient twenty-two. Do you know how old you are?"

I shook my head.

"Seven." He lifted seven fingers.

I pointed at him.

"Me? I'm twenty-four. One foot in the grave. Not enough fingers for that." He grinned and poured white powder into the bowl. "Next year, when you turn eight, we'll throw you a party. My boy just turned eight a few months ago. Bet you didn't know that, did you? I've got a son just about your age."

I frowned and looked around. "Where?"

He laughed. "At home, scrap. With his grandfather, where he belongs. I'm a bad influence." Another laugh. "Someday soon you'll meet him. He'd like that. I'm sure you will, too."

Personally I doubted it, but I didn't say anything. He handed me an egg and showed me how to crack it into the bowl. I got more shell than egg in the bowl, but Antonio only laughed and handed me another one. This time, I got most of the egg in the bowl and only one sliver of shell.

"Well done, scrap. At least someone in this house will be able to cook."

Antonio continued to chatter. I didn't understand most of what he said. I didn't care. I don't think he did either. Nothing seemed to faze him. When I knocked over the milk bottle, he laughed and threw down some dishtowels. When I snuck a fingerful of batter, he laughed and gave me a cupful. There was no mistake that couldn't be wiped away with a laugh and a wink. And best of all, he didn't make me speak in full sentences.

When the cake was done, Antonio pronounced it perfect. It looked a little lopsided, but I didn't argue. We hid the cake in the toaster oven. Antonio swore it'd be safe there. He doubted Jeremy knew what a toaster oven was for, much less how to operate it. Most of our meals came straight from the cupboards and refrigerator, cold cuts and fruit, breads and cheese, whatever could be served with a minimum of preparation. Dinners appeared miraculously on our doorstep everyday, in a cooler, with instructions for reheating.

After dinner that night, Jeremy said he was going out back to "practice." I was welcome to come out, but forbidden to sneak up on him. Intrigued, I started to follow. Antonio caught me and pulled me aside.

"I'm going out, scrap. Jeremy's birthday present is ready. Want to come?"

"Where?"

"Town. Go. In car. You and me. Yes?"

I shook my head. "Go Jeremy."

"Are you sure? Jeremy won't be much fun. He's busy."

"Stay Jeremy."

"All right then. I'll see you when I get back. Jeremy's out back. Go through the patio doors. Make sure he hears you coming. Our Jeremy gets pretty wrapped up in his practicing and he might not notice you. Be careful. Understand?"

I nodded.

"Can I get you something from town? Bring something home for you?"

"Food."

Antonio laughed and ruffled my hair. "You're easy to please, scrap. Go see Jeremy then."

I found Jeremy outside shooting pointed sticks. This I accepted as a perfectly fine hobby, much the same as I had the plastic-talking. Jeremy was my god. Whatever he did was good and right.

I'd later learn that this hobby had a name. Archery. Not the sort of thing I saw people doing everyday back in Baton Rouge. Not the sort of thing you'd expect a werewolf to do either. Why learn to use a hunting weapon when you came with your own built-in set? For Jeremy, though, archery had nothing to do with hunting. It was all about control, developing and improving the mental and physical control needed to put an arrow through a target. Of course, I wouldn't know that for years. Right then, it looked like he was shooting sticks at a tiny dot out in the field. Strange, but if it made him happy, then I was happy.

When he saw me watching, he offered to show me how to use the bow. Didn't look like much fun, really, but if it meant spending time with him then, sure, I was game.

Jeremy was repositioning my hands on the bow for the umpteenth time when a sound came from the house. We both stopped and listened. Somewhere inside, a

door closed. Jeremy straightened.

"Antonio's ba?"

He stopped in mid-word. His eyes narrowed as he listened. A second later, I heard it—a voice inside the house shouting Jeremy's name. His back tensed, but he didn't answer. After a minute, the patio door swung open. Jeremy turned, taking the smallest step backward toward me.

"I thought you weren't coming home until next month," Jeremy said.

"That's a fine welcome."

Jeremy's back blocked my view. All I saw of the newcomer was a pair of loafers below tan slacks. The voice definitely wasn't Antonio's, though. A stranger? Coming into our house? Invading our territory? Outrage shot through me and my hackles went up. I sniffed the air, but the newcomer was downwind.

"Welcome back," Jeremy said. His voice was stiff. He stepped back again, keeping me shielded behind him.

"My, my, now I do feel welcome," the man said cheerfully. "Of course, an even better welcome would be to return to find you've moved out. Or perhaps had an unfortunate run-in with a local hunter. But that would be too much to hope for, wouldn't it?"

Jeremy said nothing.

"Did I see Tonio's suitcase upstairs?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"He's here? My timing isn't so bad then. Where is he?"

"Out."

Keeping his back to me, Jeremy picked up the bow and adjusted the string. It was a subtle dismissal, but the man seemed in no hurry to leave.

"Still playing with your toys, I see," the man said.

Jeremy said nothing.

"What exactly is the point?" the man continued. "You don't hunt. You're afraid of everything that moves. But I suppose that bulls-eye is a safe target. You don't have to worry about it attacking you, not like one of those vicious little bunny rabbits. Of course, it could give you a nasty sliver."

Jeremy plucked at the bow string.

"Well, come on then. Let's see you take a shot," the man said.

Jeremy didn't move. The man snorted. I saw his legs move as he turned to leave. Jeremy's back relaxed ever so slightly. Then, in mid-turn, the man stopped.

"What is that?" he asked.

"What's what?" Jeremy said.

"Behind you."

"Oh. That." Jeremy hesitated, then reached back for my shoulder and pulled me out a few inches, still shielding me. "This is Clayton."

He propelled me out a bit farther, keeping his hand on my shoulder. I looked up, my gaze moving from the man's trousers, to his shirt and finally to his face.

"Clayton, this is Malcolm. My father."

It was the werewolf who'd beaten me in Baton Rouge.

Malcolm

If I'd seen this man a month earlier, I would have turned tail and run. But things had changed. I was no longer a frightened castaway defending a speck of territory. I had a protector and I had a home. The outrage that had surged a few minutes ago flared, fueled by something stronger than anger. I looked at this man and felt hate.

I snarled and charged. Jeremy snatched me from behind and yanked me back. I howled, lashing out with all limbs. In mid-swing, I realized who I was swinging at and stopped short.

"Don't," Jeremy whispered. "It won't help."

"I see you're teaching him cowardice already."

Malcolm hadn't moved an inch, even as I'd been flying at him. As I met his eyes, I knew why. I was no danger to him. And, if I attacked him, he was fully justified in hitting back. If anything, he was disappointed to have lost the opportunity.

Malcolm turned to Jeremy. "What is he doing here?"

"I brought him here."

"You?" Malcolm laughed. "Not goddamned likely. You're afraid to leave the house. You certainly wouldn't cross the country chasing some brat. This is another scheme you dragged Tonio into, isn't it? I told you about the boy and you got all misty-eyed and Tonio offered to fetch him for you. A pet for poor Jeremy."

While Malcolm was speaking, Jeremy crouched down in front of me, his back to his father. My heart was still hammering. Jeremy rubbed my shoulder.

"Let's go inside," Jeremy said.

"I'm talking to you," Malcolm said.

"You've upset him. I'm taking him inside."

"You're not taking him anywhere. He's not staying."

"I'm sorry you don't approve."

Jeremy started steering me toward the door. Malcolm stepped in front of us.

"Did you hear me? This is not open for negotiation, boy. You are not keeping that mutt in my house."

"It's not your house."

Jeremy propelled me past him and through the patio door. Just inside, Antonio was leaning against the wall, almost collapsing with silent laughter. He thumped Jeremy on the back.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that," he said. "Congratulations. Now, the next step is to boot him out the front door and change the locks. Need some help?"

Jeremy gave a small shake of his head and kept walking, pushing me in front of him. When we got to the stairs, a sigh rippled the surface of his composure. He turned to Antonio.

"I should have warned Clayton. I kept putting it off and?" He stopped and turned to me. "I'm sorry, Clayton. I can't imagine what you must be thinking."

Antonio ruffled my hair. "Oh, you're fine, aren't you, scrap?"

I'd just discovered that my new sanctuary was the very home of the werewolf who had destroyed my last place of refuge. So, no, I shouldn't have been fine. I should have been frightened, even angry. I should have felt betrayed. But I didn't. I was confused, maybe a little apprehensive, but I knew Jeremy would do nothing to hurt me. Whatever was going on here, I was still safe, and that was all that mattered.

Taking my cue from the Antonio's tone, I nodded, and threw in a "yes" for good measure. Jeremy didn't look convinced. Antonio grabbed me around the waist and swung me over his shoulder.

"Come on, scrap. I have something in the kitchen that should take your mind off the big bad wolf. Go wait in the study, Jer. We'll be there in a minute."

Without waiting for an answer, Antonio carried me to the kitchen, then put me down on the tabletop and closed the door.

"I suppose that was a bit of a shock. Jeremy wanted to tell you, but we didn't expect Malcolm back for a few weeks." He paused. "Do you understand me?"

I nodded. He hesitated, then opened the oven and took out the birthday cake.

"Malcolm is Jeremy's father. He does live here, but he's hardly ever around. Probably just stopped in for money. God forbid the bastard should earn his own keep. Expects Jeremy to hand over?" Antonio stopped, shook his head and reached for a stack of plates. "With any luck, he'll clear out in a couple of days."

Antonio pulled mugs from the cupboard, then handed me the cake plates.

"Can you manage those?"

I nodded.

He smiled and thumped me on the back. "Good. Don't worry about Malcolm, scrap. Just stay out of his way. He'll curse and threaten but, as long as you stick close to Jeremy, he won't hurt you. He doesn't dare. Remember that."

I nodded again and he waved me toward the door.

Jeremy was in the study. When I entered, he had his back to me and was stirring the fireplace embers. The poker circled slowly, sending up fountains of sparks. He stopped, shoulders tightening as I walked in. He inhaled sharply. Then he relaxed, turned and smiled.

"Happy birthday," I said.

Jeremy's crooked smile widened. "Thank you."

He glanced up and I heard Antonio behind me. As I turned, Antonio kicked the half-closed door open with one foot. The overburdened tray in his hands started to tip. Jeremy lunged to grab it, but Antonio righted it at the last second and waved him back.

"Sit down and relax," Antonio said.

Antonio poured the coffee, adding a half-cup of milk to mine and an equal portion of brandy to the other two. I passed out the filled cups and plates, leaving only a small trail of coffee droplets. Before Antonio sat down, he took two brightly colored boxes from the mantle and handed the larger one to Jeremy.

Jeremy took the gift, but made no move to open it. His eyes were unfocused, his mind still elsewhere. Antonio nudged him, then leaned over and whispered something in his ear. Jeremy's gaze flicked to me and he forced a crooked quarter-smile.

"Open," I said.

"Hmmm?"

"He's eager to get to the cake part," Antonio said. "I told him he has to wait until the gifts are opened."

"Ah. I'll get to it then."

Jeremy lifted the box and peeled off the colored paper. Underneath was a hinged wooden box. He undid the tiny latch and lifted the top. His eyes widened. Smiling, he lifted a strangely shaped piece of molded metal and carved wood from the box. Although I didn't recognize it at the time, it was an antique revolver, one of a pair.

"Beautiful," Jeremy murmured, turning it in his hands so the light glinted off the barrel.

"You said you wanted to try handguns," Antonio said.

"I wasn't imagining something quite so fancy. It's only for target practice."

"Do I ever do anything by halves? Besides, I'm hoping you might use it for something more productive." Antonio tossed the smaller box to Jeremy. "See if this gives you any ideas."

Jeremy unwrapped a velvet jeweler's box. When he opened it, he threw his head

back and laughed, the sound echoing through the room. I scrambled up and over onto his lap to see what caused such an uncharacteristic outburst. All I saw in the box, though, was a polished metal chunk with scratches on the side.

Behind us, the door opened and a voice said, "Well, I•fm glad to see everyone is having such a good time. If I•fd known my return would have made you this happy, I•fd have stayed away."

"Fuck off, Malcolm," Antonio said. "This is a private party."

Malcolm walked in and closed the door. "And what might we be celebrating?"

"Your son•fs birthday, which you•fve obviously forgotten."

"Forgotten? Hardly. I remember every second of the day that slant-eyed bitch whelped him. Much the way one might remember the day one is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Had I known how he would turn out, I•fd have put him in a sack and dropped him off the nearest bridge. I should have guessed the outcome, really, right from the moment he was born. Any normal child would come out into the world bawling his lungs out. My brat? He didn•ft make a peep. Even as a baby he didn•ft have the balls to complain."

"Cake?" Jeremy said, holding out the piece he•fd been cutting through his father•fs tirade.

Malcolm ignored him and dropped onto the sofa. Jeremy shrugged and gave me the piece. Antonio rolled his eyes and mouthed something to Jeremy. The corners of Jeremy•fs mouth flicked in the faintest of smiles, but he kept the rest of his face impassive.

"Did you bring Jeremy a gift?" Antonio asked.

Malcolm snorted and reached for the brandy snifter.

"Want to see what I got him?"

Antonio grabbed the tiny jeweler's box from the table and tossed it to Malcolm. A spark of worry passed behind Jeremy•fs eyes, but when Malcolm saw what was in the box, he laughed nearly as loudly as his son.

"A silver bullet with my name on it," he said. "One can never accuse you of subtlety, Tonio."

"Regular bullets may work just as well," Antonio said. "But I thought this one might find a special place in your heart."

Malcolm laughed again. "Only if you fired the gun, my boy. That one would never do it. He doesn•ft have the nerve. You•fre too good to him, Tonio. You inherited your father•fs soft spot for weaklings. Your intentions are admirable, but you should pick more worthy friends."

"Like you? Sorry, Malcolm, but I already have a father. And you already have a son."

Jeremy closed his eyes, the barest wince, fingers tightening around his cake plate as if bracing himself.

"Son?" Malcolm snarled. "That•fs not a son. It•fs a punishment. An embarrassment I would have abandoned twenty-one years ago if my father hadn•ft?"

"But he did," Jeremy said softly. "And you were stuck with me, as you've reminded me every day since." He got to his feet. "I think someone is getting tired."

He looked at me, but it must have been a mistake, because I was wide-awake and absorbing every word.

"Does he have a kennel out back?" Malcolm asked. "Or is he housebroken already?"

"Off you go," Jeremy said, putting one hand behind my back and propelling me to the door.

Antonio closed the door behind us and followed us up the stairs.

Jeremy's bedroom was at the far end of the hall. I'd been sleeping there since I came to Stonehaven. Jeremy had tried setting me up in a room of my own, but I was having none of that. Now that Malcolm was here, it would be a while before he started encouraging me to take a separate room again, which was the only obvious advantage to his father's return.

Jeremy's room was furnished as a place to sleep and nothing more, just a bed, a night-stand and a dresser. The floor was bare wood, no carpet. The walls were unadorned except for a cluster of small framed sketches by the window. All the sketches were portraits, Antonio being the only one I recognized. It would be years before I realized Jeremy was the artist. When I'd asked about them, he'd only named the people pictured and explained their relationships to one another. It would have never occurred to him to say he'd drawn them.

Antonio walked in behind us and threw himself onto the bed. "Paradise lost. The serpent has returned."

"Get ready for bed, Clayton. Just push Tonio out of the way."

Antonio propped his head up on his arms. "I could help you regain that paradise, Jer. Just say the word and he's?"

"That's enough," Jeremy said, jerking his chin at me. "He doesn't know you're joking."

"Am I? The Pack Laws don't always apply to the beloved youngest son of the Alpha."

I'd spent the last few exchanges standing there with my shirt pulled up around my neck, listening. Jeremy tugged my shirt off and lifted me onto the bed. He shoved Antonio to the side, folded back the covers and motioned me inside.

"All right," Antonio sighed. "Forget the permanent solution. How about just kicking him out? After all, it is your house." He grinned. "I still can't believe you actually said that to him."

Jeremy sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his socks.

"You shouldn't let him forget that," Antonio continued. "There's a reason Edward passed over Malcolm and left it all to you. Because he knew his son was

a psychotic son-of-a-bitch and he hoped you'd toss him out on his ass the moment the will was read."

"I don't think that was quite what my grandfather had in mind."

Jeremy folded our clothing and laid it on the dresser. Then he turned out the light and crawled into bed beside me. Antonio ignored the hint. He stripped off his shirt and pants and thudded back on the bed.

"This bed isn't that big," Jeremy said.

"I wasn't done talking."

"Are you ever?"

"Watch it or I'll take back those revolvers. Now shove over, scrap."

Antonio wriggled under the covers and knocked me with his hip. I held my ground. I'd been here first.

"If you kicked him out, my father would support you."

"Hmmm."

Antonio flipped onto his side. "Don't think you can fool me, Jer. You're not afraid to kick him out, you're just too damned stubborn. It's like the ultimate challenge of willpower. If you can survive Malcolm, you can survive anything."

Jeremy said nothing.

"Don't pretend you've fallen asleep, either."

"I'm not pretending anything. You were pontificating so nicely, I hated to interrupt."

"Ha."

Silence fell, punctuated only by heartbeats and slow breathing. I curled up between them. Waves of heat and scent ebbed out from either side of me. As I closed my eyes, the anxiety of the last few hours washed away. After a while, the bed creaked and I sensed Jeremy looking down at me.

"He's asleep," Antonio said.

"Hmmm."

"What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking." A pause. "Perhaps I haven't done the best thing for him. Bringing him here. Into this."

"You know, I was thinking the same thing myself. I was lying here thinking, what a monster Jeremy is, snatching this poor kid from that swamp, hauling him across the country and forcing him to endure some semblance of a normal life. I mean, the boy is absolutely miserable here. Anyone could see that."

"You don't need to be sarcastic."

"And you don't need to be stupid. If you didn't rescue Clayton, he'd have

been dead within the year, and I don't mean by natural causes. The whole Pack heard Malcolm's story. How long do you think it'd be before someone decided it was too risky, having a child werewolf running around Louisiana? No one else would think of rescuing him. Not even me. You're different."

"So I've been told," Jeremy murmured.

"You did the right thing, Jer. End of discussion."

Silence. I was starting to drift off when Antonio started up again.

"You don't need to worry about him, you know."

"End of discussion?"

"End of your discussion, not mine. As I was saying, he'll be okay. Malcolm has too much to risk by hurting him. He knows you wouldn't stand for it, and he wouldn't find any sympathy anywhere else. My father won't put up with that shit. He keeps Malcolm around because he's useful, but he's not useful enough to earn his keep."

Jeremy paused, then spoke, his voice barely audible. "If ever I wanted to throw him out, it would be now. But I can't risk retaliation."

"I know. He'd go after the boy. I'll shut up about it."

"Careful. I wouldn't want you hurting yourself."

Something shot over my head. I peeked to see a pillow sail clear over the bed and land with a soft whump on the floor.

"You need to work on your aim."

"It was just a warning shot."

"Ah."

Jeremy rolled over. I waited until I was certain I wouldn't be missing anything, then let myself fall asleep.

The next day, the three of us were in the back yard, and had been for most of the afternoon, namely because Malcolm was indoors.

Antonio and Jeremy were wrestling. At first, Antonio thought it would be fun to teach me a few moves, but after a flip sent me skidding to the ground with a bloody nose, I was relegated to spectator status.

Personally, I would have continued playing, but when Jeremy hoisted me off the ground and set me on the stone wall, I knew I'd better stay there. Watching wasn't so bad. It was an interesting study of maneuvers and strategies, possibly transferable to more important things, like hunting. Antonio had the clear advantage of weight and muscle, but he pinned Jeremy less than half the time. He'd thunder and charge, and Jeremy would just dart out of the way, often slipping around behind him and taking advantage of the momentum of Antonio's charge to knock him face-first to the ground. Soon Antonio had a bloody nose to match mine, but no one suggested he stop playing.

Jeremy didn't always get out of the way in time. Once, when he was a split-second too slow and Antonio had him flat on his back, the phone started to ring. Now, the phone was over a hundred feet away and inside the house, but all three of us heard it. Even in human form, we share a wolf's keener senses of smell and hearing.

"Will he answer it?" Antonio asked, taking his knee off Jeremy's chest.

"Only if he's expecting a call."

"Are you?"

"No." The phone continued to ring. "It's probably for you."

