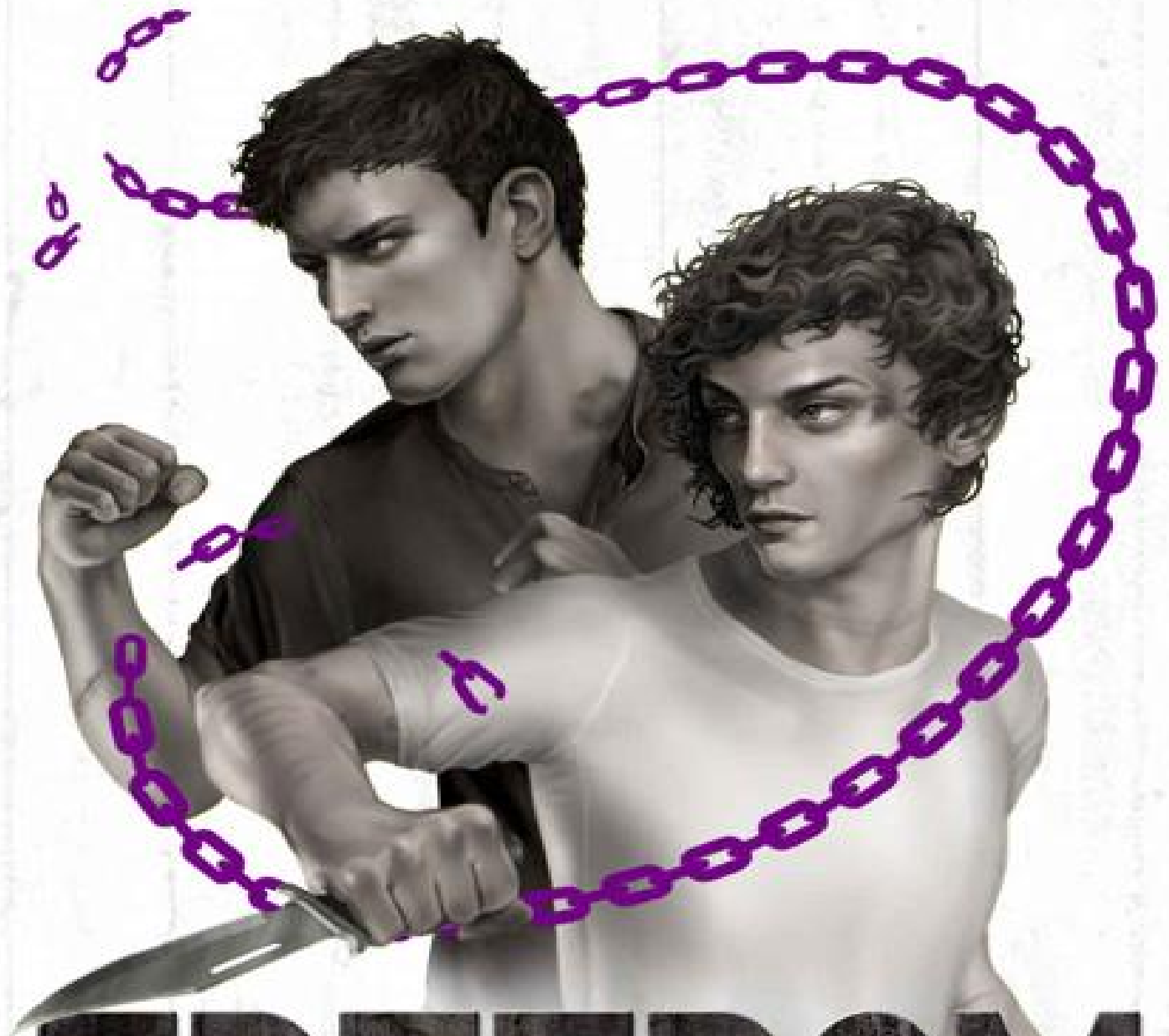




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FREEDOM

A MONSTER BY ANY OTHER NAME:
BOOK 3

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A MONSTER BY ANY OTHER NAME

BOOK 3: FREEDOM

by Laura Rye and Bailey R. Hansen

For bonus Freak Camp stories and early access to the next book in the series, [sign up now for the monthly Freak Camp newsletter!](#)

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FREEDOM book description

You can check out of Freak Camp, but can you ever leave?

Jake and Tobias hit the open road together and are determined to live out of the shadows of the prison Tobias once called home. But when Jake's past beckons, they're ready to embrace their destiny as hunters, pursuing the grisly supernatural threats lurking in America's dark alleys and dusty roads.

Every hunt deepens Jake and Tobias's bond, transforming their friendship into something neither knows how to name. In a world where supernatural threats intertwine with human struggles, they face new challenges every day, but the path to love is winding.

Amidst echoes of pain and the promise of a future, Jake and Tobias must confront their deepest fears, fighting not only for their love but for their freedom. As shadows close in, their love becomes a beacon of hope in the heart of the abyss.

FREEDOM is the third book in the A MONSTER BY ANY OTHER NAMES series, an m/m paranormal romance. Readers are recommended to start with either book 1, FREAK CAMP, or book 2, FEAR. Please take note that FREEDOM includes references to past sexual and physical abuse, torture, and neglect of children. This series is the slowest of burns, but **each book comes with a happy for now / happily ever after.**



Content Notes

A MONSTER BY ANY OTHER NAME is a series about trauma recovery. The first book (FREAK CAMP) is the part of the story when the trauma takes place. The second book (FEAR) is an optional entry point to the series for those who prefer not to read those scenes in detail.

The third book (FREEDOM) you are about to read contains references to those past scenes of sexual and physical abuse that happen to Tobias and other characters as minors.

This is a hurt/comfort story to the max: for every ounce of hurt, there will be a pound of comfort down the line. It is a very slow burn, but each book guarantees a happily ever after.

A Monster By Any Other Name

Book 3: FREEDOM



Chapter One



Two weeks since they left Boulder. Two weeks of driving toward the rising sun, of rushing landscapes—countless shades of green flashing by, more than Tobias had noticed even in Boulder, and fields dotted with many more colors—and Jake’s music humming along his bones while Jake drummed on the wheel, singing because he must be *happy*, in the Eldorado, with Tobias, or maybe, possibly, both.

Two weeks of flying through half a dozen towns every day, riding unending gray and black highways that stretched on forever before them, smooth and sure and promising to carry them anywhere Jake thought to take them. Tobias had studied American geography, he knew the distance in miles, but he was tempted to believe this gently changing land, these hills and plains, these people, were infinite, or covered at least half the globe.

Every day Jake made pit stops to refill the tank, clean the windshield and swipe bug smears off the hood, hit the restroom, and stock up on snacks and drinks, but he never left Tobias for a second. When Tobias came out of the restroom, Jake always had some excuse to be dawdling by the door; when Tobias was staring at the almost endless options of food and drink, Jake never stepped away into the sections of clothes and magazines and instead kept so close that Tobias could feel him at his back, could feel Jake’s smile on his skin even when he wasn’t looking at him.

And it seemed like everywhere they stopped, the reals were cheerful, happy, and *nice*, like the people in Boulder. They even smiled at him—from what Tobias glimpsed before he dropped his eyes—and he wished he could smile back. He knew Jake would have liked him to look, but it was as though he had a guard shoving his head down every time their gazes fell on him.

He'd worried at first that Jake would know and be angry that Tobias understood what he wanted and wasn't doing it; the Director would have had him flogged for the implied disobedience. But he gradually realized, with every brilliant smile and reassuring touch on his arm, that Jake was happy enough when Tobias managed the little things. Getting out of the car without being told. Answering simple questions from reals (*What would you like to drink?* and *Hot, isn't it?*), even if he stuttered over the single-word response. These triumphs seemed so small. Tobias knew they were a fraction of what he was capable of if it was for Jake, and he came close to panic sometimes—not as bad as it had been those first few weeks in Boulder, but still clogging his throat, twisting in his chest like straps compressing his ribs.

But something was always changing now, and it was good to have distractions. As soon as Tobias felt the walls closing in, those walls fell away, and new corridors led out. When he knew the people in the latest little town were watching them (*They must know what a freak I am and everything I've done*), he and Jake left them behind and found new people down the road.

And Jake, Tobias's one constant, the only person he needed, was there (*Time to hit the road, again, Toby*) driving the fear away.

Even in the hours when Jake was quiet as he drove, no sound but the hum of tires over pavement, Tobias felt . . . he wasn't sure how to define it. He didn't want to call it happiness—a freak didn't deserve to be this happy, certainly not for this long—but there was a lightness in him, a sureness that this was *right*, and it all came back to Jake. Jake belonged in the Eldorado, on the road. Tobias was sorry Jake had tried to stay fixed in one place as long as he had, especially if he had stayed in Boulder just for Tobias. It was so much better out here, on the road, with new places, limitless highways, eternal horizons.

They drove east—north and south across the states, but always heading east—and Tobias kept the map spread out in his lap so he could run his finger along the highways, the

snaky country roads, and match names to the signs flashing by. He could say *We're here, and we'll be here by nightfall*, and watch Jake beam at him, like Tobias ever needed to know where he was besides that he was with Jake.

They didn't dawdle much in the towns, but when they had lunch at a diner in Gibbon, Nebraska, Tobias noticed a flier for the Grand Island Library Book Sale (that week, ten a.m. to seven p.m.) pinned to the bulletin board behind the counter.

Jake followed his gaze. "Wanna check it out?"

Tobias kept his hand still on his fork, wondering. He always first considered the possibility that this was a No question: one of those moments when Jake wanted him to practice saying no, as if it was somehow so important that Tobias learn to defy him at the right times. If he said yes, would Jake really take him there, maybe even pay money for books just for Tobias to have? Tobias tried not to think about how much money Jake had spent on him already, for the food and the motel rooms and the extra gas needed to carry him in the Eldorado, all for which he'd gotten nothing in return. He didn't want to ask Jake for more because he didn't *need* more, he needed nothing but Jake, and yet because Jake had asked . . .

"Do you want to?" Tobias asked hesitantly. He lifted his eyes only to see Jake's mouth twist in a way that wasn't happy. Not the right answer.

Jake leaned forward across the table, and Tobias fought not to pull back. "I'm asking you, Toby. I'm happy to take you if you want to go."

Tobias bit his lip and dropped his gaze. Jake wouldn't mind for that moment, and he needed to focus, to clear worry out of his thoughts for just a second to decide what he . . . wanted. Jake had looked so earnest. "We—we can go," Tobias forced out. The words didn't come easily. "We can look."

Jake sat back, and he looked relieved, though Tobias wasn't sure why. If Jake had wanted to go, he didn't need to ask him.

When the waitress came by with their check, Jake asked for directions to the library, and Tobias listened close to her answer too, in case Jake wanted to ask him later.

The book sale filled the little park outside a large stone building—not as big as the Boulder library, but still many times bigger than the one in the Administration building back in Freak Camp. Tobias could have spent hours just looking at the stone structure, the architecture, the tall shelves of books he could see through the second-floor window, and the bright beds of flowers trailing around the corners of the building. But the sidewalks were lined with carts and folding tables piled high with books, empty cardboard boxes stacked on each end, and signs proclaiming Fill a Box for \$5.

Tobias stopped before the array, awed just by the number of books, the possibility of *purchasing* so many, and the few reals walking around, picking up and flipping through books like they already owned them all. Like reals owned everything, which they did.

Jake broke Tobias's daze by stepping forward, picking up an empty box and pushing it toward Tobias's chest. Tobias grabbed it reflexively. "Go on," Jake said. Sunglasses hid his gray eyes, but his small smile was one of the rare, openly gentle ones that could stop Tobias's breath.

Tobias didn't know where to begin. It was hard enough to believe he could really reach out and take any of these books, put them in the box, and keep it as his own, even if Jake paid for it. Worse, that he might take books that reals wanted. He didn't know what to pick, what he *wanted*, even though he had more practice now at wanting things. Every day, Jake asked him what he wanted on his toast, if he wanted diet or regular Coke, whether he wanted cheese on his hamburger.

But books were more important, and Tobias could feel the old habit of not wanting things, of hiding anything he did want so that it wouldn't be taken away, crawling over his skin. He wanted to want, but he couldn't quite find the words to admit it.

But Jake was there, always there, in this like in everything. Jake picked up books at random, reading the backs, snorting at them, passing them to Tobias. He handed Tobias a little of everything—paperback novels, ancient books with broken spines and the titles worn away, a textbook on marine biology—telling him to “Check this out, Toby. Sound good?” and keep it if he wanted it. Before Tobias knew it, his box was nearly full, and Jake had another box under his arm—Tobias hadn’t known Jake wanted books too—and Tobias was dazed and nervous and happy.

When no more space was left in either box, Jake stacked them together and handed ten dollars to the gray-haired librarian sitting at a table in the middle. Then he came back, heaved both boxes up, and walked with Tobias back to where they’d parked the Eldorado.

He stowed both boxes in the backseat, then turned back to Tobias. “These should last you a couple of days, right? I mean, there’s got to be at least thirty books there, all with really small print, and you can probably count that fat one about zoology as two just because it’s such a fucking awkward shape. I’m glad she let us get away with kind of shoving the corner in there, y’know? Otherwise we would’ve had to get a different box if you were really set on learning about a day in the life of a wasp.”

Tobias’s mouth fell open, though words failed to immediately come. He glanced, astonished, at the two boxes of books, then back to Jake. “They’re b-both—but I thought some, the ones y-you picked up—”

“Nah,” Jake said, and leaned against the open door, hands in his pockets. “I’ve read enough books in my life. You can fill me in on the good parts.”

Tobias couldn’t speak. He looked at the ground, knowing there was nothing he could say to thank Jake, repay him for his unbelievable generosity. Tobias couldn’t possibly be good enough to deserve this. He didn’t have the words. He wasn’t sure the words existed.

“Hey.” Jake reached out, pushed his knuckles lightly against Tobias’s shoulder. “Ten bucks, no big deal. Just wait until I clean out my next poker game. We’ll wipe out the next library sale down to the Baby-Sitters Club.”



They’d settled cautiously into the new nightly motel routine without any horrific scenes like the very first night Jake had brought Tobias out of Freak Camp, when Toby had expected Jake to just take him then and there. Jake tried hard never to think of that night, though sometimes he had breath-stealing moments of panic when he glimpsed Tobias standing outside the motel bathroom—but he was never frozen there, instead moving to sit cross-legged on his bed, peering with cautious interest at whatever TV channel Jake had found.

Mostly it was the Weather Channel, but once, Jake had stumbled on a Spanish telenovela. He’d rarely had cable growing up, but Telemundo was usually reliable. With his and his dad’s trips to Mexico and time spent in the Southwest, Jake had managed to keep up a decent level of Spanish.

As nervous as he was about exposing Tobias to new triggers, Jake couldn’t hold back his glee recognizing some old favorite actors, and before he knew it, he’d launched into explaining the never-ending sagas and drama. Tobias seemed genuinely interested (Jake was pretty sure—Toby often looked absorbed by whatever nonsense Jake rambled on about), and it was a bonus that Jake could edit or leave out any details he liked from the stories.

That was the good part of their evenings.

The bad part came a couple of hours after they’d shut the lights off.

The first time, Jake hadn’t understood what he was hearing—was there a drunk asshole hollering outside? A whining dog?—but then it became all too certain that that was Toby making those noises, whimpers and sobs and muffled pleas.

Jake slapped his lamp switch, scrambling to sit up, and a moment later he was next to Tobias on the other bed. “Toby —” He hesitated with his hand over Toby’s shoulder, but Toby didn’t seem to hear him. He let out a wrenching sob, face buried in his pillow.

This had happened in Boulder a few times, and Jake felt as helpless as ever. The book Roger had sent him on dealing with PTSD had offered a few tips about nightmares but ultimately concluded that the decision to wake someone up from a nightmare was case-specific.

So Jake repeated Toby’s name, finally daring to rub his shoulder, and Toby emerged from the nightmare. He caught hold of the edge of Jake’s pajama shirt and didn’t seem inclined to let go, even when he was fully awake, so Jake sat down next to him, leaning against the headboard. He gently wrapped his hand around Toby’s, not trying to loosen his grip.

Toby didn’t speak, and Jake didn’t ask. He pressed his forehead against Jake’s thigh, and slowly his breathing evened out again.

After an hour or so, Jake fell asleep sitting up. He woke the next morning to find Toby sitting up in bed next to him, looking a little horrified.

Jake rubbed his eyes. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I—” Toby bit his lip. “I woke you up last night.”

“Nah. You were having a nightmare.” Yawning, Jake stretched and winced at the crick in his neck. “Not your fault, so don’t apologize.”

Toby still looked pained. “I wish you didn’t have to—”

“Dude, I didn’t have to do anything. I wanted to help, you know, just like back in Boulder. And it helped, right? Or am I wrong?”

Slowly, Toby shook his head. “It did.”

“Good. That’s what counts. We can get some extra shut-eye tonight.” He yawned again. “Or maybe a nap after

breakfast. Okay staying here another day? I'll see if we can book another night."

They followed through on that plan, both sleeping more solidly until just after noon. Toby read for a while as Jake watched TV with the volume low before going for a run, and they went out for dinner at the same diner as the night before.

When they got back and were getting ready for bed, Jake paused as he sat on the side of his bed, facing Toby's. It was a struggle to put into words what he'd been wanting to say all day, to make the offer he wanted without Toby interpreting it as an order, and without Jake wanting to crawl under the bed for a week from sheer embarrassment.

"Look, you know I don't want to pressure you to do anything. But if it helps—you can come sit by me, you know. Whenever you want, even if it's the middle of the night. I don't want to crowd your space."

Toby paused as he set his book on the nightstand, his brow furrowing as he looked at Jake. "You . . . don't mind?"

"No way." Jake patted the space next to him, and Toby slowly came over, taking a cautious seat next to him. He didn't relax, though, and Jake slipped an arm around his too-bony back, tugging him closer.

Toby swallowed, his body still tense. "How long—how long is this okay?"

Jake had to laugh a little, tipping his head back. "Dude, you can stay here all night if you want. If it helps."

"You don't mind?" Toby repeated cautiously.

"I really don't." Jake bit back the next admission, then made himself reconsider. This was Toby, for whom he'd already given up damn near everything without regret. Toby was the one who—for every day of his sixteen years, as far back as he could remember—had been through hells Jake couldn't imagine. Hells holding true monsters, even if they were one hundred percent certified human. They had carved permanent imprints on his skin, more numerous than Jake

could ever bear to count. If Jake couldn't be totally honest with him, what was he even doing?

“Do you remember the night on the sofa, after we'd been to the library?” A soft smile lit up Toby's face, and Jake laughed a little and squeezed his side. “That couch wasn't exactly built for two guys, but it was one of the better nights of sleep I had in a while. I don't mind if you want—I mean, maybe it could help us both, we can sorta test it out—” Jake winced, resisting the urge to bury his reddening face in his hand. “Look. I'm just trying to say—you can stay here through the night. If you want. That'd be okay with me.”

Toby's hazel eyes were wide, trained on him with almost unnerving intensity. Jake didn't let himself look away.

“You don't mind if I sleep next to you in bed?” he asked at last, in no more than a whisper.

Jake shook his head. “I really don't. I mean. I'll probably like it too.” He bit back the urge to add *not like that* because he didn't want to even put the idea in Toby's head if it wasn't there. And besides, they still had the PG rule in place. Still . . . “Just sleeping, right?”

Toby nodded slowly.

It was a little awkward getting into bed that first time, Toby still tense and uncertain, Jake not wanting to push him or make it awkward. But after he'd turned off the light and they'd lain down—still with a healthy foot of space between them and Toby balanced on the edge of the mattress—Jake sighed and reached across to nudge his knuckles against Toby's hand. “It's okay. I don't mind you touching me.”

By slow degrees, Toby shifted closer. Still not in danger of making skin contact, but after a few minutes, he curled his hand around the edge of Jake's T-shirt again.

Then they were asleep.

It didn't happen every night after that—Toby was still uneasy, of course, always anxious about intruding on Jake's space, and Jake seriously didn't want to pressure him. But more often, they sat side by side against the headboard for an

hour before bed, watching TV or (in Toby's case) reading, and Toby got less worried about leaning against him, head on Jake's shoulder.

Jake liked it more than he wanted to admit. Not in any sick way, hell no. He wasn't that kind of pervert. But he couldn't remember even a handful of times in his life he'd gotten to just sit close to someone he loved. Well, he was sure he'd gotten to with his mom, but he didn't remember much of it, and it was a hell of a long time ago, before Jake would've even been in kindergarten. Leon had only offered the briefest and manliest of one-arm embraces on rare occasions, though Jake thought he could remember one or two incidents, back when he was in elementary school and sick, when he'd gotten to huddle against Leon on whatever couch they'd had at the time as they watched a movie together.

This was different, of course. This was Toby, Jake's whole reason for living for most of his life, and he still suffered nightmares even when he was next to him. But it made all the difference when Jake could wake up with him, talk to him, touch his face and brush his hair back, until Toby could come fully awake. The first few times, he seized Jake's hand in a tight grip as shudders ran through his body. Then, over the next few nights, they'd rolled closer to each other, knocking knees and bare feet, until Jake could wrap his arm around Toby's back and hold him close enough to feel Toby's breath on his collarbone.

It did help, as he'd thought. For both of them.



Often Tobias was convinced he would fuck it all up, even in new places a long way from his Boulder fuckups, or even with Jake next to him humming and tapping along with the music playing in the car. He was a monster, after all, and just because everything around him was good—the Eldorado, the real world, food, clothes, beds, and *Jake*—didn't mean he couldn't make Jake sad, angry, silent. Some days, Tobias was certain he

would destroy whatever unnamable thing he and Jake had between them and never know how to stop it.

They ate at a lot of diners, restaurants, and fast-food places. Jake might have tried to cook in Boulder, but as he put it, if someone else was getting paid to roast themselves in a kitchen, why should he expose Tobias to his own crap meals? Especially when most motel rooms had little more than a microwave and hot water, if that.

Tobias thought the food Jake had made in Boulder had been fantastic, and restaurants still kind of scared him—too many reals, too many ways for him to betray himself and for someone to recognize what he was. But he had to admit that every time that didn't happen, every time they got burgers and fries at a greasy spoon, mom-and-pop joint (sometimes Tobias had no idea what Jake was talking about, none at all, the spoons were always perfectly fine), and no one pointed and started screaming about him being a freak or rushed to call the ASC, every time the waitress smiled while Jake placed their order, Tobias grew a little more confident in himself and his ability to survive in the real world. It was one thing for Jake to tell him that it would be fine, that no one would notice him, and quite another to go into shop after shop, restaurant after restaurant, and not have a single person do more than spare him a glance.

It was still hard, but every day got a little better.

A couple of days after the library book sale, at yet another diner—this one busier, the noise just on the edge of where Tobias wanted to curl into a ball and hide but not quite crossing that line yet—Jake unfolded his menu with a practiced flick of his wrist. “So, what do you think you want?”

Tobias looked at the neatly written lines. The glossy pictures. The tiny notes about prices, sizes, cooking requirements and age restrictions, and he closed the menu again, putting it carefully on the table. He was breathing evenly. He was proud of himself.

“Y-you can order for me,” he said. His brain was too full of words, pictures, and *food*, utterly unreachable to a monster

like him. Except incredibly, it was reachable because Jake was right there across from him.

But even with Jake's presence and Tobias's slowly developing tolerance for reals, he was still pretty sure he wouldn't be able to look at the menu long enough to actually pick something out. There were simply too many options. Too many variables. And he had the sinking suspicion that even if he did manage to decide on one thing—with or without fries, soup, salad, vegetables, sauces, salsas, fruit cups, pancakes, or muffins—and a drink and all the other details that every restaurant seemed to require, Jake would still want him to *ask* for it.

He wouldn't be punished. He wouldn't lose the meal if he didn't do it right—although sometimes he thought the confused, wary, or irritated looks of the waitstaff were almost worse than skipping one meal in the dozens of delicious meals Jake fed him every week. He hated the way he stuttered and shook and how Jake's hand clenched on the table, like he was the one suffering for every one of Tobias's mistakes.

But unlike any sensible real person or monster (maybe Jake was beyond these categories because he was, after all, *Jake*), Jake kept pushing for those moments, forcing Tobias to the edge of his safe zone and urging him to take one more step out. Tobias still found it strange to believe there would be no physical pain for a failure, that Jake wouldn't beat him or even shout at him.

Hard to believe, and yet every day it was true. Slowly, some of the great weight he'd never known he was under eased off. And every time that pressure released . . . well, he was beginning to want that too.

For Jake, he would jump off a cliff or stare a person in the eye. If Jake told him to, he would pick up the menu again and try to find something edible. The problem was that it would all be edible *and* delicious, and he didn't deserve that. He'd have understood his options if there were a section marked "Freak Food" on the menu, but even that was a stupid idea, because freaks weren't supposed to be in restaurants at all.

But Jake didn't ask. His fingers tightened on his menu, but Tobias doubted anyone else noticed. "Okay. How about a cheeseburger, extra onions?"

"That w-would be delicious, Jake."

"Or a salad? You liked that chef salad in Kendall, right? And the Greek one in Indy, though maybe with fewer of those weird, wet, leafy things."

"A-artichoke hearts."

"Yeah, those. Oh, hey, the soup looks good. Want soup? Or soup and a sandwich. What's the special—ugh, three-cheese squash and bean soup, I don't even want to think about that. Uh, if you want to try it, though . . ."

If Jake didn't like it, or didn't like the sound of it, Tobias didn't particularly want to try it. But he would do anything for Jake. "If you think I sh-should, Jake."

"Yeah, well, there's lots of other stuff, too. Hmm, smothered baked potato. Oh, you can get extra sour cream on it. That would put some meat on your bones. You like those?"

"Maybe." Tobias was fairly sure he'd tried everything Jake had just mentioned, but it was hard sometimes to keep track of which vegetables and sauces were which, especially if they were just a side dish and Jake was in the middle of a story. And that was assuming the food itself wasn't flavorful and rich enough to distract Tobias from asking Jake what each was called so he'd remember.

Jake looked discouraged. "Yeah. Well, maybe not. There's steak. Want a steak, Toby?"

Tobias risked a glance into the menu. Shut it again. "That's r-really expensive. Do you want one?"

"No, I'm asking . . . how about a malt, something basic to start us off?"

"I don't know, Jake." Every time Jake asked him what he wanted, Tobias felt that old frisson of fear, that foreboding that he wouldn't have the right answer. But at this point he knew

that even if he messed up this moment, he would never lose the most important thing, which was always Jake.

Jake sighed, frustration and irritation hissing out of him. “Dammit, Toby,” he said without heat. “Is there anything you do like?”

Tobias could have said anything, from yes to a list of foods that he’d tried and sincerely wanted to eat again—garlic chicken pizza, crawfish burgers, or artichoke cheese dip (Jake had insisted that Tobias could like things that Jake didn’t, but Tobias wouldn’t test that theory yet).

But the very first thing he thought was *I like being with you*.

Jake wanted him to walk the edge. He wanted him to push for what he wanted, and to be so brave he couldn’t catch his breath. So Tobias opened his mouth—and said it aloud.

Jake stared at him. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed, like Tobias had just smacked him in the head with the menu resting by his arm. “You like . . .” he started, his face revealing such wonder and honest-to-God *happiness* that Tobias found himself blushing.

They were saved by the waitress, who asked what they wanted, and Jake replied automatically, ordering them both lasagna and salad. When she walked away, Jake stretched his open hand over the table, and Tobias took it, hooking their fingers together. If anything, Jake’s grin grew sillier, wider.

Jake held his hand until the food came, and he looked regretful letting go. Tobias felt dizzy, light-headed this time with amazement that he had done something so *right*.



Jake suspected his head wasn’t quite screwed on tight enough. Everything kept rattling around, and just when he thought he’d gotten something straightened out, he’d look at Tobias, and everything he thought he could make out would turn on its head.

I like being with you, Tobias had said, and if that didn't make Jake feel like he'd been run over by a truck—but in a good way, a really fucking fantastic way—then he didn't know what would.

He barely tasted the lasagna, and he ate all of his salad (generally, he would have rather gone ghost hunting naked), and by the time they got around to dessert, Jake thought that maybe he'd be able to look at Tobias without grinning like a schoolgirl with a crush.

