

Ascension

By Kelley Armstrong

Table of Contents

- 01 • Initiative
- 02 • Vision
- 03 • Lesson
- 04 • Player
- 05 • Angst
- 06 • Misunderstood
- 07 • Problem
- 08 • Circumstances
- 09 • Legend
- 10 • Changes
- 11 • Challenge
- 12 • Stalemate
- 13 • Endgame

Initiative

I raced over the snow, head down, eyes slitted against the flurries thrown up by Jeremy's paws. Although Jeremy was cutting the path for me, I could still barely keep up, and with each bound, I fell a bit farther behind. For once, Jeremy didn't slow to let me catch up. He couldn't. Just ahead of him ran a doe. Antonio kept pace on the deer's other side, reigning her in and keeping her running straight.

At a soft growl from Jeremy, I glanced up. Still running, Antonio ducked his head to peer at Jeremy under the doe. Jeremy growled again, and they both checked their speed, letting the deer pull ahead. As they fell a foot behind, then a yard, the doe found her last reserves of strength and shot forward, all attention fixed on the field just ahead. She made it another couple of yards. Then Malcolm sailed from the bushes on her left side. The deer skidded and wheeled on him, hooves flying. As Malcolm danced out of her way, Dominic flew from the bushes on the other side of the path. He vaulted onto the doe's back. Her thin legs buckled and she went down. Malcolm lunged at her belly, teeth bared, but Dominic snapped at him and Malcolm veered out of the way, leaving the final blow for the Alpha.

As the deer's blood seeped into the snow, Dominic fed. Everyone else had to wait, which they did with varying degrees of patience, from Malcolm and the Santosos, who paced icy ruts in the snow beside the deer, to Antonio and Dennis Stillwell who stood poised like setters on point, to Jeremy, who found himself a clear patch of snow and laid down, head on his paws.

After Dominic took the first few gulps, he glanced my way and snorted, jerking his muzzle toward the deer. When it came to eating, I wasn't expected to follow the rules of Pack hierarchy. I might have been the only child werewolf they'd ever known, but in this, like most things, they followed the rules of a real wolf pack. The feeding of pups was too important to be left to chance. So I was permitted to eat with the Alpha. For the first few years, I'd accepted the privilege but, at ten, I no longer considered myself a pup needing handouts. I could wait my turn or hunt for myself. I declined Dominic's invitation with a grunt, and walked over to lie down beside Jeremy.

After Dominic ate his fill, it was the next highest ranking wolf's turn. As for who held that position . . . well, that was open to interpretation. Since Dominic's older son, Gregory didn't hunt, his youngest, Antonio, usually ate second. But today Malcolm, who usually grumbled that deer hunts bored him to tears, had decided to join us.

When Dominic backed off, both Antonio and Malcolm stepped forward, approaching the deer from opposite sides. They looked across the deer at one another. Malcolm flattened his ears against his head and raised his hackles. Antonio lowered his head between his shoulder blades and growled. There was plenty of meat—and room—for both to feed, but that didn't matter.

As the two faced off over the deer, Jeremy pushed to his feet. When I glanced at him, his mouth opened, tongue lolling out in a wolf-grin. As Antonio and Malcolm growled and snarled at one another, Jeremy slipped up behind Antonio, stopping just behind his field of vision. No one else noticed, all too intent on the fight brewing. Jeremy crouched, wiggled his hindquarters as he tested his grip in the snow, then vaulted forward, darting in right under Antonio's nose. He grabbed the deer's fore-haunch, ripped it free and backpedaled out of the way.

With a roar, Malcolm flew over the deer at his son, but Antonio knocked Jeremy out of the way, then fell on him, snapping and snarling. To an outsider, Antonio's thrashing would look real enough, but a wolf would notice that none of his snaps did more than graze Jeremy's skin. A playful drubbing for a good-natured trick. As Antonio and Jeremy rolled together tussling, Malcolm stood back, hackles still raised, waiting for them to stop so he could let his son know *what* he thought of his trick. But they kept at it, tumbling out of the clearing, the deer forgotten. Malcolm snorted, then grabbed the haunch Jeremy had ripped off and dragged it away to feed.

Once Malcolm was preoccupied with the leg, Jeremy and Antonio raced back into the clearing, before the others could decide they'd forfeited their share. They ate together, side by side, bickering over the choice bits with mock snaps and snarls.

By the time Jorge and the Santos brothers moved in, it was apparent that there wouldn't be much left for me. Only Gregory had sat this hunt out, and the doe wasn't very big. I'd probably wind up with scraps, and I'd need to battle Stephen even for those. Time to find my own meal.

I had to cross the forest before I stood any chance of finding a rabbit. A Pack hunt is pure sport. Keeping quiet isn't a priority—if they miss their target and scare off every animal within a half-mile radius,

it's hardly a matter of life and death. They can just head for the house and raid the refrigerator instead.

The first rabbit I found, I lost just as quickly. No big surprise. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd caught my first target. There were grown werewolves in the Pack who couldn't catch a rabbit if it ran under their nose, so I didn't feel so bad. It took me a while to find rabbit number two, but when I did, I nabbed it on the first pounce. It'd been worth the wait. The first had been a scrawny winter-starved yearling; this one was a fat hare—more than a meal even for my appetite.

As I tore it open, another scent pierced the overwhelming smell of fresh blood. A werewolf. As I lifted my head, I caught a glimpse of dark fur. Jeremy probably. Maybe Antonio. But when my muzzle rose above the rabbit, I got a better whiff and my hackles rose.

Stephen Santos slid out from the trees. He met my gaze, and his lips curled back in a grimace more sneer than snarl. I grabbed my rabbit and backpedaled into the brush. Stephen advanced on me, nose twitching from the smell of fresh meat. A few drops of saliva dribbled into the snow. I growled, a clear "get your own meal". He bared his teeth and continued forward, ears going back, fur rising . . . as if he needed to make himself larger—he was not only double my age, but nearly triple my weight, and filling out with more muscle each time I saw him.

I backed up another few feet, and hit a solid wall of tree trunk. I looked from side to side, but the brush here was too thick. There was no chance of a breakway—not with a rabbit in my mouth . . . and I sure as hell wasn't leaving that behind.

I crouched. Stephen's mouth fell open in a grin, interpreting my posture as a sign of submission. When I dropped my gaze, he snorted a chuckle, and loped toward me. I watched his forepaws, waiting until they were close enough for me to see his claws. Then I threw myself forward, snarling and snapping.

Stephen fell back. Before he could recover, I wheeled, snatched my rabbit and tore past him. He jumped at me, but slid in the snow, yelping as he crashed into the thick brush. I kept running—and almost plowed headlong into a tall pair of dark legs. As I skidded to a halt, I caught a whiff of scent and my gut twisted. Still holding my rabbit, I looked up—way up—and met Malcolm's eyes.

Malcolm looked down at me, then over at Stephen, who was still disentangling himself from the bushes. He shook his head and shot a disgusted glare Stephen's way. Stephen rose to his feet, gaze fixing on mine, eyes blazing hate and humiliation. I looked from him to Malcolm. I was trapped.

I laid the rabbit down. Malcolm's muzzle dipped, nodding, as if this was what he expected from me. I released the rabbit and stepped away. As Stephen lunged for it, I grabbed the rabbit by the rear legs and ran the other way.

I got about twenty feet before Malcolm leapt into my path. From behind me came the pound of Stephen's running feet, growing closer each second. Malcolm jerked his muzzle to the side, telling me to toss down the rabbit. I planted my feet and pulled myself up as tall as I could, my head barely reaching his chest, rabbit still in my mouth. His eyes met mine. He tilted his head and, for a moment, just looked at me. Then he stepped aside.

I got to keep my dinner that night. I might not be able to outfight or outrun Stephen, but I could outsmart him, which I did by picking a path through brush too thick for a full-grown wolf to pass. By the time I finished eating, I heard Raymond Santos whistling for his son, and I knew the others had Changed back.

I did the same, then ran to catch up.

I found Jeremy with Dominic and Jorge, about a quarter-mile from the house. As I ran to Jeremy, Antonio ambushed me from behind a tree, scooping me up in the air.

"Hey there, scrap," Antonio said. "Where's you'd run off to?" He held me out at arm's length and made a show of sniffing. "Is that rabbit I smell? I hope you caught enough for all of us."

"If he can catch one for himself, he's doing just fine," Dominic said. "Better than fine."

"But he can always use more practice," Antonio said. "I say next Meet we let Clay catch our dinner. A bunny buffet." He grinned down at me. "Or guinea pig. He knows how to carve up a guinea pig."

"No, I don't," I said. "They never let me finish."

Everyone laughed. Antonio swung me down to the ground. At a shout from the yard, I looked to see Nick running toward us.

"Good hunt?" he called.

Antonio shot his son a thumbs up. Nick raced up beside me.

"Did you get to help?" he asked.

"Course he did," Antonio said. "And he caught his own rabbit."

"Oh, man," Nick said. "You are so lucky. Was it a big one? Where'd you find it? How'd you catch it?"

While I answered his endless questions, the rest of the Pack caught up with us. Only Ross Werner and Dennis Stillwell joined our group—the Santoses and Cliff Ward hung back with Malcolm.

"Is someone here?" Ross asked, pointing at the driveway.

He was off to our right, the only one who could see around the rows of cedars lining the drive. A few more steps, and we all saw what he meant—a black pickup truck in the lane, new paint glinting in the winter sun.

"Oh, right," Nick said. "That's what I came out about. Some guy dropped it off about an hour ago. Didn't come to the house or anything. Just left it there. Joey said you guys must have forgotten to tell me we were getting a new truck."

"Truck?" I said, wrinkling my nose. I glanced over my shoulder at Antonio. "You bought a truck?"

Dominic mock-scowled at me. "And what is wrong with a truck, Clayton?"

Antonio put his arm around my shoulder, his other going around Nick. "They aren't fast, are they, boys? And we like 'em fast."

Jeremy rolled his eyes.

"So whose truck is it?" Nick asked. "Jorge? Poppa?"

Jorge shook his head. Dominic looked around, pretending not to hear.

"Hey," Antonio said. "I think we're missing a car in that driveway. Not that I'm surprised. Damn thing was on its last legs. Probably just crumpled into a pile of rust."

I scanned the driveway, then looked over at Jeremy, who was doing the same, his brows knitting.

"Jeremy? Where's our car?"

"The junk-heap," Antonio said. "Where it belongs."

Jeremy turned to Dominic. "Please don't tell me you—"

Antonio grinned. "It was a mercy killing."

I watched Jeremy, seeing him struggle to keep his face impassive.

"I appreciate the gesture, Dominic," he said slowly. "But I don't need—"

"I know you don't," Dominic said. "But *I* do. Last month, when Nick had a fever, it took you eight hours to get here in that snowstorm. We can't have that."

"Hell, no," a voice muttered behind us. "Kid might have died. A fever. Imagine that."

Dominic turned sharp, lips curling. Stephen, Wally and Raymond Santos all stood behind us. Dominic's gaze slid from one to the other, but he couldn't tell who'd made the comment.

"Dominic has a point," Jeremy said softly. "My car wasn't suited to winter driving, and if I'm going to provide emergency medical care, I need something that is. So I will buy myself a truck—"

"What?" Antonio said. "Some old beater that doesn't run any better than that car?"

Jeremy stiffened.

Antonio slapped his back. "Come on, Jer. Stop being so damned stubborn—"

"An old truck won't do," Dominic said. "This isn't a gift, Jeremy. You're taking on this new responsibility, and saving me a bundle on doctor's bills. I know you won't accept anything more than gas money—"

"I don't need payment."

"Of course you don't. You're doing it for the Pack. And, in return, the Pack will make sure that you have everything you need to do the job properly—including reliable transportation."

"I—"

"Enough," Dominic said.

He shot Jeremy a scowl that said he meant it. Jeremy hesitated a moment, then nodded.

Wally strode up beside us. "So, let me get this straight. Jeremy plays doctor and he gets a brand-new truck for it? Hell, if I'd known that I'd—"

"You'd what?" Dominic said, turning on him. "You'd have thought of it first? You've had years to think of it, Wally. And you didn't. No one did."

"That's—"

"It's called showing initiative," Dominic said. "Something we could always use more of around here. Now, Jeremy, go check out that truck of yours. Make sure it's the way you want it. If not, you and Antonio can pick out something else. Before dinner, though, I want you to have a look at Cliff's shoulder. It's been acting up again."

Cliff shook his head. "It's nothing. I don't need—"

"You were favoring your right foreleg. That won't do. First mutt that catches you doing that will fix your shoulder for you—permanently. Did you see Clayton out there today? You'd never know he broke his arm four months ago. All those special exercises paid off, and that's what I want Jeremy to do for you." He shot a look at Cliff. "And you're going to let him."

"Come on," Nick whispered to me. "Let's go see the truck."

As we started to run, I caught a glimpse of Malcolm. He was watching Jeremy, a strange, unreadable look in his eyes. I stopped and circled back, sliding between Jeremy and his father. Malcolm shook his head, glanced over at the truck, shook his head again, and strode off toward the house.

Vision

Late that spring, when Jeremy was called in to deal with Gregory's sprained ankle, Dominic found excuses to extend our stay for nearly a week. Why? Because Malcolm was at Stonehaven, and had been for three weeks. Not only that, but Malcolm had invited the Santos brothers, Stephen and Cliff to Stonehaven for the week, which turned an uncomfortable visit into sheer torment—for both of us. Dominic knew we could use a break.

When we returned to Stonehaven, Malcolm was still there. Most times he only stopped by long enough to get money but, occasionally he stayed longer. I had no idea what his excuse was this time. Like Jeremy, I'd stopped caring *why* he was there, only gritting my teeth and toughing it out until he left. Asking him when he was leaving only invited trouble. I'd done that last year, and he'd extended a planned two day visit to two weeks, just to show me that he could stay as long as he liked.

By the time we got home from New York, only Malcolm remained. He pounced before we could so much as pull off our boots.

"All done playing doctor?" he said.

"Yes," Jeremy said. "Gregory is fine."

"No, Gregory is not fine and hasn't been for eight years. If you really wanted to do us a favor, you'd

give the idiot strychnine instead of aspirin. But I'm sure that wouldn't help your cause, would it?"

Jeremy only gave a half-shrug and took off his boots, then turned to me. "Go into the kitchen and we'll fix dinner." He glanced at his father. "We're having sandwiches. Can I make you one?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

Jeremy tugged off his coat, hung it on the rack and steered me toward the kitchen.

"How's that new truck working out for you?" Malcolm said, sticking at our heels.

"It does the job," Jeremy murmured.

"Dominic must be pretty pleased with you these days. Taming stray pups. Training the boys. Learning emergency medicine. What'd he call it? Initiative. That's right. Showing initiative. The question is: what do you hope to initiate?"

When Jeremy didn't answer, Malcolm swung in front of him and brought his face to Jeremy's.

"You get in my way, boy, and I'll squash you."

"I never doubted it," Jeremy said, and sidestepped into the kitchen.

Malcolm's next extended stay came six months later. It was early December, a month away from my eleventh birthday.

That weekend Antonio and Nick were coming up to take me Christmas shopping for Jeremy. Although the Pack didn't really celebrate the holiday the way humans did, we would have a Pack Meet and exchange gifts. The original shopping plan had been for me to go to New York and stay with the Sorrentinos, but then Malcolm showed up, and seemed prepared to hang around until the holidays, so Antonio decided they'd come to us, minimizing the time Jeremy would need to spend alone with his father.

On Wednesday night Jeremy woke up from a nightmare. When I heard a muffled cry from his room, I bolted upright and nearly fell out of bed in my haste to get up. As I scurried into the hall, I heard the click of his door handle, and backed into my room. I listened, heart thumping, almost certain it was just a nightmare, but unable to shake the fear that someone had attacked him in his bed. When I heard his soft footfalls in the corridor I knew it had just been another bad dream. Staying behind my door, I waited until he passed, then slid out after him.

Normally after a nightmare, Jeremy would fix himself a sandwich, or pour a glass of brandy, depending on how bad it had been. This time, though, he walked into the study, passed the brandy decanter and headed straight for the desk. He stopped in front of the phone, and stared down at it, as if expecting it to ring. For at least five minutes, he stood there. Then he sighed, picked it up, moved it to the table beside his chair, and sat down.

He picked up a paperback mystery novel he'd left by his chair, but after ten minutes of staring at the same page, he tossed it aside and he eased back in his chair. A few minutes later, he started to nod off. His eyes were only half-closed when he jerked up, mouth forming a silent "o". From my post outside the

door, I swear I could hear his heart pounding triple-time. His gaze shot to the door and I pulled back farther out of sight. He tensed, listening, as if afraid he'd cried out and alerted Malcolm. He listened to the silence for a minute, then looked back at the phone, swore under his breath, and rolled his shoulders.

"Call, damn it," he whispered. "I can't help if you don't call."

The phone didn't ring. After glaring at it for a few minutes, he sank back into his seat.

Twice more, he began to drift off and twice more a vision startled him awake. It was a vision, not a nightmare. I knew that now.

Jeremy saw things. I don't know how to explain it any better than that. *I can't* explain it any better than that. I've never understood much about this side of Jeremy's life. I don't know because I don't ask. I don't ask because I don't want to intrude—no, that's bullshit. I don't ask because I don't really want to know.

Wolves like conformity. They understand it. In the wild, a pack will drive out a member who doesn't fit the accepted standard of wolf behavior—most animals do. While the Pack wasn't so heartless, even those less attuned to their wolf-side were uncomfortable with change, and with those who were "different". I knew Jeremy didn't like to fight, and I knew that wasn't normal werewolf behavior. Yet I could overlook it, even accept it, because I knew *he could* fight. As a wolf, that was what was important to me—the ability, not the desire. Not every member of the Pack felt that way. Take Malcolm. To him, a werewolf was a fighter, and a werewolf's value was directly related to his martial skills. For Malcolm, having his only son show no interest in fighting was a humiliation beyond bearing.

If Jeremy's refusal to fight lowered him in the opinion of some Pack members, knowing that he had visions might have been grounds for exile. Such a thing went beyond the realm of individual difference. Even I had a problem accepting it. Unlike the rest of the Pack, though, I knew that Jeremy sometimes saw things, bad things, always about a Pack brother.

After nearly two hours, Jeremy fell into a semi-doze, disturbed only by the twitches and moans of a fitful sleep. When I was sure he wasn't going to wake up again, I crept into the room and fell asleep on the sofa.

The next day, Jeremy stayed close to the phone. Malcolm noticed. Malcolm always noticed Jeremy's moods. He hated the thought that something bad might be happening in his son's life . . . and he couldn't claim the credit for it.

The phone rang twice that day. Both times Jeremy bolted for it, which didn't escape Malcolm's notice either. The first time it was Pearl, the woman who cooked our dinners, confirming our menu for the next week. The second time it was one of Jeremy's employers asking whether he'd received a delivery.

Late that afternoon, Malcolm went out. Where? Didn't know, didn't care. He was gone, and that was enough. Jeremy tried to curb his restlessness by painting, one hobby he never dared practice in front of his father. At least marksmanship was a sport, which made it a marginally worthy pastime for a werewolf. But painting? That would open him up to a whole new arena of mockery. So when Malcolm was home, the paints and canvasses were locked in a basement storage box.

Today, though, even that hobby couldn't distract Jeremy from whatever bothered him. Instead, he threw

himself into physical activity, playing two straight hours of touch football with me before dinner. While we played, he kept the study window open, despite the bitter December cold. Every now and then he'd stop in mid-play, motion for me to wait as he looked toward the window, as though he'd heard the phone ring. When no sound came, he'd shake it off and resume the game.

After dinner I reminded Jeremy that it was our hunt night. We had two joint Change nights per week—one for hunting and one for running. As well, Jeremy encouraged me to run by myself once a week, and he did the same. One advantage to Changing so often was that if anything interrupted our schedule, we could skip a run or two with no ill effects. Given Jeremy's mood, I figured he planned to skip our hunt that night, and I knew that *wecould* skip it, but I wasn't going to let that happen without a fight. On my scale of Change events, solo runs ranked at the bottom, runs with Jeremy fell in the middle, and my absolute favorite—the one thing I loved even more than a full Pack hunt—was our weekly hunt together.

