

## Chapter 4

I wasn't given much time to think about it. Paul usually made dinner during the week — his job was pretty flexible, and he was usually home long before Mrs J. Today he was later than usual. Not that I was aware of that; his arrival home wasn't exactly high on my list of worries.

But, unsurprisingly, it *was* on Mike's. And maybe talking about Paul had brought it to a head. Suddenly he threw on his clothes and said, "Paul's late. Maybe we should start doing something about dinner."

"Sure." I stood up quickly and followed him out.

Down in the kitchen, Mike opened the fridge and looked in, but I could see he wasn't seeing anything. Not anything that was in there, at any rate. His whole body was tense, his head cocked as if straining to hear. It made me nervous. I didn't like to think about what would happen when Paul came home, if Mike was as needy as he appeared. But what could I do about it?

I nudged him gently out of the way. "Let me see." He moved out of the way without comment, only barely aware of me. I studied the contents of the fridge, pulling out a couple of large containers that looked promising.

I glanced at Mike, seeing his whole body was tensed like a dog straining at a leash. Frowning, I erased the mental image. Mike was a person, even if he wasn't, quite, human. Lifting the lid of one of the containers, I said with as much cheerfulness as I could muster, "I think this is some of that vegetable curry your Mom made in the weekend. I wonder if there's any poppadoms left."

No response. Biting my lip, I put the container on the bench, then found a box of poppadoms in the pantry, measured out the rice and rinsed it and set it to soak. There was some raw steak in the fridge. I waved it under Mike's nose hoping the smell would get through his preoccupation. "This do for you two?"

His nostrils flared. He moved his head, blinked at me. "Yeah, sure." He frowned at me like he wasn't quite sure where he was or what was going on. Then he shook his head like a dog shaking water and made a noise. He looked at the open doorway. "Sorry. I don't ... I need him home."

"Got that," I muttered, the words slipping out before I could stop them. His

head jerked round, his eyes focusing on me properly. I put the meat on the table, not looking at him. “He’s going to freak if you —.” What exactly was I afraid he’d do? I shook my head. Like I was in any position to advise him how he should be with his dad. Going over to the freezer, I took a few sausages out for anyone who wanted some meat with their curry. Me, mainly, though Becky would probably have one.

Mike sighed and started to head toward the sink, then stopped, his head jerking around like he’d heard a noise. He stayed like that, frozen, staring at the open doorway to the hall.

I ignored him, filling my mind with thoughts of dinner. I dug out some vegetables for a salad, which Mike’s Mom was big on, although I was going to have to modify her usual recipe to accommodate my one-handedness. Maybe Becky would grate the carrots and beet.

Not looking at Mike, I walked past him to the doorway and called Becky’s name. I’d rinsed the rice again and set it on the stove by the time she came into the kitchen. I heard her start to say my name with her usual bounce, then stop. I turned around. She was looking at Mike, her blue eyes worried.

“It’s all right, Beck. He’s just ... focused.” I found a smile from somewhere. “Could you help me with the salad?”

She smiled happily. “Sure!” She gave a Mike a final glance, more curious than concerned, and moved past him toward me. I set her to grating the carrot and put the sausages into the microwave to thaw. I was trying so damn hard not to think about what was going to happen. Then the front door banged, and I heard a rapid soft-footed tread on the wooden floor. I swung round. Mike wasn’t moving, which surprised me. The way he was acting I’d have expected him to rush to meet his Pack-brother. Maybe he was scared. I knew *I* was, although I wasn’t entirely sure why. Except that Mike looked as if he’d forgotten everything except that his Pack-brother was coming. Forgotten the most important thing, which was that this Pack-brother wasn’t sane.

Paul came through the door, and for all the twenty years between them, he looked so like Mike I felt the same sympathetic wrenching in my gut I felt whenever Mike was visibly distressed.

He stopped in the doorway, and Mike jolted out of his paralysis and took

two long strides toward him, into him, their bodies touching, their faces cheek to cheek. There was a long, aching moment, and then Paul screamed, and Mike spun away, and his father screamed again, putting his hands to his mouth and holding them there, his eyes wide with shock.

Mike's hands were pressed to his lips in a terrifying mirror-image, his own eyes wide and black. With an effort that wrenched my gut, he pulled his hands away from his mouth and stepped back, and back again, then stopped. He looked around wildly, looking for ... I didn't know what.

His eyes lit on me, and he said desperately, "Hold him!" I stood there frozen. Why was he asking *me*? With relief, I heard the front door bang again, and a rapid staccato of heels. Mike turned from me and looked over Paul's shoulder, at his mom just coming into view, and shouted, "*Hold him!*"

His dad was moaning, the very deep moan that reverberated in the bone, the moan I hadn't wanted ever to hear again. Mike was rocking, an echoing moan beginning to sound. He took another step back, and his mom cautiously wrapped her arms around her husband and stroked his hair, murmuring soothingly.

Mike left, eeling past them with frantic grace, careful not to let his body touch them. I wanted to leave too, then I remembered Becky. She was staring at her parents. I wasn't sure whether she was frightened or simply upset and confused. I said, "Hey, why don't we leave this for a bit?"

Her eyes moved to meet mine, and I could read the fright now. I smiled, trying to reassure her. *She's found out her Mom and Dad aren't her Mom and Dad, that her Mom's her aunt and her Dad's not even human, and now he's screaming because he touched her brother, and she cannot have the foggiest clue what's going on, and what can I possibly say that will fix any of that?* I said lamely, "We'll come back a bit later, okay?"