Antonio grunted, grabbed his shirt from a nearby bush and wiped the streaming sweat from his face. He looked toward the house, hesitated, then headed for the back door. Jeremy sat up in the grass and rotated his shoulders, wincing as something cracked.

"Hop down, Clayton, and I'll show you some moves."

We played for a few minutes before Antonio came back, walking out of the house even slower than he'd walked in.

"Trouble at home?" Jeremy said.

Antonio muttered something and dropped onto the grass. "A meeting in Chicago. My father can't make it. Something's happened at the factory and he's stuck in New York."

"When do you leave?"

"Tonight. Damn. I hate responsibility."

Jeremy smiled. "You're good at it. Better than anyone expected."

Antonio snorted and broke an icy twig off a tree. He pretended to study it. "My father thinks you should stay in New York with him for a while. You and Clayton."

"No."

"Don't be?"

"I appreciate the concern, but Clayton's not ready for that yet, the new surroundings, the new people. We'll be fine here."

Antonio threw down the stick. "No one said you wouldn't be. You have to introduce him to the Pack eventually. Why not now?"

"I don't want to rush him."

"You're stubborn."

"No, I'm realistic."

"Stubborn."

"Up you get, Clayton," Jeremy said, lifting me under the armpits. "It's getting cold and I imagine you're hungry."

Antonio muttered something under his breath, but followed us into the house in silence, probably afraid Jeremy would withhold the food if he continued arguing.

Campaign

That night, after Antonio left, Jeremy and I were in the study, where we spent most of our evenings. I lay on the carpet before the fire, eyes half-closed, content to doze and daydream. Jeremy was poring over some ragged book that stunk of time and poor storage. On top of the book he kept a notepad, and wrote in it as he read, his eyes never leaving the page.

I know now that Jeremy was working, though at the time I just thought he spent a lot of time reading. To be honest, I wasn't even clear on the reading part, not remembering having seen anyone in my family partake of that pastime. Now I realize that much of that reading time was actually work. Jeremy made his living translating, mainly for academics. It wasn't going to make him rich anytime soon, but it kept the bills paid, and it was something he could do from home, which suited him better than any office job in the city.

We'd been in the study for about an hour when the door swung open. I smelled Malcolm and kept my eyes shut, hoping he'd see we were both very busy and go away.

"Christ," Malcolm said, footsteps thudding into the room. "He's like a goddamned puppy, curled up at his master's feet."

I lifted one eyelid just in time to see Malcolm take a swipe at me with his foot. His aim went wide, coming nowhere near me, but I growled to let him know I'd seen.

"Don't growl at me, you little?"

"Then don't antagonize him," Jeremy said, still reading. "Leave him alone, and he'll leave you alone."

"He'd damned well better leave me?"

"What did you want?"

"I need money."

Jeremy's expression didn't change. Nor did he glance up from his book. "I've had some unexpected expenses with Clayton. I can spare a few hundred now, but if you'll be gone for a while, I can wire you more when I get paid."

"I'm not going anywhere."

At that, Jeremy stopped reading. The barest reaction flitted across his face, but vanished before Malcolm could seize on it.

"I see," Jeremy said slowly, laying his book on the side-table. "What happened this time?"

"Don't take that tone with me."

"I wasn't taking any tone. If there's another . . . problem, I need to know about it, don't I?"

Malcolm thumped onto the couch, sprawling across it, a clear invasion of our

territory. I squelched a growl, and settled for inching closer to Jeremy.

"Just a dispute with a mutt," Malcolm said. "A disagreement over a lady. Not that I'd expect you to know anything about that. You'd have to leave the house to get?"

"You do more than enough for the two of us."

Jeremy pulled out his wallet, took some bills and handed them to Malcolm.

"Eighty bucks?" Malcolm said. "How the hell am I supposed to live?"

"That's all I have. If you're staying, then you don't need more. Things are tight this month. I'll be lucky if I can pay the electric bill."

"The trials and tribulations of home ownership."

Malcolm slid a crocodile grin Jeremy's way, then stuffed the money into his pocket and left.

So we were stuck with Malcolm.

Long before I'd arrived at Stonehaven, Malcolm and Jeremy had perfected the art of living together without actually living together. Despite what I'd thought on my first day, Stonehaven was no mansion, but it was a roomy five-bedroom house, just big enough that two people could pass their days without spending more than a minute or two in the same room.

Most times, Malcolm ignored us. Several times a day, though, he'd corner Jeremy with some petty complaint or slam him with a sarcastic put-down. With Malcolm there, Jeremy was always wary, stiffening at the sound of a footstep, lowering his voice, scuttling me off to another room when Malcolm approached.

The cure for Jeremy's discomfort seemed obvious enough. We had to get rid of Malcolm. Foolishly simple . . . or so it appeared to me. As Antonio had said, the house belonged to Jeremy. I understood little of what went on between Malcolm and Jeremy, but the concept of territory was hardwired in my wolf's brain. This was Jeremy's territory, and if Malcolm made Jeremy miserable, then he had to go. Foolishly simple.

By getting rid of him, I don't mean killing him. However dangerous I liked to imagine myself, I knew I stood no chance against Malcolm. For now, I'd have to settle for getting him out of the house. To do that, I needed to understand him. The wolf in me knew this, and told me how to do it. To understand your adversary, you watched him. You studied him. You stalked him.

My first opportunity came a few days after Antonio left. Jeremy was out back practicing with his new revolvers. Usually, I was content—if not downright happy—to sit and watch whatever he was doing. Today, though, I had a more important mission, so I left Jeremy in the courtyard and slipped into the house to find Malcolm.

Malcolm was watching television in the back nook, a room Jeremy and I rarely entered. Though I vaguely recalled the delights of cartoons, sitting in front

of a television no longer held any appeal for me, probably because it held no appeal for Jeremy, and he was the yardstick by which I now measured the attractiveness of any activity.

For nearly an hour, I peered around the doorway and watched Malcolm watch TV. Finally the show ended. Malcolm turned off the TV. I darted into the hall closet and waited until he started down the hall, then slid out and followed. Several times he paused, and seemed ready to turn, but only shook his head and kept walking.

On to the kitchen. When he wasn't looking, I ducked inside and crouched beside the counter. Malcolm fixed himself a sandwich. Though I failed to see the importance of his selection of cold cuts, my brain told me it was critical information. Finally, he finished making his sandwich, poured a glass of milk, and headed for the dining room. I scurried after him, then watched from the doorway.

Malcolm sat down. He took two bites. Then he turned fast and caught me watching. I raced for the back door.

"Jeremy!" Malcolm shouted.

"He's following me," Malcolm said before Jeremy got through the back door.

Jeremy unzipped his jacket and wiped a line of sweat from his forehead.

"Who?" he asked.

"Who? Who? How many people live in this house? If it's not me and it's not you?"

"Clayton? Where?" Jeremy looked around and frowned, then saw me hovering behind him. His gaze swiveled to Malcolm. "What did you do to him?"

"Do? I didn't do anything. He's been following me around for the last hour, watching me."

"Of course. He's a child. He's curious."

"Curious, my ass. He's stalking me."

"Stalking?" Jeremy's lips twitched. He coughed and rubbed a hand over his mouth, erasing all signs of a smile. "He's a little boy, Malcolm, not an animal. He's playing a game with you. Spying. All children do it. If you ignore him, he'll tire of it soon enough."

Before Jeremy could lead me away, I snuck one last glance at Malcolm. He returned a glare. In that glare, I saw my victory. My stalking had unsettled him. Jeremy hadn't forbidden it, which meant I was free to do it as often as I liked.

This was going to be easier than I thought.

In stalking Malcolm, my only goal had been to gather information, but I

quickly learned that the very act drove him crazy. Within days, all I had to do was slip past a room, and he'd be on his feet, storming into the hall to glower at me. And all he did was glower. Never said a word, never raised a hand, never again complained to Jeremy.

Once I learned how much he hated being stalked, I stopped making any effort to hide my efforts. If he was watching TV, I'd walk right into the room, sit down and stare at him. He'd scowl at me, and try to sit it out, but I outlasted him every time.

In Malcolm's refusal to challenge me, I read cowardice. Yes, he'd terrorized me in the bayou, but that was different. This was Jeremy's territory, and here, Malcolm didn't dare touch me, which made me decide that, in our little pack, Malcolm's status was no higher than my own. If anything, it was lower because I enjoyed Jeremy's personal protection.

I wondered, then, if Malcolm was so powerless, why hadn't Jeremy kicked him out years ago? But the very thought felt like betrayal, so I swept it from my mind. Had I been older, I would have realized there must be more to it. Yet, at the time, I was too pleased with my success to question it.

After two weeks of being stalked, Malcolm showed the first sign of cracking. One day, when Malcolm retreated to the back nook to read, I followed, perched on the chair across from his and stared at him. Just stared. After ten minutes, Malcolm threw down the magazine, shot a single scowl my way, and stormed from the room. He gathered his jacket, wallet and keys, then shouted to Jeremy not to lock up, and stalked out the door.

I had him on the run.

Now all I needed to do was give him a reason to keep running . . . and not come back.

Again, my wolf's instincts blessed me with a centuries-old plan for handling this next step of the fight. To keep an enemy running, one had to give him a reason to believe that staying, or returning, would be bad for his health.

I knew I stood no chance in a fight against any grown werewolf. In a fair fight, that is. But what about an unfair fight? Strategy, that was the key. The world of the wolf is heavily dependent on might and muscle, but there's plenty of wiggle room for a beast with brains. I didn't need to hurt Malcolm. I only had to make him think I could. And the only way a pup could take on a seasoned fighter three times his age was to catch him off guard. Attack when he is most vulnerable. When are we most vulnerable? When we're asleep.

Two nights after I first scared Malcolm out of the house, I decided to act. I had a plan in mind. I'm not sure how I came upon it, but most likely had dredged it up from a half-remembered movie or television show. Whatever the plan's origin, I was certain it would work.

I didn't sleep that night. I kept myself awake by fantasizing about life post-Malcolm. About how happy Jeremy would be, and how happy that would make me.

When Jeremy came to bed, I feigned sleep. Then I waited and listened for Malcolm's return. Finally his footfalls thumped down the hall. His door slammed. Jeremy started awake, mumbled something, and fell back onto the pillow. I listened to his breathing. It took a while for him to return to sleep. It always did.

By the time Jeremy fell asleep, Malcolm's distant snoring signaled that he'd done the same. I reached between the mattress and bedspring, and removed the prize I'd secreted there earlier in the day. Then I slid from the bed.

It took a long time for me to get out of the bedroom, moving as slowly as I could, so I wouldn't wake Jeremy. I scampered barefoot down the hall to Malcolm's room, eased open his door and peered through the crack. Malcolm was on the bed, his back to me. I pushed open the door and looked around.

Unlike Jeremy's room, Malcolm's had stuff. Lots of stuff, all in a jumble that smacked more of carelessness than untidiness. Clothing hung on the chair back and piled on the seat. Dual dressers, both covered in toiletries, cuff links, watches, paperback novels. Where Jeremy's only decorations were pictures of his friends, Malcolm didn't have so much as a photograph on his night-stand. Everything was his: his acquisitions, his hobbies, his life.

I dropped to all fours, crawled forward and peeked over the bedside. Malcolm still faced the other way. I considered my options. Over the bed or around it? Having grown accustomed to Jeremy's fitful sleep habits, I knew the danger of crawling onto the mattress. Better to take the longer route around the bed.

When I was on the other side, I lowered myself to my belly and inched along the hardwood floor. A board sighed. I froze. Malcolm's snoring continued, undisturbed. I crept to the front legs of the bed. My fingers tightened around my prize. A steak knife. I'd considered one of the carving knives, but decided it would be too awkward to carry, and too easily missed.

I eased my head over the mattress edge. A warm puff of Malcolm's breath tickled my face. I watched his eyelids, tensed for any sign of movement. Then I lifted the knife and laid it on the pillow, so it would be the first thing he saw when he awoke.

Message delivered. Time to retreat.

I waited all the next morning for Malcolm to wake. A bloodcurdling scream would be nice, but I'd settle for a good shout of surprise.

Shortly before lunch, Malcolm came downstairs. He passed the open study door without so much as a glare in my direction, and headed to the kitchen. He fixed himself breakfast and took it into the dining room.

Had the knife fallen off the bed? In rising, Malcolm could have shifted the pillow, causing the knife to slide to the floor undetected. How else to explain this complete lack of shock and terror?

After lunch, Jeremy retreated to the study again. Once he was rapt in his work, I sneaked out and followed the sound of the television to the back nook. The door was open. I peered through. The TV was on and the recliner was turned toward it, facing away from the door. I slipped inside.

I tiptoed toward the chair. When I'd made it halfway across the room, the

door clicked shut behind me. I whirled to see Malcolm standing in front of the closed door. I backpedaled, eyes darting about for a second exit.

"Relax, brat," Malcolm said. "I'm not going to touch you. I'm just playing a game." He smiled and tossed the steak knife onto the side-table. "You like games, don't you?"

I backed up until I hit the wall. Malcolm stayed in front of the door.

"I bet I can guess the name of your favorite game," he said. "Let's see . . . Is it: 'Get Rid of Jeremy's Old Man'?"

I said nothing, just stayed pressed against the wall, watching his body language for signs of impending attack.

"Lots of fun, I bet," Malcolm said. "It's pretty close to a new game of my own. Do you know what mine's called?"

I didn't move.

"'Get Rid of Jeremy's Little Beast'. It's still in the planning stages, but I'm quite looking forward to playing."

He sauntered to the recliner. I lunged toward the door, but he was in my path before I got halfway there.

"Now, now. Don't be rude. We're having a conversation, though I'm not sure how much of it you understand. Too bad, really. It's always so much more fun to compete against a willing opponent."

He leaned toward me. "That is what we're doing. In case you haven't realized it. Competing. Who can get rid of who first. Or is that 'ewhom'? Never could keep them straight."

"Want go," I said, then cleared my throat and pulled myself to my full height. "I want to go."

"Oh, don't worry. You will. In . . ." Malcolm glanced at his watch. "Today's Monday . . . so let's say by Wednesday night, you'll have your wish. You'll be gone." He grinned. "Unless you can get rid of me first. But it'll take more than a steak knife to do that."

He picked up the knife. My gaze flew to it.

"Oh, don't worry, brat. I won't hurt you. Won't lay a finger on you. That would suck all the challenge out of it. No, I know a better way. Rid myself of a growing inconvenience and get a little payback in the bargain. Teach my son a lesson about the danger of picking up strays."

Malcolm tossed the knife down and stepped aside.

"Well, go on. Go make your little plans. May the best man?or beast?win."

I darted past him and didn't stop running until I was at the study door. I peered inside. Jeremy was still engrossed in his work. I crept to my spot on the rug, lay down and, set about working on a revised plan of attack.

When my heart stopped pounding, I considered Malcolm's threat, and dismissed it. He hadn't even dared box my ears for the knife incident. I understood enough of his babble to know he wanted me out of the house, but I wasn't

concerned. He admitted he couldn't touch me. So how could he hurt me?

What I forgot, though, was that it wasn't me Malcolm wanted to hurt. I was nothing to him. Nothing but a new tool in a campaign he'd been waging for years.

Territorial

Though our days at Stonehaven may have seemed casual and unstructured, there was a schedule at work. Jeremy liked order, therefore Jeremy liked schedules. Mornings he devoted to me, teaching, playing or, more often, a combination of the two. After lunch, he squeezed in a couple hours of work while I napped, then came a walk, snack-time, and the dreaded daily speech lesson. Once my lesson was done, he took an hour of much-needed personal time, reading or doing target practice or sketching. Next came dinner, followed by a walk or a game, another snack, then back to work while I dozed by the fire.

On Tuesday and Friday nights, Jeremy went for a run. Although he often changed when I did, he spent that time playing with me rather than running or hunting. Adult werewolves need more. A Pack wolf knows that he must change at least once a week and run off that excess energy, adrenaline and aggression. Otherwise, he risks a spontaneous change, likely at a very inconvenient moment.

So, the day after my knife-scheme failure, Jeremy went for his run, as he did every Tuesday. Leaving me alone was relatively safe. I was in more danger of emptying the refrigerator than sticking something in an electrical socket. As for Malcolm, he always left around dinnertime, and never returned until near morning, so Jeremy assumed I faced no danger from that quarter. Yet, as it turned out, I wasn't the only one who paid attention to Jeremy's schedule.

That night, Jeremy left me with a plate of cold cuts and a National Geographic. The pictures in the magazine fascinated me, not the photos of humans, but the ones of wilderness and wildlife. I was studying a spread on lions hunting gazelle when the side door to the garage opened. Knowing it had to be Malcolm, I growled and got up to close the study door. Then I smelled something that made me stop. There was a human in the house.

No werewolf likes having strangers in their house. It's a territorial thing. They learn to tolerate the occasional repair or delivery person, but most will go out of their way to avoid having a stranger step through their front door?like Jeremy having our groceries and dinners left in a cooler on the doorstep, claiming convenience for the deliverer. Yet, while it only made them uncomfortable, it drove me crazy?synapses deep in my brain went wild when they scented a stranger on our property. We'd discovered this last week, when a woman selling cosmetics had rung our bell and Malcolm let her in, which had more to do with her youth and attractiveness than a sudden interest in lipstick.

What happened next was as much her fault as his. Jeremy and I happened to be at the other end of the hall when Malcolm invited her inside. She stepped in, I snarled. She screamed, I pounced. If she hadn't screamed, I would have backed down and retreated to a safer part of the house. But a scream shows fear and fear shows weakness and weakness shows that I have the upper hand. So, recognizing my advantage, I acted accordingly. Luckily, Jeremy was right behind me, and managed to grab me in mid-sprint and hustle me upstairs.

This time, when I smelled the stranger in the house, I jumped to the obvious conclusion. Someone had broken in. With Jeremy gone, it was up to me to defend our territory. I swung into the hall, prepared to fight to my last breath. Then I heard familiar clomping footsteps.

"Whoops," a female voice giggled. "Is there a light switch?"

"To your left, my dear."

Malcolm. I stepped back into the study and closed the door, not so much locking him out as barricading myself in. After the Avon lady fiasco, Jeremy had explained the concept of "invited guest," and my brain understood it even if my body didn't. Although I had little control over my instincts, I was learning to thwart them in small ways. As far as I was concerned, Malcolm had no right to invite anyone into Jeremy's house, and doing so was a serious insult, but I'd cause Jeremy trouble if I interfered. Better to stay locked in this room until Jeremy returned to deal with the matter.

"The estate has been in the family since the eighteenth century," Malcolm was saying. "The current house was built in 1894."

"Wow, that's old. That's back in pioneer days, isn't it?"

Malcolm chuckled. "Close enough."

The footsteps drew closer. I rapped my knuckles against my thighs, eyes clenched, willing them to move on.

"That is the formal dining room," Malcolm said. "The parlor is beyond that."

"Parlor? Like in England?"

"That's right. Now, over here . . ."

The footsteps paused outside the study door. I watched the doorknob twist one way, then the other. I jammed my foot against the door base and put all my weight against it.

"Appears to be jammed," Malcolm murmured.

"That's okay. Show me?"

"One moment, my dear. I'll get this."

He knew I was there. He couldn't help but smell me. He knew how I'd react to confronting a stranger in the house. And he forced open the door.

I tried to dart past him, but he grabbed my shoulder, fingers digging to the bone. With his other hand, he tugged the woman into the room. I don't remember what she looked like? I never looked. She was human and she was a stranger, and that was all I needed to know.

"Oh!" she said as she saw me. She wagged her finger at Malcolm. "Did you forget to tell me something?"

"He's not mine. He's visiting. A very short visit."

Malcolm propelled me forward, pushing me within inches of the woman. I dug my heels into the Oriental carpet and closed my eyes.

"Say hello, boy."

I kept my eyes screwed shut, concentrating on inhaling and exhaling without smelling the intruder. Mentally, I screamed for Jeremy, but outwardly made not

a sound, not daring provoke Malcolm.

"Say hello, boy." Malcolm's fingers dug into my shoulder.

"Oh, leave the poor kid alone."

She leaned down, bringing her face so close I could smell the beer on her breath. I opened my eyes and tried to step backward, but I hit the solid wall of Malcolm's legs.

"What a little cutie," she said. "Are you shy, hon?"