When I reminded him that our hunt was scheduled for that night, I was fully braced for verbal battle but, to my surprise, Jeremy told me to grab our coats and boots. Like playing touch football, a hunt was action—it was something to do. If someone phoned, he'd miss the call, but I think, in some ways, Jeremy was almost as uncomfortable with his psychic abilities as I was. At that age, he hadn't yet learned to trust them and, when the phone hadn't rang in twenty hours, he'd probably decided it wasn't going to ring at all.

We caught a fawn that night. Normally young deer aren't on our menu, but that one was a fall fawn, born out of season and abandoned by its mother. Better to kill it quickly and let its death serve some purpose, rather than leave it to starve.

We were still feeding when the phone rang. Jeremy had left the study window open again, so the distant ring cut through the stillness of the forest. Jeremy tore off to Change. I listened. The phone rang only three times, then stopped. Jeremy was fast with his Changes, but he wasn't that fast.

By the time I finished my Change, Jeremy was already in the house. I ran inside to find him striding down the hall, peering into each room. One sniff and I knew what he was looking for. We found Malcolm in the kitchen, pouring a beer.

"Did you—?" Jeremy started, then stopped and made his voice casual. "I thought I heard the phone. Was it for you?"

"No idea," Malcolm said with his back to us. "Strangest thing. I picked it up, said hello, and no one answered." He turned and fixed Jeremy with a look. "Very strange, don't you think?"

I didn't think it was strange at all that someone wouldn't want to speak to Malcolm, but he wasn't asking me, so I kept my mouth shut.

Jeremy shrugged. "Probably a wrong number."

"I'm sure it was."

Jeremy poured me a glass of milk, then grabbed a bag of cookies and led me to the study. Malcolm followed. He walked to the sofa and dropped onto it, beer sloshing to the floor. I looked at the frothy puddle and bit back a snarl. Of course he didn't care about it. *He* wasn't the one responsible for cleaning the floors. That was my job, but I wasn't wiping it up with him looking on. I'd rather let it dry and scrub

the spot off tomorrow.

Jeremy stood in the doorway, looking at Malcolm and struggling to hide his dismay. "I have work to do," he said finally.

"That's fine. You do it. I'll just sit here and keep quiet." Malcolm's gaze traveled to the phone—the only one in the house—and his lips curved in a smile. "Seems a good place to relax tonight, don't you think?"

Jeremy poured himself a brandy, took a sheaf of his work papers and sat down. I grabbed my book and plopped onto the throw rug to read.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. After a furtive glance toward his father, Jeremy answered it.

"Hello?"

Relief flooded Jeremy's eyes as I heard a man's voice reply. Malcolm put down his newspaper and perked up. Jeremy gripped the receiver tighter to his ear, muffling the voice on the other end.

"Slow down . . . no, slow—wait. Stop. You can tell me when I get there. Let me grab a pen."

He took a pen and paper from the desk. Malcolm stood, sauntered over and leaned around Jeremy, trying to see the paper as Jeremy wrote. Jeremy covered his notes, then ripped the paper from the pad and stuffed it into his pocket.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

When he hung up, he turned to Malcolm and tensed. But Malcolm just yawned as if the whole affair had proved disappointingly dull, and strolled to the door. He took one step into the hall, then leaned back inside.

"Oh, if you need someone to look after the boy while you're gone, just ask." He looked at me with a teeth-baring grin. "I'll take good care of him."

When Malcolm was gone, Jeremy glanced at me. "That's a problem."

"I'm going with you."

"No, Clay, not this time."

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Jorge? It's Jeremy. How are you?" A short pause. "Is Antonio there?" A longer pause, then Jeremy winced. "That's right. And he's flying straight here Saturday afterward, isn't he? Can't believe I forgot that." Pause. "No, no. It's not important. I was just calling to discuss our plans for the weekend."

Jeremy chatted for another minute with Jorge, then hung up. After a moment's pause, he sighed, shook his head and looked at me.

"I'm going with you," I said.

"Yes, I suppose you are."

Lesson

We caught a plane to Los Angeles and arrived there late that day. Once in the city, Jeremy rented a car, bought a map and found the address he'd been given. When he reached the motel, he swung into the lot, then hit the brakes, and sat there, blocking the entrance, until someone trying to leave blared his horn. Jeremy pulled into the first parking spot, checked his scrap of paper, checked the address on motel office, and shook his head.

One glance at the place—and one whiff of the smell coming through the open car windows—and I understood his hesitation. The motel was a dump, the lowest, cheapest form of accommodation possible, the type usually rented by the hour or by the month. No werewolf in his right mind could sleep in a place that smelled like this. After triple-checking the address, a look of sadness mixed with apprehension washed over Jeremy's face, a look that said the situation was worse than he'd expected, and maybe worse than he was prepared to handle.

"Come on," he said, opening his door. When I made a face, he added, "Breathe through your mouth until you get used to it."

Jeremy knocked on a room door. After some rustling from within, the curtain cracked open, then fell shut, and the door opened. Staying almost hidden behind the door, Peter ushered us inside, then closed and locked it. I took one whiff of him and knew something was wrong—very wrong. He hadn't neglected his hygiene too badly, maybe a few days without a shower, but there was an unnatural chemical stink to his sweat, something that brought back flashes of my nights prowling the alleys in Baton Rouge. Peter stepped from behind the door. A dull sheen of grease coated his long red hair, a short beard covered his cheeks and chin, and his shirt and jeans were dotted with brownish-red splotches—dried blood.

"Thank god you're—" Peter started. Then he saw me and stopped. "You brought the boy?"

Jeremy hefted his suitcase onto the bed and opened it. "Antonio's out of town on business. There's no one else I could ask. Not without answering too many questions."

"Oh." Peter's gaze shot to me, then back to Jeremy. "I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

"Clayton will be fine." He handed Peter a folded set of trousers and a shirt. "Get that clothing off first, give it to me, take a shower and put these on. Then tell me what happened."

Jeremy stuffed Peter's bloodied clothing into a plastic bag and carried it out to the car. It took him a few minutes to return, probably because he couldn't just throw the bag in the trunk, but had to find a hiding place until he could burn them.

When Peter finished showering and dressing, he came back into the bedroom, and took a seat in the chair by the television. Jeremy and I sat on the end of the bed.

It may seem to reflect poorly on Jeremy's parental judgment that he'd let me listen in on what was certain to be a discussion unsuitable for a young boy, but that's how things were done in the werewolf

world. When it came to the violent facts of our lives, the Pack never covered our ears or sent us to the next room. These were things we had to know, and postponing such knowledge wouldn't be protecting us, it would be the worst kind of recklessness. You couldn't let a Pack son grow up believing werewolf life was all rabbit hunts and pleasant runs through the forest, or the first time he met a mutt would be the last. So too, with Peter's story, there was a lesson to be learned for any young werewolf.

"I know what you're thinking," Peter said, looked down at his hands as he worried a hangnail. "You're thinking that Dominic was right, that I wasn't mature enough to handle it." He looked up, meeting Jeremy's eyes. "But it wasn't like that. I didn't walk away from the Pack and forget everything. I remembered the things you and I used to talk about, how to keep better control, how to make it easier. I Changed twice a week. I hunted. I never had more than one drink at a sitting. I was careful, more careful than I'd ever been in the Pack because I knew I had to be. One screw-up and that'd be it; Dominic would have me killed."

Jeremy didn't protest this. He couldn't. It was true. The only thing more dangerous to Pack safety than a renegade mutt was a renegade mutt who used to be a Pack wolf.

"I tried. I tried so damned hard!" Peter ripped off the hangnail, and winced with the pain. The finger started to bleed and he stared at the blood. "I saw it coming. That's what makes me so mad. I saw it coming, but I kept telling myself I could handle it." He wiped his bloodied thumb on his pants. "When I started the tour, it was me and three other guys doing the A/V work. Last year, one guy quit. They said they'd hire a replacement, but they didn't. Then this summer, they fired the third guy, and didn't even bother promising a replacement. So it was two of us doing the work of four. Concert days, we'd be up at dawn, work all day setting up, work through the show, get maybe two hours sleep and be right back at it. Once I was so beat, I screwed up the sound levels, and I knew if I did it again, I'd be out of a job. The other guy I work with was taking stuff, stuff to keep him awake."

"Drugs?"

Peter nodded. "For most guys here, it's like taking coffee. Everyone does it. I told myself I'd be careful. I took a little, and it worked. I could stay up during a concert run, then crash on the tour bus afterwards. I watched for other effects, but there weren't any. So when things got busier, I took some more. Then when I started having trouble sleeping, I took something for that. On my days off, when I got down, feeling lonely, thinking maybe I shouldn't have left the Pack, I'd take something to make me feel better. Pretty soon I was—" He swallowed. "I was taking a lot. And noticing problems—mood swings and trouble Changing—but I thought I could handle it."

"And then two nights ago . . .?"

Peter blinked, as if surprised Jeremy knew. "There was this party, with the crew. I took some dope, no more than usual, but it made me edgy. I—I haven't Changed in a few weeks. I tried once, but I couldn't, so I gave up. I was feeling real edgy, like I had too much energy, so I thought maybe if I—" He glanced at me. "I thought some, uh, company might help. So I went back to this girl's room, and we were—" Another glance at me. "—together, but it only made me edgier. Things got rough and she didn't like that, so she tried to leave, but I—I, uh . . . wasn't done. When she tried to get dressed, I didn't think, I just reacted. I threw her and she hit her head." He inhaled sharply. "I didn't think I threw her that hard, I really didn't, but . . ."

Jeremy brushed back his bangs. "Okay, we can handle this, and I'll help you, but only on one condition—"

"There's more," Peter said. His gaze darted away from Jeremy's. "I—she—" He stopped and swallowed. "She had a roommate. I was . . ." Another swallow, harder. "I was cleaning up the room when the other girl came in. I—I killed her."

Peter lurched to his feet and walked to the window. He pulled back the curtain, then quickly shut it. Jeremy said nothing, just sat there, his eyes downcast, hiding his reaction.

After a moment, Peter shuddered, then turned around. "The first girl—I can't say that wasn't my fault because it was, because I let myself get into that situation, but I didn't mean to kill her. With the other one, I knew what I was doing. She walked in, she saw the body, she saw me, and I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"Where did you bury them?" Jeremy asked, his voice low.

"I—I didn't. I left them there."

Jeremy's head shot up. "You left—?"

"I panicked. I took off, and I checked into the first motel I found, and I was going to take a shower, clear my head, and plan stuff, but then I just crashed. When I woke up, it was yesterday evening, and I didn't know if I should still go back, so I called you—"

"Okay," Jeremy said, lifting a hand to cut him off. "We'll see what we can do. If it's too late, we'll have to deal with that. But back to my condition. One thing you have to agree to if you want my help."

"Anything," Peter said.

Jeremy's condition seemed simple enough: Peter had to rejoin the Pack. The problem, as they both knew, was that if Dominic found out what had happened here, Peter was a dead man, no matter how vehemently he might promise to reform. For this, there were no second chances.

Peter could argue that the whole Pack suspected Malcolm killed the occasional human for sport, and remained not only alive, but a Pack brother in good standing. But Malcolm was a Danvers, and an integral part of the Pack, someone Dominic could rely on to keep the mutts in check and solve other unsavory "problems." Peter was a nobody, a kid who hadn't been a full-fledged werewolf with the Pack long enough to prove his worth. Peter had defied Dominic by taking this job, and proceeded to prove Dominic's fears well founded, so his execution would stand as a lesson to the rest of the Pack youth.

The trick, then, would be to clean up Peter's mess so well that *no one* would ever know it had happened. Even with that, getting him back into the Pack would require serious negotiating, but Jeremy had played go-between before, and he was ready to do it again.

Peter trusted Jeremy enough to agree. Not that he had much choice in the matter, really, but at least he was clever enough to realize his best shot when he saw it. So the plan was set. Soon it would be dark. They would use the next few hours to prepare, then they would return to the murder scene and—if it hadn't been discovered—clean it up.

As tempting as it would be to flee town afterward, it was too dangerous. Peter couldn't remember who, if anyone, at the party had seen him leave with the girl, so he couldn't disappear at the same time she did.

He'd have to return to work and, if all seemed fine, give his notice and work out his two weeks. Jeremy and I would stay in Los Angeles with him for the first week, to help him through any complications that arose. Then Peter would hole up at Stonehaven with us while Jeremy negotiated his return to the Pack. A solid, straightforward plan . . . one that was about to hit a very big, very determined obstacle.

Every adult member of the Pack knew how to dispose of a body. Normally, though, the task involved a dead mutt, and took place in a forest. Even a mutt knows that if he wins the battle, he'll have a body to get rid of, so he's not going to pick a fight in a public setting.

Cleaning up a murder scene in an apartment was more difficult, but Jeremy knew more than the average twenty-five-year-old knew—or *should* know—about cleaning up a crime scene. Body disposal was taught to werewolves approaching their first Change, and since these lessons were now Jeremy's responsibility in the Pack, he'd done what he always did—learned everything he could about the subject. He also had hands-on experience. The lab tech may have been the first human he'd ever killed but, thanks to his father, it wasn't the first human body he'd disposed of.

All this did not, however, mean that he was an expert in the matter. He made mistakes that day, including returning to the murder scene without first making sure the crime hadn't been reported. For all we knew, someone had found the bodies, and the police were staking out the apartment, hoping the killer might return. Luck was with us that night, though. The girls lived in a rundown tenement, the kind of place where no one would pay much attention to a scream or a thump in the upstairs apartment. And they didn't lead the kind of lives where an employer or friend or family member would start worrying if they didn't show up for a couple of days.

The apartment was exactly as Peter had left it . . . or so I assume. I never saw it. The educational portion of this trip ended well before I got a look inside that room. Jeremy set me up in an alley next to the building, where I was to stand watch. This was probably just an excuse to keep me out of the apartment, but I played my role to the hilt, keeping my eyes, ears and nose on alert.

Jeremy and Peter presumably cleaned the room as best they could. Then they brought the wrapped bodies down to the car, which was parked in the back alley, loaded them up, and we left.

After we buried the bodies—okay, after *Jeremy* and *Peter* buried them while I played lookout—we had one more job to do: burn Peter's bloodied clothing. Jeremy knew not to dispose of them anywhere near the bodies, so we headed out of the city. First we dropped Peter off at a nature preserve Jeremy had found on the map. Before we found a motel for the night, Peter had to Change. No matter how difficult it might be with the drugs still in his system, Jeremy insisted on it.

While Peter went for his run, Jeremy and I disposed of Peter's clothing a few miles away. As we did, Jeremy talked the situation over with me, making sure I understood what had happened and why. He no longer worried that I might be traumatized by such things, nor seemed surprised when I wasn't. At first I'm sure he wondered whether my acceptance of such things was a cause for concern, maybe a sign that I lacked a conscience. By now, though, we'd been through enough for him to understand the truth about me. I couldn't grieve for those two dead girls any more than I could ever grieve for any person, human or werewolf, that I hadn't known.

That didn't mean that I couldn't understand the tragedy of their passing. Every death should have a

purpose. If it doesn't, then it is tragedy, and anyone who commits such an act has violated a basic law of nature. The only excuse for killing an animal is for food. The only excuse for killing a human is protection of self or Pack. Even if I could stand there, stone-faced, as Peter and Jeremy disposed of two bodies, that didn't mean my brain wasn't processing the tragedy of it, and that I wasn't storing this lesson away in my memory. What I'd seen that day shouldn't have happened and, knowing how it had happened, I'd make sure I never let myself get into a similar situation.

Once we'd burned the clothing, we returned for Peter. Jeremy parked a quarter-mile from the nature preserve. Then we walked to the fence, climbed it and headed into the woods. Jeremy followed Peter's trail to a pile of clothing haphazardly shoved under a tree. He inhaled deeply, sampling the wind. I did the same, and couldn't pick up a fresh scent, meaning Peter was still running.

"Can we go, too?" I asked as Jeremy pushed Peter's clothing farther under the bush.

"I suppose so," he said. "Just remember—"

"Hide my clothing better than that," I said. "Yeah, I know." I started to look for a place to Change, then glanced over my shoulder at him. "Can I go find him as soon as I'm done? Or do I have to wait for you?"

Jeremy chuckled. "Since when have you ever had to wait for me?" he said, and disappeared into the forest.

Jeremy was right, of course. Even at Stonehaven, where I could gain a few minutes by tossing my clothing wherever it landed, I could never Change faster than Jeremy. No one in the Pack could, though, so that was some consolation.

When I finished, Jeremy was lying outside my thicket, head on his paws, eyes closed, as if he'd been waiting so long he'd fallen asleep. I snorted and pounced, but he rolled out of the way easily, sprang to his feet, twisted around and pinned me by the neck before I even had time to think of my next move. I sighed, breath billowing out in the cold air. He gave a low tremor of a growl that I'd learned to interpret as his wolf-version of a chuckle.

He released my neck and turned, as if to run, presenting me with his flank. I shouldn't have fallen for it. Only the most incompetent wolf would turn from his opponent like that. I was young, though, young and hopeful. When Jeremy turned, I scrambled up and dove at his flank, jaws open. At the last second, he dropped to the ground, and I flew over his back and pitched muzzle-first into the ground. While I lay there, sulking with a noseful of dirt, he prodded my hindquarters and gave a soft growl, telling me the game was over, we had to go find Peter.

When I got to my feet, Jeremy jerked his head, making an arc to the left. Then did the same to the right. Communication in wolf-form is never easy, but we've learned to supplement the basic growls, yips and snorts with enough motions to get across a more complicated message. Jeremy was telling me that the game wasn't really over—it had just changed form. Since there was no rush to find Peter, we could make a tracking sport of it. One of us would go left, the other right, neither following the easy trail Peter had left. We'd see who could find him first. I answered by tearing off to the left.

After about a hundred feet, I stopped and set to work. Tracking by secondary clues is much harder than following a trail. You have to use all your senses: listening for twigs crackling underfoot, sniffing for a scent on the breeze, looking for movement in the shadows. Being overanxious to beat Jeremy, I took off

after the first noise I heard, and startled a couple of field mice. That was embarrassing—mistaking two mice for a hundred-and-seventy pound wolf. After that, I forced myself to take a sixty-second breather. When I felt calm enough to continue, I set out again.

I found a path and padded along it, nose and ears twitching for some sign of Peter. I'd gone about fifty yards when there came a noise so loud that I dove for cover, fearing gunfire.

When my heart stopped thudding, I realized that the sound came from something crashing through the undergrowth. Had Peter frightened a buck? Or a stray dog? Whatever it was, it was large, and it was running full out, not caring how much noise it made. I crept from my hiding spot and moved a few cautious steps down the path. The wind shifted then, bringing a scent that made my eyes widen in shock. Jeremy? No, that couldn't be right. Jeremy would never crash through the forest like a panicked deer. I snorted, clearing my nose to sniff again. Then I caught Peter's scent . . . and that of another werewolf, one who definitely shouldn't be out here.

A yip rang out, the high-pitched yelp of a surprised wolf. I didn't recognize the voice, so I knew it was Peter. A growl followed. I knew that growl.

I shot forward, running as fast as I could. I veered off the path to take the shortest route. Twigs whipped my face. One caught my left eye, the sudden sting forcing it closed, but I just narrowed the other eye and kept running.

I made it to the clearing first. There, inside, was a wolf with dark red fur—Peter—lying on his back. Looming over him was a massive black wolf.

Peter twisted and bucked, hind legs kicking, but Malcolm had him pinned. Malcolm growled, lowered his face to Peter's and looked him square in the eye. Peter struggled wildly and managed to claw Malcolm in the belly. With a roar, Malcolm grabbed Peter by the neck ruff and dashed him, headfirst, into a boulder. Peter went limp. Malcolm stepped over Peter's prone body and pulled his head back for the throat slash that would end Peter's life. Then the bushes behind him parted, and Jeremy leapt through.