She nodded, her small kitten face still solemn. We headed for the door. Mrs J lifted her head from its place against her husband's and pulled them both out of our way. She gave a barely perceptible nod as we went past, maybe thanks that I was taking Becky away, maybe just an acknowledgment that we were doing the right thing.

I stayed with Beck for a while in the family room, not wanting to abandon

her right away. Part of me wanted to go after Mike; part of me was scared to.

He was lying curled on the bed when I came in, his arm curved as if hugging another body. But he heard me come in, and as I shut the door behind me, he sat up and looked at me. “How is he?” His voice was barely understandable.

I mumbled, “Okay, I think.” What was I supposed to say?

He cleared his throat, and the words came out a little clearer. “How long did it take to calm him?”

I felt the heat rising in my face. “I don’t know. I ... ” What did he expect me to do?

“You left him?” His voice was incredulous, like he couldn’t believe anyone would do such a thing.

I really didn’t want to have this conversation. I muttered, “I didn’t think he’d want me to see him like that. I thought he and your Mom would want to be alone.”

“You think like a human!”

It hit me like a blow. I felt myself hunch over, good arm cradling the broken one, my whole body tight. I heard Mike slide off the bed and come over to me. “Jesus, Dave, I’m sorry. That was about the stupidest thing I’ve said in my life.” I took a deep breath, trying to straighten, to show him it didn’t matter. “It’s just I’m hurting so much, you know? But you didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t.”

I finally managed to straighten up, and heard myself whisper, “I *am* human.”

He reached out a hand, stopped it just short of touching. “I know, brother.” He shook his head. “It’s not even true.”

A corner of my mouth twitched up. “I’m *not* human?”

He shook his head again. “I mean, what you did, it was human, yeah. But not all humans would have reacted like that.”

I tensed again. *Let’s not go there.* “He’s not you, Mike. I don’t think he wanted me there.”

“He *is* me, brother.” His voice was intense. “I’m him.”

*No he isn't. You're you.* But I wasn't sure any more what that meant.

He said softly, "I had to leave, brother. I was the one hurting him. But he needed the people he loves." I felt a jolt in my gut. Mike's eyes on me were steady. "He loves you. He thinks of you as a son." He paused, then added, "And you're part of me. You smell of me a little. It's comforting for him to have you around. You're a part of me that he can be close to without being afraid."

Okay, that was weird. I shook the thought from me and asked, "Why is he afraid of you?"

"Not me. Us." He gestured widely around him. I followed the sweep of his arm automatically, then caught myself. He said unhappily, "Right from the beginning, he wanted to be human."

"You don't?" The words were out before I could stop them.

He made a soft explosive sound. "I don't know what I want." He hesitated, studying me, maybe wondering if I could handle the truth. I didn't give him any help; I wasn't sure myself. Eventually he admitted, "I don't want to repeat my line-brother's mistakes. I'm not going to live my life as he has."

"Line-brother?" I focused on the unimportant bit.

He nodded. "A brother in direct line of descent. A brother whose memories I have." His eyes slid away from me. "I remember growing up there, Dave. I remember lying awake in that hut, listening to the night, waiting for my brother to return from the hunt. I remember trekking out of there every day to go to school, hearing the other kids whispering to each other, shutting me out. I remember wanting, desperately, to be one of them. To be accepted. I remember wanting to be human."

He swallowed, voice deepening into that barely intelligible gravel pitch. "I understand why he feels as he does. I understand why he became what he is. But I also know what he feels now, what he's felt all these years." He shuddered.

*So why the heck did you do what you did?*

But I knew the answer to that. At least, I knew all about doing stuff you knew with your head was a really bad idea, but felt compelled to do it anyway.

Mike was staring down at the floor, or whatever it was he saw. His voice

was strained as he asked, “Will you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

He looked up. “You don’t know what it is yet.”

I hesitated, then decided to be honest. Good practice. “It doesn’t matter what it is.” Did he realize how much I was revealing there?

Probably not, bound up as he was in his Pack-brother’s pain. “Will you go downstairs and talk to Paul for a few minutes?”

*Oh God, ask me something else. Please.* “What for?”

“I need to know he’s all right.” He watched me carefully, like me with a wild animal I wasn’t sure of. “Do you trust Paul?”

Was he serious? I started to say something facetious, then stopped. Of course he was serious; he wanted me to think about this. So I thought. I’d known Mike’s father all my life; he’d always been ... well, fairly distant, actually. But he was like that with everyone. He’d always been pleasant enough to me, anyway. I’d never felt unwelcome — which, considering how much time I’d spent at his house, was saying something.

None of that was really the point. I met Mike’s eyes. “Yes. I trust him.” I shrugged and tried to smile. “He looks like you and sounds like you. How can I not trust him?”

“Will you let him hold you?”

I froze. Mike said desperately, “I know what I’m asking, brother, but I need this. Paul and I both need this. We can’t touch each other, we need someone to ... go between us.”

“What about your mom?”

He shook his head. I don’t know what was wrong with my suggestion, it seemed obvious to me, but all he said was, “Please, Dave.”

I owed Mike everything, but that wasn’t what decided me. No, it was something much more pathetic. I needed him, and I couldn’t, wouldn’t, say no to anything he asked of me. I turned to go and Mike held up a hand, not quite touching me, and I stopped. He leaned in closer, breathing into my hair, then pressing his face into it. I remembered him doing that at the hut, and felt a quiver in my gut and ruthlessly suppressed it. I breathed in, out, in, out, and then he drew back.

I said stiffly, “I can’t just walk in and give your dad a hug.”

