

## Chapter 1

*Her eyes are liquid gold in the sunlight. She looks at me sideways, mouth open with excitement. Our shoulders touch. She leans closer, there is a laugh shimmering in her mind. Her smell is honey and moonlight and young moist leaves. I touch her face with my fingertips and the breath catches in my throat and there is a tightness in my chest, and her eyes widen and there is a different excitement in the air.*

*We will be mates when we are older. We have always known this but now, at this moment, in the tightness in my chest and throat, I know what that means.*

*She feels it too.*

*She puts her face close to mine, I let my hand slide through her hair and it is soft and thick and my heart pounds. Her lips touch my hair and my heart gives a lurch and she pulls back, mischief in her smell, amber eyes teasing.*

*She dances away, and I follow her, as I must, as she wants me to do. We don't break silence but we are laughing as she leads me away from the others.*

*We are not allowed to be here. And never in daylight.*

*We are young.*

*She will never grow old.*

Mike's voice drifted into silence. I swallowed. His eyes had darkened to almost black, something I'd learned to associate with extreme distress. When he told me about a specific memory, it was like he was seeing it ... no, like he was reliving it, right in front of me. Even the way he spoke changed, as if it wasn't him —.

*No!* I turned my mind from that thought. I'd seen Mike become someone else, and that wasn't anything I wanted to see again.

I wondered what to say — what I could possibly say, after that. Callous to remind him his Pack-sister had died tens of thousands of years ago; it was real to him. Here-and-now real.

I thought about all those hundreds of generations remembering the rape and torture of that long-dead girl. Reliving it, renewing their hatred and undying enmity against humans, who had done this terrible thing, who had taken First

Brother's lover from him. I imagined waking to it, when the Change came upon them. At least it wouldn't have been as bad for them as it had been for Mike. They would have come to it knowing what they were, that the visions they had were memories of their ancestors, impressed into their genes.

Not like Mike. I wondered if he had truly forgiven his father for that ignorance, but dismissed the thought almost as soon as it was born. The relationship between Mike and his father, who was his brother, his clone — as all of them were, all the generations of Pack-brothers back to First Brother — was probably even more complicated than the relationship between me and *my* father, and I was a long way from understanding that one.

Heck, I was a long way from understanding my relationship with *Mike*.

But I knew what he wanted from me, or thought I did. Sometimes I let myself hope I was wrong.

*Damn it, why does it have to be this?* I owed him everything. I really wanted to be able to give him what he wanted.

This was so damn hard.

I'd been silent too long. Mike turned his head to look at me. His eyes had lightened to a dark gray, the pupils — slightly more elongated than human ones — were becoming faintly visible. I breathed in carefully, pushing my slumped shoulders back against the wall behind me, trying to blank my emotions.

Something tightened in Mike's face. It was weird, because I'd known Mike all my life, but since he'd Changed, his face had become harder to read. I hadn't pinned down exactly what it was yet.

His voice was easier to interpret. It was almost a growl. "Don't do that."

I looked down, at my crossed legs, the hand of my unbroken arm resting loosely on my lap. I'd been sitting like this on Mike's bed for the best part of two days, ever since —. No, wasn't going to go there.

I said cautiously, "What am I doing?"

His eyes were still dark. Outside of this room he wore dark glasses most of the time — the Pack was nocturnal, and his eyes didn't like bright light. But when we were alone, I'd learned to use the color of his eyes as a sign of his feelings. His voice was still gravel-deep as he said, "I'm not one of your

animals. Don't lie to me about what you're feeling."

I felt a sinking in my gut. I tried to ignore it. "It really bugs you, doesn't it?"

"Smell's important to us. More important than sight or sound." He paused. His voice dropped to a barely audible subterranean rumble that vibrated along my nerves. "And you're my brother. A brother can't lie to me about what he's feeling. But you can. Please don't."

My gut was fluttering now. I trusted Mike — heck, he was the only damn person on the planet I fully trusted — but ... I hated feeling so exposed.

He twitched the hand closest to me, as if he wanted to touch me. A slight movement, it wouldn't have been noticeable if the rest of him hadn't been lying so still, as he had been for two days. The panic feeling grew in me. I had to do something. I breathed slowly, trying to calm myself. Mike flinched.

"I know it's not reasonable." I could tell he was trying to sound calm, but I could hear the tension in his voice. "It's not that I need to know what you're feeling all the time, it's just ... hell, I don't know how to explain it. I mean there's a million ways you're not like a Pack-brother, you're not even the right frigging *species*. I don't know why this bothers me so much."

I looked down, away from that intense, disturbing stare. Taking a last deep breath, I managed to say, "I'm not doing it to lie to you, Mike." True for right now, but not always true, and the implicit lie caught in my throat. "Sometimes I need to control what I feel. You know?" I lifted my head and forced myself to meet his eyes.

He frowned. Not something the Pack had much experience of, I guessed. Quickly I said, "I'll try. Okay?" Did that count as a lie? 'Try' was an ishy word; hard to define or prove. I didn't know how hard I could try, whether I could muster anything he'd count as trying.

And then I thought, surely I could, because he smiled. The approving smile, not the one that looked as if he wanted to tear out your jugular. "Great. Thank you."

It was ridiculous, and pathetic, how that made my panic recede. And then he said, "Dave?" And just that, my name, the way he spoke it, what I thought he was going to say, hurled me into full-blown panic.

That was Sunday night. Monday, we went to school as usual. Just as if the world hadn't changed.

Mike's mom fussed over him at breakfast. I could understand that. He was still paler than normal, and I didn't think he wasn't moving with quite his usual speed. But his dad didn't say anything, and neither did I. I was used to concealing injuries, to pretending to be fine when I wasn't. I guess it didn't seem a big deal to me. But that wasn't why I was silent.

