

Chapter 16

I really didn't want to do this. I didn't think Mike was any happier than me. He's never enjoyed these sorts of things, and entering the gym, seeing the bright flashing lights and feeling the loud music vibrating my bones, I realized just how much he was going out of his way for me and for Linny. Suddenly I hoped, passionately, that if nothing else came of this, Linny would. I remembered Paul saying that, however long Mike lived, he'd still love Linny the way he did now, and I remembered Mike's grief at being the last, and even though I'd seen what Mike's mom had gone through, was still going through, still ... I hoped.

At first it wasn't so bad. The music was fast and the dancing was frenetic, and Sue and I stayed near Lin and Mike, and I saw Lin start looking like her old self, and I thought, maybe this will work for them at least. Even if Lin didn't want to be his girlfriend anymore, if they could just find their old closeness I knew that would make Mike happy.

Eventually, I actually started to enjoy myself a little bit. And then the music shifted down, and everyone was getting close, and Sue moved into my arms. And the panic went off inside me like a bomb.

I found myself near the toilets, no idea how I got there, and Mike was at my shoulder saying, "I can hear two, maybe three, guys in there."

I stared at him, saw him open his mouth and taste the air. "You going to puke? You hardly had any tea."

I swallowed hard. "Maybe not."

Someone pushed past us. Mike snarled, then caught himself and said, "Come on. You need some fresh air."

The cool air cleared my head, which was a bummer. "I left Sue on the dance floor."

"Oh yeah." The tone said it all.

I closed my eyes again. "You didn't dump Lin did you?" Because if I'd been responsible for ruining things with Lin I was never going to forgive myself.

“Not as abruptly as you did Sue.” His quizzical tone said he really wanted to know what that was about.

I kept my eyes down. “Can you go talk to them?”

“You sure?” He was worried about leaving me, I knew. I got my head up.

“I’m damn sure *I* don’t want to talk to them.” Managing to say it lightly, just to prove that I’d got myself that much together.

He nodded. Patted me on the shoulder and got up.

I sat there on the low wall and breathed, carefully not thinking about anything. Hey, it was one of my best things.

When Mike came back, the girls were with him. Well, I expected that, or would have if I’d been thinking. I got to my feet and took a couple of steps away from them, not looking at them. Mike drifted up to me and said softly, “Paul’s on his way.” I gave a quick nod, praying for him to leave me alone, not to touch me or try to talk to me. Not in front of the girls.

He hesitated, then moved to stand with the girls. He and Lin started up a low-voiced conversation. At least she wasn’t mad at him.

Sue was silent.

Time passed.

Sue was sleeping over at Lin’s, so we only had the one stop to make. Paul did the affable-parent bit until we’d dropped them off, then fell silent. He pulled up in the garage, turned off the engine, and said, “Anyone want to say anything before we go in?”

Mike said, “Got anything for a headache?”

Paul undid his seatbelt. “I tore over there for a headache?” There was a smile in his voice, which kind of clinched it, since there was no way he couldn’t smell the emotions in the car. Was he hoping to make me believe Mike hadn’t told him exactly what had gone down? I felt exposed, my screwed-up feelings spread on the table for everyone to see.

I lost it. “Christ, can’t a guy have any privacy around here?” I threw myself out

of the car, slamming the door behind me.

I took refuge in the clearing. The cages were still there; I'd have to do something about that sometime. I knelt in the middle of the clearing and closed my eyes, and wanted to ... not die, but not *be*. I wished for life to be a movie, so I could skip over this part, get to the bit where I was over this, over all of it.

Mike was somewhere close, watching me. When I'd calmed down, I knew that. Knew there was no way he would be able to bear to have me out of sight. Or maybe that was out of smell. Maybe he couldn't see me. If he could smell me, maybe that would be enough.

I sighed. But he was keeping his distance; he was trying to give me the space he thought I wanted.

Okay. If I said I couldn't talk about it, he'd respect that.

I stood up. Gave the cages one last glance, half-wishing they were still occupied. I could do with having an animal to soothe.

That made me smile. I did, after all.

I turned to go back to the house. Mike materialized beside me halfway to the fence. He didn't speak.