Fuck it, this called for a celebration.

And conveniently, there was a sale on pastries.

“Hey, Toby, how about we get an entire pie? Like, maybe one of these pumpkin ones. Just the whole thing with extra whipped cream and the whole nine yards.”

Tobias had been quietly, happily smiling at the remains of his lasagna—just a remnant of sauce at the bottom of the little pottery dish, Tobias never left food behind—and occasionally glancing toward the door, maybe intrigued by the claw machine. He'd been a bit distracted ever since he'd said he liked being with Jake, and he said absently, “No, Jake.”

For one second, Jake was stunned. That had totally not been a No question. He'd been completely serious about that pie.

But that reaction was blown away in a wave of triumph and exhilaration that threatened to overwhelm the buzz from when Tobias said that he really, truly liked being around Jake. Because Tobias had just said no to him. For real.

Yeah, Toby had likely just thought it was another one of Jake's cheesy setups. But that didn't wipe the taste of victory and lasagna off his lips.

Best. Day. Ever.

Then Tobias looked up, saw the surprise on his face, and went pale as a ghost. All he needed were a few more dark spots around his eyes and maybe a death wound or two and Jake would have expected him to flicker.

“I’m—” Tobias began but had to swallow, hard. It looked like he was almost choking on something, and he suddenly wasn’t looking at Jake, or any of the people in the restaurant, but instead staring fixedly at the salt and pepper shakers on the side of the table like they were a magic talisman to take back what he’d said. “I’m s-s-s—”

“Toby.” Jake reached across the table and pulled Tobias’s hand up. Wrapped the delicate, too-thin fingers in his own callused hand and squeezed. *Just look at me. See how happy I am.* “You’ve got nothing to apologize for. I think you’re awesome.”

He waited until Tobias looked at him, really looked at him, and the pinched, terrified look around Tobias’s eyes eased up. He let him soak in the knowledge that Jake wasn’t angry but *really fucking ecstatic* right now. He hoped a fraction of that showed on his face because this was a fantastic day to be Jake Hawthorne, and he wanted that happiness for Toby. It was, always and forever, the most he wanted.

When Tobias’s breathing eased back from panic attack levels, when his grip in Jake’s hand was firm but not bone-crushing, Jake grinned. “We’re totally gonna celebrate with pie.”

They didn’t get an entire pie. Tobias was completely correct that getting an entire pie for the two of them was a ridiculous idea, and Jake repeated this fact so many times that the people at the next table probably thought he had some kind of mental condition. But it was worth it to see Toby relax and finally grin back at him.



Jake sometimes suspected he was the slowest bastard in the continental U.S., but he had, eventually, figured out what Tobias liked.

He liked seeing new places, he liked the Eldorado (who wouldn’t?), he liked the freedom of the road (new places every night, strangers smiling at them with vague politeness), and unless something had radically changed in the last week, he

liked being with Jake. Okay, so that last hadn't taken any stretch of deductive reasoning (the funny squeeze around Jake's chest every time he remembered *I like being with you* made him think about finding the closest defibrillator), but Jake knew it for sure now.

Tobias liked fresh fruit and the Discovery Channel. He liked sunshine, trees, and apple juice. But of all the things Tobias liked that Jake had carefully, precariously sussed out, books were the most obvious.

Tobias liked watching the scenery roll past the Eldorado's window, but he spent most of the time reading while Jake drove. He read before bed too, while Jake channel surfed idly and bumped Tobias's shoulder with his own. And talking about books was the surest, safest way to light him up, like now, when the noise and bustle of a new restaurant pushed him farther into his seat.

Jake took a sip of water and tried to sound casual, as opposed to sneaky. "So, you finished that book about the kids digging holes?"

Tobias brightened, straightening and leaning toward Jake like the question was a line drawing him closer, letting him forget everyone else in the room. "Yes, I did. Stanley found Zero in a r-rowboat, and they climbed a nearby mountain to find water. They ate a lot of o-onions there too, so later when they got caught in a h-hole with a bunch of yellow-spotted lizards, the lizards didn't bite them."

Jake asked Tobias about whatever book he was in the middle of pretty much every time they stopped to eat. At first he'd asked just because fuck, it was something for them to talk about, right? And nothing opened Tobias up the same way. But gradually he'd realized that he really did care. Books weren't something he had time for unless it was research for a hunt, and even then, hell, sometimes he'd rather just wing it, stupid as that was. But with Tobias, it didn't matter if he was explaining the fine points of snail farming or the plot of an old-timey children's novel. Jake got the same low thrill as listening to a favorite tape with the bass cranked high or fine-

tuning the Eldorado's engine until she purred just right again.
"Because their breath stank?"

"Because the o-onion juice was in their blood," Tobias said patiently.

"Huh." Jake sat back. "Maybe we should start munching onions in the Eldorado in case any of those lizards skedaddled out of Texas."

There it was, a quick flash of a grin before Tobias ducked his head down for a second before he raised it again. "No, Jake, I don't think so."

"All right. I guess I have enough problems choking down French onion soup and crap like that, let alone eating the things raw, so that part of the plan would be pretty hard to pull off. What happened after they were saved by their onion blood?"

"In the hole, they found a s-suitcase belonging to Stanley's ancestor, the first Stanley. It was full of treasure, and Stanley u-used it buy a new house for his family and to help find Zero's mom." Tobias paused, tilting his head with a sudden idea. "A lot of books end with treasure."

"Yeah, that's what everyone wants at the end of the day," Jake said dryly. "Find a big sack of gold, make all your dreams come true."

Tobias looked out the window, over the parking lot of gleaming cars, shining bright enough in the sun to make him squint, his forehead knit in thought. "I don't want a sack of gold. I don't know w-what I'd do with it."

"You could buy one hell of a library with a sack of gold."

Tobias's mouth quirked again, and he looked back at Jake. "I don't want just *one* library. Libraries are n-nice. You can visit any of them. I'd rather see them all." He straightened with a sudden thought. "We could use the g-gold to put gas in the Eldorado."

Jake smiled down into his Coke, not sure why he wanted to conceal the curve of his mouth. Stopping at that book sale had to have been one of the five best decisions in his life. A

month ago, Tobias had been full of hesitations, flinching from Jake, touching the spines of books gingerly, as though they could bite him for his presumption. Now, all these moments of confidence, from the way Tobias handled his latest novel to how he took that *we* for granted, did funny things to Jake's heart no matter how frequent they were becoming.

“Anyway, that br-broke the curse,” Tobias added. “Over the lake and Stanley's family, the bad luck.”

Jake looked up, eyebrow raised. “They didn't set anything on fire? No salt and accelerant?”

Tobias shook his head, still smiling faintly. “Rules were d-different in this world.”

Jake might have kept going, found out what other rules had been different or what Tobias would read next, but the waitress brought their plates, and any literary discussion was trumped by turkey clubs and french fries. He'd always loved food: the mouthwatering goodness of a prime burger, the satisfaction from a cold beer. Everything was ten times better with Tobias. And today wasn't a day when Tobias stared at the food as though he wasn't sure what he should do with it or couldn't quite believe that Jake wanted him to dig in. He ate steadily and with almost as much gusto as Jake; he'd picked up Jake's habit of cleaning up every last bit of sauce with a few carefully applied french fries, though he was much more thorough about it than Jake had ever been.

Jake appreciated his company. In its own way, the comfortable silence was as satisfying as their conversations, to the point that it took him a minute to realize that Tobias was staring intently at something over Jake's shoulder rather than sinking in the same zoned-out food coma.

Jake twisted to look (not a threat, Toby didn't look spooked enough for that), just as Tobias said, “I'll—I'll b-be right back,” and placed both hands on the table to push himself up out of the booth. Jake watched in astonishment as Tobias strode to the long empty bar counter and leaned over to speak to the waitress.

Jake realized that he'd half risen out of his seat, tense as though he'd just found a pile of fresh shapeshifter slough. But someone talking to Tobias when he couldn't hear, Tobias getting up and walking away from him, didn't count as life-threatening danger, and no, he did not almost just pull out his fucking knife.

Before Jake could quite get his heartbeat and adrenaline under control, the waitress had answered—Jake still couldn't hear anything, dammit, had Tobias noticed something suspicious that he hadn't?—and Tobias had returned to his seat.

Toby probably looked calm and composed to anyone, but Jake saw the set of his shoulders and the way he spread his fingers wide over the table, as though he hoped the surface would keep him steady.

“They have blueberry and rhu-rhubarb pie,” he said.
“Three-fifty a slice.”

He was looking Jake in the eye, mouth set, trying not to show what that had cost him. As though walking away from Jake on the spur of the moment was no big deal. Like he got up to inquire about dessert options every day. Like he never folded down on himself, no matter how animated he'd been a second before, when the waitress surprised him.

Jake realized he should say something, respond to the information about the pie, accept what Toby had just given him in the spirit it had been offered. But it was hard to string words together when Tobias had completely run him over with awesome, and he wasn't sure he could convey how proud he was without sounding like he had a head injury.

“Uh,” he tried, and that was not a good start, *Dammit, Jake, get it together*, “that's—blueberry, you said? Man, I haven't had good blueberry pie since I hit this tiny mom-and-pop in Arizona, which was weird because I didn't even think they had blueberries in the desert, and—what was the other one?”

“Rhubarb,” Tobias said, and he was smiling, clearly getting a kick out of Jake babbling like an idiot. That was

completely fine, Jake would babble every day if it meant Tobias would keep smiling like that.

“Dude, what the hell? That stuff’s like some kind of mutant celery and totally shouldn’t be allowed in a pie in the first place, it’s practically sacrilege—”

“Okay,” Tobias said, and looked up, swaying forward a few almost imperceptible degrees to catch the attention of a passing waiter. “Ex-excuse m-me, cou-cou-could we have two—two s-slices of blu-blueberry pie, p-please?” His eyelids fluttered shut halfway through, and one hand had fisted tight at his shoulder, but oh God, he was the bravest thing Jake had ever seen in his fucking life.

Some people couldn’t see true heroism if it fucking asked them for pie. “Sure,” the kid waiter said before he wandered off.

Tobias was visibly trembling now, resting his head on his fist and breathing shallowly, drained of resources to pretend he was still okay.

Jake had no words—*Fuck, Toby, you didn’t have to do that for me, don’t push yourself like that*—but he could act. He got up to step around the table and slide in next to Tobias, pressing in close from knee to shoulder.

“We could try the rhubarb too, if you want,” he said softly. Toby’s eyes didn’t open, but his mouth twitched in a smile.

“S-sacrilege in a pie? Maybe n-next time.”

Jake laughed and squeezed his shoulder, light-headed. “Could be worse. I was in upper Maine, and there was a group of dudes worshiping a cannibalistic minor god they’d gotten out of some sci-fi book. I’m never touching minced pie again, man.”

Then there had been that cherry pie in Shreveport that had been really better than it should have been, and probably no one would ever have it again because he and Leon had to dig up and burn the grandma who made the recipe, but that was neither here nor there because Toby was the bravest person in

the world, and Jake was pretty sure that no pie would ever be as awesome as him.

Chapter Two



Once he decided to say it, Tobias had to mentally rehearse for several days before he actually voiced the words. Each day, hours beforehand, he thought, *Tonight I'll tell him*, but every opportunity slipped past. It was just so hard to force out the words, even if he believed intellectually that Jake wouldn't backhand him for his presumption.

When he finally found the courage to say it, he stumbled over the words and probably twisted his hands more than Jake would like, but he kept his eyes on Jake's face the whole time, which he hoped would count more.

He hadn't known how Jake would react, but for all he'd tried to tell himself nothing really bad would happen, he held his breath after, watching Jake's face flicker through different emotions too quickly to decipher them all. He caught surprise, puzzlement . . . but the emotion Jake's face finally settled on was too close to that horrible sad, tired look to ease the mounting pressure of anxiety in Tobias's chest. He'd promised himself he wouldn't backpedal and apologize—even if he'd said the wrong thing, Jake wouldn't like that—but he had to bite his tongue now to stop those words.

“You want me to go out?” Jake repeated.

Tobias nodded, gaze locked on Jake, ignoring the bruising crush of his right hand over his left. “I—I think—it would be good. You should. You like going out to b-bars, and I like . . . reading and staying in. I'll be okay here. I know it's safe in this room, and no one's going to c-come in. So we'll both d-do what we want, and it'll be good, Jake.”

Jake didn't look convinced or happier. He fidgeted with his paper napkin from the Chinese delivery, tearing apart shreds and dropping them into his empty carton. Tobias forced himself to take slow, measured breaths.

“You want me to go out at night?” Jake said at last, as though he still wasn’t sure he’d heard right. “You feel okay about that?”

Tobias nodded quickly. “Yeah, I—I want you to. I mean, I like it . . . when you’re with me, but not when I know you’re not—doing anything you like.”

Tobias was afraid to specifically mention the TV. Jake had liked other channels back in Boulder, but now all they watched were programs about weather or nature, things that rarely made Tobias flinch. He felt horribly guilty about not being able to block out the television when he had ignored so much in his life, not being able to just control such small physical reactions when Jake did so much for him. He wished Jake hadn’t noticed, but Jake seemed to have developed an eye as sharp (*as the Director*) as any guard for whatever made Tobias twitch. Though, so very unlike the guards, Jake went out of his way to remove those things.

If only Tobias could have told him Jake didn’t have to worry about protecting him, that he was sure he’d get control over his tics with practice. But just thinking about the whole situation was enough to drive Tobias to the edge of a panic attack on his bad days, so he tried not to . . . think about it. He wished he could have told Jake that taking away yet another source of Jake’s comfort made him feel far, far worse than when reals were screaming or hitting each other on the television.

That was why he really, really hoped this would work. In Boulder, Jake had gone out when he’d been most upset. Though he hadn’t really seemed happier when he came back, going out had always changed Jake’s mood, relaxing him or focusing him, like getting away from Tobias was something he had to do to clear his head. But he hadn’t gone out at all since they’d left Boulder, and while Jake seemed better than he had before most days, Tobias was still very conscious of all the things he took away from Jake just by being with him. He had to convince Jake this was okay, or the guilt would suffocate him.

Jake was still watching him closely, forehead knit. “You know I don’t mind staying with you, Toby,” he said, and he rested his fingertips lightly over Tobias’s locked hands.

Tobias let out a breath, and his shoulders slumped, even as he nodded again. “I know, I . . . I’m glad.” And he was, desperately. But if he didn’t convince Jake of this tonight, he wasn’t sure when he could force himself to try again. “But if you stay in every night, I’m not going to enjoy . . . reading or . . . anything, because I know you aren’t d-doing what *you* like.”

He didn’t add, *You shouldn’t have to be around a monster every moment of the day and night. You deserve better than that, Jake; you need a break.*

Jake wasn’t immediately convinced, but Tobias was persistent. Tobias was brave. He said again and again that it was what he wanted Jake to do. In the end, Jake still looked unsure, conflicted, but he agreed.

The next second, Tobias fought down another kind of panic because it scared him that Jake was following a freak’s suggestion. But he told himself this couldn’t hurt Jake, that Jake always managed fine going out on his own, and this would be better for both of them. He kept the illusion up, smiling and meeting Jake’s eyes and saying yes, yes, he’d be fine, he was going to sit and read, and he knew Jake’s cell number and could call him from the motel phone if there was an emergency. He’d be *fine*.

Jake sat beside him on the bed, keys in hand but still irresolute. “I don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Jake, I *want* you to go out,” Tobias said, and that was the hardest part, saying that like it was a reason Jake should go, trusting that Jake would know he didn’t mean *forever*.

Jake just watched him for a second. And then he smiled his tight *I’m trying too* smile, brushed Tobias’s hand, and got up. “Okay, I’m going. I’ll be back.”

The moment the door finally clicked shut after him, Tobias’s shoulders dropped, and he sagged back against the

headboard like he'd just been released from standing at attention at a five-hour assembly. He blew out his breath slowly, closed his eyes, and only reopened them when his heart rate slowed.

He made a circuit of the room once, checking the door and window locks, the salt lines, adjusting the curtain so not a sliver of the room was visible from outside. He straightened the towels and toiletries in the bathroom for no particular reason, then returned to the bed and placed his book in his lap.

Jake returned after barely an hour, and Tobias could hardly tell he'd been drinking. He dropped his keys and wallet on the table, shrugged off his jacket, and crawled up on the bed right next to him. "Hey, Toby."

"Hi, Jake." Tobias sat with his hands resting around the book, like he'd been sitting there easily with nothing else on his mind. "Did you have a good time?"

"Oh, I had a blast." Jake set his chin on Tobias's shoulder, like he was checking out what Tobias was reading. There was something funny in the words, and Tobias wasn't completely sure he believed him. While he hesitated over whether to ask if anything had happened, if this was really okay, Jake whispered, "I'm real proud of you, y'know."

Tobias smiled, feeling it grow on his face to match the warmth inside him. He wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve Jake's approval laid out like that, but he'd made Jake happy, and that was the best thing that could happen. It made sixty-seven minutes of total focus on blanking out, letting nothing cross his mind but the words on the pages, completely worth it.

Jake didn't go out every night after that, but sometimes he did. He usually stayed out until midnight, but he was always back before one a.m. Tobias kept a precise routine during those hours: double check the locks and curtains, change into the T-shirt and boxers he slept in, clean and tidy anything they had unpacked. Then and only then, when breathing was easier, he would open whatever book he had on hand.

After the first couple of times Jake went out, he added a new step: reaching for the TV remote with the same caution he used when the Director had ordered him to assemble his own restraints.

Although he didn't want to watch TV, he would train himself to like it for Jake's sake and so he could have a distraction. Silence did nothing to stop the whispers growing louder in his head. He had managed to block them out the first night, mostly due to his overriding anxiety about whether this would even work, if Jake would enjoy himself and appreciate what Tobias was trying to do. But after that, he couldn't escape them. The moment Jake closed the door behind him, his fears never failed to emerge: that Jake, once away, would realize how much happier and better off he was without Tobias, that he wouldn't come back. That he shouldn't drag himself back to the burden of Tobias.

With nothing to distract himself (like on long Wednesday afternoons waiting for the inevitable session with the Director), Tobias couldn't stop envisioning the night vanishing without Jake coming back. What he would do in the morning, through the next day, if he was still alone? Surely Jake had offered one last kindness by leaving the duffel with his weapons behind so that Tobias could finish himself quietly, quickly, rather than waiting for the ASC to pick him up. With the TV on, Tobias didn't have to sit in silence and wonder how many hours (twelve? eighteen? forty-eight?) he was supposed to wait before picking up the knife and wishing Jake had just told him so he'd know. He tried not to think of how the Director wouldn't have missed that detail.

Every night Jake went out, Tobias waited for the sound of footsteps, the snick of the key sliding in. It made him freeze every time without fail, panic-adrenaline hitting him like a bucket of ice water—but it was always Jake, alone, on the other side, and then the equally strong tidal wave of relief followed. Jake was back; he'd come back to Tobias, as he promised, and now Tobias would be okay. Though sometimes he curled up under the covers after the clock clicked over to midnight, Tobias could never do anything but lie still and wait. He couldn't imagine trying to sleep alone in the motel. He'd

already gotten too used to Jake's warmth, breath, and skin beside him, knowing he'd only have to reach out to feel him there.

Tobias had been a little afraid at first that the alcohol would loosen Jake to the point where he might start treating Tobias like he deserved or forget the PG rule and just take what was already his, but that never happened. So he didn't mind the nights Jake moved less than gracefully, sliding his keys off the edge of the table or missing the chair with his jacket before dropping onto the bed and tugging Tobias close. He just closed his eyes and let himself finally relax and sleep. And if some nights Tobias could almost taste the whiskey on Jake's breath, well, that was part of Jake too.

Besides learning how to breathe through the hours without Jake and gradually building up his tolerance for TV shows featuring reals, Tobias found an unexpected benefit in his evenings alone. One night he realized that the alarm clock on the nightstand also had a radio—he'd been reading a book about the development of radio and television, and a couple of hours after Jake left, it clicked that that was what the extra buttons on the alarm clock were for. Tobias never would have just fiddled with something meant for reals, except that Jake had encouraged him to experiment with things like soda machines, ATMs, and using the microwave without supervision, so he figured that the clock radio was a fair bet as well.

Tobias switched on the radio, keeping the volume very low as he scanned stations for any that played music like Jake's. Often the commercials and DJs' voices were loud and abrasive, making him wince as they joked about things he didn't understand and some he only wished he didn't, but he could always move to another station or turn it off entirely—a marvelous power he was still absorbing.

One night, however, as he scanned through stations in search of the elusive Led Zeppelin, he found something totally unlike anything he had heard before.

The DJ's voice was what first caught his ear; unlike all the others that talked about concert giveaways and titties late at

night, this one was smooth and cultivated, the lilting rhythm of the words designed to soothe rather than rankle. He was so taken by the voice alone he didn't really register what it was saying (*gifted conductor, first movement, rare combination of styles for a duet*) until the words ended, and maybe he should have been listening, if only to know about what the voice had been advertising, informing, or discussing.

And then the music began.

Tobias forgot everything—where he was, his preoccupation with how he was still giving himself away when he looked a real in the eye, his worry that he'd never be able to meet Jake's expectations. He even forgot that Jake wasn't there. Nothing existed but the music rising from the simple black clock radio: a clamorous burst of sound that commanded his attention. The notes moved faster and more gracefully than he could fathom, carrying him along so rapidly he could barely grasp what was happening, what he was hearing. The melody was everything at once: smooth and rushed, elegant and airy until it crashed down in sudden tumult, quieting and then exploding into sound again. It rolled and danced over unseen terrain until it reunited in the same exuberant clamor. Then, just as suddenly and inexplicably as it began, it was gone.

He had never known anything like that existed.

The cool, melodious voice returned as Tobias lay dazed, not registering yet what had just happened or wondering if he would ever experience it again. He tried to breathe, tried to savor the moment and hold onto those wild, good sensations wrought from a few minutes of gorgeous, indescribable sound. He clung to them and almost felt tears rising and his throat clench when he realized they were slipping away.

And then a second piece of music began.

For the first time, Tobias wasn't conscious of the minutes ticking by until Jake's return. The click of the door opening took him off guard, breaking the trance of the music and sending him scrabbling hastily up from where he'd been lying on his stomach. Instinctively, he slapped the radio off before looking at Jake.

Jake stood by the door, car keys and key card in hand, watching Tobias with an odd expression. On anyone else's face, a look like that would have sent Tobias sliding off the bed to his knees. Even now with Jake, after they'd come so far, it would have normally flipped Tobias's stomach and set anxiety sprinting over his skin. But Tobias still had vibrations through his blood, tingling in his ears and head, from the beautiful music that no words could possibly contain, whose source or creator he could not fathom. He would have had no trouble believing that station had beamed in from another planet or dimension. And perhaps he should have been more worried, looking at Jake, but he couldn't feel it. His pulse was ringing with crescendos.

"Hey," Jake said, and dropped his keys and jacket onto the table. Tobias relaxed back down onto the bed as Jake crossed the room and sat down next to Tobias. His hand found Tobias's hair, threading through it gently, and Tobias closed his eyes. This was one of his favorite ways that Jake touched him, and it made worry even more impossible. Jake had been drinking—Tobias could tell from the fluid slight-sloppiness of his movements, the way his gray eyes were more foggy than sharp, and he could smell a little on his breath—but only enough to ease his movements from the tension of dealing with a monster so much of the time. Yes, it was good for Jake to take breaks from him.

"Found something you liked on the radio?" Jake asked eventually.

"Yeah," Tobias said. He didn't worry as much anymore about confessing such things to Jake, who had never taken (or threatened to take) away anything that Tobias had liked. Jake had only driven away the things that could hurt him. It seemed that every day spent with Jake, every day of safety and kindness, left Tobias with such a particular glow of peace, stronger now that Jake was in the same room with him again, touching his hair with slow, even strokes. "I don't know what it was."

"Not sure I can help you out, Toby. I'm not much of an eighteenth-century, curly-haired music buff."

Tobias blinked. For a moment he considered that Jake meant the music had streamed directly through a time loop across three centuries; then he remembered that any kind of music could be recorded and played again, just as Jake's music was. "Eighteenth century," he repeated slowly. Jake had already said this wasn't one of his areas of knowledge, so Tobias wouldn't push him, but—"Do you know what it's called?"

"Uh . . . classical?"

Tobias blinked at him. "Like your music?"

"No, no, that's classic rock. Classical's, like, Beethoven, Mozart, Chekhov, all those guys in the powdered wigs and sticks up their—" Jake caught himself, and his thumb resumed even stroking over Tobias's hairline. "We could dig them up," he said instead. "A book about them, I mean. I don't think any of them are buried—that is, if you want, you can learn all about them and tell me what I'm missing out on."

Tobias felt a smile break over his face like the dawn, like the arcing sound of brassy horns breaking over the heartbeat of the lower whistling instruments, and then—he had never been so brave before, the happy buzz still overriding his usual inhibitions—he pressed his palm to Jake's hip, against his shirt, right above the waistband of his jeans. Jake's hand stopped, and Tobias's eyes flickered up.

Jake looked arrested, like that was the last thing he'd expected Tobias to do and he didn't know how to respond. Tobias wasn't sure if he should pull his hand away. He liked feeling Jake's warm skin through the cotton—he rarely got to touch even this much directly. At night, when they slept side by side, he usually only held Jake's shirt, sometimes resting his knuckles against Jake's chest. He only allowed himself touches that were indirect, blunted, leaving at least a shadow of the distance appropriate between a monster and a hunter, a freak and a real. But this touch, too, felt good. Reckless. Safe.

Jake drew his thumb slowly over Tobias's forehead, his beautiful gray eyes fixed on him, lips red and parted. They looked very soft, and Tobias had a sudden urge to touch them

too, to see if they felt as they looked. But that step, that choice, was far out of his capacity. Maybe someday, with more of this beautiful music to listen to, he could manage it. Or he could at least tell Jake that he wanted this too, just as much as books and desserts.

“Toby,” Jake started, an odd husk to his voice that made Tobias’s breath catch. For a moment, he felt a hot swoop in his belly, as he thought that Jake was about to bend over and cover Tobias’s body with his own—then Jake’s eyes fell shut, and he straightened off the bed abruptly. He snatched his hand from Tobias’s head, and Tobias’s empty hands fell to the bed, the heat on his palm just a memory.

Jake stumbled toward the bathroom, though Tobias thought it was more haste than alcohol. “I gotta piss,” he called without looking back. “Then we’ll catch some z’s and go on a super-duper oldies search tomorrow.”

Jake shut the door before Tobias could reply—not that he often tried to reply when Jake was moving away from him that quickly—but Tobias couldn’t feel disturbed, nervous, or anything he usually felt when Jake pulled away from him. Jake had come back, and he hadn’t told him he couldn’t have this beautiful music. Jake gave him everything, and tomorrow would be better simply knowing the music existed and he might hear it again.

When Jake left the bathroom, Tobias was on the verge of sleep, overlapping melodies sliding through his mind. Jake climbing in behind him and tucking his head over his shoulder was just the last soothing touch needed for sleep.



Dawn in Freak Camp arrived slowly. Like every morning, the monsters waited for the barracks inspection and for the day’s work plans and assignments to be finalized. They shivered in their roll call lines for nearly an hour when the first rays of sunlight broke over the twenty-foot concrete and iron eastern wall. The vampires in line moaned as the sun touched them; it wouldn’t turn them to ash as some myths told, but it certainly

wasn't pleasant. They flinched and rocked from the burn on their skin but kept to their places. There were worse things than sunshine.

Like the guards.

While some inspected the barracks and common areas for infractions (and any pathetic escape attempts), others strolled slowly around the inmates of Freak Camp. Some guards muttered about the day shift taking their sweet time finishing the first cup of shit coffee in the breakroom. Others kept their eyes on the freaks with a cold, predatory eye.

Kayla, an eleven-year-old shapeshifter, looked at none of them. Today would be the worst day because every day was the worst day in Freak Camp. The first week she'd arrived, another freak had told her that. It had been the first of many survival lessons.

She stood in the third row on the far left. Edge positions were something of a privilege allowed to long-term inmates with no record of trouble. Kayla had been in Freak Camp for five years, and her record was spotless, but it wasn't because she was smarter, stupider, or just plain luckier. It was because she'd been taught by a monster of unidentified species who had been in Freak Camp long before her arrival.