Mike bore with her patiently. Guilt maybe. It was Mr Jaeger who called a halt to it eventually.

"He'll be fine, Maggie. We're very tough." It wasn't his usual gentle tone, but I guess none of us were 'usual' right now. Not after what Mike had done. To Mike he said, "Better not do much writing. I'll put your left hand in a sling. We can say you've sprained it. I'll write a note." Mike made a noise. I don't know what it meant. His dad drew in a deep breath, and then paused, and tipped sideways, brushing his head against Mike's. That surprised me. I knew he hated Mike not talking in words, and I understood that, after what he'd gone through with *his* father. But ... I guess we were all changing, or trying to change.

Becky's wide blue eyes watched her brother and father curiously. She'd been pretty subdued since Friday night — well, that was hardly surprising. We'd all been subdued, and it was a terrible thing for a ten year old to see. What her fourteen-year-old sister thought was another thing. Kathryn had been quiet too, but her silence was a world away from her little sister's. I wondered if Mike's desperate action had made any impression on her at all.

Now Kathryn got up from the table abruptly, carrying her toast. Her mom opened her mouth to say something, then shut it. Wisely, I thought. I couldn't handle an argument. *So what's new?*

Mrs J glanced at me, and I looked down hurriedly. She hadn't said anything about my dad yet, probably because we were all so shattered, and maybe also because I hadn't been out of Mike's company since ... since it happened. But I could see it in her eyes when she looked at me, or thought I could.

We got through the morning somehow. I'd been faking it all my life, I don't

know why it was suddenly so hard.

At lunchtime, we got our lunches, though I doubted either of us felt like eating, then hesitated. We always met Linny and Sue for lunch.

Mike said, “She’s not going to want to see me.”

It was stupid, but I didn’t think about what he’d said, right off. I just enjoyed the fact that he’d spoken. Something about his voice, the depth of it ... Stupid. I realized then that I hadn’t heard him speak since first thing that morning. I shook my head and thought about *what* he’d said, rather than how.

After a moment, I said hesitantly, “You’ve been friends a long time.”

He pushed a hand through his hair, sighed. “Yeah. But —” He looked at me sideways, then around at the other kids. Not many, slow as we were being, but any was too many. I started walking toward the side door.

Once we were outside, away from listening ears, I said, “I know what you did to her, but you didn’t ring her yesterday. Whatever ... happened ... between you, she’s going to be worried, after what I said.” I felt the heat rise in my face, embarrassed all over again, as I was whenever I thought about that phone call.

“Yeah.” He gave another sigh. Then he leaned toward me and bumped his head against mine. “It wasn’t your fault, little brother. Paul shouldn’t have asked you to do it. He wasn’t thinking clearly.” He snorted softly. “None of us were thinking clearly.”

I should have had more control.

The girls were sitting in our usual place under the tree. We came up to them, and stood there, looking down, not sure of our welcome.

Sue said, “What’re you doing?” She tilted her head up, squinting against the sun. I saw her notice Mike’s sling. “What is it with you guys? You got to always be a matched set?” She said it like it was a joke, but there was an edge to her voice that I knew was directed at Mike. I tried to find a joke of my own, but for the first time, I couldn’t think of anything to say. I just wanted to disappear. Be alone with Mike, not needing to pretend. I was sick of pretending.

Ignoring her, Mike said, “Can I talk to you?”, his eyes fixed on Linny.

She said, “I didn’t think you’d be here today.” I’d never heard Lin sound

like that. Sue glanced at her, obviously surprised. Lin hadn't said anything then. I hadn't thought she would.

Mike said, "Yeah, well, here we are." He shrugged.

"Your dad said you'd ring. I waited all day for you to ring."

Sue watched avidly. I could tell she was thrilled by the thought that Linny and Mike had had a bust-up. If she knew ... *Well, she doesn't. And I don't think anyone's going to tell her.* I was pretty sure I knew what her advice to Lin would be. And that would be fatal for all of us.

Mike said, "I'm sorry, Lin. I'm sorry you were worried, and I'm sorry," he flicked a glance toward Sue, "about Friday night." He grimaced. "I know that means nothing, but ..." He glanced at Sue again.

Lin said, "I want to know what happened." Then she blushed suddenly, and her voice lost its uncharacteristic firmness. "I mean ..." She nodded at his sling.

"An accident."

Her jaw hardened again. "Dave was hysterical because you had some *accident?* I thought you'd be in intensive care, at least, the way he was carrying on."

Sue looked at me, eyes wide. Surprise, but not only surprise. I could tell she was enjoying this. I felt sick.

Lin was still talking. I heard my name, and then she said, "Go on, tell me it was all some stupid joke." She glanced at me. "I can tell from Dave's face that it was a joke."

I wanted to go. I wanted to sleep. Just disappear from all this. Not deal with it. With anything.

Mike stood there, quite still, not looking as if he was on the verge of panic, which was how I felt. Then he said, and it did absolutely nothing to still my panic, "Lin, I'll tell you whatever you want to know, but," he tipped his head sideways, "can we walk?"

She hesitated, then nodded and rose to her feet. Sue started to get up too, but Mike gave her a look, really flat, like she wasn't even part of his universe and ... I don't know ... it was just really chilling. I wasn't surprised Sue settled back and turned her attention to me, as if that was what she had intended all along. As the other two walked away, I tried to put them out of my mind. It

hadn't occurred to me till then, till Mike said those words *I'll tell you whatever you want to know*, that Mike would no more lie to Lin than he would to me. I wondered how she'd react.

"So, what gives with the arm? I can't remember Mike ever hurting himself before. He's not a klutz like you." Sue was smiling, but her eyes followed Mike and there was no admiration I could see, though I imagined the ease and power in the way he moved would be quite a turn-on for some girls.

And intimidating for a lot of guys.