Mike tilted his head. “You could actually. But if it freaks you out, tell him I asked you to.”

*Right.*

His eyes stayed on mine. “You’ll find a way. You can do anything you have to, little brother. You can do this. Please.”

Didn’t leave me much choice, did it?

Mike’s dad was alone in the kitchen, lifting the lid of the pot on the stove. Not turning, he said, “Thanks for doing this, Dave.” He sounded worn to the bone. And so much like Mike, I couldn’t help responding to his distress.

But he *wasn’t* Mike. I went over to the bench, babbling. “I thought the leftover vege curry would do for the rest of us, and there’s a few sausages in the microwave.” I took them out. “I was going to —.” He silently put the frying pan on the stove. “Uh, yeah.” I turned up the heat and splashed some oil in. “Um ... we were doing some salad ...”

“I’ll finish that.” We were both of us not looking at each other.

His voice was so like Mike’s. And his body was Mike’s — same height, same stocky build. The hair on his head was the same coarse, grayish brown. And if I dared look at it, I knew I’d see the same face, a little more worn.

I put the lid on the frying pan, and suppressed a sigh. I hadn’t managed anything else Mike had asked of me; I was damn well going to manage this. “Um ... Mr Jaeger?”

He made a soft snorting sound. Stopping his grating, he turned toward me, fixing me with his son’s eyes. “Dave, you probably know me better than my own wife. You better call me Paul.”

I was a little startled by that — not by him asking me to use his first name, but his comment that I knew him better than his wife did. I knew he’d never told her much about the Pack, but ... I guess it was the same thing Mike was saying. To know one was to know the other. I didn’t believe that, but I couldn’t deny there was truth in it.

I took a breath. “Paul. Um ... Mike asked me to come down. He thought ...”  
Damn it, did Mike really expect me to do this?

Yeah, he did.

I closed the gap between us. “Um ... You want to ... smell me?”

When I got back, Mike was grooming himself, his claws pulling through the long hair on his belly. He looked up as soon as I came in, and when I hovered just inside the room, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The tilt of his head invited me nearer.

I went over and sat down next to him, and he turned his head toward me and leaned close enough to bump heads. I waited, and after a few breaths he sat back. He said softly, “He’s unhappy, and tired, and scared. And ashamed.”

When he’d said they needed someone to go between them, I hadn’t thought he’d meant it so literally. “You can smell all that? On me?”

He nodded. “He was grateful that you let him touch you, smell you. Thankful for the smell of me on you, warmed by your concern.”

I felt my face heat. Mike lay back and started grooming himself again, looking more relaxed.

“Dinner’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

He flinched. “Don’t think so. I mean, I’d like some food, but I don’t think Paul could handle it right now.”

“I could bring something up?”

“Great.”

I watched him another minute. It wasn’t like any of the animals I was used to, but then how could it be? None of them had hands. More like chimpanzees, I thought vaguely. But the hair was more like wolves than primates. I asked hesitantly, “May I touch?”

He looked surprised and pleased. “Sure.”

I perched on the edge of the bed and touched the hair over his ribs lightly. Parting the hair, I probed curiously into the dense under-layer. Spreading my fingers wide, I pulled them back through the long topmost layer. “You need a brush.”

“I need a brother.” His voice was sour.

I realized the problem. “You can’t do your back.”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “You offering?”

Was I? “Um, let’s have a look.”

He rolled onto his front, bringing his arms up to pillow his head. I poked tentatively into the hair between his shoulder blades. Mike said, “You’d be hard put to hurt me with those stubby nails.” I laughed and pushed my fingers in with more force. This was weird but ... it reminded me of my animals, I realized. Which was not something I was going to tell Mike but ... it *was* making me feel better.

“God, that hair’s thick. Impenetrable. I need something with sharp teeth.” I stopped digging into the dense under-layer and pulled my fingers through the longer hair. “Knots easily, huh?”

“Yeah.” His voice had deepened into a dreamy rumble; after a moment I realized he was purring. I grinned. I’d heard it before, a couple of times, and didn’t think I’d ever stop enjoying it. It was deeper, more powerful than a cat’s, but like enough to earn the name. It was ... relaxing.

I spaced for a bit, I think. I didn’t hear Paul call, but Mike murmured sleepily, “Dinner’s ready.”

I paused, not withdrawing my hand right away. “You be okay?” Stupid. He probably realized it was my own reluctance to leave that was the problem. I’d spent the weekend holed up here with Mike, and breakfast this morning had been leavened by people coming and going, caught up in the business of getting ready for the day. This would be the first proper, sit-down, everyone-together, time since the ... accident.

“I’ll come down,” Mike said abruptly, as if he realized what I was thinking. Maybe he did.

“You read my mind?” I tried to say it jokingly, but it wasn’t a joke.

He went very still. “I can’t read your mind, brother.” The words were very stiff and careful. There was a pause, and then he added, “I wish I could.” Such longing in his voice, I was silenced.

I stood. “We better go down.”

## Chapter 5

Mrs J smiled at me. “This rice is terrific, Dave. What did you put in it?”

“Curry powder, coconut milk. Um, I hope you weren’t keeping it for anything special. I saw it in the pantry, and ...”

She shook her head, still smiling. She said teasingly, “I think we’ll have to make you chief cook.” She added quickly, “Not that you should feel obliged to cook for us.”

“I like cooking.” I wasn’t sure that was true. I’d never thought about it. Cooking was just something I’d had to do.

Kathryn said jeeringly, “Isn’t that sweet?”

I heard Mike growl. Her mother stared at her with astonishment. “Kathryn!”

