

## Chapter 10

I couldn't help worrying about my dad. I believed Mike. I believed he'd kill him if I went back to him. But ... I just needed to know that he was all right.

So, when Mike was dreaming with his brothers after we got home from school, I ducked out. Becky was at a friend's and who knew where Kathryn was.

Though I knew Mike was deep in dream, I also knew how good his hearing was. I didn't know how much he was aware of when he was like that. I took the phone out to the laundry, shutting both the door between the kitchen and the hall and the one between the kitchen and the laundry, and spoke as softly as I could. Paranoid I know, but I really didn't want him to hear me do this.

I rang the hospital.

He'd been discharged two days ago. Which was good, I suppose, except that when he was in hospital I could feel he was being taken care of, that he wouldn't be able to drink.

I stood there in the laundry, holding the phone tightly, not knowing what to do. I had no idea where he could have gone. He couldn't, surely, have gone back to the house, could he? The house was a wreck, but I could see him camping out there, grimly drinking himself into oblivion. The picture was so vivid I looked up, toward the house, as if I could see through the walls and the trees between us.

And saw Kathryn through the glass in the back door. As soon as she saw me looking, she opened the door and sauntered in. She looked at the phone in my hands. "Something you don't want big brother to know about?" Smiling. It wasn't a nice smile.

I couldn't think of any believable story, so I ignored the comment. "Hi, Kathryn."

"Hi Kathryn," she mimicked. She swept past me, then turned when she got to the door. "Didn't think much of your cake by the way. But then I guess it wasn't really designed for *human* consumption."

I didn't say anything. Time was I'd have turned it into a joke, but then, time was, Kathryn wouldn't have spoken to me like that. We'd always got on pretty

well I thought. Of course, that was before I'd moved into her house.

"Nice for Mom to have someone she can moon over Mike with, I guess."

*Oh.* "She was just trying to be helpful. I haven't done much baking." I knew they were the wrong words, but what else could I say? *Your mom just feels guilty. She doesn't lo- care about me like she does you.* Hard enough to form the words in my head; no way could I say them aloud. Not to mention opening up that whole can of worms thing about why her mom should feel guilty about me.

Kathryn did an eye roll. "Yeah, right. And you're not here because the poor little wild animal can't manage on his own. You always did like animals, didn't you?" She didn't wait for a reply, which was good, because I didn't have one. She opened the door and went through, and I stood there some more, not thinking at all.

Eventually I forced myself to move. I went upstairs and sat on my bed and watched Mike. His claws were out and he was pulling them through the air in a tugging rhythm that was familiar. He was purring.

It made me feel lonely, but it also reinforced my intention. Mike had tried to *kill* himself. And he had to live with all those memories in his head. And live with knowing he wasn't human, that this world wasn't really his. And what help had I been? Curled in on myself like my pathetic problems were world-shattering. And yeah, I was here because of my dad, but I was also here because Mike needed me, I didn't doubt that.

"Mike?" I didn't know I was going to speak until the word was out. And then I thought, *Hey, couldn't you have let the guy at least have this?* But I knew he needed me to be part of his world, and I hadn't tried hard enough.

"Mmm?"

"I just wondered ... um ... who's here?"

His hands stopped moving and he rolled onto his back, wiggling a bit, as if to make room, and he opened his eyes. "You mean my brothers?"

"Yeah."

He frowned like he didn't know what I was getting at.

"I just wondered which ones were here." I wasn't sure how to explain what

I was trying to do. “Just ... wanted to say hi.” That sounded stupid, but Mike’s face lit up.

“They’re not ones you’ve named.” That surprised me a little. I guess I’d assumed that those were the only ones he hung around with. His voice got dreamier and he closed his eyes, turning toward me and starting to groom someone on his right. His deepening voice rumbled in my bones. “One is from very long ago. There have been fifteen winters since he Changed. His hair is very thick, all over. The winters are very cold in his time. He has scars, many scars.”

I saw his claws retract and he traced a line through the air with one finger, as if tracing a scar. Then he twitched as if someone had moved against him and grinned. “It pleases him to spend time with a new brother. He has just seen a brother Change and found out it was his own line-brother.”

He murmured something unintelligible, his face poking the air as if nuzzling into someone’s hair. Then he drew back a little and said more loudly, “Son. The new brother has his memories.” My voice deepened even more. “A line-brother is special.”

He arched his back like a cat stretching and tipped his head back. “The other brother is younger, and from more recent times. The group he lived with is smaller, and has to live in hiding from the humans. He’s only ... oh, a year past the Change? One of his brothers — only a few months older, they were very close — he has just left the group, gone off with two older brothers, to make a new group elsewhere. The group can’t grow too large. If we steal too many females from the same area the humans will hunt us down.”

He didn’t react to what he’d said, and I guessed he was too much in Pack-mode to worry about human sensibilities. He gave a long sigh, his body looking almost boneless as he relaxed.

I said, just to say something, “You’re grooming each other.”

“Mmm.” His eyelids fluttered and his voice lightened a little, as if trying to bring himself closer to awareness. “As we touch each other our minds touch too. We can share the same memories. Dream together.”

“Is that why you sound so sleepy? Because you’re dreaming?”

“Mmm.”

“What are you dreaming about?”

“Long ago. Long before the humans began to cut down the trees, destroy our hunting ranges. We can live in a larger group. There are four hands of brothers in this group. A hand and two of females. Three hands of young ones. Two of the young ones will be Changing soon. We can smell it on them. They will dream with us this day. When the Change is complete we will take them to hunt the mammoth.”

His voice deepened. “Three brothers must be left to guard the females and the young ones. When we return we will share the memory with them.” An anticipatory smile lightened his face. “It is nearly dawn. The forest is still dark, but we can glimpse the lightening of the sky from this small clearing where the females prepare food for themselves and the young ones. The clearing has been made by the falling of one of the great trees. A stream bounds the clearing on the opposite side. The tree was rotten inside. We have hollowed it out and here the young ones sleep.

“It was a good hunt. We have given a portion of the meat to the females to cook for themselves and the young ones, and now, the rest we share among ourselves. The flesh is warm, the blood is sweet.” He gave a satisfied grunt, then stopped, and his eyes flew open as if he’d been thrown out of his dream. “Sorry.”

“S’okay.” It really didn’t bother me any more. Long as I didn’t think about it too hard, anyway. “Is that how you think life should be? I mean, you’ve got thousands — tens of thousands — of years of memories. And I guess for most of that time life was pretty much the same. I’d think ... well, doesn’t it make you think life should be like that? Even if it hasn’t been like that in the last few hundred years.”

“Yeah.” He sounded surprised, like he hadn’t thought of it before. “I guess that’s one of the problems. There’s a real ... weight ... of memory telling us how things should be. And they aren’t. They aren’t anything like how they should be.”

“So. Tell me how things should be. Describe a typical day.” I felt myself sitting straighter, eyes shining.

Mike said sharply, “I’m not a research project!” Then sat up, looking

stricken. "I'm sorry, brother. I didn't mean it like that."