I made myself grin. "Some of us have just never mastered that whole bipedal thing. Should never have lost those tails." I dropped down on the ground; I wasn't going to be able to leave till the others came back, might as well look as if I wanted to be there, though I was so not in the mood for our usual repartee. "Problem is pants."

Sue turned her eyes to me, frowning. "You what?"

My grin broadened. Sue was usually a lot quicker on the uptake than that; she must be as distracted as me. Which was ... okay, not good from one point of view, but good from the perspective of me trying to fake my usual happy-go-lucky shtick.

"Pants," I said brightly. "If we still had tails, we'd need a whole different fashion thing. Maybe we'd all wear skirts?" I waited a moment for that mental picture to cross Sue's mind, then screwed up my face and gestured with both hands, imitating a skirt flying up. "Maybe not." My guts were twisting and it was taking major self-control not to turn and look at Mike and Lin, try to work out how she was taking this. How much was he going to tell her?

*Any damn thing she wants to know.* I couldn't imagine the guilt he must be feeling over Friday night.

Okay, I could. Too much damn imagination, that was half my trouble. *And he really does care about her.* Even in my head, I shied away from using the L-word.

"Don't give me any of that," Sue said impatiently. "Your buddy's always been weird, but he's gone way beyond weird lately. There's the whole disappearing for a month thing, and don't think I bought that bullshit story for one moment! And there's the rumors around school ... and don't think I've

missed that there's quite a few guys — guys older than him, and bigger than him — who are seriously wary of him. And you know, when he looks at me like that, I sure in hell know why. Don't you think I've got a right to know?" She turned and looked after them again. They were halfway down the field by now, but even from here I could see the tension. Or maybe that was my imagination again.

"She's my best friend, Dave. I want to know how worried I should be."

"He'd never hurt her." Absolute, utterly convincing, conviction in my voice. Hey, lying — to anyone but Mike — is one of my best things. Anyway, it wasn't really a lie. I was sure Mike would never hurt her as long as he was in his right mind. Trouble was, that wasn't the reassurance it would have been once.

## Chapter 2

Closeted in a toilet cubicle, willing myself not to puke, I remembered what I'd done that morning. I saw myself open the cages, saw the wild cat jump out gracefully, pausing to rub itself against my leg before stalking into the undergrowth. I saw the baby possum look up at me with huge round eyes, then run up my leg. Reaching down, I had plucked it from its clinging hold on my pants, and carried it in cupped hands across to a tree. Placing it on a branch just above my head, I'd muttered, "Sometimes people have to be kicked out of home for their own good."

I felt embarrassed all over again. You didn't have to be Sigmund Freud to work out where those words had come from.

Mike had sat there, watching me, not saying anything. Not even when I made that muttered remark, although there was no hope whatsoever that his keen ears wouldn't have heard exactly what I'd said. I knew he wouldn't understand it. Heck, I didn't understand it myself.

*No surprise there. You're three for three — don't understand you and your dad, don't understand you and Mike, don't understand why you do any of the stupid things you do.*

The thought wasn't exactly helpful.

When I finally emerged from the toilet, Mike didn't make any comment then either. For which I was grateful. I felt stupid enough.

I couldn't bring myself to ask how the talk with Lin had gone, what he'd told her, how she'd reacted. I wanted to know, but every time I started phrasing the question in my head, my guts knotted.

She'd seemed calm enough when they rejoined us, long as you didn't notice the stunned shock in her eyes, and the way the space between her and Mike had widened. I wished I thought those signs were too subtle for Sue to read.

Fat chance. I could tell she was desperate to get Lin alone to pump her. No problem there; none of us were anxious to prolong the encounter. Mike and I left immediately, and I headed straight for the toilets.

And here we were, in the shadows of the science block, in a grotty little nook that had the sole advantage of being reasonably private. I leaned against

the cold brick wall and closed my eyes.

Mike said softly, "I told her what I was. I told her about the memories and how I'd let First Brother take me over. I told her about slashing my wrists. I didn't say anything about you, and I didn't give her any details about the memories. Okay?"

I swallowed, feeling the vomit rise in my throat again. This was so not like me. I didn't understand why I was freaking out like this. What was him telling Lin, compared to the rest of it?

Mike said, "Everything's coming out, all the secrets. And now someone outside the family knows part of it, and you're afraid everyone's going to know everything. That's why you're freaking."

Okay, I didn't understand what was going on with me, but that didn't mean I wanted to be analyzed. Not that I could tell him that.

"She thinks I'm crazy, of course. Can't blame her for that. But she couldn't deny the claws and the hair. So. Crazy *and* some kind of horrible mutant. But I don't think she'll tell anyone. Even Sue." There he went again, answering my fears. Okay, maybe that wasn't as bad as all that. Long as he didn't confront me with them, and long as I didn't think about how he knew what I needed, I wasn't unhappy that he knew what to say to make me feel better.

And I really hoped his insight into Lin was as good as his reading of me, but I wondered how long Lin would be able to resist telling such a juicy secret to her best friend.

No, that wasn't fair. But I knew the weight of this secret, and I didn't think she'd be able to resist sharing it with someone eventually. And I was damn sure, if she told Sue, that would be an end to secrecy.

We got through the rest of the day somehow.

Mike started eating as soon as we got home. All this time barely eating, now ... I stared in amazement as he went through a big bag of chops. He paused, looking up at me. "Is this grossing you out?" There was trepidation in his face.

I shook my head. "Course not. It's just ... you haven't eaten much till now."

He shrugged. "Got to build back my strength. And we're usually pretty

hungry when we're in Change. I've just been ... too stressed. Y'know?" His eyes watched me intently over his raw chop.

"Mm. Um ... aren't they ... cold?"

He made a face. "Yeah. They'd be better at room temperature, but I can't wait." His eyes still watched me. He was worried about my reaction, I realized. Like I had enough room in my head to care about what he ate.