The guards had called him Pretty Freak. The monster inmates spat *Whore* at him. To her, he was simply Tobias.

She still couldn't believe that he was gone, and not to the incinerator. Tobias himself had been honest about their odds of dying and ending up as nothing but a smudge of ash. Those odds, he explained, were approximately ninety-nine-point-nine percent. No freak had ever escaped. Before Tobias, Kayla only knew one other monster that had been taken outside the camp, and they were for a hunter to use as bait. That shapeshifter had left trussed, drugged, and destined for a beast's intestinal tract or else a makeshift pyre. No monster ever came back.

All the freaks knew that Tobias had been taken out as bait by the hunter Jake Hawthorne. They were sure Tobias was as dead as any other monster gone through the camp's incinerator by now.

Kayla knew better. Or thought she did. Or hoped she did, even if hope was a deadly danger that Tobias had warned her against. She didn't know for sure, but she didn't think Hawthorne had taken Tobias to be a staked-out sheep for a chimaera or a wendigo. She didn't know the real reason, and whatever it was couldn't be good, but it meant that Tobias might still be alive.

She'd seen Hawthorne visit over the years, always taking Tobias somewhere private. Monsters got tortured in private sessions with hunters. They came back with new injuries, their eyes blank, often unresponsive, or lashing out unexpectedly in a way that got them put down immediately in the yard. Tobias never looked that way after Hawthorne visited. He didn't talk about those sessions, but he hadn't been tortured. She would know.

Hawthorne had given him some kind of protection. The guards would push down and take any freak they liked—her included—but they never fucked Tobias because everyone knew he belonged to Jake Hawthorne.

Hawthorne had been a kid himself most of those years, usually visiting with his infamous hunter of a father, Leon Hawthorne. Only later had Jake started visiting Tobias alone. But Hawthorne had stopped coming around the time that the Director of Freak Camp had taken an interest in Tobias, which included weekly private sessions that returned Tobias with the well-known hallmarks of torture, some of the worst Kayla had ever seen. She had been sure Hawthorne had finally lost interest and it was stupid of Tobias to keep hoping he'd come back, but she was the one wrong in the end.

She understood better now that irrational hope he'd warned her against but had kept him alive anyway. She didn't have any way of knowing that Tobias was still alive, but she felt sure. Hawthorne had been so strange and persistent in his interest in Tobias over the years, long before she'd arrived in Freak Camp. Something told her he hadn't gotten Tobias out just for a quick stake-and-kill.

Whatever he was doing with Tobias, whatever purpose he'd taken him for probably wouldn't be quick at all. In Freak

Camp, quick could be the best form of luck you could get. She didn't think that Hawthorne would be quick, but if anyone could endure what a hunter had in mind, Tobias could. Hopefully it was worth it to him in the end.

At last the day guards arrived, conferred with the night shift, and took out the clipboards with the day's assignments. Victor Todd apparently drew the short straw that morning, judging by his scowl as the clipboard was handed to him.

"98WW5925," he called, and the werewolf mumbled, "Present."

Victor had the most seniority among the guards, aside from members of the Dixon family. He wasn't the worst of the guards, but he saw everything, and he wouldn't hesitate to hurt you for anything you did or didn't do.

The roll call went on until he reached "94SS7223," and Kayla nodded. Victor accepted this, jotting on the clipboard.

She was the only one who got away without speaking because everyone knew she couldn't. They hadn't heard her utter a word in years. Not since the first time Crusher had dragged her into the break room. The truth was she could speak just fine, but she had nothing to say to anyone, not anymore. She had only spoken a few words to Tobias on occasion, but now he was gone.

Crusher walked past, swinging his baton with its sharp silver spikes, and a shudder went through the monsters nearest him. Most of the guards liked hurting the freaks, but no one liked it more than Crusher. He had the most creativity, and he loved being the first to go after the youngest freaks like Kayla.

Tobias had taught her how to go away in her mind when Crusher found her. It still hurt, of course, but she didn't fight or try to get away or react much at all. So Crusher had gotten bored with her and moved on to fresher prey who didn't know screaming only made it worse.

She knew Crusher still pined for Tobias, his Pretty Freak, the one who'd gotten away. He'd been obsessed with him for years, furious that Hawthorne had a claim on him and that

he'd never gotten to bend him over a table the way he wanted to. He'd been even more vicious to them all in the weeks after Tobias had vanished.

When the roll call was complete, the monsters slowly broke out of their lines, shuffling toward the mess hall where they would each pick up a piece of moldy bread that was one of their two daily meals. Out of long habit, Kayla kept a wary eye out for any monster getting too close and who might try to swipe her bread, but they nearly all knew better by now. When she bit, she always drew blood.

She ate her roll in three quick bites, cramming it into her mouth until it was safely gone, and made her way back outside. Most of the monsters turned toward the Workhouse for their daily assignments—stuffing silver-and-salt bullets or creating protective gear for hunters, too bad for them if they were allergic to it—but she headed instead for Reception and Administration at the front of the camp.

It was a long, two-story building, and freaks were only allowed with permission to enter one door on the far end unless a hunter was taking them inside to one of the interrogation rooms. Lonny Fitzpatrick stood before the door, shotgun in hand, but he let her pass without a second look.

Kayla took the stairs up to Administration. A long hallway with offices on either side led toward the Director's office at the end, and she always averted her eyes from it, moving quickly to the library door on the right and slipping inside as noiselessly as possible. The Director had never taken an interest in her, which was the one form of mercy she savored in her life in Freak Camp.

Tobias had worked in the library before her. He'd taught her to read and write so she could assist him with hunters' research, paging through dusty old tomes to collect all data, mythological or factual, on various types of monsters and supernatural phenomena. Someone whose name she didn't know came by once a week to check her work. They knew she couldn't talk, but when they asked questions, she pointed at where she'd found each detail, and that satisfied them.

The Director had come by to watch her once. Nothing really scared Kayla anymore, but her heartbeat had been very fast, and she'd concentrated on every motion she made, moving just as slowly and woodenly as she always did when being watched. She hadn't raised her head from her work, hadn't done anything to acknowledge him, and eventually he'd gone away.

She didn't know precisely what the Director had done with Tobias in those weekly sessions before Hawthorne had taken him away, but it hadn't been good. Everyone knew the Director didn't fuck monsters; you could get whipped or lose a finger or more if you suggested otherwise. But there were plenty of other ways to hurt a monster, and there were whispers that the Director did things even Crusher couldn't think of.

Every Wednesday night, Tobias had staggered back late and crashed onto his bunk, and sometimes he didn't get up at all on Thursday. Kayla had never asked him what happened with the Director. She didn't want to know. She'd hated him for refusing to give up, refusing to accept the death she knew he was routinely offered, and she'd hated Hawthorne for giving him that hope that had to just be another hunter's lie.

But Hawthorne had come to get him. Maybe surviving everything had been worth it to Tobias. She didn't dare hope for much—it never got you anything but disappointment in Freak Camp—but she thought it might be okay to hope if she never spoke it aloud.



Tobias loved nights when, after dinner, they just kept driving. Sometimes Jake had a reason (a place he wanted Tobias to see in the morning, or maybe he didn't feel like *settling in like a damn civilian*), but other nights Jake offered no explanation, and Tobias asked for none. There was something utterly comforting about him and Jake in the Eldorado, riding beneath the endless stars. Jake stopped for naps when he needed them, often as not pulling over at some truck stop or just off a ragged

country road, and Tobias slept on and off. Sometimes he could even believe that Jake wouldn't mind him watching Jake's profile against the moonlight. If they were both lucky, Jake would never know how much the ugly monster beside him longed for him.

It didn't really matter what lay at the destination. Tobias was more than happy with what he had right now: Jake, the Eldorado, and the soaring, heartbreaking notes of classical music from the radio.

"This station comes in best," Jake had said the first time he stopped on a clarinet concerto. "Sound okay to you, Toby?"

The question momentarily took his breath away. He knew this wasn't Jake's kind of music. Jake had never listened to it, after all, until he found out Tobias liked it. And though Jake was so kind as to get books for him, to insist that Tobias get a salad or whatever he had liked previously in restaurants, Tobias had still never dreamed Jake would choose to listen to *Tobias's* music over his own. The Eldorado was made for Jake's music, for Led Zeppelin and rock and roll, the bass thrumming under Tobias's seat. And yet the fact that Jake would offer to switch to Tobias's music, to give him that privilege like he was any other real—it filled Tobias with the best kind of indescribable light and joy, just as Jake had done so many times before.

That night, they chose a motel that Jake said clearly showed some self-respect, and he was an expert judge. Sure enough, once they got inside their room, the carpets were clean, the bathroom spotless, and the blankets and sheets didn't smell of anything but detergent.

They had fallen into a nightly routine within the first few days. Jake dumped his bags—one for clothes, one for weapons Tobias had never yet seen used—on the bed closest to the door and then sprawled on the second bed, grabbing the TV remote while Tobias carefully laid his one bag with the others. As Tobias unpacked their toiletries bag in the bathroom, he'd hear voices, explosions, sales pitches for high-quality vegetable choppers, but by the time he left the bathroom, Jake would have the TV switched off or muted on the Weather Channel.

Tobias took his time brushing his teeth and showering, but it was always a balance between letting Jake enjoy his TV time and being out before he came to the door to check on him.

And then when Tobias left the bathroom, Jake would grin at him and make space on the bed. Tonight, Jake had stripped to his T-shirt and boxers and was flipping between the weather and nature channels, looking intent.

When he glanced away from the TV, he smiled. “Hey, Toby. You want a storm front over the Midwest or the secret life of mongeese?”

Mongoose. Tobias felt himself freeze, along with the usual rush of adrenaline that told him no answer could possibly be right. Then he smiled back. He could be brave and trust in Jake. “Mongeese.”

But he didn’t feel the tension completely leave until he had climbed into the bed and Jake had thrown an arm over his shoulders, pulling him in closer. Then and only then could Tobias completely relax.



Jake had just gotten comfortable and ready to soak in mongeese facts when his phone lit up. His immediate alarm—he still hadn’t heard from Leon since he got Tobias out—settled the second he saw Roger’s name on the screen.

He snapped it open with a cheerful, “Hey, Rog!” and felt Tobias’s shoulders jump under his arm. He didn’t even wait to hear Roger’s response before he was untangling himself from Tobias. “Gimme a second, gonna get some air.”

He’d left his pants somewhere, probably under the other bed, so he just grabbed his jacket on the way out the door. “I’ll be back, Toby,” he called, then stepped out onto the second-floor walkway overlooking the parking lot.

“What was that about?” Roger sounded guarded.

Jake hesitated. He wasn’t sure he could explain how even Tobias’s mildest reactions—a wary glance, the tense set of his

shoulders—made Jake want to fix it, whether by explaining the situation to Tobias, dragging the problem out of sight, or shooting a threat point-blank. And a call from family (Roger definitely qualified after all the shit he'd put up with for Jake, especially if Leon wasn't willing to do the job anymore) made Jake want space, for all their sakes.

He couldn't explain that, and even the brush of the thoughts made him feel like not just a moron, but a moron standing outside a hotel room in the middle of the night in his damn underwear. Especially since he was pretty sure he'd caught this fear from Tobias. He didn't think Roger posed any threat to Tobias—he'd helped get him out, after all—but hearing Roger's voice while his arm was wrapped around Tobias had made Jake jump like a civilian faced with his first ghost encounter.

"Nothing." He shifted uneasily. Fuck, it was cold out here. He should've taken the time to find his fucking pants.

"Jake."

Jake froze midshift. That was Roger's *don't fuck with me* voice, close enough to Leon's to make his blood pressure jump. His first instinct was to hang up, but that was also Roger's *give me a solid explanation for your weird behavior or I'm going to start force-feeding you holy water* voice. Not a safe tone to ignore, especially since Roger had cosigned the paperwork. Jake didn't think Roger would send Tobias back to that shithole, but it would be fucking stupid to gamble on this when there was nothing wrong with him. With *them*.

"Hey, sorry," he said with his best attempt to sound light and offhand. "Toby gets a little twitchy when I get phone calls, so I wanted to give him some space in the room, you know?" He didn't say that Roger was the only person who ever called.

Roger sounded unconvinced, but he didn't sound quite as close to dumping Jake in a holy water and salt bath. "How're you both doing?"

Jake leaned on the railing, looking over the dark parking lot. "Better. Hell of a lot better."

“You thinking about getting out of Boulder anytime soon, maybe catching a job?”

Jake’s stomach dropped. “Hey, yeah, about that . . .”

“Jake . . .”

“We’re kinda in Virginia.”

“*Kinda?* You’re either there or you aren’t, dumbass.”

Jake smiled. “Yeah, we’re here.”

“Well. That’s different. How’s . . . Tobias doing?”

“Good. Better. I mean, this is still frea—damn weird for both of us, but it’s . . . better. And it’s nice not to be trapped in one place, you know?”

“Yeah. Road’s what you’re used to. Probably feels like familiar territory, or your old stomping grounds, old habits . . . that sort of thing.”

Shoulders tensing, Jake scanned the parking lot and walkway. “Something wrong, Roger?”

“Well—yeah, maybe something. Just got a report about some missing teens in Maryland, not sure if the ASC assigned someone yet.”

“Ah.” Jake gripped the rail tight, feeling the cheap paint flake off into his palm. Shit. He knew what he should say now. He knew it like he knew the weight of the slim knife tucked into his jacket’s inside pocket. Not saying *Yeah, I got it* felt wrong, so wrong, like having a car other than the Eldorado under his hand or telling a civilian he was Sally Dixon-Hawthorne’s son, *that* Jake Hawthorne.

He’d never yet turned aside a case unless he had a broken leg or head trauma and a ten-hour drive between him and the distress call. That was what being a hunter was about: being committed to saving lives, holding the front line, getting your hands dirty. You didn’t flinch or back down. Once you started only doing the hunts nearby or those with a nice fat bounty, you were just like the scumbag asswipes in the ASC breeding pool. Leon’s—and Roger’s, and Jake’s—view was clear: real hunting was thankless, miserable, and about as far from glory

as you could get. Those smarmy dicks soaking up Granny's tears of gratitude on CNN were a fucking disgrace to the profession.

Jake's hesitation now didn't mean anything—he had Toby to think about now, he couldn't just jump into things the way he used to—but Roger seemed to read plenty into it. “So,” he said, voice noticeably cooler. “I've been meaning to ask. You still a hunter?”

“Of course I am,” Jake snapped, anger flaring up. Fuck Roger for asking, seriously. “Do you think that's something I can *drop*? Do you think I'm gonna blow everything off and road-trip the rest of my life?”

“People have,” Roger said, neutrally. “Sometimes they find a person, a reason for getting out. It's not like you need your head checked for wanting a career with a retirement plan that doesn't require dismemberment first.”

Jake blew out his breath. He didn't know what their future looked like. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to hunt with Toby along, didn't know if he'd have the stomach for the danger, bonfires, and bloodstains when he'd have to look Toby in the eye every day—or worse, if doing what he had been born to do would cost him Tobias. Christ, Jake knew the kid wasn't a monster, but Toby had grown up with monsters in Freak Camp, so how would knowing Jake was killing supernaturals help him feel any safer around him or even make him someone Toby wanted to be around?

But it was what he was. Since Dad had sat him down and told him there were monsters and he killed them, Jake had never wanted, expected, or known himself to be anything but a hunter. He made the world safer so other people wouldn't lose their moms, their children, or the people they loved. As long as he could walk and hold a weapon in his hand, he would be a hunter. Fuck, he would be a hunter in a wheelchair or a coma.

He hadn't fired a gun in over two months.

And it was because right now, his biggest priority was taking care of Toby and making him feel safe and happy. That was his number one mission and a twenty-four-hour job right

now, and he couldn't just take a break from it, no matter how much he itched just to say *Yeah, I can do the job*. Because Toby couldn't cope with that, not right now, and Jake had promised to stay with him, no matter where he had to be.

Dammit, it wasn't easy, but there was no question of what he would do. He just hoped he wasn't throwing away his entire life in a few words.

"I'm still a hunter, Roger," he said at last. "I don't know how long it'll be, but I just gotta—I gotta make sure Toby's okay, all right? I gotta get him to a place where . . . where he's okay. Not even great, Roger, just . . . okay."

"Huh." Roger sounded skeptical. "Got a rough idea how long that'll take? Six months, a year?"

"We're not on a fucking timer, Roger." It was like he was ten again, asking Leon for a camera, a few extra snacks, a couple of hours more in the camp to talk to his friend. "Toby was in that shithole for eleven years, do you get that? He hasn't even been out for three months and we're getting better every fucking day, and if some days ought to be salted and torched, and Toby's kinda fragile about every fucking thing right now, I think that's pretty goddamn normal. At least it is according to that book you sent me."

"Watch your tone, boy." There was no way Jake could ignore the warning in Roger's voice.

He scrubbed his forehead, leaning his elbows on the railing. "Shit, okay, sorry, I shouldn't have gone off on you. We just need time. Can I, like, take a break without being out of the game?"

"Course you can," Roger said, suddenly gentle. "I get that. There don't need to be a deadline either. Just wanted to see if you had a picture."

Jake sighed, closed his eyes, and raked his fingernails over his scalp. "I'll let you know. I'm coming back, Roger, I am, I just need to figure some shit out first."

"Right. Well, no rush, plenty of hunters running on the ASC dime. Cub like you, shouldn't take more than three, four

other bastards to pick up the slack.”

Jake’s lips twitched in a smile. “Shut up, old man.”

“Watch yourself. This old man might save your neck one day.”

Jake snorted. “Maybe when I trade my baby for a PT Cruiser.”

“Don’t bet the farm, kid. And hey, that phone of yours does more than receive calls—I wanna hear from you every couple of weeks on this sightseeing tour, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you run out of country and wind up showing him Wall Drug and the Badlands, swing on down here to New Mexico. You know you’ve got an open invitation here, just gimme a call before you swing by. Don’t want you tripping a bear trap while I’m away, it would be a pain in the ass to clean up.”

Jake smiled, relaxing. He hadn’t been sure if Roger wanted Tobias visiting, even if he had signed the papers. “Thanks, Roger, I appreciate that. We’ll definitely head your way eventually. We’re just taking it easy now.” *Still heading east.*

“All right. Take care, kid.”

Roger hung up, and Jake stood against the rail, trying to ignore the cold breeze tickling his bare calves.

Living with Tobias, watching his fear grow and swallow him when Jake tried to ignore what hurt, meant that he had learned to face down what unnerved him and not fucking run from it, no matter how much he wanted to turn away. So he would deal with the turmoil in his chest, not ignore it, not pretend this phone call hadn’t happened, because if he put off the question of whether he could keep hunting until it became vital for him to know, then that might mean finding the answer far too late to do what was necessary for Tobias. Whatever the hell that would be.

He had to think about it, but in that moment, the first step was to go back where Tobias was waiting for him and not

panic him just because Jake felt like he'd been socked in the jaw by a yeti and wasn't sure where he should go from there. Baby steps. Every day. And maybe someday, they'd get somewhere.

It took him five minutes, shivering slightly in the early autumn chill, before he could put the phone back in his jacket pocket and slide the key into the door.



Tobias couldn't stop listening to Jake. Even through the closed door, even when he lifted his hands to cover his ears, he could still hear bits and pieces of the conversation.

Jake wasn't hunting because of Tobias. Because Tobias was weak, useless, and scared and couldn't—no, that wasn't true. Tobias could interact with reals. He had just that day.

It wasn't nearly enough. Nothing he did could really be enough for Jake, but he was trying, and he had to believe that whatever Hunter Harper said, Jake would keep giving Tobias the chance to prove himself. Tobias was just grateful that he had never heard *freak*, *FREACS*, or *ASC* on Jake's end.

Even after Jake stopped talking, he didn't come back right away. Tobias dropped his hands but couldn't make himself relax. At some point he had pulled his knees up to his chest (all the better to press his palms over his ears, try to drown out things he wasn't supposed to hear), so Tobias wrapped his arms around them to try to ease the trembling.

When he heard the key card slide in the lock, Tobias started, even though he'd been waiting (hoping desperately) for Jake to come back, watching the door like the power of his gaze alone could draw Jake back to him. The sight of Jake's drawn face, of the tired lines around his gray eyes, reminded Tobias it was his fault Jake was only twenty and so tired already; having a monster so close was taking its toll on him. Tobias thought for one horrible moment that Jake knew he had heard him through the walls and that Hunter Harper had said he should punish Tobias for eavesdropping and being a useless piece of filth.

But Jake just rubbed at his mouth as though he could force it into a smile. He tossed the phone on the table and shrugged out of his jacket before crawling back onto the bed. Tobias hugged his legs tighter, not sure if he should get out or move more to one side, but Jake stopped, facing him, one hand over his clasped fingers, the other rubbing Tobias's shoulders and neck.

Tobias relaxed into that touch as the heavy pressure of anxiety eased from him. Whatever Hunter Harper had said, Jake still wasn't afraid to dirty his hands by touching him, didn't mind providing that direct comfort for a needy monster. Hunter Harper had never hurt Tobias, but Tobias was still more afraid of him than of any other hunter. No hunter had more influence over Jake. He talked about Roger constantly, far more than about his own father, whom he hadn't mentioned since he picked Tobias up. Even though Tobias had come to believe that Jake really didn't want to hurt him, no matter how stupid Tobias was, he also knew that if anyone could change Jake's mind and remind him of his responsibilities as a hunter, it would be Hunter Harper.

"It's okay," Jake said quietly. "It was just Roger calling for a checkup. He wants to make sure we're still plugging along, y'know, 'cause he cares. Doesn't want us dying in a bloody crash or cracking up or anything." His mouth quirked, and another layer of tension in Tobias eased. If Jake could laugh, he wasn't angry. Not at Tobias. "I told him we're doing fine, because we are, y'know? Better than fine. Awesome." Jake squeezed his shoulder, and Tobias made himself smile. It would be okay. They would be okay.

Jake smiled back, wider this time but still sad, and then turned and flopped down on the bed next to Tobias, their shoulders bumping. He kept one hand on Tobias's leg and reached for the remote with the other.

"So, did you get to hear how mongeese giggle their way through dates?"

"Yes, Jake." Tobias hadn't had much success paying attention to the television once Jake left the room, but he remembered the high-pitched noise the little animals had been

making and how it was called giggling. Maybe real human giggling sounded the same way.

The program had changed to a special on volcanoes. Jake frowned, finger hovering over the change channel button as computer-generated lava overwhelmed the ancient city of Pompeii. He kept glancing at Tobias out of the corners of his eyes and then sighed, visibly forcing his posture to relax. His voice was soft. “Whaddaya say we call it a night?”

If Jake didn’t want to talk about his phone call, it wasn’t any of Tobias’s business. Even if he had decided that Tobias deserved a beating or shouldn’t sleep that night, it really wouldn’t have been Tobias’s business, but Tobias was relieved nonetheless.

“Okay.”

“Cool. You need to use the bathroom before lights out?”

Tobias shook his head, and Jake smiled and brushed him on the shoulder as he got up.

Jake had been touching him more to reassure him earlier during the day; Jake was always touching him, and it was so good, but Tobias still had the same reaction as he had at Jake’s first touch; his cheeks warmed, and he had to fight the urge to duck his head. It was hard but worth it because seeing it made Jake’s mouth relax into a more natural smile and made his step to the bathroom easier.

In their daily life, waiting for Jake to finish in the bathroom was one of the times when Tobias had the most trouble accepting that his life was better now and that it would stay better. He couldn’t let himself believe that Jake would come back to him when he left the bathroom. That Jake wouldn’t just stay on his side of the bed, stiff and distant, but lie down next to him, reach out and slip his arm over Tobias’s stomach or chest beneath the covers, as though he really did want Tobias that close. Tobias couldn’t believe it, and yet every night, it was true.

Only with the reassuring warmth of Jake at his back and their legs tangled together could Tobias truly believe this was

real.



Roger leaned against the kitchen counter, looking at the phone in his hand and wondering if he should have pushed for an exact visiting date or, hell, even a time frame. Or maybe gotten Jake to give him more than the state so Roger could track them down himself.

He'd been on Jake's side from the start. First of all because he trusted the kid more than his bastard excuse for a father, and second because he'd gotten a long enough look at what those bastards at FREACS were doing to that freak Jake cared so much about to have a certain level of sympathy, just as far as his conscience was concerned. Roger knew where he stood and didn't regret helping Jake get Tobias out, but he was starting to wish he'd kept a closer eye on him from the start.

It wasn't unusual for Roger's acquaintances to disappear like a couple of annual ghosts in between surprise visits and emergency calls, especially if their last name was Hawthorne, but he and Jake had kept in pretty close touch since Leon threw him out of the house. Assuming that the Hawthornes had been living in a house at the time, which Roger doubted. Jake had hung around Roger's small town of Truth or Consequences and often as not crashed on Roger's couch for almost a month before picking up some hunts farther west and scouting out a home base to which he could bring Tobias. Roger had liked Boulder and spotted Jake the basics in furniture. Then the months wore on, and Jake just kept brooding—even worse as his paperwork got no attention—until Roger had let him go burn off steam however he could. Roger knew that had involved fights, women, men, and hunts that had been on the crazy edge of dangerous to do alone, and he'd been relieved for more than one reason when Jake finally got the notice that his application had gone through.

Contact had been much more sporadic since Jake picked Tobias up. After that one drunken distress call a few weeks in, Roger had had to piece together a picture of the last few

months himself. Jake had insisted they were getting better since then, but tonight he'd let something slip: *if some days ought to be salted and torched, and Tobias's kinda fragile about every fucking thing right now, I think that's pretty goddamn normal.* That could mean a lot of things, from the simple explanation that the kid was as traumatized as a long-time POW to the sinister possibility that the kid's trauma was making him lash out in ways Jake, or any psychiatrist, wasn't prepared for.

It hadn't seemed important when Roger saw those bastards torturing the kid or when he helped Jake with the paperwork, but in this moment, Roger hated like hell not having the least clue what might have made the ASC toss Tobias into FREACS. Roger liked research and backup plans (because Plan A worked about a quarter of the time, and generally speaking, that meant Plan B had to be good because he was damned if he'd let himself get eaten from lack of preparation), but the files on Jake's freak hadn't been available, and the unidentified classification could mean anything. Jake had known Tobias since he was a kid himself, but had they ever ruled out every form of mind control? Would it have killed them if Roger had gone to at least interview the kid before signing the papers?

Jake was a smart boy for sure, but he was still awfully young and just at the age where a man's dick, heart, and stomach had a hell of a lot more control than his head. Roger had known him since he had been a silent four-year-old hidden in the shadow of Leon's rage, grief, and paranoia. The two of them were mourning Sally, reeling from the national revelation of the supernatural following the White House Massacre, and running from everything they had known before, including—maybe especially—the Dixons. Roger had given them refuge more times than he could count and had talked Leon down from more than one raving, drunken edge. More than once he'd been tempted to wipe the Hawthornes off of his contact list, but he'd always turned the other cheek—generally after giving Leon a matching black eye—for Jake's sake. God knew that the kid needed more people in his life he could trust to always be there.

Maybe that was why Jake had latched onto Tobias so easy.

Roger wanted to trust Jake. He did. He wanted to believe that Tobias was just a harmless kid on the wrong side of the ASC (though, coward that he was, he tried not to think of how fucking likely it was that someone innocent could end up in that place). But he didn't know if he, the book he'd sent, or an expert could give Jake the intel he needed to help Tobias. He'd seen only a fraction of what Tobias had survived, and from that alone, he wasn't sure that anything could really give them all the answers.

He wished he could believe that Jake would call him if he was getting in over his head, but Jake had always been strange about that kid. Obsessed, yeah. He'd learned it from the best. Protective and defensive as hell too, though of course he'd had to be, with Leon breathing down his neck. The few times Roger had tried to nail down the details—whys, wherefores, benefits, threats—with him, Jake had just looked at him and said, simply, *He's Tobias*, as though that explained it all.

Roger's question tonight about hunting had been partly genuine, partly to see if Jake's priorities had been drastically altered in the few months Tobias had been with him. Jake was a passionate and damn good hunter, even if he was too fucking young to be regularly courting death from the things that went bump in the night. Kid needed someone to watch his back. But if that key personality trait had been changed, that would have been a clear warning sign. If Roger had been a monster, making sure the person he was with had no interest in killing supernaturals would have been high on his priority list.

