

Chapter 7

“Nothing’s changed!”

I shook my head. It just proved what I’d always known. He needed me.

“Dave. I mean this. *Nothing* has changed. He’s still the guy who had you washing his clothes and cooking his food and cleaning up his bloody vomit like you were his bloody *wife*! The guy who beat you up whenever he was bored, put you down every time he opened his drunken mouth.” He paused, looking frustrated, as if he knew his words weren’t enough, though they were worse than anything he’d said before, and I wanted to tell him whatever it would take to get him to stop.

But I didn’t say anything. I knew he couldn’t understand this. And he should, because I knew, whatever Paul did, Mike wouldn’t turn his back on him.

Not the same, and you know it.

Mike said, very calm, like he didn’t mean it, but I knew damn well he did, “Brother. I already regret saving him. There was only one reason I did. But if you go back to him, I *will* kill him.” For a moment he let me see it in his eyes, how close he’d come to letting my dad burn, how much he wanted to kill him slowly, doing the sort of things his brothers had been doing to humans for thousands of years.

I shook my head. Not because I didn’t think he’d do it, but because I couldn’t handle it. “I’m not talking about going back to him. I just want to visit him, see he’s okay. He’s in hospital. He can’t actually ... do anything.”

“You can’t even say it, can you? The word is hurt. He can’t hurt you. And that’s not really true, is it? That bastard can hurt you just breathing the same air.” He let out an exasperated huff, then added, “And you know as well as I do that talking to him’s just the first step on a familiar road, and we both know where that road ends.”

I looked down. I couldn’t believe he was talking to me like this; he never used to. *You never let him*, I reminded myself. I wondered how often he’d longed to say this stuff.

More gently, Mike said, “If you want, I’ll keep an eye on him for you.”

I jerked my head up. “No!” Heat flooded my face.

Mike backed off, his face going blank. Hiding his anger? My response hadn’t exactly been subtle.

“Mike, I didn’t mean ... I know you wouldn’t ...” What could I say? We both knew what I was thinking.

“It’s okay,” he said stiffly. “Can’t blame you for not trusting me with your precious —.” He caught himself up. “Sorry.” His voice had softened. “Really.”

“S’okay,” I mumbled.

“Look, we better go down to breakfast, we’re going to be late.” He correctly interpreted my look of revulsion. “Well, *I’ve* worked up an appetite, and you’re going to be fading by break if you don’t eat now.” He sounded like his mother. He must have heard it too, because he rolled his eyes and shrugged, but didn’t let up. I didn’t want to go down and face the questions and comments that would be waiting there, but ... At least he’d told me in private.

And he’d saved my father’s life.

I met his eyes. “Thank you.”

He didn’t ask what for. Just shook his head as if to say *No need*, and headed for the door.

It was as bad as I thought it would be.

Becky was big-eyed and sympathetic. Kathryn was all, “Just as well you weren’t there, Dave. Although if you had been, I guess things would have been different.” I saw Mrs J open her mouth, and then glance at Mike, and shut it. Kathryn wasn’t saying anything I didn’t know.

“How did the fire start, Dad?”

First time I’d heard her call Paul that since she found out he wasn’t her real father. Score one for the excitement of having your neighbor’s house burn down.

“Something left on the stove. Could have happened to anyone.”

Yeah, right. Any drunk. And who else but a drunk is cooking up a meal at three in the morning?

He wouldn’t have needed to if I’d been there.

I couldn’t believe I’d slept through it, but the houses weren’t neighbors in

any close sense. We just connected at the ends of two big sections, and the trees and wildness of our section formed a pretty effective barrier. I wondered how long it would have taken anyone to notice if Mike hadn't smelled the smoke.

I wondered how long he had stood and watched the house burn before doing anything. But that wasn't a thought I wanted to dwell on.

Becky said, "But Dave's dad's going to be all right, isn't he?"

"Sure, honey. Just some damage from breathing in the smoke. And some cuts and bruising from being taken out of the house." Paul didn't look at Mike. "He'll be fine."

Becky smiled happily and dug into her cereal, but Kathryn was more sensitive. Her speculative sidelong glances suggested she was picking up the vibe that some people weren't that thrilled about him being fine.

Imagination, I told myself firmly.

Kathryn said dreamily, like it was a hypothetical, "It must be so awful to know you nearly got your dad killed, just cos you were hanging out with other people and couldn't be bothered with him anymore. Kind of like running over a k—."

"Kathryn!"

Kathryn looked at her mother with wide-eyed innocence.

"That will be quite enough, thank you." She softened her tone. "It was an unfortunate accident, but I'm sure Dave finds it distressing enough without having you girls picking it over."

"Mommy, I wasn't —."

Mrs J smiled at Becky. "I know you're honestly concerned, sweetheart," Kathryn stood up and noisily gathered up her dirty plate and glass, "but I think we've said all we need to say about it." She ignored Kathryn, now clattering her things into the dishwasher, and stood up. Kissing her younger daughter on the top of her head, she commented, "Time we were all moving."

She lingered after the girls were gone, though. Then she embarrassed and unsettled me by giving me a hug and saying, "Don't pay any attention to Kathryn, Dave. It wasn't your fault."

"I know," I lied. The sense of her arms around me lingered after she let me

go.

She looked at Mike. "I haven't told you how proud I am of you, Mike. I didn't want to say anything in front of the girls; Paul said it was better if noone knew."

He nodded. "I left him out on the front lawn like he just stumbled out on his own and collapsed." I knew that if he'd died because Mike had delayed in calling the alarm, Mike wouldn't be worried. *And whose fault's that, that he hates him so much?*

She crossed over to his chair and stooped to kiss him. "Well, I am proud."