I said, "Some people like their meat raw. There's even a word for it." I thought. "Tartare. Steak tartare." I managed to lift one side of my mouth. "Gourmet food."

He grinned. Then frowned at my mug. "That all you having?"

I shrugged. He studied me, his tongue flicking out to taste the air. I was getting used to that, though I worried that he'd forget himself in public sometime. He sighed. "I'm sorry, little brother. I wish I —."

"It's okay," I interrupted. I didn't think I could bear to hear him apologize again. I knew it was my fault he'd done what he did. "I'm just ... It's the future I'm stressed about." Which was more than I wanted to say, but ... Honesty. That was what Mike had said. We had to be honest with each other.

I trusted Mike like I trusted noone else on the planet; why was it so difficult to do that?

Mike asked gently, "Talking about it?"

I managed a nod, concentrated on my hot chocolate. Prayed he wouldn't say anymore. Not here.

*Not here, not now, not ever.*

I was saved. Becky bounced into the kitchen, greeting us cheerfully, though she stopped and stared when she saw what Mike was eating. He crunched down hard on the last chop, splintering the bone, and grimaced.

Becky said curiously, "What does it taste like?"

"Not very nice," he grumbled. "The bones are too old." Then something changed in his face. "You mean eating them raw?"

"Yes." Her eyes were wide, but there was no shock or distaste that I could see. I guess she was young enough to accept what people did without judging. Or maybe it was just her.

Mike shrugged. "It's better fresh-killed." He looked at the bones in front of him, then stood up and went into the laundry.

Becky looked at me. I thought maybe she wanted someone to explain it to her, but before I could find the words, she said earnestly, "He won't do it again. He promised." As if she thought I needed reassuring.

I flushed. I must be really transparent if even the ten-year-olds could read me. I said, "I know," and was saved from having to say anything more by Mike coming back in with some newspaper. He wrapped the bones and chucked them in the rubbish.

Then he turned to Becky. "You're right, little sister. I won't do it again. We keep our promises."

Her eyes flicked from him to me. She looked puzzled. Mike closed his eyes briefly, opened them and said, still with that peculiar gentleness that was only in his voice when he spoke to his little sister, or, I suddenly realized in embarrassment, me, sometimes. "I mean the Pack. When I say "we" like that, I generally mean, my Pack-brothers and me." He looked at her questioningly, not sure how much she'd been told about the Pack.

She nodded uncertainly. Mike hesitated, then looked at me, tipping his head toward the hall door. I guess he'd had enough too. I nodded, and we went upstairs.

When we reached his room, he went straight to the window and leaned his forehead against the glass. I dropped my bag and put my mug of hot chocolate on the desk, watching him. I wasn't sure what to do, what was wrong with him, other than the obvious. Even a Pack-brother would surely still feel the effects of that blood loss.

Or maybe not. He turned around, a hand in his hair. "Long day." He grimaced. "Without them."

*Oh.* I looked away.

"It bothers you?" His voice was hesitant.

"No. Of course not." I tried to sound firm, though why I bothered I don't know. He must be smelling what I was feeling. I made myself meet his steel-gray eyes. "I'm feeling weird about everything right now, Mike. I'll get used to

it.”

He nodded slowly, then moved with his usual predatory grace to his bed. He stripped and stretched out.

I said, “You people don’t have a nudity taboo, huh?”

He turned his head and stared at me. “Why would we? Clothes are really uncomfortable over all this hair. And we sure don’t need them for warmth.”

“I was joking.”

“Oh.” He studied me a while longer. I sat down at the desk, feeling the heat rise in my face. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Of course not.” I could feel his eyes still on me, waiting. I grimaced.

“Yeah, well, maybe a bit.” I looked at him. “When you take your clothes off, all your hair seems to spring out. I can see it must be a bind having to cover it. Don’t sweat it, I’ll get used to it.” I grinned. “It’s not as if you’re really naked. I swear to you that hair is twice as long and heavy as it was only a few days ago.”

He grinned. I was exaggerating, but not by much. “It’s the Change. It’ll settle down eventually.” His face sobered. “Brother? Is it okay if I call them?”

“Of course.” I said it quickly, dipping my head to my mug. I drained the cooling chocolate to the bottom, and put the mug down. “Mike, I said you shouldn’t call them in public. I can’t say don’t call them in your own room.”

“*Our* room. And I don’t want to call them if it’s going to freak you out.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not *that* fragile, Mike. It’s not like I can even see them.” I thought about that a while, watching as his eyes took on that silvery cast I’d learned to associate with his other world. “Tell me about them.” I knew he heard me, despite that look. How he did that — straddling two worlds, keeping part of himself in this one, while part of his mind was with his long-dead brothers, I didn’t know. “Are they always the same ones?”

He tilted his head. His body shifted as if accommodating others on his bed, his hands drifting to touch something, someone, I couldn’t see. When he spoke, his voice was low and dreamy. “There’s about twelve in my Pack.”

“I thought there were hundreds.”

He made a low rumble of agreement, then, with an obvious effort, pulled himself out of it enough to say, “There are hundreds of brothers in my

memory, and I can call any of them. And I guess sometimes, when I talk about the Pack, I mean all of us. But other times ... I'm not sure how to describe it. Maybe ... You know how people talk about families? Sometimes they mean cousins and aunts and uncles and relatives like that, and other times they just mean their parents and siblings." I nodded, although I wasn't sure he could see me. "Well, it's the same sort of thing. There's the Pack that's all the brothers held in memory, and there's our own close Pack. The people I see every day. The people I live with."

I wasn't sure how to take that. Mike must have sensed my reaction, because his eyes lost their other-world focus, and fixed on me. He said carefully, "There's you, and me, and Paul, and Mom, and Becky, and ... um ... eight ghost-brothers."