She reached out and touched my cheek. I growled and knocked her hand away. She stumbled back, catching herself on the bookcase. Malcolm laughed.

"That's not funny," she said, straightening up and brushing off her miniskirt as if I'd soiled it. "You should have warned me he was a retard."

"Oh, but he isn't. Quite intelligent, actually . . . in a feral way. I suppose you could call him simple, though. A very uncomplicated set of values with clearly defined likes and dislikes. You happen to be one of those dislikes."

The woman blinked, then made another show of smacking imaginary dust from her skirt.

"You can take me home now," she said without looking up.

"May I? You're too kind. But I brought you here to teach the boy a lesson and we've barely begun."

She sniffed. "You can teach the brat manners when I'm gone."

"Hardly possible, my dear. You are the lesson. A hunting lesson." His index finger stroked my shoulder, grip still tight. "You see, the boy likes to stalk. To hunt. A born predator. Given his size, he hasn't had much experience with the killing part yet, but I hate to limit such intriguing potential."

"I don't think that's funny. I'm going to hitch a ride home."

She tried to walk past us to the door, but Malcolm grabbed her arm with his free hand. She gasped and her eyes widened.

"Does that hurt? I'm barely squeezing."

His biceps twitched. The woman yelped and yanked back. Malcolm released her arm, letting her crash to the floor. Then he pulled me forward.

"Go ahead, boy. Kill her."

I closed my eyes and willed my feet into lead weights.

"Come now. None of that. She won't hurt you. She's a woman, and a weak one at that. You're already stronger than she is. I won't let her escape. It's an easy kill."

"Not hungry."

Malcolm threw his head back and laughed. "Did you hear that, my dear? He's

not hungry. No troubling moral barriers there."

"Th?this isn't funny."

Fear seeped into the woman's voice, draining any confidence from the words. Holding the chair, she slowly rose to her feet, eyes locked on Malcolm. He waited until she was up, then shot out his leg and hooked hers. She crashed to the floor.

"See how easy that is, boy?"

The woman started to crawl toward the door. Malcolm pushed me toward her.

"Yes, I know you're not hungry, but this is a lesson, for when you are hungry. Now?"

"No."

The woman was at the door. Malcolm reached down, grabbed her by the hair and threw her across the room. She lay still, then her shoulders convulsed in a sob. She curled up on the rug and made mewling noises.

"Want to go," I said, straining against Malcolm's grip.

"You're not afraid, are you? If you need help?"

"No kill humans. Jeremy say no."

It was the wrong answer. Malcolm's mouth twitched. He flung me into the center of the room. I caught myself before I fell and lifted my arms to ward him off. When I turned toward him, though, he was leaning against the door.

"Jeremy's not here, is he?" His voice was calm, the fake camaraderie back in place. "Even if he was, he'd have to agree. The girl must die. We can hardly let her go. She's seen you. She knows about you. A shame, really, but?" He shrugged. "What must be done, must be done. If you'd prefer, we could wait for him to get back. Of course, I'd have to tell him what you did."

"Did nothing."

"You let her see what you are."

"I?I didn't see anything," the woman snuffled from the corner.

Malcolm smiled. "Of course you did. A shame, but one easily remedied."

The woman pulled herself to her elbows. "No, it's true. I didn't see anything. If you let me go?"

"If I let you go, you'll tell what you saw. That the boy is a werewolf." He paused, smiling at her reaction. "Oh, you didn't know? My mistake. But, now that you do?"

He started advancing on her. She lifted her arms and inched backward.

"I don't know anything. I don't believe you anyway. You're crazy. Just let me go and I'll?"

He grabbed her outstretched arms and snapped the hands back. Two sharp cracks and a piercing screech. The woman fell back, chest heaving, lips moving

soundlessly. Malcolm lifted one of her broken wrists. Bone pierced the skin. He filled his hand with blood, then let the woman fall.

"Can you smell this, boy?"

He lifted his hand, letting the blood drip.

"Can you feel this?" His eyes gleamed. He stepped forward and turned the bloody palm toward me. "Can you feel it? Close your eyes and smell it."

I could smell it, the hot coppery scent filling the room. But I felt nothing. Why would I? To me, blood only smelled like food, and I wasn't hungry.

Malcolm closed his fist, then opened it and wiped the blood on my face.

"Do you feel it?"

His voice was hoarse, his eyes glowing. He leaned down to look into my eyes, gaze searching mine. Then his eyes dimmed with something like disappointment. He strode across the room, grabbed the woman by the back of the neck and swung her toward me. Her lips still moved soundlessly.

I looked in her eyes and I saw the fear of a trapped animal. Malcolm's free hand went around the woman's throat. He started to squeeze. Her eyes went wild and she kicked at him.

I turned and ran to the door. As I touched the handle, I heard the distant sound of running footsteps. I pulled open the door. The woman yelped. There was a crack, louder than the sound of her wrists snapping, then a thud. I walked into the hall.

Jeremy skidded around the corner. His shirt was off, pants undone and feet bare. His eyes were black with dread. When he saw me, he stopped. I raced over to him. He put out one hand, as if to pull me closer, but pushed me behind him instead, and held me there, shielding me.

When I peeked around Jeremy, I saw Malcolm standing outside the study door. Malcolm blinked once, a second's worth of confusion passing over his face.

"How did you??" Malcolm started, then shook off the question. "You're too late. He's already done it. Killed a woman. I brought?"

"No!" I screamed and lunged forward.

Jeremy caught my arm. "I know," he said softly. "I know who did it."

He motioned for me to stay, then walked forward, pushed past his father and stepped into the study. When he came out, there was a look in his eyes I'll never forget, a look that made me swear never to kill a human, if only so I would never be the cause of such a look.

He stood there, caught in the doorway. I thought he was looking at me, then saw the blankness in his eyes. If he was seeing anything at all, it was nothing out here, but something inside his head. His lips twitched once and he swallowed. Then he snapped back. Ignoring his father, he strode down the hall, gently herding me ahead of him. We walked to the parlor. He motioned for me to sit on the sofa and headed for the telephone.

Cleanup

"What are you doing?" Malcolm hurried into the room, then slowed and tried to

saunter.

Jeremy picked up the receiver. Malcolm grabbed it from his hand. Jeremy steered me into the front hall and took our coats from the hall stand.

"Where are you going?" Malcolm said.

"To finish my phone call."

"Who are you calling?"

"You know very well who. Dominic."

"For what?"

"Stock tips," Jeremy spat, then inhaled and met his father's gaze. "You know why I'm calling. To tell him what you've done."

"To tattle."

"Yes, to tattle."

Jeremy helped me zip up my coat. His fingers were trembling. He shifted sideways to block them from Malcolm's view.

"I've never told him anything you've done," Jeremy said. "He's asked. He suspects you've killed humans, but he needs proof to banish you. I've always refused to give him that proof. It seemed . . . safer."

"Avoid confrontation at all costs. That's my boy. A coward to the very?"

"I told myself I could handle it." Jeremy's voice was as calm and emotionless as if he was reading from a book. "Better for you to be in the Pack, subject to its laws, than living outside it, with nothing to stop you from killing whenever the whim strikes."

Malcolm stepped in front of Jeremy. "I have never killed anyone who wasn't a threat to the Pack. Dominic knows that, and if you try to tell him otherwise?"

"That poor girl in there was no threat until you brought her into this house. You broke the Law even by bringing her here. That's proof enough." He stopped fidgeting with his jacket, pulled himself up to his full height and looked down at Malcolm. "I told myself I could handle it. But it's not just me anymore. I have other responsibilities. Other considerations."

"You mean this stray?"

"Do you think I've forgotten?" Jeremy roared, making me stumble back, shocked. He advanced on his father. "Do you think I forget what you did? That scene in there. Do you think I forget the last time you killed in this house? I was nine years old. You told me it was my fault. Well, it wasn't my fault, and this wasn't his fault, and I swear you are never going to do anything like this to him again. It ends here."

He took hold of my shoulder and turned us toward the front door. As his fingers grazed the handle, Malcolm's voice cut through the silence.

"I'll leave," he said.

Jeremy paused, then turned slowly.

"You want to protect the brat from me?" Malcolm said. "Fine. I•fm not the one he needs protecting from, but have it your way. I•fll leave for a few weeks?"

"Ten months."

"I can•ft?"

"Until the end of the year. I•fll give you enough to live on, but I don•ft want to see you again before Christmas."

"And how•fs that going to look? Me taking off for nearly a year? The Pack will know something•fs up if I don•ft go to the Meets."

"Then they•fll know something•fs up. As for the Meets, come up with an excuse and I•fll go along with it."

With that, Jeremy led me upstairs. No parting shot. No final threat. No "be gone before I come down." He had what he wanted. Malcolm was leaving. That was enough.

Jeremy took me into his room and set me on the bed, then crouched in front of me. For several minutes, he studied my face.

"Are you okay?" he asked finally.

I nodded. Was I okay? I wasn•ft sure. The death of the woman meant little to me. I•fd say it meant nothing, but I feel I should leave some opening for interpretation on the matter. To admit that I, as a child, felt nothing at seeing someone die shifts me into the realm of unfeeling monster. So I•fll say I felt little.

I knew, even then, that I should feel something. I saw it in Jeremy•fs expression, the expectation that I should be traumatized or, at the very least, shaken. But the woman was nothing to me, so how could I mourn her passing? Her death was wrong. Unjust. That I understood. The law of the wild is clear on such matters. You kill to survive?for defense and for food. There•fs no excuse for anything else. But to feel pity for a stranger? It was, and still is, beyond me.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Jeremy stopped, tensed and swiveled his head to track them. Along the hall. Down the stairs. Slam. Jeremy rocked back on his heels and nodded.

"He•fs gone." He swiped his bangs back from his face, then met my eyes. "There•fs something I need to do now. I•fm sorry, but it•fs important. It must be done right away. I•fll make sure he•fs gone and I•fll be close enough to hear him if he comes back, but I need to do this. Can you wait here?"

"Go?" I tried again. "Go with you?"

He went very still, then squeezed my hand. "No, Clayton. I•fm sorry. I don•ft want to leave you right now, but?"

"I am okay."

He blinked, as if startled, then he hugged me, a spontaneous two-second hug,

broken off quickly and hidden under the guise of an awkward back pat.

"You're a good boy, Clayton," he whispered as he drew back. "I'm sorry . . . I'll be back as quick as I can and we'll talk. Okay?"

"I am okay."

A twist of a smile, and he was gone.

Just enough time passed for me to wonder whether I should go after Jeremy, make sure Malcolm hadn't come back and hurt him. Then I heard the bathroom taps running full-tilt, water thundering into the basin and down the ancient pipes.

I crept to the hall bathroom and inhaled. Jeremy. Good. I turned the doorknob. With the sink water running, I knew Jeremy wasn't doing anything private but, the truth is, I would have opened the door anyway. In the transformation from human to werewolf, some learned behaviors slid free from my brain. Some, like the proper use of a telephone, I recovered. Others, like the concept of privacy, never returned. Undressing, bathing, urinating, defecating, it was all a normal part of life. You weren't doing anything wrong, so why did you need to hide to do it?

I pushed the door open. Jeremy was hunched over the sink, his back to me. At first, I thought he was throwing up, having had some experience with this myself only a few weeks ago, after I mistook a carton of cream for milk. I inhaled, but didn't detect the sour taint of vomit.

Jeremy's shirt lay in a heap on the floor. I stared at it, scrunched up in a ball, nowhere near the laundry basket.

"Jeremy?"

The rush of water drowned me out. Jeremy leaned down until his face was nearly in the bowl. When he shifted, the light caught the sweat on his back, the rivulets cutting through a fine dusting of dirt. He splashed water on his face. Then he turned off the taps and braced his forehead against the mirror.

Even now, I have to remind myself how young Jeremy was when he found me. He never acted young, never did the sorts of things you'd expect a young man to do. He couldn't. Long before I'd arrived, he'd had to take on adult responsibility, getting a job, running a household, looking after his father. Looking back on that moment in the bathroom, I can see how young he was. Young and tired and confused, not yet confident enough to be sure he was doing the right thing, but trying so hard to do it.

I wish I could have done something, said something, to make him feel better. But when I looked at him then, I saw only my savior, my protector. An adult, with no needs or fears of his own. Standing in that bathroom doorway, staring down at that discarded shirt, I saw only a sign that the world was off-balance, and wanted only to right it again, to get my Jeremy back.

"I am sorry," I said.

He started, then turned, saw me and rubbed his hands over his face, finger-combing his hair in the same motion. Then he dropped to one knee before me, took hold of my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Clayton. Absolutely nothing."

"Get rid?" I stopped and restarted. "I try get rid of him. Scare him. He not like. Say he get rid of me. Want me kill her. Make you mad."

Jeremy took a moment to assimilate this, then sighed, dropping his head forward. "So that was his plan. I thought?" He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You had absolutely nothing to do with what happened tonight. It wasn't your fault. Do you understand that?"

I nodded.

"What he did, Clayton, was wrong. Killing that woman was wrong. You understand that, too, don't you?"

"No kill humans. You say that. I remember."

"Good. That's a good boy. I'm sorry you had to . . . to see that. It was wrong. Very, very wrong. I should have been there. I shouldn't have left you alone. I should have known he'd?" Another shake of the head. "I should have made sure from the start that he never got that chance. He's gone now, Clayton. Do you understand that?"

I nodded.

"Gone for a long time," Jeremy said, pushing himself to his feet.

"Will come back."

"That's for me to worry about, not you. It'll be a long time before he comes back and, when he does, I'll work something out. You don't need to worry about him. I'll make sure of that."

I looked up into Jeremy's eyes, and I knew, if I hadn't before, that what happened tonight had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with him, with hurting him. As he vowed that I wouldn't need to worry about Malcolm, I made a vow of my own. Someday, he'd never need to worry about Malcolm again. I'd make sure of it.

Dominance

Spring deepened into summer and Malcolm stayed away. Weeks passed like a leaf floating downstream, unconcerned with progress or destination. I gave in to the equally gentle but unrelenting force of Jeremy's will, and learned to speak properly and behave with passable normality in public.

I didn't need to worry about public behavior very often. Jeremy rarely went out. Everything we needed was here—food and shelter, companionship, land to run on and endless diversions of our own devising. If we wanted something, it came to us. Food was delivered. Banking and legal affairs were conducted by telephone and mail. Jeremy's work also came and went by the mail. Antonio drove up from New York City every few weeks to visit. We had no reason to leave.

Over that spring, Jeremy taught me more than just language and manners. I learned to shoot an arrow within ten feet of the target, to swim in the back pond, to read the Sunday comics (even if I didn't understand the humor) and to sneak up on a rabbit (even if I couldn't catch it). An idyllic spring, which gave way to an equally idyllic summer. Then I went and screwed it up.

Jeremy and I were in the backyard replacing a section of stone wall that had crumbled over the winter. Actually, Jeremy wasn't so much fixing it with me as in spite of me. I'd already knocked two stones out of the fresh mortar, one of which had landed on Jeremy's foot. But I wanted to help, and enthusiasm always overruled ability with Jeremy. He wouldn't discourage me even if it meant wasting half the day and breaking a few toes.

"Pull it back," Jeremy said as I put a stone in place. "Not so much. A bit more. Now toward me. Perfect."

It wasn't perfect, but I knew that once I turned my head, it would miraculously find its way to the right spot. I bent to lift the next stone.

"Hello?" a voice shouted from the back of the house.

I dropped the stone. Jeremy yanked his foot out of the way, then straightened and brushed his bangs back from his face, mortar streaking his black hair with gray.

"There you are." Antonio strode around the back wall. He skirted Jeremy and ruffled my hair. "You aren't getting any bigger, scrap. Isn't Jeremy feeding you enough? It's past noon and I didn't see anything on the table."

"We weren't expecting you," Jeremy said.

"So you don't eat when you're not expecting company?" Antonio grinned, but avoided Jeremy's eyes. "Are you hungry, scrap?"

I looked up at Jeremy. He was watching Antonio, his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. I recognized the look. It was the same one I got when he caught me sneaking back into my new bedroom late at night, smelling faintly of cold roast beef.

"So, you just happened to be in the neighborhood, thought you'd pop by for lunch?"

"What? I can't make a surprise visit?"

Jeremy didn't answer. He scraped the trowel off in the bucket, then laid it on the wall. "I suppose we should go in for lunch."

"Before we do, I?"

The creaking of the distant back door cut Antonio off. I tensed, inhaled and caught the scent of a stranger. The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

"Dad?" a voice called.

"Just a sec, Nicky," Antonio called back.

"I thought we agreed to wait."

Jeremy's voice was low, his tone even and calm. I shivered in spite of the warm sun. I recognized this too? the voice I got when Jeremy went downstairs the next morning to discover that not only was the entire roast gone, but the fridge had been left open and the milk was spoiled.

"It's been four months, Jer," Antonio said. "Stop fretting about it."

He clapped Jeremy on the back. When Jeremy stiffened, Antonio pulled his hand away and shoved it into his pocket.

"He's not ready," Jeremy said in that same measured tone. "I asked you to wait."

There was more to the discussion, but I didn't hear it. I'd tuned out, concentrating instead on listening for sounds from the house. A child. A boy. In my house.

Tension strummed through me. I strained toward the house like a bird-dog on point, waiting for the word of release. Every second seemed interminable. A boy in my house. Strange adults were one thing; I was learning to deal with that indignity. But children? Sneaky, sneering boys like the ones at the print-shop? In my house? That was beyond tolerating.

"Clayton?" Jeremy said, laying a hand on my shoulder. "I'd like to speak to you. Come around to the garden and?"

The back door swung open, then slammed shut. Jeremy's hand tightened on my shoulder. A boy bounded around the corner and stopped short on seeing us.

"Hello, Nicky," Jeremy said.

Jeremy said more and the boy responded, but I ignored them as I sized up the boy. So this was Antonio's son. He had his father's dark wavy hair and dark eyes, but was built slender and tall, already outstripping me by at least a foot. He had a good twenty or thirty pounds on me, too. The first prickling of fear zinged through me. Then I noticed my advantage. He was unprepared. As he talked to Jeremy, his eyes darted over to me, but they held nothing but curiosity.

"Clayton," Jeremy said. "This is Nicholas. Antonio's son."

The boy extended a hand and a wide grin. I knew it was a grin, but the bared teeth still made my hackles rise.

"He's like you," Antonio said quickly, stepping forward. "A werewolf. Or, he will be, when he gets older."

The boy said something. Ignoring his words, I stared into his eyes and saw nothing but open trust. I sniffed the air and caught only the barest undercurrents of werewolf scent, heavily overlain with the stink of a human child. Like me? This boy? Not likely. At least I had the sense to be wary of a stranger. I sniffed and turned my face away, not quite willing to turn my back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the boy step toward me. I turned, slowly, and met his gaze. He smiled at me with that affable smile that made me curse him doubly a fool. I bared my teeth. He seemed to think I was returning his smile and grinned broader.

"Man, I thought I was never going to get to meet you," the boy said. "Dad's been talking about you all the time and then he said maybe you guys were coming to the Meet last month, but then you didn't and I kept bugging Dad and . . ."

He kept talking. I stopped listening.

As he spoke he moved closer. His shadow fell over me, making me feel suddenly very small. I clenched my fists at my sides and pulled myself up straighter. I still only came up to his chin. I inhaled. The werewolf scent was stronger now. So this was a werewolf child, was it? Well, if so, something had to be done and quickly. You only get one chance to establish dominance.

I lunged without warning. I hit him in the stomach, knocking him back to the ground. As I held him down, he didn't struggle, but just stared at me, eyes wide. The acrid scent of something vaguely familiar floated up. I felt a dampness seep through the knee of my pants and looked down to see a dark patch creeping outwards from the crotch of his trousers. As I wrinkled my nose and pulled back, Jeremy hauled me into the air.

The next few minutes blurred past in a series of images. Jeremy's face, shuttered and hard, not looking at me. The stink of urine. Antonio bending to help his son up. The boy jabbering something. Then, as I was being carried into the house, I turned my head and caught the boy's eyes. I saw no anger there, no lingering fear, just complete bewilderment. Any struggle for dominance had existed only in my head. Then I felt something I'd never felt before. Guilt, regret and more than an inkling of shame.

After a few hours of being left in my bedroom, Jeremy brought up my belated lunch. He explained, calmly, that as Antonio's son, Nicholas must be treated with the same respect I would accord Antonio. Although Nick wasn't a full-fledged werewolf, he would be when he grew up.