I was afraid for a moment that he'd say he nearly let him die, but he glanced at me, amusement in his eyes, and said easily, "No biggie."

Lin and Sue were sitting near the front of the bus. We would have headed to the back despite the empty seat behind them, except that Lin had obviously been keeping it free for us. Mike lifted her bag from the seat and handed it to her, letting me go in first, so I was behind her and he was behind Sue.

Lin turned in her seat, while Sue looked straight ahead, obviously not happy. Under the noise of the bus, Lin said softly, "We're still friends, Mike."

Oh boy. You know it's bad when they pull that one. But, hey, it wasn't exactly likely that she was going to say, Mike, I don't care what you did to me, that you're crazy and I can't trust you, that you have some weird werewolf-type mutation. I'm still your girlfriend.

Whoa! Where did that come from? Was that really what I thought of Mike?

No. No way. I was just putting myself in her shoes.

I stared out the window, trying not to think. I had a lot of stuff not to think about.

Lunchtime was a barrel of laughs. All of us trying to pretend nothing had changed. And it didn't help that the grapevine had caught up with the latest news.

Lin was all over me. Maybe she wanted the distraction. "Dave, I couldn't believe it when I heard! Why didn't you say something this morning? Are you all right? Is your dad all right? What happened?"

I shouldn't suggest, even in my head, that Lin was glad about the fire, just to have something to talk about. She'd known me as long as she'd known Mike, and I really didn't doubt her interest and concern were real. "We're both fine. You can see. Well, Dad caught some smoke, had to go to hospital, but he's going to be fine." I smiled widely, willing them not to pursue this. Like that was going to happen.

"Well, come on, Dave, let's have all the sordid details." Sue was trying to joke, but I knew she wasn't as callous as she sounded. Her eyes studied me anxiously, and the suspicious glances she'd been tossing Mike's way suggested she was trying to work out how the fire was his fault.

I shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. It was the middle of the night." I toyed with the idea of making up a story, but pretending to be there when I wasn't would be a lie too easily caught, so I admitted, "I wasn't there. I was sleeping over at Mike's. Didn't even know what had happened till breakfast this morning."

Lin looked startled, and then shocked. Probably wondering why I was at school and not hanging around the hospital fretting over my dad.

Sue didn't seem bothered by my callousness. She said, "Well, weren't you lucky? You two really are joined at the hip, aren't you? If I didn't know Mike was so crazy about Lin, I'd be worried." She laughed. "No wonder —."

"Sue," Lin said quietly. Sue widened her eyes.

"What? Don't you think they should know what people are saying?"

"People are stupid," Lin said with unaccustomed asperity.

"What are people saying?" Mike asked evenly.

Just leave it, Mike. I could imagine only too well what they were saying. There'd always been snide remarks from a few about how much Mike and I hung out, but the hard work I'd put into being popular had kept it from being more than that. But the way I'd been these last few weeks, I wasn't surprised if the remarks had gone beyond the occasional.

Sue looked at Lin, and Lin sighed and made a flapping gesture with her hand.

Sue said, "You two are sticking closer than glue nowadays. What do you think they're saying?"

I expected Mike to go off the deep end, but he surprised me by laughing. Then he looked at me and stopped. I realized he didn't care on his own account, but he was worried for me.

I shrugged.

Lin said softly, "Well, we know it's stupid. I mean I know Mike isn't gay." She hesitated, then blushed. "Not that I think you are, Dave. Unless ... I mean, there's nothing wrong with being gay, if you were, that would be absolutely fine, I'm just saying there's nothing about you ..." Her voice trailed off.

Mike grinned broadly. "Don't tie yourself in knots, Lin. Dave's not gay."

I wondered how he could be so certain. It wasn't like I'd ever actually dated a girl. Too screwed up for that.

Sue said abruptly, "So what's really up with you two? Is it something to do with Dave's dad?"

Where the hell had that come from?

I tried to speak casually, like I had no idea what she was talking about. Which I didn't. Because how could she know? "How do you mean?"

She met my gaze squarely, almost angrily. "Your dad hits you, doesn't he?"

I froze. Oh, this was so not happening.

Mike said, "Why do you think that, Sue?"

Her face darkened. Maybe anger, maybe embarrassment. Maybe both. "What's it to you?"

Steel entered his tone now, though I could tell he was making a big effort to keep his cool. "He's my brother. And I know you're pissed at me, and I know you'd like me out of Lin's life, and probably Dave's too. But believe me on this: anybody getting between me and my brother will regret it."

I cleared my throat, tried to speak lightly. "Look, I don't know where you got this idea from, Sue, but it's way off base." I tried to laugh. "You really think Mike would let someone beat me up?" Because when we'd been younger, there'd been a few incidents where someone had tried to bully me, and the stories still lingered. More believable now, with Mike carrying this aura of *Don't fuck with me* around with him.

Sue said tightly, "Yeah, well, that's my other theory." She glared at Mike.

I didn't understand at first. Then Mike said, his voice low and dangerous,

“You think it might be *me* bashing him?”

Oh thank you, Mr Subtle. Let’s just make it clear that someone’s bashing me.

Sue flinched but held her ground. “It’s not my top choice; I’ve seen the way you hover over Dave, like a mother hen with a single chick.” I nearly grinned at that, or would have if I hadn’t been so mortified. She glanced at me, then looked away. Took a deep breath. I didn’t want to hear this.

“You remember that time last summer the four of us went on that hike?” Mike nodded, his anger fading. “I was walking right behind Dave.” She hesitated. “It was a really hot day, Dave had on this heavy cotton shirt. I was looking at it, wondering why he was wearing such a heavy shirt, thinking how hot he must be. Then it snagged on this bush. I was right behind him,” she said again.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to leave right now.