I wondered about Kathryn, but decided this wasn't the time to get into that. "Tell me about them." Because, yeah, I wasn't quite sure what I felt about these brothers that existed only in his mind, but it *was* fascinating. I mean, if I bought into Mike's whole these-people-really-existed, what-I-remember-really-happened thing, then this was a window into the deep past. People who'd lived thousands and thousands of years ago.

Mike looked around the room, as if not sure where to start. After a moment I prompted, "I know you said you don't have names, but you must have some way of telling each other apart? How do you know who you're talking to? Who you're talking about? You talk about each other, don't you?"

He looked confused. "Every brother is different."

"But how do you refer to them, without names?"

He tilted his head, studying something I couldn't see. At last he offered, "It's ... a smell, a feeling ... an image."

"So you do have names." I managed a smile. Easier than I'd thought it'd be; this really was fascinating, if I could just keep away from the emotional tangle. "They're just not expressed as words."

He twitched a shoulder in a minimal shrug. "I suppose."

"Can you put the names into words for me?"

He frowned, then gestured to the space on his left. "This is," he paused, visibly searching for words, "Brother drowning in the snow when the

mammoth falls on him.”

“Is that how he died?”

His eyes widened, the expression of appalled shock unmistakable. “He’s not dead!”

*Oh God.*

He stopped abruptly. Maybe he sensed my reaction, maybe he just realized what he’d said. After a moment, he said carefully, “They live in our minds at the age they were when they passed on their memories, when they conceived the brother of our line. The incident of the mammoth occurred when our brother was newly Changed, on his ritual mammoth hunt. It captures something important about this brother. It was funny. This brother is like a clown. Things happen to him. Accidents. He appears clumsy, and then he saves himself. He is quick and strong and ... lucky.” He shrugged, as if to say the words were inadequate.

I said, cautiously, not sure how it would be taken, “I’ll call him Snowfall.” I looked at Mike, then, thinking about it, at the empty space beside him. “Is that okay?”

Mike grinned widely. “He likes that.” His eyes slid to the side of me and he growled. I tensed.

“A brother was touching you. Sorry.”

I rolled my eyes. “You serious?” *Shit.* Of course he was. I said more carefully, “Sorry. But you know, Mike, I can’t feel it. I really don’t mind.”

Mike slid off the bed and crossed the room. He reached down and put his hand on my belly. “*That* is where his hand was,” he growled. “But his was under your shirt.” I felt my stomach muscles tense. He pulled his hand away quickly, then, sighing, patted the air near us. “They don’t understand. They’ve never had a human brother. They’ve never touched a human male except to hurt.” He looked back at me, his worry for me clear in his face. Maybe I was getting the hang of his expressions. “They’re fascinated by you. By your skin, by your hair. And they have no boundaries, little brother. No concept of privacy.”

I wasn’t sure how to deal with this, but ... honesty, that’s what Mike had said. “I know they’re real to you, Mike, but they’re not real to me. Why should

it matter to me what they do?" *What you imagine they do*, I thought, but didn't say.

He looked ... confused, uncertain. Instincts at war with logic, maybe. After a moment he said, "They won't touch you without permission. I'll make sure they respect your boundaries."

He went back to his bed, pushing a little at the air as if making room for himself. When he was comfortable, he said, "Snowfall is about ten winters past his Change." He paused. "About twenty-two, twenty-three, I guess that makes him. They came to their Change earlier back then. He's quite solid — a little shorter than me, and quite a bit heavier. His hair's really thick. The climate's really cold in his time. His ... I'm not sure how to describe it. The brother who's closest to him, the one he spends most time with ..." He frowned, looking for the words I thought.

"We spend a lot of time grooming each other, but we don't spend the same amount of time with each brother. Some brothers we spend more time with and there's always one we spend most time with. It doesn't have to be a line-brother. In fact, it's nicer if it isn't." He shut his eyes. "I guess you could call that brother a brother of the heart. The one we love the most, the one we need the most." He opened his eyes and stared at me. "You're my heart-brother."

The muscles tightened in my chest. I felt myself suddenly short of breath.

Mike went on evenly, as if unaware of my reaction though I knew he wasn't. I was grateful for that. "Snowfall's heart-brother is proud of Snowfall, proud of the way he lightens our spirits." He shook his head. "His heart-brother isn't part of our line, of course. But I know how he feels about Snowfall. His feelings for Snowfall are an important part of Snowfall's image of himself." He looked at me. I understood what he was saying. He was talking about us as much as Snowfall and his brother.

"There's one with many scars, fifteen winters past his Change. He is ... Brother alone against the lion, blood in the air, a brother in pain. And there's a younger one, from more recent times. He is ..." He frowned, looked into the air above the rug, his eyes intent on someone I couldn't see. "He's really young, about our age."

"You said your brothers are remembered from the time when they

conceived your line-brother.” I realized my stupidity as soon as I said it. It wasn’t something I ever thought about — that we were old enough to father kids.

Mike knew what I was getting at. He shrugged. “Old enough to fuck.” The crudity made me flinch, don’t know why. Or maybe I did, but it wasn’t something I wanted to think about. Mike noticed of course. I saw his jaw tighten, but he went on evenly, “We don’t usually father children this young. Because memories are so important to us, we like brothers to be at least five years past Change, and preferably closer to ten. This brother —” He grinned suddenly. “Brother rape among the wildflowers in the sun.”

*Jesus, Mike.*

*He* flinched then. “I’m sorry. This brother was ... wild. Well, we’re all pretty wild, but this brother ... when we were children we all went through a stage of sneaking off in twos or threes to watch the humans during the day. But this brother had no brother close in age to him. He’d sneak off alone. Watch the humans for hours. One day, long before he’d Changed, he found a girl alone, in a high meadow.” His eyes had that silvery sheen to them again, and the focus of his gaze left me no doubt he was reliving that moment. “The grass is so green,” he said dreamily. “The flowers are thickly scattered paint-blots of color. The woman has only recently finished bleeding, and the smell of her blood is a bright metallic edge to the scent of her musk.”