We walked to the house in silence; we went to bed in silence; we breakfasted in silence. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Mike didn't do uncomfortable silences. It was more like ... he knew I couldn't speak, and he was giving me time until I could.

I couldn't expect the humans in the house to be so sensitive.

Maggie came up to our room late in the morning. She blinked at Mike, lying naked on his bed, then looked away quickly. The momentary shock faded back into concern as she looked at me. I got this nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

But she didn't ask about last night. She said, carefully, "Dave, I would like to tell Becky about your father." She held up a hand at the horror that was probably evident in my face; I was getting less careful in hiding my feelings — Mike's

fault. “Just so she knows that you’re not going back. I won’t ... I wouldn’t want to ... tell her any more than she needs to know. But the other night, when he came around ... For her own safety, she needs to know he can’t be trusted.”

I couldn’t argue that. And after all, everyone else knew; it wasn’t fair for her not to know. But I didn’t want to see the way she looked at me change.

I muttered, “Sure. It’s fine.”

She came closer to the bed where I was lying, ostensibly reading a book. “No, Dave, it’s not fine, none of this is fine. And I know ... I do know how hard this is, to have people know. But —.”

“I understand, Mrs J.”

“Maggie.” She smiled.

I managed to smile back. “Maggie.”

“I won’t go into any details,” she reassured me. Well, I wasn’t really worried about that. I had no doubt she’d be very careful what she’d tell her ten-year-old daughter, but the basic facts were humiliating enough.

She said gently, “Dave, I think you are very brave, and strong, to have borne all this for so long.” She gave me another smile and left. I was grateful for her haste; the tide of red was already crawling up my face.

Mike said, “See? I’m not the only one who thinks that.” He sounded pleased.

I still didn’t want to talk, but ... Pack-brothers were happy not talking, weren’t they? They didn’t have to talk.

I put the book down, and rolled off the bed, and went and sat on the edge of his. I reached for the comb lying on the bookcase. Mike grinned. He rolled onto his stomach. I groomed him.

Sunday lunch is a sit-down meal at the Jaeger’s, like dinner on other days. Maggie always cooked it, so we didn’t go downstairs until the meal was ready. I wondered if she’d already told Becky. I didn’t think I’d have any trouble telling if she had.

I was right.

Not that Becky said anything. She didn’t have to. Her eyes said it for her.

Mike said bluntly, “It’s not pity, little brother. She hurts for you.”

Kathryn wasn’t down yet. Would her presence have made him more circumspect? I hoped so, because I really wouldn’t have wanted him to say that in front of her. But, oddly, I could tolerate it in front of Maggie and Becky.

Becky asked curiously, “Why do you call him little brother? He’s not little.”

He gave a wide smile. My nerves jumped. He wouldn’t lie to Becky. I really didn’t want him explaining to her what it meant.

He said, “Becky, when you’re forty, you’ll still be my little sister.”

She frowned. “But you’re the same age.”

Please don’t go into the whole thousands of years old thing. I didn’t know why I didn’t want him emphasizing that to Becky, but I didn’t.

Mike said easily, “I’m six weeks older than him.”

She stared at him, and then giggled. The giggle brought back her usual happy face, the shadow gone from her eyes. That was good.

Kathryn came down — not late, not obviously grumpy, I wondered what that was about — and we sat down to eat.

Ten minutes into the meal, Maggie said, very casually, “Kathryn and I have signed up for a workshop at the Seven Sisters Playhouse.”

Paul said, “That sounds interesting.”

Kathryn didn’t say anything. Which said something in itself — that she wasn’t making any derogatory comments. Maybe Maggie had actually found some way to reach her.

I prayed Mike wouldn’t say anything to piss her off. If this was something that would help, we really didn’t want to put her off it.

Maggie said happily, “It’s a special mothers and daughters production. We don’t know much about it yet, but there’s going to be singing and dancing. But not a straight musical. It’s something some of the Playhouse members have written especially for this.”

She talked about it some more, and Paul and Becky asked questions, and Kathryn sat there eating, not saying anything, but not looking sullen like she usually did. She looked ... not happy, like Maggie was, but ... like she wasn’t sure

of this, but she was prepared to give it a go.