Sue said, “It rode right up. Up his back.” Her eyes were fixed on Mike’s. “He pulled free really quickly, I only had a glimpse. I thought maybe I imagined it. I didn’t imagine it, did I?”

I couldn’t breathe. *Get me out of this, Mike. Spin a story.*

Mike said softly, “What did you see?”

Sue looked down at the ground, sighing, like the hard part was over. “Welts,” she almost whispered. “They were all ... angry ... red. The skin was all puffy around them. There were older scars too. Criss-crossing his back.” She swallowed and looked up, met my eyes, looked away. “You were carrying all our lunches and stuff in a back-pack. I’d wondered about that. When I saw his back, I knew why. And that you must have known. Whatever ... was done to him ... you knew about it.”

I jumped to my feet, babbling. “Well, this has been fun. Must do it again some time. Don’t call us, we’ll call you. It’s been real. Ciao.” I moved away, walking as fast as I could without running. Behind me, I heard Sue say, “How could you let that happen to him?” at the same time as Mike said, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

I didn’t want to hear any more of this conversation. I didn’t want to have heard what I heard. I didn’t want to realize that my pathetic secrets weren’t as

secret as I thought. I didn't want to be on the same planet as these people who knew what I was.

Chapter 8

I dragged Mike off to the pet-shop after school. One of my haunts, and Mike had been with me often enough, but this time, checking out stuff in the shop, I realized I was embarrassed. But Mike seemed amused. I wasn't sure if he was genuinely amused, or just making an effort. Anyway, we chose a suitable comb, and I got us out of there as fast as I could.

Although it had been my idea, when it came to using it I was embarrassed about that too, but Mike had no scruples. After I'd been working at the desk for an hour or so, he spoke up from his bed, where he'd been grooming himself and communing with the brothers in his head. "Come on then. Let's see how good it is."

I turned in my seat. "Sorry?"

"The comb. Let's try it."

"You don't need me to try it," I pointed out, though I was already digging into my bag for it.

"Got the claws," he said, holding his hands up and wagging his fingers. "Don't need no comb." He grinned. He was chipper. Fun stories around the campfire, or whatever it was he did with his dead brothers.

I couldn't believe how thick the hair on his back was, but once I got over the fear of hurting him, and caught the rhythm — dig, wiggle, tug, tug, pull — it was actually kind of relaxing. Hypnotic.

Mike, cunningly, waited until I was relaxed before saying, "So, the girls had this idea for dealing with this rumor about us."

I froze. Then resumed the combing. "Nothing to deal with. Who cares what know-nothings say."

Mike turned his head to look at me. "Hey, do we need the aggro? You think my control extends to some jerks doing some gay-bashing?" His jaw dropped in that go-for-the-throat grin he had, and the sparkle in his eyes said he'd really like the excuse.

I felt myself pale. Mike dropped the grin and his eyes darkened. I shook my head, not wanting to hear his apology. He was what he was; he shouldn't have to apologize just because I was pathetic. To forestall him, I made myself ask,

though I really didn't want to know, "So what was this idea?"

"Some double-dating. I mean, the four of us have gone out together lots of times, but —." He stopped, looking at me warily. I realized he really wasn't sure how I was going to react. Which was pretty unusual for him.

"Why are you so sure I'm not gay?" I asked suddenly, surprising myself. Shocking myself, to be honest. Thinking, *I'm sitting here with a guy with no clothes on, on his bed, combing his hair. Is this a good time to ask this question?* If Mike said he wasn't sure, I was going to freak.

Mike grinned — the cheerful grin, not the predatory one. He seemed totally relaxed. Of course, I didn't think he'd have a problem with me being gay. In fact —

Not thinking about that.

Mike moved the hand under his cheek and touched his nose.

"You can *smell* it?"

He moved his shoulders in a shrug. "It's all hormones, bro. I'm good at hormones." His gaze was steady and I knew he wasn't going to be distracted.

They're suggesting Sue and I be seen acting like girlfriend and boyfriend. I was trying to think about this objectively, but my heart was pounding. I said, "Surprised Sue approves. Thought she was only too happy you and Lin were —." I stopped there, not wanting to reinforce that. He hadn't talked about Lin since the accident, but I wasn't making the mistake of thinking that meant it wasn't important to him. He probably thought I couldn't handle anyone else's problems.

Get over yourself, I thought wearily. Didn't Mike have problems enough of his own without burdening him with mine?

Only I knew what he'd say to that, and it wasn't like I could deceive him about my feelings.

Mike said, "I'm pretty sure it was Sue's idea and, yeah, I don't suppose she's too happy about that consequence. Just shows you how much she cares about you." He grinned. "And how long she's waited for a chance to get her hands on you."

I stared at him.

"What? You didn't know she's always fancied you?" Mike sounded

honestly surprised. I wondered why he'd never said anything about it. Probably assumed I knew. "I reckon she'd have worked a lot harder at separating me and Lin if it wasn't for the crush she had on you. Not that she used to dislike me the way she does now." His voice roughened. "Can't blame her for that." He shook his head as if to say I should forget he said that, and went on more lightly, "Anyway, I thought you liked her? I mean, I know you two always argue, but I always thought that was just, you know, how the two of you showed you were interested in each other."

I stared at him some more. I'd never thought about it that way. Never really thought that much about Sue, to be honest. I mean, I liked her, sure, but ...

"It never occurred to me."

"You've never thought about her like that?" Mike asked cautiously. Something was telling him there was more to this than met the eye, but I could see he didn't have the faintest clue what it was. That made me feel better.

"Nope." I managed to get a measure of insouciance into my voice that time. A small victory, but every little helps.