There were no others like me, no child werewolves. There never had been. There were other children of the Pack, like Nick, who would grow into werewolves, but not until they became adults. These would be my Pack brothers. No matter how I felt about them, I would have to learn to get along with them.

I offered to apologize, but it was too late. Antonio and Nick had already left Stonehaven. I'd blown my first chance at fitting into the Pack. Although Jeremy never said this, I understood it. Deep down, I sensed his other fear, too. That I'd never fit in. I was determined to prove him wrong. Of course, I'd also been determined never to raid the fridge again, never to attack strangers again, never to . . .

As summer passed, Jeremy began steering me into situations where I'd be with other children. After the fiasco with Nick, I was eager to please him, so I did my best to tolerate the little monsters.

Twice a week, for an entire month, he took me to a playground in Bear Valley, the nearest town. I behaved perfectly. I sat motionlessly on a swing, watched the children and gritted my teeth until the ordeal finally ended. Whenever a child ventured too close, a covert growl always sent him or her scrambling to find another piece of playground equipment.

I was so busy congratulating myself on my model behavior that I failed to realize the obvious—that these excursions were leading up to something. Had I known, I would have kicked and screamed and thrown my finest temper tantrum each time I so much as saw a swing-set. Instead, I behaved so well, that at the end of the summer, Jeremy pronounced me, with no small amount of

trepidation, ready for the next major phase of my integration into human society, a torture worse than anything I would have thought him capable of devising. I was to go to school.

Schooldays

The school secretary escorted us into a small room that looked as if it had been carved inside a tree. Everything was wood, from the floor to the baseboards to the desk to the chairs. Two lights shone overhead, but even their combined power was not enough to win the battle against the all-encompassing darkness of the wood. All the lights seemed to do was illuminate the oily, lemon-stinking sheen on the wood. Jeremy sat down amidst the cluster of chairs. I touched the seat beside him. The wood felt as greasy as it looked. I looked at him and curled my lip.

"Sit," he said.

I sat.

A door opened on the other side of the room and in walked a sour-looking middle-aged woman who smelled like fruit left on the tree to rot. Jeremy stood, tugging me to my feet, and extended his hand. She ignored it and skewered me with a snarl masquerading as a smile.

"So this is Clayton," the woman said. "Welcome to Harding Academy, Clayton."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, remembering the response Jeremy had taught me.

"Your cousin here has already taken care of all the enrollment arrangements, and I don't believe in protracted good-byes, so let's take you straight to Miss Fishton's kindergarten class."

"Kindergarten?" Jeremy said. "Oh, there's been a mistake. I know he looks small for his age, but he's seven?eight in January."

"With no formal education, am I right?"

"Yes, but he's been home-schooled?"

"By whom?" She snatched a paper and pen from the desk. "You should have provided the reference when you enrolled him. The instructor's name, please."

"I've tutored him myself."

"Ah," she said, lips twitching. "And your credentials, Mister Danvers?"

She said the formal salutation with a mocking lilt that made my muscles tense. Jeremy's hand gripped my shoulder, restraint disguised as an affectionate squeeze.

"I don't have any formal qualifications," he said. "However, I can assure you that Clayton is well beyond kindergarten level. He's an extremely bright boy?"

"I'm sure you think he is."

The hand on my shoulder tightened, then relaxed. "Perhaps you could test him. He knows basic addition and subtraction, and he reads at a grade three level."

"I believe you mentioned socialization problems?"

"Problems? No, I didn't say problems." A slight hitch in his voice here, undetectable to anyone who didn't know him. "I said he lacked socialization experience. There was some early trauma, before he came to live with me. I have, however, been taking steps to correct this and he's been making progress."

"I'm sure he has. However, given the combination of no formal schooling and socialization issues, I'm standing by my decision. He will go to kindergarten and if he proves himself ready, he will progress to the appropriate level. Clayton? Come with me."

"May we have a moment?" Jeremy said.

"As I've said, I don't believe in protracted good-byes. Children can't have their parents hovering over them?"

"I would like a moment," Jeremy said, meeting the headmistress's gaze. "And I will escort him to his classroom myself."

They locked gazes. The headmistress broke first. She muttered directions to the kindergarten room, then shooed us out of her office.

"We only have a moment, Clayton," he whispered as we walked. "Now, remember what I told you? Where will I be?"

"On the other side of the playground. In the forest."

"Right. So when you go outside for recess, you'll be able to smell me, but don't come over or I'll have to leave. Just remember that I'm there for you. If you can't handle it, absolutely can't, you come to me. But try, Clayton. Please try. It's very important that you go to school."

I nodded and he led me down the hall.

"Oh, this must be Clayton!"

A young woman with bright red lips and a high-pitched cheep of a voice flew at me. I ducked. Jeremy's hand tightened on my arm, pulling me up straight and propelling me into the classroom.

I squinted against the brightness, not only of the sun streaming through the windows, but of the screamingly vivid colors that assaulted me from every direction. The classroom walls were painted in bright primary colors, the tones so overwhelming they made me cringe. When Jeremy had decorated my bedroom last month, he'd asked what color I'd wanted, and I'd picked two: black and white. That's what I liked best. I didn't mind colors, so long as they weren't too . . . colorful.

"I'm Miss Fishton, Clayton," the woman chirped, then turned and fluttered her hands at the gaggle of children behind her. "Class, this is our new student. Can we say hello to Clayton?"

"Hello, Clayton," a dozen voices chimed in monotone.

"You're just in time, Clayton," she said. "We were just getting ready to sing Old MacDonald. Do you know Old MacDonald?"

I looked up at Jeremy.

"I don't believe he does," Jeremy said.

"Oh, that's okay. We'll teach you, won't we, class?"

"Yes, Miss Fishton," the class intoned.

"And then, after we sing, we'll do some finger-painting. I bet you love finger-painting. Now just come on in, Clayton, and we'll join hands and sing Old MacDonald. You can be the pig. Do you know what a pig says, Clayton?"

I looked up at Jeremy. He rubbed his hand across his chin, then bent down and whispered. "I'm sorry." A quick pat on the back, one last apologetic glance, and he hurried from the room. I watched him go.

By the end of that week, I hated school as I'd never hated anything in my life . . . except maybe Malcolm. I knew I was here to learn, but learn what? How to sing songs about farmers? How to distinguish red squares from green circles? How to build towers of blocks? After a month, we'd only begun the alphabet, and I could already read every book in the teacher's story library. Yet nobody seemed the least bit interested in moving me to a higher grade.

So, Jeremy continued my academic lessons at home and instead stressed the importance of other lessons I could learn at school, namely how to fit in. This I understood. I needed to know how to pass for human. Unfair, to be sure, but necessary. Jeremy could do it, and he was very good at it, so I resolved that I would learn to be just as accomplished an actor. So I studied my classmates. I watched them. I stalked them. I learned how to imitate them.

The watching and stalking portions of these lessons prompted many a parent-teacher interview in those first two months, but Miss Fishton could never quite pinpoint exactly what I was doing wrong, just vague concerns about me "making the other children uncomfortable," which Jeremy dismissed as an obvious consequence of putting a seven-year-old with five-year-olds. Developmentally, I was light years ahead. Yet another reason, he argued, to bump me up a grade or two. Still they refused.

At home, Jeremy decided to distract me from my boredom at school with lessons that I deemed long overdue. Though I'd hunted with Jeremy for months, he preferred to do the killing. He insisted that this was because I needed more practice with the pre-killing parts of the hunt?stalking and chasing?but I suspected it had more to do with my killing method, which basically consisted of chomping on my prey until it stopped moving. Once I did manage to catch a rabbit while out running by myself and, after I changed back, I proudly showed my accomplishment to Jeremy. He took one look at the unrecognizable mangle of fur and bone and declared he would handle all future kills until I was ready.

In late October, he finally deemed me ready. To my surprise, these new lessons were conducted, not in the woods, but in the kitchen. For the next two weeks, Jeremy produced dead specimens of every small wild animal found at Stonehaven?rabbits, opossums, raccoons, squirrels, even a skunk. He then dissected them and showed me where the vital organs were located. For the skunk and raccoon, he pointed out their defense systems, how to avoid getting

sprayed or clawed. For the prey animals, he showed me how to kill them quickly and what parts were edible.

At school, our classroom had a small rodent zoo consisting of two rabbits, three hamsters, a litter of baby gerbils and a guinea pig. At first, I'd thought the teacher was raising snack food, which impressed me, being the first sign of intelligence she'd shown. Soon, though, I'd figured out the animals' true purpose and left them alone, though I would never understand the appeal of petting and coddling perfectly good food.

Once Jeremy began my killing lessons, I began to see the classroom pets in a new light. Maybe I couldn't kill them, but I could study them, just as I studied the children. I began to spend my free time sitting near the rodents and watching them, studying how they moved, their weaknesses and blind spots, and how they could be most easily killed.

My newfound interest in the classroom pets was a great relief to Miss Fishton, who had probably given up hope of interesting me in anything. The next time she Jeremy stopped in after school to discuss my behavior, her report was near-glowing.

"He just loves the animals," she said. "He could sit and stare at them for hours." She beamed at me. "I think we might have a little zoologist on our hands."

Jeremy glanced down at me. I adjusted the clasp on my lunch-box and pretended not to notice the look he gave me.

Miss Fishton continued. "He's absolutely enthralled by them. It's just so cute. Have you considered getting him a pet? I have a friend whose cat just had kittens."

I stopped playing with the lunch-box clasp.

"Would you like a kitten, Clayton?" Miss Fishton asked.

"Yes." I looked up at Jeremy. "I would like a kitten."

"I'm sure you would," Jeremy said. "But you know we can't have pets in the house." He turned to Miss Fishton. "Allergies."

"Oh, that's too bad. But it's good to see him taking such a keen interest."

"Yes, it is."

After we left the classroom, Jeremy hustled me out to the car without so much as a "how was your day." Once he'd pulled from the near-empty lot, he looked over at me.

"I know you must get hungry at school, Clayton. It's not easy, getting through the day without as much food as you're accustomed to. Perhaps I can slip in another half-sandwich into your lunch-box. Would that help?"

"I would like another whole sandwich," I said. "Or two."

Jeremy sighed. "Yes, I know, and I wish I could give it to you, but you can't eat so much more than the other children. Are you getting enough to eat at

breakfast?"

I shook my head.

"Then I'll start making you more."

I smiled.

"Now, about these animals," he said. "I know they're a temptation but?"

"I'm not allowed to eat them," I said. "I know."

"Good."

He leaned over, popped open the glove compartment and handed me a candy bar.

"Two?" I said. "I'm very hungry."

He gave me two.

"So we're clear on this?" he said. "No eating the pets in your classroom." He paused, then added. "Or any other classroom." Another pause. "Or any pets anywhere at all." Still another pause. "No killing them either."

I nodded. "No killing and no eating any pets. I understand."

"Good."

So, as Jeremy continued his dissection lessons at home, I continued my live animal studies at school. The rodent that interested me the most was the guinea pig. I'd never seen one in the wild, but it looked like the ideal prey, much fatter than a mouse and much slower than a rabbit. This one was probably slower than most of its kind. It was dying. I could tell by the smell, and the fact that the teacher seemed oblivious to this only proved her intelligence was about as high as that of the birds she resembled.

The more I studied the guinea pig, the more I became convinced that I'd found the ideal food source for a young wolf. There was, however, one problem. I didn't know where its vital organs were. I could guess, based on the similarities between the guinea pig's anatomy and those of the other rodents, yet this was, at best, an imprecise science and Jeremy had taught me that precision beget accuracy. For a swift kill, you needed to know exactly where to strike.

The answer, of course, was very simple. Jeremy had forbidden me to kill the guinea pig, but I didn't need to. It was already dying. All I had to do was wait.

One day in mid-November, the guinea pig climbed into its house and died. I could tell by the smell that it was dead, but Miss Fishton paid no attention, knowing the creature wasn't the most active of the classroom pets. When recess came, I went out with the rest of the children, then slipped back in and went to my lunch-box, where I'd been secretly transporting a knife in preparation for this moment. I took the knife, opened the guinea pig's cage, dumped its body out of its house and set to work.

By the time the grade one teacher snuck in to swipe some chalk, I was so

wrapped up in my work that I didn't hear her, even as she walked up behind me. I did, however, hear her scream . . . as did everyone else in the building.

"You weren't ready," Jeremy said as he drove me home, his hands gripping the steering wheel. "I was too eager. I wanted to get you in right at the start of the school year and I should have waited until you were ready. There's no rush. No rush at all." He exhaled and glanced over at me. "I think we'll stick with home-schooling for a while."

So our lives settled back into the old comfortable pattern, and I was glad of it. There was nothing a school could teach me that Jeremy couldn't. As for socializing, the only people I needed to socialize with were those in the Pack, and I'd be doing that soon enough. With the end of November came a quarterly Pack meet. After the school fiasco, I think Jeremy would have preferred not to rush me into yet another new experience, but the Alpha, Dominic, insisted. He wanted to meet me, and so he would. All Jeremy could do was prepare me and hope for the best.

Freak

The Sorrentinos lived on an estate about fifty miles north of New York City. All three generations of the family lived together, as was Pack custom. The family was headed by Dominic, who had three sons, Gregory, Benedict and Antonio. Benedict had left the Pack several years earlier, having moved to Europe with his two sons. Gregory had also fathered two sons, but the eldest had been killed in a dispute with a mutt five years ago.

Dying young wasn't uncommon for werewolves. Under Dominic's rule, fifty percent of Pack werewolves didn't live to see their fortieth birthday, and most of those deaths were at the hands or jaws of another werewolf, usually a mutt, but sometimes a Pack brother. This was an improvement over previous Alphas, who'd often seen at least two-thirds of their Pack dead by forty. Dominic himself was close to seventy and had been Alpha for nearly two decades, an almost unheard-of longevity, both in age and length of rule.

I learned none of this from Jeremy, of course. On the drive to the Sorrentino estate, he talked about the Pack, but not its problems. Instead, he relayed facts. Most importantly, he told me who would be there, how they were related and their place in the social structure. Hierarchy is very important for werewolves, as it is for wolves. Jeremy didn't attach meanings like beta wolf or omega wolf or outline a rigid structure of who topped whom. He simply told me whom I had to respect, and whom I had to obey, and from that my wolf's brain assessed status.

Jeremy expected most of the Pack members to show up at the Meet. Those would include Dominic, Gregory, Antonio, Nick, and Gregory's remaining son, eighteen-year-old Jorge. The Santos family would also be there, the elder generation, brothers Wally and Raymond, and Raymond's three sons, sixteen-year-old Stephen, thirteen-year-old Andrew and seven-year-old Daniel. Along with the Danvers, the Sorrentinos and the Santos comprised the three main families, their ancestors having been members since the American Pack began. Of the periphery members, Jeremy expected Ross Werner, Cliff Ward, Peter Myers and Dennis Stillwell to attend, plus Dennis's son, twelve-year-old Joey.

The Meet was scheduled to run from Friday to Sunday. Jeremy and I arrived at noon on Saturday, not because we'd had more pressing business, but probably because Jeremy hoped that by reducing the length of my first visit, he could reduce the possibility of disaster.

For the last hour of our trip Jeremy ran through the do's and don'ts. Most of them were don'ts. The simple act of dining now came with even more rules than Miss Fishton had for the kindergarten sandbox. I couldn't raid the icebox. I couldn't ask anyone except Jeremy for between-meal snacks. I had to eat with utensils. I had to chew with my mouth shut. I had to sit with the other Pack youth. I couldn't touch any food before everyone older than I had taken their share. I couldn't take seconds until everyone older than I had taken seconds. I couldn't eat other people's scraps. I couldn't eat food I found on the floor. With all these rules I began to fear I might have to starve, rather than risk disobedience. I hoped it'd be a short weekend.

Finally, we arrived. The Sorrentinos house was a sprawling Italianate manor set amidst fifty acres of forest. The house was probably three times as large as Stonehaven, but the grounds were less than half the size of our property, which convinced me that we had the better deal. Better to have more room to roam than more rooms to vacuum. The minute we stepped from the car, though, I discovered that it was unlikely Nicholas Sorrentino ever had to do vacuuming duty. The place stunk of human. When I asked Jeremy about the smell, he told me that the family employed a part-time housekeeper. We wouldn't see her, since she came only during the week, while the Sorrentinos were out of the house, at work and school. Still, given the choice between letting a human in the house or vacuuming a few carpets, I'd stick with my hated household chores.

We walked from behind a row of cars and along a walkway through the gardens. At the front door, Jeremy didn't knock, he just opened it and walked in. That was normal Pack etiquette. Knocking or ringing the bell would imply you didn't think you were welcome, which would insult your host. Instead, you walked in and shouted a greeting. Jeremy has never shouted a greeting in all the years I'd known him. Instead, he does what he did now, stepped inside, closed the door, and paused to see whether anyone heard him enter. When no one came to greet us, he followed the scent of his host toward an open door, then paused again and called a soft "hello."

There was a scuffle of movement from within the room. Then a large man with graying dark hair wheeled around the corner, grinned and embraced Jeremy.

"Finally!" the man boomed. "I was about to send Tonio upstate to drag you here." He turned and shouted toward the front of the house. "Gregory! Jorge! Come!" He turned back to Jeremy. "Now where is this trouble-making pup of yours? The one who attacked my Nicky?"

I stepped back, slowly, and looked over my shoulder, measuring the distance to the door.

"Is that him? Hiding behind you? That little runt?" The man's laugh boomed so loudly it hurt my ears. "Come here, boy. Let me get a better look at you."

I tried to take another step backward, but Jeremy put his hand between my shoulder-blades and propelled me forward.

"Clayton, this is Dominic."

I hadn't needed the introduction to know this was the Pack Alpha. Dominic

Sorrentino was one of the biggest men I'd ever seen, as tall as Jeremy, yet as stocky and muscular as Antonio. Of course he was the Alpha.

Dominic looked me in the eye, his gaze so fierce I could barely hold eye contact. At least two excruciatingly long minutes passed. Then I had to drop my gaze. Dominic's laugh roared through the hallway and he clapped one huge hand against my back.

"Did you see that?" he said to Jeremy. "Did you see how long it took him to look away? Tonio's right. The boy has balls. He'll make a good playmate for Nicky." With his hand still at my back, Dominic steered me past him. "Head down that hall, turn left, go downstairs and you'll find the other boys in the basement. Nicky will do the introductions."

"Perhaps later," Jeremy said. "He's quite shy?"

"All the more reason for him to go. You and I need to catch up, and I'm sure Clayton will be happier playing with the other boys."

"Yes, but perhaps I should make the introductions. He's not entirely comfortable with other children?"

"He'll be fine. You worry too much, Jeremy. Clayton? Off you go now. Find the others."

I looked at Jeremy.

He hesitated, then forced a smile. "Go on, Clayton. Just . . . be good and I'll see you soon."

I stood there as Dominic prodded Jeremy into the room, then closed the door behind them. I hesitated, torn between wanting to obey Jeremy and wanting to just sit on the floor and wait for him. From the front hall I heard footsteps coming down the stairs and remembered Dominic had called his son and grandson down. Better not to be caught challenging the Alpha's authority quite so early in my visit. I turned and hurried down the hall to seek out Nick and the other boys.

I'd forgotten the directions Dominic had given for reaching the basement, having been too disturbed by the prospect of being separated from Jeremy to pay much attention. I still remembered Nick's scent, though, and although it permeated the house, I was able to find and follow the most recent trail to the basement steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, I stopped and inhaled. I could pick out five separate scents—the five Pack sons Jeremy had told me to expect: the three Santos boys, Nick and Joey Stillwell. These five comprised the Pack youth, all the sons who had yet to undergo their first Change. Jorge Sorrentino had made his first Change the year before, so he was now considered an adult, and would be upstairs with the men.

Of the five boys I smelled, one was taking on the distinctive odor of a werewolf. This would be the oldest Santos boy, Stephen. Although werewolves don't make their first change until their late teens, it's only the end of the lengthy process of maturation. With puberty, a werewolf begins developing his secondary traits, primarily the sharpened senses and increased strength necessary for life as a wolf. Right now, Stephen Santos was the only one of

the Pack youth who had begun this process.