I said carefully, "It *is* interesting, Mike. It's a window into a time we've only been able to guess at from a few fossils and chipped stones. You're a first-hand observer. I can't help be interested in what you remember, and I can't help wishing we could tell all those scientists dealing with this sort of stuff. But ... that's not why I'm asking."

"I know. I'm sorry." He smiled. "Okay. A typical day." His smile widened into something more convincing. "Night, actually." He sat up properly, leaning against the bed-head. "We'd wake up as the sun's setting. We'd —" He stopped, the light fading from his eyes.

I didn't know what the specific problem was, but I could guess what was worrying him. "I'm not going to judge you, Mike. Just tell it like it is, don't worry about how it sounds."

He flicked me a quick nervous glance. "Yeah, well, we sleep all together. I guess you know that anyway."

"*Everyone?*" I had this vision of forty or so people all piled up like a heap of puppies.

"Not the little brothers. Not the females. Um, the rest of us, yeah. We sleep ... all tangled up. In a sort of heap. Our ... our minds are open, y'know? While we sleep, we're all ... joined up. In our heads. You know?"

"You dream a lot."

He nodded, still eying me warily. "We spend a lot of our 'sleep' time sharing each other's memories. Catching up on what's been happening with each other. You know?"

I grinned. "No, I don't know. I can't even begin to imagine." This was actually helping. Maybe because it emphasized that he really was different, that the rules didn't apply to him. The only thing that freaked me was: "No privacy."

"No." He sounded as if he didn't quite understand that, as if he was just saying that to be agreeable, and then he frowned, and his voice changed. "It bothered me in the beginning. Not the ones in my head —" He waved vaguely. "But it bothered me that Paul knew what I was feeling, and even what I was thinking."

“It doesn’t bother you any more?”

“The opposite.” He met my eyes, looking worried, though I think it was only my reaction he was worried about. “When we wake up, we have to ... find ourselves again. Remember which one we are.” His eyes were intent, wanting my reaction. When I didn’t say anything right away, he said, “Weird, huh?”

Well, what could I say to that? That it wasn’t weird? I said instead, “Is it hard?”

He shrugged. “Not really. But it takes a little while. We groom each other for a while when we wake up.” He stopped. For a moment I thought it was just another thing he was embarrassed to mention, and then I saw the anguish, the longing, in his face, and he started to make this horrible moaning sound, which he cut off real soon, but not soon enough. “Shit!” He leaned forward, bringing up his knees and pillowing his head on his folded arms.

“I miss it so much.” His voice was muffled. “I know it’s stupid, but —”

“Why is it stupid? Why shouldn’t you miss it? You were designed for that world. You remember it. Why shouldn’t you want it?”

He lifted his head and blinked at me. “Why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you,” I said quickly, automatically. Then I took a breath. “For you, maybe.”

He studied me, frowning a little, as if he couldn’t understand why I’d be upset at his distress. “Brother?”

I had to make him understand this. “What you feel is important. You shouldn’t think something is stupid just because other people don’t understand it.”

He kept staring at me, then said quietly, “You think what you need is stupid.”

I felt my eyes widen. I hadn’t thought ... *It’s not the same*, I wanted to tell him. But then we’d have had to get into a discussion about why it wasn’t the same. I didn’t say anything.

He kept looking for a moment, then he took a deep breath and said, “We wake up. Untangle ourselves from each other. Spend a little time grooming each other. Have breakfast.” He tilted his head as if thinking about that. “The

females and little brothers eat their dinner at the same time — they're out of sync with us, eh? We found there was no point forcing the females to become night-time creatures. They need daylight to find food, do the other stuff they do. You know, look after the kids, make clothes, weave baskets, stuff like that."

"They're awake when you're asleep?" That surprised me. How could they keep the women captive if they weren't awake at the same time?

He gave a short sharp laugh. "They're guarded. We take turns." His eyes flicked to mine, and then away. "Anyway, most of them don't try to escape after the first few days. They know they've run out of choices. They know they wouldn't be welcome back even if they could find their own people. Not once we've —" He waved his hand. "You know." He said the word anyway. "Raped women are usually badly treated by their men. And the humans developed all sorts of superstitions about us. No way the men would let women who've been touched by us survive. The women know their only chance of survival rests with us. Anyway, it's not such a bad life for them. Better than they'd have with their own people."

I didn't say anything, but he responded as if I had. "They eat better! And don't tell me that's not important. When you've spent half your life on the borderline of starvation you know how to value food. I've known women *give* us their daughters just to make sure they'd have enough to eat!"

I tried to turn the conversation to a less controversial topic. "The children are raised in the day, too, then?"

Mike settled. "Yeah. We see them at the beginning and end of the day. They eat with us. We play with them. And of course there are the brothers who are guarding the women. They are there for the little brothers too."

"Never any little sisters." I smiled, just trying to lighten the atmosphere, but Mike's face tightened.

"Sometimes there are girl children," he said grimly. "It's easier if you get them young." He didn't look at me.

*O-okay.* That was a conversation-stopper. But I managed to gather myself. "So, how does the rest of your day go?"

He gave me another quick glance, then shrugged. "We hunt. We usually

travel quite a distance from our camp, so that takes a bit of time. We split up into groups of three or four unless we're going after something big."

"Hunt all night?"

He shook his head. "We're not incompetent. Our diet's mostly all meat, but even so, it's not usually hard to get enough." He grimaced. "Well, depending on how much prey's around. Sometimes we can spend all night hunting and still go hungry. But most of the time it's okay. I guess we'd spend, oh, maybe three hours hunting? Max. Counting traveling time."

"So what do you do the rest of the time?"

"Play. Groom each other." His voice dropped. "We spend a lot of time grooming each other, sharing ... our thoughts, our feelings. Our memories."

I reminded myself I'd started this conversation to try and help him. Was this helping? I wasn't sure.

But I remembered how he'd responded when I doubted his memories. This was important to him, that I believe in his visions. He needed to be able to talk about them and know I believed in them, didn't think he was crazy.

And this *had* helped, even if it had been hard for him. I told him, "I guess I'll have to believe in your memories. You never had that much imagination."

There was a moment's pause while I panicked that I'd read this wrong, that this wasn't what he needed from me, and then he turned his head to look at me, and his eyes shone silver — a sign of pleasure, I knew — and he said, "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He grinned at me — a wide, jaw-dropping grin. Then he cocked his head and said, "Paul's home."

"You want to go down?" I started to scoot off the bed. He and Paul were still not touching, but they liked to be around each other and they seemed to find it easier if I was there too. I wasn't sure why, maybe it was just that Mike knew I couldn't properly relax when he wasn't close, even when he was only a few rooms away.

"Mm." He didn't move right away though.

"Mike?"

"He nearly killed us once, you know."

“What?” I remembered him saying something about that at the hut, but noone had explained, and with everything else going on, I’d forgotten about it.

“When I was very young. When his brother, his father died.” Mike had wrapped his arms around his chest and was hugging himself tightly. “There were probably other times when he thought about it. If it had just been him, it would have happened. But he couldn’t leave me to be alone. He couldn’t do that to me. And it was a lot harder to kill both of us. But, coming back from burying his father ... he nearly did it.”