I felt ill. Mike said, “*Shit.*” He pulled himself out of it, and looked at me, his eyes darkening. “I’m sorry, brother, I —.”

I cut him off, not wanting to discuss this. I didn’t doubt that he was sickened by the memories he had. But he enjoyed them too. How could he not? The brothers whose memories they were had no doubt enjoyed the experiences. I said neutrally, “I’ll call him Wildflower.” I took a breath, re-capped. “Snowfall, Lion-alone, and Wildflower. Who else?”

He looked around again. “One brother has only two fingers on his left hand. Two fingers and the thumb were bitten off.”

“You’re left-handed.”

He nodded. “We’re all left-handed. Our brother cannot hunt.”

“Is that what names him? His inability to hunt?” I was shocked by the bitter

edge to my voice. Where did *that* come from? Fallout from the wildflower thing, I guessed. I started to apologize, cut myself off and bit my lip.

Mike said steadily, "It's an important part of what defines him. His inability to do what his brothers do." He met my eyes squarely. "But dependence on our brothers isn't something that worries us. We all depend on our brothers. His disability is a sorrow shared among us all."

"You really mean that, don't you?"

"What's felt by one of us is felt by all." He stared at me. "I know we can't echo your feelings the way we do each other's, but you're our brother, Dave. We share your pain. We don't feel superior, or pitying, or even sympathetic. We simply hurt."

My eyes filled suddenly with tears. I closed them tight, willing Mike not to move, not to say anything. It must have worked, because he didn't, and eventually I opened my eyes and took a breath and said, "I'll call him Right-hand." I managed a tired grin. "For the hand he has, not the one he's lost."

He looked somewhere to the right of me and said, "He likes that."

I felt my grin widening, becoming more real. "Who else then?"

He told me about two brothers who had been born at one birth. Twins were apparently rare, but when they happened the brothers were inseparable, hardly able to have a thought the other didn't share. Only one could be Mike's line-brother of course, but their minds were so close he claimed both were there, captured in memory, in his cells. That depth of closeness freaked me out, but Mike seemed to find it comforting. It worried me, sometimes, how much he'd changed. I tried not to think about it.

He told me about his oldest brothers. One was as old as his dad. Another, rare among the brothers, was a good ten winters older.

I noted that, how he said "winters" instead of years. Sixteen years growing up with me, in a world of computers and planes and TV, and now he counted in winters survived.

When he'd finished, I listed them. "Snowfall, Lion-alone, Wildflower, Right-hand, the Twins, Traveler, Summer-fruit." I grinned at him, feeling comfortable enough now to say, "You're very weird."

"Yeah, I know." His lips twitched in a token acknowledgment that I was

teasing, but his eyes were fixed on me anxiously. I wasn't sure what he wanted from me, but I got the message that there was something.

I said hesitantly, "I can't see them, Mike. It's up to you to make them real for me." He nodded, eyes still fixed on me. I tried again. "You can talk about them as much as you like. I want to know your brothers better." I didn't know if there was really any difference between Mike's fantasies and schizophrenia — the fact that the people in his head had once been alive didn't alter the fact that their presence in Mike's world was pure fantasy — but he was my brother, my best friend, and this was important to him. And he wasn't human. Paul had shown me what it was like for a Pack-brother to deny the ghosts, however unreal they might be.

He relaxed. "I want to know *you* better."

I tensed. "You know me better than anyone else in the world."

"I want to know you as well as I know my other brothers."

"Mike —" I stopped, breathed out heavily, trying to squash the panic twisting in my gut again. "I'm trying."

He sighed, flapped a hand apologetically. "I know. I'm sorry." He looked around the room, then back at me. "How long do you reckon?"

### Chapter 3

Now what was he on about? “I’m sorry?”

“Since First Brother.”

I’d actually done some thinking about this. “Thirty, forty thousand years?” I shrugged, because I didn’t have enough information for this to be anything but a wild guess.

Mike looked thoughtful. After a minute, he said, “Twelve hundred generations, minimum.” He shook his head. “Twelve hundred brothers. You reckon I can fit twelve hundred brothers in my head?”

I grinned, though I was a little freaked myself. “You can fit a world in your head. Several worlds.”

He grimaced. “Yeah. I should know that if anyone does.” He looked sideways, at the space beside him. His hand reached out and stroked the air. The weird thing was, I could almost see what — who — he was touching. Like one of those mimes pretending he’s in a box.

Mike looked back at me. “I nearly cut and ran. In the kitchen this morning.” *Me too.* “You were so cool. Like everything was just the same as always.”

“I couldn’t see *your* panic either.”

He frowned. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” It was actually good to know he wasn’t always monitoring me, even if he had to be upset to be blind to me.

Maybe he sensed what I was thinking. I knew he couldn’t read my mind, but he’d known me a long time, and with his ability to smell exactly what I was feeling, I was afraid he came damn close. He stared at me as if reading every last pathetic fear, then, sighing softly, turned his head so that he was looking up at the ceiling. Or whatever it was he saw. “Why did you say thirty to forty thousand?”

“Well, it’s just a wild guess.”

“Sure, but why then?”

“Um, well, because Neanderthal man disappeared about then.”

“We’re not Neanderthals!”

I had to smile, he sounded so offended. “Well, further back, a lot further

back, there were several hominid species.” I paused. “How much do you know about human evolution, Mike?”

“You probably know every book I’ve ever read and you certainly know every damn thing I’ve ever learned at school.” He made a face. “Or not learned, in my case.”

I grinned. “We’re proceeding from a starting-point of total ignorance, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, well, humans haven’t been around for very long, eh? The first hominid species are called australopithecines. There were several different species, but they all died out about a million years ago. Too far back, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really have a feeling for how long the line is, but a million seems too far, yeah.”