It hadn't sounded like Jake didn't care anymore, but even the fact he was on indefinite hiatus prickled the back of Roger's neck. What if Tobias was working some kind of mojo on him?

Roger hated the ASC. He'd cut ties with them in every unofficial way, though he kept his license and membership if only because it was stupid to throw away the resources and approval of a nationwide organization like the ASC. If giants actually existed, he'd probably try to kill them, but he wasn't

going to start kicking the metaphorical ones while they were sleeping.

He didn't approve of the Dixon camp, its practices, or most of the Dixons' personalities, but what if they had been right this once? What if the excesses that probably killed more than their share of vanilla humans and harmless supernaturals also served to suppress the powers of a monster like Tobias?

Jake had rescued Tobias from inhumane treatment and torture with the best of intentions, but what happened when you took a monster out of Freak Camp?

Roger didn't like it, but that didn't change the world or what he'd seen. Life had taught him it was better to be safe than sorry (or, you know, disemboweled). So he might be a damn fool now for letting those boys keep road-tripping, bringing Tobias into contact with God knew how many people, when he could have Jake under his spell already or, for that matter, be doing something freaky without even being aware of it.

But Roger had let Jake go, so now he just had to hope they'd eventually swing his way so he could take his own look at Tobias. He didn't know what he'd find—hard to imagine the kid he'd seen on the floor of that interrogation room standing in his living room or sitting next to Jake in the Eldorado—or what he'd do if he *did* find something. He hoped to God, for Jake's sake, that there was nothing to find.

Chapter Three



Some nightmares blindsided them both.

As Tobias had gotten more comfortable with the outside world (or at least a little less paralyzed, less often brought to the edge of a panic attack by ordering breakfast), Jake had hoped Tobias's nightmares would lighten up. Maybe only happen once a week instead of four or five times, or at least stop jerking him out of sleep, his throat raspy from withheld screams, whether he was in his own bed or beside Jake.

When it became clear that wasn't going to happen, Jake realized how stupid he had been to think it would be that easy. For eleven years in that hellhole, Tobias had been terrified every fucking day of his life. And worse, he'd been so used to the pain, the fear, and the misery that it hadn't even registered. It had been normal.

It hurt remembering their meetings over the years, how fucking *calm* Tobias had been compared to how he was now. Jake had seen fleeting shades of terror over Tobias's face—reserved for sightings of guards and hunters—and the familiar, utter blankness he'd tried his best to break, but it had never clicked for him that those two expressions hadn't been just a bad day for Tobias. Those had been his life.

Jake still didn't have all the stories; he didn't know exactly what had gone on or if he could even handle knowing what had made Tobias like this. Could he keep joking with waitstaff, filling the Eldorado's tank, coaxing Tobias to look him in the eye, if he knew? Didn't the marks on Tobias's body, the textures on his back that Jake felt even through Tobias's T-shirt at night, tell him enough? For eleven years, those fucknuts had been free to do whatever they wanted to his wonderful, breakable Tobias, who had never been able to lift a finger to stop them.

Of course he was still terrified now; of course he didn't believe he was really safe with Jake. Tobias didn't know what safe was. And even if he said he felt safe with Jake, that didn't mean his body or his subconscious, the parts of him that had been fucked up the worst, could believe that, now or ever. If Jake was honest with himself, he didn't actually think he had what it took to fix that part of Tobias. Just because he would spend the rest of his life trying didn't mean that it would be enough. But in the interest of getting through every day and giving Tobias the best he had, he tried not to think of the big picture, focusing instead on how many times he could wheedle Toby into smiling that day or help him relax a little more the next time they walked into a gas station. Things he could do. Places in Tobias's life he could actually see improvements, day by day, because nighttime was completely out of his control.

The nightmares, like the panic attacks, became just another fucked-up routine. And when Tobias stopped trying to stifle his sobs and fretting about keeping Jake up, it felt better, more like they were dealing with this together and less like Tobias was suffering and Jake could do fuck all about it. Though in Jake's opinion, Tobias was still too fucking quiet once he woke up.

Some nights, Jake reminded Tobias that he could tell him what he'd dreamed about, though he always stressed this wasn't a rule or order. The PTSD book said that sometimes talking about the past and nightmares could help "lance the wound," and Jake believed it after its advice about waking Tobias up had let Jake pull him out of more than one nightmare without causing a panic attack. And while the idea of hearing the details of Tobias's nightmares was personally terrifying—Jake was pretty sure that Tobias's nightmares could be his too with just a little prompting—he would do anything if it might help.

Tobias never took him up on the offer until a week after Roger's call.

The night that changed Jake's perspective on what he could and couldn't do started like any other. Jake woke to

Tobias's steady whimpers (fucking awful noises, worse because they were half stifled, as though he didn't dare scream) and his body twitching as he tried to curl in on himself. Jake sat up, tugging the sheet so it wasn't tangled around Tobias, then rested his hand lightly on Tobias's shoulder, calling his name steadily—and wasn't that a fucking challenge, to keep his voice even when he wanted to scream and hurt something that existed only in Tobias's head and the past.

His voice broke through all at once, and Tobias flinched away, pulling himself into a sitting position and dragging in ragged breaths, his face averted. Jake let him go; Tobias would let him know when he wanted to be touched.

“It's all right,” Jake repeated, the same fucking hollow words he offered every night (*of course it's not fucking all right, nothing that happened to you can ever be made all right*), but they were all he had. “You're okay now. You're out. We're on the other fucking side of the country, Toby, and I'm never gonna let them touch you again.” He didn't have much, but he could at least assure Tobias he wasn't *there* anymore.

Tobias shuddered, dropping his face into his hands as his breaths broke into sobs.

Shit. Jake tried to wait for Tobias to reach for him before putting his hands all over the kid, but at times like this, when Jake wasn't sure if Tobias was hearing him at all, he couldn't stand to watch Tobias locked alone in his own head. Jake drew closer, rubbing his palm lightly over his shoulders, trying not to think about the furrowed skin beneath the fabric.

“Hey. Hey, Toby. I got you now, right? You're safe here. You're gonna be okay.”

And then Tobias collapsed, curling against his chest and clutching handfuls of Jake's T-shirt like that was the only substantial thing he dared touch, and Jake pulled him in because dammit, Toby deserved *more*, anything Jake could give.

When the sobs eased back into deeper, ragged breaths, Tobias whispered, “I dreamed,” and Jake's hand froze on the

back of his head. They stayed like that, still, for no more than the count of five breaths, and then Tobias took another deep shaky breath and continued. “I dreamed th-they came to take me b-back.”

Ice prickled down Jake’s spine. He bent his ear close to Tobias’s mouth, barely stopping himself from tightening his holds.

Tobias’s words were a thready half whisper against his shirt. He made no effort to speak louder. Maybe Tobias was half hoping he wouldn’t hear. “We were in Boulder.”

“I wouldn’t let them, Toby,” Jake whispered. Gentle, gentle; he tried to be when all he wanted was to make threats and promises, to vow retribution and snap necks. “No one will ever take you away from me.”

“Y-you . . . weren’t there.” Tobias drew a half-choked breath. “You h-hadn’t left me, not f-for good, but just like an e-errand or run. They k-kicked in the door. I couldn’t d-do anything. I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t even c-call for you. I just . . . froze.”

“It’s not gonna happen, Toby,” Jake said vehemently. “Fucking never. I’ll get them—I won’t let them near you. And you won’t freeze up, you get to a damn phone or run like hell and find me, or fucking fight them off, but they’re never gonna get you.”

Tobias was crying openly again, head shaking against Jake’s chest. “I can’t . . . I can’t fight them. I *can’t*, Jake.”

There were lines. Sometimes Jake could even tell where they were. And he knew, for the time being, that he had to back off.

“It’s okay,” he said, rubbing Toby’s shoulders. “They’re not here. No one but me. They won’t get you.”

Some nights they turned to the TV for some kind of mindless distraction, like the Weather Channel and BowFlex ads. But tonight, Jake couldn’t make himself reach for the remote when they lay back down. He kept one arm curled around Tobias, who tucked his head to Jake’s chest.

He didn't know how Tobias could roll over and get back to sleep after a nightmare like that. He certainly couldn't do more than drowse fitfully, his own nightmares picking up the sounds of Tobias's weeping. But that night, when Tobias's sobs slowed into the even breathing of sleep at last, Jake had something else on his mind.

Tobias had said he couldn't fight, and it occurred to Jake that it wasn't just that the hunter bastards in Tobias's head were stronger, faster, or armed. It was also that Tobias didn't have the tools to resist.

Where could he go if Jake weren't there? Sure, Roger would help—fuck, Roger had better help, or Jake would come back from wherever he'd been and deal out some Hawthorne vengeance—but Tobias didn't even know how to find him, and what other options did Tobias have?

He didn't have money, weapons, the location of Jake's safe houses, a functioning ID, or even a working knowledge of a world of normal people. Tobias didn't *have* these resources. And while understanding the fucking strange world into which Jake had dragged him was probably one of the most important tasks and the one they worked on every day, Jake should damn well work on getting him everything. And then maybe next time those bastards showed up, in Tobias's dreams or otherwise, he would have more options than fighting or being taken.

Jake had never once deliberately thought about the laws that had defined his childhood. He couldn't remember once when he and Da—Leon had talked about when they should change a PO box or replace their old IDs. The only time he could remember talking about the emergency procedures besides Leon reminding him of them before walking out the door for another hunt was after the CPS shitshow when he was thirteen.

But tonight, with Toby sleeping exhausted under his arm and the dawn still far away, he had plenty of time to consider the strategies and rules that made up the fabric of his life and figure out how many of those he could refashion to support Toby too.



The next morning, after breakfast, Jake paid for another day at the hotel—clerk probably thought he was some kinda druggie with the dark circles under his eyes—and took Toby out shopping. Luckily, there was a fairly small cell phone store in a nearby strip mall, and Tobias didn't seem particularly stressed out while Jake handled the salespeople and paid in cash. Next up was an office supply store, which was bigger, but when Jake took Tobias's hand and asked if he felt up to coming inside, Tobias nodded. Jake got what he needed, and they headed back to the hotel. The table was small, but Jake gestured for Tobias to take one of the rickety chairs, dropped the bags to the side, and sat down across from him. From one of the bags, he slid a fresh leather-bound journal and a new pack of pens across the table.

“Okay, Toby. This is something I should have done ages ago, but better late than never.”

Tobias tensed slightly, his hazel eyes wide and fixed on Jake, but there was less blind terror there than there used to be. Jake kept track of small miracles.

“If things ever go south and we get separated, this is what we're gonna do.”

It took a heck of a lot longer than he'd expected to lay it all out. The emergency drills and panic plans that had been the foundation of his childhood were just the beginning. Jake had code words for varying levels of emergency situations and eighteen running aliases that either rented PO boxes and safe house locations across the country or were authorized with access to his various credit cards. He had tricks for getting fake credit cards, staying under the law enforcement radar, forging signatures, patterns for which town, hotel, and fake name they'd take next if they split up, and the numbers for his actual bank account in Boulder, the one where the ASC deposited his monthly dough. Other than the bank account he'd only opened when he turned eighteen, he'd never had to think about these, and he'd certainly never said them in one

go. He didn't have to think about them, no more than he thought about those other details that were as much a part of his daily life as sliding knives into his boots every morning and doing an ammo check every night.

Jake was nervous. Not as nervous as Tobias, of course, but he still didn't have any idea what Tobias's reaction would be. These plans required a lot of him. He couldn't just wait for Jake's directions, and it wouldn't always be crystal clear which course he should take. But fuck, it had to be better than nothing, right?

Tobias listened as he always did, relaxing perceptibly while keeping his eyes fixed on Jake, hand flying over his paper making tiny, copious notes in the neatest handwriting Jake had ever seen. He had questions sometimes, stuttered occasionally, asked in his quiet-but-not-terrified voice if he could get the map from the Eldorado when Jake was in the middle of listing safe houses, and generally absorbed the information like taking notes was a direct line into his long-term memory. He didn't seem wildly relieved at the end, but Jake thought—well, he thought he saw Tobias's shoulders loosen, his hands rest with more determination than fear on the table, like this could be the start of a new, better stage.

Jake could swear up and down until he was blue in the face that he'd always be there for Tobias, but the fact was that Tobias was too goddamn smart to believe that. He knew a situation could always go fubar, or maybe just that he would always screw up eventually, and that when that happened, a man damn well better have a plan.

And now Tobias had everything Jake did. He had safety nets and contact information for all the other hunters Jake trusted—that was a pretty fucking short list, but it should still help—and a brand-new cell phone with Jake's and Roger's numbers in the contact list. He had everything Jake could give him.

It could have felt like giving Tobias the power to leave him, but instead it was as comfortable and *good* as handing Tobias a bag of M&Ms in Freak Camp or splitting a sandwich. What was Jake's was Toby's, and every time Toby accepted

what he had to offer, they built more between them than the memory of FREACS and fear.



Tobias hadn't known what to expect when Jake sat him down. The stores had been fine—thankfully empty, so he hadn't really had to be brave to walk through them, and Jake had held his hand besides—but when Jake sat down across from him looking so very serious, his stomach dropped.

He knew it had to have something to do with telling Jake about his nightmare. It was the only thing that had changed, and Jake had looked so broken after—arms wrapped around him, his eyes dark in a way that Tobias knew now not to associate with imminent pain—and Tobias thought that no matter what Jake had said, he should have kept his fucking monster mouth shut, because something had changed, and change was so rarely good.

And then, in his most serious voice, Jake told Tobias the secrets of being a Hawthorne.

After about five minutes, Tobias knew that Jake wasn't making this up or designing this just for Tobias. There were too many details, and they came too easily to Jake for it to be invented. Which meant that each of these steps, each of these words, locations and processes was something he had used. Jake was laying out his life, and Tobias could barely believe it, even as every word convinced him of the truth of it.

He gave Tobias stratagems for keeping safe and free from anyone unlucky enough to try to catch Jake Hawthorne. There must have been a dozen of them, relayed in precise, clear details, but then Jake helped him see how each trick could be adapted for Tobias to keep him just as safe. And gradually, as Jake recounted the steps, the possibilities and the variations, Tobias realized that Jake wasn't just giving him information and rules, like for a test. He was telling Tobias that he would always find him and, more breathtakingly, giving Tobias the abilities and the knowledge to look for Jake as well.

So Tobias listened, listened for all he was worth, with almost more concentration than he had given to the Director's instructions during a session, because this wasn't just a question of pain or survival. This was from Jake, a gift of trust and faith, and Tobias *could not fail*. He would never let himself.

He wrote everything down as a matter of course, glancing at the notes Jake was making—messy and hard to read upside down, but Tobias had had to absorb more illegible documents faster in the past—but he knew it wouldn't take him more than a couple hours to commit the information to memory.

Applying it would be another matter. Most of these steps required Tobias to walk alone into stores without having a panic attack. He would have to be able to look reals in the eye and talk like he belonged there, and Jake had even mentioned the prospect of carrying a weapon of some sort. Tobias hoped it wouldn't come to that (*A freak doesn't require a weapon to be dangerous, but the very possession of one indicates a willingness to resist which must be burned out at the root. Do you understand, 89UI?*), but he supposed he would be willing to fight to make his way back to Jake. And if Jake gave him a weapon, that might indicate that he was willing to let Tobias end himself rather than be taken back to Freak Camp if there were no other options. Though Tobias was beginning to believe there would generally be other options. Just the fact that Jake was telling him all of this showed Tobias that whether or not he could actually remember and perform every aspect of these plans, Jake would track him down.

Even with all these reassurances, it was hard to accept the phone.

“J-Jake,” Tobias said, running his fingers slowly over the small device. “I d-don't—”

He didn't need it. Just knowing all of Jake's numbers, having access to the hotel phones, and waiting for Jake to show him how pay phones worked—“There aren't that many anymore, but we'll try one out next time we see one”—would be enough. Why would a monster need to be able to contact others? Didn't that imply he would be seeking out other

monsters—*never, never, never*—to hurt humans, to do bad things? And it was yet another unnecessary thing Jake had bought for Tobias, a stupid monster, when he had already given Tobias so much, when most of his emergency plans didn't require phone calls anyway.

But before he could even get the words clear in his own mind, Jake reached over and closed Tobias's fingers around the phone. "Toby, don't. It's a gift. I want you to have it. Here, I even kept the manual. Maybe you can teach me how to change the damn background photo."

Tobias took the manual and made himself breathe. Jake thought he should have this. Jake thought he could do it. So he would. He had to. He wanted to. "Okay."

It helped that every time he let Jake treat him like a real person, truly capable of doing what Jake asked, the dark smudges around Jake's eyes faded.



Taking Tobias's picture was the hardest part.

First of all, finding a good enough camera was a bitch. The cheap throwaway cameras wouldn't do—Tobias both deserved and needed the best—and the ones in the first shop he tried were frankly more expensive than he could justify spending for a couple of shots.

He was about to bite the bullet and bring Tobias to a shop to take a normal sort of passport picture (even though Leon's handed-down paranoia and his own common sense said it wasn't the best idea to advertise what they were doing and stick around in a town that long) when he remembered the camera. They'd picked it up in a pawn shop when they'd had to make IDs fast and dirty, and then later it came in useful against a weird Venus flytrap thing that only appeared in mirrors and through camera lenses, so Leon had made enough space for it in the Eldorado with their bags of rock salt and the shotguns.

But even after Jake dug up and put together the camera—new film wasn't nearly as expensive as the cameras themselves, pricey fuckers—the second problem was Tobias.

Jake explained what he was doing and why, and at the time, Tobias had looked relieved, a strange light of hope gleaming in his eye making Jake kick himself for not thinking of this earlier. But when it came to actually taking the picture, he couldn't get Tobias to look like anything but a terrified sixteen-year-old who'd been through hell and was facing it again.

They'd pinned a sheet up over the hotel window, and Tobias stood before it uneasily, eyes locked on anything but Jake's face.

"C'mon, Toby," Jake said, finger on the shutter. "Smile."

Tobias tried, forcing his lips to curl up. Jake took two pictures and then lowered the camera with a sigh. Tobias looked like someone had stabbed him in the stomach and he was trying his best to smile for a picture anyway. Jake set the camera on the end table, grabbed Tobias's hand, and pulled him over to the bed. He didn't want to try to talk about this with Tobias standing awkwardly in front of the blank white backdrop.

"Toby, what's the problem?"

Tobias ducked his head. "I'm trying to look n-normal. L-like a real, and I d-don't know how, and with the c-camera. I'm s—I don't know what you want."

"Just look like yourself, that's all we need here." Jake brushed his hair back from his face. Sure, he probably didn't need to do that, but it would look better for the picture. "The camera's not gonna hurt you. Can't steal your soul."

"It can s-see ghosts," Tobias said. Then his mouth quirked in a real smile, but it was bitter as three-day-old black coffee. "Probably don't have a soul to steal."

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't say stuff like that." Didn't it figure that when Tobias started cracking jokes (and that had better have been a joke), they sliced open Jake's heart as quick as

Tobias's nightmares? "It's not a problem, Tobias, seriously. And you look great just the way you are. What's really stressing you out?"

"Jake, should we . . ." Tobias's hands twisted together in his lap. "Should we really be doing this? I mean, I'm a . . . isn't this illegal? I don't want . . . You shouldn't get into trouble over me."

Jake gave Tobias a cocky smile, but he kept his movements slow and gentle when he reached out to take his hand. "Toby, we're Hawthornes. Illegal is our middle name. I had my first fake ID when I was younger than you. But seriously, I will always protect you. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Jake. You promised."

"Good, and here's another promise. Doing this will make things easier. This will help. This is gonna give you what you need to protect yourself until I come for you. I don't want them to come for you, I'll fight them down to my last breath, but if that can't happen, you *do* have power. You survived them, Tobias. And every day reminds me that you're the bravest person I've ever met. Do you believe me?"

Tobias nodded sharply. And still didn't look up.

"Okay. Let's do something different. Just look at the camera, okay? And try not to look like you think the camera's gonna knife you."

Tobias didn't look happy. There was still that depthless fear in his eyes, dark circles underneath them. But the photos were good enough that after another fifteen minutes of Jake moving around and talking aimlessly to try to get him to loosen up, he called it a night.

The pictures, when they came back, worked for what he needed—it wasn't like he was forging a passport or anything, just a couple IDs. It was only then he realized with a gut-deep jerk that he had forgotten about the scarring on Tobias's neck from the goddamn collar he'd worn all his life in Freak Camp. That rough circle embedded in the skin around his neck

seemed starker and more condemnatory in the photo beneath Tobias's dark eyes.

Jake had to crop the photos he was using, but he kept some of the duplicates just to remind himself.



Standing for the photo had been stupidly hard for Toby, even though it wasn't painful at all. He couldn't stop thinking how he didn't look like a real—too thin, too pale, too *freak*—and the photo would just give it away and all Jake's hard work would be for nothing because you could take the monster out of FREACS but that would never change what he really was. It was a huge relief when Jake said they'd had enough and put down the camera and Tobias could push all those thoughts from his mind.

He'd watched Jake get the ID ready, of course. Jake had put it together on the hotel table, and Tobias had glanced over every once in a while as he brushed up on the notes—he was still getting the street address for the Nebraska safe house mixed up with the Florida one, even though he'd gone over the notes twice before recopying them from memory—but then it disappeared, and they drove on, swinging through Tennessee. Jake didn't say anything more about it, so Tobias thought he'd given up on the idea after realizing how pointless it was to try to pass Tobias off as a real. He tried not to think about it or feel anything like disappointment.

Jake took him to one of his nearby PO boxes to show him how they worked. They stopped that night in a small motel—one that Jake had said had character—just over the Georgia border, and Tobias stretched out on the bed, lost in the middle of *Watership Down*, until he heard Jake clear his throat.

“Got something for you, Toby.”

Tobias sat up, eyes falling on what Jake held out halfway between them, from where he was sitting on the other bed. It was a wallet, Tobias recognized, similar to Jake's, but shinier and creaseless.

He knew that Jake would never pass him anything that might hurt him without warning him first, but he still reached for the billfold with a thrill of inexplicable apprehension.

“We still got a few months before Christmas, and we’re only halfway to your next birthday,” Jake said in the tone that told Tobias he was trying to be cheerful even when he didn’t feel that way. “But this can count for one of the ones I missed. Got a lot of catching up to do.”

Tobias heard the words, but he didn’t quite process them because the wallet was in his hands now, and the weight told him it wasn’t empty. He couldn’t hold this unmistakable mark of a real with power, let alone open it. It didn’t belong anywhere near him.

“Go on, open it,” Jake said in a rush, without even the pretense of patience, and Tobias did as he was told.

Three cards were tucked into the pockets, and Tobias’s hands were remarkably steady until he pulled the top one out.

It was a driver’s license from the state of Colorado, the same design as Jake’s. But the name in bold capitals said Tobias Hawthorne, eighteen, from Boulder, CO. Brown hair, hazel eyes, 5’10” tall, 120 pounds.

Tobias couldn’t get his lungs to expand. It was like the library card all over again, but this was so much more. This was his name and Jake’s, his picture staring at him with dark, sad eyes, and his description laid over glinting, real-looking holographs, with no place left for his Freak Camp ID 89UI6703.

“Thank you.” He didn’t raise his head because Jake might see how watery his eyes were and think that he was sad, and that was so far from Tobias’s emotions that he couldn’t let Jake think that for a moment. It was all he could do to keep his shaking hand from dropping the small, precious card that fit so easily in his palm.

Jake reached over and, as he had with the phone, curled Tobias’s fingers over the card. “Anytime, Toby.” He sounded

happy again, with the easy confidence Tobias knew so well. “Check out the other ones.”

The second was a credit card for James Plant, but the third, a debit card for a Boulder bank, bore *Tobias Hawthorne* at the bottom too, in raised letters he could trace.

“Sometimes the credit cards fuck up and quit working—it happens,” Jake said. “But the debit card is legit, goes right to my ASC direct deposit account, so if you ever need some quick cash, it’ll work at any ATM. We’ll try one of those out sometime soon so you can get the hang of punching in the PIN and stuff. It ain’t a bottomless account, but it should put at least a few hundred bucks in your pocket if you need it.” He sounded smug now. “Go on, keep looking, there’s more in there.”

Tobias was already reeling, a thousand thoughts and feelings clashing within him, and he didn’t know where to start with which ones he should utter; but he had been given another direction, so his fingers moved on, sliding under the pockets, feeling the soft, supple material. Then two crisp green notes peeked out, and Tobias’s stomach pitched forward again.

This was too much. Wonder, disbelief, and consternation had warred within him, but the battle was abruptly over, one side sweeping over the others. Tobias couldn’t drop Jake’s impossible, priceless gift to the floor, but he let it fall to his knees. He clasped his hands together over it in an effort to get them to stop shaking, but he had no such luck with his voice. “I can’t.”

Crossing the space between them, Jake sat close beside him and rubbed his back with the heel of his hand until Tobias found it easier to breathe and could bring the room back to proper focus. Then Jake asked quietly, “Why can’t you, Toby?”

Tobias gestured once with his hands helplessly before clenching them together again. “I can’t, I can’t carry all that. I can’t p-pass well enough, they’ll *c-catch* me eventually, and they’ll be so angry, Jake, so angry that I was carrying—that I pretended to be—”

“Toby.” Jake covered his hands with one of his own, and Tobias let himself drop his forehead to rest atop it, over his knees, fighting for deeper breaths. “No one’s gonna catch you. Gimme a little credit, okay—I’ve made IDs for just about every government agency there is, and no one’s ever called me a fraud.”

“Because you’re *Jake*,” Tobias said, unable to stop himself.

Jake huffed a laugh. “Well, I got some practice. But it’s good, okay? This’ll work. I told you that every fake credit card eventually goes belly up, but if that happens, or if the IDs fuck up—that’s my fault, Toby, not yours.”

“No!” Tobias pushed himself up on his elbows, shocked.

“*Yes*,” Jake said, smiling, though his tone was still gentle. “This is my arts and crafts, dude, I get credit for however it turns out. I’m just asking you to trust me. I wouldn’t give you anything that might get you in trouble, right? Nothing but the best.”

Tobias took a couple more slow breaths, then sat up and forced himself to pick up the wallet again and take out the ID. It was good, very good. He had to believe Jake that the marks of authenticity would count more than all the signs of *freak* shining from his face.

They sat there quietly for a few more moments, until Tobias said, “I don’t think I weigh 120 pounds.”

Jake’s laugh shook through his arms, warming Tobias, and a smile tugged at his own mouth. “Yeah, well, you’re not eighteen quite yet either. Think of it as a good first goal.”

Tobias nodded, slid the ID back inside, and folded the wallet back together, clasp it between his hands. “Thank you,” he said again and this time looked into Jake’s face.

Something flickered in Jake’s gray eyes, and he bent his head forward, pressing his mouth to Tobias’s hairline as he squeezed Tobias’s shoulder tight. Tobias closed his eyes, breathing in Jake’s scent deep.

Just when Tobias thought he had gotten any kind of grasp of what Jake wanted from him, just when it started to seem feasible, Jake reset his expectations to impossibly enormous. Quite often that scared Tobias, though never with the hopeless dread he had in camp. He was finally coming to believe that every time he failed, Jake would catch him and never let him hit the floor. He could count on that, and Jake's faith in him, over his certainty of his own shortcomings.

This wallet was scary in new, indefinite ways because it suggested he could survive without Jake; it opened the possibility that Jake might leave him someday. Tobias tried not to think about that, focusing on the plan rather than the necessity for the plan.

The power the wallet offered was alien as well because this was something that didn't depend on Jake's kindness or whether Tobias could perform in the way the guards had expected him to. Tobias didn't know if he could accept or trust in it yet, but just the new possibility open to him was enough of a revelation.



The next night, neither of them felt much like going out when they checked in to the motel. Conveniently, the hotel had one of those little ring binders with restaurant options. There was even a nice little subsection for delivery.

Jake ran his hand down the line, decided he didn't want to eat tofu curry, and turned around. Toby had already laid his bag on the second bed and sat next to Jake, watching the black TV as though it were already showing the soothing clouds. "Pizza or Chinese?"