Maybe it was that, on top of Paul's efforts, that made it happen. Maybe it was knowing that they all knew now, it wasn't a secret. Maybe it was because I was so tired of the walls around me. But I didn't know I was going to say it until I did.

We were onto dessert — Sunday lunch is usually pretty good, a meal Maggie usually takes trouble over — and I'd said something complimentary about the chocolate cream pie, which wasn't hard because it was great, I just wished I was in a better mood to appreciate it. And Maggie had said something about my cooking, and I said my dad wasn't big on desserts. And maybe there was something in the way I said it, or maybe she'd finally worked it out, because she frowned and said, "You do like cooking, Dave, don't you?"

And I heard someone say, "Half the time he'd make me cook something for him and I knew he wasn't going to eat it. It was just another excuse to get at me, to show me his power over me, to tell me how useless I was, how I couldn't do anything right. Sometimes he'd throw the whole thing on the floor and I'd have to clean it up."

Oh my God. I couldn't believe I'd said that. I was already looking at my plate, but now I lowered my gaze even further, so I was looking at the edge of the table right in front of me. I didn't want to see anyone's face.

Mike said, "Kitchens are dangerous places." And his voice was empty; I don't know what there was about it that made me keep going.

"He liked to move around the kitchen while I was cooking, keeping me on edge."

"Eight times you've been burned."

Something twitched at the corners of my mouth. I didn't know why; it wasn't funny. "I haven't counted."

"I have."

Silence. A very long, scary silence. Then Maggie said softly, "I'm so sorry, Dave."

I had to look up then. Had to see Becky looking at me with horror in that kitten face, Kathryn looking at me like a puzzle she wasn't sure how to do, Maggie

looking at me with ... grief. Not pity. Grief.

I said, "I was usually quick enough," and somehow found a smile as if it was a joke. Because it was grief, not pity.

When we got back to our room, Mike said, "I am very very proud of you." Which could have sounded patronizing, if it wasn't for the expression on his face. Shining. Happy.

Then, slowly, giving me the chance to back off, he leaned toward me and kissed me very gently on the forehead. I blinked. Just stood there blinking, not knowing what I felt, why there was a distant pricking behind my eyes, why ... I felt ... like this.

Then he smiled, and the smile turned to laughter, and he gave me a tight, fierce hug. And backed off, flinging his hands up, eyes on me, nervous. I breathed in, and walked back into his arms.

That was Sunday. A better day than I'd expected it to be. Monday was another matter. I was very carefully not thinking about how Sue was going to behave, and what I was going to do. Which wasn't exactly the most useful policy, but ... You can only do so much, can't you?

We got on the bus, me on Mike's heels, close enough for him to shield me, like that would stop anyone seeing me. But it wasn't like I was doing it deliberately.

And it didn't work anyway.

The girls had saved us a seat behind them. I sat down beside Mike, looking vaguely into space, my eyes unfocused. Trying not to see them. Very mature.

Lin said brightly, "Jerry's decided he's going to be a physicist." Jerry was her eleven-year-old brother. He had very clear ideas on what he was going to do when he grew up — only the ideas changed every six months or so. Last I'd heard, he wanted to be a swordsmith for Weta Workshops. That ambition had actually lasted a lot longer than usual, ever since watching the DVD extras on the Lord of the Rings trilogy. When his parents had pointed out the Workshops were in New Zealand, he'd just shrugged. I didn't know whether he knew where New Zealand

was, but I was pretty sure it wouldn't worry him. He wasn't unhappy at home, but I'd often thought he was one of those who always wanted to see over the next hill.

Mike said lightly, "What brought that on?"

"He's been watching MacGyver reruns." They both laughed.

Sue said, "You see Angel on Thursday?"

Mike raised an eyebrow, probably wondering what that had to do with anything. Lin giggled. Sue said with heavy patience, "Hallo? Angel? MacGyver?"

Lin giggled again, and explained, "She means the connection is hot guys." To Sue, she said, "I didn't think anyone matched up to Angel for you?"

Sue shrugged. "I'm not saying MacGyver's in the same league. I mean, that seventies haircut? And he doesn't have that brooding, bad-boy thing." She did a fake swoon.

"Nobody broods like Angel," Lin agreed.