“Well, he’s just so wonderful, isn’t he? It’s a pity you didn’t adopt *him* instead of me! I bet you wish you had!”

“Kathryn —.” Her mom sounded distressed now rather than angry. I wanted to disappear.

Kathryn said, “Yeah, yeah. You know we love you, you’re our daughter, yada yada yada.” She stood up jerkily, pushing back the chair. “You care more about him than me. You care more about that *animal* than me.” She threw Mike a quick, scathing glare. “At least I’m human!” She rushed out of the room.

Mrs J stood up quickly, looking around the table, checking us out one by one. She gave Becky a quick smile of reassurance before lighting on me.

“Dave, I’m sorry —.”

I shook my head quickly. “It’s fine, Mrs J. Don’t worry about it.”

She shook her head as if to say, *no, it’s not fine*, then went after Kathryn.

Mike said, “Let’s get some air.”

What was that about? But I was glad to follow his lead. We went out into the garden. In the shade of the big magnolia tree, he said softly, “You going to puke?”

I managed a smile as I shook my head. “Am I that transparent?” Because he was right, I did feel like throwing up.

“Of course not. Paul and I have an unfair advantage, you know that.” He

touched his nose, giving a fleeting smile. I leaned against the trunk of the magnolia tree and shut my eyes. “You know she’s just jealous.”

“She has a right to be.”

“No, she doesn’t!” At his anger, my eyes sprang open. I tensed. Mike took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. “Dave —.”

I pushed myself off the trunk. “*Please*, Mike. Can you please ... just go?”

He looked puzzled, then disbelieving, then hurt.

*Damn it.* I said, slowly, “Mike ... brother ... I know you ... care about me, but I can’t handle it, right now.”

“Love isn’t something you *handle!*”

*Not for normal people.* I turned away, ashamed. I heard him take a quick step toward me, then stop. I could almost hear the frustration, but he didn’t speak, and after a long moment he went away. I knew it hurt him to do that. I knew he didn’t understand. I hated to hurt him; it was just I was afraid I’d hurt him worse if he stayed.

I waited under the tree, breathing slowly, trying to hurry my heart into slowing, trying to get over the sick, adrenalin backwash. It was so stupid to get so upset by people arguing.

*It’s not just that though, is it?* I didn’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t stay here. I was trying very hard not to think about that.

I made myself go back in before I was ready. Mike didn’t deserve my stupidity. When I entered the kitchen, Becky was still sitting at the table, eating slowly, her eyes darting between her father and her brother. Paul was at the sink, cleaning up the pots and stuff. Mike was just standing there, watching him. He looked at me when I entered, and the bewildered hurt shone in his face as he looked between me and his dad. We’d promised to try, and here we were, still pushing him away.

I felt fear constrict in my gut. I mouthed, *Sorry*, at Mike, and Becky looked over her shoulder at me, following Mike’s gaze. She smiled tentatively. I don’t think her hesitation had anything to do with me; she just wasn’t sure how to behave.

I forced a smile for her. It must have been better than it felt, because she

looked happier. Turning back to her meal, she started to eat with more enthusiasm.

Mike glanced at Becky as if my noticing her had brought her to his attention. He frowned. Then he glanced at his dad and made a noise that sounded apologetic, and kind of hopeful. Walking round the table, keeping his distance from his dad, he stopped by Becky's chair.

"I'm sorry, Beck."

She looked up from her plate, wide-eyed. "It's not your fault."

He gave a rueful grin. "Well, it is actually. If I hadn't blown off my mouth ..."

She frowned, and glanced at her father, resolutely ignoring them. "It was true." And her parents had lied. She didn't say that, but it was there.

Mike shrugged. "Sometimes lies are kinder."

She thought about this for a minute, then said, "I think the truth is better." A pause, then she added, "Mommy says we're just as much her daughters as if she gave birth to us." Her face was tilted up, and I imagined her blue eyes staring into Mike's, challenging him to confirm or deny it.

Mike blinked, and I wondered if that was because he hadn't been thinking about that particular family secret. But apart from that quick blink, you wouldn't have guessed from his response. His eyes were dark and intense, and all his attention seemed weighted on her, as he said, "You're more her daughters than I'm her son, if it comes to that. She may have carried me, but I don't have any of her genes. You're her sister's kid." He tilted his head, his eyes still fixed on hers. "We don't have any of the same genes. You still think of me as your brother?"

"Of course!" She sounded distressed. Was this supposed to be helping? Sounding even more upset, her voice coming out very small, she asked, "Don't you think of me as your sister any more?"

Paul had given up pretending he wasn't here and had turned round. His face reflected Becky's distress. Mike must have been aware of it, and maybe of me too, but he didn't seem to be paying attention to anyone but Becky. He picked her right up from her chair, and pulled her into a tight hug. "Of course I do, Becky. You'll always be my little sister." His voice was rough and growly with

emotion.

When he released her, I could tell she was beaming, the happiness clear in her voice. She said, “You feel like Daddy.” A moment’s pause, then she added, “You smell like him too.”

Mike shrugged. Paul said, his voice as deep as Mike’s had been, “Peas in a pod, honey.”

I didn’t think she’d understand that, though the comment seemed to please Mike, and maybe that was whom the words were directed at. But Becky said, “You mean like twins?”

I didn’t think Paul really wanted to explain any of this stuff to his little girl, but he nodded, and said with a fair show of ease, “Just like twins, only not born at the same time.”