Toby turned his head. "What?"

Jake hefted the phone. "Delivery. Pizza or Chinese."

Toby tipped his head back, studied the ceiling while he thought. "Pizza."

Jake punched in the numbers and then stopped. Savored.

A month ago, Toby would have stared at him, panicked at the very idea of choosing. Maybe even last week, he would have asked so many more questions, price and preference and convenience. But tonight he thought and chose, and these were the small gifts. These were the moments Jake had to hold on to when even the good things he could do with his life didn't seem like enough.

And because he paused, an idea came to him.

He stretched the phone toward Toby. "You wanna make the call?"

Jake knew Toby didn't, even before Toby froze, eyes fixing on the phone like it might bite him. He could tell that just the idea of talking to a stranger he couldn't see, couldn't even physically take the measure of, brought Toby instantly to the verge of his second panic attack of the day. Jake's instinct to protect Toby from these threats had been honed as strong as his awareness of flickering lights, of someone shifting to touch a weapon under their jacket, but it wasn't doing Toby any favors to keep him in a bubble forever.

And Toby didn't want him to. So this was another step. A baby one to anyone else, but for them . . . it made fucking Godzilla look like a garden snake. Toby took the phone, cleared the partially inputted number, and turned it over and over in his hands. His eyes flickered to the pizza ad's number. "What's the—the a-a-address here?" Jake slid over a notepad with the hotel info printed on top. Toby took a deep, slow breath, like he was going underwater and wasn't sure when he'd get another shot at air. "Yeah, I w-want to."

Jake's rush of pride and triumph nearly had him pull a fist pump, but he restrained himself to a bright grin. "Okay, let's go over this. I'm a pimply sixteen-year-old, working for minimum wage at Papa John's and bored out of my skull. The only thing I'm thinking about is whether or not I can catch a break with Sally from algebra class and she'll maybe, like, you know, want to watch a Star Wars marathon with me tonight after work."

Toby was almost smiling, his shoulders looking less like they'd break if Jake touched them wrong. Pleased, Jake went slack-jawed and mimed answering the phone. "Uh, hi, this is Papa John's, my name's Lance, may I take your order?"

Catching on, Toby raised Jake's cell to his ear. "Can I get two large pizzas—one cheese, one half vegetarian and half pepperoni?"

"Uh, I guess . . . do you want any, like, soda or girly little cinnamon sticks with that? They've only, like, been sitting on the counter since yesterday, dude."

"Just a two liter of Coke."

"Okay . . . your total will be like, fifty bucks, or something like that, and it'll be there in an hour or maybe two because we're in the armpit of Tennessee and I think I'm gonna smoke a joint before delivering your pizza. Bye, dude."

Toby was grinning at him, bright and unreserved and beautiful, and it was so fucking good to see his hands steady again.

Jake spread his hands. "See? Piece of cake."

"Right." Toby dipped his head and punched in the number. His shoulders became two brittle lines of tension, and his left hand started to lock around his calf, but Jake slipped his hand in between before he could, and Toby held on tight to him instead. His eyes shut tight as Jake heard the muffled sound of Papa John's picking up.

"Uh, hi, yes—I-I'd like to place an order. For pickup—no, delivery, I mean delivery." Toby was rocking slightly in agitation, and Jake tightened his grip on Toby's hand, trying not to hate himself as Toby stammered the rest of the way through the order. He enunciated the name of their hotel and room number with painful clarity, and Jake winced and wanted to go and punch the bastard when the employee hung up halfway through Toby's goodbye.

Toby exhaled without opening his eyes, slowly releasing the phone until it dropped onto the bed. Then he pitched forward, face-first into the pillows.

“Toby.” Jake rolled onto his side, rubbing his hand slowly over Toby’s spine, checking to make sure he was still breathing, because fuck, you never knew. “Hey, man, you did it. You got through it, that was good. You’re a fucking badass. That weaselly little bastard’s gonna bring us pizza, and he didn’t think a damn thing.”

“I hate this.” Toby’s voice was heavily muffled in the pillows, but Jake stopped his hand. Toby turned his head, like he thought Jake hadn’t heard him the first time. “I hate how hard this is. It’s stupid. I know it shouldn’t be hard.”

“Says who? No one’s making rules about what’s supposed to be hard and easy for you. And every time, it’s gonna be easier.” Jake kept rubbing Toby’s back, thinking. “Hey, you wanna pay the guy when he comes?”

Toby opened his eyes wide and stared at him. And then he tipped his head back and made a noise that was somewhere between a choke, a laugh, and like he got sucker punched in the abdomen. “No.” He shook his head, smiling and hyperventilating at the same time. “No.”

And Jake laughed a little with him because that sure as hell hadn’t been a No question, and Toby knew that just the same.

Chapter Four



Toby was hungry, and the bars weren't open. Sure, Jake had no concrete proof that Toby was hungry, but Jake could pack in a cheeseburger right now, and he figured that anytime he could eat, Toby could use another layer of fat.

They stopped at a diner, a dinky mom-and-pop affair with vinyl booths and coffee that practically ate the roof off Jake's mouth. The cheeseburgers on the menu looked disgusting, even to Jake's admittedly obscenely high grease tolerance, so Jake ordered two stacks of blueberry pancakes with bacon on the side, an orange juice, and a milk for Toby. Jake still got twitchy when he thought about those long days of flu and misery, when he had thought Toby might breathe out and never take another breath in again. It wasn't in Jake's nature to think about food groups or say no to cholesterol, but for Toby's sake, he would try to keep down the grease and increase the vitamins whenever he thought of it.

"Like it?" Jake nodded at Toby's pancakes, blueberry sauce dribbling off the oily-but-still-delicious berry-filled cakes.

Toby swallowed his latest bite, met his eyes, and smiled. God, Jake loved that smile. It almost made his last draft of coffee taste good. "Yes, Jake. Though they're a little . . ." He shrugged, probably lacking the vocabulary yet to properly criticize the crap Jake fed him sometimes.

That was fine. Jake could give him a crash course in salty, sour, greasy, and swimming-in-mystery-sauce as soon as they got back to the Eldorado. Right now, he was just going to enjoy that smile.

But a bark of laughter from the assholes behind them made Toby wince, and maybe Jake should be giving them a crash course in basic table manners. Like, if Toby is goddamn

smiling, you keep your damn mouth shut, or one Jake Hawthorne will close it for you. He looked over Toby's shoulder, scowling. The three dudes sitting at the counter were another set wishing for a bar, if the amount of liquid moving from dented flasks to the coffee mugs was any indication. Or maybe they were just trying to sterilize the coffee before ingesting it.

"Hey," said one with a huge, bushy beard and the shakiest hands, "did I tell you Margie thinks they've got goddamned rats now?" He took another drink of coffee and laughed, the same laugh that had Toby flinching a moment before. "If it ain't one goddamned thing, it's another. Fucked, shorting electricity, floor settling, damned if that woman's had a piece of luck since she gave that shit what was coming to him."

"Damn straight," said the youngest, a kid with an orange-red crew cut and slightly slurred speech. "Damn fucking straight. Would have shot him in the head myself if I knew what that fuck—"

"Keep your mouth off the dead," said the third. "Just drink your damned coffee."

"Though probably it was the goddamned rats that were pushing stuff around," Bushy Beard said. "Least that's settled. I thought she was gonna smack that kid for saying—"

The third guy slammed his glass onto the table. "You shut up too, Nick. That kid's been through enough. Fuck, Margie's been through enough. Drink your fucking Irish coffee and shut the hell up."

Jake wasn't completely sure when he'd grabbed Toby's hand. Maybe when the younger guy had mentioned shooting the mystery spouse in the head. Maybe when the third had slammed his glass into the wood. He didn't know, and he didn't really care, because Toby's pulse was beating like a busted muffler against his fingers, and his wasn't much better because he wanted to shove his fist into somebody's face, ask them why the hell they were talking about shit like this in the middle of the day, half drunk and so stupid because couldn't they see?

And the rest of him, from his gut to a dozen years of experience, knew what this was.

They were outside, six feet from the Eldorado before Jake found the balls to say it. “It’s a ghost,” he said. “I mean, all signs point to that, and . . . well, it’s a hunt.” He couldn’t look at Toby, not when the drive to go out now, chase down those civvies and pump them for the info he needed to salt and burn this sucker, was locked in combat with the need to not scare Toby, to not throw away what they had been carefully growing together over one stupid spirit.

Toby nodded.

“Toby.” Jake swallowed. “I have to—”

“I c-can help with the r-research,” Toby said, without looking at him. “I’m—I was good at that. Unless you’re already s-sure that it’s the husband? Or at least, the m-man who was hitting them . . .”

Jake stared. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around the idea that Toby could be so calm. This was *hunting* they were talking about, with death and blood and monsters, and putting that in the same thought as Toby made him uncomfortable, in spite of how many stories he’d told over the years about what he and D—what he’d done his entire life, though not since he got Toby out of FREACS. But in the face of possible supernatural death and risk, Toby *was* calm.

For so long, he’d fought down the urge, clamped it down, strangled it because Toby couldn’t deal with it when he was fresh out of FREACS. And Jake would have done so much more than that for Toby. He had in fact tried to channel that energy into things Toby could work with. But now the adrenaline broke through, filling him with the familiar electricity of anticipation, and that buzz in his body brought a natural, fierce grin to his face.

“Research is a good idea,” he agreed. “We should at least figure out where this sheet-wearing, ham-fisted bastard got buried.”



The Oak Acres Library was smaller than most of the libraries Jake had taken him to but still smelled comfortingly of paper, dust, and plastic shelving. It had five well-worn computers along one wall, a three-couch sitting area, two tables surrounded by folding chairs, and dozens of six-foot shelving units, all of which were visible from the desk and reception at the main door.

Jake looked over everything with the air of a man putting together a battle plan. Tobias caught the quick glance he shot his way. It wasn't the kind of look he had gotten from guards when they weren't sure why the monster was allowed in the library or from the Director when he was assessing a monster's advantages and weaknesses. While Tobias was grateful that Jake's glance wasn't either of those—and honestly, he hadn't expected one of those—his stomach still clenched.

He was sure that some of the times that he'd researched had been for real hunts, with real time limits and risks. Probably even some of the ones where the Director had given him a time limit and beaten him because his progress had been too slow. But this was the first time he had heard the story, the first time he could possibly help and see how it worked in the real world. He wanted to do good, to show Jake that he could be useful, but even more than that, he wanted to actually *be* useful.

“Hey.” Tobias turned to look directly at Jake, waiting. Jake wasn't the Director, and this wasn't a test, but he was ready to do anything Jake needed, and he wanted to. Because he had seen the look in Jake's eyes, an excitement that he usually only got when telling Tobias about lives saved, BAMFs burned, and Tobias wanted to see it again.

“Maybe you could find that book you're looking for, that sequel. *The Blue Towers*?”

For a second, Tobias was just confused. He'd actually been looking for *The Two Towers* after finishing the first in the

series (twenty-five cents at the last book sale), but it didn't seem like the time to be looking for literature when there could be a ghost killing people in the very same town. He loved reading stories, he loved that Jake let him, but keeping people safe was much more important. "But if you need any help . . ."

"No, I got this, Toby, it's fine." Jake made a vague flapping gesture, looking nervous and about as uncertain as Tobias was. "I'm just gonna be over on the computers, see if they've got some old newspaper articles digitized. You can catch up when you find it."

Tobias nodded slowly, even though he was still confused, and stepped toward the genre section while Jake leaned on the help desk for a second and then headed over to the computers. This was clearly important to Jake, so Tobias was willing to follow his instructions until he could figure out what Jake was thinking.

But when Jake just ended up sitting at one of the computers and laboriously two-finger typing the code to access the files he wanted, Tobias was confused. He could have done that. He could have done that *faster*.

It took him about two minutes to find *The Two Towers*, and then, even though Jake didn't seem to want him involved, he came over. He thought that sitting on the floor would draw attention—the only other person sitting on the floor was a chubby five-year-old smashing blocks together in the reading area while a tired-looking woman read a book with a shirtless man on the cover—so he cautiously pulled one of the unoccupied computer chairs closer behind Jake.

Jake's brow was furrowed, all his attention focused on typing into the search engines. Typing with two fingers. Tobias's own fingers itched. He could have done in less than five seconds what took Jake entire *minutes* to accomplish. He wasn't sure if this was a brilliant plan of Jake's to look less computer-literate than he was or if he really hadn't ever gotten the hang of it. Even before the Director, Tobias had been good with computers. The Director's systems of punishments and expectations had jumped his words-per-minute rate some twenty words and taught him to find his way around any

operating system that FREACS had and even some that the Director had brought in specifically to test his adaptability.

Even at Jake's glacial speed, finding the pertinent information about the death was easy. There wasn't much about any "Margie" killing her significant other on the internet, but the local papers had all been scanned into the archives. They barely had to scan back three months before the article came up.

Eddie Womsley, unemployed drunk and wife beater, had been shot to death in June by his wife, Margie, shortly after the police had been called in on one of their many domestic abuse calls. He was survived by aforementioned wife and a son, fourteen-year-old Liam, who had been a frequent victim of his father's drunken rages along with his mother. Margie had pled self-defense and been found innocent. Everyone knew Eddie had been a rat bastard, and most of the town felt that they should have done something before she had had to fire a .22 into his skull and leave him to bleed out over the living room rug.

"Bingo," Jake said, looking at the brief obituary. "Quiet Oaks Cemetery."

"Salt-and-burn, right?" Tobias asked.

Jake jumped in his chair and swore, and Tobias hunched back guiltily, wishing he had stayed in the reading area like Jake had meant for him to. Then Jake turned to give Tobias a wide, half-appraising, half-troubled look. His gray eyes rested on the book in Tobias's lap, then lifted back to his face.

"Toby," he started, then blew out his breath and looked back at the computer screen. "Let's talk about this in the car."

Heart hammering, Tobias returned *The Two Towers* to its shelf (he still had two or three books to read that Jake had bought, and he didn't have a library card here) and followed Jake out.

When they were on either side of the Eldorado, Jake rested his forearms on top of the car and looked Tobias straight in the eye. "Look. You don't have to do this."

Tobias looked back at him, waiting.

“I mean it,” Jake said, a little desperately now. “This is what I do, yeah—but even though you’re with me, you don’t gotta do it. Even in a basic salt-and-burn, there can be a hell of a lot of danger, and even experienced hunters can crack their walnut open on a gravestone. Nothing says you have to do this, okay? I won’t be mad—hell, I’d be impressed you’ve got the brains not to jump into this. It won’t change *us*, all right? I’ve taken on a hell of a lot worse cases on my own.”

Tobias rested his arms and chest against the warm metal. He didn’t break Jake’s gaze, even as he wondered about the fierce earnestness in Jake’s face. It didn’t sound like Jake was saying he didn’t want him to come along (freaks mess things up, after all, he could be a hazard), and Tobias wanted to go. He had to, because if Jake was going into danger, if Jake was risking his life and limb even on one of the easy hunts, Tobias wanted to be right there with him.

“I don’t want to be left behind,” he said at last. “I know I don’t have to. I believe you. But I want to come along, Jake. I can help you dig, I can—help watch your back.” *I can protect you*, he didn’t say, because Jake was a hunter; he had been protecting himself for years, and he didn’t need a monster, no matter how devoted, watching his back. But Tobias wanted that very, very much. He took a steadying breath. “I know it can be dangerous, but—I’m not scared.”

Jake leaned back, taking in Tobias’s words and expression. At last, he nodded. A little grimly, not looking quite happy about it, but accepting. “Okay. If that’s what you want to do, Toby. I’d be glad for another pair of eyes.”

“Okay,” Tobias said, and smiled before opening the door and sliding with Jake into the Eldorado.



By the time they were getting ready to leave for the cemetery, Jake had had enough time to recapture all his nerves—even though Tobias showed none whatsoever, despite the close eye Jake kept on him. The kid had been far more nervous at the

raucous sports bar where they had had dinner last week. Now, after he finished gathering everything Jake listed, he sat on the other bed and waited expectantly.

“So technically, we can walk into the nearest sheriff’s office, flip out my ID, and they’d give us whatever excavating equipment we like,” Jake told him. “They’d even loan us the people to use it, and we could sit back in lawn chairs and drink rum and Coke with those little umbrellas while they do the heavy lifting. A lot of hunters take that route. But that’s because they’re not just lazy asses, but melonheads. You do something flashy like that, call in the cops and the coroner, and it spooks the locals and sends up the supernatural equivalent of a signal flare for miles around that hunters are here. And if you don’t get the right spirit, or there’s an unexpected sequel, then every nasty in the area has the advantage. So my old ma—Hawthornes do it the old-fashioned way: late at night, by hand, privately, and if anyone comes bothering, *then* you flash the badge.”

Tobias nodded. Jake picked up his shotgun, checking the chamber automatically before counting out ammo shells, until a new concern stopped him. He held up the shotgun, turning to Tobias. “You know how to use one of these?”

Tobias blinked at him. “No, Jake.”

Jake’s brain tripped over and then reset. Yeah, he was an idiot. When would it have ever been safe or logical for Tobias to have learned how to shoot a gun? Maybe that just went to show how rarely Jake thought of him as a civilian, how he trusted him like he’d only ever trusted Dad and Dad’s friends. “Yeah, it’s loaded with rock salt,” he said. “Good for sending ghosts packing. I should show you how to shoot. But not tonight. Tonight, I want to get this bastard before he does anything to that kid. You can remind me later.”

“Sure, Jake,” Tobias answered, but if he’d said it with a little less enthusiasm, Jake would have had to check for his pulse. Jake figured he’d have to remember to give the gun lesson and a few other self-defense basics by himself.

Security at the cemetery was nonexistent, and if there were any angry spirits around, they stayed the hell away. Tobias was new to shovel work, but Jake showed him a few tricks to break up the ground—damn lucky it wasn't the middle of winter, frozen earth was always a *bitch*—and Tobias set in with energy. Jake rested the gun on the edge of the tombstone where he could snatch it up in a second, and with two people digging, they got to the coffin in near record time. After that it was routine, Tobias scattering the salt like he'd done it a hundred times before, Jake dumping gasoline over the casket like shitake sauce and throwing in a cheap lighter.

The fire roared up at once, flames flashing blue before settling into the usual yellow-orange, and Jake glanced at Tobias's face in the fire's light. He stood with the handle of the shovel clasped between his hands, absorbed by watching the flames, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead despite the cool early October night. He'd taken to the night's work more naturally than anything he'd yet done in the real world, Jake realized. The thought twisted something funny inside him, and Jake couldn't tell if it was good or bad.

"You did good," Jake said at last. That was a pretty shitty summary for how awesome Tobias had been, but it wasn't like Jake had the words for that either. "Seriously. Don't know if any other sixteen-year-old could keep his cool handling his first salt-and-burn."

Toby smiled, and it lit up his whole face like an internal fire, transforming him from the frightened kid he usually was into someone far more confident. Someone Jake hadn't seen before.

His blood beat against his skin from the exhilaration of the work, the fire, and he had the sudden, irrational urge to walk around the cheerfully crackling grave, grab Tobias, and—

What? What the fuck?

Jake blinked several times, staring intensely at the flames until his eyes burned. Finally, he said, "I think the show's over. Might as well fill it back in."

The work went fast. Given how abandoned the cemetery felt (what, had the family gotten a discount by moving to the least popular boneyard?), and the unlikely odds of a remorseful widow showing up with flowers, no one might even know about this round of grave desecration.

But somehow, even after they'd packed away the shovels, Jake couldn't start the car right away. Something niggled at the back of his mind, but the harder he tried to grab at it, the faster it slipped away. He sat, scowling at the high cemetery walls, until Tobias glanced at him.

"Seemed too easy," Jake muttered, not sure if it was an apology or an explanation. "Think we missed something? Could the guy have left something else behind?"

Tobias considered. "There was a lot of blood," he said quietly. "You could see it in the first newsprint photos they pulled because it showed too much of the corpse. And the floors were wood and fairly battered. That kind of surface makes it hard to get blood out if it soaks in."

"Yeah," Jake said, finally sliding the key into the ignition. "I think we better check that out. Let's go over to the widow's—shit, I didn't write down the address. Well, fuck, it's a small town, probably anybody we ask knows where she—"

"611 Sycamore," Tobias said. Jake stared at him, and Tobias smiled again, ducking his head. "I saw it on one of the r-reports you were looking at. And I brought a town map. The sign in the motel said they were free." He pulled it out of the side pocket of the door.

"Damn," Jake said, poleaxed for the second time that night. "Now you're making *me* feel like a rookie."

With Tobias navigating from the map, they reached Sycamore Street fifteen minutes later. They had no trouble finding house number 611: only one had the living room lights not only on, but flickering like a disco, and screams—a woman's, part anger, part terror, part despair—breaking into the night like a brick through shattering glass.

Shit. Talk about Hawthorne timing.



The Eldorado had barely stopped—Jake hit the brakes hard enough to throw Tobias forward into his seat belt, the flat edge cutting into his neck—before Jake grabbed salt and the shotgun from the backseat and bolted for the house. “Stay here!” he shouted over his shoulder, then ran toward the screaming without another look back.

Tobias froze, eyes locked on Jake’s back. He could hear a younger voice now too, probably the son, Liam, screaming, “You let her fucking go! You let her go!” But even those screams, clear enough that Tobias could understand the words, were overwhelmed by a man’s deep, spectral, half-mad laughter.

When Jake reached the door, he barely broke his stride to kick it in.

Tobias had always known that Jake ran into danger fearlessly, without hesitation. Even without his stories about casually risking their necks against vampire nests and in spilled-beer bar fights, Tobias would have known that someone as good and brave and determined as Jake wouldn’t flinch from a threat.

It only took Tobias half a second (during which his hands were already unlocking his seat belt and reaching for the door handle) to realize he would follow him, always.

When Tobias rushed through the broken door, he was in time to see that Jake had just fired on the ghost point-blank, scattering his ectoplasmic form into sickly green motes of light, while the widow, Margie, blinked up at him, arms wrapped around her son. She was so far in shock that when Dead Eddie flickered back into view behind Jake, her eyes didn’t even track him, didn’t give Jake even that much of a warning before the spirit slammed him into the wall with one energy-ridden punch.

Dead Eddie went in for the kill, the heavy ring on his right hand morphing into something like a claw as he pulled back his fist, a nasty smile curling his lip, and Tobias didn’t have

time to slow down. He grabbed the iron poker from the scattered remains of the fireplace.

Too hard a swing would unbalance him; too easy would give the ghost time to dodge the blow and go on the offensive. Tobias weighted it just right to swing it through the ghost's head, and the ghost fragmented as the cold iron passed through his insubstantial skull.

Jake had pulled himself to his knees, dragging the shotgun onto his lap, ready for the next attack. Tobias glanced down at him just as Eddie vanished while he shifted the poker to a more comfortable grip. Jake could have been angry or want Tobias ready in a particular spot—he'd told him to stay, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have an idea of how best to use Tobias now that he had disobeyed—but what he saw in Jake's face made him almost drop his weapon in surprise.

Relief, gratitude, and amazement shone from his eyes. And when he saw the weapon in Tobias's hand, he only smiled wider.

Tobias looked away quickly, his heart beating fast. No one had ever looked at him like that before, and he didn't know exactly what it meant, but he was sure at the very least that Jake was glad and not angry that Tobias had disobeyed him. It had never felt good before to break the rules. He was shaking from that look, from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes, and that had nothing to do with fear.

He was almost thankful for the distraction when Eddie reappeared, sliding his hamlike hands around Margie's neck and squeezing. Liam shouted and began beating at his father's ghostly grip. His hands, flying straight through the ghost, only ended up striking his mother again and again while the monster grinned until his mouth was impossibly wide with laughter.

Tobias had never been allowed actual weapons at FREACS, but he had practiced this lunge at least a few hundred times. The poker slid through the ghost's chest, missing Margie's cheek by bare inches.

“Holy shit, tiger,” Jake said, twisting the cap off the lighter fluid he carried in his back pocket. “Can you hold the bastard off while I torch the floor?”

“Yeah.” Tobias caught movement out of the corner of his eye and spun, slicing the ghost through the legs before he could fully materialize.

Jake dumped the fluid, premixed with salt, liberally over the floor and then pulled out his backup lighter.

The ghost snarled and dove at Jake, shrieking like an enraged banshee, sweeping up picture frames, lamps, and books that followed his charge like broken boats drawn after a tidal wave.

There wasn't room to get the poker up, not without hitting either Jake or the civilians. Tobias threw himself between Jake and the monster without a second thought. If his death could save these civilians, if it could save Jake, then it was utterly and unquestionably worth it.

Eddie's ugly grin was wide enough that Tobias could see his cracked, yellowing molars splitting and sharpening, like he was a shark that could erupt new teeth. Tobias gasped at the impact of the ghost's hands, first over and then *into* his chest—burning cold inside him like being half-drowned in ice water, clawing at muscles and nerves, not just lungs, passing through his essence, searching for his staccato heart.

The fingers found what they were looking for, locked through the lattice of his ribs, and *closed*. Tobias shut his eyes.

And then Jake lit the bastard up.

Heat flamed against his chest, warmth flooding him like feeling coming back into hands bruised and burning from the cold. He opened his eyes in time to see Eddie scream one last time, crinkle like wax paper held to a flame, and disappear.

For a second Tobias hung in space, neither warm nor cold, not up or down. Just as he realized that he was tilting, that he wouldn't be able to balance himself, strong arms wrapped around his waist, a warm chest braced his back, bringing him back to balance.

“Toby, you okay?” Jake tucked his head toward Tobias’s ear, and Tobias could hear the worry in his voice, could feel the tension in his arms.

“I’m fine,” Tobias said, ready to be dropped. He was safe, he was fine, and Jake didn’t need to stay just because Tobias would feel cold again without Jake wrapped around him.

To his shock, Jake’s hands tightened. He took a deep breath, right where Tobias’s neck and shoulder met. “You did great,” Jake said. “I mean it, you were a goddamn *tiger*. And I’m fucking glad that bastard—”

“Jake, the fire,” Tobias said. Flames were clawing their way through the center of Margie Womsley’s home.

“Shit. Yeah.” Jake let go and stepped away from him. That was different, utterly different from being pushed away. Tobias shivered slightly, but it wasn’t something bad. “Yeah.”

Jake dragged an already ragged curtain down from its broken rod and began stamping on the fire while the civilians huddled together and watched with wide eyes. Letting out a long breath, Tobias finally relaxed his grip on the poker.



The house was old, the wood dry enough to light up from a cigarette ad, but they managed to stamp out the fire before it did more than burn away the bloodstain that was Dead Eddie’s last physical tie to the world.

The widow and the kid were shaken but grateful. Jake was just glad they were still breathing and the bastard hadn’t managed to strangle them to death before they arrived. The fact that they weren’t screaming or telling him and Tobias to get the hell out of their house before they called the cops was the icing on the cake. Lifesaving heroics and ASC badge aside, civvies didn’t always have the best reaction to their first brush with the supernatural and those chasing it down. It was always a pain when they had to run like hell after a job because some shell-shocked civilian wouldn’t believe that they’d been trying to save their asses.

When I have to run like hell, Jake corrected himself. Sure, it might be him and Tobias now, but he hadn't even asked him if once was enough, hadn't made sure that the grin on Tobias's face when Dead Eddie turned into charcoal hadn't been some kind of nervous tic. Too soon to tell, too soon to start picking out curtains. Though the widow would have to do that soon, given the mess they had made putting out the fire.

"Thank you," Margie said again, one hand on Jake's arm, the other on Tobias's. "God, I mean, I can't thank you enough. When I saw him, and he was the same and going for Liam like he always—I couldn't . . . I thought I'd . . . and then he . . . God, thank you."

Tobias looked nervously at her hand on his arm, but he wasn't bolting, twitching, or looking like he expected her to hit him, so Jake could concentrate on projecting a hundred percent confidence and shooting the widow a cocky—and, because they'd won, reassuring—grin.

"Just part of the job," Jake assured her. "No trouble at all. Sorry we were late, had a little digging to deal with on the other side of town."

She gave him a tight smile. "Should have scrubbed that damn floor long before this. It's just . . . easier to throw a rug over things sometimes than to *deal* with them, like I didn't know that comes back to punch you in the face." Her laugh wasn't quite stable. "Maybe you shouldn't have put out that damn fire. We're not staying here, not . . . no more."