The basement was a series of rooms branching off a central corridor. Most of the doors were closed. Of those propped open, only one near the end led into a room that wasn't dark. I started down the hall. Halfway to the end I heard Nick's voice.

"Can I have my radio back, Steve?"

"What's the magic word?" an older voice said.

"Come on, Steve," another voice said. "Don't be a prick."

"You calling me a prick, Joey?"

I peeked around the doorway. Inside, a tall teen with long red hair was approaching a slowly backpedaling acne-pocked boy. Nick stood beside the threatened boy, hovering there, as if wanting to stand with him, but not sure he dared.

Across the room two other red-haired youths looked on, wearing twin tooth-bearing grins. The youngest wasn't much bigger than me.

I'd drilled Jeremy's litany of names into my head, understanding the importance of knowing who was who in this new world, so now I could look across the faces and identify all the players. The boy backing away was Joey Stillwell. The boy bearing down on him was Stephen Santos, and the two on the sofa were Stephen's younger brothers, Andrew and Daniel.

"You think I should give this back?" Stephen waving a light-blue transistor radio over his head. "Come on and take it then."

Stephen held out the radio. Joey didn't move.

"Can I have my radio, Steve?" Nick said. "Please."

"Why? You don't need it. Your daddy and your granddaddy can buy you fifty of them." He turned to his youngest brother. "I think Danny would like a radio. You want a radio, Danny-boy?"

Daniel jumped from the sofa. "Sure."

"Then here's what we'll do. Danny gets the radio, and Nick tells his daddy he gave it to him, as a gift." He turned to Nick. "Got that?"

"No."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"N?no. It's m?mine."

Stephen started to advance on Nick. I felt an urge then that surprised me, the urge to protect Nick. I recognized the unfairness of this assault, perhaps more than a human would. Stephen was double the young boy's size and quadruple his strength. Though I couldn't imagine why anyone would fight over a radio, it did belong to Nick. It was his property. You had to protect your property.

So, in this dispute, Nick was, by every reckoning, the wronged party. Jeremy had told me to be nice to Nick. Getting his radio back would be nice,

wouldn't it? On the other hand, Jeremy had told me not to attack anyone. I was allowed to defend myself with reasonable force? Jeremy had always been clear on that. Did this apply if I was defending someone else? We'd never discussed that scenario. Should I take the chance? Which was more important: that I be nice to Nick or that I not start a fight?

"You want your radio?" Stephen said, holding it up out of Nick's reach.

"Yes." Nick paused. "Yes, please."

Stephen turned and whipped the radio at the brick fireplace beside the doorway. It shattered, pieces scattering across the orange shag carpet. No one seemed to notice the broken radio, though. They were all staring at me.

I stepped inside the rec room, reached down and scooped up the biggest pieces of the radio, then walked over to Nick.

"Yours," I said.

Nick smiled and took the pieces. "Thanks." He turned to the others. "Guys, this is Clayton, the boy who's living with Jeremy."

"The werewolf," Joey said, smiling at me.

"Of course, he's a werewolf," Andrew said, getting up from the sofa. "We're all werewolves, stupid."

"I mean he's a full werewolf. My dad says he can Change already." Joey looked at me. "That's so cool."

"It's not cool," Stephen said. "It's freaky."

"So that makes him a freak," Daniel piped up. "Right?"

"He's not a freak," Nick said. "He's just different."

Daniel met my eyes. "Freak."

Stephen tousled his little brother's hair. "That's right, Danny." Then he turned to me. "He's worse than a freak. He's a mutt." His eyes gleamed and I knew he'd lobbed what he considered the worst possible insult. When I didn't react, disappointment darted through his eyes.

"He's not a mutt," Nick said. "He's Pack. Poppa says Jeremy can keep him, so he's Pack."

"Maybe, but he was a mutt," Andrew said. "Once a mutt, always a mutt. That's the rule."

"Doesn't count," Joey said. "He's a kid. A kid can't be a mutt."

"So does that mean he's bitten?" Daniel said, lips curling back.

"That's right, Danny," Stephen said, ruffling his brother's hair again. "He's not even hereditary. A total freak."

"Stop that," Nick said.

"Ignore them," Joey said, turning to me. "They're being stupid."

"We aren't the stupid ones," Stephen said. "Look at him. He doesn't even know what we're talking about. Call him a mutt and he doesn't even flinch. Our dad was right. He's a retard."

"He's not a retard," Nick says. "He just doesn't talk much."

Stephen lowered his face to mine. "Retard."

I stared him in the eyes and said nothing.

"See?" Stephen said, straightening. "He's a retard like Gregory and a freak like Jeremy."

My head whipped up, gaze going to Stephen's.

Stephen laughed. "Oh, ho. He didn't like that. Freaks stick together, boy. Everybody knows that. The minute my dad heard Jeremy brought some wolf-cub home, he said eat last, that idiot's done something so stupid Dominic will finally kick him out."

"Jeremy's not an idiot," Nick said.

"No, he's just . . . different, right?" Andrew said from across the room. "If he wasn't your dad's friend, he'd have been banished after his first Change."

"No, not banished," Stephen said. "Executed. Put down like a dog, before he embarrassed the Pack."

I clenched my fists, every ounce of willpower going into keeping them still. Jeremy had warned me about this. He'd said I might hear things, things about him. I hadn't known what he'd meant, and he hadn't elaborated, just forbade me to start a fight over it.

"Jeremy's fine," Joey said. "My dad says he has some interesting ideas?"

"His own father's ashamed of him, can't stand to be around him." He turned to me. "You think Jeremy's special? Ask him how many mutts he's killed. None. Not a single one. Only time he ever fights them is when he's cornered. He won't even go on a hunt?"

"He hunts," Nick said. "He hunts with my dad all the time."

"For what? Rabbits? I meant the real hunts. Jeremy never goes on the mutt hunts."

"That because he doesn't believe in them," Joey said. "Jeremy thinks we shouldn't kill mutts unless they do something wrong, and my dad says that's okay, everyone's entitled to their opinion, and if Jeremy doesn't want to fight mutts?"

"Don't give me that opinion crap," Stephen said. "Everyone knows the truth. Jeremy doesn't fight mutts because he's afraid of them. He's a freak. A freak and a coward. A yellow-bellied coward who hides behind the Pack for protection?"

I launched myself at Stephen, knocking him off balance. We hit the floor. All the defense lessons Jeremy and Antonio had taught me flew from my head, and I acted solely on impulse, kicking, punching, clawing, and getting kicked, punched and clawed in return.

Dimly I heard the shouts of the other boys, Stephen's brothers egging him on and Joey yelling at Stephen to leave me alone. Though I got in a few good hits at the onset, when I caught Stephen off guard, soon I was receiving more than I was giving. A seven-year-old werewolf versus a sixteen-year-old werewolf is as uneven a match as the human equivalents, and all the rage-fueled energy in the world wasn't going to even the odds.

Just as my initial fury cooled, and I began to realize that Stephen wasn't going to let me off without a good thrashing, a hand reached down, grabbed me by the back of my shirt and hauled me into the air. I twisted to see Dominic holding me. Nick stood beside him, panting from running to get help. Jeremy rounded the corner. I couldn't see his expression, and was pretty sure I didn't want to.

"Looks like you bit off more than you could chew, pup," Dominic said with a laugh. "You need to put on a few more pounds before you try that again." He glanced over his shoulder, voice hardening. "Raymond, I expect you to have a talk with your son about this."

"But he started it," Stephen whined, wiping blood from his nose. "He attacked me. I was just standing there and he jumped me?"

"You're weren't just standing there," Nick said. "He attacked you because you were making fun of?"

"Of him," Joey cut in. "He kept making fun of Clayton, and he wouldn't stop."

I looked at Jeremy and I could see in his eyes that he knew the truth, that I wouldn't have attacked Stephen if I'd been the one he'd insulted. I tensed, waiting for that dreaded look of disappointment, but it didn't come. Instead, Jeremy took me from Dominic, stood me up and checked me over, his expression neutral, neither approving nor disapproving of what I'd done. When he didn't find any major injuries, he patted me on the back, murmured a soft "let's get you cleaned up," and steered me from the room.

Hierarchy

Nick came with us to the bathroom. While Jeremy cleaned my bloodied nose, Nick told him about the broken radio, making it sound as if the radio incident was another reason for my scrap with Stephen. Jeremy said little, but I could tell by his expression that he considered defending Nick a more acceptable excuse than defending Jeremy himself. So here was the answer to my earlier question. Fighting to help a weaker party was an acceptable use of force.

Afterward, as further proof that my actions hadn't been too objectionable, Jeremy left me alone with Nick. He told us that lunch would be ready soon and we should wash up and head for the dining room.

"Man, it's about time we get to eat," Nick said, swiping his hands under the running water then wiping them on his jeans. "We were supposed to eat hours ago, but then Poppa said we had to wait for you guys to get here and you've been here for what, an hour already and we still haven't had lunch."

I finished drying my hands and we headed into the hall.

"Do you get to eat at the grownups' table?" Nick continued. "I bet you do, because that's where you eat after your first Change and you've had lots of Changes, so I think you get to eat with the grownups, even if you aren't old enough."

I shook my head. "Jeremy said I eat at the kid's table."

"Whoa, bummer. So how do they know when you're ready to join the grownups' table? Do you think they'll pick an age? Like sixteen? That's kinda young, but Poppa had his first Change when he was sixteen, so I hope I do too. Maybe they'll let you join the grownup table when I do. Then if I Changed at sixteen, you'd be fifteen?"

"Hey, Nicky?" Stephen said, walking up behind us. "Does that mouth of yours come with an OFF button?"

"I wasn't talking to you." Nick glanced at me. "Do you think I talk too much?"

I shook my head. Nick flipped his middle finger at Stephen, who shouldered past us, knocking Nick against the wall.

"Asshole," Nick muttered. "I can't wait until he's sitting at the grownup table, away from us. When we sit down, you sit with me, away from him. If you're beside him, he'll swipe your food."

"No one swipes my food."

Nick grinned. "Hey, maybe we should sit next to him, then. See what happens. You almost took him downstairs. Just a few more minutes and I'm sure?"

A laugh sounded behind us. Before we could turn, Antonio scooped us up, each under one arm.

"What's this I hear? Poor Clayton's only been here one hour, you've already led him into one fight and now you're tempting him into another? Shame on you, Nicky."

Antonio's laugh belied his words and he twisted us around in midair, then thumped us down on our feet.

"When did you get back?" Nick asked.

"Just this very minute."

"And you're done working now? You don't have to go back to the plant after lunch?"

"I fixed the problem and I'm home until Monday." Antonio glanced down at me. "So where's Jeremy, scrap? Don't tell me you left him at home."

"I'm right here," Jeremy said, stepping through the next door. "Just waiting for Clayton so I can introduce him to the others."

"Is everyone here now?" Antonio asked.

"Everyone except Peter."

Antonio winced, then caught Jeremy's look of concern and thumped him on the back. "Don't worry. I'm sure he's just been busy with school. Once he graduates, he'll start coming to Meets again. Now let's get some lunch before we all starve."

Everyone except Dominic was already in the dining room, milling about, talking, as they waited to uncover the cold food platters. Jeremy introduced

me to the adult members of the Pack.

Although it almost certainly wasn't intentional, Jeremy performed the introductions in order of rank. First came the remaining two members of the Alpha's family: eldest son Gregory and his son Jorge. Jorge was a quiet, solemn young man who took after his grandfather and uncle Antonio in appearance only.

Jorge stayed close to his father, always hovering, ready to get whatever Gregory needed. At the time, I mistook this closeness for a lack of self-confidence, the boy preferring to stay under his father's protective shadow even after he'd become a man. I'd eventually realize the situation was reversed. It was Gregory who needed his son nearby.

On the drive to the Meet, Jeremy had explained about Gregory's condition. Gregory had been brain-damaged in a fight with a mutt six years earlier—and it was this fight that had led to his eldest son's death when that son had gone seeking revenge. When Jeremy introduced me to Gregory that day, I saw nothing wrong with him . . . nothing more than a slightly unfocused look in his eyes, as if he wasn't quite paying attention. That is how I remember Gregory best, a vague man who never seemed to be fully present. Though I've never been clear on the full extent of his injuries, I believe they affected random areas of short and long-term memory. He could debate politics, discuss global economics, predict stock market trends, and yet, if Jorge wasn't there to help him, he'd forget where to find the bathroom.

The next Pack members Jeremy introduced me to were Wally and Raymond Santos—the Santos boys' uncle and father—two red-haired men who barely let him finish the introduction before Raymond cut in.

"Where's Malcolm?" he asked.

"In Tampa," Jeremy said. "He's been chasing a mutt who showed up at Stonehaven last year."

"In other words, he's doing your job," Wally said. "If a mutt shows up on your territory, you're supposed to take care of it."

"Jeremy does?" Antonio began, but Jeremy silenced him with a look.

Wally continued, not noticing the interruption. "Malcolm has enough to do, hunting mutts for Dominic. He doesn't need to clean up after you, too, Jeremy."

I looked from Jeremy to Antonio, waiting for one of them to correct Wally, to tell him the real reason Malcolm wasn't at the Meet, that he'd been banished by Jeremy. From the look on Antonio's face, he was biting his tongue to keep from saying something. Another warning look from Jeremy, and Antonio stomped off, muttering about stubborn sons-of-bitches.

"Tell Malcolm if he needs any help with that mutt, he can give us a shout," Wally said. "Anything we can do for him, we will. He knows that."

"I'm sure he does," Jeremy murmured.

Jeremy steered me over to Joey's father, Dennis Stillwell, a small man who greeted me with a warm smile. Then Ross Werner, who was at least Dominic's age. Ross clapped me on the back, proclaimed me a "good-looking young man" and commended Jeremy for doing "a fine job" with me. Finally Jeremy introduced me to Cliff Ward, a young man no older than Jeremy, with an insincere smile and

eyes that always darted on contact.

Cliff also asked after Malcolm, proving that Jeremy's father had a higher standing here than I'd anticipated. Yet I hadn't heard Dominic or any of the other Sorrentinos ask after him. It was Jeremy they obviously wanted to see. That had to count for something.

"Where's Poppa?" Nick asked the moment Jeremy finished the introductions.

"He had to take a call from the office," Jeremy said.

"Working?" Nick fell into a chair with a groan. "Everyone's always working. When I grow up, I'm never going to work."

"No?" Antonio said. "Then I guess your Poppa and I will have to work harder, so you won't have to. Come on and take Clayton to the kids' table. Poppa will be down any moment."

"He'd better," Nick said. "I'm starving. I hate these rules. Why do we have to wait for him before we eat?"

"Because he's the Alpha," Antonio said. "If you want to eat first, then you need to become Alpha."

"And do all that extra work?" Nick said. "No way."

Dominic walked in then, and the chatter died down as everyone swung into their places at the table and started uncovering the food. Nick led me to the children's table, which was in the far corner of the room. Nick watched to see where Stephen sat, then picked seats for us on the opposite side of the table.

"See how far away we are from the grownups?" Nick whispered. "They do that so we can't hear what they're talking about."

"I can," I said.

He hesitated, taking a moment to figure this out, then grinned. "That's right. You've got the super-hearing already. Cool."

As we settled in, I looked at the main table. As I expected, it was arranged by pack hierarchy, with Dominic at the top, his sons on either side of him, then radiating down the table to Ross Werner and Cliff Ward at the end. Jeremy sat beside Antonio. I must have looked pretty satisfied with this arrangement because Stephen followed my gaze and sneered.

"You think that means he's something special?" Stephen said, voice lowered to a whisper. "Jeremy only gets to sit there because he's Antonio's best friend. It's bullshit. Look who sits at the old man's right hand. Gregory. A fucking retard."

Ross and Cliff, sitting at the end of the adult table and therefore closest to us, both turned and I knew they'd overheard. Ross glowered and shook a finger at Stephen, but when the older man turned away, Cliff shot Stephen a grin.

"Now boys," Dominic boomed from the head of the table. "I think we may have a problem down there."

"S?sir, I?I didn't?" Stephen began.

Dominic continued. "Ross put out the food, but I don't think he knows how much Clayton eats. From what Tonio tells me, those dishes on your table are just barely enough to feed Clayton alone." He looked at me. "Is that right, boy? Can you eat that much?"

I looked at the uncovered plates and nodded.

Dominic threw back his head and laughed. "You think so, do you? Well, then, maybe we should do something about that. We don't want you boys scrapping over the food. Grab your chair and come on up here, Clayton. You can eat with me today. We'll see which of us eats more."

From the other boys, I caught a wave of disgruntled looks, ranging from Joey's mild envy to Stephen's outright fury.

"Lucky," Nick mouthed and shot me a grin.

I searched his expression for any trace of envy, but saw none. He was simply happy for me. Had the situation been reversed, I knew I couldn't have been so unselfish. I took my chair, carried it to Dominic's side and asked him a question.

He laughed. "You don't want to sit up here alone with the old men? I don't blame you." He craned his neck to see the children's table. "Nicky?"

"Yes, Poppa?"

"Bring your chair on up here. You're keeping Clayton company."

Nick's smile lit up his face. He grabbed his chair and scrambled to the head of the table.

Dominic out-ate me by a half-sandwich and a banana.

"He would have beaten you," Antonio said. "But he knows a good Pack member always lets the Alpha win. He's a smart boy."

"So I hear," Dominic said. "Tonio tells me you're able to read already." He looked out across the table. "Can you believe that? Less than a year ago, this boy was living in the swamp. He couldn't talk. He couldn't control his Changes. He could barely even walk upright. And now he's going to school. School! Can you believe it?"

I waited to see whether Jeremy would correct Dominic. He didn't. I decided Dominic's statement was close enough to the truth to be an acceptable facsimile. I had been in school . . . for a while. And I'd be returning to school . . . eventually. In the meantime, Jeremy was giving me daily lessons so, technically, I was still being schooled.

Dominic continued. "When Jeremy told me he brought this boy home, most of you know how I felt. I was against it. I thought the boy would be dangerous. I thought he'd have to be locked up in a cage and if he ever escaped, he'd put us all at risk of exposure. I thought we should?" He glanced at me and stopped short. "Well, you know what I thought should be done. But I trusted Jeremy. I told him he had one year to show me that the boy could be controlled." Dominic laughed. "Controlled? Look at him. This boy could walk around New York City and he'd be no more an exposure risk than you or me. I have a lot of faith in

Jeremy, but I'm still amazed by the job he's done."

Jeremy murmured a thank-you as the rest of the Pack pitched in with congratulations of varying degrees of sincerity.

Dominic continued. "Jeremy, I know there's still two months to go on that year's probation, but I've made my decision. The boy is yours, and he's a member of the Pack."

"Thank you," Jeremy said.

From Jeremy's other side, Raymond Santos cleared his throat. "Shouldn't we . . . give the boy some kind of test. I agree Jeremy appears to have done a good job?"

"Appears?" Dominic said, skewering Raymond with a glare. "Clayton, come up here. Jorge? Grab me today's paper."

Dominic pushed back his chair and lifted me onto his lap. The boys at the children's table took advantage of the break to pull their chairs close enough to hear. When Jorge brought in the newspaper, Dominic laid it in front of us.

"Can you read the headlines for me, Clayton?"

I nodded.

"Well, you go ahead and read what you can, then."

I selected the first article, a piece on the Vietnam War. I stumbled over a few of the place names, but managed to get through the whole article. When I finished, the room was silent.

Dominic looked at Raymond. "How about you ask Daniel to read the same piece?"

From the end of the table, Cliff said, "Hey, Jeremy? Think while you're teaching him to read you can teach him to speak. Kid sounds like a goddamned hillbilly."

A few chuckles greeted this. This was the first time anyone had mentioned my accent? I talked so little that it usually wasn't apparent. I suppose it makes the sense that when I regained my language skills, I'd speak as I'd always had. Jeremy had certainly never commented on it.

"He sounds just fine," Dominic said, patting me on the back. "Nothing wrong with being different. As for the reading, I'll be the first to say school-smarts aren't everything. No one in my family ever went past high-school and we do just fine. My point is that the boy can learn, and learn quickly. Jeremy's taught him very well, and I have no concerns about Clayton's future with this Pack."

"Nor do I," say Antonio.

Gregory and Jorge added their agreement, quieter but equally firm. Dennis Stillwell and Ross Werner chimed in with their support. The Santos brothers and Cliff Ward said nothing. That was fine; they were permitted to disagree. Their votes didn't matter either way. Only the Alpha's decision mattered.