Becky giggled. She looked back and forth between Mike and Paul as if comparing them, feature by feature, then she took Mike’s hand. That seemed to really affect Mike. There was an expression almost of anguish on his face, and his eyes darkened all the way to black. Becky let out a squeak, and Mike released her hand. “Sorry. Sorry, Beck.” He smiled. He had to be forcing it, after that display, but it looked real enough. He said again, “You’ll always be my little sister, Becky.”

He glanced at me, and walked out. I followed.

When we got to our room, Mike threw himself down on his bed as usual, and I sat down at the desk. I stared at the books there, my head full of all the questions I wanted to ask.

Mike’s voice was molasses-slow, as if he was already half-asleep. “No more little brothers.” Such despair.

I turned round. “Sorry?”

His eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. I wondered what he saw. “Becky’s hand ... it was so small. Soft. Trusting.” He stopped, as if he’d explained himself. I wondered if I should point that out, and got as far as “Er ...” Not changing his distant stare, he said, “Like a little brother’s. But there’ll be no more little brothers. Not ever.”

Understanding hit me like a fist in my gut. I couldn’t really feel the loss

Mike must be feeling — I'd never thought about being a father, and, thinking about it, wasn't at all sure I could handle the thought of ever having a kid — but this was the end of a *species* we were talking about. And I knew, from what Mike had said, that having sons ... clones ... was vitally important to them. And Mike remembered being a father, remembered ...

I shook my head. I hadn't properly thought this through before, but Mike — a guy I'd grown up with; a teenager — *remembered* being a father. Not just being a father of a baby, but a father who'd done the whole parenting thing, watching his kids grow up, teaching them, protecting them, finding them food ... Whatever bringing up a child back then meant.

He'd seen his kids come into the world. He'd probably seen some of his kids die.

And they weren't just his kids, they were *himself*.

It made my head hurt.

I said, "You're not going to have kids?" It didn't surprise me, after what his dad had done, but I didn't think it would last. Probably his dad hadn't meant to have kids either.

Mike brought himself back from wherever he was and looked at me. "You think I'd do to my son what Paul did to me?" The tone was incredulous.

I looked away. "You don't have to do what your father did. You could bring your son up knowing who he was."

"That he was the last of a species the humans would probably kill if they knew?" The words sounded bitter, but his voice held more pain than bitterness.

I kept my mouth shut. I didn't think they'd be killed if their secret was discovered, but from their point of view what would happen would probably be worse. They'd be locked up and studied.

"Anyway, it's not just that. You think I'd do to some woman what Paul did to Mom? You think it's been easy for her all these years? You think she's proud of her animal son?"

I looked him straight in the eyes. "Yes, I think she's proud of you."

He held my glare, then his eyes lightened a little. "You're not going to argue about the animal-son thing?" His voice was teasing.

"We're all animals," I said evenly.

He just looked at me. After a while — when Mike turns that intense stare on you, there's a limit to how long you can hold it — I looked back at the books, and mumbled, "What is it between you and your dad anyway?" I wasn't sure I wanted to get into this. I wasn't even sure what exactly I was asking. I thought I knew what was going on, at least as well as anyone not a Pack-brother could understand. But maybe it would help Mike to talk about it.

There was a long pause. So long I thought he wasn't going to answer me. Then he said, "It's so hard to be alone."

I couldn't breathe. That was definitely a kick in the gut. Before I knew it, Mike was squatting down by my chair, his voice urgent. "Brother, I couldn't get through the days without you. I couldn't. I didn't mean —"

"It's okay." I didn't look at him. Like that would make a difference.

More softly, he said, "But you're not a Pack-brother." He made a noise. Exasperation, anguish. Then said, "Look at me, Dave." I sucked in a breath, tried to remove expression from my face — a completely pointless exercise, but reflexive — and turned in my chair to face him. "If you were a Pack-brother, I'd be back at that hut. I *need* you not to be a Pack-brother."

*Okay.* "But you need your Pack-brothers too."

"Yeah. I do. That a problem?"

"Of course not." I tried to laugh it off, but Mike's dark eyes burned into me and I let my face resume its blankness. "It shouldn't."

"You feel threatened. You're worried it makes you less important to me."

I closed my eyes. That sounded so ...

"You're feeling insecure right now. It's okay. I understand that."

I opened my eyes. "You know the biggest way you've changed? The way you just come out with all this ... touchy-feely stuff!"

He grinned. "Embarrasses you, huh?"

"You know it does." I sighed. "I'll get used to it."

He nodded. The grin faded from his face and he kept his eyes on me, studying me. Not just with his eyes. I saw his nostrils flare and his tongue flicked out, quick as a snake's. Then he settled back on his haunches, comfortable as any Aborigine, as if he'd spent his life without furniture, squatting on the bare earth. "I know it's hard to understand."

I said carefully, “I can see you’re both always aware of each other, even though you hardly ever look at each other. And what’s really weird — when you’re together, you breathe at the same time.”

He stared at me. Couldn’t be I’d told him anything he didn’t already know; must be he was surprised I’d noticed. I shrugged. “Body language is something I pay attention to.”

He nodded slowly. “Our hearts beat at the same time too.” He frowned. “How obvious is it?”

I shrugged again. “Your mom’s probably noticed. But it’s not like anyone outside the house ever sees you two together.”

He wrinkled his nose. “It’s not something I really want to emphasize to Maggie.”

“Why not?”

“Paul and I, we shadow each other, echo each other. If Paul panics, I panic. You know? It’s not ... there’s a difference between the species the First Brother was born into, and what we are now. The Pack — “ He stopped, frowning. “Need different words. The Pack’s the original species, okay? That’s how they thought of themselves. We still think of ourselves that way, but we have another name. Picked it up from the humans somewhere along the way. Ulfsson. Sons of the wolf.” He gave me a quick smile. “Sort of a joke.” Wasn’t one I found funny.