"What's the problem?" His voice was gentle, like he was trying not to get me wound, but it didn't really help. "You like her. I mean, I know you'd probably prefer it was Jackie, but —"

"What?"

"What what?"

I didn't think he was faking the bewilderment.

"What did you mean, prefer Jackie?" I didn't really want to go down this path but anything was better than answering his question.

"Jackie Roca."

"I know who Jackie is." I paused, because that in itself was a giveaway. She wasn't the only Jackie in school.

He grinned as if I'd made his point for him. But I'd never showed any particular interest in Jackie. Okay, I'd known immediately that was who he meant and it wasn't like she was in our circle, but ...

"Why do you think I ... like her?" Because I wasn't about to call him on an issue like this, but I really didn't think I paid any more attention to her than anyone else.

Mike rolled his eyes. “Desire. Got nothing to do with liking. You don’t know her well enough to like.”

Desire. It was a strange word for Mike to use, and though I was getting used to the changes in his language, every now and then it jarred on me. Or maybe it was the word itself that jarred. It wasn’t a word I liked to think of in connection with me.

I didn’t know what to say. Mike saved me the effort.

“I hadn’t thought of it before.” Now *he* was sounding troubled. “I guess ... I’m starting to see how much I ran on instinct before. I mean, I had the same senses, just not as well-developed and I didn’t know I had them. Now I can see that I never talked to you about this stuff because it makes you uncomfortable, but I didn’t do it deliberately. I just ... avoided the subject because you wanted me to.” He brooded on that a few moments. I kept pulling the comb through his hair, trying not to think. Like that was a helpful tactic.

Eventually he asked the obvious question, and I didn’t have an answer.

“Why does it make you uncomfortable?”

I breathed. I found a knotty patch and teased the comb through the knots, concentrating all my attention on doing it as gently as I could, counting the knots as I picked my way through them.

Mike said, and he didn’t sound angry or frustrated, just simply, aching, sad, and it nearly undid me, “Another thing you won’t talk about, huh?”

I swallowed. *Three*. The fourth knot was a real tangle. I tried to pull it clear with my fingers. They were shaking.

Mike turned onto his side and my fingers released their hold, leaving the comb stuck in his hair. He put his hand on my chest, over my hammering heart, and said, “I’m not going to make you answer, little brother. If you can’t talk about it, that’s okay. I can wait till you can.”

I couldn’t imagine ever being able to talk about it.

“Okay?”

I nodded.

“Okay.” He lay back, and I grabbed the comb again, and worked it slowly through the tangle.

I did that for a bit, and Mike started to purr again, and I let it relax me. And

then he moved his head and the vacant dreaminess in his face had changed to ... such a tangle of emotion I couldn't begin to make sense of it, and he said quietly, "It's Paul." And I didn't understand right away, but then there was a knock on the door, and I did.

I jumped up from the bed like someone found in bed with another guy's girlfriend, and crossed the floor to the desk in three long strides. Mike, though his expression told me he couldn't understand my reaction, waited until I was sitting down before saying, "Come in."

I didn't turn around. I heard Paul come in, closing the door behind him. I heard ... a silence ... that charged the air with a tension that twisted the knot in my gut tighter. I thought, *I should leave*, but I couldn't bring myself to move. I felt like a mouse between two cats, hoping they wouldn't notice me if I stayed still.

Paul said, "I'm trying." And I only knew it was him because of where the voice came from.

"I know."

Another silence, then Mike burst out, "I'm not him!" And there was a pause no longer than a heart-beat, and then he started to laugh.

Paul said tightly, "You're *not* him."

"Oh yes. I am. I'm him, and I'm Snowfall, and I'm Traveler, and I'm Right-hand, Lion-alone, Wildflower, the Twins. I'm my great grandfather, and I'm First Brother."

I turned round. "No! You're not!" Mike was sitting up on the bed, hugging his knees. Without moving his head, he turned his eyes from Paul to me, and said gently, "Yeah. I am. And I'm other people too. A thousand of them, five thousand. Who knows how many?"

"You're you."

Still standing stiffly near the door, Paul said, not looking at me, "Dave's right. Mike ... I can't do this if you're not ... something different."

"Oh, I'm different all right. I have a human brother. And a brother who wants to be human."

"You can't define yourself by us!"

“Why not?” He sounded honestly puzzled.

Paul opened his mouth, then shut it, then opened it again and said, “I’m sorry about the other night.”

I thought, *Neither of you really get it, do you?* Even Paul, who’d tried so hard to deny the Pack. But he was a Pack-brother however hard he tried to deny it.

Mike stretched out his legs and slid down the bed, putting his hands behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, and I wondered what he saw. “My fault. I was desperate to touch you. I lost control, let the Pack come too close.”

“It wasn’t only you that was desperate.” Paul sounded as weary as Mike. “I guess we’d been winding each other up, making it worse.”

Mike turned his head and looked at Paul. “That’s what we do, isn’t it? You feel lousy; I feel lousy. Which makes you feel worse, which makes me feel worse. And round and round we go, spiraling down.” Now the frustration was evident. “You know it works for good feelings too. If we could find some!”

“I’m sorry,” Paul said again.

And I guess that wasn’t the right answer, because something just flipped in Mike — it was clear in his eyes, in his face, in his voice — and he spat out, “Maybe if you got back into Maggie’s bed we wouldn’t both be climbing the walls!”

Oh ... boy. I stood up, no decision needed, I was just ... out of there. But then, the door behind me, I stopped. Wasn’t anywhere I wanted to go. Through the door, I heard Paul growl, “I know you think of him as your brother, but you really think Dave wants to discuss my sex life? You need to remember who he is.”