"Now," Dominic continued. "Speaking of the Pack and the future, I've been considering something for a while, and seeing how well Jeremy has done with

Clayton has only confirmed my feelings on the matter. As you know, when Jorge came of age, I allowed Jeremy to mentor him, guide him through his early Changes. That was Jeremy's idea and, although I'll admit I didn't see the need for it, Jorge thought he'd like to try it. The transition from a boy to a full werewolf is never easy, but Jeremy made it smoother. Jorge learned control much faster and his Changes come easier."

Jorge nodded. "I remember what Peter went through, and I had a far easier time of it."

"Everyone's transition is different," Wally said. "Peter's was tough. Mine wasn't. There are a million factors. You can't take one example?"

"Of course you can't," Dominic said. "And that's why I'm thoroughly testing this theory of Jeremy's by having him try the same with the other boys as they come of age."

"What?" Stephen squawked, but his father shushed him.

"Furthermore," Dominic said. "Last year Jeremy asked for permission to tutor the adolescent boys, so they're better prepared for their first Change. I'm granting him permission to do so, starting today. After lunch, Joey, Andrew and Stephen will go with Jeremy for a few hours. They'll do the same at each Meet until they reach their first Change."

"Cool," Joey said.

Stephen and Andrew shot Joey looks that said he'd pay for his enthusiasm later.

Raymond cleared his throat.

"Yes, Ray," Dominic said, his voice heavy with warning.

"I, uh, don't entirely disagree with the idea of someone prepping my boys for their first Change. But Jeremy . . .?"

"And what is wrong with Jeremy?" Dominic asked, infusing the words with a near-growl.

Raymond glanced at Wally for support.

"Jeremy's very young," Wally said. "Not only to be taking on a position of this responsibility but, don't forget, he only went through his own Change four years ago?"

"Which is exactly why he's the right person for job. He still remembers what it was like. I've made my decision. End of discussion."

Dominic picked me up off his lap and plunked me on the floor. "You've done well, Clayton. Now go play with Nicky and Daniel. Jeremy, take the rest of the boys into the living room. Antonio, you can help Jeremy if you like. Everyone else, amuse yourselves until dinner. I'll be in my office."

Before anyone could say another word, Dominic walked out. Antonio murmured something to Jeremy, then rounded up the three older boys and shepherded them from the room. Jeremy followed.

"What do you want to do?" Nick asked me.

"Can we go outside?" I asked.

"Sure. Let's go."

As we headed for the door, I glanced over my shoulder to see Daniel trailing along behind us.

"Don't worry," Nick whispered. "We'll ditch him as soon as we're out of the house."

And, with that, we left.

Snitch

We pulled on our shoes and coats, and went out the back door. Daniel followed.

"Once we get to the path, run," Nick whispered. "Just keep running until he gives up."

As plans went, this one sounded somewhat primitive, but Nick had the experience in this matter, so I went along with it.

The path led into the forest behind the house. It started behind a wooden shed, which meant that by the time we reached it, we were out of view of the house, so no one would see us abandon Daniel.

When we reached the path, Nick took a quick look around, then whispered, "Run!"

I quickly discovered one drawback to the plan. A werewolf's special skills are intended to improve our chances of survival. Yet Mother Nature is selective with her gifts, apportioning no more than necessary. She gave us additional strength for fighting off our enemies, so that was what we were designed to do when faced with danger: fight, not run. In wolf form we run as fast as a wolf and in human form we run as fast as a human. So Nick, who had a tall, long-legged build, was a whole lot faster than Daniel . . . and a whole lot faster than me.

After a quarter-mile of enduring Daniel panting at my heels and Nick's impatient waves for me to catch up, I stopped and turned to face Daniel.

"Go away," I said.

He looked past me to Nick who was jogging back to us. "Your grandpa said you're supposed to play with me."

"I didn't hear that," Nick said. "You hear that, Clayton?"

This didn't seem like a good time to become talkative, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Your grandpa said?"

"He said Clayton was supposed to play with you and me. But I'm not playing with you, so Clayton can't play with us both, can he? He has to pick." Nick stepped up beside me. "Who do you pick, Clayton? Me or him?"

One could point out that this was a pivotal moment, and had I refused to choose one boy over the other or suggested that we all play together, I would have saved myself a whole lot of pain twenty-five years later, might have even saved the lives of two people I cared about. Call it denial, but I don't see

it that way. I honestly believe that, had I acted differently, things would have turned out the same, that there were too many other factors that built up over those twenty-five years to blame it on something as simplistic as this.

The truth is that I was incapable of making any other decision. Even to call it a decision implied a choice between two options. For me, there was only one answer. Nick had been nice to me; Daniel had not. I have zero capacity for political insight? I cannot look at a situation like this, mentally play out both sides and make a conscious choice based on what might be the "political" thing to do, what might earn the best long-term results. I couldn't do it any more then than I can now.

"Nick," I said. "I want to play with Nick."

Another boy might have flaunted his victory by grinning at his opponent or sticking out his tongue. Nick just nodded, waved for me to follow him and raced down the path. I tore off after him. As for Daniel, I don't know what he did. It never occurred to me to look back.

Nick led me to the middle of the forest, where Antonio had built him a tree fort. It was no more than eight feet off the ground? high enough to be fun, but not high enough to be dangerous. We climbed up and Nick took two bottles of soda and a bag of beef jerky from his secret stash.

"I know, I shouldn't be mean to Danny," he said as we opened our bottles. "Pack brothers and all that but, man, he is such a sneaky little shit. Sometimes I play with him, because I'm supposed to and there's no one else my age, right? And I'm nice to him, share my stuff and everything, and he pretends to be really nice back, so I think, okay, he's not so bad. But then, later, when his brothers get going, making fun of me, saying I'm stupid and spoiled and stuff, Danny's right there with them, laughing at their jokes, calling me names." Nick champed off a piece of beef jerky. "You know any kids like that?"

I shook my head.

"Well, you're lucky, then. You know what else about Danny? He's a sneak. A sneak and a snitch. Nothing worse than that, is there?"

I had no idea what Nick was talking about, but I nodded because it seemed like what I was supposed to do.

"You like school?" Nick asked, passing me another strip of jerky.

I shook my head.

He grinned. "Good. I hate it. Especially math. Do you guys have to do multiplication yet?"

I shook my head.

"Lucky. What grade are you in anyway? Oh, wait, you're a year younger than me, so you'd be in grade two, right?"

I considered this, but felt compelled to honesty. "Kindergarten. They made me go in kindergarten."

Nick scrunched up his face. "Why?"

"Because I didn't go to school before," I said.

"Oh, right. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Man, so they put you in kindergarten? With the babies? Bummer. But they'll move you up soon, right? 'Cause you're smart and all. You read better than me, so they have to move you up, maybe even into grade three. Maybe they'll do it after the Christmas break. That's when they change stuff at my school, after the Christmas break and after the spring break. I can't wait for Christmas break. We get almost a whole month off, because some of the kids live in other countries and stuff. How long do you guys get?"

Again, I felt compelled me to set the record straight. Nick had called Daniel "a sneak and a snitch." I wasn't exactly sure what those terms referred to in the lexicon of preadolescent boys, but I suspected some form of dishonesty was involved, and I was determined not to follow in Daniel's footsteps.

"I'm not in school now," I said. "I got kicked out."

Nick's eyes went wide. "Kicked out? Wow. That's so cool." He paused, seeing my expression. "Hey, don't worry, I won't tell anyone. I'm real good at keeping secrets. What did you do?" Another pause. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

I could tell by his expression that if I didn't tell him, he wouldn't hold it against me, but he would be disappointed. So far I'd seen nothing to indicate he was anything less than trustworthy. I was also, I'll admit, somewhat eager to explain what had happened, to get another child's opinion on why something as innocent as a scientific experiment had warranted screams of horror and swift expulsion.

So I told him about dissecting the guinea pig. He listened with rapt attention. The last words had barely left my mouth before the bushes near the base of the tree erupted, and Daniel flew out from his hiding spot and raced for the house.

"He's going to tell!" Nick said, jumping up so fast he bumped his head on the low ceiling. "Come on! We have to catch him!"

As he climbed down and started to run, I hesitated, wondering what Daniel was going to tell, and to whom. Then I figured it out, leapt up, spilling soda onto my jeans, and vaulted out of the tree-house. That was a mistake: jumping down instead of climbing. It was an easy leap for a werewolf, and I landed on my feet, but it shocked Nick enough to race back, thinking I'd fallen. By the time he started running again, Daniel had too much of a head-start. We tore from the woods just in time to see the back door to the house closing behind him.

As we ran across the lawn, I told myself the situation wasn't as bad as it might be. When we'd left the house, Jeremy and Antonio had been teaching the older boys and Dominic had been in his office. Daniel would undoubtedly blurt his news to his father and the others first, leaving me time to find Jeremy and warn him. Then Jeremy could tell Dominic about my school mishap before Daniel did. I knew Jeremy could find a way to put a less damning slant on the story.

Nick pulled open the back door. Down the hall I saw Daniel dart into the living room, and heard his father call out a greeting. Exactly as I thought. He'd run to his father rather than Dominic.

Nick sprinted down the hall. I stopped and sniffed the air, searching for Jeremy. Then I heard Dominic's voice . . . coming from the living room. He asked Daniel where Nick and I were. Then, before I could react, I heard Jeremy second the question.

Everyone was in the living room.

"No!" I shouted, nearly tripping as I stumbled forward.

"Clayton got kicked out of school," Daniel announced, his voice ringing down the hall. "He killed the class guinea pig and cut it up."

I lunged past Nick, nearly knocking him flying as I swung around through living room doorway.

"He's lying!" I said. "It was already dead!"

Apparently, the state of the guinea pig before the dissection was not the issue. Getting kicked out of school was. And I suspect they were a little concerned about the dissection part, too. Killing the animal they would have understood; cutting it up after it was dead just seemed . . . strange.

Although Jeremy hadn't asked me to lie about still being in school, he'd really hoped Dominic wouldn't learn the truth, and for good reason. At lunch, Dominic had said he'd given Jeremy a one year probation period with me. It would be several years before I fully understood what that meant.

When Dominic learned that Jeremy had brought me home, he'd evaluated the situation, based on what Malcolm had said about me from that first encounter in Baton Rouge and what Antonio reported from his first visit, taking into account that Malcolm had exaggerated my wildness to embellish his story and Antonio had downplayed it to help Jeremy's cause. With these quasi-facts in mind, Dominic made a decision. Jeremy could keep me for one year. If at the end of that year, I was not civilized enough to walk down the streets of New York without raising eyebrows, Jeremy could keep me. And if Jeremy failed? Then I had to die.

That explained why Jeremy had been so eager to get me off to school, sending me as soon as I had my Changes under control. Socially, I'd been far from ready for daily interaction with other children, but Jeremy had been desperate, seeing the end of the year only a few months away and me still growling at children in the town playground. Jeremy had been determined to give me a permanent place in the Pack by proving that I could be a normal child. What better way to do that than to have me successfully enrolled me in school, like every other normal child.

So when Dominic found out otherwise, what did he do? He laughed it off.

As Dominic pointed out, my early interest in anatomy might put some question marks in the psychological fitness section of my school records, but it wasn't as if I'd been caught tearing the animal apart with my nails and gulping bloodied chunks. No one was going to read that report and think "oh my god, the kid's a werewolf!" And, really, that was all Dominic cared about. I walked upright. I could speak enough to be understood. I rarely growled at people. I was no more likely to piss on a tree than any other seven-year-old boy. I could pass for human, and that was all that mattered.

If I couldn't pass for human, would Dominic have really ordered my death? Yes. I'm sure of it. That never bothered me, never altered my opinion of him. Nothing in my life had ever given me reason to think that I had a God-given right to live. Werewolves don't have the luxury of sentimentality. Like a wolf Alpha male, every decision a Pack Alpha makes comes down to one question: how does it affect the safety of the Pack? A feral child whose Changes are uncontrollable is a clear exposure risk for all werewolves. Where Dominic failed, though, is where Jeremy's wider vision succeeded. When Dominic learned of my existence, he did nothing?he left me out there in the bayou where any human could have found me. Why? Because Dominic wasn't able to see the larger picture. Had I been on Pack territory or had I been bitten by a Pack wolf, he would have handled the situation. As it was, I was on the other side of the country, having no connection to the Pack, so he didn't see the threat. Jeremy saw it.

Jeremy knew that if I was found, the effects of that discovery would ripple back to the Pack. It was not, however, in Jeremy's nature to eliminate the threat by killing me. To the other Pack wolves, I was a mutt?vermin werewolf. To Jeremy, I was a child werewolf, as entitled to protection and to a normal life as any Pack son.

As for mutts, if the Pack's view of them seems harsh, one must remember that integral question: how does this affect the safety of the Pack? Mutts are a threat. They are always a threat. No matter what kind of lives they lead, whether they kill humans or not, their existence threatens the Pack because they are beyond the control of the Pack and they are beyond safety net that the Pack brotherhood supplies.

Dominic's approach to handling mutts was the same as that of every Alpha who came before him. He imposed rules of engagement that every Pack wolf was supposed to obey. If a mutt steps onto your territory, kill him. If you encounter a mutt off Pack territory, kill him. And if you're feeling restless, have some excess aggression to spend, then go find a mutt, and kill him.

As a plan of action for dealing with the mutt problem this was about as sophisticated as Nick's method for getting rid of Daniel and, not surprisingly, Jeremy saw the flaws in it. He hadn't yet come up with a solution?or not one that anyone would listen to. In the meantime, he bowed out of Pack-organized mutt hunts and, since he rarely left Pack territory, he didn't need to worry about killing any he bumped into while traveling. This did, however, leave one problem. If a mutt came near Stonehaven, Jeremy was supposed to kill him. So far, in my year with Jeremy, this hadn't happened. Jeremy's luck, though, couldn't hold forever, and the next spring I had my first encounter with a trespassing mutt.

Duel

Winter came and went, and spring returned. It was later this year, but by early May snow was a memory and the ground had hardened enough that Jeremy no longer handed me a mop and pail each time I raced into the house without removing my shoes.

Little had changed at Stonehaven. Malcolm came back in late December, but his week-long stay was uneventful. He paid no attention to us, we paid no attention to him and, before we knew it, he was gone again, having scarcely sent a ripple through the calm of our day-to-day life.

With spring came a fresh litter of baby rabbits under the oldest, biggest pine tree in the front yard. A group of rabbits had made their warren here years

ago, and lived under the shadow of werewolves in relative safety. Jeremy had decreed the warren off-limits. Having it there was like having a food factory on our front lawn. Jeremy didn't use those exact words, but I got the picture. Adult rabbits bore baby rabbits? lots of them? and the warren was small, so those baby rabbits had to find a new place to live. Most moved around to the back of the house, into the woods of Stonehaven. Once there, they were fair game.

One day in May, as late afternoon stretched into evening, the baby rabbits ventured out to explore their new world, and I was using the opportunity to practice my hunting skills. I was in human form, which added challenge. The game was to see how close I could get, both upwind and downwind, before the mother rabbits noticed me and herded their babies back into the warren. After they went into hiding, I'd back off and wait for them to return, then start over. Being wary animals, they often waited a half-hour or more before venturing forth again. I didn't mind the wait. It was a warm spring evening, my lessons were done, Jeremy was sitting on the front step, working, and I had all the time in the world.

As the light faded, Jeremy crept over near my hiding spot, being careful not to disturb the rabbits, and motioned that he was going to take his work inside, then return and join me in my game. I grinned and nodded, and he slipped off to the house.

Almost as soon as the door closed behind Jeremy, I heard the rumble of a car slowing near the house. From where I sat, I couldn't see it. The Danverses built the existing house at the turn of the century, and built it to suit their needs in every way. The house itself was over two hundred feet from the road, with a winding driveway and a front lawn strategically dotted with evergreens. From the road, you could barely glimpse our roof. The world couldn't see us, and we couldn't see them.

The car died. A door opened, then shut. From the distance of the noise, the driver had stopped either on the road or just at the end of the drive. I tensed and listened. Footsteps crunched along the gravel drive. Heavy steps. A man. A salesman? Stonehaven didn't see many door-to-door salespeople, and I'd recently overheard Jeremy joking to Antonio that the one upside of my incident with the Avon lady was that he hadn't seen an encyclopedia or vacuum salesperson in months.

Of course, Jeremy hadn't known I'd been listening or he'd never have said that, putting a positive spin on negative behavior. When I overheard things like this, though, it only confirmed my suspicion that, when it came to such matters, what Jeremy told me was not always what he'd like to tell me. He might say it was okay for salespeople to come to the door, but the truth was that he didn't like trespassers any more than I did. That meant I had all the more reason to scare them away. I just had to be sneakier about doing it.

So, now, with a stranger on the property and Jeremy in the house, I knew what I had to do. I had to get rid of the interloper before Jeremy knew he was there. I pinpointed the man's location and looped around the tree. I moved downwind. With humans, I knew this was unnecessary, but it was second nature to me. As I crept around behind the man, I spotted him. He was short and stocky, maybe ten years older than Jeremy, with a brown brush-cut. Before I could take another step, I caught a whiff of the man's scent.

He was a werewolf.

I stopped short and tried to get a better look at the man, see whether he resembled any of the sketches in Jeremy's room. If so, he'd be one of the

Pack wolves I hadn't met, maybe this "Peter" that Jeremy was so concerned about. Yet the man had his back to me and in the waning light I could see no more than his build and hair color.

I decided to scoot back into the shadows, zip around him and get Jeremy. I'd just turned when I heard the swish of Jeremy's loafers in the grass. I looked to see him on the front lawn, a few yards from the stoop. He stood hidden by the shadow of a pine. He was upwind of the other werewolf, which means the newcomer should have scented him, but he didn't notice Jeremy until he was less than a few feet away.

Jeremy opened his mouth, then blinked, probably catching the other man's scent for the first time. He hesitated only a split-second, then said, "May I help you?"

"Sure," the other man said, his voice grating with a strange accent. "You can get your daddy for me, boy. Tell him Carl Pritchard wants to talk to him."

"My father isn't home," Jeremy said. "And not likely to return any time soon."

For several minutes, neither man spoke, but just stood there, watching one another.

"That's a shame," Pritchard said at last. "Course, it'd be even more of a shame if I came all this way for nothing. I'm thinking maybe I could have that talk with you instead."

"If it's my father you wanted, I'm a poor substitute."

Pritchard rocked on his heels. "Maybe, maybe not. Your daddy does have a damned fine reputation, but a rare opponent is just about as good as a famous one. Can't say I've ever met anyone who fought the elusive Danvers Junior."

"That doesn't mean no one ever has. It just means no one ever returned to tell the tale."

Pritchard barked a laugh. "Nice try, boy, but from what I hear, I'll wager the real reason is you've never stuck around long enough to let anyone throw a punch."

Jeremy tensed, but quickly hid it with a shrug. "Believe what you like. If that's true, then, it won't gain you anything to bother with me, will it? So I would suggest that you return when my father is home and take up your quarrel with him."

The man laughed again. "Another nice try, but you aren't going to weasel out of it that easily. I'm throwing down the towel."

"You're giving up? Can't say I blame you."

Pritchard scowled. "I'm challenging you."

"Ah. Well, in that case, for future reference, the correct phrase is throwing down the gauntlet. And, you know, that's a fine idea, so why don't you just go out, find yourself a gauntlet, and when you have one, bring it back, throw it down and we'll talk . . . or fight, though I must warn you, I'm a much better talker."

For the next couple of minutes, Pritchard said nothing. I think it took him

that long to process Jeremy's words, and even then, when he did speak, there was an air of hesitancy.

"I'm challenging you to a duel."

"Right then. A duel. At dawn? Does that work for you? Pistols or rapiers? My swordsmanship is a bit rusty, but I could probably make do."

Again, Pritchard hesitated, dull brain whirring. "I don't think you're taking this seriously."

"No? Really? Perhaps that's because the situation itself is so ludicrous I find it impossible to take seriously." Jeremy stepped forward. "You're here because you want to challenge my father to a fight. At worst, you could die. But even at best, if you kill him, what have you have gained? A better reputation as a fighter. What will that get you? More challenges. More challenges equals more chances that you aren't going to live to see forty."