Okay, we were going with the it-never-happened strategy. I could do that. I started to relax. I even — though I'm not saying it was easy — managed to enter the conversation eventually.

But I wasn't getting out of it quite that easy.

When we got off the bus, Sue managed to get close enough to me to say softly, "I'm sorry about Saturday. I didn't understand." What? What didn't she understand? As she walked quickly away, I stood there with the panic jumping in my veins and wondered what she'd meant.

Mike touched me lightly. "Brother?"

He couldn't have not heard her. I started moving again, waiting until we were far enough away from anyone else not to be overheard. Then I stopped.

"What does she understand? What did you tell them, Mike?"

"You sure you want to know?"

I looked at him, not really seeing him. *Did* I want to know?

"Not really. But I think I better." I didn't want to know, but not knowing was worse.

"I reminded them you were raised by a sadistic monster, and I invited them to consider how such a person might respond to being touched." He said it without

expression, and I knew he was controlling what he felt, for both our sakes. “Sue pointed out that I touch you, and I told her that if she was willing to pay all that I had to earn that trust, then no doubt you would tolerate her touch too.”

I breathed. Mike waited, not touching. I suspected that was more because we were at school and he didn't trust himself than because he was afraid I'd spook, but that was alright.

I breathed, and eventually I managed to say, “Okay.” Which it wasn't, but ... what can you do? You put one step after another, and pretend you're okay, and one day it'll be true.

We went to class.

I couldn't stop myself wondering if Mike believed what he had told Sue, or whether he knew, or suspected, the real problem.

Chapter 17

I did a lot of that the next couple of weeks. One step after another. Mike seemed to have found some reserve of patience, or maybe I was giving him all he needed.

No, I didn't think that was true. I saw his eyes when he looked at Paul sometimes, and, more rarely, when he looked at me. But I had grown more comfortable touching him. I groomed him every day, and let him hug me whenever he wanted. Well, it probably wasn't as much as he wanted, but it seemed to be enough. And I was talking more to him; I'd told him far more than I ever imagined being able to tell anyone.

But not all, no, not all.

He was being patient with us. Everyone in the house, those two weeks, seemed to be walking carefully, as if we all knew how hard everyone was trying, and that we had to give this a chance.

It surprised me that Kathryn had the patience, but the theater workshop seemed to be taking a lot of her time, and she and Maggie were out a lot. That probably helped.

One afternoon Mike surprised me.

I was at the desk, writing an essay, and he was lying on the bed behind me, dreaming with his brothers I assumed, but he said my name, and when I turned my head he was watching me with steady grey eyes, shadowed faintly by what I thought was nervousness.

My breath caught. Anything Mike was nervous about made me nervous.

He said, "I didn't tell you where we went last night."

Why would he have? I turned around properly. "You weren't running with Paul?"

"We ran." His eyes were intent, and his tongue flicked out to taste the air. "But we ran *to* somewhere." He paused. I waited. Whatever this was, I wasn't going to like it, or why would he be so wary of telling me?

"I know you worry about him. We went to see how he was doing."

I stopped breathing; I felt my eyes go blank. He didn't say who 'he' was, but he didn't have to. There was only person he refused to name.

I asked him not to call him bastard. I'd left him without anything to call him by. I knew he wouldn't call him my dad.

Don't make me ask.

He said very carefully, without expression, "He was managing. He's still drinking. His place isn't as clean and tidy as you kept it for him. But he's okay. He's still got a job, and he's feeding himself, and he's not sick." Some emotion leaked into his voice. "He's a grown man, Dave, and he's perfectly well able to look after himself without —" He stopped himself abruptly, pressing his lips together.

"Without me," I finished for him. He didn't say anything, just held my eyes with his. "How did you get in?" I knew perfectly well, but I wanted to hear him say it, I don't know why. I didn't know what I was feeling.

He didn't look away. "With the key he sent you." I could hear in his voice the words he didn't say. *Which he should never have sent you, and which you should never have kept.*

I didn't know what I was feeling. I wished I didn't care how my father was. I wished Mike didn't know that I cared.

But it meant something, that he'd done that for me, hating my father though he did.