I guess I should have been more shocked about that than I was. But it was only too understandable. Like Mike’s attempt. I hadn’t been shocked because I didn’t understand why he’d wanted to do it. I’d been shocked because, selfishly, I couldn’t imagine living without him. I don’t know why Mike had revealed this now — maybe he was trying to tell me why he didn’t push his dad harder — but it was something else that I took from the story. “So you kept him alive.” He looked at me and I could see his confusion, that he hadn’t thought about it like that. “Like me.”

I watched him take two long slow breaths. I waited, forcing myself not to look away, not even when he asked, “How much did you think about it?”

My nerves were jangling, gut fluttering, but I forced myself to go on. This wasn’t the bad stuff; I could say this. And it would be something to give him. “Oh, I worked it all out. The method’s changed a bit over the years. Since I was twelve, it’s been the same though.” My heart was speeding. I was so damn tired of feeling like this. I didn’t try to pretend this didn’t matter, I just said the words, let them lie there. “Drowning. I thought that’d be nice, you know? I mean, I guess if you’re fighting it, it can be pretty nasty, but if you’re tired ... I don’t swim well, you know that.” I’d managed to avoid swimming since my dad had marked me for keeps. “So I figured it wouldn’t be hard for me. Just go out as far as I could, and let the sea take me.”

“You have a particular place in mind?” I could hear the effort in his voice as he tried to speak as flatly as I had.

“Up the coast. You know the place. Lots of rocks to hide me, fairly deserted, open sea ...”

“We went on a class trip to see the seals. When we were twelve.”

“Yeah. I worked out the buses and everything.”

“I remember that year. That winter. It was a bad winter.”

“Mm.”

He drew in a breath, let it out again. This time I could hear the concern and the grief in his voice. “What happened that winter, brother?”

I sat down on the edge of my bed, feeling as weary as if I’d run a marathon. But the panic was gone. There was a lesson there, if I could bear to hear it.

“Nothing. Nothing different. It just ... I don’t know ... I guess I realized it was never going to change. That whatever I did, he wasn’t going to stop.”

Mike swung his legs over the side of his bed and sat there opposite me, leaning forward as if to close the distance between us. “I was so scared. All winter. You sat like a ghost in the corner of this room, and hardly spoke. All bloody winter.”

“You made me play chess.” I found I was smiling. It was ludicrous. Mike was not a game player.

“Well I couldn’t let you just sit there for hours, could I?”

“And you read out loud to me.” I hadn’t thought about this for a long time. I met his eyes, the smile still playing about my mouth. “That was pretty weird, actually. What made you think of it?”

“Had to do something. And the novelty of winning every chess game wore off after a while.” He grinned, then added quietly, “I wanted to keep you from thinking.”

“Yeah, well, it did that.” I sat there, looking at him, remembering that twelve-year-old boy, stumbling through books, playing games he didn’t enjoy, doggedly talking to me, doing everything he could think of to distract me.

“Why?” Mike asked very quietly. “Why *didn’t* you kill yourself? If you were so unhappy.”

How could he know all that he knew — know how much I had needed him to do what he’d done, even though I never responded; know how I panicked when he left me, how I’d fallen apart when he’d gone — and not know this? “I told you,” I reminded him. “It was you.”

“You never talked to me about it.”

“No.” I rubbed the back of my neck, then realized it was Mike’s gesture. A

twitch of his lips showed he'd recognized it too. I made a noise that was almost a laugh and told him, "It was, like, a bet with myself. When I really came close ... like that winter ... I had a ... sort of arrangement. If you weren't there ... if you said anything that made me feel you didn't ... want me around ... then I'd do it." I closed my eyes briefly, then forced them open again. I was *not* going to wimp out of this. "You never did. You were always there when I needed you. You never made me feel I wasn't wanted."

He looked stricken. I hadn't meant to make him feel bad; I'd wanted him to realize what he'd done for me, how grateful I was.

He said, "I'm sorry, Dave."

"Why? You did it. You kept me alive."

"It freezes my blood to think how close you came to giving up. To think ... that it all rode on what I said, how I said it, how I looked."

*Oh now that sounded pathetic.*

His face changed again. "Dave, I —"

I stood up. "We should go down, help your dad with dinner."

He stood up too, but he wasn't going to let me go that easily. "Brother, I'm glad I was there for you. It just freaks me out that I could have lost you."

"I know." I shrugged. "I just wanted to ... say thank you."

He looked at me a moment more, his tongue flicking out to taste the air, then he grinned and said expansively, "Hey, what are brothers for?" He touched my shoulder. "Come on then. Let's go down."

## Chapter 11

Dinners were getting less stressful. I guess the time I'd spent with Mike's mom meant I was getting more relaxed around her, and Mike and Paul seemed to have reached some sort of accommodation, though I suspected it was more of the band-aid-over-the-wound than any true healing. Whatever. We could fake light conversation now, and that was enough for me.

Kathryn, of course, had to ruin it.

Halfway through the meal, interrupting her mom's light rant about the morning traffic on the Bridge, she looked across the table at Mike and me and said abruptly, "Big plans for Saturday, I hear. Sure you can handle it?"

For a panicky moment I thought she was talking to me.

Mike said calmly, "Why shouldn't I be able to?"

Maggie raised her eyebrows, clearly asking what they were talking about. Mike said, "Dave and I are taking Lin and Sue to the Save-a-life dance." He flicked a glance at Kathryn. "Little sister's got big ears."

"Was it private?" Snarky.

Mike didn't respond to the tone. "No. Just wondering where you heard it."

She shrugged. "Around." Her mouth curled in a sneer. "Some people think what you do is worth gossiping about."

Mike just smiled. I wondered if he was really this calm, or he was controlling himself because he knew how I was feeling.

Maggie said quickly, "It sounds fun." There was relief in her voice, as if she truly thought this was a sign of returning normalcy, that Mike's and my problems could be solved simply by acting like regular teenagers. Kind of like she'd been when my arm had come out of its sling — as if the disappearance of the visible hurt made everything better.

I sat there, not saying anything, praying noone would say anything to me directly. I didn't want to talk about the dance; I'd been trying hard not to think about it ever since the girls had pushed us into doing this. I didn't think a crowded, noisy dance floor was something Mike could handle easily either, but I guess he was prepared to do anything that might help Lin get back with him. Which was why I'd agreed. Not because I gave a shit about what people were

saying about me.

Okay. Not true. But I was more scared of the date.

*It's a dance, not a date.*

*Yeah. And there's not going to be any slow, lets-get-close dances. Right.*

Kathryn couldn't resist poking some more. "Wouldn't have thought it was really an animal thing." She grinned nastily. "Can you see a pack of dogs dancing?" She gave a fake laugh.

Her mom said quietly, "Kathryn."

"What? We can't talk about what he is? It's not like he's hiding it." Her stare challenged her mom to deny it. I wondered who she was maddest at, her mom or her brother? Not that it mattered. The fallout fell on all of us.