Player

Jeremy sprang at Malcolm and hit him in the left flank, knocking him to the ground. Malcolm's surprise lasted about a millisecond. Then he jumped to his feet and charged. Jeremy tried to feint, but the momentum of his spring left him off-balance and Malcolm hit him square in the side of his ribcage. Jeremy's breath flew out in a groan and he skidded sideways to the ground. Malcolm lunged for a throat-hold, but Jeremy managed to scuttle backward fast enough to get out of his way.

As Malcolm swung around again, Jeremy leapt to his feet and dove out of the path of his charge. Jeremy barely had time to recover from the dive before Malcolm twisted around and rushed him. This time, though, when Jeremy tried to evade, Malcolm was ready. He swerved in mid-lunge and caught Jeremy by the hind leg, throwing him down.

As much as I wanted to believe otherwise, I knew Jeremy was no match for his father. At forty-seven, Malcolm was a werewolf in his prime, having the experience of age yet none of its disabilities. The only wolf in the Pack who could beat him was Dominic and even that was starting to be questioned as age slowed Dominic's reflexes. Mutts came to Stonehaven for one reason: to challenge the best. That "best" was not, and never would be, Jeremy.

Although I knew this, I waited out the first few minutes, hoping I was wrong, and afraid if I jumped in,

I'd get in Jeremy's way. Jeremy recovered from the first throw-down, and managed to slice a gash in Malcolm's foreleg but that was the only hit he scored. Within five minutes, Jeremy was bleeding from his hind leg and his left ear, and the froth around his mouth was tinged with pink.

I knew then that no amount of luck was going to get Jeremy through this. Nor was staying out of his way going to help. So I leapt in, snarling, and threw myself on Malcolm's back. For a full-grown wolf, this is a good offensive move, pitching your weight onto your opponent and bringing him down. For an eighty pound pup, it was like dropping a terrier onto a bull Mastiff. I executed my leap perfectly, and landed square on his back, fangs finding purchase in the loose skin behind his neck. And all Malcolm did was huff in surprise, then fling me off.

When I got back to my feet, I changed tactics. If I couldn't be formidable, at least I could be annoying. While the two wolves fought, I darted around Malcolm's legs and tail, nipping and tripping him. It distracted him enough to prevent a quick victory, but not enough to let Jeremy win. Finally, Malcolm tired of snarling and snapping at me. With one full-on charge, he knocked Jeremy flying into the undergrowth. Then he turned on me.

I should have run. I know that. But running would mean leaving Jeremy behind, and I couldn't do it. I pulled myself up to my full height, braced my forelegs against the ground, lowered my head between my shoulder-blades and snarled at him. Malcolm stood there for a moment, watching me, head slightly tilted, an unreadable expression in his eyes. Then he lumbered over to me, lowered his head until we were muzzle to muzzle, and growled. I growled back. Malcolm met my eyes and I swear he smiled. Then Jeremy hit him from behind, knocking him away from me, and the fight began again.

Any hope we had of besting Malcolm faded fast. Jeremy was hurt, and getting more hurt by the minute. I was only wearing myself out. Soon Malcolm had Jeremy pinned by the neck. I went wild then, attacking his head with every ounce of strength I had left. He just pinned Jeremy with his forepaws and threw me off. By the time I recovered, he had Jeremy by the throat again.

Jeremy's eyes were closed. When I saw that, everything in me went cold. Then I saw that Jeremy's chest continued to rise and fall. Malcolm loosened his grip and lifted his head. The fur around Jeremy's neck was wet, but with saliva, not blood. Malcolm hadn't bitten Jeremy, only choked him until he lost consciousness. Malcolm backed off then, gaze fixed on Jeremy.

Had he realized, in that last moment, that he couldn't kill his son? Yes. But only because, if he did, he would lose everything. Edward Danvers's will not only gave Jeremy Stonehaven and all its assets, but stipulated that on Jeremy's death—no matter how he died—the estate would go to charity. And, perhaps even worse, a letter would be delivered to Dominic or his successor, detailing crimes that would guarantee Malcolm's execution. Should Jeremy not die, but be permanently incapacitated, the same provisions took effect. So Malcolm was trapped. His life and his livelihood depended on the continued good health of his son.

After a long, regret-filled stare at Jeremy, Malcolm turned to me.

I raced forward, swerved past him and wheeled, positioning myself over Jeremy's head. When he stepped toward me, I lowered my head and growled. He took another step. I snapped at his foreleg, teeth clicking hard when he pulled back. For a moment, he just looked at me. Then he turned to his original quarry: Peter, who was still unconscious.

I waited until he was far enough from Jeremy that I could be sure he wasn't trying to divert my attention. Then I sprang over top of Peter and growled. Malcolm stopped short, eyes widening. This, I suppose, he

hadn't expected. Again, he stepped toward his prey. Again, I warned him off, forelegs braced, fur on end, making me look, oh, at least a good five pounds heavier.

I drew back my lips and snarled. He stopped and tilted his head, gaze locking with mine. I could feel the depth of that gaze as he studied me. He feinted left. I blocked him. He darted forward. I snapped, this time in an awkward swipe at his throat. He pulled back and, again, I saw a smile in his eyes.

Several more times he tried to get around me. I know now that he'd been toying with me, testing my willingness to protect Peter. If he'd wanted me out of the way, he could have grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and tossed me aside. At the time, though, I truly believed I was the only thing standing between a Pack brother and certain death, and I put everything I had into countering Malcolm's moves. Once I even managed to snag his foreleg. When that happened, he pulled back, as if in shock. He looked down at the small wound, then at me, and I saw something in his gaze that made my stomach turn: admiration.

I lunged at him, snarling. He grabbed me by the throat and pinned me to the ground. For a minute, he held me there, not clamping down, just holding me, like a wolf with a misbehaving pup. While holding me, he glanced at Peter. Resolution flickered in his eyes, as if he'd decided something. Then he backed off me, huffed once, billowing steam from his nostrils, and loped into the forest.

I kept watch over Jeremy and Peter until they awoke. Jeremy was first. About ten minutes after Malcolm left, he started twitching and moaning as if struggling to wake up. Then he shot to his feet and looked around, lips pulled back in a snarl. When he saw me, he relaxed. He circled the clearing once, sniffing the air, but Malcolm was long gone. Peter stirred then and, after a few prods from Jeremy, opened his eyes. He looked around dazedly, then his lids drooped. When Jeremy prodded him again, he snapped at him. Jeremy snarled back and prodded Peter until he got to his feet. Peter shook himself, then blinked, as if suddenly remembering what had happened. Jeremy herded us back to where I'd left my clothing. We took turns Changing while the other two stood guard.

Once we'd all Changed, Jeremy assessed injuries, beginning with me. I had only bumps and scrapes from being thrown around by Malcolm.

"I'm sorry," Jeremy said softly as he fingered a rising bruise on my wrist, making sure the bone wasn't broken. "I shouldn't have brought you along."

"I'm okay."

A wry quarter-smile and a pat on the back. "I see that. But it shouldn't have happened. I should have guessed what he was up to back at the house."

"And what *was* he up to?" Peter said. "Besides trying to kill me."

Jeremy motioned for Peter to sit on a rock and began checking his head injury. "That, I'm afraid, was his only goal. To kill you."

"Why?" I asked.

Jeremy looked at me, as if trying to decide whether this was information I needed to have just yet. "What Peter did—killing a human after leaving the Pack—is grounds for execution."

"I know," I said. "If Dominic found out, he'd order someone to kill Peter." I paused. "And that's Malcolm's job, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's not a job," Peter muttered. "It's a pleasure."

"So Dominic found out about Peter, didn't he? He sent Malcolm after him."

"Shit," Peter said, staring at me. "How old is this kid again?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Dominic didn't send Malcolm. Ordering a Pack member—or a former Pack member—to be killed isn't, well, it isn't easy for an Alpha. It would be simpler for all concerned if that Pack member died before the Alpha had to deliver the order. Dominic would . . . appreciate that."

"Oh, I get it now," Peter said. "Malcolm kills me. *Then* he tells Dominic, probably saying I 'resisted arrest' or some shit like that. Saves Dominic from ordering an execution. So Malcolm earns himself a pat on the head from the Alpha for solving an ugly problem."

"I believe he hopes to earn more than a pat on the head. He may win Dominic's gratitude, but I think he's more interested in making a point to the rest of the Pack, proving that he can take care of problems like this swiftly and efficiently."

"But why?" I asked.

"Don't tell me he's angling to make Alpha," Peter said.

"He's been angling for years," Jeremy said. "Now he's campaigning."

Both Peter and I opened our mouths, but Jeremy waved away our questions. He proclaimed that Peter might have a mild concussion, but seemed otherwise uninjured. Finally, his attention turned to his own wounds, which were much worse than ours. Besides bruises around his neck, he had a jagged gaping wound down his leg and he winced each time he bent over or straightened, probably from bruised ribs. The leg would require stitches, but for now he wrapped it with strips from his shirt. Then shrugged on his jacket, brushed off our concern and declared himself fit for the walk back to the car.

Malcolm was waiting for us. He wasn't lurking in the bushes, ready to leap out. That wasn't his style. Had he wanted to kill Peter, he could have done so back in the clearing.

No one had wondered aloud why Malcolm had cut short his mission, but Jeremy had enough experience with his father to know this wasn't over. As we walked to the road, Jeremy kept looking from side to side and discreetly sniffing the air as he searched for signs of Malcolm. He had us stick to the middle of the deserted dirt road, as far from the shadows of the embankments as possible.

Jeremy moved slowly, and although part of that was caution, it was also necessity, as his injured leg kept giving way. As we rounded the corner to where he'd pulled the car off into the trees, his foot caught on a root. He tripped and instinctively threw his weight onto his injured leg for balance. His knee buckled and he inhaled sharply.

"Physician, heal thyself," called a voice in the trees.

I caught Jeremy's arm to brace him, but he only patted my shoulder, slipped from my grasp and pulled himself up straight. When I peered into the darkness, I could make out Malcolm, perched on the trunk of our rental car.

"Leg giving you some trouble?" he said. "That's funny. *I* feel fine."

To prove it, he leapt off the car and sauntered over. Peter hung back, but Jeremy kept moving forward. When he skirted Malcolm, their eyes met and Malcolm laughed.

"Was that a glare, boy? An actual glare? Well, that's a start. Of course, a real man would take a swing at me, but that would be too much to hope for, wouldn't it?"

Jeremy put a hand between my shoulder blades and steered me toward the car.

"Not even going to ask what I want?" Malcolm said.

"We know what you want," Peter said, struggling to throw some bravado into his voice. "Me. But you're too late. You caught me off guard once. It won't happen again."

"Of course it will. You're a child. I could take you down any time. Could have done it back there if I'd wanted. Bet you're wondering why I didn't, aren't you?"

"I know why you didn't," Jeremy said as he unlocked the car. "You could justify killing him quickly, and argue self-defense, but once Clayton and I became involved, things became more complicated. Kill Peter under those circumstances, and the Pack will wonder why you carried out his punishment yourself, instead of bringing him in. So now you're falling back on plan B—demanding that I turn him over so you can bring him to Dominic."

"You think you're pretty clever, don't you?"

"No, but you asked what I thought, so I told you. Clayton? Peter? In the car, please."

"He's not going—" Malcolm began.

Jeremy turned to his father. "I called Dominic this afternoon. He knows I'm with Peter, and that I want to negotiate his return to the Pack. If you bring Peter in and tell Dominic what he did, then he has to order Peter's death. Given the choice between negotiating a pardon and killing a former Pack member, which do you think he'd prefer?"

"You're bluffing," Malcolm said. "You haven't called him."

Malcolm searched his son's face for some sign that he was lying but Jeremy's shuttered expression gave nothing away.

Malcolm rolled his shoulders and leaned against the car. "You know you're being played, don't you?"

"By Peter? No, I told him to call—"

"I don't mean Peter. I'm not a fool, boy. I know why you're doing all this. You think it'll help you weasel in closer to Dominic, prove what a good Alpha you'd make."

"I—"

"You think you're being clever, proving yourself to Dominic, taking over his duties. But the truth is, you're being played and you don't even know it. Sure, Dominic might name you as his choice. In the end, though, that doesn't mean piss-all and we both know it. Even *he* knows it. So why is he going through all this trouble, making the Pack think he wants you to succeed him? Because it buys him time. No one seriously considers you Alpha material, so no one's going to push for Dominic to step down and let you take over. He trains you as Alpha, and he looks like he's doing his job, planning for the future, but the truth is, he's just securing his place for another ten years."

"No one's playing me," Jeremy said softly.

Malcolm threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, but you're a fool. A fool twice in one night, too. That must be a record. You know, I could have killed your boy out there. You led him right to me, and then you couldn't even protect him."

Jeremy flinched. He tried to cover the reaction, but couldn't.

Malcolm smiled. "Piss-poor guardian you are. Hell, he protects you better than you protect him."

Jeremy saw me still standing beside him and waved me into the car.

"He's not moving until you're safe in that car," Malcolm said. "You should have seen him when I had you down—a regular little ball of rage, all fangs and fury. He's got it. Whatever you lack, boy, he's got in spades. You know that?"

Jeremy met his father's gaze. "Yes, I do." He rumbled my hair, a rare show of affection, and nudged me toward the car. "I'm getting in now, Clay. Go on."

"I want to train him," Malcolm said.

Jeremy stopped, hand on the door, and slowly turned to his father. "You want . . .?"

"You heard me. I want to train the boy. Teach him how to fight."

Jeremy stood there, struggling to make sense of this request. I saw the sense, though. As much as I loathed Malcolm, I saw the benefit in what he was offering. Jeremy and Antonio had taught me a lot, but after that night, I knew it wasn't enough. If I wanted to protect Jeremy against Malcolm, there was only one person who could teach me how to do it: Malcolm himself. As for why he was offering, even at that age I knew he had to have an ulterior motive, probably to turn me against Jeremy, but that would never—*could* never—happen.

"Let him train me," I said.

Jeremy blinked and, for a split second, I feared I'd made a horrible mistake, that even accepting Malcolm's offer would make Jeremy doubt my allegiance. But after that first blink of surprise, he gave a slow nod.

"Let me take Peter back to Dominic," Jeremy said. "What happened here—all of it—is never mentioned again. In return, I'll allow you to train Clayton. But only under my supervision."

"Fine by me," Malcolm said. "Who knows, you might even learn something." He looked down at me. "I'll see you back at Stonehaven then, Clay. Make sure you rest up. We have a lot of work ahead of us, unlearning all those bad habits."

He smiled, clapped me on the back, then turned and strolled off into the night.

Angst

Malcolm kept his end of the bargain and we kept ours. Jeremy negotiated Peter's return to the Pack. Dominic never found out what happened in Los Angeles, and if he ever suspected anything, he pretended otherwise. As Jeremy had said, given the choice between reuniting a young werewolf with the Pack or executing him, Dominic would pick the former any day.

So Malcolm taught me to fight. I still took the majority of my lessons from Jeremy and Antonio because they were around more often, but when Malcolm was at Stonehaven, he trained me every afternoon, from lunch until dinner. His motivation? Well, that wasn't immediately apparent. He didn't use the lessons as an opportunity to mock Jeremy; although Jeremy was always present, Malcolm acted as if he wasn't there. Nor did Malcolm use the lessons to woo me from Jeremy's side in any overt way. He was a harsh taskmaster and I often left my lessons exhausted and covered in bruises, but every bruise was earned in combat, and he never treated me in any way that could ever be interpreted as abusive.

One person who was never happy with the arrangement was Antonio. I'm sure he was put out by the insinuation that his teachings were less than perfect, but there was more to it than that. When Antonio had been a teenager, Malcolm had made him the same offer: to train him. Antonio had flat out refused. When Antonio found out Jeremy had agreed to let Malcolm train me, he hit the roof. Argued with Jeremy like I'd never heard them argue before, then stomped out the door, left Stonehaven and didn't return for nearly a month.

When he did return, he barreled in, found us in the study and lit into Jeremy as if he'd only just left.

"I can't believe you'd do that. After everything that son of a bitch has done to you, I cannot believe you'd let him near Clayton."

Jeremy laid down his book and looked up calmly. "I'm always there."

"And that makes it okay? Goddamn it, Jeremy, you're giving him what he wanted. *You're* his son. Not me. Not Clayton. If he can't accept you, that's his problem."

"So you think I'm offering up Clay as a substitute? Sacrificing him to placate my father?"

"Hell, no. Never. You want Clay to learn how to fight. I get that. But I can teach him and you can teach him, and he doesn't need some psycho—"

"Yes, he does. Malcolm is the best fighter we have, and that's what I want for Clay. To learn from the best so he can be the best, because the better he can fight, the less he'll have to."

"What?"

"You heard me. The better he can fight, the less he'll have to."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it says. If you want to stay for dinner, there's stew on the stove. Clay? Can you set the table, please?" He glanced at Antonio. "I managed to stash a few bottles of wine in the basement storage room, where Malcolm wouldn't find them. It's a beef stew, so red would be best, if you'd like to grab a bottle."

Antonio threw up his hands and stomped off to the basement.

So Malcolm continued to train me, and seemed happy enough to do it just for the sake of doing it, of having someplace to direct his energy when he was at Stonehaven. As the first year passed, his treatment of Jeremy changed too. Not that he treated him any better. Instead he began to extend his attitude toward Jeremy on the training grounds into our daily lives. He ignored him. Now and then, he couldn't resist tossing off a barb or an insult, but as time passed, he no longer seemed to take the pleasure in it that he once had and preferred to carry on as if Jeremy wasn't there, which suited us all just fine.

I started high school at thirteen. As concerned as Jeremy was about my social maturity, I think he was more concerned about me getting bored if I didn't find school challenging enough, so he applied to have me start a year early at a private school outside Syracuse. At first, the school balked. They didn't like to advance anyone that way, particularly someone who'd been home schooled. But, as Jeremy argued, having been born in January, I was only a few weeks younger than some other kids who would be starting ninth grade that fall. Still, they hemmed and they hawwed, and they put me through a whole battery of tests. Then they gave me an IQ test. When they didn't believe the results of the first one, they administered a second. Then they declared I was indeed ready for high school.

School wasn't nearly the hell I'd expected. Yes, I'd rather have stayed home with Jeremy, but this gave me the opportunity to further study human behavior and develop my public face. I even made a few friends—not the "come on over after school and we'll listen to my 45s" kind of friends, but school chums, classmates I could eat lunch with or team up with for joint projects. These friends invariably came from the fringes of teenage society, the kids who were too smart, too overweight, too homely or just too odd to fit in. With these outsiders, I could feel some kinship, even if they weren't werewolves.

Gregory died when I was fourteen. Since his injury, he'd never regained his full physical strength and had always been more prone to illness than most werewolves. One night he went to bed and didn't wake up. Outside his family, Jeremy was the only one who seemed to grieve his passing.

The next landmark of my life came at fifteen, when I killed my first mutt. In the Pack, one's first mutt kill is considered a rite of passage, something to be celebrated with a night of drinking and carousing. I was too young for either drinking or the Pack's version of "carousing", which usually involved women. It didn't matter because I told no one that I'd passed this landmark, not even Nick. I kept it to myself because I didn't consider it an event worthy of commemoration. I wasn't proud of what I'd done. Nor was I ashamed of it. The need to kill trespassing mutts was an unavoidable fact of my life, and I accepted it as such, with no emotion either way.

It happened in late spring. Antonio and Nick had come up for the weekend. Nick and I were now old enough to stay home alone, so Antonio and Jeremy had gone to Syracuse for some drinking and . . . carousing, and we didn't expect them back before the wee hours of morning.

Nick and I spent the evening hanging out, talking—mostly him talking, mostly about girls. He'd snuck over a few copies of Playboy, and we went through those. I didn't really "get" it, but I played along with his enthusiasm. When it came to sex, I was a late bloomer. I'd begun filling out and putting on some muscle heft, helped by the weight set that Jeremy had bought for my fourteenth birthday. I'd also shot up a few inches. In the past year or so, I'd begun showing the first signs that, while I might never be as tall as Jeremy or as muscular as Antonio, I wouldn't be the runt of the litter forever.