Jake glanced at the kid, Liam, but he just looked relieved.

"Well, that's why we're here. Helping people, hunting evil since 1980. You can call the ASC hotline or your local law enforcement if you need anything else. But honestly, my advice is that you first get some friends or family to come pick you up tonight. Don't hang around, and don't be alone." Maybe some help like that would have taken care of her rat bastard husband before he had to die twice.

Jake kept the smile on his face all the way out the door and to the Eldorado, one hand on the small of Tobias's back to

make sure he was with him, and then burned rubber out of there.

About four miles out of town, after easing his speed to a respectable five over—the Eldorado deserved to go fast, but moderation kept the cops too bored to bother him—he glanced over to Tobias to see how he was taking it.

Tobias grinned at him, meeting his eyes easily and without hesitation. “We burned that bastard,” he said, and Jake heard the same deep satisfaction in Tobias’s voice that he felt every time he took a supernatural scumbag off the streets.

“Hell yeah we did,” Jake agreed. “You were smokin’ in there. The way you handled that poker, just unbelievable. Wanna do it again sometime?” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and then stopped short when he realized it sounded like he was flirting. With Tobias. That was against all the rules.

But Tobias was still grinning, his face shining in a combination of relief, hope, and sheer energy. “Can we?”

No matter how good this moment was right now, the prospect of jumping down that road still made Jake pause. Some of that must have shown on his face, because Tobias’s eyes dropped and his hands slid between his knees. Jake could see him pulling himself together, fighting down the rush, and he hated that, but the buzz from the hunt was strong enough that he didn’t immediately feel the need to punch something. He could think about what Tobias needed instead of just how angry it made him that Tobias was still so afraid to admit what he wanted.

“I l-l-liked it,” Tobias said in a rush, not looking at him, words starting out strong and fading almost to a whisper. “I l-l-liked helping you and being useful and . . . and it was g-good. Seeing something . . . *evil* and s-stopping it. That felt good. I’ve never felt good after a fight before.”

Jake wondered who Tobias had been fighting, how much he hurt them, what they had done to deserve it—because any asshole in a fight with Tobias deserved what was coming to him, in Jake’s book. “If you’re sure,” he said slowly, “we

could stop those bastards together. You know, as a team. As Hawthornes.”

Jake would never forgive himself if anything ever happened to Tobias, but he was going to teach him how to hunt anyway, even though it was a fucked-up life that sane, well-balanced people should avoid if they wanted to stay that way. He would teach Tobias how to be a hunter because he had asked and because Jake wanted that too. More than anything, he wanted a life with Tobias, but hunting was the only life that Jake had.

He'd have changed for Tobias. He'd have tried, at least. But now Tobias had asked. And had actually run after him to kill a ghost. That was a good start, and more choice than Jake had ever had.

Tobias watched him, hazel eyes wide. “Really?”

“You were awesome, Toby,” Jake said. “You can watch my back any day.”



After running into the house, Tobias's constant worry about disappointing Jake vanished. Any thought but *Keep the ghost off Jake* and *Protect the civilians* was completely buried, and for the first time in a long time, he wasn't afraid of anything. Not of the reals, not that Jake would find him useless, not about anything but that the ghost would get close enough to hurt Jake—though even then, in the back of his mind, Tobias hadn't really believed that Jake would get hurt. Because he was Jake.

It had felt good, not being afraid. To have a purpose and be truly useful for maybe the first time in his life. He had killed things before, destroyed things, hurt things, been hurt, been afraid, had even helped other monsters (*Don't think about Kayla, you can't help her now, you need to keep yourself together, need to be good for Jake*), but never before had he been able to look in the eyes of a real woman and a child and know that he had helped remove some of that fear from their lives.

He hadn't even been terrified that because they were real, they might find out he was a monster too. He had helped them because he had made the choice to run after Jake. The woman had touched him on the shoulder and smiled at him—a stress-panicked smile, like Kayla's after a fight or one vampire's to another, but a smile anyway—and the boy had just looked at them, and Tobias had known that they were grateful because he'd done something good, he'd saved them.

And then he had asked Jake to let him help him. To help him save people. Even asking him hadn't been difficult when adrenaline pumped through his veins.

A yes would have kept him high for the rest of the day, would have been the best thing anyone had ever said to him.

But Jake had looked at him, gray eyes bright and charming and sweet, and had smiled the smile that made Tobias's heart beat too fast and him flush from ears to fingertips. *You can watch my back any day*, Jake had said.

Mile after mile flew past, and Tobias was almost too happy to breathe, warm and dizzy (*God, I would do anything for you, but if you smiled at me, nothing could possibly hurt*). For a moment that could stretch into infinity, everything in the world was good.



“So, I've been thinking. If we're gonna do this thing, we're gonna do it right.”

Tobias gave Jake a quizzical look, his fork speared into the center of three syrup-soaked waffles. “This thing is . . . hunting?”

“Yeah. I mean.” Jake swallowed, made a vague gesture with his nearly empty coffee mug. “If you still got any interest in doing it again. I'd understand if it's . . . well, not something you really want to make a habit.”

Toby watched him, eyes sharp. He looked like he was trying to pick the words apart, searching for some meaning

hidden within them. “I want to help you,” he said at last, slowly, like he wasn’t sure where the problem was.

“But you don’t gotta—” Jake glanced around, lowered his voice. “There’s lots of ways you can help, you know? Researching, watching the Eldorado . . . I don’t know, holding down the fort and stuff. You don’t gotta be on the front lines.”

Tobias’s brow knit, but his hazel eyes never left Jake’s face. A couple of months ago, Jake wouldn’t have bet money that Toby could hold his gaze. Now he wasn’t sure which of them would look away first, at least not in a conversation like this. “I don’t want to stay behind. I’m not scared. And I can help you. You said I d-did the other night.”

“Yeah.” Jake couldn’t stop the grin on his face. He looked away, tried to take a swig of coffee, and realized there wasn’t anything left in his mug. “You rocked that joint. Badass out of nowhere, right when that bastard was gonna—but you don’t need to keep throwing yourself at the baddies, you know that, right? I’m real proud, but it’s dangerous and you don’t have to . . . You get what I’m saying?”

Tobias nodded slowly. “Yes, Jake. You’ve been saying it a lot.”

“Right,” he said, and poured himself more coffee. “Guess I have. It’s just really, really, *really* important to me that you know that.”

Tobias took a small bite of waffle and studied him. “Are we going to be hunting more now?”

“Well.” Jake took a deep breath. “Guess it matters what comes up. Dunno how much I’ll be looking for cases. My calendar is full up just showing off all the wacky corners of the USA to you, but if something’s just there . . . Hunting is kinda what I *do*.”

“Of course. It always has been.” Tobias sounded dismissively impatient, like Jake was stupid to point out something so obvious, like his hunting was a fact of the universe.

Jake had a sudden picture of himself, standing with his feet apart in the Freak Camp yard, telling the small boy crouched in front of him that he was an honest-to-God hunter. For a second, he thought his breakfast might surge back up.

“You shouldn’t have stopped,” Tobias said, frowning again. “N-not for me. So it’s good for you to start again. And I want to help you.” That *want* carried the slightest emphasis—Jake figured that in anyone else’s voice that would have been a hint, a pointed remark, but in Toby’s soft, quiet voice, it was a declaration of independence and strength. *I’m finally telling you what I want, just like you ask me to every day. Listen.*

“Okay,” Jake said, and this time didn’t try to hide his grin. “But we gotta do it right.”

Toby looked at him half-quizzically, but no way was Jake going to start talking about hardcore training and ghost ganking in public. Instead, he asked, “How you like those Frosted Flakes?” He kept being caught off guard by all the things Toby had never encountered before, all the things Jake couldn’t wait to get in front of him.

Toby glanced down at his cereal and smiled, suddenly and genuinely. “They’re great.” As Jake started to laugh, his smile faded. “What?”

“No, no—it’s not—” Jake was almost starting to wheeze, which was a problem: he had to get enough breath to tell Toby he wasn’t laughing at him. He reached across the table to take his hand in a warm grip, then finally said, “Toby the Tiger. That’s exactly what he says. You’re a tiger for real.”

Toby still looked baffled, though less worried, and finally Jake got it together to explain cereal mascots, and even when he remembered that maybe the tiger was named Tony and not Toby, it didn’t matter. His Toby was Toby the Tiger, now and forever.

When they got back to the motel, Jake sobered on the idea of them actually hunting together as a team. He spun a chair around to face Tobias, who sat on the edge of the bed, and launched into the mission overview.

“Before we step foot into another graveyard, you’re gonna be a ghost-blasting Schwarzenegger. I’m gonna teach you how to handle a gun, a flamethrower, a Taser, and every kind of blade I’ve got in the Eldorado. You’ll learn how to take guns apart and put them back together and how to load, clean, wear, and handle them like they’re attached to your own hands. Hesitation can lose you a finger or a major organ in this business, even your head if you’re not lucky, so you’ve gotta get to the point where there’s less than a heartbeat between thought and action, maybe a millisecond to choose between fight, flight, and freeze. And there’s no way in hell I’m gonna take you out to face some ugly-ass fang-face with an unhinging jaw or whatever else we meet unless you’re totally prepared. Got that, Toby? I didn’t get you out of Freak Camp to see you cut down by some asshole you could have put in the ground. Or any asshole, period.”

Tobias gave a quick nod, hands clasped together over his knees. “I understand, Jake.”

“Good.” Jake sat back, relaxing a fraction. “Good. We’ll also cover first aid, the whole works—or at least what I know, which would probably make a med student order a double brandy—until you can recite the hundred most common supernatural poisons and their cures backwards and forwards, wrap up a gash, and treat a concussion. We aren’t taking another hunt until you can do that too.” Tobias nodded again. Jake chewed on the inside of his cheek, wondering what else he needed to cover. “I guess you didn’t get much PT in camp?”

“PT?” Tobias repeated, a tentative question.

“Physical training.”

Tobias’s shoulders stiffened, his eyes dropping as a familiar blankness shuttered over his face. After a beat, some signs of life came back into him, but he still seemed stiff, a little off, and didn’t meet Jake’s eyes. “W-what kind of physical training?” he asked quietly.

Jake took a moment to lock down the surge of anger. The image of Toby’s scarred back flashed across his mind as clear

as though it were bared again before him in the light of day. His stomach flipped, a second sick roil that threatened to expel the recent pancakes at the thought of the kind of “physical training” Tobias had experienced.

It was a miracle, frankly, that Tobias didn’t look afraid. Cautious, uncertain, yes, but not terrified. Jake could almost believe that Tobias knew Jake hadn’t meant anything he’d experienced before. But the nausea and disgust in his own stomach made him take a long moment just to ensure his voice would be steady, calm. “Like running. Push-ups. Stuff to improve endurance and strength.”

Tobias’s eyes flickered back up to him. “No, we didn’t have anything like that.”

Jake nodded, not surprised. “Well, we’ll start a routine, light at first. I’m not gonna push you too hard; we’ll see where we can start. You gotta tell me if you start to feel dizzy or you need a break, okay? Always, no matter what we’re doing. I’m not gonna be angry, even if we’re stopping for a snack break every five minutes and you can’t get more than ten feet without a breather. Only way I’d be upset is if you end up collapsing and I have to carry you back after flipping my shit because you didn’t say anything beforehand.” He quickly added, “But I won’t be angry at *you*.”

A too-rare smile flitted across Toby’s face. “Okay, Jake.”

“Good. Excellent.” Jake reached across to rub Tobias’s hand, looking him straight in the eyes. “I don’t ever want to see you hurt, got that? That’s the point. If you’re gonna be hunting with me, if you really want to do that, there’ll always be danger, and we’re gonna pick up bumps and bruises and stitches. But hopefully, if we’re a team, and I watch out for you and you watch out for me, we’ll keep ourselves in one piece.”

Toby’s smile widened the way that made Jake’s heart double-thump, and he turned his hand over, catching Jake’s fingers with his own. “Sounds good to me.”

Jake had always figured Toby was a tough kid, someone who could walk through hell and come out with the same

strong, white-knuckled grip on his life and his sanity—he'd survived FREACS, and if that wasn't hell, Jake didn't know what was—but when they actually started Tobias's endurance workouts, Jake was floored. The kid still looked like skin and bone, like he didn't have any muscle or fat. Even after months and months of regular meals, the lines of his shoulder blades still pushed up like wings through every T-shirt. He said he hadn't had any experience, but when Jake started them off light with half-mile runs, push-ups and sit-ups in increments of five, Tobias didn't get winded, rarely got tired, turning to him expectantly every time Jake tried to slow down, as though to say *Is that all?* Jake tried not to think about Tobias's other "physical training," but he supposed it had given him a different kind of endurance.

Tobias had promised to warn him the second it felt like too much, but Jake kept an eagle eye on him anyway. He didn't doubt Tobias's promise for a second, but he wasn't sure if Tobias would notice his own limits before he keeled over on a run. So they ran, stopping often, guzzling water and Gatorade so frequently that they almost needed a bathroom more often than a breather.

Tobias's speed at learning weaponry made Jake repeat his standard compliments so many times, increasing each time in fervency and admiration, that Tobias flushed redder from embarrassment than exertion. Tobias paid precise attention as Jake first explained all the parts and functions of the various firearms he kept in the trunk, then showed him basic safety procedures for using, carrying, and storing them. Tobias repeated everything exactly without a single deviation and remembered the steps better than Jake did sometimes; sure, some things became instinct after a while, but it wasn't like he always did things in the same order or thought about them the same way, so sue him. When they actually went out to shoot some shit (empty beer cans on a fence and a license plate that would get him arrested for burglary in four states and grave desecration in another three), it took Tobias a few tries to adjust for the recoil and weight of the gun, but pretty soon he was reloading and shooting nearly as fast and accurately as Jake.

It was seriously badass. Jake told him so at length and with enthusiasm until Tobias was ducking his head to hide his grin and red cheeks.

He learned first aid even quicker, absorbing the information as fast as Jake chowed down cheeseburgers, with the kind of brainy osmosis Jake wished he had in school. After so many warnings about how there were no deadlines for Tobias to learn anything, that any training they did was at his own pace, Jake found himself struggling to think of things to teach, ways to present the lessons of a lifetime in a compressed form that Tobias would understand without having lived it. Tobias's comprehension, even on days when Jake had to struggle through an explanation, was impressive to the point of unnerving.

Jake knew only one area Tobias wasn't ready for yet, and that was sparring with him. He wanted to see what Tobias was capable of when it came to hand-to-hand combat, especially after what he'd seen of Tobias's quick reflexes—his moves with that poker had been gorgeous, a work of art, an engine in motion—but even his tentative suggestion that Tobias could practice sparring against him brought the worst kind of blind panic to Tobias's eyes, as though Jake had suggested he whip the skin off his own back and look happy about it. Jake wasn't such an idiot that he thought Tobias would be capable of raising his hand against him in any way, no matter how lightly or playfully. So that was one project for the back burner, and in the meantime, Jake would just have to hope they didn't end up in a bind where Tobias would need the serious hand-to-hand.

There were more literal kind of binds too, and those Jake didn't want to put off until they came back to bite them in the ass. Jake had grown up fiddling with knots and lockpicks and handcuffs, Leon routinely timing him on old and new combinations. It had been a game, though Jake supposed most kids didn't get handcuffed to a radiator with five minutes to uncuff themselves, find the hidden weapon, escape the room, and rendezvous at the Eldorado in time to get their McDonald's bag while the fries were still hot.

He didn't kid himself that he could make those lessons fun for Tobias. Took him ages—way after he'd figured out how to bring up tourniquets and knife throwing in the least threatening way possible—to even think about how he would introduce Tobias to a pair of handcuffs. He began slowly, teaching Tobias different knots, just a length of rope wrapped round the arm and back of a chair, around door handles and hotel luggage stands. Tobias handled the rope cautiously, letting it rest between his fingertips, but he was precise and quick with Jake's orders. Jake had counted on that, but he tried not to think about it; he was only teaching Tobias what was good for him and what was important to know in this line of work, what would make him stronger and keep him alive.

He had never yet wrapped the rope around his own wrists or Tobias's. Handcuffs were easier, less claustrophobic—they'd start there.

Jake began with a roundabout conversation about cops. He could admit to himself, if not always to anyone else, that he might have a bit of a prejudice against legal law enforcement professionals (fucking amateurs in the field, complete mess when a ghost showed up, and complete *douches* if you asked his opinion, which no one did because they'd all heard it before), so Tobias had probably heard him talk about cops at length previously. Maybe not about what they were actually, technically supposed to do, but instead about Jake's personal experiences with law enforcement, minus the actual examples of him getting grabbed when he was a kid and Dad ending up with a bullet in his shoulder after a job went wrong. Jake tried to focus on the practicalities, the ways not to piss off authority figures, to play nice and go slow and easy. And sure, maybe Jake didn't follow his own advice there, and maybe he tended to get even mouthier than usual when presented with someone who thought they knew all the answers but was really neck-deep in shit he didn't understand. But Tobias didn't need to be harassed just because he followed Jake's questionable example, which was always more for the sake of making a point and following up on decade-old indignities anyway.

“Cops always got the same basic set of tools. A radio, a nightstick, a gun in a holster, sometimes a Taser, and a pair of

handcuffs.” Jake pointed to each item as he named it: the gun, Taser, and nightstick on the bed, then the clock radio on the bedside table because he hadn’t thought to get a walkie-talkie out of the Eldorado. He drew the handcuffs out of his duffel last, setting them on the table between them, and Tobias looked at them. His poker face was on, had been for most of the conversation aside from a twitch of his eyelids when Jake had mentioned the nightstick. Jake had experience with Tobias’s poker faces—they were some of the best he’d ever seen on anyone, including Leon—and he could almost be certain when it was a thin veneer before sheer terror. They weren’t quite there yet.

“These aren’t so bad.” Jake picked up the handcuffs, twirling them around his index finger. “Way easier than rope. You can pick ’em with just about anything, maybe even a blade of grass if it’s stiff enough. Though a paper clip’s a lot easier.” He held up one from his pocket, then slid it across to Tobias. “Go ahead and unbend it.”

Tobias picked it up, and his fingers shook slightly as they straightened out the paper clip. Jake took it back and showed Tobias how to insert the tip into the lock, how to jiggle and twist, until the cuffs snapped open.

“Piece of cake,” he said, and snapped them shut again. “Wanna give ’em a try?”

Tobias drew a deep, slow breath, rubbed his palms on his jeans, and took the cuffs and paper clip from Jake. His hands were definitely shaking now, and it took him a few seconds to even get the bit of metal into the hole. Watching, Jake made an effort not to hold his breath—like that would help at all—and fought the urge to snatch the cuffs back and save Tobias the agony. Instead, he offered a few careful bits of advice, trying to strike a balance between putting Tobias at ease and not distracting him. It took Tobias over a minute, and when the cuffs did snap open, he released a breath and pulled back in his chair, rubbing his palms again on his jeans as though the metal had burned him.

Jake swept the cuffs back into his bag, then reached across the empty table for Toby’s hands. After a moment, Tobias

placed his hands in Jake's.

“Hey,” Jake said. “You okay?” Stupid-ass question, like Jake didn't have eyes to see or hadn't learned a damn thing over these last months. Sometimes it felt like he hadn't, like every tip or tool he'd picked up to help Toby cope was nothing but a plastic Cracker Jack prize. But he hoped Toby knew what this meant.

Tobias nodded, though he didn't quite meet Jake's gaze.

“That's all we're gonna do today, all right? It'll get easier. You know how cops use 'em, and it's just—it happens sometimes. Hunters rub cops the wrong ways, tend to walk over some polished, official toes. So sometimes, guys like us find ourselves in a police station cuffed to some asswipe's desk, and meanwhile there's a pissed-off spirit bulldozing a house and terrifying the neighbors. You don't have time to explain and fill out eight pages of paperwork. So you gotta slip out the cuffs, crack a window, and shimmy down a drain pipe.”

Tobias swallowed, still not meeting Jake's eyes. His fingers trembled in Jake's, his grip loose to the point of nonexistence, just *there*.

“Hey,” Jake said, quieter. “Can you tell me?”

Tobias drew in and released another breath, not quite steady. “It's just,” he said, so softly, “in—back there. If, if a freak tried to get out of anything—” He shut his eyes and shook his head quickly.

Jake tightened his hands around Tobias's. They hadn't had many of these conversations; what had gone down in FREACS was still untested ground. The fact that Tobias even volunteered this much set Jake's heart thrumming with adrenaline. “What would happen, Tobias?”

Tobias didn't look at him, eyes shut hard, face turned away as though stinging from a blow. “Lose a hand,” he whispered, barely audible.

Jake sucked in his breath, squeezing Tobias's hands until he realized his nails could probably cut straight through

Tobias's skin and he would never so much as whimper. He let go abruptly but didn't have the heart to actually stop touching Tobias, to stop trying to offer some kind of comfort for all the fucked-up years when Jake hadn't saved him. Instead, he rubbed at Tobias's palms and swore a low, steady stream of invectives. It was soothing, he hoped.

"That's not how it works here," he said at last, when he was ready to try sentences again. "No one—no cop, or bureaucrat or smug-ass sheriff, *no one*—is allowed to do that, no matter what the fuck is going on. The possibility isn't even on the books, and fuckwads don't walk around with people-axes. That won't happen to you, okay, Toby?"

Tobias nodded jerkily. He still hadn't opened his eyes.

"Yeah, well, always carry a couple paper clips on you, all right? It's a good rule of thumb for making like Houdini, and you never know when you'll actually have to clip papers together. You don't believe me, let me tell you about Tulsa sometime, that was one hell of a weird case. But we'll keep working on this whenever you're up for it, and pretty soon you'll be picking locks in your sleep, and wasn't that fun for Leon when I was a kid." Jake reached out for Toby's face, stroking his cheek, wishing he would look back at him. "You still with me?"

Tobias turned his head, even without the pressure of Jake's hands, and opened his eyes. They were sad and shrouded with pain, but just the fact that Tobias was looking at him sent a rush of relief through Jake. And then when Tobias smiled, wobbly as it was, there was no fucking question that the Hawthornes were on the top of the world.

It was slow going, weeks and weeks of practice and training and talking and eating, crappy TV and driving through mountain ranges and forests. They discussed the principles of questioning people, and they started taking tiny jobs: the sorts of things that, to Jake's practiced eye, looked more weird than supernatural. Tobias gradually grew more comfortable with people and the idea of interviewing. Even when he stayed silent behind Jake, taking notes and not really offering an opinion even when they returned to the hotel, he counted it a

win every time Tobias could be around people and keep breathing.

But meanwhile, something started itching uncomfortably at Jake, like a spot he didn't dare try to reach while going toe to toe with a wendigo. It might have started when they'd driven past a billboard for a missing child. Nothing special about it, just the usual muted tragedy of the kid's smiling school photo and outdated haircut, but Jake had felt uneasy the rest of the day.

Then over lunch Toby told him about the latest book he was reading, *The Last Unicorn*, and as soon as they shut the doors back inside the Eldorado, the words finally burst from Jake.

"We could, you know—try to figure out where you came from. That's what the internet's for. Not just solving our kind of hunts. It could help you find any family you want to go back to."

He couldn't meet Toby's eye, so he didn't know what his face looked like. He stared straight ahead until Toby said, his voice distant and strange, "What?"

Jake swallowed, gripping the steering wheel for something to hold on to. "It's just—something you should think about. Because you can. I didn't just get you out of that hellhole to keep you to myself. I mean, I know I gave you my name, but it's—not the only name you got. You had another one, you know, before. And I—I'll help you find out what it was, and where you came from, and whatever family you've got. Whenever you want." It hurt worse than it should have to say those words, and Jake hated himself for it.

Then Tobias said, "Jake," in an uneven tone, and Jake's head snapped to him.

Toby's hazel eyes were wide and fixed unwaveringly on him, his face pale, but he didn't look like he was on the verge of a panic attack. His expression was more like Jake had pulled a gun on him, and it seized the breath in Jake's chest.

Slowly, Toby said, "Do you . . . want me to leave?"

“No,” Jake said at once. “No, no, that’s not what I meant —”

“Are you s-sorry”—Toby swallowed hard, the words sounding jagged in his throat—“you gave me this name? Do you want me to have a different one?”

“No, that’s not it. Fuck, Toby. It’s not about me, okay? I mean, yes, that’s what I wanted—to get you out and have you with me and call you a Hawthorne too, so no one fucks with either of us—but that’s not all that matters here. It should be what *you* want because you’ve got a choice, and it’s not just this life stuck with me in this damn car. I know you might not want anything different today, but I just want you to know . . . any day you want something different, or you want to find out who you used to be or where you came from, some kind of home, it’s okay to look for it. That’s all I’m saying.”

Toby still looked at him like Jake had suggested gutting him with a fishhook. “Okay,” he said at last, though it did not sound okay. “And if I don’t want that? If I just want to be To-Tobias Hawthorne? If that’s r-really my name?”

“It is,” Jake said immediately. “It is, I really meant it. It’s legal and everything.”

“Then I don’t want anything else,” Toby said flatly. “I’ll tell you if that changes.”

Jake exhaled, leaning his head back against the seat rest, not sure how much worse he could’ve fucked up this conversation. “Okay. I didn’t mean—my point is just, you got a choice. It’s not just me and all this.” He waved a hand in front of him, like that could encompass their life on the road with motels, diners, and now their hunts.

“I want this,” Toby said again. “This is my choice, okay?”

Jake nodded, trying to ignore the lingering knot of guilt in him that whispered, *But he doesn’t know anything else*. It didn’t really seem like a fair choice when there wasn’t any solid alternative. Unable to stop himself, he said, “But you’ve got people out there too, you know. Probably a mom and dad

who'd do anything to get you back. Who would give you a home.”

“Jake,” Tobias said again, and Jake looked at him. “Why do you think that? Do you know something—”

“No,” Jake said quickly. “I would tell you if I knew anything.”

Toby's eyes narrowed. “So you're just imagining this. Like it's a book or a story on TV.”

Jake lifted his hands, palms out in defense. “It's not that crazy. You were a little kid when they threw you in there. You had to come from somewhere. Someone was taking care of you.”

Tobias studied him, his brow furrowed and lips compressed. Finally, he said, “There was a shapeshifter kid I knew. She remembered how she got there, unlike me. It was her grandfather who called the ASC to come get her. Her mother tried to hide her, but when her grandfather found out what she was, he made the call.” He leaned forward, holding Jake's gaze. “There's no happy story in the past, okay? The ones on TV are made-up, just like you told me.”

Jake swallowed and had to look away.

Toby went on. “You remember your mom, right? If I had anyone worth remembering, I would.”

Jake flinched. He wanted to argue because that had to be so wrong, so fucked up. How could there not be people out there who loved and missed Toby every single day, who would give anything to have him back? But it was Toby's choice. Jake had at least made the offer so Toby knew he wasn't trapped here. That was all that mattered right now.

“Okay,” he said at last. “I hear you.” Toby still studied him suspiciously, so he added, “It's up to you. I mean it. If you don't want to look, we're not gonna look.”

“Good,” Tobias said, and sat back in his seat, but it was many more miles before he opened his book again.

Chapter Five



Tobias chose East Liverpool, Ohio as their endpoint for the day. Jake often handed him the map and told him to pick a place to stop for the night. Tobias had gotten pretty good at converting inches on the map—measured by finger joints and folded roadside brochures—into hours on the road, figuring out feasible distances they could travel and still arrive before midnight when the hotels closed without Jake speeding too much down the interstate. The giddy thrill never faded over the knowledge that Jake would let him choose so much, where to point the Eldorado and where they would sleep that night.

These days, their direction and destination depended more on what rumor of a hunt they were following than on Jake's whims or Tobias's random pick. They'd only had one successful hunt since the first ghost hunt: a small-town poltergeist that had tried to make a home in an old lumber mill. They'd investigated a couple others, from a haunted restaurant to a cursed typewriter, but those cases hadn't gone anywhere. It had been both agonizing and reassuring to work on those cases, interviewing civilians (or at least, as Jake said, *Offering moral support*) with Jake, following leads and weighing evidence. Those had been some of Tobias's best days since he'd gotten out of Freak Camp. But as much as he loved everything about working with Jake and knowing that Jake cared enough to take things slow, he wanted the satisfaction of seeing a real hunt out to its conclusion, knowing they'd made an actual difference and that reals—those happy, smiling, carefree people he was getting more used to every day—were safer now because of what they'd done.