I moved away. Still didn’t know where I was going, but no way did I want to hear this. But I was only halfway to the stairs when the door opened and Paul came out. As he passed me, he said, “Sorry about that, Dave.” He kept moving fast, and I was grateful for that. I waited a few minutes, then went back. Not that I particularly wanted to be around Mike right then but, where else did I have to go?

Mike was prowling around the room like a caged panther. If he had a tail he’d be switching it. I thought about trying to calm him, then realized I was

thinking of him as if he was one of my wild animals, and I didn't want to do that. So I sat down at the desk and tried to ignore him, praying that he wouldn't say anything, because I couldn't think of anything we could possibly talk about right now that wouldn't send one of us off the deep end.

But it went on, and on. And then he hit the wall, real hard, with his hand, and I felt this massive jolt in my gut, and I said to myself, *He's not mad at you*. Which didn't actually help, because I knew how little that had to do with anything. My dad wasn't really mad at *me*, most of those times.

Mike said, really deep, like the words were being dragged up from the soles of his feet, "Brother, I'm sorry, but I really need to run."

And that was another jolt, just as unpleasant. He knew.

I said, trying to speak casually despite the tightness in my throat, "Then run."

He came and squatted down beside me, waiting until I looked at him. "Dave —."

Stuff this. Okay, I'd promised not to pretend I was feeling anything other than what I was, but it wasn't like he didn't know, and he knew I knew he knew. I felt a hysterical giggle forcing itself up as I thought those words, and pushed it down. I met his eyes with wide-open fake-innocence. *I'm not really pretending, but can we just both pretend I'm not feeling what I'm feeling?*

"What? Run." We used to run together, but I knew without being told he was in no mood to hold back, and anyway, I rather thought he wanted to be alone. At least, not alone, but not with anyone except his Pack-brothers.

He stared at me some more, so hard I figured he was trying to see inside my head. I turned to the book I was supposedly taking notes from, and made a note. God knows what I wrote. "Lots to do." I found some buoyancy that time. Don't suppose it fooled him but he stood up, hesitated a moment longer, then threw on some clothes.

Two minutes.

That's all it took.

Two minutes after the door closed behind him. Two seconds after I heard the back door slam.

That's all it took.

It was beyond pathetic. I knew he was coming back. I knew he wouldn't leave me again. I knew that.

I thought I might throw up. I wrapped my arms around my gut, leaning forward like I was going to puke. Realized I was rocking. My bowels turned liquid. *Shit scared.*

Beyond pathetic.

I didn't know what to do. Kept thinking of him ... going. Leaving me. Tried to stop the thoughts, but my mind kept skittering around them. Like a sore place you can't help touching.

I couldn't stay in this room. Alone with my thoughts.

I thought maybe the TV would distract me, but when I got down the stairs I couldn't hear any noise from the family room. I hesitated, then heard something in the kitchen, and for a moment, my heart leaping, I thought Mike was back. I moved quickly.

Mrs J looked around and smiled at me. "You want a drink? I'm just making one."

I hesitated. Felt my mouth dry and my throat tighten and my guts start to unravel, and, from somewhere, found a big smile, and a voice. "Thanks, that'd be great. Hey, do you want to play cards?"

He was gone ninety-eight minutes. When I heard the back door open, I nearly said something, made a noise, reacted in some, far too obvious, way. Relief, and also a resurgence of panic, as if I was afraid it wasn't him, and it not being him would prove he wasn't ever coming back. And then someone was in the doorway, and it was Paul, and I thought I'd throw up.

Becky said happily, "We're playing poker, Daddy! Look!" She gestured at the small pile of counters in front of her.

Paul smiled and said, "Well done, Becky." He came forward and Mike appeared from behind, and I felt everything inside me, all the tension, just collapse.

Mrs J said gaily, "I'm afraid Dave's been thrashing us though."

Mike looked at me, not smiling, his tongue flicking out. Then he came around the table and leaned over my chair. Resting his arms along its back, his chin brushed my hair. Because he knew how much I needed to feel him close? Or because he did?

He gave a low whistle. "I wouldn't bet too much, Mom."

"Too late." She laughed. "Come on, Dave, what have you got?"

I spread my cards on the table. "Two fours." I found a grin.

Becky groaned. She'd dropped out earlier with only two sevens. Mrs J laughed again, showing a pair of queens and sweeping the small heap of counters toward her. "You must have brought me luck," she told Paul. She scooped the cards up and began to shuffle them. "You two want to join us?"

Paul flicked a glance at Mike. I had the sinking feeling he knew exactly what I was feeling, and why. *Duh*. Mike straightened up. "Dave and I still have some homework to do."

I stood up. Mike started for the door. For some reason his mom's face tightened. "Dave works extremely hard, I don't think an extra half-hour's card-playing is going to set him back. And he doesn't have to jump to it every time *you* decide he's had enough of something."

Where did that come from?

Paul said, "Maggie —"

Becky was looking at her all bug-eyed.

Oh shit. I dug deep inside for a grin and aimed it at Mike's mom. "You just want to get your own back. But a wise man once told me," I put on a sing-song Chinese accent, "*Always quit while you're ahead.*" I dropped the accent. "I'll give you your chance tomorrow. Maybe my luck will have turned by then." I pushed back the chair. "Thanks for the game."

She smiled warmly at me. "It was fun." She glanced at Mike, frowning. And said abruptly, "You know, we could move Dave's bed into the sunroom. That room's pretty small for you both."

My heart stopped. Panic rising ... and Mike said, "Isn't it enough you've taken one brother from me?" A growl in his voice.

I couldn't believe he'd said that. I saw his mom's shock, felt my own. Paul

closed his eyes. Becky looked shocked and puzzled. For a long moment no one moved or spoke. Then I said quickly, “Mike’s room is fine.” Like that would wipe out what Mike had said.