In other areas of puberty, though, I lagged behind. My voice only cracked when I lost my temper and shouted loudly enough to strain my vocal cords, and the only excess hair I had came when I Changed. Sex and desire were things I understood only as hypothetical concepts. So, although I felt no physical reaction on seeing the Playboy centerfolds, I seconded Nick's opinion that they were "hot" and tried very hard to keep my attention off the articles, and on the pictorials.

After eating everything that Jeremy left out for us, and sampling his brandy, we headed up to my room to sleep. I waited until Nick drifted off, then slipped from bed, took my flashlight and sat in the corner to read. With Jeremy gone, I was the man of the house, and I didn't feel right falling asleep on the job. Anything could happen. And that night, something did.

When the clock downstairs struck midnight, a wolf's howl echoed the last few gongs. I leapt up, dropping my book and flashlight, and opened my window. The howl came again, from deep in our back woods. I knew that it was a mutt, not because I didn't recognize the voice, but because it was a howl of challenge, the call of a wolf who has ventured onto another's territory and dares him to do anything about it.

I knew I had to act fast. Jeremy and Antonio would be home any moment now. If they heard the howl, our weekend would be ruined. Antonio would insist on handling it, Jeremy would insist on defending his own territory, and any way that it ended, no one would be happy. Better for me to take care of it first.

Two things told me I was relatively safe taking on this challenge alone. First, the wolf's cry held a quaver that said he was getting on in years. Second, coming at midnight and howling in the woods rather than appearing at our front door meant he wasn't all that sure he wanted anyone to answer his challenge. This was an old wolf making his last stand, maybe ill or otherwise close to death, hoping to die doing something he'd never dared do in life—take on a Pack wolf.

So I leapt out the window, raced into the forest and Changed. Then I tracked him and killed him. It was, as I'd suspected, not a difficult task, and not one that requires any further detail. I killed him, I buried his body, and I went back to bed.

That winter, I killed my second mutt. This time, the mutt presented himself at our door, so I couldn't intercede before Jeremy found out. As usual, Jeremy gave him until midnight to leave town. The mutt only laughed and said he'd be in the back forest, ready whenever Jeremy got up the nerve to take him on. I knew he wouldn't leave. And I knew Jeremy would give him until midnight. So, on pretense of working out, I went down to the basement, then climbed out a window and zipped to the forest. I Changed, lured the mutt away from the place he'd promised to meet Jeremy, and killed him. This time wasn't nearly as easy as the last, but I managed it. I stashed his body far from the assigned meeting place, and downwind

so Jeremy wouldn't find it, then hurried back to the house. Late that night, long after Jeremy had decided the mutt had fled, I returned and buried the corpse.

Two mutts within six months was unusual. Normally, we saw an average of one per year. A third one showed up just a few months after the second. This one, fortunately, did take Jeremy's advice and left town. But that still meant three mutts in a year. Something was wrong. Yet because Jeremy knew nothing of the first one, he thought we'd only had two mutts in just over a year, both of whom had left without a fight, so he saw no cause for alarm.

When I hit sixteen, puberty finally kicked in, bringing with it a problem far more complicated than the killing of trespassing mutts. I began to feel the first tugs of sexual desire, and while that's probably confusing for any kid, my situation only made it ten times worse. With no females of my own species, my body fixed those desires on the nearest approximation it could find—human girls. And that might have been fine, had my wolf-brain not jumped in with demands of its own. On the matter of sex, the wolf in me was clear: I needed to find—not a casual sexual partner—but a life partner, a mate. I would accept a human mate, since it seemed I had little choice in the matter, but it had to be someone I wanted to spend my life with. Yet there were few humans I could envision spending an entire weekend with, let alone a lifetime. So here I was stuck. I looked around, and saw no potential life partner, and the wolf in me would accept nothing less.

That September was one of the worst times of my teen years.

I always arrived at school early so I could run a twenty laps around the track, wear off excess energy before beginning my day. That was be my only chance to get some physical activity in before I went home and worked out. I didn't take gym class. We were supposed to, but Jeremy had managed to convince the school that my time was better spent where my obvious assets lay—in academics. With the help of a sympathetic teacher, who agreed that I needed to be challenged academically, I was already on the fast-track to college, skipping any "extra" classes like gym or art so I could graduate a year early.

That morning, the football field was flooded, so the team had to move their before-school practice to the track field. I ignored them, but the disinterest wasn't mutual. After a few minutes, I noticed the football coach watching me more than he was watching his team. When I headed to the stands to grab my towel, he came over.

"What's your name, son?" he asked.

I wiped the towel over my face. "Clayton."

"You're a student here, aren't you? I know I've seen you around."

I shrugged and kept drying off.

"You took those hurdles pretty good. You on the track team?"

I shook my head, grabbed a clean shirt from my bag, and peeled off my sweat-sodden one. The coach's gaze slid over my upper body.

"How much are you lifting?" he asked.

Another shrug, and I yanked on my shirt.

"Not very talkative, are you, son?"

I hefted my bag. "I gotta go."

He stepped in my path. I tensed, but pushed it back. He was a teacher, and I knew I had to respect him, but it was something that I'd been having more and more difficulty faking in the last year or so.

"I want you to try out for the team," he said.

I swung my bag into my other hand. "What team?"

Someone laughed. I turned to see a half-dozen members of the football team behind me, shifting into a semicircle, as if blocking my escape route. Whether they knew what they were doing wasn't clear—humans are notoriously ignorant of their body language—but that didn't keep me from interpreting it as a trap. The hairs on my neck rose.

"The football team, son," the coach said. "I want you to try out for the football team."

I knew I should take the high road, like Jeremy would, quietly demur with an excuse and a thank you. But, as I said, I was finding this increasing hard to do. I thought of a polite excuse, but instead what came out was:

"Not interested."

A rumble rose from the boys behind me. Even the coach stiffened, his good humor sliding away.

"Not interested?" he said. "This is the *football* team, boy, not the goddamned chess club. If we want you on the team, you join. It's a little something called school spirit."

I said nothing, but my sneer answered for me.

The coach's face went bright red. "Get to the office, boy. Now."

I wound up with a week's detention for being disrespectful to a teacher.

If that wasn't bad enough, the coach started cornering me in the halls. If I tried out, he said, there was a good chance I could make running back, maybe even quarterback, and didn't every sixteen-year-old boy want to be quarterback? Another student overheard, and ran off to inform the current running back and quarterback, neither of whom was too pleased with the prospect. So then I had *them* harassing me. Finally, I snapped. As hard as Jeremy might teach me to turn the other cheek, there was a limit to how long I could do it.

The next time they challenged me to a skirmish match, I accepted. Fortunately, no bones were broken. The wounds to the quarterback's ego were another matter, though and, instead of getting him off my back, I'd only pissed him off more. I knew I couldn't fight them—that football skirmish had been pushing

it enough—so I was stuck swallowing their insults, and accepting their shoves, and getting more miserable with each passing day. Soon even my school friends were avoiding me, for fear of catching the fallout.

From there, it only got worse. On Thursday, while racing home to make sure Jeremy didn't find out about my detention, I got a speeding ticket.

Jeremy had bought me a car for my sixteenth birthday, so I wouldn't have to endure the school bus any longer, and this was my third ticket so far. If you worked it out, the number of times I sped versus the number of tickets I received, I was doing pretty good. But Jeremy didn't see it that way. Nor did he understand my view of traffic laws. I understood why speed limits existed, but I saw no reason why they should apply to me. I was an excellent driver. With my enhanced senses and reflexes, I could drive eighty miles an hour and still swerve before hitting even a squirrel. I made my own money, transcribing notes for Jeremy's growing translation business, and I paid for my tickets, so what was the big deal? Threatening to take away my car was wrong. Wrong and unfair.

That ticket only added fuel to a fire that had been blazing all month. The source of that fire? College. Having condensed my studies, I was due to graduate next June, which meant I was supposed to head off to college in a year. I had no problem with going to college. *I wanted* to go. I enjoyed learning and I knew that I needed a very good education if I hoped to find a career that I could pursue from home, like Jeremy did.

Now Jeremy *had not* gone to college. He'd wanted to, and expected to, but then his grandfather died and he'd been forced to start working to pay the bills. So naturally Jeremy wanted me to go to college and, as I said, I agreed. The problem came with the question of "where." The school had already hinted to Jeremy that I could probably get a scholarship pretty much anywhere I wanted to go. So what did he do? Started gathering information on colleges, to decide where *I should* want to go.

I knew damned well where I was going: Syracuse University. Jeremy shot down that idea as if it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. I'd already decided my major—my early studies of human society had led me to a high school anthropology course, and I'd decided that was what I wanted to pursue. As Jeremy pointed out, Syracuse did not have a topnotch anthropology program. So I had to go elsewhere. Well, I wasn't. I just wasn't. I was staying home, and going to Syracuse University. Move away to school? Wasn't happening.

On Friday, battered down by my hellish week at school, I returned to Stonehaven, seeking solace, and found Jeremy filling out a form to request more information from the University of Chicago. I hit the roof. Broke a chair and a couple of plates. Said a few things I shouldn't have. Then I stormed out the back door to the woods, and stayed there until midnight, which I figured was long enough to make my point.

When I walked into the house, I passed the study, saw Jeremy in there, and kept going. He followed me.

"Your bag is by the front door. Check it and make sure I haven't left anything out."

My heart jammed into my throat. I didn't turn. "Bag?"

"You're spending the weekend with Dominic. I have business to do in New York."

I turned and scowled. "What business?"

"Nothing important," he said. "Check your bag and we'll leave."

He headed back into the study. I resisted the urge to follow. What business could he have in New York? He never took meetings in person, never needed to.

He was sending me away. Taking a break from me, just like he did with Malcolm. I suspected that was the reason behind his sudden vigor to find an out-of-state college for me: to rid himself of a boy who'd turned from a devoted child to a troublesome teen.

And what if he did have business in New York? What kind of business? Why wouldn't he discuss it with me? There'd been a lot of that lately, closed door phone conversations that ended the moment I walked in. He didn't trust me. He still thought of me as a child. Well, he treated me like a child, didn't he? Deciding where I should go to school, threatening to take away my car, arranging my weekends for me. It was wrong. Wrong and unfair.

Without checking my bag, I grabbed it and stormed off to the truck.

Misunderstood

I couldn't believe Nick had done this to me.

It was Saturday night. A special Saturday night planned by Nick to lift me out of my black mood, because that's the kind of friend he was. Thoughtful, considerate, generous . . . the best friend a guy could want.

I scowled into the night, took a swig of my beer and dumped the rest over the side of the deck.

It had been a great plan, one that made me regret every thoughtless thing I'd ever done to him. We'd start with a movie. He knew I liked movies, and there was nothing better to get my mind off my horrible week than a good action-packed thriller, full of life-or-death dilemmas that would make my problems look laughable. After the show, we'd go out for pizza. Then we'd go somewhere else and have more pizza. Then we'd head back to the house, and Nick would try Changing. In the last few months Nick had begun showing the first signs of impending werewolf-hood—increased hunger, heightened senses and greater strength. We'd been trying to rush the process along with practice sessions, where we'd go into the woods and I'd coach him. So far, it hadn't worked—and everyone in the Pack swore it never would—but we kept trying.

Right after dinner, we left the estate. Like me, Nick had his own car. That's common for Pack boys—not because we need wheels to head out into the country for an urgent Change or to make a speedy getaway, but just because every teenage boy wants a car, and the Pack spoiled us, knowing our lives would be difficult enough later.

When Nick realized we were too early for the movie, he decided to stop off at a friend's place. His friend's parents were gone for the weekend, and he was having a party. There are few things in life I hate more than parties—if you want to scare me with visions of hell, just tell me it's eternity squeezed into a small room full of people drinking, shouting, sweating and playing music loud enough to shatter eardrums. But Nick had planned an entire evening for me; the least I could do was give him the first half-hour of it.

So I went to the party without complaint. Then Nick found out they had a beer keg, and that a girl he'd been pursuing for the last month was there . . . without her boyfriend.

Two and a half hours later, I was standing on the back porch, alone, glowering into the dark yard, and wondering where my life had gone so horribly wrong.

When the patio door slid open behind me, I hoped it was Nick. One sniff of perfume, though, and I knew better. Without turning, I sent off another hope: that the girl behind me had come out for a cigarette or some fresh air, not because she'd seen me through the window and decided I looked lonely. In the ninety minutes I'd been out here, two other girls had come out, trying to cheer up my night, and only making it more unbearable.

I kept my gaze fixed on the yard, and slumped forward against the railing, leaving my back to her.

"Nice night," she said.

I nodded.

She moved up beside me. "You're Nick's friend, aren't you?"

I made a noise in my throat. Had she been a wolf, she'd have interpreted it for what it was: a polite "leave me alone."

"Hmmm?" she said, billowing perfume as she leaned around me. "I didn't catch that."

I shrugged and moved away.

"Hey, I asked you a question," she said.

"Yeah, I'm with Nick."

I headed down the steps to the yard.

"Hey!" she called after me. "I'm talking to you."

I kept walking. She hurried after me, and caught my hand. When I shook her off, she only grinned, as if it was a challenge.

"Do you have a name, Nick's friend?"

"Yeah. Not interested."

She blinked, eyes snapping with outrage. "Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Just go back inside, okay?"

"Is that an order?"

"Just go—"

"Hey!" someone shouted from the porch.

I looked up to see a tall, muscular boy bearing down at us. One glance at his scowl, and I knew he was the girl's boyfriend. My evening was complete.

I turned to walk away. The boy grabbed my shoulder and whipped me around. I shrugged him off and struggled not to return his glare of challenge.

"What do you think you're doing with my girl?" he demanded, bringing his face down to mine.

I held my ground and met his eyes. "Nothing."

"Bullshit," the girl said. "I just came out here for a smoke, and he grabbed me. Tried to cop a feel."

I snorted. "Not likely."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" the boy snapped.

The look I turned on the girl answered for me. The boy grabbed for me again, but I threw up my hands and knocked his aside before they could touch me.

"Oooh, tough guy," the boy said. "You asking for something, tough guy?"

"Yeah, I'm asking for you to leave me alone, take your girlfriend and go back inside."

"Ah'm askin' fah ya . . .?" The boy screwed up his face, exaggerating and mangling my drawl. "Is that English? What rock did you crawl from under, talking like that? Who brought you here?"

"Nick," the girl piped up. "Nick Sorrentino."

"Well, then, I think I should talk to ol' Nicky—"

"Leave Nick out of this," I said.

"You gonna make me?"

When I said nothing, he grabbed me by the shirtfront. I swept my arms up fast, knocking his hands off me. He stumbled back, then caught his balance and rushed me. I didn't budge, just whipped out my hands, slammed them into his shoulders and sent him flying backward to the ground. Before he could get up, I stepped over him.

"Whoa!" a familiar voice yelled. "Whoa! Hold on!"

I looked up to see Nick running off the porch, pushing past the small group of onlookers who'd gathered. He waved me off the guy, and I did as he asked, slowly backing away, then strode to the far rear corner of the yard.

I waited, with my back to everyone, while Nick sorted it out. When I heard him walk over, I turned, fully expecting an apology for the way he'd abandoned me. Instead, his eyes blazed with fury.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he hissed, bathing me in beer fumes. "I bring you to a party and

you pull this shit? In front of my friends?"

"I didn't pull anything. That girl came out here—"

"And you blew her off, right? Couldn't be nice about it. It's a girl, Clay. Any normal guy—oh, wait, but you're not a normal guy, are you? You don't even try to be normal, that's the problem."

One of the partygoers on the deck shouted an insult in an exaggerated drawl. Nick winced and waited for the laughter to die down.

"See?" he said. "See? You gotta be different. Can't even bother talking normally. There's no reason why you keep that stupid accent—oh, wait, there is a reason. Because you don't want to sound like everyone else. You like being different, being an asshole, acting like you're too good for everyone. Well, let me tell you something, Clay—"

I brushed past him and headed for the front gate.

"Hey!" Nick shouted. "I'm not done!"

When I didn't stop, he jogged after me.

"You walk out that door, and you're walking all the way home. I'm not coming after you."

I pushed open the gate and strode through.

I had money for a cab, but no idea how to summon one from a residential neighborhood. I assumed that if I called the operator, they could put me in touch with a local cab company, but first, I had to find a pay-phone. So I wandered up and down the streets, telling myself I was looking for a phone, but I'm sure I could have walked right past one and not noticed. What did it matter? Where would I go? Nobody wanted me around. I could probably wander the streets all night and no one would even notice I was gone.

An hour or so passed. When a horn blasted behind me, I jumped, expecting Nick and ready to blast him back, or maybe ignore him and keep walking. But it wasn't Nick. It was, however, a familiar car, driven by someone with a familiar face.

"Now my week really is complete," I muttered under my breath, and walked faster.

The car revved up beside me. I thought of taking off across the lawns, but that would be fleeing, and this was one person I refused to give that satisfaction. So I stopped and waited for him to roll down the passenger window.

"What?" I said.

Malcolm laughed. "There's a greeting to warm the heart."

"Go away."

"That one's even better." He leaned out the window. "Not even going to ask what I'm doing here?"

"No."

I did wonder, but given what I knew of Malcolm, if he'd said his pet demon told him where to find me, I wouldn't have doubted it. As I'd discover later, the answer was far more ordinary. Dominic had summoned him to the estate to discuss a mutt problem and, shortly after he'd arrived, Nick had called, wondering whether anyone had heard from me. Malcolm found out where the party was, made an excuse to leave, and came looking for me.

"Having a rough time of it lately, I hear," Malcolm said. "Want to talk about it?"

"With you?" I snorted. "No."

"I don't see anyone else offering."

That arrow hit its mark. I strode away. Malcolm kept pace beside me with the car, leaning into the passenger seat so he could talk.

"Let's see if I can guess what the problem is," he said. "No one understands you."

I kept walking.

"Now I might not be the person you'd choose to talk to about it, but I might be the best person there is. *I* understand you."

"No, you don't."

"Ah, you might be surprised. I know you've killed two mutts at Stonehaven. Bet I'm the only one who knows that."

I stopped, wondering how he could know this when I hadn't told anyone. Again, pet demons whispering in his ear was a damned fine explanation, but I quickly thought of a simpler one.

"You found the bodies," I said.

"Found where you buried them. You have to work on your technique, Clay. It might fool Jeremy, but it won't fool me."

"And now you're going to tell him."

"Is that what you think? Nah, I wouldn't tattle on you. You're a good kid. You want to kill mutts for Jeremy, all the power to you. When I found that first one, I thought, 'well, the mutt was pretty old, it wasn't a tough kill.' But then I found the second, and I was proud of you. Damned proud of you."

"I don't want—"

"I know, you don't want my admiration, but you have it. You've earned it. Now, in case you haven't noticed, we're having a problem with these mutts at Stonehaven, and I think maybe you and I should talk about it."

I hesitated.

"Do you know why they're coming around?" he asked.

I shrugged as if I didn't care, but I'm sure he could see in my eyes that I did.

"Well, I know why, and I think you should, too," he said. "Climb on in and we'll go someplace where we can talk."

The mutt problem *had* been weighing on my mind. This wasn't the person I wanted to discuss it with, but right now, Malcolm was the only one who wanted to talk to me at all. So I nodded and opened the car door.

Problem

I wasn't worried about Malcolm driving me to a dark alley and breaking my neck. Wouldn't happen. Not that I could outfight him; I couldn't—not yet. But I'd lived with Malcolm long enough to understand how he operated. If he wanted me dead, he'd have ended my life that night outside Los Angeles. Training me for a few years, lowering my defenses and then killing me might seem like a clever plan, but Malcolm could never pull it off. He was a creature of impulse, of brawn and might, not without the cunning to conceive of a long-term plan, but lacking the patience to see it to the end.

Malcolm drove to a town on the other side of the Sorrentinos's country estate. He pulled into a parking lot in the downtown core.

"Here?" I said.