He'd thought they were on the right track with a couple other leads that looked like they could be a demon and a djinn, but Jake had muttered and made a call to Roger, then came back saying it wasn't their gig. Tobias didn't question that;

Jake knew these things better than he did, and Tobias knew that Hunter Harper had decades' more experience, but he hoped they'd find one that was their gig soon.

In the meantime, Jake told him to pick their endpoints, and Tobias stretched out the huge, battered maps, running his fingers down the thick highway lines even after he had found the right place just because he liked the look and feel of the paper under his hands, the knowledge that wherever he named, Jake would stop there because he trusted Tobias. He liked East Liverpool. The town stood at a crossroads of the Ohio River with three highways and two states, with a third state border less than ten minutes away. But he hadn't chosen the town for any of those reasons.

"It r-reminded me of this book I've been reading," Tobias told Jake over dinner, half a slice of meatloaf with gravy sprawled over his plate, forgotten in the explanation. "It's really good, the l-librarian at Joliet told me it was a classic, and it has a Liverpool too, though not in Ohio, or even the United St-states. It's about England in the 1800s, and there's a bunch of stories about two men who live and travel together and s-solve crimes, and stop bad things from happening, and save people. And they take care of each other." Feeling himself flush, Tobias dropped his gaze to his baked potato, prodding it with his fork. "Holmes is kinda h-harsh sometimes, though. To Watson and everyone else."

"Huh." Jake leaned back, stretching his arm out along the back of the booth, fingers splayed. Fleetinglly, Tobias wished he were sitting on that side, Jake's arm that close, his hand brushing Tobias's shoulder. "Isn't Holmes some kind of genius badass detective?"

"Oh, yeah. He knows everything by little clues no one else sees, so he figures out all the answers in a-advance. He doesn't tell anyone right away, though, just keeps people in suspense so he can have a big dramatic reveal at the end. He doesn't even tell Watson."

"Well, that makes him a pompous jackass. Guess I'm more of a fan of cute genius badasses who aren't totally stuck on

themselves.” Jake’s boot nudged alongside Tobias’s sneaker, a crooked smile tugging his lips.

Tobias’s face was still warm. He wasn’t sure if Jake had touched Tobias’s shoe on purpose, but he thought it might be okay to leave it, if just for a moment longer. “So, sh-should we get the pie to go? Maybe eat it later back at the motel?”

Jake grinned and waved down the waitress. Tobias felt a rush of pleasure, knowing that Jake had meant him a moment ago, knowing that Jake thought pie was a good idea. Maybe Jake liked that Tobias had made the suggestion almost as much as the idea itself. Jake liked it when he said things, offered opinions, tried to piece together the facts of a case like Sherlock Holmes did.

Maybe—just maybe—he liked Tobias in another way too. He wasn’t sure he dared to think about it; the idea was so shocking and *wrong* according to the facts of all the universe, facts everyone knew both inside and outside of Freak Camp. Other than the guards, humans never dirtied themselves by touching monsters, let alone engaged in any of the relationships he’d read about in books.

But he doesn’t see you as a freak, a voice inside him whispered.

But that didn’t matter. Did it? No, Jake would certainly find someone else, someone who deserved him, whenever he wanted to. Tobias was pretty sure that Jake already did that some nights when he went out to bars while Tobias read in the motel, but it wasn’t anyone he talked about later or wanted to see again before they left town.

He had to be imagining things, his stupid freak brain making things up like he had any right to them. Jake would be disgusted if he knew. He wouldn’t think of it again.



Jake looked up curiously from his notepad, his expression a perfect study of sincerity and concentration, almost to the point of parody. Tobias wasn’t sure what the witness thought

about the expression, but he personally believed that if he'd ever looked at a guard that way, he'd have gotten slapped at minimum. "Exactly how long have your chickens been misbehaving according to moon phases, Mr. Havers?"

Either the rules were different for reals or the farmer wasn't as good as Tobias at seeing the quiet scorn and amusement underneath Jake's tone. He answered very seriously, with a hint of confusion wrinkling his blue eyes. "Bout two months now, they's been acting funny every couple o' weeks."

"Has there been any funny stuff? Bad eggs, demonic signs, foaming at the mouth?"

"Well, there's a few bad eggs in every batch, but no, nothing else like that as I can recall. Don't want no trouble from the ASC here. Who you say you's from again?"

"*The Weekly World News*," Jake lied, making the last few marks on his legal pad. Tobias, from his secure place behind Jake's shoulder, could see that he'd taken a couple of notes, mainly about the security on the farm and the scuff marks on the chicken house—or coop? Tobias thought it was a coop, not a house, dogs had houses—and a fairly stylistic sketch of a chicken foaming at the mouth, complete with little satanic horns and a trident, possibly a pitchfork.

"My wife reads the *Weekly*," the man said. "Guess our chickens weren't famous enough to rate a reporter from the *Enquirer*. And what's with the boy?"

Jake had told Tobias to watch everything, to keep his eyes off the ground and on his surroundings, to think about everything he saw and heard, especially anything the witness said, so Tobias could deduce from even the smallest clues what might actually be going on. The first couple of times they had gone to question witnesses (question *reals*, demand answers, hide what he was), it had been horrible. Tobias had held off a couple of panic attacks only by strength of will and the knowledge that their current job, no matter how innocuous it was turning out to be, would be completely ruined if he collapsed to the ground, shaking and gasping. Now, by their

fourth interview, he was getting better at watching his surroundings, better at following Jake without retreating into his own head, and he had even managed to notice things that Jake hadn't (or said he hadn't) a couple of times.

But there was still no way he could keep his eyes locked on the current real's face when that real was talking about Tobias, when he was calling attention to his existence, and clearly not in a good way.

Tobias's grip on Jake's jacket (carefully hidden behind Jake's back, hopefully where Mr. Havers couldn't see him clinging) tightened, and he breathed very carefully, gaze locked on his toes, running through all of Jake's promises about what wouldn't happen, the Eldorado's location, and any possible weapons that Mr. Havers could be carrying in case they had to run, in case he suspected the truth.

But Jake just grinned at the question, his half-assed facade of a polite reporter vanishing into cocky cheerfulness as he threw an arm over Tobias's shoulders. "Toby here's my brother."

Strange to feel safe being touched, to feel that Jake could protect him from anything and everything even when Tobias knew that the current position of their arms made getting to their weapons harder, that if the real—the civilian tried anything, their reaction time would be slowed because of the embrace. But the muscles in his back slowly unlocked, and the jump of fear from being noticed faded into the background at Jake's touch.

All that was sorely tested when Mr. Havers frowned. "Ain't a kid that age supposed to be in school?"

Tobias swallowed painfully. He and Jake should have thought of that, prepared some kind of cover; because of him, this entire job would be blown, and those chickens might—

"Parent-teacher conferences," Jake lied smoothly. "Toby had a long weekend, I figured I'd steal him for the trip down here, get in a little brother-to-brother bonding. Anyway, I think I have what I need, Mr. Havers, thank you very much for your time."

Still looking confused, Mr. Havers shook Jake's hand, frowned at Tobias, and then Jake hustled them off the property and back to the Eldorado, where they pulled out of the country lane, back to the highway toward the nearby small town.

They got back to their lodgings, a smaller-than-usual mom-and-pop that offered free Belgian waffles if you got up early enough and had three six-packs of a local microbrew in the common fridge. Jake dropped his bag and sprawled onto the afghan-topped bed, arms spread, and said, "I just can't get freaked out by Chicken McNuggets, no matter how nasty. So, what'd you think?"

Tobias looked up from carefully tucking Jake's notebook back into his duffel, taking off his shoes and putting them in the hand-carved shoe rack near the door. "Mr. Havers didn't seem to believe his chickens were haunted. He implied it was fairly normal for this kind of b-bad temper to manifest occasionally and was honestly confused about w-why we were asking. He was suspicious of you at times. I th-think he knew you weren't being completely up-front about the reason behind your questions, and he thought it s-strange that I was there. A-also, given how nervous the nephew was when we mentioned the chickens, and w-what his friends said about his partying during their interviews, it d-d-doesn't seem like this is something . . . supernatural."

"Yup," Jake said. "I totally agree. Looks like this case is another nonevent." He sighed and pulled himself up to rest against the headboard. He flipped through the *TV Guide* even though the bed-and-breakfast TV only got eight channels. Jake liked to check the guide anyway and talk about all the paid programming and bad movies he could be watching if they only had cable. Finally he tossed it back on the bed and reached for his wallet.

"Hey, you feel up to getting us a couple beers from the fridge?" Jake fished a few dollars out of his wallet and handed them to Tobias. He frowned at them and then looked at Jake, who grinned. "Well, get me one of those Ladies' Blue Bloomers microbrews and yourself a root beer. It's all got *beer* in it, right?"

“I don’t think root beer is alcoholic, Jake,” Tobias said, but he was smiling when he left.

Intellectually, Tobias knew that the people who ran the bed-and-breakfast—a plump old lady with a huge, layered pile of white hair and equally white, even teeth, and a rickety old man with only two yellowed teeth and no hair at all—wouldn’t be upset with him for going into their fridge. The elderly lady had told him and Jake straight away when they arrived that the food and drink in the kitchen was for everyone, that they should just pay attention to the food prices attached to the fridge by cat magnets, but Tobias’s shoulders still tightened as he stepped into the room.

But still, today was a day for bravery. He’d been quiet and attentive during the interview, unlike the first few he’d done. He’d been panicked and borderline hyperventilating during those until Jake had asked him if he wanted to wait in the car, at which point he had retreated to the Eldorado with the taste of pain and shame in his mouth beneath the overwhelming relief from being away from the reals. This time, he’d been able to tell Jake about his observations without stuttering too much over the words, and they’d been right, and Jake had smiled at him. It was always good, always a relief when Jake agreed with some conclusion that Tobias had offered, some theory that he had drawn from words and tone and body language—even when, as they did more and more interviews, Tobias was realizing that Jake didn’t always know everything. He missed some small clues, occasionally ignored what the interviewees thought of him in favor of pressing his questions, and couldn’t see behind his back. Tobias wouldn’t say that Jake was wrong, ever, that was ridiculous, but he did miss things, and it was good to know that he, Tobias, was there to catch those details for him.

Tobias still checked the kitchen before walking in. Empty. He could breathe a sigh of relief, drop the dollar bills in the box marked with a smiley face and a money sign, grab a beer and a root beer from the fridge, and then take the stairs two at a time back up to the room.

Jake smiled when he pushed the door open, and Tobias had to stop for a minute. That was the smile just for him—the one that said Jake hadn't been completely sure who would come through that door, that he had been ready for a completely different response if a stranger walked in. But because it had been Tobias, his smile spread from his beautiful lips to his bright gray eyes.

He took the beer that Tobias held out to him, and their fingers touched. A hot flush spread over his face and neck that matched the flutter in his stomach—the same odd sensations sparked every time Jake touched him, ran a hand over his shoulder, brushed his fingers over his wrist. He sat next to Jake on the wide, short bed, held out his root beer for Jake to pop that cap off too, and tapped the neck to Jake's bottle.

Jake took a long swig and sighed happily. “Well, the job's all wrapped up, but I figure we'll stick around here tonight at least. I don't have any place in particular to be after this one, and we're paid up through tomorrow, so no reason to head out too soon. So, you want to work on picking?”

Tobias leaned his head against the backboard, keeping his breathing even and his heart rate as close to normal as he could so that if Jake reached for his hand or his wrist, he wouldn't feel the difference. It didn't matter how many times he practiced or how happy Jake looked afterward, grinning widely with a thousand variations of *you were awesome* and *badass work, Toby* on his lips. He couldn't shake that same old clawing fear, the knowledge of what happened to a freak that tried to get free, someone who dared even think about getting out of a lock. Images of those consequences (guards seizing and holding him down as another fetched a saw, taunting him before starting the slow, excruciating cut) had started popping up in his nightmares too, even though those weren't happening nearly as frequently as they had before.

It was almost too much, more than he wanted to do today. But it wasn't about what Tobias wanted. It should never be about what he wanted, but about how quickly he could do what Jake wanted, what he needed so that Tobias could be as useful as possible on a hunt, so they could go on a real hunt

and not keep asking old men about chickens that Jake had suspected weren't possessed the first time the nephew's friends had mentioned the parties they'd thrown on the farm. Tobias wanted to save people. And he understood, intellectually if not instinctively, that if he wanted to save reals, there might be a time that he would have to save himself before he would be any use to them.

"Okay," he said.

Jake smiled and leaned closer, his silver eyes brighter. "Sweet." Then he rolled off the bed toward the dresser where he kept his duffel, pulled the handcuffs out, and slapped one cuff over his own wrist.

When he came back, sprawling down over the too-short bed with his boots hanging off the end, Tobias had already unfolded the paper clip from his pocket. When Jake held out his wrist, the open end of the cuffs dangling like he'd already escaped from a distant prison, Tobias took his hand with all the care he always had for Jake's person, the worry and anticipation boiling together.

He took one deep breath, eyes closed, reminding himself that if he couldn't do this, nothing bad would happen. Jake would use the key he kept in his other hand and free himself, and they'd watch bad television until Jake decided they should go to sleep, and it would be fine. And then he focused on Jake's hand, on the thin band of metal confining his wrist, on breaking that. And slowly, with each click of the pin within the mechanism, that fear faded away.



Eventually, he and Toby moved up to actually hooking the other end of the cuffs through the slats in the bed frame, Jake's wrist dangling from the thin metal chain. Jake had noticed early on that certain positions of the cuffs made Tobias more nervous, which in turn made it harder for him to actually work the locks. On one hand, the fear that filled Tobias's eyes, the way his hands shook around his makeshift lockpick, made Jake want to throw the cuffs in the Mississippi, punch

someone's face in (maybe his own), and wrap Tobias in his arms and never let go. On the other, it was good—or at least useful—to know that Tobias could pick a lock in various stages of panic. And given that the one time Tobias didn't seem to be afraid had been when he was shoving an iron poker through Dead Eddie, Jake would pretend, at least for now, that hunting wouldn't be an entire other level of panic.

Tobias was curled over Jake's wrist, twisting around with the paper clip, when Jake's phone went off.

Tobias jumped back, and Jake moved toward the phone before the cuff brought him up short. When he glanced back, Tobias was breathing slowly and carefully but didn't seem to be having a panic attack. The phone kept ringing.

“Hey, could you hand me my cell?” Jake grinned and rattled the handcuff, already digging the key out of his pocket. “I'm kind of tied up right now.”

Tobias managed a small smile and something that might've even been an eye roll before he got up to pick the blinking phone off the nightstand and bring it over.

Jake quickly checked the ID and felt a flash of relief at the name before he flicked open the phone. “Hey, Rog!”

Tobias caught Jake's eye and gestured to the door, making a book-opening gesture that Jake interpreted as him going to read in the living room downstairs. Jake nodded, waving an okay at him before tuning back in to what Roger was saying.

“—it's been a few weeks of radio silence, and I thought I'd check on you.”

“Oh, we're awesome.” Jake spun the key ring around his finger, then examined the end closely for tarnish.

“What are you up to now? Still sightseeing?”

“Nah, we've moved on, mostly. We figured out Tobias's better off feeling useful, and it helps his confidence if we're doing something important. So we've been working some cases together.”

“Cases? Jake, tell me you're talking cases of beer.”

“Nope, our kinds of cases. Like ghosts and poltergeists and demonic chicke—”

“*Are you out of your mind, moron?*”

Jake jumped, yanking the phone away from his ear barely in time to save his eardrum and accidentally flinging the handcuff key halfway across the room, likely under the doily-covered dresser that neither he nor Toby had bothered to use. Jake glared after it and pressed the phone back to his ear when a cautious test showed that Roger had stopped shouting.

“What the hell, Roger? It’s not like I’ve been taking him to strip clubs.” And much as Jake liked strip clubs, he knew setting foot in one with Tobias would likely set a new world record for fastest panic attack. Bad idea. Not gonna happen.

“Don’t you give me that *what the hell, Roger*. You wouldn’t have survived two decades with your daddy if you were that dumb. Though now I’m wondering if maybe you scraped by on good looks and that cheeky grin, because what the *hell* are you thinking, taking a—a kid raised in Freak Camp, not even out six months yet, raised with monsters and treated just like one, out to hunt *other* monsters? Not even mentioning how planning a perfect hunt is about as likely as me winning the lottery when I don’t buy any damn tickets, and the kid’s about an inch away from shattering every time he hears a loud noise. What, you just gonna charge into a new situation and cross your fingers that there ain’t any triggers that’ll leave that kid shivering on the floor and you vulnerable at the wrong damn moment—”

“Hold your fucking horses.” Jake fished a spare paper clip out of his pocket and popped open his handcuffs with a quick twist. “I’m not an idiot, okay? I know there’s risks and all, trust me. We’re not hitting a fucking werewolf pack on the full moon here, we’re working our way through the hard stuff, which right now is talking to witnesses. If you’re flipping your shit over a couple of spirits, believe me that Tobias does just fine going up against the big stuff. Hell, the coolest I’ve ever seen him was when there was an undead bastard going for his throat. And we’ve talked about the whole monster thing, and Tobias gets it, all right? He doesn’t want to hurt people or see

them get hurt, and he wants to work to make sure that doesn't happen."

Jake drew a breath, but there was just silence on the other end, maybe the slight rasp of breathing, the bark of a dog in the background. "It would be different if we were tossing freaks back to the ASC—hell, that would fuck with *my* head—but that's not what we're doing. Salt-and-burns, Roger. And honestly, we aren't even doing much of that, mainly a ton of research and the least threatening gigs I can find. Like that haunting in Greenville, which isn't one, we're pretty sure of that by now. Seriously, Roger, it's—he's sleeping better, okay? Gets through the night easier. And he can look people in the eye now, and it's just—it's good for him. For both of us."

The silence stretched. Jake gritted his teeth and moved to the edge of the bed, wondering if he should grab the handcuff key from under the dresser. Wondering if Roger would say something. Then at last, Roger exhaled. "Balls. I dunno, kid, I'd like to take your word for it, but hunting screws up the best of us, and that kid wasn't so steady to begin with."

Jake let out a short laugh. "Yeah, but the thing is, we're kinda working backward on the whole thing. Monsters don't scare Tobias—people do. So we're gonna start making him the world's most badass, cracked-up hunter and gradually try and make a civilian out of him. And compared to what he's used to . . . well, hunting ain't so bad."

"Maybe not. But you gotta admit . . . the ASC did a number on his noodle. The kid might mean well, but if you hunt with him, he's gonna do something that surprises you—and Jake, when it's hunting, it's never a good surprise. Or at a good time. Or something you can always deal with. You're playing with a mess of crossed wires in that kid's brain, and sooner or later something's gonna spark."

"He's not a time bomb," Jake said, annoyed. "He's a kid, and he's my—" He almost lost his tongue biting off the words.

"Your *what*?" There went all the muttered, half-reassured calm that had crept into Roger's voice. That was the voice he used to yell at Leon when the Hawthornes had shown up

drunk, the voice he'd used once on a witch that had revealed a particularly badly thought-out plan to destroy the world. Jake winced.

"He's just—Toby." Jake rubbed his hand over his eyes, not sure what else he could have said. "My responsibility, okay? The kid I sprang from Freak Camp. We work through shit, and we eat, and we watch TV, and get through panic attacks, and I'm not gonna turn to him now and say, 'We're not doing this hunting shtick, *you* can't do this hunting shtick because I don't trust you' because it's not fucking true. Because ganking monsters is a part of my life and now a part that makes him feel good, like he isn't—because he's not what they always told him he was. And yeah, it's gonna suck sometimes, and I'm kind of nervous as hell about the first time we go against something seriously nasty, but we're taking it a day at a time, like we take everything, and that's gonna have to be enough for you."

Roger exhaled again heavily. Jake heard the man's sleeve scrape against the phone. Maybe he was rubbing his forehead or moving the handset. "Christ. Just . . . be careful, moron. You ain't eight, thinking you could fly if the car was moving fast enough and had a blanket stapled to your shirtsleeves."

"That was *once*, Rog. I'm a bit older now. Look, I'll call you, all right? I'll check in, let you know we're not dead, let you know if we are. The usual. But we're not gonna get dead. We got this, Tobias and me." *Or at least, I hope we do.*

"You better. Take care of yourself."

"Always do."

Jake snapped the phone shut and sagged against the dresser. He wasn't sure if he'd been yelling at Roger or just trying to make a point. If he'd been too defensive (*Watch the ones that insist there's nothing going on, Jake*, Leon had said. *They're the ones trying to convince themselves*), or if he was just on the level he needed to be because for the first time in a long time, this thing between him and Tobias felt like it was going good, like the bad old days were really in their past, and he desperately didn't want to fuck that up.

And yet, he wasn't sure if he knew how to avoid doing exactly that.

Taking a deep breath, Jake retrieved the handcuff key out from under the dresser, stashed it and the handcuffs in his duffel, and let himself out of the room to find Tobias.

He was right where Jake had expected, curled in the one cozy chair in the living room, out of sight of the front door. When he looked up and saw Jake, he smiled like a flare lighting up a dark night.

“Hey, you wanna go for a walk?”

“Sure.” Tobias put the book he'd been reading back on the shelf (look at that, just grabbing a book like it belonged to him; Jake didn't know how he could hold this together when he was so proud of every damn thing Tobias did).

When they left the bed-and-breakfast, Tobias's hand brushed Jake's, and Jake thought about the last time they'd gone for a walk: some truck stop in the middle of corn fields, no one around, Tobias leaning close against him and slipping his hand in Jake's.

If anyone, even Roger, thought he would gamble *this* away on hunting, then they didn't know Jake Hawthorne as well as they thought they did.

Chapter Six



The next morning, rain rolled across East Liverpool, and Jake took the poor visibility as an excuse to delay heading out. They smuggled the hotel's continental breakfast of stale-but-still-delicious donuts, a spotted apple, and strong coffee back to the room, and Tobias dug into the local and regional newspapers, looking for anything that might be a new hunt. Jake opened his laptop, tapped out a couple things—not even a sentence's worth of letters, by Tobias's estimation—and then stared outside at the sheets of gray rain pounding the vehicles in the parking lot. Tobias made careful notes on the margins of his newspaper articles about curious real customs that probably weren't supernatural but that he still wanted to ask Jake about, styles of commentary and shades of implications that he didn't really understand and Jake would. Every now and then he glanced at Jake, who never looked away from the window, ignoring the computer in favor of the damp and gray.

Tobias's fingers itched for the laptop. He could probably find a hunt in fifteen, thirty minutes with an internet connection and a few of the specialized search engines he had learned about in FREACS. Maybe he could figure out most of those cultural references without wasting Jake's time or watching him struggle to explain such basic real things to a dumb freak. Not that those were the words Jake would use, because he was too nice.

He was nice, and nothing made him look happier lately than when Tobias dared to act like a real, seizing a real's privileges. Last week, Tobias had asked the waitress at the diner for a clean fork, since the one he had inside his napkin roll had some weird sticky substance on the tines. Before, Tobias wouldn't have thought twice about it—maybe he'd have stuck it in his own mouth to clean it off. He hadn't even been conscious of why he decided to speak up.

After Jake's face had lit up like Tobias had done something truly incredible, the likes of which he couldn't even imagine (how he wished he could, how he wished he knew how to make Jake look like that every day), it had taken Tobias a few minutes to remember his reasoning before he spoke to the waitress. He still stuttered and stumbled badly over the request, unable to make eye contact for more than a second, but his thought was that ordinary reals wouldn't have accepted a dirty fork and that using it would have drawn negative attention and disgust, if not be a big enough giveaway of his nature that would have someone on the phone to the ASC. Tobias wasn't certain that Jake knew that was what he had been thinking, but he still thrilled at how he was learning to instinctively make the right choices, the choices that made Jake happy, even if just considering those same choices would have made him shudder and lock up completely just a short time ago.

If Freak Camp (*the Director*) had taught Tobias anything, it was how to adjust rapidly to new expectations.

With that thought in mind, Tobias breathed in and held out his hand toward Jake's laptop. "C-can I use that if you're not?"

Jake glanced back at him—surprised, but not (*not, not, not*) displeased. "Blast away." He made an expansive, sweeping gesture toward the computer, and Tobias cautiously pulled it toward him. His fingers moved slow at first, careful with Jake's computer in a way he might not have been with any other real's, but picked up speed as Jake didn't even glance back to watch him.

The internet didn't have much information about a local high school fundraising for their art and music department, a mention of which had snagged his curiosity in the newspaper. But another story on the news home page caught his eye, stopped his hands and breath for a moment. He pulled himself hard out of his frozen state with a deep, shaky breath. It wasn't as though such things were new to him. No, this was entirely familiar, though not something he'd seen since he was in the Administration library. It was different now, with Jake. Now

he could do something about it. And it would give them the opportunity for an entirely different sort of hunt.

Tobias read the article carefully, making mental notes of the key details, and then cleared his throat, pushing the computer back around to Jake. “I found something.”

Jake started from where he’d been staring out the window, then, still looking distracted, took the computer. Tobias wondered about his reverie, if he had been thinking of past hunts or mornings like this with his father, if he missed them, if getting Tobias had been worth giving them up. Tobias had so many questions he was afraid to ask, not sure he even wanted the answers.

Jake tapped the arrow key a few times to read the article through, forehead creasing. When he reached the end, he pushed the computer away from them and shifted uncomfortably, like when he was talking about something he thought would bother Tobias.

“What’s your question, Toby?” Jake asked. His voice was quiet, patient, not angry at all at Tobias, despite the darker tones underneath, hints of anger and sorrow, the same that emerged whenever Freak Camp came up.

Tobias hesitated, unsure why Jake thought there was a question. “It’s a hunt.”

Jake’s eyebrows rose, his lips parting as though he were about to speak, but he didn’t. He looked back at the screen, tapping on the arrows to read it through again, slower this time. When he was done, he rubbed his mouth, still looking at the screen, and Tobias realized he was clenching his own fists hard under the table, holding his breath. He forced himself to open them and exhale.

“Toby, I don’t think it’s our kind of gig.”

Tobias blinked, bewildered. Jake had said that before, mostly about monsters that would have been rated for Intensive Containment, but Tobias didn’t understand why he was ruling out this one too. Did Jake still think Tobias wasn’t ready for serious hunts? Tobias would abide by what Jake

thought best, of course, but he had to ignore the spark of something as selfish and stupid as hurt that Jake still didn't trust him. They'd trained for weeks. And this was *important*. Tobias would stay out of it if Jake wanted him to, but Jake, or someone, should stop this ugly, bloodthirsty freak from hurting any more reals.

"Okay," Tobias said, slowly, "but do you want—you could handle it, if you want, and I'll st-stay in the libraries, or else maybe you could call Hunter Harper—"

"No, I mean . . . it says here it's the first horror show the neighborhood's seen, the kid had documented behavioral issues, and they've already got a full unit on it, detectives and the real FBI and all those blue-jacketed patsies that wouldn't know a poltergeist if it plasma barfed all over their shoes, but . . . they can handle this, and they've got the resources. Wouldn't be much else Roger or I could do by sticking our noses in."

Baffled, Tobias looked back at the computer screen. "But the police—you said, they w-won't know how to identify what type of freak it is, not unless they have a hunter on hand—"

"Toby." Jake held his hand out until Tobias placed his hand in Jake's and raised his gaze. "It's not our gig. There's nothing here that points to anything supernatural."

Tobias stared, mouth dry. Something was wrong; some connection he'd missed, some gear broken or snapped in his brain after years of rigorous training and research. He knew the signs a monster left in its wake: dead reals, misery, horror, pain. He *did*. His life and skin had depended on it. "But," he said, and was distantly alarmed to hear the slight tremble in his voice, "the-the w-woman and children, they w-weren't—they were r-reals, right? J-just people?"

Jake's hand tightened on his. He never looked away, though it looked like it hurt him to maintain his gaze. "Yeah, Toby," he said softly. "They were just people. They were all just people. Normal people can be—we can be fucking monsters as easily as any freak. Like those sons of bitches who put their hands on you in camp. They're supposed to be

people, even though they don't got the first goddamn idea how to be one."