His smile slid away. “Dave, with my brothers ... it’s not just that I know when Paul’s upset, or in pain, or angry, or horny. It’s not about *knowing*. It’s *feeling*. When Paul’s close, if he’s feeling something strongly, I feel it too. Like it’s me.

“The Pack didn’t communicate in words. The brothers in my mind, we can talk to each other. We’re in the same head, eh? But Paul and I can’t talk, mind-to-mind, like that, in words. We can share pictures, feelings. Back when, that’s how the Pack communicated. We picked up language from the humans.

“Not touching ... it’s like being blind and deaf and dumb. Like being outcast.” He shuddered.

I swallowed. “So why ... why does he freak out when you touch him?”

“Because I’m not just me anymore. I’m the Pack. Unless I work really hard

at blocking them out, he sees them when he touches me.” He gave a brief, bitter crack of laughter. “It’s not like I don’t know exactly what he feels.” He hesitated, his frowning stare telling me there was something else he wanted to say but was afraid of how I’d react. I kept my eyes on him, trying to be receptive. I owed him the strength to hear whatever he wanted to say.

After a moment, he said, “Dave, you know the only memories Paul and I don’t share are the ones that have happened since I was born.” He rubbed the back of his head, letting his gaze drift away from me. He sighed, and said to the floor. “I know that sounds stupid to say ‘only’, but we’ve got thousands of years of memories. What’s sixteen years among that lot?”

I knew what he was saying. It was something I’d tried hard not to think about. I started to speak, then had to clear my throat and start again. “They’re important years.”

He looked up then. “Yeah, they are. They’re what makes me different from any other brother. But, Dave, there’s an awful lot of history making us the same.”

Yeah, okay, I got it. But ... “They’re important years,” I said again.

He nodded. His eyes stayed on mine, as he said, “So that’s why I need Paul. It’s biological. In our genes. But why do you need that bastard? Given that he treats you like shit.”

I flinched. Couldn’t help it. I wanted to run away.

Mike reached out a hand, then withdrew it. “Talk to me, brother.” He sounded desperate, frustrated. “Tell me why you *care* about him, when he’s treated you the way he has.”

I couldn’t talk. I wanted to. I owed Mike that. But I couldn’t. I could hardly breathe. When it became clear I wasn’t going to say anything, Mike said more softly, “Why can’t you talk to me about it?” Then with a different emphasis, “Dave? Why can’t you talk to *me*?”

I forced the words out. “I don’t know.” I took a deep breath. “If I think about ... talking ... about that ... I just ... everything just ... seizes up. Inside.”

Mike reached out to touch me again, and again stopped himself. The frustration deepened in his face, and he burst out, “It’s driving me crazy, Dave. I can’t not touch you.”

I felt panic, felt my heart speed up. I forced myself not to look away, though all I wanted to do was run and hide.

“What are you so afraid of?”

I didn’t know.

His voice deepened into a gravel rumble, “Are you afraid of me?”

“No! It’s not that. It’s not you.”

“Then what?” His voice had a shake in it that pushed me into trying to explain. If I could just manage this ... surely I could manage this.

“You remember when we were little? We kept building ... houses and towers ... out of sticks and stones and mud and stuff.”

He blinked at me, then suddenly grinned. He probably could see us. We’d only have been about four. It’s not like I had all that many memories from when I was little, but those towers had been really important to me. We’d played for hours every day, building them.

Mike laughed.

“What?”

He grinned at me. His eyes had lightened to their usual steel-grey and his body and face had relaxed. “Just remembering. I can see you now, jumping up and down on the ground right next to it, then getting really wild when the thing collapsed.” The smile slid from his face. “You cried once. That’s when I decided that however stupid it was, you really *really* wanted a tower that would stand up to anything.”

Okay, this was embarrassing. “You built me one.”

He nodded. “With super-glue. God, I was crazy.”

“You wouldn’t let me touch it. You said I was too little.” Despite my embarrassment, I had to grin at that.

Mike’s face reflected the same humor. “Very important, those six weeks.”

“You worked on it for days, gluing all those stones together, matching up sizes and shapes so they fitted together. Leaving a couple of small holes on one wall. You said they were arrow-slits. Did you know what you were doing?”

He frowned. “It just seemed right. What was I doing?”

I took a breath, fighting the urge to look away. “You called it a keep. Do you know what I called it? A keep-safe.” I gave a short laugh, as if there was

any humor in my stupidity. “I hid inside it. When ... when he was beating up my ... when he was cross with ... Well, I’d imagine myself inside it.”

He didn’t say anything. I looked back at the books on the desk. I tried not to think about what he was thinking. *You told him something*, I told myself. *Gotta get points for that, right?*

When I couldn’t bear the silence any more, I said, “It’s how I survived. I locked myself away. Surrounded myself with thick stone walls.”

“Super-glued together.” The words were teasing, but I could hear anger in them. I guess I reacted to that, because he said quickly, “I’m sorry, Dave. I’m just so mad at that bastard.”

*Okay.*

“Is that the problem? You’re still inside that keep?”

I shrugged, still not looking at him. “It’s not that easy to knock down something that’s been a lifetime building.”

“Okay, I get that. I guess we’ll just have to work on it.” His eyes flickered past me for a moment, then he looked back at me and said, “Thanks for telling me. It does help.”

I nodded, and swallowed, then said, “And you *can* touch me, you know. I know I’m twitchy, but ... Just ignore it.”