He shrugged. "Near here. A little place I go when things get crowded at Dominic's. Come on."

He led me to an unmarked door wedged between a dry cleaner and a convenience store. I stepped inside and found myself nose to chest with a massive bald man. When he saw Malcolm, he backed out of my face.

"Hey, Mal. Been a long time." He looked down at me. "Who's the kid?"

Malcolm put a hand on my shoulder. "This is Clayton. My boy."

"You got a son? You never told me you got a son."

"You never asked. Mind if I take him inside? Don't worry, he'll stick to root beer."

"Yeah, sure, take him in. Buy him a real beer if he wants it. No one's gonna care."

Malcolm led me into a small, dark bar, where the only music came from the clink of glasses and the occasional laugh. He steered me to a table at the back.

"You want a beer?" he asked as I sat down. "Smells like you've had one already, might as well make it two."

I shook my head.

"Soda?"

I shrugged.

He shook his head, went to the bar and returned with two mugs, one cola and the other beer. Before he could sit down, a red-haired woman in a faded tank top and frayed miniskirt slid over from another table.

"Malcolm," she said, and kissed his cheek. "You didn't call me."

"Do I ever?"

Her lips curved in a half-pout, then she saw me in the shadows and blinked.

"My son," Malcolm said before she could ask. "Clayton."

"Oooh," she squealed, the sound grating down my spine. "What a cutie. He must take after his momma."

"Ha-ha," Malcolm said. "I don't mean to be rude, Deedee—well, yes I do. Clear out. I'm spending time with my boy. He's had a rough day."

"I could make it better for him." Her gaze slid over me and she grinned. "End it with a bang."

I tugged my jacket tighter around me.

Malcolm shook his head. "Another time, Deedee. Clear out. Now."

She pouted and flounced away.

Malcolm sipped his beer. "So, what'd it feel like, killing your first mutt?"

I shrugged.

He leaned forward and his eyes glittered. "Don't give me that. It felt good, didn't it? Taking a life. Made you feel powerful."

I looked at him, and tried to figure out what he meant, but I couldn't.

"Not comfortable with it yet?" he said. "Sure, I understand that. Can't be easy when *he* tells you it's wrong. But it isn't wrong. You feel that, don't you? Taking a life isn't a crime, it's an act of power."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I needed information from him, so it seemed best to play along. I nodded and hoped that was enough.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "See? I do understand."

"About the mutts," I said. "Something's happening, isn't it? That's why there's more of them coming around."

"You don't know why? You're a bright boy, Clayton. If you think about it, I'm sure you'll realize you already know the answer. Why are more mutts coming to Stonehaven?"

Stonehaven. Of course. That was it. With my own problems, I'd overlooked the obvious clue to solving

this one. The mutts were coming only to Stonehaven. No one else in the Pack had reported an increase.

"You're sending them," I said. "You're testing me."

Malcolm's laugh startled the patrons at the next table. He shook his head and lowered his voice again. "Not bad, not bad at all. Wrong, but a good guess. I wouldn't do that to you, Clay. You're still too green to be facing mutts without backup. If I wanted to test you, I'd take you to the mutts, not send them to you. They're coming on their own. Think about it. Who lives at Stonehaven?"

I frowned. "We do. So? We've always lived—"

"Wait. Who lives there? You, Jeremy and me. Now most mutts don't know about you, so they're obviously coming to see Jeremy or me. Nothing new there but, as you said, something has changed. Something that makes them want to challenge Jeremy and me in particular."

I hesitated, then looked up sharply. "You're both potential Alphas. The mutts know that, don't they? That you want to be Alpha and Dominic seems to be backing Jeremy."

Malcolm nodded. "Good boy. Now why would they—?"

"Why would they want to challenge a potential Alpha?" I cut in, my brain racing ahead to fill in the blanks. "Because it's as close to an Alpha as they can get. They can't challenge Dominic. Even if they won, the Pack would hunt them down. But they could challenge an Alpha candidate. That'd be the next best thing, wouldn't it?"

"And an opportunity that doesn't come around more than once or twice in a mutt's life. If this stretches on much longer, we'll have every mutt on the continent getting up the nerve to try his luck."

I slumped into my seat. *It would* stretch on much longer. We all knew that. With Dominic showing no signs of giving up his position, this waiting game could continue for years. Years of having mutts on our doorstep, trespassing on our territory, threatening Jeremy.

When I looked at Malcolm, I knew he'd read my thoughts in my face as clearly as if I'd said the words.

"There is a way to stop it," he said. "If Jeremy tells Dominic he doesn't want to be Alpha, he'd be out of the race. The mutts would hear about that, and they'd stop coming after him. Now, they'd still want to take a shot at me, but most of them know I don't spend much time at home. So Stonehaven would be safe again. Jeremy would be safe again."

Malcolm really needed to work on his finesse. I'd have to be a moron not to see through this ploy. Play on my fears for Jeremy, and I'd use my influence with Jeremy to persuade him to drop out of the Alpha race. Like *I had* any influence with Jeremy. He wasn't even going to let me influence where I went to college.

I said none of this to Malcolm. Instead, I nodded and he settled into his chair, smiling, pleased with his success. In a way, he had succeeded. I now realized that Jeremy was in danger, and would continue to be in danger as long as he was running for Alpha. So how would I deal with that? By removing the source of the danger. To do that, I didn't need to persuade him not to challenge Malcolm for Alpha. As angry as I was with him right then, I still knew he'd make a good Alpha, and I planned to do everything in my power to make sure he got what I knew he wanted. No, what I had to do was stop the mutts from coming. But how?

I told Malcolm I wanted to either meet up with Nick or catch a cab to the estate so that I didn't return to the house with him, and worry Jeremy. The truth was, I wanted to get out of his company as quickly as possible, and I wanted time by myself to work on this problem.

Malcolm dropped me off back where he'd picked me up. I started heading back toward the party. Once he'd driven out of sight, I resumed my aimless wandering. I'd figure out how to get to the estate later. For now, I needed to think.

How could I get mutts to stop coming to Stonehaven? I had to do something to make them stay away. As I walked, I remembered Jeremy's "riddle" to Antonio, his explanation for why he was letting Malcolm train me. If I was a good enough fighter, I wouldn't need to fight. Not a riddle at all, but a logical fact, one that only now made sense. When you reached the top of your game, fewer and fewer people cared to take you on. Yes, mutts came to Stonehaven looking for a fight with Malcolm, the Pack's top fighter. Yet mutts did the same to other Pack wolves, picking the one they thought was in their league.

On average, fewer mutts came to Malcolm than to Antonio or Wally Santos, who were considered the next best fighters in the Pack. Most mutts aren't suicidal—they challenge the best Pack wolf whom they think they have a shot at beating—and Malcolm was more than most cared to handle.

Outside those few formal challenges, mutts almost never picked a fight with Malcolm. When a less experienced Pack wolf, like Stephen Santos, traveled, he always had to be careful. Technically mutts weren't supposed to hold territory but Dominic didn't like to bother with mutts any more than necessary, so many settled in cities and defended them against all comers. If Stephen passed through a city that a mutt considered *his* territory, Stephen was in for a fight. When Malcolm came to town, though, all but the stupidest mutts decided it was time for a vacation.

What I had to do then was make sure mutts knew that, to challenge Jeremy, they had to get through me first. If I was a formidable enough fighter, few would care to bother. Great plan. Only one problem. Such a reputation took years, maybe decades, to build. I didn't have that much time. I needed to stop these mutts soon, before the campaign for Alpha gained momentum. To do that, I had to cheat my way to a reputation. Instead of fighting dozens of battles, I needed to do it with one or two, to do something that would fly through the rumor mill and make every mutt in the country decide he didn't want to tangle with me. How would I do that? I had no idea.

I heard someone shout, but was too engrossed in my thoughts to look. When footsteps sounded behind me, I wheeled, fists going up.

"Whoa!" Nick said, backpedaling. "I thought you heard me call you."

I shook my head, turned and continued walking. He jogged beside me.

"Okay, you're mad," he said. "I don't blame you. I was a total jerk."

It took a moment for me to remember what he was talking about. When I did, I brushed it off with a muttered "it's okay" and returned to my thoughts.

"I had too much to drink, and then Becky's boyfriend showed up and she took off with him, and then I walked out to the backyard, saw you standing over Mike, and I lost it. I know you hate parties. I didn't

mean to be there that long and I'm sorry."

Another mumbled "it's okay."

"I've been driving around for hours looking for you. It's too late to catch a show, but we could get pizza. Do you want pizza?"

I shook my head, still walking.

Nick exhaled loudly. "Shit, you really are mad. Okay, okay, well, at least come back to the car with me. Please?"

I stopped and blinked, returning to reality.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Let's go."

I turned and started back for the car.

"You sure you don't want pizza?" Nick said, hurrying up beside me. "There's this great—"

"Pizza's fine. I'm just trying to work out a problem."

"Oh, well, okay, then. Maybe I can help."

I shook my head. "Not your kind of problem." I paused. "But thanks . . . for offering."

He grinned. "So we're square?"

"No. You owe me pizza, a movie and your first Change. Then we'll be square."

Another grin. "The first tonight, the second tomorrow and the third soon. Real soon, I hope."

I didn't come up with a plan that night. Or that weekend. Or that month. This was one problem that required serious deliberation. That would take time.

Circumstances

My life swung out of its rough patch soon after that weekend. Jeremy shelved the college debate, which gave me time to cool down and see that I'd overreacted, been too quick to jump to the conclusion that he was getting rid of me. Old fears die hard, I suppose.

In trying to send me off to college he only wanted what he always wanted for me: the best. In this case, that meant the best education possible, and the best opportunity to gain experience living in the human world. I still had no intention of leaving Stonehaven next year, but I realized that if I wanted to stay, I needed to stop shouting and throwing things, and come up with a logical argument.

So I set to work researching the matter and within a few weeks developed a line of attack—verbal, non-confrontational attack. After earning my undergrad degree, I wanted to go to graduate school, a plan Jeremy fully endorsed. My goal was a career in anthropology research, and I needed a Ph.D. for that. At

that level, though, no one really cared where you'd taken your undergrad courses. It was the advanced degrees that counted. Since I had no intention of spending seven years living away from Jeremy and the Pack, it made the sense for me to reserve the 'good' schools for my grad degrees. As well, that would give me a few years to get accustomed to college life before I ventured out onto my own.

When I was ready, I argued my case to Jeremy. He listened, he asked questions and then agreed to think about it for a few days. Then he came back with a decision. As long as I promised to go to a top-tier school for my graduate degrees, I could attend undergrad classes in Syracuse.

Nick had his first change at the end of October. Although Jeremy and I had prepared him as best we could, I'm sure it wasn't easy. Yet if it was any less wondrous than he expected, he never let on, never complained.

In the past few years, the question of Alpha succession had gone from back-room mumbling to heated debate, and I'm sure that whenever Dominic walked into a room and heard conversation stop dead, he knew exactly what was being discussed. He had now formally turned over all youth training to Jeremy. He'd also put Jeremy in charge of the Legacy—the Pack history book. This latter duty I'm sure he was glad to hand off, and no one else was clamoring for the job, but it still sent a clear message. These were Alpha duties. If Dominic was passing them off to Jeremy, everyone took that to mean that, any day now, Dominic would officially endorse Jeremy as his choice of successor.

Did that mean Jeremy would be the next Alpha? Not necessarily. An Alpha has the right to back a Pack brother as his successor, but when it came to choosing a new Alpha, the process was more democratic. Everyone in the Pack endorsed a candidate, and the one with the most power behind him won. Right now, Jeremy had only Antonio squarely in his corner. Although Jorge, Nick and I also supported Jeremy's ascension, we were still considered junior members of the Pack, so our votes carried little weight.

For now, it didn't matter. Dominic wasn't going anywhere. When Malcolm "accidentally" swiped the first bite of meat after a Pack deer hunt, Dominic trounced him. The battle was closer than Dominic might have liked, but he still won, proving he still deserved to be Alpha.

That winter I finally hit on a plan to stop mutts from coming to Stonehaven. It wasn't a simple scheme. It required planning—lots of planning, and lots of research on subjects that weren't readily available in the local library.

By the time I felt ready to carry out my plan, it was spring. The next problem, though, was that I needed a specific set of circumstances, an uncommon set of circumstances. My requirements for the mutt himself weren't stringent. I didn't want one who was too young and inexperienced, or too old and feeble. Other than that, my only stipulation was that he be none too bright. That last one was pretty much a given with any mutt who showed up at Stonehaven. Clever mutts looking to challenge a Pack wolf devised a way to bump into him away from his property, where the drive to defend territory would be weaker. Only the ones who didn't have the brains to think up a way to corner a Pack wolf off-territory came directly to the source.

Over the next six months, two mutts showed up at Stonehaven. Neither fit my needs, so I killed them quickly, disposed of the bodies and continued to wait. Winter came. Another mutt showed up, but those circumstances didn't suit my plan either. That time, Jeremy met the mutt first, and had to deal with it himself. I decided then that I couldn't wait for my set of circumstances to occur naturally. I needed to create them myself.

September came and college began. It took time for me to adjust. Change is never easy for me, and something like this, being inundated with new faces, new schedules, new expectations, threw me off balance, making me edgy and moody. Two weeks into the semester, a teacher scheduled me for a 5:30 PM conference, which totally screwed up my routine. By the time I drove back from Syracuse, it was after seven. I'd meant to grab a sandwich at the cafeteria to tide me over to dinner, but was so eager to get home that I forgot.

I arrived at Stonehaven starving. I parked and bolted for the door, certain dinner would be waiting for me. Instead I found Jeremy engrossed in a new painting. The frozen Shepherd's Pie he'd put into the oven was still frozen because he'd been so distracted by his work that he'd forgotten to turn it on. So I blew up. Accused him of being thoughtless and insensitive to my needs. A shitty thing to say—and laughably untrue—but I was hungry.

I stormed to the kitchen, grabbed the makings of a sandwich, then decided it was too much work to assemble one and wolfed down the components separately. When my stomach was full, I knew I'd been out of line with Jeremy. I also knew that, given my recent mood swings, if I tried to say I was sorry, I was liable to turn the apology into another fight. So I fixed Jeremy a sandwich and dropped it off outside his studio door with a note saying I'd gone for a walk.

Once outside, I debated working off some energy with a run, but was too edgy to Change, so I wandered the forest, mentally working through an essay I needed to write this week. I was in the midst of composing my thesis statement when a movement in the trees ahead made me stop short. It was almost nine now, and dark. Though I had good night vision, with no moon overhead to help, I could only make out the shape of a tall, dark-haired man. As proof of my distracted sense of mind, I never thought to sneak in for a sniff and a closer look. I assumed it was Jeremy and strode forward. When I stepped onto the path, the man wheeled. It wasn't Jeremy.

"Shit!" he said, jumping as he saw me. "What the hell—" He stopped, nostrils flaring, then blinked as he realized I wasn't some neighborhood kid trespassing in Stonehaven's woods. He squinted in the darkness. "Shit. You're Malcolm's kid, aren't you?"

"No," I said. "Jeremy's in the house, and he's not coming out so don't bother—"

"Nah, not Jeremy. The other one. The boy. The one Malcolm's been bragging about. So his phantom foster son isn't a phantom after all, huh? I figured it was bullshit, since no one's ever seen you."

"Nah, they see me. They just don't live to tell about it."

The mutt snorted and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, good one," he said, but a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes said he wasn't completely sure I was bluffing.

I sized up the mutt. Jeremy's age, decent physical condition. Yeah, he'd do. Now I just needed to persuade him to help me set up the circumstances I required.

"You know Nick Sorrentino?" I asked, circling the mutt and making him turn around to keep his eyes on me.

Another snort. "What is this? Small talk? I came here to fight, in case you didn't figure that out, kiddo."

"Nick Sorrentino," I repeated. "Do you know who he is?"

"Sure. Antonio's kid."

"He's a friend of mine."

"Bully for you."

I stopped circling and leaned against a tree, arms crossed. The mutt visibly relaxed.

"Nick's got this problem," I said. "Maybe you can help me solve it."

"What do I look like? Dear Abby? I can't solve—"

"Yeah, I think you can. See, here's Nick's problem. He's been a full werewolf for nearly a year now, but he's never fought a mutt. Never even been close to a fight. Antonio and Dominic won't let him."

The mutt sniffed. "Coddling the boy, like they do with Jorge. Figures."

"Well, that's where I'm hoping you can help. Nick wants a fight, and I want to give him one. Chance to fight the Alpha's grandson? A sweet deal for any mutt."

"You want me to fight Nick instead of you?" The mutt shook his head. "Uh-uh. Even if he's a Sorrentino, he's a pup with no notches on his belt. I'm beyond that. But Malcolm's protégé?" He grinned. "Now that might be a challenge worth winning."

"Sure it would, and I'm not trying to take it from you. Here's the deal. You want a shot at me, bring a friend for Nick. You do have friends, don't you?"

"Sure but—"

"I'm sure one of those friends isn't as experienced as you. He'd be happy for the chance to fight Nick. And he'd owe you one for setting it up."

The mutt paused, then peered at me. "You wouldn't be trying to get out of a fight, would—"

I pounced and knocked him to the ground, then jammed my forearm against his throat. "Do I look like I'm trying to blow off a fight?"

The mutt gasped. I eased back, but stayed on his chest.

"You're good," he wheezed.

For a moment, I wondered whether I'd miscalculated and scared him off, but then his eyes gleamed with the prospect of the bragging rights he'd earn by beating me. After all, I was just a kid. A decent fighter for my age, but an inexperienced, cocky pup nonetheless.

"Okay, sure," he said. "I know a couple of guys. Let's set something up."

So we did.

Legend

"A small fight?" Nick said, trailing down the path after me. "Just a small one."

"Yeah, sure, we'll just tell them 'hey, Nick wants a fight, but just a small one, so stop before you kill him please.'"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't," I said. I stopped to readjust my knapsack, then hoisted the hockey bag again.

"I can carry that," Nick said, reaching for the hockey bag.

I grunted a negative and swung it out of his reach. He didn't need to see what was in there. It certainly wasn't hockey equipment. This just happened to be the biggest bag I could find at the sporting goods store, and the one that would look least suspicious if someone saw me hauling it around in November.

"There's no such thing as a small fight," I said. "There are short fights and there are long fights, and either way you can get killed and that's not on the agenda for today. Telling them you want a fight was a ruse." I caught his look of confusion. "An excuse."

"But *Ido* want a fight."

"You'll get your chance soon enough. No need to go looking for one."

He swerved past me to open the door on the old wooden hunting cabin. I nodded my thanks and walked inside. It was empty, and had been for months, being off-season. Dozens of these cabins dotted the countryside around here. I'd scouted the area last month and found two possibilities. Had one been occupied, I'd have chosen the other. Both were at least a mile from the nearest house, meaning I'd have plenty of time to work, and clean up after my work, without fear of interruption.

"Do you want to go over it again?" I asked.

Nick shook his head.

"Okay, then go on outside and let me set up."

"I could help—"

"No," I said, and shoved him toward the door.

I'd arranged to meet the mutt and his friend at noon. The site was a half-mile from the cabin. Convenient, but not too close.

The next step was difficult. Mentally difficult. I had to cheat. No matter how senselessly violent werewolf fights may seem, they came with set rules of behavior, what human fighters might call "gentleman's rules." You couldn't sneak up from behind. You couldn't take three friends to fight one guy. You couldn't use weapons. It had to be a fair, one-on-one, open fight. But I couldn't do this. Not today. Break the rules was the only way to guarantee that my plan would succeed.

Nick and I broke the first rule by jumping the mutts on their way to the fight. We slipped downwind and nabbed them from behind. By catching them off-guard, we were able to knock them down, then gag and tie them. Every part of me cringed at the injustice of this, but I only had to remind myself of the alternative—a lifetime of battling trespassing mutts—and even my wolf-brain agreed that this was for the best. Territory had to be protected and, even if this wasn't the way a wolf would protect it, it was acceptable under the circumstances.