It was only the four of us for dinner that night. Becky was staying over with her best friend — something that seemed to happen every week or so, despite the favor never being returned. Maybe it was something to do with her friend being an only child, and her parents being divorced. Anyway, nothing to remark on there, but this time Kathryn was out too. She'd been under curfew since her parents had found out about the kids she was hanging with, but this time she had her mom's complete approval — someone they'd met at this workshop of theirs. A good influence, Maggie must think. I hoped she was right.

Anyway, it left the four of us alone in the house, without any fear of other ears.

Which was maybe what some of us had been waiting for. Maybe all of us, though I hadn't been conscious of it.

But there was something I'd been wanting to say to all of them. "There's a theory you might be interested in. About what it means to be human." I took a chunk of baked potato slathered in sour cream and put it in my mouth, wanting to see if this was an acceptable topic before continuing. Mike made a small questioning noise, Maggie looked at me expectantly. Paul tensed a little, but he met my eyes. I said, "I think you're more human than we are."

I gave them a moment to react to that, then went on, a little nervously, because Paul didn't like hearing stuff about how brothers were, "Mike said once that when brothers slept, their minds got tangled up. That they had to work out their own individual identity when they woke." There was a flash of something, was it longing?, in Paul's face, then he shut it down, became blank. Maggie simply looked uncomprehending.

I said, "Humans have always tried to find things which supposedly separate humans from other animals. Tools, language, a sense of identity ... Every time they come up with something, someone discovers an animal species who has it too. The latest idea is something called a 'Theory of Mind'.

"Oddly enough, this is something that we aren't born with. We have to develop it. A very small child doesn't have it. Autistic people don't have it." I thought of my father. "Maybe you could argue that a lot of criminal types don't have it either.

"The idea is that people have theories in their head about what other people are going to do, and what they think of you, and stuff like that. I mean, that's how we deal with other people; if we didn't believe other people have the same kinds of thoughts and feelings, then how could we predict what anyone would do?"

Maggie nodded, looking intrigued now. "That makes sense."

I grinned. "And there you have it." I looked around the table. Noone was getting it. I tried again. "What makes humans human is empathy, the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. And you have that. Heck, you have more of that than we do. We just believe, you *know*. You're in each other's heads."

I looked around again. They were beginning to get it, but I still hadn't

convinced them. “A very young child can’t lie, because she doesn’t understand that you might be thinking something different from what she’s thinking. People who never develop a Theory of Mind take words very literally. Maybe because words are simply tools for them, they don’t have a deeper meaning. They’re not windows into a deeper reality.” Anyone?

Mike said slowly, “Like you and I use words to find out what’s going on in each other’s head, because we don’t know.”

I smiled with relief. “That’s what language is for. Because humans can’t do what you do. We don’t have access to each other’s minds.” I shrugged. “We invented language to get closer to people. Not to write reports or instruction manuals or advertise products. Not to work out complicated thoughts, or to remember complicated details. To form bonds with other people.”

I laughed, remembering something I’d read. “You know, even today, with all the information out there, and everyone leading insanely complicated lives, about 60 to 70% of all talk is gossip?”

Paul said slowly, “You’re saying we’re human because we see into each other’s heads?”

I spread my hands. “Autism isn’t an either/or condition. Children don’t suddenly wake up with a fully developed Theory of Mind. I’d say lots of people have less developed Theories of Mind. I’m saying that if this is a test of one’s human-ness, then your people would score highly.”

Mike laughed suddenly. It was a happy laugh, a pleased laugh. The tension in my gut relaxed. At least I’d convinced Mike.

Maggie was smiling too. Score two. I looked at Paul.

He met my eyes. “It does help, Dave. Thank you. But —.” He broke off.

Mike said, “I’m getting better at keeping the Pack out. I can touch you and not have them come.”

Paul drew in a breath. “I know, and I’m grateful.”

“I’ve been patient.” There wasn’t much expression in Mike’s voice, but it sounded like an ultimatum. Paul flinched and I knew he read it that way too.

He looked across at his wife as he said to Mike, “I can’t do what you want,

Mike.”

“Do you *know* what I want?” A thread of anger.

Paul jerked his head around to stare at his brother. Mike said, no anger now, but his tone hard, “I’m not asking to sleep with you, brother.”