His mom said quietly, “I didn’t steal Paul from you, Mike. Just as he didn’t steal you from me.”

I couldn’t handle this. Didn’t think Becky could either.

Mike looked at me, then Becky. His face changed. Then he said, “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m a little . . . tense.” He met Paul’s eyes for a fleeting moment, and Paul made an infinitesimal flick of his head, and I thought, *Yeah. Let’s*. And Mike glanced at me and headed for the door, and I followed as quick as I could. Behind me I heard Paul say, and I knew from his tone he was talking to Becky, “It’s okay, sweetheart. Mike didn’t mean it.” I was pretty sure none of us believed that.

Lying in bed that night, I practiced the words over and over again, trying to work up the courage to say them. I don’t know why it was so hard. Eventually I managed to say, not the words I was trying to get out, but something, which was a start anyway. Although I was a bit shocked at the words that came out. “You and your dad cool now?” I hope that sounded like I was just happy they’d been running together. I’d shocked myself with the flicker of jealousy I’d felt when I’d realized Paul had been with him.

“The run helped.” He paused, then explained, “He’s not ready to touch me, but it helps, just being together.” Another pause. “And we both need to run. The whole thing with him and Maggie —”

“Yeah, well, I’m glad you had a good run,” I said hastily. *Please don’t talk to me about your parents’ sex life*. For once, I’d have been glad if he could read my thoughts.

“Well it’s —” He cut himself off, as if only then picking up my plea, or maybe he remembered what Paul had said. There was a long pause, then he said, “I know it was hard on you. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. Well, not till you’re okay with it.”

I closed my eyes. I’d really been hoping we could not talk about this. But I gathered my courage. “It was fine. I don’t want you not to run.”

“Dave, it’s okay. I don’t need to run.”

I took a breath and rolled onto my side, facing him. He was just a dark shadow on the other bed, but I knew I’d be clear enough to him. “That’s not true, is it?”

A pause, then he sighed and admitted, “It’s hard while I’m in Change. Lot’s going on in my body. Running helps.” His voice firmed. “But I’ll survive.”

“I don’t want you to just *survive!*” I lowered my voice. “Mike, I feel like crap about how much I’m already loading on you. And this ...” I didn’t want to clarify what *this* was “is stupid. I need to get over it. And I won’t do that long as you’re pandering to me.” That sounded a lot more forceful, and less grateful, than I liked. Maybe it was because I wanted to wipe out the sound of those words that I finally found the courage to say the words I’d been practicing. “I’m sorry to be such a problem.”

What was I afraid of? I knew he’d say I wasn’t a problem, which was what I needed to hear. I guess I was afraid I’d be able to hear it was a lie.

Brothers don’t lie, I remembered. And panicked again, not sure how I’d bear it if he said, yeah, I was a problem.

Mike said matter-of-factly, “Brothers can be a problem. We’ve had brain-damaged brothers, crippled brothers, brothers whose dreams have filled our sleep with terror over and over and over again. Some brothers have had to be cared for all their lives, unable to do the simplest things themselves. And when a brother’s sick, we all suffer it. We spend a lifetime enduring our brothers’ pain.” He shrugged a shoulder. “It’s how it is.”

Not the response I expected. In a funny way, it seemed to help. I felt myself relax. Tentatively, I asked, “Have you never ... been tempted to ... put a brother ... um ... out of his misery?”

“Out of *our* misery, you mean?” I flinched. He added more gently, “No, little brother.”

“If they want it?” I was surprised by my persistence. *Quit while you’re ahead, dummy*. “If they hurt so much they *want* to die? If they’re dying already?”

“Then we share the pain. We dream together, hold them in our mind while their body fades. No brother dies alone, Dave. No brother dies before their

time.”

“I wish I was a Pack-brother.” I think I meant it to be a joke, but it wasn’t a joke, for either of us.

Mike said vehemently, “*Don’t!*”

I froze. Then forced myself past my stupid, useless reflex, and asked loudly, “Why not? What’s so great about being human?”

A moment’s silence, then, “Nothing. But there’s something great about being *you*.”

I curled. At first I thought I was trying not to laugh, then I realized I was trying not to cry. Mike said, “Dave, you’re a package. Maybe I’d like to get rid of bits I don’t like. If I had a choice, maybe I’d want you to be funnier, or smarter, or shorter.”

A joke. I knew he thought I was funny, smart, and short. I relaxed. He went on, “Maybe I’d want you to have different parents. Maybe I’d want you to be happier and less vulnerable. Maybe I’d want you to enjoy the games brothers play. But I have brothers who do that. And you’re the one who’s my heart-brother. I don’t want to change you, Dave.”

I wasn’t sure that was entirely true, but I appreciated the attempt. I said softly, “I feel safe with you. If you’re not there I feel ... edgy, exposed, like someone’s going to jump me.” I swallowed. “It’s so stupid.”

“It’s not stupid, little brother.”

Chapter 9

It was helping.

I looked at the clock for about the hundredth time. It *was* helping. I was edgy, but I was holding it together. No panic. Well, not what I'd call panic.

I looked at the clock again.

Maggie — she'd said I should call her that, maybe because of Mike calling her that half the time, though I didn't think she was all that happy about that — said, "They'll be home soon." I didn't think she was trying to reassure me; she probably just meant we'd got it done in time. I flushed anyway. "Icing, do you think?"

I looked at her. "For the rest of us," she said with a smile.

"Good idea." I doubted the rest of us would find it edible, but what the hell, it was something else to do.

"Cream cheese?"

"Great."

I didn't have much experience baking. My dad's tastes didn't run to that. We made the icing together, as we'd invented the cake and made it together, and I wondered again why she was doing this. But it wasn't something I could ask.