Mike said easily, "You're right, dancing isn't really our thing. And I'm going to hate the noise and all the people around me. But I love Lin, and she wanted to go." His eyes held hers. "That's what we do for people we love."

Kathryn managed to hold his gaze for about two seconds, then she thrust herself up, grabbing her plate and taking it across to the sink.

Maggie said, "K—" and Paul gave a swift shake of his head. She stopped. She didn't look happy about it, but she stopped. Kathryn rinsed the plate and dropped it in the dishwasher with small, jerky movements, and stomped out of the room.

Maggie looked at Paul.

He said, "Give her a few minutes to calm down."

In a small voice, Becky said, "What's wrong with her?"

Mike said flatly, "She doesn't think anyone loves her, Beck."

Becky looked uncomprehending. Maggie gave Mike an angry glare, then softened her expression as she turned to her youngest child. "She's just going through a bad stage, sweetheart. She knows we all love her, but right now —."

"No," Mike interrupted. "She doesn't."

Maggie swung round, the anger back in her face and voice. "Mike, I don't think —."

"Ask your husband. He knows. Kathryn *doesn't* know you love her. She really doesn't."

The anger drained from Maggie's face as quickly as it had come. She

looked at Paul. His face as weary and grieved as hers, he nodded. “Mike’s right. She needs —.” He lifted a hand, let it fall. “I don’t know what she needs.”

Maggie nodded, slowly. Then she stood up and left the room.

Becky looked from her father to Mike to me. I wanted someone to take away that confusion in her eyes, but I didn’t know what to say.

Mike said, “You’re not her, pumpkin. Whatever’s going on with her has nothing to do with you.”

Not helping. Becky’s look of confusion didn’t fade. She said, unhappily, “I don’t want her to be unhappy.”

Paul said gently, “All we can do right now is try and show her we love her. And have patience.”

I could almost see the retort on Mike’s face, but Paul flicked him a glance and he kept his mouth shut.

It was late when Paul and Mike went for their run. I knew that was their preference and I had said it was okay, that I’d be fine reading. I was tired of using others to distract me from my panic.

Okay, it was because of the thing with Kathryn. Maggie was *her* mom, not mine. I shouldn’t be trying to take her from Kathryn. Not that I was, but she obviously saw it that way. And Maggie had enough to worry about with her children, she didn’t need me in the mix.

I lay on my bed and tried to read. Then — I felt embarrassed about it even though there was no one to see me — I took my book over to Mike’s bed. It smelled of him.

It was so stupid. Pathetic. Embarrassing.

It was comforting.

I lay on my side, head on Mike’s pillow, breathing in the smell of him. My eyes ran over the page, but none of it was going in. I don’t know where my mind was.

When the shout came, I stopped breathing.

I dropped the book. I tried to tell myself it was the TV, or someone at another house, and anyway it was no one I knew. I wanted to hide.

I wondered if Maggie was still up; if she'd locked the back door. That thought was enough to panic me, but I still couldn't make myself move.

The shouting went on, and though I couldn't hear most of the words — didn't *want* to hear — I couldn't deny anymore who it was. Then I heard Kathryn out in the hall, asking what was going on. And I heard a murmur of another voice, and knew Maggie was there.

I had to get up. This was my fault, my problem. I had to deal with it.

I couldn't move.

Then I thought of Maggie going down the stairs and opening the door to him, and I moved.

I got out into the hallway and Kathryn was standing at the top of the stairs looking down, and I ran toward her and saw her mother nearly at the bottom, and I called softly, "Maggie!" She turned to look at me. I started down the stairs. "Don't open the door."

Her hair was loose and she had on a pale blue dressing gown. Her face was tense and anxious, but not scared. "I wasn't going to."

I caught up to her. "Is the back door locked?" He was shouting outside the front door, directly in front of us, but eventually he'd think of it.

She nodded. A small part of my tension relaxed, but only a small part.

She went down the last steps and moved toward the door. I whispered, "Don't!" Not caring right then, not even thinking right then, how pathetically terrified I sounded.

She looked back at me, and I hated the pity in her face, and the gentleness in her voice. "I'm not going to open the door, Dave. I'm just going to talk to him."

"No!" I shook my head vehemently. "It'll just make him worse."

She looked at me, really looked at me, and I felt ... utterly pathetic. But I held her gaze, cos I *knew*, knew with all my heart, knew with the experience of sixteen years of living with him, that what I said was true.

The words came through the door, loud and clear. "I just want to talk to him! Come on, he's my son." Wheedling. And then the bluster. "You can't keep him from me! He's mine, not yours!" Banging on the door. "Open the damn door and let me talk to him!" Back to wheedling. "Has he been telling

lies about me? You can't trust him you know."

I closed my eyes. I didn't want anyone to hear this. I wanted to tell Maggie to go away. Shut herself in her bedroom, close her ears.

He banged the door again and it rattled. I flinched.

Maggie put a hand on my arm. "He can't get in, Dave."

I opened my eyes. I didn't want to, but ... it was her house, she had two young daughters to protect, and she was worried about *me*. But what could I say? That once he'd worked himself up enough, he'd break a window? I'd go out there if he did that. I owed them that. And it wasn't like it was new to me.

I couldn't let him touch anyone else.

Maggie patted my shoulder and turned toward the door, calling out, "Peter? I'm calling the police if you don't calm down."

There was a moment's silence, then, "Maggie?" The drunken slur was so clear in his voice when he lowered it like that. "Hey, let me in, Maggie, I just want to talk."

"It's late, Peter. Why don't you come back when you're sober."

"You think I'm drunk?" The familiar noone-understands-me tone was in his voice. Standing there, hearing it, knowing other people were hearing it, I wanted to disappear into the floor. I stared down at my feet, my face hot.

"You think I'm drunk?" This time he shouted it. "I'm upset, that's what I am! And why am I upset, Maggie? You've stolen my son from me! You can't keep him from me, you know! He's mine!"

"No, *he's mine*."

At the snarled words, the gravel-deep voice, ferocious in its anger, my head jerked up. I felt the blood drain out of my face. I'd forgotten, I'd forgotten the danger. I felt Maggie's hand on mine, realized my hand was on the door, ready to unlock it, to go out there. Her hand stopped me. I looked at her, frantic. Didn't she realize what Mike would do?

And then I heard the same voice again, but calmer, without that fierce, lusting hate. "Come on, Peter, I'll take you home." And the panic drained out of me. I'd forgotten about Paul. Paul would control Mike. Paul would take care of it.

I felt myself relax, my hand falling away, Maggie's hand falling with mine.

Looking into her eyes, I saw the same relief. She put her hand on my back and pushed me gently away from the door, toward the kitchen. Speaking quietly, maybe just so I wouldn't hear the petulant conversation on the other side of the door. "Let's go get a drink, Dave. A nice hot cup of tea. Or chocolate if that's what you want. I don't know how you can drink chocolate this late."

Chivvying me along, her hand still on my back.

As we passed the foot of the stairs, her voice changed, and she called softly, "Excitement's over, Kathryn. Go back to bed."