There was a quick intake of breath from Maggie. I froze. Then managed to explain, cos I wasn’t sure anyone else was going to, “Pack-brothers like to dream together. He doesn’t mean —.” I let her finish the words in her head, no way was I going to say them.

Mike didn’t look away from his brother. “Yeah. We sleep together, and we groom each other, and we share our thoughts and memories with each other, and all that is exactly what we need, what we’re designed to need. But that’s not all we do, and that’s not what’s totally freaking my brother out.” He paused, and we saw Paul’s eyes turn black, his face paling, so scared Mike was going to say what it was he was terrified of.

I sympathized. I empathized. My guts roiled.

Mike said more gently, “I only worked it out recently. You’d suppressed those memories so well, my brother.” He sighed. “Paul, I’m not ever going to ask you to do any of that. But I would like it if we could hold each other, if you could sometimes run your hands through my hair, if we could share images from our day. We don’t have to lie down to do that.” He smiled, though it wasn’t a happy smile.

The white of Paul’s skin was being replaced by a rising red tide. I didn’t think the Pack did embarrassment.

Maggie said stiffly, “I don’t think I understand.”

Mike said nothing. Paul looked at Mike saying nothing. The message was clear: Mike wanted him to say it, but it was still his choice. Although admittedly, Mike hadn’t left him much of a choice.

Paul’s eyes slid to me. I started to push my chair back. I was pretty sure I didn’t want to hear this anyway.

Mike’s hand on my arm stopped me. He kept looking at Paul. “Actually, I’m beginning to think that Dave might need to hear this more than anybody.”

I stopped breathing. Paul looked shocked, and then, just sad. He took a deep breath, and I knew he was going to do it.

I really didn't want to be here.

He looked at his wife. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I didn't want to ever tell you this. But maybe Mike's right." His face said he wasn't completely sure of that, but I knew, if it came down to a choice between his brother and his wife, he'd have to choose his brother. There was fear in his eyes. I knew it was a choice he never wanted to make. "If you don't want anything to do with me I'll understand."

I was frozen like a prey animal, like if I stayed very very still, the bad words wouldn't find me. Stupid.

Maggie was looking worried. She didn't say anything stupid, like 'Nothing would be so bad I'd leave you.' We'd learned about how bad things could be.

We waited.

Paul took another breath. He looked at me. I think it was easier for him than looking at his wife. "Dave, I told you how I left my father. You know how hard that was to do." He paused, and after a moment I nodded. Paul took another breath. "I loved him very much." He shut his eyes briefly, then opened them and stared at me. "Since I was four there had only been the two of us, and he *needed* me. I knew how much he needed me. It tore my heart to leave him."

Something in my chest spasmed. My hands gripped the edge of my chair.

Mike said angrily, "It's not the same! Don't try and make it like it is. He never hurt you, and there's no reason for Dave to feel guilty."

"What happened wasn't the same," Paul agreed. He sounded steadier now. "And I'm not suggesting Dave should feel guilty about leaving his father. But —." He swallowed. "But we both love our fathers, and were needed by them, and had to leave them for our own well-being."

Mike's voice was a low rumble. "This isn't relevant." He didn't like the comparison, I knew.

Paul didn't point out that it was Mike who'd made the connection, not him. He briefly closed his eyes again, opened them and said steadily, "Pack-brothers are casual about sex. Like you said, we sleep together, dream together." A breath.

“Play together.” The same words Mike used. I was trying very hard not to think about what he was saying.

Maggie was looking appalled. “You’re saying ... What are you saying, Paul?”

For the first time since he’d started this, he met her eyes. “I’m saying my father and I were lovers.”

Maggie’s voice was hard. “You’re saying your father molested you.”

Paul shook his head. “I might have been below the age of consent in human terms, Maggie, but I had an adult’s memories. I wasn’t a child.”

Maggie looked sick. Mike said, “His father was insane. By both human standards *and* the standards of the Pack. He drifted, lost, between times and places. Lost in memory. Half the time he didn’t even know Paul was his own little brother.” He looked from Maggie to me. “We don’t usually have sex with the brothers who father us.”

Paul said, “He loved me.”

And then we were all quiet for a long time.