"Yeah. So?"

"It's stupid," Jeremy said, meeting Pritchard's eyes. "Is that obvious to no one but me?"

"What's stupid about it? This is the way it works. The way it's always worked. I come here. I'm on your territory. You have to kill me."

"No, I don't have to. That may be the practice, but it's not the Law."

"Damn," Pritchard said with a laugh. "You're as yellow as they say."

Jeremy's cheek twitched, and Pritchard tensed, obviously expecting that would goad Jeremy into a fight. Instead, Jeremy turned his back and began to walk away.

"You think about what I said," Jeremy said. "I'll give you one hour to get off my territory. Then I'm coming after you."

"Whooo. I'm scared now."

Jeremy just kept walking. Pritchard waited another minute, then snorted in disgust, turned on his heel and stormed back down the drive. At the front door, Jeremy turned and peered into the night. Seeing Pritchard gone, he hurried over to where I hid in the trees.

"Come on, Clayton," he said. "Into the garage. We need to follow him."

Jeremy followed Pritchard's car, driving as far back as he dared, and keeping his lights off while in the countryside.

"I know you might not understand what you heard," Jeremy said after a few minutes. "I'm not sure even I can explain it, not in any way that makes sense to me."

"He's a mutt, isn't he?"

"Yes, and they aren't supposed to come on our territory, but they do. We say they can't, but the Pack doesn't always mean it. It's . . . difficult to

explain. The point is that mutts think if they hurt a Pack wolf, it'll make them important, and the best way to get a chance to do that is to come on our territory."

"Because you're supposed to fight them."

"Yes. But I didn't, and I'm sure you're wondering about that."

"It's like you said about him. If you win, more mutts will come. They'll want to fight you, too."

Jeremy blinked, as if surprised that I'd picked up on this. Then his lips curved in a quarter-smile. "Smart boy. Amazing how that can make sense to you, yet no one else seems to see it."

"What if he doesn't leave? Will you fight him?"

"I said I would. I have to follow through."

"But at the Meet, Wally said . . ." I let the sentence trail off.

Jeremy glanced over at me. "He said I don't fight mutts. That I let Malcolm do it for me. That's what he believes?what most of them believe?and I see no reason to enlighten them. If they know I fight trespassing mutts, they'll expect me to fight more, perhaps even challenge me."

"This mutt . . . will you kill him?"

"Not if I can help it. Usually a fight is enough."

"But if you killed him, then he couldn't come back. And he couldn't tell other mutts he fought you, so they wouldn't come either."

"If only it was that easy. Before mutts come here, they tell other mutts what they're going to do, who they're going to challenge. That's part of the game. If Carl Pritchard's friends never see him again, they'll know he lost the fight. They'd probably think Malcolm killed him, and that's fine with me, but it doesn't solve the problem. The higher my father's reputation is, the more mutts will come looking for him. And, more often than not, they find me instead."

"You need to stop them from coming."

"If I knew how to do that, Clayton, believe me, I would." Another small smile. "Maybe someday you can figure it out for me."

For ninety minutes we crouched in the woods behind the Big Bear Motor Lodge, watching Pritchard's motel window, hoping to see the light turn out and hear the roar of his car engine as he beat a hasty retreat from Bear Valley. It never happened.

Finally, Jeremy sighed and shook his head. "Looks like I need to finish this, Clayton. I want you to go back to the car and wait." He handed me the car keys. "Do you remember where we parked?"

I pointed into the woods. "On the other side. Behind the warehouse."

"Good boy. Now, you need to stay in there and be quiet. Don't let anyone see you." He reached into his pocket, took out something, then undid his watch band. "Here's two dimes and my watch. Listen carefully, okay?"

I nodded.

"It's just past ten thirty. When it's eleven o'clock, if I haven't come back yet, then you leave the car, and run to the gas station across the road. It's closed. Go to the phone booth and put in a dime. Call Antonio collect. Do you remember the number?"

Jeremy had drilled me on this months ago, teaching me Antonio's phone number even before our own.

"Call him and tell him what happened. He'll?" Jeremy faltered. "He'll look after everything. Okay?"

When I nodded, he had me repeat back the instructions, then sent me off.

I walked back to the car, got inside, waited just long enough to ensure that Jeremy would think I'd obeyed him. Then I headed back to the motel. This was not a simple matter.. Even opening the door handle was a monumental struggle. There was nothing wrong with the door; the problem lay within me.

My wolf's brain was wired to obey my leader without question. Dominic may have been Pack Alpha, but Jeremy was my alpha, and I don't think he even realized how much sway his words had over me.

Yet, as much as I was hardwired to obey, there was now another equally strong instinct conflicting with that one: the need to protect Jeremy. When obedience runs counter to protection, the protective instinct always wins.

So I made my way back to Jeremy. I never reached the motel, though. By that time, Jeremy and Pritchard had moved into the middle of the patch of woods between the car and the motel. I stopped short the moment their words reached me.

"How do I know you're not going to attack me while I Change?" Pritchard asked.

"Easy," Jeremy replied. "We're not going to Change."

They kept their voices low, so no one outside the woods would hear them. I left the path, got downwind of the pair, and crept through the brush until I could see them.

"But we have to Change," Pritchard said. "That's the rule."

"Are you a better fighter as a wolf?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Then I'm not taking advantage of you, am I? Since you've mentioned the possibility of me attacking you while you Change, I can't help but suspect you've considered doing the same thing."

"Hey! I know the rules?"

"Then you know that Changing form first isn't one of them. We're barely a hundred feet from humans. Either you fight me like this, or you don't fight me at all."

"Oh-ho, so that's what you're hoping, is it, boy?"

Jeremy's right hook flew out so fast that all I saw was Pritchard stumble backward, and wondered whether he'd stumbled. Then I saw Jeremy's arm retract from the blow.

"Does that answer your question?" Jeremy said.

With a roar, Pritchard charged. Jeremy feinted out of the way, swung around behind Pritchard and slammed a fist into the side of his head. Pritchard reeled.

"Any time you want to stop, you say so," Jeremy said.

Another roar. Another charge. Again Jeremy feinted, but didn't have time to land a blow before Pritchard wheeled, fists swinging. Jeremy backpedaled fast, catching only a glancing blow in the side. He landed another strike on Pritchard, but couldn't avoid a hook to the jaw. As Jeremy recovered, he spat blood. Pritchard barreled toward him, but Jeremy recovered in time to feint and strike from behind.

And so the fight went. Jeremy avoided roughly two-thirds of Pritchard's attacks. Of those he couldn't dodge, at least half resulted in glancing blows that didn't even throw him off balance. In contrast, Pritchard felt the full impact of most of Jeremy's hits.

I'd seen enough of Jeremy and Antonio's wrestling matches to recognize exactly where Pritchard went wrong. Jeremy's fighting style was largely defensive. Antonio knew how Jeremy fought and he adapted accordingly, changing tact as soon as he picked up on Jeremy's pattern. There Jeremy would change pattern, and Antonio would adapt to that, and so on. Both men had very different styles, but neither was significantly better—one just suited each better than the other. What Jeremy and Antonio both excelled in, though, was adaptability. I didn't realize this until I saw Pritchard losing to Jeremy. He may have been stronger, and he may have been more experienced, but he couldn't adapt. No matter how many times Jeremy dodged a charge, wheeled and landed a blow, Pritchard never stopped charging.

Finally, after one of Jeremy's lightning-fast blows to his head, Pritchard went down and stayed down.

"Enough?" Jeremy wheezed, wiping blood from his mouth.

Pritchard nodded.

Jeremy straightened and turned away. He'd gone no more than a yard when Pritchard pulled himself up, moving slowly enough not to make any noise. His narrowed eyes were on Jeremy and I knew what he was going to do. I opened my mouth to shout a warning, but before I could, Jeremy slowed. His head turned just slightly. Then his mouth tightened, and I knew he'd sensed or heard Pritchard move. He didn't turn around, though. He kept walking, his gaze was fixed to the side, as he listened intently.

Pritchard pushed himself to his feet, then charged. Jeremy swung around and dodged easily, but this time wheeled at the very moment Pritchard passed, and

threw himself onto his back. Both men went down.

From my vantage point, I couldn't see what happened next. The men hit the ground. There was a sharp crack. And everything went still. A long moment of silence passed, then Jeremy stood. Pritchard stayed on the ground, his head to the side, dead eyes fixed in a look of disbelief.

"Goddamn you," Jeremy said, his voice infused with cold fury. "Goddamn you."

He stood there a moment, staring down at Pritchard's lifeless body. Then he turned and strode back toward the motel. I scampered to the car.

About ten minutes after I got into the car, the trunk clicked open. The car dipped as Jeremy lowered Pritchard's body in. He would have to be buried at Stonehaven. That was Pack law, that mutts killed on our territory be buried on the victor's land, not as a trophy, but as a safety precaution, so they wouldn't be dug up by plows or bulldozers or hunting dogs. Every member of the Pack knew how to dispose of a body. It was part of the lessons young werewolves received as they approached the time of their first Change.

The trunk snapped shut. Then driver's door opened and Jeremy slid in. I looked over at him.

"It's over," he said softly. "There's nothing to worry about."

But I knew there was. That night, I had my first glimpse into a problem that had plagued Jeremy from the moment he'd become a full-fledged werewolf, and one that would continue to plague him for the next decade. As long as mutts continued to treat Pack territory as a gladiatorial arena, our home would never be a true sanctuary. Someone needed to stop the mutts from coming.

Jeremy had half-jokingly invited me to come up with a solution. It would take nearly a decade before I did, but I never forgot that it was a problem that required solving. Over those next ten years, Jeremy had to bury too many mutts in our back woods for me to ever forget that. Since I'd arrived at Stonehaven, I'd seen Jeremy forced to dispose of two bodies in those woods. Less than a year later, another would join those two, and this one would be the most difficult for him yet.

Dare

For most children, fall means school. For me, it only meant cooler weather, which I always welcomed after two months of sweltering heat. Compared to Louisiana, New York might not get that hot, but when you're racing around the woods in a fur coat, anything over seventy is hot.

As for school, Jeremy and Dominic had decided to keep me out until high school. Shortly after my expulsion, Jeremy had started me on a formal home-schooling program, which satisfied the state. I was happy at home, Jeremy was an excellent teacher, and I was well ahead of my public school peers, so there was no need to hurry me back to institutionalized learning.

Being home-schooled, though, did mean I missed out on a convenient form of peer socialization. To compensate, Jeremy enrolled me in extracurricular programs in Syracuse. Bear Valley did offer some recreational programs for children, but the Pack has always counseled its members to limit their participation in the local social scene. People in Bear Valley knew us enough to say hello, but little more than that. So Jeremy drove me in to Syracuse for

my weekly programs.

Choosing activities for me proved a test of Jeremy's intuitive abilities. First, he tried soccer. I put my foot through the ball. Then he tried model-building. After two weeks gluing plastic bits onto a model of the Titanic, I decided to stage a historical re-creation using the classroom wall as my iceberg. By this point I'm sure Jeremy gave up trying to pick a program to suit me, closed his eyes and randomly pointed at one in the recreation guide. The result? Drama. And, to Jeremy's surprise, I liked it. Not that I enjoyed performing—I loathed that part, and managed to contract an inexplicable case of laryngitis every time family performance day rolled around. What I liked though, was the opportunity to learn how to play a role. For me, that was a far more useful skill than knowing how to kick a ball or build a ship.

So Jeremy kept me in drama classes one season a year, and for the other three we tried different things. He quickly learned what worked and what didn't. Team sports, like baseball, didn't. Individual sports, like swimming, did. Purely artistic endeavors, like music, didn't. Functional skill-building classes, like cooking, did. Yes, I enjoyed home ec, even if I was the only boy there and the girls fell into fits of giggling every time I walked in. Cooking was a useful skill. And, living with Jeremy, who couldn't heat canned soup without scorching it, cooking was an essential skill.

With these classes, I learned life skills and basic socialization. I also learned that children could rival Malcolm for sheer malicious cruelty. Despite Jeremy's hopes, I never made a friend in those classes. I was different, and other kids sensed that like a Pack wolf can sense a mutt. Not understanding what made me different, the children seized on the differences they could see. They mocked my accent. They made fun of my height, being still a head shorter than most boys my age. They ridiculed my interest in cooking and drama, which most the other boys considered "girlie" classes. On a slow day, they'd even make fun of my hair, which was either worn too short or too long, depending on their mood. I knew there was nothing I could do or say to win their favor—and I had no desire to, which didn't help matters. When Jeremy was around, I gritted my teeth and made nice with the other kids. The rest of the time I ignored them and did my own thing.

As for friends, I had my Pack brothers. While I never did befriend Daniel, Joey and I got along fine. As for Nick, after that first Pack meeting, when we were together, we were inseparable.

The October after Jeremy killed the mutt Pritchard, Antonio and Nick came down for a weekend, as they did at least once a month. Saturday morning, Nick and I were out back, having some trouble deciding how best to utilize our time together.

"No way," Nick said, slumping cross-legged onto the ground. "You're not hunting me again."

"But I need more practice."

"Yeah, well I don't need you giving me another black eye."

"I didn't give you a black eye. You tripped."

"And you pounced and slammed me face-first into a rock."

I leaned against a tree trunk. "That's because you need more practice."

"At what? Getting the crap beaten out of me?"

"At escaping. If you let me hunt you, then I can teach you how to do that."

"How about you teach me how to hunt? You play the helpless victim and I'll chase you?"

"You're not a werewolf yet, so you don't need to know how to hunt. You need to know how to run away."

When he didn't answer, I sighed. "Okay, how about wrestling then? Jeremy taught me this new move?"

"Which you can't wait to try out on me. Uh-uh. No hunting. No wrestling. No games where Nicky gets the shit beat out of him, okay? Think up something else?"

I thought about it. And thought about it some more. While I continued to think, Nick stood and stretched his legs. He wandered to a nearby oak and peered up into its nearly bare branches.

"Bet you can't jump from that branch," he said, pointing up to one about twenty feet from the ground.

Nick loved testing the limits of my werewolf abilities. Not a pastime that lacked challenge, though it ran a distant second to hunting-and-stalking games.

"If I can, will you let me try my new wrestling move?"

"Only if it doesn't make me bleed."

"It's not my fault you bleed easily."

"If I bleed, I'm not sneaking you any extra food tonight."

"Fine, you won't bleed." I grabbed the lowest tree limb and swung up onto it. "Come on."

We climbed to the branch. Nick tried to stop halfway, but I egged him on until we were sitting side-by-side on the branch he'd chosen for his dare.

"You really think you can do it?" Nick asked, looking down. "Seems pretty high, you know." He slid a tiny smile my way. "I wouldn't blame you if you chickened out."

I flexed my legs and measured the distance to the ground. It was too high. Not that I'd ever chicken out, but I had to be careful how I landed. The last time we played this game, I'd miscalculated my leap and twisted my ankle, then had to tough it out for three days so Jeremy wouldn't know what I'd done.

I was visualizing my jump when a car pulled into the driveway. I cocked my head, listening. The engine died. A car door slammed. Neither noise sounded as it came from any car I knew. I jumped from the tree, hitting the ground hard enough to send pain stabbing through my calves.

"Whoa," Nick called down. "That was?"

I dashed off toward the house.

"Clay?" A moment's pause. "Clayton! Don't leave me here!"

I kept running. I'd return for Nick later. He could wait; this intruder couldn't.

I tore from the woods and around the side of the house, scrambling over the low fence and heading for the front yard. I was certain I'd be too late, that the trespasser would already have made it to the door and disturbed Jeremy, but as I rounded the house, I saw a figure still standing by a car. It was a young man, maybe a year or two younger than Jeremy, with red hair past his shoulders. He stared up at the house, chewing on his lower lip. One whiff and I knew he was a werewolf. My first thought was "mutt," but then I saw his face and recognized him from a sketch in Jeremy's room. This was the elusive Peter, the only Pack member I hadn't met.

When I slipped from the hedge, his nostrils flared and, scenting me, he turned. He blinked, then offered a tentative smile.

"Hey, you must be Clayton. Hello."

I returned the greeting with a nod and took a few cautious steps closer. Yes, this was a Pack wolf, but I didn't know the man, so I wasn't going to rush out and hug him. Okay, even if I did know him, I wouldn't rush out and hug him, but the point is, I had reason to be wary. All I knew about this guy was that whenever Jeremy mentioned his name, there was a note of concern in his voice. I moved closer to the front door, putting myself between it and him.

"Is Jeremy here?" Peter asked, enunciating each word slowly, as if speaking to someone of limited mental capacity.

I nodded.

"Is Mal?is Jeremy . . . alone?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, okay, then." Peter turned back to his car. "Well, maybe I'll come back later."

"Malcolm's not here," I said. "Just Antonio and Nick."

Peter blinked, as if surprised that I could speak. "Oh, ummm, well, maybe I should still come back. He's probably busy with Antonio?"

"He's not," I said, then pulled open the front door. "Jeremy!"

Peter winced at my shout, then gave one last longing look at his car, and pocketed his keys. Jeremy appeared at the front door. Seeing Peter, his lips curved in a tiny smile.

"Peter," he said. "This is a surprise. Good to see you. Come on in."

As he ushered Peter inside, his gaze went to me. Then behind me. His brows arched in a look I knew only too well.

"I'll go get Nick," I said.

"Good idea."

Nick had managed to make it down from the tree easily enough. The trouble was finding his way out of the forest. You'd think that anyone who had been visiting Stonehaven since he was old enough to toddle would know his way around the woods there, particularly when that someone had werewolf blood, but Nick often had trouble finding his way out of the forest at his own house. He obviously needed more practice, but no matter how often I abandoned him out there, his sense of direction never seemed to improve. That, of course, only increased my resolve to keep leaving him there. What were friends for, if not to help you overcome your weaknesses?

Antonio met us as we exited the forest.

"I was just coming to find you boys," he said. "Jeremy's going to be busy with Peter for a while, and they don't need us bugging them, so how about we take a ride into town? Pick up dinner, maybe grab an ice cream cone?"

I glanced at the house. As tempted as I was by Antonio's offer, I had a responsibility here that outweighed any duty I owed to my never-satisfied stomach. If Antonio went into town, Jeremy would be alone in the house with another werewolf. A Pack wolf, to be sure, but my experience so far hadn't led me to decide that Pack membership meant a werewolf could be trusted. Until I knew more about this Peter, I wasn't leaving him with Jeremy.

"I'll stay," I said.

I expected Antonio to tease me about turning down food, but he just gave me a long, hard look that led me to suspect he knew exactly why I was staying. His gaze traveled to the house, then back to me, and his mouth opened, as if to say something. Instead he only patted me on the back.

"Just stay outside, okay, scrap? They need to talk. Nicky? You coming?"

Nick shook his head.

"All right, but behave yourselves and don't bother Jeremy and Peter. I'll be back soon."

We did as we were told, staying outdoors, and not bothering Jeremy and Peter. Yet that could be done while sitting outside the study window, where we could listen to the conversation within. Kids who don't eavesdrop on adult conversations are doomed to a childhood of ignorance.

Of what I heard that afternoon, I understood only one key point: that Peter was leaving the Pack. Why he was leaving, what that meant for his life, how difficult that decision was for him to make, all that I wouldn't fully understand for years to come. From the tone of the conversation, though, I knew that this decision marked the end of a long personal struggle with the issue of Pack-hood. I knew too that this was a decision Jeremy had both known

and feared was coming.

Roughly half of all Pack youth left the group in their early twenties. It was like membership in any regimented segment of human society?children stay with the group because they have to, then when they hit adulthood, they realize that they have a choice. Some, like Antonio, chafe at the rules, but not enough to consider leaving. Some, like Jeremy, disagree with many of the principles, but believe in the institution itself enough to stay and try to effect change from within. Others look around and say "I don't belong here", and this was the case with Peter.

In the tight-knit Pack, family is all-important?not just the figurative brotherhood of the group, but the literal bloodlines. The Sorrentinos, the Santos and the Danvers were the founding families of the American Pack. Being part of one of those families automatically elevated your status. Peter's father had brought them to the Pack when Peter was little more than a baby, the new responsibility of fatherhood having made him decide that he wanted a more secure life for his son. Yet he'd never really been accepted, and Peter had grown up seeing and feeling that ostracism. With his father having died five years ago, there was nothing to tie Peter to the Pack. Now, halfway through a college degree in audiovisual technology, he'd been offered a job on the road crew of a band.