I felt myself flush again. I'd forgotten about Kathryn. Bad enough Maggie had heard that. Kathryn —.

I couldn't think about that. I let myself be herded into the kitchen, and as I entered, Mike came through the laundry, his face dark and enraged. He came straight at me, ignoring his mother. "You okay?" Not waiting for a reply, he pushed his face into my hair, breathing in my smell. I stood there passively.

Maggie said, "Mike, how about giving Dave some space?" Surprise in her voice, and something else.

Mike ignored her. I didn't think it was on purpose; I think he genuinely hadn't registered her.

I felt a tremble in my muscles. Reaction I guess. Mike made a low rumbling sound, his mouth still against my hair, then his head moved, and his tongue flicked out across my face, and his mom said, "Mike!" Shocked, disbelieving.

Even through my embarrassment, I couldn't help being amazed. *She really doesn't know what they are.* It hit me then, as it hadn't really before, just what Mike's dad had done. I'd only been around Mike as Pack-brother for a few weeks, but I already understood how deeply the need to touch went, and the forms that it took. I couldn't imagine how Paul had denied it all these years, not with the behavior imprinted in his cells by tens of thousands of remembered history.

For the first time, I understood what Mike meant when he said his father was insane.

But it *was* embarrassing to have Mike behave this way in front of his mom.

I said, "Mike." Couldn't manage any more than that one word, but I hoped it would be enough.

He stilled, then moved back. Just his head; his body was still bare inches from mine. But personal space wasn't something he had any concept of anymore, not between brothers.

That was a weirdly comforting thought.

Reassured that I was okay, the rage returned. I saw that in his face, in the shift of his body from protective concern to barely-contained violence, in the snarl that was just on the edge of human hearing. I didn't flinch. That surprised me, but maybe it was because the rage reminded me of the cause, and the hot tide of shame enveloped me again. And something else, that I didn't want to put a name to.

Maggie said, determinedly cheerful, "I'm putting the kettle on. Do you want some coffee, Mike?" Guess she was trying the ignore-the-weirdness-of-my-son-and-maybe-he-won't-be-so-weird strategy. Good luck with that.

Mike's snarl became a deep, gut-twisting growl. I wished Paul was here. To make things perfect, I heard Kathryn come up behind me. "Someone going to tell me what that was all about? Hey, what's up with wolf-boy?"

Mike looked over my shoulder. There was this weird light in his eyes, and when the growl turned back to a snarl, and his muscles bunched as if he was about to pounce, I had this terrifying thought that he was about to go for her. I heard this squeak from Kathryn, which said I wasn't alone in that thought.

But before I could say anything, he relaxed. He shut his jaws with a snap and sucked in air through his nose, and the glow left his eyes, leaving them black.

Maggie said, "I'm afraid Dave's father had been drinking." The finality in her voice said that she didn't see any need to discuss the matter. But Kathryn wasn't going to be put off so easily.

"Does that a lot, does he, Dave?"

She wanted to punish me for the secrets her parents had kept from her. I told myself that, and it didn't help. It didn't matter that it wasn't really me that she wanted to hurt; it still hurt.

Mike said, his voice rough, "It's none of your business, sis."

At the same time, Maggie was saying the same thing, only more politely. I didn't want this. They were trying to protect me, but I didn't want to be another

reason for the anger between Kathryn and her family. I turned around to face her.

“Yeah, he does a lot of that.” My voice was flat, no shake I could hear. Something at least.

“That why you’ve wormed yourself into this family? Because your father’s a drunk?”

I didn’t let Maggie’s angry exclamation, or Mike’s more physical response, stop me. I put a hand on Mike’s arm, and said, “Yeah.”

She stared at me. I could almost see the cogs whirring in her head. Remembering, maybe, all the ‘accidents’ over the years, all the times she’d heard me sneaking into Mike’s room late at night. She nodded at my arm. “Does he beat you up when he’s drunk?” She was looking at me like she’d never seen me before, like I was some sort of weird creature she’d heard about, but never thought to see.

I said, “Sometimes.” My voice was still steady. I was going to fall apart when this was over, but I could do this. I could do this.

Mike said, “So now you know, little sister, why he’s not going back. Ever. He’s my brother. He’s part of this family. We clear on that?”

The look in her eyes, that I’d prayed to see gone, vanished in a look of clear contempt. Not really an improvement. I didn’t want to hear what she was going to say.

Maggie must have felt the same, because as soon as Kathryn opened her mouth, her mom was on it. “Boys, why don’t you go upstairs?” She came over to us with two mugs in her hands. She handed us one each.

I said, quickly, before Mike could refuse, because I could tell he was spoiling for a fight, “Good idea. Thanks.” I started moving, hoping Kathryn would move out of the way without me having to ask. And praying she wouldn’t say anything.

For a wonder, she didn’t.

## Chapter 12

Mike managed to hold it together for a while — long enough for me to drink my chocolate anyway — but the rage smoked off him, visible in the swift, controlled tension of his body, the growl in his voice, the burning in his eyes. And I couldn't seem to stop myself making excuses for my dad, though I knew how Mike would react. No surprise he lost it. Maybe that was what I wanted.

“You need to be reminded what that bastard *did* to you? You want me to tell you every single bone he's broken and when? Cos I could. I can date every damn scar on your body!”

“I know.” I squeezed out the words.

“He *hurt* you. Say it. Go on. Say the words: my dad hurt me.”

I licked my dry lips, heart hammering.

“Say it!”

I couldn't.

“*Why can't you say it?*”

And the words spilled out. “Because I don't want to believe my own father did that to me! I don't want to believe I was so utterly pathetic as to let someone do all that to me! *Can't you understand that?*”

I couldn't believe I'd said that.

I curled up on my bed, my eyes tight closed, listening to my heart pound, trying not to hear Mike's silence.

When he finally spoke, his voice was quite different. I heard him close, like he was squatting right beside my bed, his head close to mine. “Do you know why I call you little brother?”

I uncurled a little and opened my eyes. Tried to make a joke of it. “Because you're six weeks older?”

He smiled. “No.” Not saying any more. Waiting for a real answer. I looked away.

“Because ... you think of me as a child?”

“No.” There was a pause. I heard his breathing change. The tightness in it suggested he was nervous too. I looked back. “It *can* simply mean brothers

before the Change — children — but it also has a ... more specific meaning.” He was watching me carefully. “It means ... brother that I watched grow. Brother that I raised, protecting him from enemies, feeding him, giving him love and warmth and companionship. It means ...” He hesitated. “Humans would say ‘son’.”

For a moment I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t know what I was feeling. But I pulled myself together somehow, and asked, not bothering to sound as if I was making a joke, we both knew it wasn’t, “You think you’re my father?”

“You’re my best friend, and my brother, and I grew up with you. And I failed to protect you, and I failed to take care of you properly.” He took a deep breath. “But I tried. And I wanted to. I still want to. More than anything else I want in this world, I want to take care of you. I know you’re not a little kid anymore, and I know I’m not your father. But, Dave ... you’re the closest thing I’m ever going to have to a son.”