When it was obvious that the only person with any appetite left was Mike, Maggie got up and put the kettle on. She didn’t ask who wanted a drink, just got out the mugs and started making them. I sat there, my hands on my lap, looking down.

Paul said abruptly, “He didn’t force me. He didn’t seduce me. I wanted him as much as he wanted me.”

“And that’s what really freaks you out, isn’t it?” Mike sounded exasperated. “You were *brothers*. You were *in Change*. And you didn’t have anyone else.” He leaned toward Paul. “Since you rejected the ghosts in your head.”

My head jerked up at that. I’d thought he’d only started that after he’d left his dad. I didn’t know why it shocked me so, except I’d seen Mike’s need, knew his demands on me and Paul would have been so much greater if he hadn’t had his ghost-brothers.

Paul said, “Maybe.” He sounded weary, and he was back to not looking at his wife. He looked down at his hands, then raised his head slowly to meet Mike’s gaze. “You’d think it would have helped me leave him, but it didn’t. It just

confused me more. Made it harder for me to sort out my feelings.”

Mike said flatly, “You’ve never sorted out your feelings about it.”

Paul closed his eyes. Breathed. “No,” he said at last. “Because I’ve never spoken of it before. I’ve never even dared to think about it.”

Mike said, “You’re not him, Paul. And I’m not you.” He grinned. “Not all you.” He slid me a sidelong look. *See?* his eyes said. *I’ve learned my lesson; I believe you.*

Paul whispered, “I’m so afraid of becoming him.”

Mike said gently, “You’re afraid of becoming yourself.”

Paul closed his eyes. Then, sighing, he leaned toward Mike, and Mike closed the distance between them, and their foreheads met. They both let out a long sigh, in unison.

I looked at Maggie. She looked as if she didn’t know what to think, what to feel. I could relate to that.

With an effort I could see, she turned her gaze away from her husband and son, and looked at me. There was a question in her eyes, as if she needed to know what I thought and felt, as if that would tell her what her own feelings were.

Couldn’t help her there.

But maybe I could help Paul, and Mike, and me.

I heard myself say, “I haven’t spoken to my dad since I was seven.” And watched the two of them split apart and stare at me in surprise.

Mike protested, “But he talks to you.”

My words came out in a low, fast monotone, spilling out of me. “Yeah, he talks to me. He tells me what happens at work. Tells me who he hates, and who he likes. Tells me what he wants to do to them. Tells me what he imagines doing with the women he fancies. Tells me what he wants to do to people who annoy him. Tells me what he did to my mom, and what he wants to do, and what he’ll do when he finds her.” Faster and faster, the words, and my heart pounding.

“He tells me his dreams and his fantasies and what he did to me when I was little and what he’s going to do to me. He tells me everything.”

Stop. You have to stop now.

No. I had to say it now. Or I'd never say it.

I wished Mike's mom wasn't there.

"He'd make me watch these videos with him. While he'd ... touch himself."

Was that enough? *Don't make me have to say any more.*

Mike said very very softly, "How long, Dave? How long has he been doing this?"

Okay. One last thing. I could do this. I opened my mouth, and the words came out, "Since she left."

"Since you were six." Mike was barely understandable, rage filling his voice. I shrank away from it.

Paul said quietly, "Did your father ever touch you like that, Dave?" Mike was growling. A low, monotonous growl that promised death, and vengeance.

I said, "No!" and my denial sounded too loud, too vehement. Though it was true, literally true. It just ... that it didn't feel like it was true. I closed my eyes, knew I'd started rocking and had no energy to stop it. "He had a couple of videos of kids. Men doing things to kids. And he'd say, that's what happens to kids who run away. That's what happens to kids in foster care. That's what happens to kids who don't have a nice home with their own family." I heard myself laugh, short and mirthless. "A nice home. Jesus."

It was kind of like spewing. When you've started vomiting and you know the only way to feel better is to get it all out, no matter how unpleasant the process is. So I opened my mouth, and let the words vomit out. "But what he really liked to watch was men hurting women." I tried not to see the all-too familiar images. "He'd jerk off, watching the screen, watching me, making sure I watched too, telling me this what men wanted. That one day I'd want to do those things. That women wanted us to do those things to them."