When Peter had told Dominic of the job offer, the Alpha's answer had been clear. A twenty-year-old werewolf, barely old enough to control his Changes, could not leave the safety net of the Pack and go off roaming the country with a rock band. If Peter took this job, he would be banished from the Pack. That was just the excuse Peter needed. Jeremy argued with him, offered to intercede on his behalf with Dominic and negotiate a compromise, but I could tell by the tone of Jeremy's voice that he knew his offer would be refused. Peter hadn't come to discuss the matter. He came to Stonehaven to see the only Pack member who cared whether he stayed or left.

Finally, his arguments at an end, Jeremy walked Peter to his car. Nick and I slipped around the house to watch and listen.

"Say goodbye to Antonio for me," Peter said as he climbed into his car.

Jeremy nodded.

"You're doing a great job with the boy. Really great."

Jeremy nodded.

Peter started his car, and leaned out the window. "I'll call you when I'm settled." A weak smile. "Send you cool postcards from the road, show you what you're missing out there."

Jeremy nodded, but I could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't expect to ever get that call or see those postcards.

"If you ever need anything," Jeremy said. "Anything at all . . ."

"I know where to find you," Peter said. "Don't worry about me, Jer. I'll be fine."

Jeremy nodded, then watched the car back down the long drive.

The next day Antonio decided Nick and I needed new winter boots. Jeremy bought almost all our clothing by catalogue, which was fine by me because I knew of few tortures worse than spending an afternoon crammed into a dressing room while some middle-aged woman tried to persuade Jeremy that a blue shirt would really bring out my eyes so much better than the plain white one I'd chosen. When it came to footwear, though, it was safer to make the trip to the store and find a pair that fit properly. With winter coming, Antonio saw the perfect opportunity to get Jeremy out for the day, with a combined boot-buying, lunch-eating and movie-watching excursion.

Our first stop was lunch. Then off to the shoe store. I found a pair of boots within minutes. Nick took longer, insisting on a brand that "all the other kids had." To me, that would have been the very reason not to buy that brand, but Nick was already growing particular about such things, and Antonio always went the extra mile—or block—to get Nick what he wanted. So it was off to the department store down the road, a five-story monstrosity that sold everything from washing machines to hammers to children's boots.

Once Nick had his boots, Jeremy wanted to take a quick look in the appliances section. We needed a new toaster. I'd broken ours by stuffing two pieces in each slot at once, trying to speed up the process. Since the toaster was one of the few cooking tools Jeremy could reliably operate, we needed a new one—fast.

Few departments hold less interest for young boys than the small appliances section, so Nick asked whether he and I could go to the sporting goods area instead. When Jeremy hesitated, Antonio pulled the "you worry too much" routine, which usually worked—Jeremy hated sounding like a worrywart. He told us we could go, so long as we waited there for them and I didn't touch anything. Jeremy pointed us in the direction of the store map, and we took off.

According to the map, the sporting goods department was on the first floor. We were on the fifth. That left us with a decision: elevator or escalator. For me, there was no choice. I'd pick zooming down motorized stairs over waiting for a crowded elevator car any day. As we raced past the elevator, though, we saw that we didn't have a choice after all. The elevator was out-of-order. We ran past the sign, then Nick stopped and walked backward for a better look.

"Cool," he said. "Clay, come here. Check this out."

He disappeared around a rack of girl's dresses. I backtracked and found him stepping over a cord that roped off the elevator area. After a quick look around, I followed.

The elevator door was open. There were tools scattered around the opening, as if someone had been working on it, but the serviceman was nowhere to be seen. I walked up beside Nick and we looked down the elevator shaft.

"Whoa," Nick said. "Where's the elevator?"

I looked around, then pointed up. It was just above our heads.

"How far down you think that is?" Nick said, peering into the inky black of the shaft. "Twenty feet?"

"Maybe thirty," I said, though I could barely see the floor through the darkness.

"Bet you couldn't jump down that."

"Bet I could."

"Bet you couldn't."

"Could."

"Couldn't."

I looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "How much?"

"All the movie popcorn. You do it, you can have mine. You chicken out, I get yours."

"You're on."

At a low murmur of women's voices, I tensed and motioned for silence. We waited. No one appeared.

"You stand watch," I said.

Nick nodded and walked back to the dress rack. As he went, I squinted into the darkness. Thirty feet? That didn't seem right. If it was five floors, and each floor was at least? I stopped calculating. It didn't matter. I'd taken the dare. I stepped up to the edge, bent my knees, counted to three . . . and jumped.

Broken

The first thirty feet of the drop went fine. It was those last twenty that did me in.

By the time I reached the second floor, I'd picked up so much speed that when my elbow glanced off the side of the shaft, my arm whipped up over my head, wrenching my shoulder, and whacked against something protruding from the wall. I heard a crack, but didn't have time to register pain before my feet struck bottom. I hit hard and, had I not positioned myself exactly right, I'm sure I would have broken my legs . . . or worse. As it was, I slammed onto the floor of the shaft with my knees bent, absorbing the shock, but the force of the sudden stop pitched me forward. My head hit the wall and I blacked out as pain ripped through my right arm.

I don't know exactly what happened next. Being unconscious does that to a person. I assume Nick realized something was wrong, and went to get Jeremy and Antonio. They probably wanted to get me out of there without alerting anyone, but I'm sure the moment Jeremy had realized I was lying at the bottom of a five-story elevator shaft, unconscious, he'd decided this wasn't a time to worry about calling attention to ourselves. When I regained consciousness, I was lying on the floor outside the elevator door, being examined by paramedics, and surrounded by what looked like every customer in the store.

The paramedics declared that I had miraculously escaped serious injury, which they chalked up to a child's resilience. My arm was the worst. When I came to, the first thing I felt was the pain in my forearm. Though the paramedics instructed me to lie still, I managed to twist around and get a look at my arm before they could cover it up. My forearm was bent above the wrist in a way I knew wasn't natural. Just above the elbow was a gash at least two inches wide and an inch deep. My first thought was "hmmm, that can't be good." I suppose the sight of my own insides should have been more disturbing, but living in the world I did, where I saw flesh and blood every time I caught a rabbit, it

didn't bother me. The pain did bother me. I won't say I sucked it up and toughed it out. I was eight years old. I'm sure I cried.

The paramedics wanted to take me to the hospital. An obvious step when a boy fell down an elevator shaft. Not such an obvious step, though, when that boy was a werewolf. Pack werewolves didn't go to hospitals. Even most mutts knew better, and had been known to die from infection rather than risk a hospital trip. Fortunately, the Pack had devised a better system.

The Pack has always relied on the power of greed when it comes to finding services it doesn't dare accept from regular sources. If you're willing to pay a premium, you can always find a doctor—even a good one—who's willing to set broken limbs and perform minor surgery, no questions asked. Dominic had found such a doctor in New York, a well-respected physician who ran a side business offering medical services to the Mafia and other criminals. Dominic insisted we go to him and paid all our bills. And if the doctor ever wondered why he saw a lot of ripped flesh and very few bullet holes, he never said a word, just took our money and stitched us up.

The problem was that our doctor was over four hours away, and I had a gaping wound on my arm plus a good blow to my head. Jeremy and Antonio talked it over—out of earshot of the paramedics, but close enough for me to hear. Antonio wanted me to go to the Syracuse hospital. Pack wolves are allowed to do this in emergencies, using the ruse of religious beliefs to prevent the staff from analyzing our blood or doing anything else that might lead them to suspect we weren't quite human.

When Jeremy hesitated, Antonio pulled the "you worry too much" routine again, but it wasn't necessary. Had Jeremy himself been lying on the stretcher, the decision would have been a simple one. He'd have let Antonio drive him to New York, and if he'd suffered as a result of the delay in treatment, so be it. But this was me. If I needed immediate medical attention, I would get it immediately. So we went to the hospital.

The paramedics gave me something for the pain, so most of the ambulance ride was a blur. Next thing I knew I was in white room being examined by a white-haired man in a white lab coat. After a few seconds of drowsy confusion, during which I feared the fall had affected my ability to see colors, I recognized the setting from a movie and knew I was in a hospital. I assumed the man examining me was a doctor, which a glance at his name tag verified.

"So," the doctor said, holding open one of my eyelids and peering through a silver instrument. "Why aren't you boys in Vietnam?"

I was about to answer when my fuzzy brain cleared enough for me to realize that although the man was looking at me, it was unlikely he was directing the question at me.

"Haven't been called up yet," Antonio's voice said from somewhere to my left.

I tried to glance at Antonio, but the doctor wrenched my head back so I was facing straight. At Jeremy's touch on my shoulder, I swallowed a growl and kept my head still. Both Jeremy and Antonio moved behind the doctor so I could see them.

"The recruitment offices closed shop?" the doctor said, shooting a glare

Antonio's way.

He shot back a rueful frown. "I wish I could. I really wanted to sign up, but now that my brothers are gone, I'm the only one left to work on the farm. After the heart attack last year . . . well, my dad's just not the same. And, of course, Jeremy has the boy to look after. But when they call us up, we'll go. Gotta fight for your country. Can't argue with that."

Jeremy made a noise of assent and the doctor seemed placated. Neither Jeremy nor Antonio would be called for the draft. No one in the Pack would. Like I said, the Pack had long since learned how to take advantage of human greed, and they'd had two World Wars with which to perfect their system of buying draft passes for their members.

"You giving these guys a hard time, Doc?" said a young dark-haired nurse as she walked around Jeremy and handed the doctor a chart. She flashed a too-friendly smile at Jeremy and Antonio, then winked. "You want my opinion, I think they should stay out of that hellhole as long as they can."

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it," the doctor said, snatching the chart.

While he read it over, the nurse mouthed "grumpy old bugger" at Antonio and Jeremy, and rolled her eyes.

The doctor thrust the chart at her. "Take him down for x-rays."

"Ummm, sir?" Jeremy said as the doctor turned to walk away. "Do you think he'll need surgery?"

The doctor seemed ready to snap something back, but noticed the concern in Jeremy's eyes and softened his response. "We can probably do this without operating, but let me see the x-rays first."

"Thank you."

We picked up another nurse on the way to the X-ray room. I didn't think my situation required a second one, but when we passed a young blond nurse in the halls, our nurse motioned to her, she saw Jeremy and Antonio, and seemed to decide our case was more important than whatever she was currently working on.

Although there was nothing wrong with my legs, the nurse insisted I be transported on a rolling bed. That meant as I was being wheeled down the hall by Jeremy, everyone else could talk literally behind my back. Everyone except Nick, that is, who walked beside me, looking miserable. Jeremy had told him the accident wasn't his fault. I'd told him it wasn't his fault. Even Antonio, after a brief talk about "peer pressure" had, seeing how upset he was, agreed it wasn't entirely his fault. But he was still miserable. So he walked beside me, gaze on the floor, and said nothing.

The nurses said plenty, most of it seeming to have very little to do with my medical condition. They seemed very impressed by Jeremy taking guardianship of his "poor orphaned cousin," and almost equally impressed by Antonio treating his nephew to a day in the city. Antonio always introduced Nick as his nephew. That was always easier than having people calculated how old?or how young?Antonio had been when his son was born, and giving their opinion on the subject of teen parenthood.

For werewolves, it's common to tangle the limbs of the family tree when dealing with humans. Not only is it an added layer of protective falsehoods, but it solves one problem with our delayed aging. Werewolves age slowly. Whether this means we can live longer than humans is debatable, since few werewolves live long enough to test the theory. It does mean though that we stay physically young longer. Like most of our special abilities, this is all about survival?the longer we stay healthy, the longer we can fight off attacks. When dealing with the human world, though, it can be tricky. Although it's not impossible for a fifty-year-old man to look thirty-five, it does call attention to him, and no smart werewolf wants that. So we fudge our ages, and lie about our family relationships. The slow aging doesn't kick in until one becomes a werewolf, so at Antonio's age, the difference was still unnoticeable. No one would look at him and say "Twenty-six? My god, he doesn't look a day over twenty-four!" Yet in twenty years, when Antonio would be forty-six and Nick thirty, they'd have a hard time passing themselves off as father and son. By then they'd look close enough in age to be brothers. To make things easy, they'd played uncle and nephew right from the start.

The next few hours were unpleasant. Fortunately, the doctor had taken advantage of my earlier drugged state to put in my IV and stitch up the gash on my arm, so I didn't need to suffer through that. Next they x-rayed the break, which they called a dinner-fork fracture, one that could be treated with or without surgery. Jeremy spent a half-hour in consultation with the doctor on that, and though I heard none of the conversation, I can imagine what it was about. If Jeremy let me have surgery here, he'd be in serious trouble with Dominic. Yet he wasn't about to accept half-measures that might leave me without the full use of my arm. For a Pack werewolf, such a handicap would condemn me to omega status?the bottom of the heap.

After much discussion, the doctor convinced Jeremy that my arm could be fixed just as well without surgery. Then came the gas, which knocked me out while they put my bone back in place and casted my arm. For the next couple of hours I floated in and out of consciousness. Jeremy stayed by my side, as did Antonio and Nick.

During one of my more lucid periods, I overheard Antonio arguing with an orderly about bringing food into the room. Seems it was against the rules on that ward. Yet Jeremy and Antonio had to eat, so Jeremy whispered to me that if I woke up and he wasn't there, he'd be back in a few minutes. While he was gone, I surfaced to groggy half-consciousness only once, when someone in a white coat poked my uninjured left arm. I assumed they were fussing with my IV, which they'd prodded several times earlier.

By the time we headed home it was eleven PM. The hospital had wanted me to stay overnight, but Jeremy knew that a longer stay meant an increased risk of trouble, so he discharged me as soon as I was alert enough to make it to the car.

Once back at Stonehaven, Antonio and Nick grabbed their bags and prepared to return home. Antonio had offered to stay overnight, but Jeremy argued that it wasn't necessary. Dominic expected Antonio home that night, and at work the next morning, and Jeremy didn't want to make the situation here seem worse by having Antonio extend his stay.

Nick signed my cast before leaving. I wasn't sure what the point of that was, but it seemed to make him feel better, so I made a big deal out of it. He

persuaded his father to let him come next weekend to entertain me while I was semi-immobilized.

After Antonio and Nick left, Jeremy herded me off to bed. Between yawns, I tried to argue that I'd already had at least a full-night's sleep, but he insisted I needed more rest.

Jeremy opened the door to my room and switched on the light.

"Do you need help getting undressed?" he asked.

I shook my head. He watched for a moment as I fumbled one-handed to undo my shirt buttons. When I didn't ask for assistance, he sighed and shook his head.

"Let me rephrase that. I will help you get undressed." He unbuttoned my shirt and looked at the right sleeve, which they'd cut off to examine my arm. "Looks like we can throw this one straight into the trash."

That was fine by me. I hated button-down shirts. Never saw the point, really. Why fuss with buttons when you can buy one that you could pull off over your head? And the button-down variety always felt like they'd been dipped in starch, stiff and scratchy. On the other hand, I never saw the point of clothes in general, unless the weather required them, but apparently I'm in the minority on this.

Jeremy was tugging my shirt off my uninjured arm when he stopped. I followed his gaze to a bandage-covered cotton-ball on the inside of my elbow.

"Oh, right, the IV," he said, nodding. Then he froze again and his gaze traveled down my arm. "I thought they put the IV?" He looked at the bandage on my hand. "There." He blinked back a flicker of fear, and gently tugged the bandage from my elbow. Under the cotton ball was a single blood-crusted pinprick. His eyes shot to mine. "Did someone draw blood from you?"

"I don't think so."

"When I left for dinner did anyone?no, you were asleep, you wouldn't know. Did they move the IV? No, I would have noticed?"

"Someone came in when you were gone," I cut in. "I was pretty sleepy. I felt something, but I thought they were fixing that other thing."

"Okay," Jeremy said, standing and inhaling deeply. "It's okay. It's only been a couple of hours. They won't have touched it yet. I can call the hospital, tell them they drew blood against my wishes and demand?" He paused and shook his head sharply. "I have a better idea. Just wait?no, let me get you into bed?no, lie down and rest and I'll be right back."

I tried to answer that I wasn't tired, but I knew he was too caught up in his own thoughts to hear me . . . just as he was too distracted to notice that I followed him downstairs.

I watched from the study doorway as Jeremy rooted around for a phone book. He

called the hospital and asked for the phone number of their laboratory, then hung up. For a few minutes, he stood there, as if thinking, then he gave a curt nod and made a second call.

"This is Doctor Lawson," he said, using the name of the doctor who'd attended to us. His voice took on a clipped, authoritative tone. "I've just been informed that someone took a blood sample from one of my patients—a patient who was not supposed to have any blood-work done."

Pause.

"Clayton Danvers."

A longer pause.

"Yes, of course I know his family requested no blood-work be done. That's the problem, isn't it? Someone drew his blood against his family's wishes and if his family finds out, we could face a lawsuit."

Pause.

"Yes, that's the correct room, but the boy was in bed B, not D."

Pause.

"I don't want to know how it happened. My only concern is making it un-happen. Take that sample and dispose of it immediately, then shred any accompanying paperwork. Can you do that?"

Pause. Then Jeremy's hand tightened around the receiver.

"I don't care if you've already started analyzing it?"

Pause.

"I don't care what that tests showed, his family was very clear?"

Pause. A line of sweat trickled down Jeremy's forehead.

"This is a matter of religious freedom, do you understand that? If his parents don't want blood-work done, we can't do it, even if we find something alarming?"

A pause. A very long pause, during which Jeremy went pale. He argued with the person on the other end for a few more minutes, but it became obvious that whatever that lab tech had found, he was determined to report it.

"Yes, well, perhaps you're right," Jeremy said at last, the words coming slow. "Let me contact the hospital administration and they can have our legal experts look into it. In the meantime, this stays between us. Have you told anyone else?"

Pause.

"You're the only one on tonight?" Jeremy said, his eyes closed. "I see. That's good. And your shift ends at . . .?"

Pause.

"Why don't I meet you there then, and we can discuss your findings, so I know

exactly what I'm taking to the hospital board."

They arranged to meet in just over an hour, and Jeremy hung up. When he turned, he didn't seem surprised to see me there.

"We need to go back to the hospital," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded and went to find my shoes.

I don't know what Jeremy did to the tech. Well, yes, I do know. He killed him. It's the "how" that I can't answer. This time when he told me to stay in the car, I did. After all, he was just going to speak to a human lab technician. That didn't require my protective eye. It would be years before I figured out that he'd had to kill the man and destroy the test results. All I knew at the time was that I fell asleep in the car, and when I awoke, he was driving us home. I asked him how it went and he only nodded, eyes fixed on the road.

Jeremy didn't sleep for three days after that. Knowing he never slept well, I'd grown accustomed to waking and checking on him. For three days after my hospital visit, each time I went to his room at night I found it empty.

On the fourth day he made a phone call. That night, he slept for a couple of hours, and the same for the few nights following. Then, just over a week after the lab tech incident, a package arrived. It was a box of medical texts. That night Jeremy stayed up dusk-to-dawn reading. Then, with each night after that, he read for a few hours and slept for a few more.

By the end of the month, he was satisfied enough with his progress to sleep an entire six hours. Though he could never fix an arm that was fractured as badly as mine had been, he now had enough knowledge of emergency medicine that he could have evaluated the break and my head injury, stitched the gash on my arm, and given me the first aid I needed to make the trip to our doctor in New York. And that was what he needed to let himself sleep?the knowledge that he'd taken every possible step to ensure that what he had done that night, he would never need to do it again.

That broken arm, and the fallout from it, marked the end of what I considered my childhood. I'd still be a child for a few years, and those years were far from uneventful, but when I look back on my life, I see this as the dividing point between feral child and Pack wolf. Though I wasn't in school yet, I was, by Pack standards, "civilized" . . . or as civilized as I'd ever be.

There's another reason why I see this event as a turning point in my life?because it marked a turning point, however subtle, in Jeremy's. The Pack quickly learned of his new medical skills, and Dominic, shrewd as ever, saw the advantage to having a Pack medic. With this, Jeremy's slowly rising status in the Pack jumped, and the others took notice, including Malcolm, who began, for the first time, to suspect his son might have a higher goal in mind, one he himself coveted. And when that happened, you can bet Malcolm? But that's another story.