I couldn’t handle this. What I was feeling. I shut down.

Mike leaned close. Sounding different now. Not unsure anymore. “Tell me you don’t want that. That you don’t want what you missed out on. A loving parent. Someone you can count on. Someone who’ll love you whatever you do. Someone who’ll take care of you.”

I breathed.

“Dave, I *want* to take care of you. I’ve wanted to take care of you for ten years.” Desperation in his voice, and then, a deep breath, a change in his voice, gentler now. “It’s not going to last for ever. Right now you need this. You need to feel loved and protected and cared for. And I need you to let me love you and protect you and take care of you. So can you just relax and let us have this?”

I swallowed. “I feel that ... the more I ... give in to what I’m feeling ... the more out-of-control I’m going to be.”

“Mmm. That’s probably true, if you think out-of-control means talking about what happened to you, and crying, and wanting me around all the time, and panicking if I’m not there.” His hand reached out, hovered over my hair. “But you need this. You can’t keep on denying what you feel.” He paused. “Don’t you think I’m a safe person to fall apart on?”

I mumbled, “It’s boring, having someone crying on your shoulder all the time.”

He hovered his hand over my hair and I moved my head fractionally toward him, and he lowered his hand. “Little brother, you could cry in my arms every night for a year and I wouldn’t be bored.”

I tried to joke it away. “At least I’m old enough not to wet the bed.” Where had that come from? *Not funny, Dave.*

Mike said matter-of-factly, “Wouldn’t matter if you did. You think I haven’t been pissed on before?” He shrugged. “The Pack sleeps all together. And sometimes brothers are sick.” A movement. I thought I felt his tongue flick out and touch my head lightly, didn’t know whether I was imagining it. “Is that what happened when your mom left? Did you start wetting the bed?”

How did he see so much? I mumbled, “I guess.”

He rubbed his face against my head. “No guess. You remember.”

A long silence. Then I sighed. “Yeah.”

“You were only six.”

“Old enough.”

“Is that what he told you? That you were too old to wet the bed?”

“Well, I was.”

“Mm.” He started to groom my hair. “Your mom had walked out on you. And she left you with that shit. It’s reason enough, little brother.”

I realized I was burrowing into him, like the little kid he thought me. Heard myself talking, couldn’t stop it, didn’t try. “He wouldn’t change the sheets. Wouldn’t let me change them. I had to sleep in them every night, and ... and ... I kept doing it. Every night. And the mattress got all ... Everything stank. He made me wear the same pajamas ... I can still remember what it felt like ... putting them on ... feeling them against my skin ... smelling ... it got worse and worse ... and I kept ... I kept thinking everyone would be able to smell it on me ... and know ... He wouldn’t even let me have a bath! I had to ... to wash myself at the basin ... with a facecloth. But I couldn’t get rid of the smell! I knew ... I knew I stank of it ... and everyone would know ...’

“Know what? That you didn’t have a mom to take care of you? That you were a disgusting little boy who deserved for his mom to leave him?”

His voice was angry. I knew it wasn't aimed at me, but I felt myself curling, digging into him, trying to hide. He said fiercely, "Or that you were being raised by a sadistic bastard who should never have been allowed near a child? Dave, for Christ's sake, it wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault your mom left. It wasn't anything you did. It wasn't because you were disgusting ... or noisy ... or rude ... or messy. She was leaving *him*, not you."

"She took *them*." God, I sounded like I really was six years old.

He sighed, his arm hugging me tightly. "Not because there was anything wrong with *you*. Dave, you didn't deserve it. You didn't do anything to deserve it." He paused. "I didn't leave you because of anything you did, either." His voice was suddenly hesitant.

"I know."

"No, you don't *know*. Maybe you know it with your head, but you don't know it in your heart. And why should you? I left you. You trusted me, and I abandoned you, to *him*. Like she did." He pushed his face into my hair and I felt his warm breath. "Oh my brother, I'd do anything never to have done that."

*But you did*. I couldn't believe the petulance of that thought. Did I really feel so resentful? I knew why he'd done it. He had reason enough.

"I wouldn't have come back for anyone else. I'm sorry I went off my head and forgot about you, abandoned you. But I came back. I wouldn't have come back for anyone else."

"What about Paul?" *What happened to thinking before you speak?* I felt like someone else had taken me over.

Mike said evenly, "If he'd come without you, I would have sucked him into the Pack. We'd both still be there. I wouldn't have come back for him, little brother. Or for Mom. Or even for Linn. Only for you."

I breathed. Breathing in the smell of him, feeling the warmth of him. I didn't think. Then, barely audible even to myself, I heard myself ask, "Why?"

He breathed out. A long, sighing breath. His voice dropped a register. He said very softly, "It's dark and cold and very quiet. The sky is full of cloud and there's a smell of coming rain. I'm standing at the back door, looking out into the night. I'm nervous, a little frightened. I'm very young and I've never been downstairs on my own at this time of night. And there's something else, more

frightening. My best friend standing on our doorstep in his pajamas, in the middle of the night. His eyes wide and frightened and filled with tears. His face is dirty. He says nothing. And I know he can't say anything, that he's desperate and frightened and there's an ... emptiness ... a feeling of being on the edge of a deep hole, leading nowhere. And there's pain. He's been hurt."

*"Quick!" I hiss at Davey, wondering if I need to step outside and drag him in. But he steps forward obediently into the house and I shut the door and turn the key. I walk past him to lead the way, get as far as the kitchen door and stop, hearing the uncertain shuffle.*

*"Can't you see?" He shakes his head, then opens his mouth.*

*Before he can speak I go back to him and take his hand. The hand stiffens, then clutches at me convulsively. I hold it firmly, awed by its icy coldness, its trembling tension. Taking a slow step forward, and then another, I drift closer so that our arms touch.*

*It seems to take forever to cover the distance to my bedroom. We have to go very slowly up the stairs, afraid Mommy will hear if there is any noise. I breathe a sigh of relief when at last I shut the bedroom door behind us.*

*I am still holding Davey's hand. It grips me as if he thinks it is his only hope of safety. I can feel the iciness of his flesh through both sets of pyjamas. I lead him over to my bed.*

*"You get in first," I whisper. I have some hazy idea he'll feel safer if I am between him and the door. He hesitates. "Go on." I give him a gentle push. He climbs in obediently and I follow, drawing the duvet around us.*

*He lies, rigid, on his back. I settle close to him, not sure what to do, wondering if Davey is ever going to talk again. My tongue feels stiff and unwieldy, my mouth dry. I'm scared, I realize after a moment. But I'm not sure what I'm scared of.*

*I turn onto my side, to face Davey, and tentatively reach out a hand. For a moment he remains rigid, then suddenly he relaxes completely, rolling onto his side and burying his face in my chest. I pull the duvet over our heads and in the warm darkness wrap my arms around him.*

*I rock him gently.*

*I can feel his mouth opening and closing against me. I'm not sure how he*

*can breathe with his face so tight against me, but I suppose he will come up for air if he really needs to. My pajama shirt grows wetter and wetter. I feel so helpless. Maybe I should get Mommy? If only Daddy was here.*