Becky said, from the table where she was doing her homework, "Is it nearly ready?"

I warned her, "Don't get too keen, Beck. This'll probably taste like those weevil-y ship's biscuits you were telling us about." She giggled. I appreciated Beck's presence. Kathryn had come in while Mrs — Maggie — and I had been debating how much pineapple to put in, and her face, and the way she had flounced out of the kitchen, had told me precisely what she thought about me getting so cozy with her mom.

My eyes flicked to the clock again.

Maggie peered through the window in the oven door. "Looking good." She straightened and moved to the bench to pick up the kettle. "Time for a drink. Chamomile, I think." She topped it up with water and put it back on its stand. "You want some, Dave?" I glanced at her. I'd never had chamomile tea but I

knew it was supposed to be calming. Did she know ...?

She didn't waver under my stare, and I made myself look away as soon as I realized what I was doing. I finished stacking the dishwasher with the things we'd used and said, "Sure, why not? Let's live dangerously." Becky giggled again.

We sat down at the kitchen table. Maggie looked at Becky's homework. I proffered some advice. We drank our tea. Maggie sent Becky up to get ready for bed, telling her she could come down to try the cake when it was done, long as she cleaned her teeth after.

Something in the air changed the moment Becky left. Suddenly I was sure that Maggie knew exactly what was wrong with me. I opened my mouth to say something, to fill the silence, derail her if she had plans to 'talk' to me. And she forestalled me. But her subject wasn't the one I'd feared.

"I always felt guilty about Mike."

I stared at her, and she met my eyes, and I dropped mine again. I wanted to ask why she felt guilty, but it was too personal, too intrusive. I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"I didn't really believe Paul, you know." She paused, waiting until I lifted my head, met her eyes. "I told myself the hair was just a ... condition. It didn't prove that he wasn't human."

I said tentatively, "You were right."

She nodded. "He didn't give me any other reason to believe it. He never talked about the memories, or about his father. We never talked about the past at all." A sad smile, but she moved on quickly, before I could panic about where she was going with this. "When Mike was born, he was covered with this gorgeous silky black hair. It was so lovely to touch." There were tears in her voice. I wondered why, feeling my heart speeding up, some sort of pathetic recognition of her emotion. She met my eyes steadily. "I hated it, Dave. I wanted him normal. I was terrified of someone seeing him." She waved a hand. "It fell out within a few days, and I was so relieved. And ashamed of myself." Her eyes willed me to say something.

I looked down, cupping the mug between my hands, seeking the comfort of its lingering warmth. "You can't be blamed for wanting your baby to be

normal. It's natural."

"I stayed at home with him when he was little because I was scared to put him in any sort of care. Scared someone would notice something, say something. I didn't even mix with other mothers. And I felt guilty about that, Dave. That part of me thought there was something wrong with my wonderful baby. That it meant I didn't love him enough." She sighed. "And I was afraid he'd sense that, as babies do. That his own mother thought there was something wrong with him."

I didn't know what to say to any of this. Part of me wished she wouldn't talk about this stuff to me; part of me was ... I don't know, flattered, I guess. And I was grateful we weren't talking about me, and — this was really bizarre — part of me was just happy to talk about Mike, whatever was being said.

Maybe my discomfort and confusion were obvious. She gave a small laugh and waved her hand, as if to erase what she'd been saying, and said, "But I didn't mean to get into all that, Dave. I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate, how much I've *always* appreciated, your friendship with Mike. I don't know how he'd have survived without you."

I kept my head down, but I had to say it. Especially after what she'd said the other night. "Or me without him."

A moment's silence, then she said, "Dave —." And her tone said it all. I shook my head, kept shaking it. *Please don't do this*. We sat there, and then the back door opened, and I felt myself sag with relief. I raised my head. Maggie had her eyes on me, and she kept them there a long, unnerving, moment, and then, as Mike came through the door, stood up with her mug.

Mike gave a little nod of his head at me, and said, "What's cooking?"

His mom smiled brightly. "Dave and I have been creating." She gave me a glance as if to say, *Your turn*, and took her mug to the sink.

Paul came up behind Mike and this time I saw the subtle way he opened his mouth and tasted the air, his tongue barely visible. I'd never noticed that before. I told them, "We were trying to create a pudding you two might like. There's no sweetening in it. No flour."

Maggie closed the dishwasher and took up the story, "We wanted to broaden your diet too. Find some way of getting some fruit and vegetables into

you. And I know you don't tolerate grains and cereals all that well, but I found this bread made from sprouted wheat. It's supposed to be good for people with allergies."

Mike was looking a bit dubious; Paul's eyes were flicking between me and his wife, his mouth still slightly open, as if trying to trace the evening in the scents on the air. I said, "It's sort of like a carrot cake. There's carrot and zucchini and pineapple and ground up walnuts ... and eggs and that bread and lots of spices." I grimaced. "It'll probably be a disaster."

Maggie said, briskly, "Well, I'm looking forward to trying it." She looked at the timer on the oven and then turned the oven off and opened the door. "Good timing," she congratulated them, and took the cake out.

"It *looks* all right," I said dubiously.

"It looks great." Maggie tipped the cake onto the waiting rack and we all watched it steam for a moment. Then she said to Paul, "We should let it cool a little, but it's late and I promised Becky she could try some. Would you call the girls?"

He went to the door and shouted, "Cake!" and Maggie cut some small wedges and put them on plates. She doled out some spoons and put the bowl of icing in the middle of the table. Becky came pattering down the stairs and into the kitchen and beamed at us. She sat down at the table.

Her mom said, "We didn't ice it, honey, but there's icing in the bowl there."