He frowned. “Not if it makes you uncomfortable, little brother.”

“It does make me uncomfortable, but ... not as much as a lot of other stuff.” I managed a smile. “It’s just a reflex, Mike, and I should learn to get over it.”

“O-”

There was a knock at the door.

## Chapter 6

“-kay.” Not raising his voice, he said, “Come in, Maggie.” He stood up. I turned round to watch his mom come in hesitantly, like someone not sure of her welcome. Or maybe just not sure how Mike was going to react to whatever she wanted to say. I couldn’t blame her for that.

Then the thought hit me — and it scared me shitless — that maybe it was me whose reaction she was worried about. She hadn’t said anything to me about my father yet, but I’d known it was just a matter of time. And after what Kathryn had said ...

I started to panic. All very well for Mike and Paul to say I belonged here, but how long I hung around was something I’d been really careful to avoid thinking about. End of the day, it was up to her. At least, I didn’t doubt Mike would give some sort of ultimatum if it came to it, but no way was I going to stay here past my welcome.

Course I probably already had, far as Kathryn was concerned. And Mrs Jaeger. Let’s be honest, she didn’t need me on top of dealing with everyone else.

All this flashed through my head in the seconds it took her to enter the room and shut the door behind her. A few seconds, to bring me to panic. Unless I’d totally lost it, I don’t suppose that was obvious to Mrs J, but I felt Mike move closer to me, so I could feel the heat of him at my back.

She said formally, “I’m sorry to disturb you boys, but I think we need to talk. Could you come down?”

Mike murmured, apparently to the air, “Kathryn’s in her room; Becky’s saying goodnight to Paul. She’ll be up in a moment.” He didn’t say anything else, and I realized after a moment he was leaving it to me to answer his mom.

I didn’t want to go down and talk about whatever it was she wanted us to discuss. Even if it wasn’t me and my dad, it was bound to be something I didn’t want to get into a discussion about. Mike and Paul. Kathryn. Something personal and emotional.

But I was going to have to hear whatever she wanted to say sometime. Putting it off sure wasn’t going to make it any better or easier.

“Sure.” My voice came out sounding surprisingly normal. I patted myself on the back for that tiny victory.

Mrs J nodded at me, giving me a faint smile, then looked past me at her son. I heard his gravel voice say, “We’ll be down in a minute.”

He waited for her to shut the door behind her, then came around the chair to face me. “You okay with this? Because if you’re not ...”

“No problem.”

He said bluntly, “Yeah, it is. You’re already upset —”

I held up a hand. “Worrying about what she wants to talk about is *not* going to make me feel better. Trust me on this.”

“Okay.” He kept standing there though, looking down at me. I thought *oh damn it*. I could do this for him. I took a breath and stood up.

“You can touch me if you want.”

His mouth stretched in a sudden, blinding smile. Without hesitation he took a step closer and wrapped his arms around me. I felt his nose in my hair. Suddenly the tension in my body just whooshed out and I heard myself laughing. There was this picture in my mind of a big dog jumping up and licking my face, all excited.

Mike took a long breath in, then released me. He tipped his head. “You laughing at me?” He didn’t seem to mind. If anything he seemed amused.

I shook my head. Then asked, surprising myself, “So what do I smell like?”

He blinked, tilted his head and frowned, then spread his hands. “You.”

*Okay*. It was a stupid question anyway.

We went downstairs.

Mrs J, or maybe Paul, had made drinks. Black coffee for Mike and his dad, tea for her, hot chocolate for me. Mike’s coffee reminded me how much his tastes had changed, but I pushed the thought away. No point dwelling on it. Mrs J was sitting in her usual armchair with a fair pretence of ease — if you didn’t see how tense the muscles in her calves were, and how her eyes kept flickering around the room. I sat down on the sofa. Paul stood by the mantel, sipping his coffee, as if that would make him look more comfortable than he was. Mike prowled.

I picked up the mug left for me on the coffee table in front of the sofa and held it cupped in my hands. The warmth and the smell were kind of comforting, but my guts were too tight to let me drink.

Mrs J said tentatively, “You know Paul told me about your father.”

Okay, I’d hoped we weren’t going to discuss this, but it wasn’t as though there was any chance at all of that. *Better to get it over with*, I told myself, which was a lie, but sometimes you need to lie to yourself. I nodded.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her look at Mike, as if asking his permission. Then, “Dave, what your father did to you, we should report it. He shouldn’t be allowed to get away with hurting you like that.” She hesitated, as if expecting one of us to interrupt, but noone spoke. That surprised me too, but ... maybe they thought this was something I had to deal with. After a moment she went on, “I know right now ... well, a lot’s happened recently ...” A quiver in her voice. “But ... um ... it ... well, right now, I understand we have ... evidence ... of what he did to you.”

I could feel Mike hovering behind me. Felt myself pushing against the back of the sofa as if hoping I could sink into it and disappear. I made myself relax. Shook my head. Couldn’t find my voice.

Mike said, gravel-voiced, “Maggie, he was alone with that bastard for ten years, and the evidence of that is never going to fade.” He came round the sofa and squatted down in front of me and fixed his grey eyes on me. And despite his words, I realized he wanted me to show her, and I felt my eyes widen with shock and I shook my head vigorously before the thought even reached me consciously. He said softly, “It would help her, little brother.”

If Mike asked me, I’d have to do it. I swallowed, felt a small voice in my head repeating over and over, *Don’t ask me, don’t ask me, don’t ask me*.