*Thinking of Daddy, I rub Davey's back, the way Daddy does when I'm upset about something.*

*"I didn't do it!"*

*The words are muffled, but on the third repetition I think I understand.*

*"Didn't do what?"*

*"What he said." Davey has turned his head a little, but he stays pressed against me. He is still shaking, but not as much as before.*

*"Who?"*

*"My dad. He said I did. He said ... it wasn't my fault!" He turns his head back, muffling his sobs against me.*

*"I know," I murmur automatically, resuming my stroking. "I know you didn't, I believe you, I know you didn't do it." I wonder what "it" is.*

*"You can't know." The small voice is truculent.*

*"I know because you said it just now," I explain patiently. "You said you didn't do it, and I believe you."*

*"You do?" The voice is wondering. Davey lifts his head and looks up at me. His eyes, swimming with unshed tears, are wide and amazed. "You believe me?"*

*"Of course I do."*

*He blinks at me. The tears spill over and trickle down his dirty face. His nose is running and there are streaks of snot across his cheek where he smeared it rubbing his face against me.*

*"You're my best friend," I tell him.*

*He takes a deep gulping breath, then says, "Do you think it's my fault? It isn't my fault, is it, Mike?" He doesn't wait for an answer. He drops his head back down on me. I tighten my hold, feeling his heart thudding against me. The sound, the feel of it, so close, distresses me. I feel fiercely protective.*

*I'm too small to protect anyone, I think sadly. But I will, Davey, I promise silently, I'll keep you safe. As much as I can.*

*I say, "Didn't your mommy believe you either?"*

*I feel him stiffen. For a terrible moment I think he's going to roll away, out of my arms. Reflexively I tighten my grip. Then he mutters, "She's not there." There is a crack in the muffled voice.*

*I suddenly have a feeling that we are standing on the edge of a cliff, that Davey is going to say something and nothing, for either of us, will ever be the same. I freeze, hardly daring to breathe.*

*He says, "She's gone. They've all gone. She took the girls. She didn't take me." And as he says those terrible words he takes a deep, sucking breath. I pull his head back down against me, to muffle the great tearing sobs. My own body shakes with them. Dry-eyed, I bite my bottom lip to keep from screaming. I don't know how to release this pain inside me.*

*I rock him, and think, I'll keep you safe! I will!*

I could feel the tears thickening inexorably in my chest, my throat, in the cavities behind my eyes and nose. Mike said quietly, in a different voice, "Dave, you can piss on me, or throw up on me, or cry on me. It won't make any difference. I won't run out on you again. You're my brother. You don't disgust me, and I don't despise you. I love you."

I tried to breathe.

"Brother?"

I took another breath, still couldn't speak, but I gave Mike a pat, trying to say it was okay, and slid off the bed and headed for the door. I felt his eyes on my back, but he must have understood, because he didn't say anything. I went to the bathroom. Shutting the door behind me, I leaned against it, closing my eyes while I tried to pull myself together. Sometimes I didn't know what Mike was to me. Father? *Mother?*

The only person who ever cared about me, that's who he was.

I swallowed, dragging my hands through my hair, then shaking my head, like that would get my head right. Then I took another breath, and walked back to my brother.

I sat down on my bed, looking down at my feet, and said very softly, knowing Mike would hear me however softly I spoke, "I've never forgotten that night. I mean, not like you remember it. But ... I know what happened. I know it was the first time he hit me. I know I hid in the garden a long long

time, until I was so cold I thought I might die. I know I got to your room somehow. Most of it's ... like something I read. I know those things happened, but I don't really remember it. There's just, you know, the odd image." I felt myself blushing, hoped the darkness would hide it, realized how stupid that was. I made myself go on. "You made me feel safe. Holding me." I swallowed. "That's what I've always remembered. Feeling really warm and safe. All the way through."

And how pathetic was that?

But I put that thought aside and forced the words out. He deserved them, and I kept enough to myself. "Maybe that's why ... you've always been the only place I felt safe. I was always so tense in that house. As soon as I went through the door my stomach would knot. Even if he wasn't there."

"It's gone now. Someone will buy the lot and pull down what's left of the house and put up something new and it'll be like it never existed."

"It's not that easy."

He sighed. "I know. It's just ... I want to take all that stuff away from you. Make it like it never happened."

I felt myself tense. Didn't know why. What was so bad about that? Wasn't that what I wanted?

Mike echoed my thought. "What's so bad about that?"

My heart was pounding. What *was* so bad about that? I said, not knowing what I was going to say until I'd said it, "Mike ... it happened. It's part of me, part of what makes me what I am." I didn't know who I'd be without those memories. *Like you know who you are now?*

I took a deep breath. "If you had the chance to have your memories of the Pack wiped clean, would you take it?"

He was silent a long time, while I waited, heart pounding, wondering if I'd said the wrong thing. Then he said, "No. You're right. Our memories have made us, are part of us. I don't want to be other than I am. I don't want *you* to be other than you are." He made a huffing sound like the not-quite laugh you make when something is definitely not funny. "It'd be nice if we could wave a magic wand and have the past not matter. But it matters, and it's always going to matter. But ... brother? I wish to hell you'd talk to me about it. Not sit on

your misery like a chook with an egg.”

Why was this so hard? I trusted him. He lo- ... cared about me. Heck, I'd survived all that shit from my dad. Why was this so damn hard?

I mumbled, “I'm ashamed.”

“So am I.” He snorted again. “You think you've got a monopoly, bro?”

“It's not your fault what you are.”

“It's not your fault what he did,” Mike countered.

*Oh come on.*

I guess Mike interpreted my silence well enough. He didn't speak right away, and when he did, he spoke with a reluctance that said clearly enough that he didn't want to be saying this.

“You'd think anyone with as many memories as I have wouldn't need to fantasize. Although ... we spend so much time in our heads, maybe it's not surprising. I don't know. Anyway, I have this ... fantasy ... I like to think about sometimes. Too often, maybe. I've had it a long time. It's got worse as I've got older.” He stopped, took a deep breath. I was pretty sure I didn't want to hear what a Pack-brother might fantasize, but I knew he was trying to help, and who knows, maybe it would.

“Maybe before I tell you what my fantasy is, I should explain why I'm telling you. I don't want you to take it the wrong way.” He stopped again. “It's not what happens, it's the way I feel. I'm ashamed of that. Ashamed of how I feel. Ashamed that I keep doing it — thinking about it.” He hesitated, ran a hand through his hair. “Shit. I really don't want to tell you this.”

“Because it's embarrassing, or for some other reason?”

Mike answered readily, sounding brisker. Maybe he was encouraged that I'd managed to speak. “Because it's embarrassing *and* for some other reason.” He paused again. “I don't want you feeling ... what you might feel toward me ... if you knew.”

“Yeah.” That came out without warning, and was embarrassingly heartfelt. I swallowed and made myself add, “That's why I don't want to talk to you all right.”

Mike gave a soft laugh, a real one this time, and then sighed, and smoothed my hair flat, then ran his fingers through it. “I fantasize about killing your

father.”