After we tied them up, I gave them each a half-dose of the sedative I'd swiped from Jeremy's medical supplies. It was enough to make them too groggy to struggle, but not too groggy to walk to the cabin.

Once at the cabin, Nick took the mutt he'd been supposed to fight, the newcomer, and tied him to a tree. I double-checked the knots, and gave him another partial dose of sedative, to put him to sleep. Then I took my mutt—the one who'd first come to challenge Jeremy—into the cabin.

I never took the gag from his mouth, and never said a word to him. There was nothing to say. He'd trespassed on our property, and he knew that the penalty for that might be death. The death he was about to receive, though, was a punishment far in excess of the crime. Again, that was a problem for me. I knew what had to be done, but I also understood the unfairness of it. All I could do, then, was to make sure he'd suffer no more than he would have if we'd fought. So, when we were in the cabin, I gave him the rest of the sedative dose, plus another half-shot. He was unconscious within minutes. Then I hoisted him onto the plastic-covered table, double checked the room, making sure all the plastic sheeting was still in place, and set to work.

It took two hours. A couple of times, I thought I wouldn't be able to finish. No, I wasn't overcome by horror or disgust at the reality of what I'd decided to do. I understand that, from a human point of view, maybe I should have been, but that wasn't a problem. This was a job that needed to be done, and because I knew the mutt felt nothing, it was no different than working with a corpse. To me, he was already dead. The problem was that I had to keep him alive, and that was a feat that required more medical skill than I possessed. As part of my research, I'd studied field guides for war medicine, so I had some idea how to cauterize the wounds I was inflicting, and keep him from bleeding out, but it wasn't easy.

Finally, the job was done. I pulled off the raincoat I'd donned, so the blood spatter wouldn't spook Nick, then headed outside.

By now, the other mutt was awake and struggling.

"Shit, that really did take a long time," Nick said. "What the hell were you doing in there?"

"I had to wait for him to wake up so I could talk to him first," I said. "And now I need to talk to this one. You remember the plan, right? I'm taking him inside and you're waiting out here."

"Sure, but wouldn't it be easier—"

"No."

"It'd be safer if there were two of us—"

I grabbed Nick's arm and pulled him aside, out of earshot of the other mutt. "You're not going inside, Nick. Not going in. Not looking in. You promised."

"Shit, what did you—?"

"I'm trying to protect our territory. That's all you need to know."

He glanced at the cabin, then at me. "Yeah. Okay."

I took a knife from my pocket and advanced on the other mutt. His eyes widened at the sight of the knife, but I only cut the ropes holding him to the tree. Then I dragged him to his feet and shoved him toward the cabin. He looked around, as if considering making a break for it, but could barely walk, let alone run. At the door, I glanced back once, to make sure Nick was staying outside, then went in and locked the door behind us.

I waited until the mutt finished emptying his stomach. The smell of vomit almost doused the stink of blood and burnt flesh. Almost.

"You sick son-of-a-bitch," he whispered, still doubled over. "How could you—?"

He puked again. I waited until the retching stopped.

"He came on my territory," I said quietly. "From now on, any mutt who comes on my territory is going to end up like this. If you want to be the last mutt to walk away alive, then there's something I need you do for me."

He shot upright. "I am not doing anything—"

I grabbed his hand. With a wrench, I forced it over the heart of the mutt on the table. The other mutt's eyes went round and he jerked back.

"He's alive? He's still alive? You kept him—!"

The mutt swung at me, lost his balance on the blood-slicked plastic sheeting, and skidded to the floor. I left him there, grabbed an axe from the pile of tools, then finished the job on the unconscious mutt.

"There," I said, turning to the one on the floor. "He's dead. I just wanted to show you that *I could* keep him alive. Think about that. I could do this to you, and let you live."

He lunged for my legs, but I grabbed the back of his shirt and swung him to his feet, then shoved him against the wall and held him there until his struggles stopped.

"Here's what I want you to do," I said. "I'm giving you a mission. The price for your life is this: you need

to pass on what you've seen. When you leave here, you're taking the first plane out of New York State. You're flying back to your friends and telling them what happened, every detail of it. You'll warn them that if they come here, this is what they can expect. Then, once you've told them, you'll find another mutt and tell him, and another, and tell him. If you don't—"

"You'll come after me," the mutt said between clenched teeth. His eyes blazed hate, but no amount of revulsion could cover the raw fear behind it.

"Yes, I'll come after you, but not just if you don't pass along the message. If anyone shows up here again, then I'll know you haven't done your job and I'll come after you."

"What?" he yelped. "I can't tell every last goddamned mutt in the world and even if I could, what's to say they'll listen to me?"

"If you tell the story right, they'll listen, and they'll do your job for you by passing it on."

"But what if they don't believe me? Shit, what person in their right mind could believe that someone would—?" His gaze swept the room, and he swallowed. "They won't believe me."

"Yes, they will." I dropped him, strode across the room and grabbed a handful of Polaroid shots. "If they don't, show them these."

"You took pictures? Jesus Christ! You're—you're—"

"Someone you don't ever want to meet again," I said.

I shoved the pictures into his pocket, and prodded him out the door.

And so the legend began. The mutt took my photos and took my tale and spread them as far as he could. The story snowballed, as all such stories do, and over the years I've heard dozens of versions of it, each more outrageous than the last. Yet I never deny any of them. If a mutt came up to me today and related the most sadistic exaggeration of the truth, I wouldn't deny it. Why should I? What I did was bad enough. If he thinks I'm capable of doing worse, why say otherwise? Sure, he'll go away thinking I'm the worst kind of depraved monster, but if it keeps him off our territory, that's all that matters.

According to the legend, that day was the last day any mutt ever set foot near Stonehaven. Is that true? Of course not. The story didn't spread fast enough to warn off every mutt. Even when it did, two or three *whohad* heard the tale couldn't resist taking a shot at this "wolf-monster." Yet none of those mutts ever returned, so even if their friends knew they'd come and that my victim hadn't really been the last mutt to trespass at Stonehaven, they didn't let this inconsistency get in the way of a good story. The legend was allowed to remain and flourish.

The news of what I'd done eventually spread to the Pack. As for Jeremy, while I'm sure he heard about it within a year or so, he never mentioned it to me. I don't think he knew how to handle it. He couldn't endorse my methods, but the whole Pack benefited from the results, so how could he complain? Take me aside and say "that was a very, very bad thing you did, Clay, and I know why you did it, and I think it might have been the right thing to do, but please don't ever do it again"?

At thirty-one, Jeremy was still coming to terms with the ugly side of leadership, the thought that he might

need to commit or sanction acts of violence to reduce the violence in our lives. As he'd said five years ago, the better we could fight, the less we'd have to. In killing the mutt so horribly, I'd tested his theory in a way I'm sure he'd never anticipated but, in the end, he saw that it did work. One act of extreme violence bought us two decades of peace at Stonehaven. No one could argue about that.

Changes

Jeremy turned thirty-two that spring. For his birthday, I decided to get him some special art supplies. In the past few years, he'd been devoting more time to his painting and I wanted to show him that, even if I couldn't really share his enthusiasm, I fully supported it. The problem was that I had no idea what "special art supplies" were, or what type Jeremy needed. So I called his mentor in New York. That was tough for me, phoning a human stranger and asking for help, but I was determined to get the best present I could for Jeremy, regardless of the monetary or psychological cost.

Jeremy's mentor was an artist whose career had been side-railed by arthritis, so he'd opened a gallery in New York City. Jeremy had met him five years ago. Presumably, Jeremy had been browsing or admiring in the gallery, and they somehow managed to strike up a conversation and he'd been advising Jeremy ever since.

I knew Jeremy's mentor's name, but had never met the man; Jeremy kept that part of his life separate from ours. Yet the moment I called and introduced myself, the man knew who I was. He promised to put together a bundle of supplies and mail them, and I could send him a check when I received them.

"It must be pretty exciting around there these days," he said after we'd arranged everything.

"Ummm, yeah," I said. "I guess so."

He chuckled. "I don't know how Jeremy stays so calm. When I first—" Another chuckle. "But you don't want to hear an old man reminisce. I'm just so happy for him. It's wonderful to see. It'll make things so much easier for the two of you. Young people can always use extra money."

He promised to get my supplies into the mail that week, then signed off. I hung up, then stared down at the phone. Extra money? What was that about? Financially, things *had* been going much better for us lately. When I'd been younger, Jeremy had spent many a late night hunched over a calculator, trying to juggle the bills. These days, he turned down work. We certainly weren't wealthy, but we were comfortable.

Maybe he'd been referring to the investments. Once Jeremy had begun earning extra money, he'd done the financially cautious thing and invested the extra. Some of it went into conservative stuff like bonds, but at least half had gone into the stock market, under Antonio's direction. A few years back, Antonio had taken over the new technology sector of the family business, just as Dominic had been ready to abandon micro-technology as an unprofitable fad. Although Antonio knew nothing about computers or technology, he had an instinctive grasp of trends and business needs, and had turned a department on the verge of extinction into a thriving part of the company. He'd also invested his own money in the technology sector, and persuaded Jeremy to do the same. Just this summer, a dividend check had bought us a two week trip to Vermont. From what Jeremy's mentor said, maybe another one was on the way, and maybe another trip in the works. I could live with that.

Jeremy's birthday came and went. No dividend check or special trip was mentioned, but he loved my gift, so that was enough. The next month, classes gave way to exams, bringing with it the prospect of four whole months to call my own.

After my last exam, I bolted for the parking lot . . . and found my car missing.

I stood in the lot and looked around. Had I been so preoccupied with my exam that I'd accidentally parked somewhere else? Not likely. My pass was for this lot. I was certain I'd parked right there, in my usual spot in the far row. But now I was standing there, in front of the spot I could swear had been mine, scowling at a black Mustang convertible. A beautiful car, and any other time, I'd have lingered to appreciate it, but right now I just wanted to go home, and this was, unfortunately, not my car. Had someone stolen mine? Yeah, as if anyone would want a fifteen year old Chevy that needed a swift kick to get started on cold mornings. Had it been towed? Shit, *I had* paid all my tickets, hadn't I?

A sharp tinkle of metal on asphalt cut short my thoughts. Following the sound, I looked to see a set of keys between my feet. I frowned down at them.

"Well, pick them up," said a voice behind me. "I'd have aimed for your hand, but I didn't want to startle you."

I turned to see Jeremy leaning against his truck. He waved at the keys. I picked them up, still frowning.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Did something happen to my car?"

"No, it's right there. Where you left it."

I turned to the Mustang, looked down at the keys in my hand, then back at the car. I can imagine my expression because Jeremy burst into a rare laugh.

"I thought you might like that," he said. "Any speeding tickets you earn with it are still yours, though."

I looked from the car, to Jeremy, and back again. "But how—where—?"

"I came into an unexpected bit of money and thought you deserved something new. Well, it's not new, but *newer*, and hopefully nicer."

"Shit, yeah," I said, still staring. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome."

I jangled the keys in my hand, itching to try them, but knowing that before I did that, I needed to be sure this was okay, that Jeremy hadn't gone into hock because I'd been bitching and moaning about my car this winter.

"The stocks?" I said, tearing my gaze from the car.

He shook his head. "A long-term investment of another kind. I sold my first painting. Two paintings, actually. One this winter and another last month."

"Sold—? When—? I didn't even know you had any up for sale."

Jeremy brushed his bangs from his face. "I wasn't ready to admit to it. Not until something sold. Remember when we were looking for schools—or, I should say, when *I* was looking for schools? I knew your teachers thought you'd get a full scholarship, but when I saw the tuition prices, I was still worried. I didn't want something like lack of money to hold you back. Don had been pestering me to put a few paintings in his gallery. Eventually I decided to give it a shot."

"So they sold?"

A tiny smile. "For far more than they were worth. And since you took care of your tuition with your scholarship, I thought it only fitting that I use the money on you."

"You didn't need to—"

"No, but I wanted to. Now get in and let's go home."

I grinned. "Race you."

He shook his head and walked back to his truck.

And so our lives underwent another slow change. Over the next couple of years, Jeremy sold more paintings. He still kept up his translation business, in case the art didn't work out, but he retained only his best clients and turned down all new work.

Malcolm continued to train me. By the time I was eighteen, I'd learned all the tricks he had to impart, but kept up the lessons for practice. That seemed to make him happy—as happy as Malcolm was capable of being. I always knew that part of his reason for training me was political. He saw in me a potentially valuable ally for his fight to become Alpha, and hoped that we'd somehow bond over these sessions and he'd woo me away from Jeremy. Never happened, though. I came to tolerate Malcolm, but would never forget what he'd done to Jeremy, and never trust him not to do it again if things didn't go his way.

And what about his failed ploy to get me to persuade Jeremy to drop out of the Alpha race? Being out in the world so much, Malcolm was first in the Pack to hear what I'd done to that mutt. Was he angry that I'd found another way to stop trespassing mutts, one that didn't help his cause? If he was, he never gave any sign of it. Instead, it seemed to give him something new to brag about, that his pupil had proven not only a vicious killer but a clever strategist. Although my original plan had only been to keep mutts away from Stonehaven, after hearing what I'd done, most mutts decided they'd better not take the chance of trespassing on any Pack wolf's turf, just in case they'd misunderstood my message. So, by the time I was twenty, our sanctuary extended throughout Pack territory.

As for the Alpha race, it was more of an Alpha crawl. Dominic had moved Jeremy into the role of advisor, and consulted him on every matter of Pack policy. This seemed a monumental step. An Alpha traditionally acted alone or, if he consulted anyone, he did it on the side, so no one knew—he certainly didn't openly ask for opinions as Dominic now did with Jeremy. Yet it was all for show. Dominic might seek Jeremy's advice, but certainly didn't feel obligated to follow it, or even seriously consider it. As Malcolm had said years ago, Dominic was playing a game, slowly moving Jeremy into a leadership role, while holding fast to the reins of power. Jeremy knew this. He'd always known it. But he allowed it to happen because it put him into a position he might never attained otherwise—that of a serious Alpha

contender.

I finished my undergrad degree at twenty and, true to my word, went away to university for my graduate program. I went no farther than Columbia but, despite Dominic's offer to come live with them, I stayed in residence, which satisfied Jeremy's desire to have me experience life in the human world.

The Pack changed little during those three years. Cliff Ward died. The summer before I went to Columbia, he was killed in a mutt fight. I mourned his passing even less than I had Gregory's. He'd been a non-player, a sycophant of Malcolm's with no power or position in the Pack. I knew I shouldn't feel that way. Deep down, I wanted to see all my Pack brothers as just that—*brothers*. But the longer Dominic held power, the deeper the schism became between those who supported Jeremy and those who favored Malcolm, and I couldn't help seeing Malcolm's allies as future threats to Jeremy, which made them potential enemies.

That fall, just after I'd started at Columbia, Dominic called a Pack meeting. It was just a regular meeting, and by now everyone knew better than to expect to him to announce that he was stepping down. Still, there was always hope. On Saturday afternoon, though, we held the meeting portion of the weekend, and he didn't say a word about succession. In fact, he said very little of anything, just snapped a few instructions to Jeremy, then left him to supervise the meeting while he stormed off to nurse a headache.

After the meeting, Nick raided the kitchen, and brought all the lunch leftovers into the sun-room, where Joey and I were basking in the heat of the September sun. As we ate, I talked about my newly discovered area of academic passion: anthropomorphic religion.

"—then, if you move to Nubia, you have the god Arensnuphis, who's depicted both as a lion and as a man wearing—"

Nick yawned. "Is anyone else ready for a nap? I don't know why, but suddenly, I'm just so tired."

I lobbed a pillow at him. "Hey, this is important stuff. If you'd gone to college, you—"

"Could be just as boring as you? Thanks, but no thanks."

I grabbed an empty plate.

Joey caught my hand. "Stick to pillows. Dominic's in a bad enough mood as it is. As for lion-gods, as long as you find it interesting, Clay, that's all that matters. So, are we going out tonight?"

"Hunt," I said.

"Bar," Nick said at the same time.

Joey sighed. "Someone give me a quarter and we'll flip for it."

"Uh-uh," I said. "He can go to a bar and pick up girls any time. Hell, he does it every night of the week—"

"Every night?" Nick said. "Like hell. I don't need to pick up girls *any* night of the week. Just open my book and dial a number . . . if they don't call me first."

"Good, then you don't need to do it tonight," I said. "I'm here, and I want to hunt."

When he started to complain, I skewered him with a look. He closed his mouth.

"Hunt," I said to Joey. Then I glanced over at Nick. "And if we have time, we'll go to a bar afterwards for a drink or two. Without girls."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Something is seriously wrong with you, buddy."

"What's wrong with who?" Malcolm said. He strolled into the sun-room, the Santoses in tow. "You better not be talking about my boy." He clapped me on the back. "Nothing wrong with him. Nothing at all."

"Nothing a lobotomy couldn't fix," Daniel muttered.

"Hey, you guys hear that?" I said to Nick and Joey. "Sounds like a pup yipping."

"Danny-boy," Nick said. "When you going to grow up into a wolf? Still waiting for that first Change, aren't you?"

"Nah, he had that last year," I said. "Not that anyone's noticed. Still couldn't take on a mutt with two broken legs. I hear that's what happens. Guy doesn't Change until he's twenty, he never quite catches up."

Joey shot us both looks, trying to hush us. He was always telling us we should be nicer to Daniel, that if we tried, we could win him over. I didn't see the point. I tossed Joey the "you worry too much" look I'd perfected from Antonio.

"Don't listen to him," Raymond murmured to his son. "You're just fine."

"Sure he is," I said. "And any day he wants to prove it, I'm ready. I can always use a few seconds of diversion."

Nick laughed. When Malcolm chimed in, Daniel reddened.

"At least I'm not some psycho who chops up—" Daniel began.

Raymond caught his son's arm to shush him, but Malcolm advanced on Daniel, looming over him.

"No, you're not, are you?" Malcolm said. "You've never even fought a mutt. Never needed to. You know why that is? Why a pup like you can run in peace, without worrying about some mutt tearing you to shreds?"

Daniel muttered something.

"Speak up!" Malcolm barked.

Raymond laid a hand on Malcolm's arm. "He knows, Mal. We're all . . . grateful." He choked on the word, but pressed on. "Clayton did us a favor and we realize it."

"Yeah," Stephen said. "Big favor. Now we have to go find the mutts. Even then, some of them just run the other way—"

"But it's a small price to pay for being safe on our property," Raymond said. "Come on, boys. Malcolm wanted to talk to Clayton. Let's leave him alone."

"Hold on," Malcolm said. "I was going to ask Clay if he wanted to hunt tonight. A full Pack hunt."

"Sure," I said. "Did Dominic say—"

"No, he did not," growled a voice from the doorway. Dominic strode in, followed by Antonio and Jeremy. "Since when are you allowed to set up Pack hunts, Malcolm? Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Sorry, Dom. I just thought since you weren't feeling well—"

"I feel fine," Dominic said, then winced, belying his words. He spun on Jeremy. "What did you tell them?"

"The truth," Jeremy said calmly. "That you have a headache, which you do."

"I don't have a headache. *I never* get headaches."

"Which is why, as I suggested, you should let me call Doctor Patterson and—"

"You'll call no one," Dominic snarled. "And there will be no Pack hunts tonight. In fact, you won't be here tonight. None of you. This Meet is adjourned. Go home."

He stalked out the door.

No one went home. We were accustomed to Dominic's moods, and knew that if we did take off, he'd summon us back the next day and blast us for leaving the Meet early. After his outburst, he retreated to his room, and the Meet progressed as usual. There wasn't a Pack hunt that night. Even Malcolm knew better than to press his luck that far. Jeremy advised that Nick, Joey and I should skip our mini-hunt. With the mood Dominic was in, he might even see that as a breach of authority. So we went out drinking instead.

When we returned to the Sorrentino estate a little louder and more boisterous than we'd left, Jeremy met us in the garage and warned us to tone it down. Dominic's headache was worse, and he was now complaining of dizziness and other pains. Jeremy was obviously worried, but Dominic only brushed off his suggestion to visit the doctor and popped some aspirin.