"Cool." She spooned some onto the piece her mother had put out for her and spread it over the cake.

There was no sign of Kathryn, but I didn't imagine that was a surprise to anyone, though Maggie had put out a piece for her.

The rest of us sat down and watched Becky eat. Mike's tongue flicked out and tasted the air. "Interesting."

I heard myself say, "Not enough blood?" I winced. It was a sign of how much better I felt, just because Mike was back close, but it was a remark I'd prefer not to have made in front of Becky and Maggie. Something flickered in Maggie's face, but Becky didn't seem to have even noticed my comment, intent as she was on the cake. Mike grinned at me.

"Blood would be nice," he agreed. He nodded at the cake. "Let's see if it

poisons you.”

I found I was grinning too, feeling more like myself than I had since ... oh, since all this weirdness started. I didn't suppose it would last, but it was like a light at the end of a tunnel, telling me that I wouldn't always feel as desperate and mixed-up as I did now.

Mike nodded again, at me this time. “Go on, then. Try it.”

“Scared, huh?” I took a tiny portion of the cake in my fingers and sampled it. “Hmm. Not bad.” I spooned off a larger piece, then made my eyes go wide and dropped my spoon, making a choking noise.

Becky laughed. Mike said, “I could do one of those emergency tracheo-things.” He held up his hand, claws out.

I stopped choking. “Tracheotomy. And I don't think so.”

Paul said quietly, “It's quite palatable actually, Dave.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “I think it's great,” she said firmly. She smiled at me. “Neither of them have ever been good with new foods.”

Becky said, “I think it would be better with ice cream.” She looked hopefully at her mother. We all smiled.

Maggie said, “Nice try, honey, but this is not dinner-time. This is just-trying-a-bit-before-bed time. Tomorrow you can have it with ice cream.”

Mike opened his mouth and nudged me. I looked at him inquiringly and he nodded at my plate. I spooned up a bit and held it out to him. He held the cake in his mouth a long time it seemed, then swallowed it, and said thoughtfully, “Needs salt. And maybe some pepper. The carrot and pineapple are still pretty sweet, though the walnuts help.” He opened his mouth again and I spooned up some more.

Becky finished her small piece and was sent upstairs.

Paul said, “I'll be up in a minute to read to you, honey.”

Maggie added, “Don't forget your teeth.”

We all watched her go, and then Paul flicked a glance at me and Mike and said to his wife, “Maggie? Why don't we take this into the family room?”

Something was going on. I saw Maggie open her mouth, look at Paul, then shut it again. She stood up. I looked down at my plate, not sure what was happening.

When they'd left, Mike said, "How about we take it upstairs?"

When we got to our room, he stripped off and jerked his head toward his bed. I crawled over to sit with my back to the wall, holding both our plates, still not sure what was going on. Mike stretched himself out on the bed and rested his head on my legs. Shutting his eyes, he opened his mouth. *Like a baby bird*, I thought, as I spooned more cake in. I had some myself. It wasn't that bad, though not nearly sweet enough for me.

I gave Mike some more. When he'd swallowed it, he opened his eyes and fixed them on mine. "I like you feeding me."

I liked feeding him. I didn't understand that any more than I understood his pleasure. I didn't want to think about it.

He shut his eyes again, and opened his mouth, and I fed him, bit by bit, all the cake on both the plates. Then he took the empty plates from me and put them on the floor, and curled around me, his head pushing into my hand like an importunate puppy, and I ran my fingers through his hair and he started to purr.

I closed my eyes. Then opened them again and reached over to switch off the light, and we were safe, cocooned in darkness, and I groomed him with my fingers, and listened to his deep, rumbling purr, and sometime later, after a timeless interval, I heard myself say, "It helped. Making something for you. Like it made it more likely you'd come back, or something."

Later, I said, "I enjoyed feeding you."

We'd been avoiding the girls. Well, okay, *I'd* been avoiding them, and Mike had gone along with it, not saying anything. The next day, however, when lunch came around, Mike stopped me when I turned right, away from the court and the field, and said, "They won't talk about your dad, Dave."

I stiffened.

"They *won't*. I had a word."

That didn't make me feel any better. Bad enough not to be able to forget what Sue had said, I didn't want to think about what else might have gone down between them.

Mike said gently, "The longer we stay away, the harder it becomes."

So? I didn't actually want to see them ever again.

Oh, let's just be completely selfish, shall we?

"Yeah. Sure." I found a more cheerful face and voice. It didn't count as lying if I didn't change my feelings, right?

So we turned left, and started walking, and I tried to close down everything, not to think of what was coming. We crossed the court, and we could see the girls, sitting in our usual spot, and I stalled. "Mike." Damn, this was hard to say. "It's not that I'm scared they're going to say something." Well, not much. "I don't ... I don't want to see the pity in their eyes."

He was silent a moment, then he said, "Do you remember that first day back at school, after my disappearing act? I said I couldn't do it, and you said, *You can do whatever you have to do.*"

Right now that sounded awfully glib.

He touched me lightly. "Tell you what though: don't look at their eyes."

I looked at him, and he grinned, and I smiled reluctantly. More seriously, he said, "Don't think about them, just concentrate on being the guy you've always pretended to be."

"I'm not as good at that as I used to be." I swallowed. "And it's a lot harder when someone knows."

"Tell me about it."

I looked at him.

"Every time Lin looks at me, I wonder what she sees."

That was a reminder, though I knew Mike hadn't meant it as such, that I wasn't the only one suffering here. I pulled myself together. "I guess it's up to us to make them see what we want them to see." There was more determination in my voice than I'd thought myself capable of, and our eyes met, and Mike nodded.

"Yeah."

And we walked over to them.