No big surprise there. I tried to breathe evenly.

“I’m not ashamed of wanting to kill him. He’s done his damndest to break you, and he’s come far too close to succeeding. Only the thing is ... I don’t kill him cleanly. I want to humiliate him, and I want to hurt him, very slowly, so that he takes a long time to die. I fantasize about doing that. Often.”

What was I supposed to say to that? After a moment, I said, trying to joke, “If I said I fantasized about doing that, you’d be pleased.”

“I’d be bloody ecstatic.” There was a grin in his voice, and definite relief. What did he think I was going to do? Go off the deep end? “The trouble is ... Brother, I know exactly how to do that to a man. I’ve got thousands of years of training in destroying humans. And it’s never been enough, just to kill them. We’ve enjoyed watching them suffer. Lingered over their dying like a lover. It makes me sick! The pleasure we feel as we kill.”

I swallowed. “Well, that’s the point, isn’t it? Presumably it didn’t make your brothers sick. Presumably they just enjoyed it.”

“So, you’re saying I’m morally superior? Instead of simply enjoying something sick, I feel bad about enjoying something sick.” His voice changed tone so abruptly I felt momentarily unbalanced. “Anyway, that’s me. Not the guy you grew up with, am I? The inside of my head is a really ugly place, and sometimes I wallow in it. Still love me?”

I felt myself go suddenly, vividly, red. *God, Mike, how can you just ... say that stuff?*

*You know, there’s something wrong with a person who’s more embarrassed by the L-word than tales of torture and perversion.*

I took a breath. And then another. And then mumbled, “It doesn’t matter.” Another breath. I said it louder. “It doesn’t *matter* who you are or what you do! I don’t have anyone else!” I closed my eyes. *Oh let’s just vote me Most Pathetic.* With shock I heard myself add, “Anyway, maybe that’s what I want. Someone violent.”

Mike didn’t seem shocked, or even surprised. That didn’t make me feel any better. “Do you *want* me to hit you?”

“I don’t know.” *Oh I’m on a roll today.* I forced the words out, the words I

really didn't want to ever say. But who was I fooling? Did I really think Mike didn't know what I was? "I know what he is, Mike. And I —" *want him to love me anyway*. The words hung there in my mind, unable to be spoken. "That night ... I *knew* what he would do. I stayed anyway. What does that make *me*?" I wondered if it was possible to die of shame. Mike's fingers through my hair didn't pause, like he wasn't revolted by my spinelessness.

He said gently, "It makes you human, little brother." A grin appeared in his voice. "And I don't mean that as a dirty word."

"I worry about him. All the time." The words blurted out of me, the disgust clear in my voice. What did it matter? He'd be able to smell it however I tried to pretend. "You call him 'that bastard' and 'that shit' and every time you say that I feel ... I don't know ... ashamed ... dirty ... like you're bad-mouthing *me*."

My eyes were already shut, but I could feel myself scrunching them tighter, like that would stop my mouth.

"I worry about how he's managing without me. If he's looking after himself properly. If he's eating, or just drinking himself insensible. I worry he'll have an accident and lie there until he's dead because there's no one to help him. And you want to know the worst thing of all?" My voice rose. "The worst thing of all is that, part of me was *happy* this happened. That it proves I'm right, he needs me."

*Oh shit oh shit oh shit*. I didn't even let myself *think* this stuff, and here it was, out there, laying there for anyone to hear. Mike leaned closer to me, his hand sliding down to my neck, and I found myself reaching out for him. He twisted his torso and swung his legs up and stretched out beside me and wrapped his arms around me in a hug, and I found myself burying my face in his chest, my whole body shaking.

I mumbled, "I'm falling apart. I'm out of control." *Pull yourself together, for God's sake*. I pulled my face out of his chest, took a deep breath. "I feel like there's this wall of ice round me and it's melting and I'm melting all over the damn place."

Mike said, "Spring thaw." He rubbed my back. "We always headed north as soon as it was survivable. In time to see the ice crack and melt. See the sun

bright on the deep frozen plains. Watch it thaw. Harvest the meat.”

He was starting to sound a little dreamy, then, pulling himself out of whatever vision had captured him, he said apologetically, “Winter’s a hard time when you live by hunting. Often our bellies would be flat against our backbones by the end of winter. The spring thaw would release a lot of frozen meat, animals that hadn’t survived the winter. We’re not usually scavengers.” His voice had become tight and defensive. Like I was going to diss him for not hunting down his food.

I started laughing ... hysteria rather than genuine humor, I guess. And the door opened without warning, and Kathryn stepped into the room and stared at us.

*Oh shit.*

Mike released me unhurriedly, and slid off the bed. I closed my eyes. “Was that what you wanted to see?” To noone else in the house would he use that tone. “Or was this what you wanted to see?” I opened my eyes in time to see his hand sweep down his body.

Kathryn’s face was pale. “Don’t flatter yourself.” Contempt in her tone, and something else. Fear, I thought. Mike took a step toward her, and I could *see* the anger smoking off him.

His voice was deadly. “We have a rule in this house, sister. If you don’t want your own privacy invaded, you better not try that again.”

It was for my sake he was angry, I realized. I knew the Pack had no concept of privacy, knew he wouldn’t care, for himself, what she saw.

She said defiantly, “I don’t need to, do I? I’ve seen what I wanted to see.” Her eyes slid down his body again, her stare insolent. His lack of clothing hadn’t really registered with me till then, I’d got so used to it. I looked at him afresh, seeing him as Kathryn would be seeing him. The long, gray hair, dense as a wolf’s, proclaiming his difference beyond any doubt.

Mike said, “And what you didn’t want to see.”

If he’d used that tone on me I think I would have died.

“You think I care what goes on between you two?” The contempt in her voice shriveled my soul. I was glad she didn’t look at me.

Mike took another step toward her. “Yeah, I think you care. I don’t think

you can stand to see anyone's love. It makes you realize that you can't love, and will never love, and noone will ever love you."

"You *bastard*." Face white. She stepped back, slamming the door shut between them. I felt sick.

Neither of us moved for what seemed a very long time, then Mike turned to me, voice as gentle as the other had been cruel. "I'm sorry, little brother."

I shook my head. "It's not me you should apologize to." I swallowed. Made myself look at him. I didn't want to think about what Kathryn must think about the two of us, and how likely she was to spread the word. And right now, that wasn't hard, because, "Mike, what you said ... that was unforgivable."

He wrapped his arms around himself. "Yeah. I know." He glanced at the door, then back at me. "I was angry."

I breathed for a bit. "Yeah, but ... Mike, if you said that to me, I'd die."

"She's not you, brother." Voice tight.

I took another breath. "In this she is." I held his eyes.

I could see him thinking, his face troubled, his eyes changing color with his thoughts. Eventually he said, "I can't take the words back. They'll always have been said."

I knew all about words that could never be erased. "Yeah. But you have to do what you can, Mike. She doesn't deserve this."

He looked at me a long time, then pulled on some sweatpants and a sweatshirt and padded out the door.