He sat back on his haunches, the query gone from his eyes, and I swallowed again, still too scared to believe I’d got the reprieve I’d begged for. *He says he can’t see into my head, but sometimes it’s hard to believe*. He stood up and I thought that was the end, and we could go and hole up again and forget about this. Stupid.

He said, softly but clearly, so everyone heard it, “It’s his shame, little brother. And mine. Not yours.”

*I let him do it.*

He sighed, as if he'd heard my thought. Shaking his head, he picked up his mug and downed half the coffee in one giant gulp, and looked across at his mom. "Say it. You don't have to be so careful of me. I've done the suicide thing, I'm not going to do it again." His eyes flicked back to mine. "I'm not going to abandon my brothers again." It had the tone of a promise. He looked back at her. "Say it. You can't blame me any more than I blame myself."

She said carefully, "I don't understand how you could have let this go on. But I know it's our fault. Paul's and mine. You didn't trust us enough to —"

Paul growled, "It's *my* fault."

Mike grinned at me. "See? Everyone's lining up to take the blame. Take a number." His mom started to protest, and his grin vanished and he gave her a flat, cold stare. Then sighed again and smoothed out his expression. "I spent ten years agonizing over this, Mom. I don't take it frivolously." He drank down the rest of his coffee and thumped the mug down on the coffee table.

I didn't want to say anything, but I couldn't let Mike take the fall for my patheticness. "I made him promise not to tell."

He made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "I didn't keep quiet because of a promise. I'm not *that* moronic." He reached out; didn't, quite, touch my hair. He let his hand drop. "I kept quiet because I thought it was more important for you to have someone to trust, someone who loved you. And maybe that was poor judgment, but I tried my best to keep you safe."

I swallowed. "You did."

He shook his head. "No, brother. I didn't."

I didn't want to say this in front of his mom, but ... she needed to know how much I owed Mike. "I'd be dead if it wasn't for you." My heart was pounding. I wanted to tell him he'd been right, that it had been more important for me to have someone I could trust, but I couldn't say the words.

Mrs J said, "Dave —." Her voice suddenly cracked, her distress suddenly overwhelmingly, amazingly, obvious. "Dave ... what's been done to you —." She stopped, took a deep breath. "I know Paul and Mike have reasons not to get the police, social services, involved in our lives. But this is important. He can't be allowed to get away with it."

Mike said, his voice hard, “We’ve got our own ways of rendering justice, Maggie. Don’t think he’s got off scot-free.” Though I knew he thought he hadn’t gone nearly far enough; I didn’t want to think about what it would take to satisfy him.

His mother’s face hardened. “Vigilante justice, Mike? That’s not the answer.”

“Maybe not yours.” He stared challengingly into his mother’s face.

Paul said, “Mike.”

Mike relaxed, spread his hands. “Sorry, Mom. But this is what we are. What *I* am.” He glanced at me. “If Dave wanted the cops, I’d ring them myself, never mind what it might bring down on our heads. But he doesn’t, and I’m not going to ask him.”

“That’s not the only issue.” She looked at me apologetically. “Dave, I’m sorry, I think you’ve coped amazingly. I’m not suggesting that you’re not ... I don’t know ... tough enough to deal with this.” Worried about offending the macho male ... Well, she couldn’t think I was that. Maybe it was the touchy teenager thing. “But don’t you think, if, well, if this is something’s that’s been going for years, you need some ... professional help?”

My whole body jerked, panic dowsing me like a bucket of cold water. “You mean therapy?” *Jesus*. “No way!” That was way louder and more vehement than I wanted, and I wished I could replay the moment, say it calmly, like someone who didn’t need any of that touchy-feely crap.

Paul said, “Noone will make you do anything you’re not ready for, Dave.” His voice was a little slow, heavy with deliberation. Even in my panic, I wondered who he was trying to calm, then saw his eyes flick to Mike, and knew.

Mike said tightly, “He has me, Maggie.”

“Mike, you’re only sixteen —.”

He gave an incredulous laugh. “Don’t you listen to anything? I haven’t been sixteen in thousands of years.” She started to protest, and he said, “*I’ve seen you in the quad.*” There was a moment when we all must have wondered what the heck he was talking about, then I saw the distance in his eyes, the shock in Paul’s, and realized he was calling forth a memory.

He said, "I wonder if she realizes I've been rehearsing the words in my head for the last ten minutes. She lifts her head and for a second I see her ice-blue eyes widen in surprise, and then she looks away again. Her voice is soft, and as hesitant as my own. She says, *Yes. I'm doing the secretarial course.*

*"Lab technician,* I tell her, and she looks up at me again, and we smile. My heart is thumping. Something in me still expects to hear an echo, but I am alone. I'll always be alone now.

*"Perhaps we could have coffee sometime, after class,"* I suggest, wondering if she can hear the frantic, terrified beat of my heart. But she is nervous too. I like that about her. And something in her eyes, and the way she holds her body, that tells me she understands silence. And grief.

*"I'd like that,* she says softly. And suddenly we are caught in each other's eyes."

He blinked, his eyes darkening and focusing. Paul was looking freaked, and Mrs J shocked and disbelieving. It hit me then, how he'd made his point. Made it at the expense of his parents' comfort. Maybe he thought they had to confront it. Me, I'd have let sleeping dogs lie.

Mike said, "I'm not sixteen, Maggie, and I can take care of my little brother." He headed for the door, scooping me up with his eyes, and I went quickly, not wanting to be caught in the fallout of what he'd done. It wasn't something anyone would want to think about, that your son knew everything that had happened between you and your husband. All the things you thought were private between you..

That was bad enough. In the night, everything changed.