I didn't want to say this, I didn't want this to be true. I didn't want to be the son of someone who thought like this. "He said that was what women and children were for. For men to use. He said I —," the words stalled in my throat. I forced them out. "He said I liked him doing the things he did to me. He said some people liked hurting and some people liked being hurt, and those were the two choices.

That when I grew up, maybe I'd be a real man.”

Paul said, “Jesus Christ.” It was the first time I'd ever heard him swear.

Mike put his fingers under my chin and gently raised it, so I couldn't help but see the tears running down his mom's face, the anger in Paul's. Then Mike's eyes caught mine. Dark as I'd ever seen them, and his hand was trembling with the effort to contain his rage.

He searched my face, his tongue tasting the air, and then he put his arms around me and pulled me toward him, wrapping me tight. And everything inside me unraveled, and I cried.

Chapter 18

If life was a book, and every story had a beginning and an end, then maybe that would be it. Maybe spilling our deepest secrets would have solved all our problems. But our problems — all our problems — are too deep-rooted for that.

It was a long time before Maggie could touch Paul without remembering what he'd told us, and longer before the two of them could be happy in bed together. And yeah, I'd have preferred not to know that, but it seems this is something Mike and Paul both need — for the four of us to have no secrets. I'm Mike's heart-brother, and Maggie is Paul's in a way — in the only way he can bear. And Mike and Paul are the only two living Pack-brothers in the world. As far as we know. They need each other in ways Maggie and I will never truly understand. But we can accept it, and we do.

I don't know how Kathryn will be, but she and Maggie have both become very close to another mother-daughter pair from the workshop. Maggie asked them both over to Sunday lunch the other day, and something changed then. I hadn't realized until then that I had been the only person outside the family to ever be invited into the house. The meal was a sign that things were changing, that they weren't going to live in fear of being exposed any more.

Yesterday, Paul said he'd be home late, that there was an after-work celebration of someone's engagement. Mike was surprised, and Maggie was delighted. Apparently he's never socialized with his workmates before.

Mike doesn't seem to mind Paul reaching out into the human world. He seems to understand that Paul needs to do it to balance the connection with the Pack. Mike says he understands that Paul's path is different from his.

And me? I don't know what I'll become. But I can tell you when I stopped worrying about it. It was last night, in the deep night, when the house was still and the two of us were curled together on his bed. Mike said, "It's up to me to make a good ending for the Pack. Somehow to make it matter that we lived."

I didn't know how he could do that, and when I asked, he said, "I don't know that yet. But it's the purpose I give myself. It's the meaning I give to my life."

I knew then he wasn't just talking about himself. He was saying it was my choice, what meaning I gave my childhood. That I could let it ruin my life, or I could try, somehow, to build on it.

I said, "I can't do it on my own."

He touched my hair, feather-light. "It would kill me if you tried." Turning it round, so that it was *his* need I was answering, not my own. The love in that kindness warmed me. If I was a Pack-brother, he'd know that. But I wasn't. And that was what he loved most about me, I did, truly, believe that now. I wondered how to show I understood what he was saying and why he was saying it, and then it came to me, in his own words, which I gave back to him.

I met his eyes, and said, "Have I told you," I paused, "how much I love you?"

Discoveries is the sequel to *Secrets*, published by Medallion Press. You can find out more about *Secrets* at <http://www.fmmcpherson.com/books/secrets.htm>

Why I decided to make this story freely available

Unfortunately, the publisher of *Secrets*, Medallion Press, decided to discontinue their YA line soon after publishing *Secrets*. After a lot of thought, because I had written quite a bit already on the sequel, I decided to finish it anyway. But since some time had passed, and because I knew how hard it would be to get another publisher interested in continuing a series begun by a different publisher, I decided to make the sequel available free as an e-book. In so doing, I hope to develop a fan-base for my work and for these characters, who I hope to write about for many years, in their adult lives.

If you've enjoyed this story, I hope you'll pass it on to others who might enjoy it. I also hope you'll be encouraged to read *Secrets*!

And if you haven't already, do check out my website, at www.fmmcpherson.com, where I have information about all sorts of mythical and not-so-mythical human-related creatures, lists of fantasy, science fiction, and humorous books for different moods, and some bits and pieces about the Pack. Dave also keeps a blog there!