So we bustled off to bed. I slept in Nick's room, and Joey slept in one of the guest rooms with his father. Nick and I stayed up for a while, talking, but drifted off shortly before two.

At three-thirty, I awoke to Jeremy shaking me. One look at his face, and I leapt up.

"What's—?" I began.

"Dominic," he said, handing me my clothing from the floor. "He passed out and I can't wake him. We need to get him to the doctor, fast. Are you okay to drive?"

"Sure," I said, and grabbed the clothes.

Challenge

I drove Dominic to the hospital so fast that, if I'd been pulled over, I'm sure I would have lost my license.

He'd had a stroke. Things like this are less common among werewolves—maybe because of our different physiology and maybe because of our more active lifestyle—but sometimes it doesn't matter how healthy you are, mother nature decides your time is up. And so it was for Dominic.

For the next three days we kept vigil at his bed in the private clinic. I wanted to stay, but Jeremy insisted there was nothing I should do and so I shouldn't miss school. I did, however, skip classes that weren't absolutely necessary so I could zip across town to the clinic and spend as much time there as possible.

On Tuesday morning, Dominic died, having never regained consciousness. I didn't learn of it until I arrived late that afternoon and found Nick and Jorge alone, sitting beside an empty bed.

Antonio made the arrangements for Dominic's funeral. Or, he did his best, but Jeremy ended up quietly taking over. This is one part of Western death rituals I've never understood, that a person has just died and, within hours, those closest to him, who most want to go home, close the door and grieve, must instead sit in some stranger's office and decide what kind of coffin or flowers they want. As for the service itself, it was small, as are all Pack funerals. Afterward, we retreated to the Sorrentino estate to grieve.

We'd been back for less than an hour, all gathered in the living room. Each of us was lost in our own thoughts—each except Malcolm, who knew exactly where he was heading and wasn't waiting another minute to get there.

"We need an Alpha," he said. "Word gets out that Dominic died without a successor and we're in trouble. Every mutt in the country will think something's wrong with the Pack."

"We just put my father in the ground," Antonio said, lifting his head from his hands. "You can wait another goddamned—"

"No," Jorge said softly. "He's right. We need to get this over with."

"I don't mean any offense to your father, Tonio," Malcolm said. "If it seems that way, then I apologize. I'm just thinking of the Pack. We can get this over with quickly and painlessly, then let everyone get back to mourning a great Alpha. We all know how this works. I'm putting my name forward. If anyone cares to challenge me, we'll step outside right now and settle this."

"Challenge you to what?" I said. "A duel? You gonna pick swords or pistols?"

Jeremy's lips curved as he recognized his own words from so long ago.

"A fight, Clayton," Malcolm said. "A fight to the death. That's how it works when an Alpha dies before the Pack chooses an official successor. Now, the only people here who might have a shot at winning that

challenge are you and Antonio. Tonio doesn't want it. Never has. As for you, I'm sure you'd make a damned fine Alpha . . . in ten or fifteen years. If that's what you want, you can have it then. I'll pick you as my successor and I'll make sure you win. That's a promise."

Jeremy cleared his throat. Malcolm turned on him before he could get a word out.

"Don't embarrass yourself, Jeremy. Do us all a favor and keep your damned mouth shut for once."

"No, I don't believe I can," Jeremy said. "You said that this is how we choose an Alpha when the previous one dies without a successor, but I must point out that you are mistaken."

"Bullshit. Go grab the Legacy. The last time an Alpha died without a successor—"

"—was in 1912," Jeremy said. "And they did indeed choose the next Alpha with a battle. However, there is nothing in the Law to say that's how it *must* be done. If you read the Legacy entry, it quite clearly states that a battle was how both candidates decided to handle the matter. I am putting forward myself as a challenger but, unless I agree to a fight, which I will not, then the matter must be handled in the same way all Pack successions are handled, by a vote."

"He's right," Jorge said. "Do you want to check the Legacy?"

"Never mind," Malcolm said. "He wants a vote, let's give him a vote. All in favor of me—"

"That's not how it's done," Jeremy said. "We both need to deliver our platforms, let the Pack know our plans for the future—"

"Screw the future. If we don't decide this fast, we won't have a future. The mutts will see to that. A leaderless Pack is a weak Pack. Everyone here knows you and they know me, and they both know what kind of leader we'd make."

"If that's what you want, that's fine by me," Jeremy said. "We'll vote. But, as the Law says, if any Pack member feels he isn't ready to make a decision, he has two days to consider the options."

With that, a decade of Alpha campaigning came to a sudden end. The vote was open, as all Pack votes are. Antonio, as the former Alpha's closest relative, led the vote. He went around the group and each person named their choice.

Antonio started by casting his vote for Jeremy. Then he turned to Jorge.

"Jeremy," Jorge said.

Next to Stephen. "Malcolm."

"Malcolm," Andrew seconded, before being asked.

"Malcolm," his father said.

Antonio looked at Peter. "Jeremy."

On to Ross Werner. Ross cracked his knuckles then, gaze still on his hands, said, "I'm not ready."

"Oh for god's sake," Malcolm snarled. "Just pick—"

"He gets his forty-eight hours," Jeremy said. Then, to Antonio. "Should we continue? Or leave it there?"

"We'll keep going," Antonio said. "Anyone else wants time to think, just say so." He turned to me. "Clay? Do I need to ask?"

"No."

"Jeremy, then. Joey? You're next."

Joey's lips pursed as he started to say Jeremy's name, but an elbow jab from his father cut him short.

"We'll take the forty-eight hours," Dennis said. "Both of us."

On to Nick. "Jeremy."

Daniel. "Malcolm."

Finally, Wally Santos. "Malcolm."

There it was. Five votes for Jeremy, five for Malcolm and three abstaining for forty-eight hours.

As far as I was concerned, Jeremy had won. Joey had been ready to name Jeremy, and would do so. His father, Dennis, liked Jeremy, and supported him, though he'd usually been too conscious of the balance of Pack power to do so openly. So he would also vote for Jeremy. Ross had always been a fence-sitter, the type of guy who never wanted to offend anyone. We could try to sway him our way, but ultimately, his vote wouldn't matter. Even if he picked Malcolm, the final result would be 7:6 in Jeremy's favor. All we had to do was wait two days. After a decade of waiting, that was nothing.

After the meeting, Joey and Dennis retreated to the guest house. Although we called the one-bedroom cabin a guest house, few guests actually stayed there. During a Meet everyone liked to stick together, so we all slept in the main house. The guest house was used for human guests and, occasionally, as for Pack members whom Dominic chose to punish by making them sleep elsewhere.

When Dennis asked Antonio for the guest house key, we all knew that it meant they wanted a place to talk without being overheard. That was fine. We sent them off and Jeremy forbade Nick or I from trying to "visit" Joey, and sway his father's decision. This was a choice they had to make on their own.

The day passed, and Dennis and Joey stayed in the guest house. This was taking longer than I expected, and I began to worry that maybe, instead of Joey persuading his father to support Jeremy, Dennis was working to persuade Joey to change *his* vote. While I was certain neither Dennis nor Joey wanted to see Malcolm as Alpha, I knew that Dennis feared him, and fear can be a powerful motivator.

When night fell and they still didn't return, I told Nick to cover for me, and slipped into the backyard. The guest house was in the far corner of the estate, in the wooded portion, accessible either by road or a very long path. I took the path. That way, I could tell myself I wasn't disobeying Jeremy, that I was just going for a walk.

I'd gone no more than a quarter of the distance when I saw a dark figure on the path ahead. I slowed and sniffed the air. It was Joey.

"I figured your patience would be running thin," he said with a twist of a smile. "Actually, I thought it would have run out a couple of hours ago. You surprised me."

"Are you done, then?" I asked as I approached. "You've made up your mind?"

"Uh, yes, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

He dropped his gaze as he spoke and I froze, certain I knew what was coming.

"Don't say it," I said. "If you tell me you're voting for Malcolm—"

"No. I can't. *We* can't. Jeremy's the right choice. We both know that. The problem is . . ."

He let the sentence drop off and scuffed the ground with his shoe, gaze fixed on the clods of dirt that flew up.

"The problem is . . ." I prompted.

"The problem is that we can't vote for Malcolm, and we don't dare vote against him."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He met my gaze. "You know what it means. He's already been out here twice—"

"What?"

"He knows very well which way we want to vote, Clay, and he's not going to let that happen. My dad and I, we're the weak links. Neither of us can stand up to Malcolm in a fight. We know it and he knows it."

I slammed my fist into the nearest tree. "Goddamn him! And goddamn you, Joey, for not coming to me. I'll protect you. You know that."

"For today maybe. For tomorrow maybe. But not for the rest of my life. We vote against him and he'll take his revenge. He's already said as much. So we're leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Leaving the Pack. Tonight. I wanted to tell you—"

"Tell me what? That you're running away? That you're—"

"Don't say it, Clay," Joey said, pulling himself up straight and meeting my gaze. "I know what you think, that this is the act of a coward. It's not. It's the act of someone who doesn't care to become a martyr, no matter how much he may believe in the cause. Jeremy will win. I'm sure he will. He's smart enough to outwit Malcolm. He'll be the next Alpha, and he doesn't need our votes—or our deaths—to ensure that."

"So then you'll come back. After he's Alpha."

"I—I don't know." Joey rubbed his hand over his mouth. "It's not the same for us, Clay. We aren't Danverses or Santoses or Sorrentinos. Even in Jeremy's Pack, I'm not sure how much that would change."

"It would," I said. "Hell, I'm not a Danvers. Not really. Nobody gives a shit."

"Because you're special. Look, I didn't wait out here for two hours to argue with you. I wanted to say goodbye. I know this *will* be goodbye." Another twist of a smile. "A mutt can't be buddies with the Alpha's son, can he?"

"Joey, don't. Please—"

"We've leaving the country. Probably heading up to Canada. Dad's been to the west coast there and he thinks it would be a good place for us. Lots of room to roam. No mutts, as far as we know. Plus we wouldn't have to worry about accidentally bumping into one of you guys and forcing you to fight—"

"Shit, Joey, no one would ever—"

"But it's a consideration, right? Let's just leave it at that."

"I can't," I said. "Come back with me. We'll talk to Jeremy. He'll work this out—"

"Clay, no. Please. Let's just shake hands—"

"And say goodbye? Let one of my friends leave the Pack and become a mutt? No way. No goddamned way!"

I spun on my heel and whammed my fist into a tree so hard it shook. When I turned back again, Joey was gone. I stood there, breathing hard, heart pounding. Then I hit the tree again, slammed my hand into it over and over, until I heard a bone crack. Only then, when I felt real pain overtake the pain in my gut did my brain clear. I stopped, raked my hand through my hair, and concentrated on breathing until I could think again.

I wanted to go after Joey, to say a proper goodbye, but I knew that that the moment I caught up with him, I'd start arguing again, desperate to find someone way to persuade him to stay. He was better off leaving. As much as it hurt to say that, to admit that I couldn't protect a friend, it was true. My priority was Jeremy. It had to be. Although I could try my best to protect Joey and Dennis, it wasn't fair to ask them to entrust their lives to secondhand bodyguard.

I looked down the path.

"Goodbye," I said, then turned and headed back to the house.

When I told Jeremy what the Stillwells had decided, the news didn't seem to surprise him. He promised that, when this was over, we'd try to find them and bring them back into the Pack. Until then, we had to let them do what they thought was best.

The next morning, we awoke to find Ross's bedroom empty. Everything down to his toothbrush was gone. Jeremy tracked his trail to his car, which was also missing. There was no other scent mixed with his, no sign that he'd done anything other than emulated the Stillwells and decided this wasn't a fight he was prepared to join.

With that, the race for Alpha came to a grinding halt. The vote remained split evenly, and both sides knew that wouldn't change. Who of the remaining ten would switch sides? One of the Santosos, who despised Jeremy as much as Malcolm did? One of the Sorrentinos, all three of whom had been Jeremy's friends and supporters from childhood? Peter, who owed Jeremy his life and nearly died at the hands of Malcolm? Me? Of course not. The only three who might have been swayed were now gone. So we were deadlocked, and nothing in the Legacy or the Law gave us any ideas on how to break the stalemate.

Stalemate

We spent six months locked in that stalemate, neither side willing—or even able—to budge. Contrary to Malcolm's dire predictions, hordes of mutts did not descend when they heard the Pack was leaderless. They did, however, pace at the edge of our territory, like scavengers who weren't sure their prey was dead yet.

At first, Malcolm was content to bare his teeth now and then and hope Peter or Jorge would cave, but we circled our wagons fast enough that everyone felt safe. But that only meant that Malcolm had to do more than threaten—he had to consider eliminating one of us. By the new year, we didn't so much as dare collect the mail without backup.

I managed to make it through the fall term but when it ended, I told Jeremy I wasn't going back—not until this problem was resolved. He argued, of course, but he understood where my priorities lay and that this wasn't so much a matter of choice as necessity. I couldn't concentrate on school knowing my absence put everyone in danger. So I told the university I was having problems at home and arranged to resume my studies the next fall.

In April, Malcolm launched his first strike. All six of us were at Stonehaven, and we'd decided to blow off some steam with a deer hunt. Once we found a deer, we split into pairs. Jeremy and Antonio had looped around in front of the stag. Nick and I chased it from the left side while Jorge and Peter took the right flank position. Then the four of us would drive it to where Jeremy and Antonio were waiting.

I was running ahead of Nick. I shouldn't have been—I should have stayed at his side—but he'd stumbled in an animal hole and, once I'd checked to make sure he was okay, I'd dashed ahead, eager to catch up before the stag realized its left flank was unprotected. After a few bounds, I could see the stag ahead, and hear Nick racing up behind me. A shot cracked. Then a yelp. I wheeled to see Nick fly sideways. As I raced back to him, the smell of blood and gunpowder hit me, and I knew he'd been shot.

The next half-hour is a blur. Peter and Jorge, having heard the shot, ran back. Then Peter went to get Jeremy while Jorge Changed. I stayed where I was, standing over Nick, frantically licking at the blood that poured from his shoulder. When Jeremy arrived, he was in human form. I dimly recall him struggling to pull me off Nick, then Antonio arriving and dragging me off his son. I stayed there, as close as they would allow, until I heard the words "he'll be okay." Then I slid into the nearest thicket and Changed.

When I peeked out, I saw Peter hurry to Jeremy with the medical kit from the house. I stayed hidden for

another couple of minutes, as I listened to them. Once I knew that I hadn't misheard, and Nick would indeed survive, I slipped out the other way and crept back to my clothes. I dressed, raced to the house, grabbed my keys and took off.

Malcolm was in Syracuse, where he'd been since this all started. I knew exactly where he was staying because he'd told us, as if daring us to try something.

I should have known he'd go after Nick. Of the six of us, Nick was, arguably, the weakest, being the newest werewolf, with little fight experience outside our practice sessions. Yet all this time, we'd focused on protecting Peter and Jorge, not Nick. Why? Because no one, including myself, seriously thought Malcolm would harm Nick. He liked Nick. I suppose that's naive, to think that someone as ambitious and ruthless as Malcolm wouldn't kill a person he liked, but to us it made more sense that he'd go after Peter or Jorge, both men that Malcolm barely tolerated. Yet it was more than that. We thought Nick was safe not only because Malcolm was genuinely fond of him, but because he was Antonio's son and my best friend, and Antonio and I were Malcolm's favorites, no matter how little we wanted the honor.

Despite this, I never doubted that Malcolm had shot Nick. Hunters hadn't set foot on Stonehaven's property in well over a generation. The Danverses had always made it clear that they didn't want hunters on the estate and, since they were otherwise good neighbors, and there was plenty of other forest in the region, local hunters obeyed the "No Trespassing" signs and warned visitors to do the same. To have a hunter come on the property, after all those years, and just happen to shoot Nick was coincidental beyond belief. Malcolm had known we were all at Stonehaven, and would likely take advantage of the full moon for a group run. He'd seen his shot, and had taken it.

At Malcolm's hotel, I stormed down the hall to his room and pounded on the door. Daniel opened it. I shoved him aside and strode into the room, where I found Malcolm, Stephen and Andrew sitting around the television.

"Clay?" Malcolm said, pushing to his feet. "What's—"

"Get outside," I said.

"What?"

"You heard me. You want a challenge. You've got it. Get outside now."

"Challenge? What's—?"

"Did you really think you could get away with it? You'd shoot Nick and I'd just chalk it up to a tragic hunting accident?"

"Nick's been shot? Is he okay?"

I could see the lie behind Malcolm's fake shock and I wanted nothing more than to cross that room, grab him and beat him until he confessed. But, if I did, Stephen, Andrew and Daniel would be on me in a second, I wasn't risking my life to prove Malcolm was lying. Not when I knew an easier way.

I marched to the front closet, yanked it open and grabbed Stephen's shoes. Of everyone in Malcolm's camp, he was the only one who owned a rifle and could use it, having friends who were hunters. I checked the bottoms, then walked back to Malcolm and shoved the shoes under his nose.

"Smell that mud?" I said. "Stonehaven's mud, still wet. On Stephen's shoes."

Malcolm's eyes went wide. "Stephen? Did you shoot—"

"Don't pull that," I snapped. "Stephen didn't do this on his own. He's too stupid to think of it, let alone carry it out."

"You little—"

Stephen flew at me. I nailed him in the gut and he toppled backward. Daniel jumped from his spot by the wall. I met his glare.

"Try it," I said. "Go on. Show me you've grown a pair, Danny."

Daniel didn't move. Stephen got to his feet and charged. I feinted out of the way and was turning to strike when someone grabbed my hand. I roared and wheeled to see Antonio holding me. I stopped short, but he used my momentum to yank me off balance, and threw me out the door into the hall.

"This isn't over," I heard him say to Malcolm.

The door slammed and Antonio turned on me. "Either we continue this out here or you go downstairs to the car quietly."

"But he—"

Antonio loomed over me, eyes blazing. "Where are Wally and Raymond?"

"What? I—they're not here."

"But who is, Clayton? Who is here?"

"I—I don't—"

"You're here and I'm here. The two people most likely to come after Malcolm if he hurt Nick. And where is Jeremy?"

I scrambled to my feet. "Oh shit!"

Antonio grabbed my arm. "He's okay. He's down in the car with the others. Fortunately, only one of us is as hotheaded as Malcolm hoped. Think before you act next time, Clay. If you're going to protect Jeremy, he needs to be your first priority at all times. No one else can matter. Let me look after everyone else, including Nick."

"I'm sorry," I said, rubbing my face. "I didn't think—"

"Well, that was your first mistake." He thumped me on the back. "Now, come on."

I nodded and followed him down to the car.

The next night, when Nick felt well enough to join us, Jeremy convened a meeting. The subject? How to break the stalemate. Knowing this impasse put us in danger was one thing, but seeing Nick nearly killed, on our own property, surround by all of us, finally brought home the urgency of the situation. Jeremy knew we had to act. Since he wasn't yet Alpha, he didn't need to make all the decisions alone. He could solicit advice, so he did.

"I'll fight Malcolm," I said as I plunked onto the sofa beside Nick. "Set it up and I'll take him out."

"Presuming you do 'take him out', then what?" Jeremy asked.

"Well, then I give you—" I stopped and thought about what I was saying. "Er, I—uh, sorry."

"I appreciate the sentiment and the offer," Jeremy said softly. "But I wouldn't expect anyone to respect an Alpha who had his title won for him by another. The answer to our problem, I believe, is obvious. Malcolm clearly wants a fight, and I doubt he'll settle for anything less. If that's my only option then I'll have to—"

"No way," Antonio said.

"I know I'm not on his level," Jeremy said. "But perhaps under the right circumstances, with a good strategy, I could outwit him. Strength isn't everything."

"In this case, it is," Antonio said. "Malcolm gets you in the ring, Jer, and he'll fight like he's never fought before. He's been waiting for this his whole life. He'll kill you."

"Maybe that's a chance I have to take."

"It's not a chance, it's a certainty. If you challenge him, you'll die, and then the only thing you'll have accomplished is to break the Pack in half, because none of us would stick around if Malcolm becomes Alpha. The only two he'd *let* stick around are me and Clay, and if he kills you, nothing in the world would make us follow him. We'd rather be mutts."