“The first species that the fossil hunters have really claimed as human is *Homo habilis*. That’s what they mean by putting that “Homo” at the front of the name. But I’ll tell you something interesting. *Homo habilis* lived about two to two and a half million years ago.”

“What’s so interesting about that?”

“Same time as the australopithecines. They were in competition, eh?”

“And *Homo habilis* won.” The bitterness in his tone surprised me. I reminded myself that what was ancient history to me was something very real and present for Mike.

More cautiously, I said, “It’s probably your line, too. Every animal alive today is alive because their line survived while others died.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “My sympathies tend to be with the losing lines nowadays.”

I felt a quiver in my gut. I hadn’t really thought this through before. Mike was probably the last of his species. That was ... heck, I couldn’t even imagine what that must be like.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, after *Homo habilis* — well, not really after, because they probably co-existed for a few hundred thousand years — came *Homo erectus*.”

“Erect homo!” Mike’s voice was joking. “I like it.” I could hear the effort he was making to lighten his mood, but at least he was trying.

I grinned and answered equally lightly. “I don’t think that was what was in the scientists’ minds when they named the species.” I leaned back in the chair, stretching out my legs, searching my mind. “Homo erectus lived from about two million years ago right up until about 250,000 years ago. They spread out quite a long way. All the way to Asia, and Europe too.”

Mike frowned. “Spread out from where?”

“Africa, of course. Don’t you know anything?”

He grinned. “That’s what I keep you for.”

“I’ll be testing you later.”

He closed his eyes and recited, “Australopithecines, died out a million years ago. Homo habilis, died out two million years ago.” He opened his eyes and shook his head. “It’s all too far back. I can’t believe First Brother was that long ago. I mean, two million years ...” He shook his head again. “Feels like yesterday.” A rueful grimace. “Everything feels like yesterday.”

I said briskly, “Anyway, I don’t see how you could have survived that long. It’s a damn chancy way to reproduce. The whole point of sexual reproduction is diversity. Increase the species’ chance of survival. But according to your story you’ve thrown that away.”

“We reproduce sexually.” His voice was stiff.

*Uh-oh.* “Um, in biology sexual reproduction refers to the genes, uh, mixing. You know? And you said yours don’t. That’s parthenogenesis.” I hesitated. This was obviously a touchy topic. “It’s usually females. Actually, I think it’s always females. I’ve never heard of males reproducing like that. Using a host.”

“It’s not possible?” Mike sounded worried.

“Heck, Mike, I’m not a biologist. A lot of really weird things go on in nature, I’m not going to say it’s impossible. Just, I never heard of it before.” I hesitated, not really sure how Mike would react. “I wish I could do a DNA test on you and your dad.”

“Fingerprints,” he suggested readily. “Only identical twins have identical fingerprints, have I got that right?”

“I think so. You’re saying only genetically identical people could have

identical fingerprints? So if your fingerprints are identical, then we'd have proof your DNA was identical. And since we know he's not your twin, then we'd know you were clones of each other." *Oops*. "Sorry. It's a biological term, okay? It just means your genes are the same."

"It's okay. I've got used to the idea." Was that true? I wasn't sure.  
"Anyway, why are you so interested in how we reproduce?"

I shrugged. "Well, it's interesting. Also, well, it's about evolution. How long could a species survive, that reproduced in that way?" I wasn't sure I could explain this properly. I wasn't sure Mike really wanted me to talk about this.

"You have a mutation, right? That first bloke, the one who started it all off. He has this mutation that enables him to ... uh ... plant copies of himself in human women. I mean, how many copies can he have? I know a man can reproduce a zillion times, but he's got to find a woman, eh? And she can only have so many kids. We're not a profligate species. Rabbits, you know how they breed. Within a few weeks the babies have to fend for themselves and Mom's ready to have another batch. Humans don't work like that. They have to invest a lot of time and energy in their kids. Years. So they don't have many. And then, some of those kids aren't going to reproduce. Some of them'll die before they're old enough to have kids. Some won't find mates. I mean, you need a minimum number to have a viable population, Mike. I don't see how you kept going."

He said grimly, "Our survival has always hung on a thread. But we've hung on. Because we *remember*. Everything. That ever happened."

Well, I could see there'd be advantages, but ... "What's memory got to do with survival?"

"Learning is easy. It's all been done before. We know what to do. We only ever make a mistake *once*."

"Even so."

"And ... we know how important it is." His voice had dropped into its lowest register. "We have a ... really strong ... need ... to ... reproduce. Have sons ... brothers." He didn't look at me. "I mean ... *really* strong."

Well, that killed the conversation.

The silence drew out. Eventually I gathered my scattered thoughts and asked, “What exactly do you want to know?”

He frowned. “Well, what we are, I guess.”

Thought we’d sorted that. I mean, I wasn’t entirely sure I bought into his story, but I was sure that *he* believed it. I said carefully, “You know what you are.”

He looked confused. “Well, where we come from I suppose.” He stopped and thought some more. “Actually ... I think what I really want to know is how we’re related to humans.”

“Well, you’re obviously hominid —.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t know what it means.”

“Hominid? It’s just the family humans belong to, eh? You know, *Homo sapiens*.”

“There aren’t any other species in that family.”

“There were. *Now* there’s only us.” *Damn*. “Sorry.”

He tipped his head. “How do you know all this? All this stuff about how humans evolved?”

I felt my cheeks heat. “Well, when you ... went away ... um ... I didn’t really believe you about not being human. It just seemed too weird. But ... well, I did a bit of reading. To see how plausible it was.”

“And what did you decide?”