Jeremy was silent for a moment. Then he gave a slow nod. "Maybe, then, *that's* the only solution. To break the Pack in half."

"Two Packs?" I said.

Jeremy nodded.

"It might be the only way," Jorge said.

"How would that work?" Peter asked.

"I have no idea," Jeremy said. "So let's talk about it."

By morning we'd come up with a proposal. We'd split the Pack in two, each with an Alpha. Jeremy's side would retain New York State as its territory, and Malcolm would take Pennsylvania, where the Santoses lived. That would mean Malcolm would give up Stonehaven as his home, but Jeremy would compensate him for that with a generous monthly stipend. In time we hoped to persuade the others to

move their territory farther west or south, and put more distance between us, but for now, the division would be the boundary between the two states.

Antonio and Peter took the proposal to Malcolm. He turned them down flat. Wouldn't even negotiate terms. He sent back a message to Jeremy saying that the only way the Pack was splitting was if we all left the country and started a new Pack in Canada or Mexico . . . after Jeremy deeded Stonehaven to him. In other words, we could put our tails between our legs and flee, and he might let us live. Jeremy didn't dignify that with an answer.

Over the next few days, Antonio and I held some private meetings, to discuss taking matters into our own hands. Antonio wanted to kill Wally or Raymond, and thus swing the vote in our favor. I didn't see the point of such political wrangling. If you want to kill a beast, and make sure it's really dead, you don't sever a leg and hope it bleeds out—you lop off the head. Kill Malcolm and our problems would be over. While not opposed to the general theory, Antonio knew Jeremy would figure out who had killed Malcolm and, whatever the history between them, Malcolm was still his father. To have him killed by someone Jeremy had raised would be too much. Personally, I though Malcolm had long since lost any paternal rights, but I wasn't sure enough about the situation to test it. Not just yet. So we reverted to discussing Antonio's plan. The trick, though, was to kill Wally or Raymond without it being obvious that we'd done so. Otherwise, we reduced Jeremy to Malcolm's level, because everyone would assume *he'd* ordered the death.

Midweek, Antonio had to return to New York for an unavoidable business meeting, and we agreed to think the problem through and come up with some ideas before he returned on the weekend. Jorge and Nick went back to New York with Antonio. Normally, Peter would have stayed with us, but after the attack on Nick, we decided Peter was better off with the Sorrentinos. He was a more experienced fighter than Nick or Jorge, so it made sense for the four of them to stick together, and let me devote my full protective attention to Jeremy.

Dinner Thursday night started like any other. Our dinners were still made by the same woman who'd been cooking for us since I'd first arrived at Stonehaven. I could cook, and had been doing so on weekends for a few years, but even now that I was home full-time, Jeremy knew Pearl needed the income, so we still had our meals delivered on weekdays.

That night it was her specialty: Shepherd's Pie. While Jeremy dished it up, I threw together a salad in the kitchen. I walked into the dining room to see him leaning over the steaming pan, spatula only partway through the first cut.

"Smell this," he said.

I did. The scent of hot beef and potato wafted up. My stomach rumbled.

"Smells great. Now hurry up and scoop it out or I'll take the whole dish."

I reached for the casserole, but Jeremy pulled it back.

"I'm serious. Something smells off."

"The meat?" I said, leaning in for a closer sniff. "Seems fine to me. Doesn't matter anyway." Our stomachs, like a wolf's, were strong enough to withstand meat that was undercooked or past its best-before date.

Jeremy waved me away from the food, forked up a mouthful and sampled it. Then he made a face and discreetly spat it into a napkin. I scooped up a fingerful and ate it. It tasted fine, but I didn't say so. If Jeremy thought our food had been tampered with, I wasn't going to argue. His sense of smell and taste were marginally better than my own and, even if he was imagining things, he was entitled to a little paranoia these days.

Jeremy started for the door, paused, came back and took the casserole with him.

"Hey, if you think there's something wrong with it, I'm not going to eat it," I called after him.

After one last look in the direction of my vanished dinner, I tucked into the salad. A few minutes later, Jeremy returned.

"I called John," he said. John was Pearl's son, who'd taken over delivering our meals when his father died a few years ago. "He says he didn't see Pearl this afternoon. When he got to the house, the cooler was inside the front door, so he took it and left."

I laid down my fork. "And he didn't think that was strange?"

Jeremy shook his head. "These days, Pearl often naps in the afternoon. Even I knew that."

"Does Malcolm?"

As Jeremy pulled something from his pocket, he gave a half-shrug that I interpreted as "probably." He laid the Shepherd's Pie in front of me again.

"Close your eyes," he said.

I did. He instructed me to sniff and I again smelled the pie. Then he held something else in front of my nose and I inhaled a vaguely familiar odor—one that I'd also faintly smelled on our dinner.

"Yeah, that's it," I said, opening my eyes. "What is—?" I knew the answer before I even saw the bottle in Jeremy's hand. "Sedative. The stuff from your medical bag. Is any missing?"

He shook his head.

"But Malcolm's seen it before, plenty of times. We all have. If he knew the name, he'd know what to get, and he'd know it works on werewolves." I looked at the casserole. "So he dumped enough in there to kill us."

"No, we'd smell that much easily. This is just enough to knock us out."

I pushed my chair back and stood. "Well, I'm not waiting around to see what he planned to do next."

Jeremy laid a hand on my shoulder. "I think we should do exactly that. Malcolm expects us to be asleep early tonight. Let's give him what he wants, and see what he does with it."

Endgame

Three hours later, when I heard the garage door knob turn, I was sprawled out on the sofa in the study, the most likely place for me to crash pre-bedtime. Sure enough, the footsteps headed straight for me. I

counted three sets and, almost the moment I'd finished counting, identified them: Wally and his two oldest nephews, Stephen and Andrew. Disappointment zinged through me as I realized Malcolm wasn't among our uninvited guests, but I wasn't surprised. As much as Malcolm might like a showdown with his son, he wasn't stupid enough to take that risk. This way, if things went bad, he could claim that the Santos had acted on their own.

I held myself still as they came into the room. I was lying on my back, with my left arm slung up to hide my face, in case I slipped up. As they walked into the room, I struggled to keep from tensing. I could end this here. We had to let them make the first move, or Malcolm would claim he'd only sent them to retrieve his shaving kit or something equally ridiculous.

"Out like a light," Andrew said, leaning over me.

"Probably because he scarfed down most of dinner himself," Stephen said.

"Let's just hope he left enough for Jeremy," Andrew said.

Stephen snorted. "Like it matters. Even if Jeremy's wide awake, I could take him with one hand tied behind my back."

"Maybe so," Wally said. "But you're not going to try it. Andy, I want you to stay here, make sure Clayton doesn't wake up."

"Let's skip that step," Stephen said, stepping close enough that I could feel the heat of his body. "How about we stage a little 'accident'? Damn, Mal, I know you wanted Clay left alive, and we really tried, but he woke up and we just had to—"

"Don't even think about it," Wally said. "Even if he does wake up, we're following orders, tying him up and leaving him alive. You don't want to test Malcolm on this."

"Goddamn it!" Stephen snarled. "He hates Malcolm. We're the ones who—"

"It's not fair, I know," Wally said softly. "When all this is over, we'll take care of Clayton, and things will change. Now, Andy, as I was saying, you stay here. If he so much as stirs, come and get me. Got it?"

"Got it."

The moment Wally and Stephen left, my heart started pounding, urging me to take care of Andrew and go protect Jeremy. Yet I knew it would take them a while to find Jeremy . . . if they found him at all. Jeremy had crisscrossed the house, from top to bottom, laying enough trails that they'd eventually get frustrated and give up trying to track him. Then they'd check the obvious spots he might have passed out—his bedroom, his studio, the bathroom—but he wasn't in any of those. I had at least fifteen to twenty minutes before they began to suspect that Jeremy wasn't asleep at all.

I forced myself to count off five minutes before I peeked. By that time, Andrew had retreated to Jeremy's armchair. He sat there, staring at me, unblinking, as if I could wake up and pounce in the millisecond it took him to blink. The stink of fear wafted from him. That was why Wally had left him behind, because if I did wake up, Andrew would make damned sure he called for help instead of trying to take me on by himself.

After another couple of minutes, Andrew began to relax and, as he relaxed, his gaze wandered to the

bookshelf. Two more minutes passed. Then he eased up from the chair, gave me one last look, and turned toward the bookshelf.

I sprang the moment his back was to me. My hand was around his mouth before he realized I'd left the sofa. I could have killed him then. But of the three Santos boys, Andrew had given me the least reason to hate him. I didn't like him, but he wasn't enough of a threat to warrant killing. So I wrapped my free hand around his throat and squeezed until he passed out. Then I lowered him to the floor and crept from the room.

As soon as I walked into the rear hallway, Jeremy slid through the back door. He motioned me to silence, cocked his head and listened. Footsteps sounded above. Jeremy waved me closer and I whispered what had happened so far—that Andrew was unconscious in the study, and Wally and Stephen were searching.

"Time to let them find me," Jeremy murmured.

Of all the parts of Jeremy's plan, I hated this one the most. But Jeremy insisted we play this to the end, that we had to know, beyond a doubt, what they had in mind.

Jeremy pointed to the kitchen. When I hesitated, he met my gaze and jabbed his finger toward the room. I muttered under my breath, but obeyed.

I slipped into the kitchen, half-opened the pantry door and stood behind it. In the hallway something crashed and the footsteps above stopped.

"Clay?" Jeremy called, his voice weak, as if sedated. "Clayton?"

A softer bang as he knocked into the hall-stand. Overhead the footsteps resumed, quieter now, heading for the staircase. Jeremy's unnaturally heavy footfalls thudded toward the kitchen, interspersed with the odd thump as he stumbled into a wall. By the time he threw open the kitchen door, Wally and Stephen were on the stairs, moving fast now.

"Clayton?" Jeremy called into the kitchen. "Damn it, where are—?" The squeak of his shoes as he turned. A soft intake of breath. "Wally? Stephen? What are you—?"

A thump. I dove from my hiding spot as Wally pounced on Jeremy. Not seeing me, Stephen raced across the room to join his uncle. I slammed into him and we sailed into the far wall. Stephen's eyes went wide.

"Surprised?" I said. "You wanted to fight me, you got it."

He swung, but in his haste didn't aim, and I didn't even need to duck to avoid it. I grabbed his arm, ripped it backward and heard the bone snap. Stephen howled. I put my face to his.

"What? Can't fight *me* with one arm? What about Jeremy? Care to test that boast now?"

He drove his good hand into my stomach. The air whooshed from me and I stumbled back, but when he brought his hand up again, I grabbed it and threw him over onto his back. Still holding his left hand, I took the forearm between my hands, met his wild eyes and broke the bone. While he screamed, I leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"I could stop here," I said. "You're not fighting anyone with two busted arms so, really, I should just stop. But I'm not going to. And you know why? Because you wouldn't if it was me lying there. Sooner or later, it's gonna come down to this, and I'm not taking the chance that you'll go after Jeremy again in the meantime."

He opened his mouth, but I grabbed him by the neck and snapped it before he could say anything. Then I tossed him to the floor and raced across the kitchen to where Jeremy and Wally were fighting behind the table. Jeremy had Wally in a headlock, but before he could tighten his grip, Wally managed to kick Jeremy in the stomach and wriggle free. I jumped in and grabbed Wally by the back of the shirt. Jeremy stopped. He looked up at me, met my gaze and, very slowly, shook his head. It took every ounce of will, but I forced myself to let go of Wally and step back. Jeremy sprang at him and they went down fighting.

That was the longest five minutes of my life. I knew Wally was at least as good a fighter as Jeremy, yet I also knew that Jeremy had to do this himself. So I welded my feet to the floor and I watched. Finally Jeremy got Wally back in that headlock and, with a sharp thrust on Wally's chin, he ended it.

Jeremy struggled to his feet and wiped his sleeve across the blood streaming from his split lip. His left eye was fast swelling shut.

"You okay?" he asked.

I managed a laugh. "Yeah, *I'm* fine. Let me grab some ice for that lip. Looks like you might need some stitches for it, too." I looked him over. "Is that it?"

He nodded. Silly question. He could have a dozen broken bones and he'd still wouldn't admit to any injury I couldn't see.

He stared down at Wally and Stephen and, for a moment, looked as if he might be sick.

"It should never have come to this," he said. "I don't know where—" He paused, eyes closing. "We're Pack. We don't kill—" Another glance at the bodies and a long, slow shake of his head as his eyes filled with a quiet grief.

"Yeah, it shouldn't have happened," I said as I took a bag of frozen peas from the freezer. "But you can fix that now."

"Hmmm?"

I shot a pointed look at Wally and Stephen. "Three to five. You won."

Jeremy took the peas and shook his head. "Not like that. I won't take power by killing off the other side."

"But—"

"I have an idea," he said. "One that I hope will settle this for good. You said Andrew's alive?"

"I just knocked him out."

"Good then. I'll call Antonio, see if he can get back here sooner than tomorrow night, and we'll finish this."

Nine o'clock Friday morning. We met at Stonehaven. When Malcolm arrived, Antonio ushered him into the living room with Raymond and Daniel. Seeing Andrew alive, Raymond's eyes lit up, but any remaining hope for his brother and eldest son died as Jeremy explained what had happened. When he heard the news, Raymond walked quietly to the sofa and sat down. Daniel flew at me, as if it was my fault Wally and Stephen had tried to kill Jeremy. Antonio intercepted Daniel before he got to me, then led him to a chair and signaled for Peter to guard him. Throughout it all, Malcolm just stood there, expressionless. Then he shook his head.

"I don't know how this happened," he said. "I knew they were getting restless, but I didn't think they'd try this."

Andrew's head shot up, and he opened his mouth, but a look from his father cut him short.

"So you had nothing to do with this," Jeremy said.

Malcolm's mouth tightened. "Are you calling me a liar, boy?"

"Yes, I am. I've been to Pearl's house. I found her body. You did a good job of making it look like a heart attack, but your scent was everywhere."

"That's because I went by there a couple of days ago—"

"Clay?" Jeremy cut in. "Tell us what you heard."

I related what Wally and Stephen had said in the study when they'd thought I'd been asleep. Malcolm rubbed a hand across his mouth and I could tell he was thinking fast.

"Clayton may have misinterpreted what he heard," Malcolm said carefully. "I knew Stephen was looking for an excuse to kill him and I'd forbidden it, but that was months ago—a general rule, not related to any specific circumstances."

"Bullshit!" I said, wheeling on Malcolm. "I didn't mishear—"

Jeremy raised his hand. "It's not important. If Malcolm says they acted alone, then we have to take his word for it. However, that leaves us with a problem." He turned to look at Andrew. "Conspiring to kill a Pack brother is a capital offense."

Andrew paled. "No, I—"

At a glare from Malcolm, Andrew closed his mouth.

Jeremy continued. "If Andrew acted on orders from someone he considered to be in an Alpha position, then he can't be held responsible. However, if he acted on his own, or along with his uncle and brother, the punishment is death. That's the Law."

Raymond glanced up. His gaze went first to his son, then to Malcolm, and a look passed between them. Raymond turned to his son and gave a small nod, telling him everything would be okay.

"Are you Alpha?" Malcolm asked quietly.

"No," Jeremy said.

"Then you can't make that decision, can you?"

"It's not a decision," Jeremy said. "I will abide by the Law. If Andrew acted on your command, he lives. If not, he dies. The only person who can 'decide' anything is you. Tell us what happened and, if necessary, the punishment will be carried out."

"By you?" Malcolm said, walking over to stand behind Andrew. "That is the Law, you know. He tried to kill you, therefore it's your right—and duty—to kill him yourself." He met Jeremy's gaze. "Can you do that . . . *son*?"

Jeremy looked into Malcolm's eyes. "The question isn't how far I'll go, but how far you will . . . *father*."

They locked gazes for a moment. Then Malcolm snarled, reached up . . . and broke Andrew's neck.

"That's how far I'll go," he said as Andrew's body fell to the floor.

The room went silent. Jeremy paled, as shocked as the rest of us. I glanced over at Raymond. He stared at his son's body, face contorting with pain. Then he glanced up at Malcolm and, for a second, rage replaced the grief. Malcolm tensed. Then Raymond dropped his gaze, got to his feet, put his arm around Daniel and led him from the room.

A few moments later, the front door clicked shut behind them. Malcolm launched himself at Jeremy, face twisted in a snarl. I lunged into his path, grabbed him and threw him against the wall. He recovered and shot back toward me. I braced myself, but he veered past, heading for Jeremy again. I grabbed Malcolm by the shoulders. He twisted and knocked my feet out from under me, but I kept my hold and we both went down.

Once down, and fighting, it should have been a fair match. Yet instead of trying to incapacitate me, Malcolm just kept trying to throw me off, his attention still fixed on Jeremy. Within minutes, I had him pinned, my forearm jammed against his throat. As I pressed down, he barely struggled and, for a moment, I thought this was what he wanted—a wolf's death. But then he looked into my eyes and, as his widened in disbelief, I realized he hadn't struggled because he hadn't really thought I'd kill him. But when he looked into my face, he saw his mistake. Whatever bond he thought we shared only went one way. And when he saw that, a look passed over his face, something akin to grief.

"Clayton," Jeremy said sharply. "Let him up."

I stopped pressing down on Malcolm's windpipe and looked up at Jeremy. "We can't trust him, Jer. You know we can't."

"Let him up and he'll leave. There's nothing here for him." When I hesitated, he added a soft, "Please."

As much as I wanted to finish what I'd begun, I knew Jeremy was right. With the Santoses gone, the fight for Alpha was over. Jeremy had won. To begin his reign by condoning the death of his defeated opponent would taint his Alphahood forever.

I grabbed Malcolm by the arm and yanked him to his feet. As I did, I leaned over him and whispered in

his ear, too low for Jeremy to hear.

"I'll be waiting for an excuse," I said. "Remember that."

Without waiting for a response or a reaction, I twisted him around, grabbed him by the shoulders and escorted him to the door. Then, with Jeremy behind me, we stood and watched Malcolm leave.

He didn't look back.

We never saw Malcolm again. We expected him to call for his things, but he never did. Over the next year we heard rumors that he'd been sighted here and there, tracking down the mutts with the best reputations and challenging them. Antonio thought that was his way of doing the "honorable" thing—suicide by mutt. And, eventually, he did meet one he couldn't beat. By the time the story got to us, it was six months old. Antonio went in search of the mutt who'd killed Malcolm, to confirm it. Before Antonio caught up with him, Malcolm's killer became a victim of his own success—his victory having brought him a slew of challenges, including one ambitious mutt who didn't play by the rules, and had killed him.

For a few years after that, we waited, half-expecting to return from a run one night and find Malcolm alive and well, stretched out on the sofa, beer in one hand, sandwich in the other. Finally, we packed up Malcolm's things and hauled them to the attic. Jeremy gutted Malcolm's room and made it into another guest room. Soon, there was no sign that Malcolm had ever lived at Stonehaven. For me, that exorcised him from our lives. For Jeremy, it wasn't that easy, but he had other things to occupy his attention, and keep him from dwelling on his father's fate.

As we'd feared, the fight for Alpha had indeed split the Pack in two. Only we six were left. A few months later, Ross Werner returned, and Jeremy accepted him back without comment. When another year passed with no word from Dennis and Joey, Jeremy sent me and Nick to search for them in western Canada, but it was hopeless. As Joey had said, there was plenty of room to lose yourself in up there, and he and his father had done just that.

Under Jeremy, the Pack reinvented itself, a slow but steady process that took years. We paid more attention to mutts, keeping them off our territory but at the same time watching them, and acting if they did anything to call attention to themselves and werewolves in general. In this, I became Jeremy's enforcer, along with Antonio. Before the next decade ended, Antonio would bow out of this job, and I'd have a new partner, one that would turn the Pack upside-down yet again, fill the void in my life . . . and nearly end it, on multiple occasions. But that's another story.