“Well, there’s been maybe as many as twenty different hominid species, and you know, there’s not that many fossils found. I mean it’s unlikely we’ve found all the different types that have ever lived.” He really seemed to resist the idea that he might be human, which I put down to the Pack’s strong feelings about humans, but their feelings weren’t really proof. I said tentatively, “You might be like, a different race. The mutation could have arisen among the humans?”

He took it better than I expected. His voice was flat. “You forget, I have his memories. First Brother’s. We knew the humans. And they weren’t us. Not anything like us.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, well, how far can we rely on those memories?”

He looked completely bewildered, as if I’d asked him how he knew he was

male. “They’re *memories*. They *happened*.”

Treading carefully, I suggested, “I remember lots of things that probably didn’t really happen the way I remember them. Memory’s not terribly reliable, Mike.”

“These ones are. I know memory can be lousy, I’ve got ordinary memories too. That’s how I know the difference. These memories are special. They’re completely accurate.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do!” He jumped off the bed and started pacing the room. I felt a flutter of panic and suppressed it quickly. Mike wasn’t going to hurt me, for God’s sake.

He stopped moving, and just stood there, in the middle of the room, breathing deeply. After a moment, he said, “I’m not a scientist, brother.”

I tried to lighten the atmosphere. “A bit of scientific thinking wouldn’t do you any harm.” I gave the words a quick grin then sobered. “I’m not challenging your sincerity, Mike. But, you know, however strongly you believe something is true, that doesn’t make it true. If we’re going to rely on your memories for information, we need to verify their accuracy.”

He ran a hand through his hair. He was shaking. I didn’t know why he was reacting so strongly, but clearly it was a big deal to him. “Yeah, okay.” His hand dropped to the long hair on his chest, claws digging deep in the dense hair. “How do we do that?”

I watched him carefully, not wanting to set him off again. “That’s the tricky part. Can you tell me more about the memories? How are they different from ordinary memories?”

He gestured helplessly. “They’re real.” He looked around as if hoping to find an explanation inscribed on the air. “You know how dreams are so much more real than memories? Well, the memories are that much more real than dreams.” I wasn’t sure that helped. He tried again. “You know how when you’re dreaming, the dream seems real? Only, when you wake up, you realize it’s not quite as real as real life.” He lifted a shoulder. “I can’t tell the difference between my memories of being with the Pack, and being here, with you. They’re both ‘real’.”

I'd seen him with his brothers, but ... I realized I'd imagined it like some video display. I said slowly, "Your brothers," I made a sweeping gesture around the room, "they really seem as real to you as I am?"

He looked embarrassed and confused. Maybe the part that still remembered being raised human was embarrassed; the Pack-brother couldn't understand how I couldn't see what was so obvious to him. He nodded, then contradicted himself. "Not always." He cleared his throat. "I guess it depends how much attention I'm giving to them. Sometimes they're just shadows. Sometimes I can see through them. Other times, yeah, they're as real as you are." The embarrassment was more obvious now. He added awkwardly, "Um, I can touch them, you know. And feel them touch me. And smell them."

Well, I'd seen that. "Probably why you believe in them so much." I made my voice matter-of-fact. "You believe they're true because they're so vivid. But it doesn't follow, you know." I paused, trying not to flinch, nervous of his reaction. But he didn't say anything this time. I felt I was letting him down by not accepting everything he said as if it was gospel, but I thought this was one of the things he needed from me. And he'd said he needed me to be honest.

"If you could describe exactly what the world was like way back when, when the mutation happened, maybe I could find some books that we could check your memories against. You know, plant life, and what sort of animals were around, things like that. Maybe even the stars. They must have changed a bit in that time. If you could draw a picture of the night sky back then, I bet I could find a book that would help me work out what it should have looked like. You reckon you could do that?"

"Sure." His body relaxed; his eyes lightened. "Know the night sky back then a damn sight better than the one here, to be honest."

"Okay. Good." I nodded vaguely, my thoughts busy. "There must be people living who are in some of your "special" memories."

"Yeah, course." He moved uneasily. Now what had I said? "I've got some of Paul's memories, eh? Mom's in some of those." He blushed, and I thought, *Oh boy*. I hadn't thought of that. He hurried on. "There's my own, of course. You're in some of those."

I gathered my thoughts. "Difficult to prove anything by comparing our

memories. I mean, we know you lived through,” I flapped my right hand, “whatever. And if you remembered a lot more than me, so what? Unless it was videoed at the time, we wouldn’t be able to prove how accurate you were.”

“Well, that’s true of Paul’s memories, too.”

“But you shouldn’t have your dad’s memories. Just showing that the things you remember happening to Paul, long before you were born, really did happen, will be some sort of proof.” He had to have *some* memories that weren’t embarrassing, right? “Of course, he must have the same memories as you, eh? So that would be another test — if he described one of the older memories to me and you could describe the same thing.”

“I can’t talk to him about that!” Mike’s eyes were wide and suddenly dark.

*Fathers and sons. What is it with fathers and sons?* I knew all about not being able to talk to your father, but ... they weren’t just father and son, they were brothers. Heck, they were identical twins! Didn’t that make it different?

But I remembered Paul’s panic when we got to the hut — still didn’t know how much of that panic was because of the place or what he expected to find there — and that desperate, almost subsonic moan, that had raised the hair on the back of my neck and sent shivers all along my nerves. I couldn’t blame Mike for not wanting to raise that again, and I was in no position to fault Paul for not wanting to bring up stuff he’d spent twenty years trying to forget.

But Mike had shown in the worst way how much he needed us to do just that. Or had I misunderstood?

“Mike? What *can* you talk about with him?”

I wasn’t trying to be funny, I was just feeling my way, trying not to say the wrong thing. But he stared at me, and then he started laughing. And then he looked at me like I had completely failed to understand everything, and said, “I don’t want to *talk* to him about anything.”

And I got that. I just didn’t know whether the ice in my belly was for Paul’s sake, or some more selfish reason.