"But—" Tobias opened his other hand, reaching for the explanation that had to be right there, obvious if he only had the eyes to see it. "But *we're* the monsters. It's not like the guards did anything to real people."

Jake jerked back in his chair, almost letting go of Tobias's hand, but he moved back at the last moment. He took a deep, deliberate breath, then spoke clearly, though with visible strain. "Okay, Toby, listen to me. This is important." Tobias gave Jake a tight nod, his back a straight line while his heart pumped so hard he could imagine it hitting his ribs. "No one in that camp had any right to treat you that way. No one. You didn't do anything to deserve it, and everything they did, everything you saw or experienced, that's just as fucked up as what happened to this family. Every bit as fucked up."

Tobias swallowed. Jake was so serious, the most Tobias had ever seen him. It was important that Tobias believe him because *Jake* believed it, but Tobias couldn't account for it, any way he tried to make the facts add up to a single coherent whole. Monsters and reals were antithetical beings, unable by the very order of the universe to live in harmony, one always destined for destruction at the other's hands. Reals were the source and pinnacle of decency, beauty, and good in the world, while monsters fed off of them like a cancer and a curse. Monsters did not have the right to exist and must be restrained, beaten down, and destroyed by whatever force or means that reals could find—and they'd be lucky if those measures were enough. Those were the principles of Tobias's life, his existence, of Freak Camp, the truths he had woken to, the pain he had slept with for as long as he could remember.

Until Jake had pulled him out of there, given him a new life ordered by new rules about what Tobias did and didn't deserve. Because Jake didn't count him among the monsters. He'd said it over and over, sometimes in subtly different ways, sometimes in those exact words. He said that Tobias wasn't a freak, that Tobias was a *real*, as though the ASC could have made some mistake, as though Tobias's life could have been

an error that could be wiped away by the will of one Hawthorne. Tobias couldn't believe him, couldn't imagine that being true. And Jake didn't know all the filthy freak things Tobias had done, didn't know all the ways he was just another monster (more obedient, more useful, but a freak down to his bones). He might reconsider if he knew.

But in the meantime, it didn't change Jake's theory, didn't change how Jake was waiting, watching him with something that looked like trepidation. So Tobias tried to nod. Jake didn't look exactly reassured, so Tobias pressed on: "How—how do you know it wasn't a freak? Could have been a shifter posing as their son, maybe."

Jake shrugged one shoulder, mouth twisted. "It's a lot of little details, I couldn't even point them all out to you. One-time event, weapon used, damage done, stuff I couldn't even name but I know. You know? And . . . this kind of thing happens, Toby. Even when it's not monsters, people just . . . I wish it never happened, but it does. The cops'll check the video for lens flare and run a handful of other tests, but unless something pings their radar . . . it's just not something we should stick our noses into."

"What if he's an unidentified," Tobias asked in a whisper, "like me?"

Jake's fingers dug into Tobias's palm, hard pressure points grounding him. "He is *nothing* like you, Toby." His vehemence made Tobias flinch. "Look, you got it right, in a way. There's no question that this piece of shit is a monster. Just the human kind. And we can't hunt everything that's a monster—there's not enough hunters, even if it were legal. So if they're sprouting extra teeth or shedding skin, we go after them because we've got the skills that put those mothers down. And if they're not, the cops and real FBI dudes go after them. But you—you don't qualify either way, because you're *not* a monster, got it?"

Tobias nodded. That made sense, as far as he knew. Because he couldn't remember what he had done to make the ASC put him in Freak Camp. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapping his free arm around them and tucking his head

down. Jake had made perfect sense, and there was no reason Tobias should want to tuck himself beneath the creaking hotel bed and cry.

He heard Jake sigh, then the click of the laptop being shut. “Let’s leave it alone for a while, okay, kiddo?” Jake got up from the table without letting go of Tobias’s hand and rested his other palm on the back of Tobias’s neck. “Maybe we can find one of those shows about deep-sea fish or something. C’mon.”

Unfolding from his chair, Tobias let Jake lead him back to the bed (on *top*, not in the dark where he belonged, where monsters belonged). Jake turned on the TV, muted it, and channel surfed absently, one hand stroking over Tobias’s shoulder, steady as the beat of his heart. Tobias tucked his face to Jake’s chest, letting the flashing colors wash over him. The rain had lulled into a quieter drum but still colored the world an even gray, keeping them safe indoors. At least, that was what Tobias let himself believe.



Later that day, when Tobias felt steadier, he reopened Jake’s laptop, determined that this time he would find the right thing, something they could do. If, as Jake said, humans could be vicious to each other, then they would at least try to stop the monsters.

He found it hours later, when the sun began to descend and the rain was at last clearing. A series of somewhat mysterious, water-related deaths near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania might not have been a guaranteed monster incident, but the way incidents increased during the dark of the moon and dropped off during the full let him be about as certain as he could be without a hunter corroborating his conclusions.

Tobias ran a quick cleanup program through Jake’s computer and deleted the web browser’s cookies and cache (carefully not looking at the sites Jake frequented that accumulated the most junk), before turning the computer

silently toward Jake with various web pages open. He'd drawn from several sources this time, not just the one.

Jake studied what he'd found for a few minutes, then nodded agreement.

It was already fairly late, but they packed up and struck out on I-76. With not just a destination, but a purpose in mind, Jake pushed the Eldorado to her best speeds, until they reached an exit for the outskirts of Harrisburg that promised a diner and motel.

The waitress serving them their late-night dinner was an affable older woman, and Tobias practiced making eye contact as he smiled; it still didn't feel any easier, not after this many months, but his efforts went unrewarded. She smiled back, but as she refilled their water glasses, she asked, "Up kinda late for a school night, aren't you, hon?"

Tobias's breath stopped. This wasn't the first time someone had said something about that, about what he should be doing if he were a real, but he completely froze up yet again. He couldn't even remember what Jake had said before in these situations.

But Jake was still there across from him, knocking their feet together before leaning in to catch sight of the waitress's name tag. "Hey, Darla, can I get a refill?"

She looked down her nose at him, then at his half-empty coffee cup, her heavy blue beaded earrings swaying gently. "No problem, hon. You want decaf?"

"Nah, regular's fine."

"It's your brain cells." Even when she walked away, even when Jake pressed his foot along Tobias's shin, he couldn't relax. When she came back, carrying the coffee thermos half-braced against her hip, he couldn't stop his hands from clenching under the table and couldn't force himself to raise his eyes.

Darla poured for Jake and then stood there. Tobias could feel her gaze, an almost tangible heat across the table. Or maybe that was the panic running just under his skin, the fear

he'd thought he could handle but couldn't. Once again, someone had proven that no matter how safe he thought he was, there was always another reason he couldn't pass as a real. No matter how hard he strove to strip away the appearance and mannerisms of a monster, there was another inevitable reminder that he was and always would be a fool and a freak.

“Really, hon, your friend over here oughta be sleeping if he's got school tomorrow. Sleep deprivation can be as bad as alcohol. Or drinking too much coffee.”

Tobias kept his head down and watched through his bangs. Jake smiled, but it was more a baring of teeth than his usual open grin. “Tobias's older than he looks, and I like my coffee as black as my soul, thanks.”

“Decaf comes in black,” she pointed out.

“I like to live dangerously. And it's not like there's nothing else out there to watch out for. Speaking of which, you hear about the drowning near South Enola Road?”

Darla nodded slowly. “Yes, I did. Good man. Not the first mighty strange happening around here either. My cousin's girl had a flat tire by the Harvey Taylor Bridge, and out of nowhere she got jumped by some crazy bastard wearing a rug.”

“She okay?”

“Good thing she's a fire-eater. She took a swing at that hobo with her tire iron, and he took off like a bat out of hell. Still hasn't been caught. It's enough to make an honest woman bring a shotgun to bed.”

Jake took a sip of his coffee. “You know anyone else had a scare like that? Maybe somebody walking along the river that same night or thereabouts?”

She glared. “You one of those boys that looks up freaky crap just for giggles?”

“No, ma'am. Just concerned about my kid brother here.” Jake gestured vaguely toward Tobias, and Tobias had to remind himself (before he bit his fingernails into his arms,

which he knew would make Jake upset, and besides, it was a Rule) that Jake didn't necessarily mean that Tobias wasn't capable of protecting himself. He didn't think that Tobias would go wild and start attacking people. He was just talking to a civilian to get intel, making small talk. Except for the fact that Tobias was there now and would be there for this hunt, the conversation had nothing to do with him.

“Well, there's Joanne Boswell, whose brother-in-law ended up dead over by Fort Hunter, and Mark Burns. He swore up and down this time last month that he saw a wild dog or some such, but he's been known to drink—and not coffee—so we ain't paid him much mind, at least not until my cousin's girl, Lorie, got jumped. Weird things have been happening around here and all the way up by Marysville. There's been rumors the sheriff might call up them damn monster hunters if it keeps up this way, even though no one wants one of them government types tramping around, least of all at old Bosco.”

Jake's voice was completely sincere. “I don't think that'll be necessary, ma'am. Probably just some dog, shouldn't be a problem to take care of without calling in the ASC.”

The waitress nodded. “Hon, I hope so, but I'm not much on believing that anymore.”

Tobias hoped so too. He hoped so very much.



Later that night, Tobias was stretched on his stomach over the worn hotel bed, spinning his cell phone on the bedspread, when Jake came out of the shower. A book lay closed on one corner of the bed, a slip of paper marking his place in the middle.

Dropping the towel he had been using to rub his hair dry, Jake sat down next to Tobias. “Hey, Toby. What's bugging you?”

He expected something about the latest murders (no way anyone could convince him that nine lunar-cycle drownings were anything but supernatural) or maybe another talk about

what made a monster, but instead Tobias rolled on his side to look up at him, forehead knit above his hazel eyes, and asked, “If . . . if I were a real . . . what kind of school would I be in?”

Jake took a moment to absorb that question, working out in his head what Tobias was getting at. This . . . this was important. He answered with deliberation, as he did all of Tobias’s important questions. “You’d, uh . . . be in high school. A sophomore, or maybe a junior, I guess. Maybe a couple years left to go.”

Tobias pondered that, tapping his phone against the bed. The next time he spoke, his voice was even softer, more hesitant, making Jake’s gut clench in memory of that first cata-fucking-strophic week in Boulder. “Could you . . . tell me more about high school? What I’m supposed to know, what I would be doing. Just in case someone asks again?”

Jake touched Tobias’s hair, brushing it slowly, carefully back from his temple—an automatic gesture to buy himself time, a moment when Tobias wouldn’t worry or try to backtrack, apologize for asking the wrong question, or tell Jake to never mind, it wasn’t important. But if Tobias wanted to learn about those things, it was important, and he had every right to know. Tobias shouldn’t have to ask at all. Jake just didn’t know where to start, not when Tobias deserved to know everything and Jake was pretty much the worst person to cover any of that, at least in the way that it should be explained.

But there wasn’t anyone else. Jake wouldn’t waste time wishing on a star for a fucking Jiminy Cricket.

He began, awkward and fumbling—bad as his first time trying to unhook a girl’s bra—to tell Tobias about high school. He’d been in enough schools in his time to have a fairly sweeping idea of how it worked all across the country, but that generalized knowledge didn’t exactly help him compress four years of girls (and guys), fights, and half-assed classes. How was he supposed to describe teachers and cliques that were the same no matter where you went, no matter what school you ended up in anywhere in the country? So he moved on to a play-by-play description of periods and semesters, first days and finals, gym classes and lunch hour posturing. He tried to

make it cut-and-dried, leave out the shit of being wrapped up in the whole racket. But like always, it was no good trying to keep anything from Tobias and his quiet, watchful eyes.

“What do you mean, ‘or something like that’?”

Jake shrugged, self-conscious and uncomfortable. “Just, I mean, it’s been a while since I was there.”

Toby’s brow wrinkled. “But it was just a couple of years ago, right? You said most kids finish when they’re about eighteen?”

“Yeah, I guess. Seems longer is all. I’ve had bigger things to worry about, you know.”

To Jake’s relief, Tobias let the point go. He was probably a coward for not owning up to his sawed-off education—and it was ridiculous, hiding this from Tobias—but he just didn’t want to admit to being a dropout, not when Toby’s hazel eyes were so big, every iota of attention trained on Jake’s lame descriptions.

“Science, math, history, English, art, PE.” Toby ticked each one off on his fingers almost reverentially, like a catechism to keep close to his heart. That was the same way he treated so many tiny things, like the ingredients for a cheeseburger or the value of each coin. It never failed to twist Jake’s heart, make him want to promise Tobias that it didn’t matter that fucking much, that there were better things to care about—family and duty and, fuck, even trees and books and finding the best pizza in the state. “And they change every year?”

“Yeah, you get algebra, then algebra II, and . . . trig? And biology and chemistry and physics—and there are electives, like Spanish or woodworking or computers, if you’re in a fancier school.” Jake kind of wanted to crawl into a hole and hide when Tobias just kept listening with rapt attention, eyes shining as though he was talking about a candy store instead of a damn high school. “Look, if you really want to know more, I can get you—I don’t know, some textbooks? Might have some shoved under the seats still. That’s where I found that one back in Boulder. They’re not too hard to dig up if you want to look

through some yourself. Way better than me trying to remember that shit.”

“Oh,” Toby breathed, wonder filling the word like the first time Jake had taken him to a library, and that settled it.

The next day they roamed Harrisburg’s streets for bookstores. A place called the Midtown Scholar Bookstore sounded promising, but Jake had no luck finding standard textbooks or anything that really laid out the class schedules and instructions the way Tobias was looking for. Local bookstores weren’t exactly a familiar stomping ground for him, but Jake guessed that the run-of-the-mill textbooks they passed out in schools weren’t really available at your mom-and-pop bookstore. He’d probably have to figure out how to order something from a teacher’s warehouse or, barring that, do some breaking and entering. After all, how much security would they really put on a bunch of textbooks that most kids didn’t want to get anyway?

He had picked up an anthology that stirred up memories of being bored out of his skull in English class, along with an intro to algebra guide, and eventually found Toby kneeling before a shelf of local history textbooks. “Whatcha find, tiger?”

Tobias looked up with a half-apologetic smile. “I was . . . checking to see if there were more records of attacks on the river, particularly around the dark of the moon. Just to see if there’s anything like that w-waitress described last night.”

Jake leaned against the shelf. “That’s not why we came in here, you know.”

Tobias shrugged one shoulder. “It seemed like—since there are books, we might as well . . .”

“Nah, I hear you. Good thinking, Toby. We can head to the library next.” Jake hesitated, then held out the books he’d picked out. “Think you’d want these?”

Standing up, Tobias hesitantly skimmed his fingers over the covers, then looked questioningly at Jake. “If they’re—these are what students use? In school?” His voice dropped to

a soft whisper, barely audible even where Jake stood and certainly impossible for anyone else to catch.

Jake frowned at the books. “Well, they’re . . . kinda. I mean, this one might be. I dunno.” He set the books on a nearby pile with a thump and sighed. “I don’t remember enough to say. But you don’t have to settle for them. I’ll find you the real deal.”

They ended up buying the anthology, a book on the history of Pennsylvania, and a notebook. A guy reading with his bandaged foot propped on the counter looked up when they brought up their purchases, then grabbed a crutch to limp to the cash register.

Jake nodded his head toward the guy’s leg and raised an eyebrow. “Kinda early still for Halloween, don’tcha think?”

The man glared. “I’m not wrapped up like a mummy for kicks. I got jumped. There’s a damn wild dog or something by the river, attacking whatever the hell it wants. If I hadn’t been carrying a knife, the thing would’ve taken out my throat.”

Jake’s heart rate jumped. That lined up with what Darla had told them the night before. A quick sideways glance at Tobias showed he was feeling the same excitement. “Whereabouts were you? ’Cause I heard a guy named Burns had a scare like that too. Pretty crazy, these things happening in the middle of the city.”

The man looked no happier. “You’ve been talking to *Burns*? No wonder your story’s all messed up. I was up by the Susky, same as he was—and if he says differently, you can be sure he’s had a few and can’t even remember his address. I don’t hold with all the stories old folks used to tell, but it was damn strange to see something that big coming at me that time of night. Most wild dogs won’t go after humans, even when it’s dark like that. I wouldn’t have been out there at all, but me and a buddy wanted to check out the deer hunting. Not the best night for it, but my buddy, he ain’t that bright, so one second we’re checking out where there might be ducks in the pitch black, and the next this dog is coming at me. It ran away real fast when I got out my knife, but you can bet it scared the crap

out of me. I'm lucky to get nothing but a broken ankle out of it."

"Your friend get home all right?" Jake asked.

The man rubbed a hand across his mouth, scowled at them and then at the books. "He's fine. The cops are still looking for him, but he'll be fine. And your total will be \$18.75."

Jake handed over a twenty. "Keep the change. I hope that leg gets better."

"Yeah, you and me both."

Jake turned to go, bag in hand, but Tobias's hand on his wrist stopped him.

Tobias turned to the man and smiled, tentative yet so fucking brave. "E-excuse me, sir, but w-what kind of knife did you have?"

The man blinked at him and then took down the crutches and hobbled back over to his chair. "It was this one." He reached into the space behind the counter and took out a dagger.

Even wrapped in a fine leather sheath, Jake could tell the thing was old just by the handle. When the man drew it, he couldn't stop his eyebrows from shooting up to his hairline. The blade was a smooth line of polished iron, maybe crude steel, with symbols etched all the way down the edge and a wicked point. If Jake had seen that baby in a secondhand shop, he would have picked it up right away because it was the kind of blade that might—judging by the worn edges of the symbols engraved around the edge—have history and the power to take down monsters that iron alone couldn't.

"This was my grampa's knife," the man told Tobias, turning the blade this way and that to catch the light. "I carry it everywhere because he told me it would bring me luck. Not that fucking lucky."

"You're still here," Tobias pointed out shyly. "When did you say that d-dog ran off?"

The man blinked and then snorted, sheathing the blade in one smooth motion and tucking it back under the counter. “Now that you mention it, it was pretty much the second that I drew this. Lucky, I guess. Or maybe it just recognized a weapon.”

“Maybe,” Jake agreed. “Anything else, Toby?”

Tobias shook his head. “No, Jake. Thank you, sir, for the books and everything.”

Jake didn’t look back to see if the guy gave any kind of acknowledgement, just followed Tobias out of the shop.

Tobias met his eyes outside, his own wide and filled with a determination that Jake couldn’t imagine denying. “I think we need to focus on the hunt,” he said. “This”—he gestured with the hand swinging his new books—“is important, but not as important as hunting. So, who do you think we should talk to next?”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe this Burns guy? And then I think cheeseburgers for lunch.”

And if Jake experienced a twinge and a twitch setting aside the books, these textbooks that Tobias wanted, in favor of hunting and what had always been Jake’s life, what he understood best in the world, he eased that with the knowledge that they would come back to books and classes and school. Today, Tobias was right that the hunt had to come first.

If Tobias felt any of that unease, it didn’t show in his smile. “Sounds good.”



That night, two nights before the new moon, Tobias and Jake were about twenty miles outside Harrisburg, where the western shore of the Susquehanna River degenerated into a twisting mess of forest and swamp. Jake had parked the Eldorado in a county park half a mile back. Before they left, he’d taken a crowbar and a camping lantern for himself and had given Tobias a heavy iron knife and a flashlight that neither of them had suggested turning on, even if Tobias had

been concerned about losing their night vision. It was dark, but there was enough starlight not to run into trees or end up drowned in the river.

His steps squelched in the mud, no matter how hard he tried not to make a noise; there hadn't been much opportunity in Freak Camp to walk silently through grass or to navigate the soft land by a river. Beside him, Jake was nearly silent, only the glint of his ring and the crowbar he carried giving him away. Tobias focused on matching that noiselessness. Most of the attacks had occurred within two miles of this spot, and they didn't want to warn their prey.

He was so focused on maintaining silence that Jake's hand landing on his shoulder made him suck in a startled breath. "Did you hear that?"

This time, Tobias heard the nearby splash. It could have been a fish, but something was off about it. Tobias didn't have much experience with wildlife, but nothing he had seen so far on the Discovery Channel would have explained the low hiss that accompanied each successive almost-footstep. He nodded sharply, sure Jake would feel the movement even if he couldn't see it.

"You go left," Jake whispered, "and I'll go right, and we'll try to—"

Something moved on the edge of Tobias's peripheral vision: a fast, pale blur.

And just like that, he was back in camp. But not because of a panic attack, not in the way that made him fall apart in supermarkets and malls or when reals looked him in the eye and smiled slightly askance. This was the old, easy thrum of adrenaline, a complete awareness of his environment that made the world a crystal clear exercise in precision, with every nerve and sense on edge to anticipate—and incapacitate—any threat. Tobias had survived eleven years in Freak Camp, and guards hadn't been the only danger.

Almost without conscious decision, he locked one hand around Jake's arm, the other weighing his iron blade, knees slightly bent and ready. "Did you see that?"

“Kinda,” Jake said. “You?”

Tobias shook his head and then spun. Something charged them from behind, long claws and pale arms lunging for his stomach, a low chittering sound coming from the dark. Tobias sidestepped the attack with reflexes the Director had sharpened to a razor’s edge and drove the long hilt of the knife forward with muscles Jake had trained. When the claws struck his blade—a blow Tobias could feel in his bones—the chittering changed to a scream and the beast jerked away, leaving behind the smell of burning hair.

The chittering resumed at a distance, sharper this time, ups and downs that almost mimicked language. Maybe Jake would know what they were saying if he’d learned words more practical than archaic Latin and Old Germanic. Tobias blocked another blow, acting on instinct more than sight, responding to each pale flash of movement, rocking from the hits he managed to block.

“Toby, close your eyes!”

From nearly anyone else, Tobias wouldn’t have listened. It was a fight, he had a blade, the enemy was coming hard and fast, but when Jake pushed in next to him and gave the command, his shoulder a solid weight against his, Tobias clenched his eyes tight just before the lantern lit up the night. Tobias couldn’t remember the last time he’d fought beside someone (*Kayla*) he trusted without question, someone who wouldn’t leave him to his enemies’ claws should he become too damaged to continue. It filled Tobias with that same fierce joy as when they fought the ghost, and he grinned as he opened his eyes a moment later, already adjusting to the glare.

It could have been an innocent by the river that night. Someone without iron, unprepared and alone, but instead it was Tobias and Jake, the Hawthornes, and this particular freak would never hurt anyone again if Tobias could do anything about it.

The monster, a furred, yellow, vaguely humanoid creature, screamed and wheeled back, clawing at its own face from the sudden light. Jake swung the crowbar hard and hit the thing

squarely in its chest. The beast screamed again and swiped at Jake, cutting a jagged line through his jeans, before its small, beady eyes widened. It coughed wetly twice and died, black steam rising from the dirty yellow fur on its arms from Tobias's earlier cuts, the flesh dissolving into white ooze where the crowbar entered its body.

Tobias and Jake stood over the monster, panting. It was smallish, about three feet tall, wearing a strip of greenish cloth across its loins and covered with fur everywhere else. Its stubby hands, splayed out in death, were clawed and webbed; its mouth, open and filled with jagged teeth beneath two slits where its nose should have been, was stained with blood. Not just fresh, but layers and layers of old blood, in shades from dry, dark black to bright red and all the browns in between, glistening wetly over its flat chin and down to mat the fur of its chest.

"Nice work there, Toby," Jake said, limping closer to him. "Definitely some kind of fairy. I'm glad we brought iron."

Tobias sheathed his knife and grabbed Jake, dropping to look at his leg. "Jake, you're bleeding."

Jake grinned, hoisting Tobias back to his feet by his elbow. "No biggie, Tobias, it's just a scrape. We'll patch her up in the Eldorado, and I'll be sprinting from the cops in no time."

Tobias had to force himself to breathe normally. Jake wasn't supposed to be hurt. If anyone was hurt, it wasn't supposed to be Jake. But a scratch was normal; Jake had come to visit him with worse than that even when he was in camp. He'd be okay. They'd be okay.

And then something slammed into him hard from behind, sharp points digging into his back where the layers of shirts gave some protection, and he and Jake were tumbling forward, that same chittering in his ears, louder and furious now. Jake landed hard, and Tobias launched himself over him, trying not to barrel into Jake with his full weight and throwing the monster off in the process.

Rolling to his feet, Tobias wheeled. The lantern was still burning on the ground beside Jake, lighting the grassy banks

with an uncertain half light, but he could see the other monster well enough: the same species as the dead one, but this time, he could see those dark, beady eyes and the hate in them, how the creature moved sinuously, flexing its claws and baring its bloodstained mouth.

Knife in one hand, searching backward with the other, Tobias moved until he could crouch over Jake and feel his pulse. When he found it, he almost shuddered with relief. He had never seen Jake so still, so absent. There was a frightening wetness matting Jake's hair, but his breathing was steady, and the pulse under Tobias's fingers was strong.

Tobias straightened. What do he had to do now was get Jake back to the Eldorado, patch that head wound, clean the wound on his leg, and get him somewhere that didn't smell like wet and rot. He couldn't fucking do any of that because the monster before him—a fuath, he recognized it now, type of fairy, territorial—was revealing its bloody fangs and hissing long and low as though it recognized him, monster to monster.

Tobias reached over and pulled the crowbar from the other monster's corpse. Then, armed in each hand, he bared his teeth. "Come on, you bloodsucking, ugly piece of shit."

There was a hint of intelligence in those beady eyes, a flicker of understanding in the way the beast moved away from the iron and snarled at his words. But not enough for it to know what it faced.

The fuath charged. Tobias crouched down to meet it.



When Jake finally rose back to consciousness, blinking in confusion at the dim light filtering through their hotel's drapes, the first thing he took in was Toby's pale, intent face above his. The image receded for a moment—Jake took a couple rapid, unsteady breaths, bracing against the wonkiness of the world—but then Toby came close again, came into focus. He peered closely at Jake's eyes, then glanced at the nearby clock and wrote something down on the yellow legal pad in his lap. Jake followed his motions, unsure if this was real or a

hallucination courtesy of one too many sudden impacts to his cranium.

He tried to speak. “Toby?” His voice came out in a croak, with an embarrassing crack he hadn’t heard in years.

Tobias’s eyes snapped back up, and he leaned forward as he reached for a glass on the table. “Hey, Jake. How are you feeling?”

Jake’s next effort to speak only ended in a hoarse grunt, and Tobias raised the glass, angling the straw to Jake’s lips. Water, cold and crisp, hadn’t tasted this good in years.

After a few mouthfuls, his tongue was down to something like normal size and his voice less like sandpaper in his throat. “What happened?”

Tobias’s brow creased, and he looked more worried. “Do you remember anything?”

Jake started to shake his head, then gave it up as a bad idea. They’d left for the hunt, hadn’t they? There had been darkness and stars and the ground uneven beneath his boots and Tobias beside him and . . . even that much might have been part of whatever dream he’d just had. “We were hunting, right? Did we get jumped?” Shit, was Toby hurt? Would he just be sitting there with a notebook on his lap if he were hurt?

Tobias was still watching him intently, eyes never leaving Jake’s face. His mouth had a new set to it. “A second fuath knocked your head against a rock out by the river. Can you feel all your limbs? How’s your vision?”

Jake thought about it. His body felt heavy and removed, but he could shift his legs and arms and feel his fingers and toes. “No, nothing weird . . . Toby, how long have I been out of it?”

“A little over twelve hours,” Toby said tersely.

“Shit.” Jake let his head fall back onto the pillow. Try as he might, he couldn’t remember more about the river. How the hell did they get back to the hotel? “What the hell happened?”

Tobias drew a breath. “I killed the fuath. Dragged you away from the riverbank, toward the Eldorado. Then you woke up, but you were in and out, w-walking but s-stumbling into me, and then this car slowed down by the road—saw my flashlight, I g-guess. It turned out to be that waitress. D-Darla? She stopped to ask if we were okay, then she saw—your c-condition. Offered to give us a ride back into town, and maybe to the doctor if you n-needed it.” Tobias took a deep breath, making a small, futile gesture. “I didn’t know how else . . . I had my knife, so I could . . . but I remembered what you said about how most reals are nice and mean well and want to help. And she seemed . . . safe. So I said okay, and we helped you into the car. You were talking and seemed pretty awake, except your speech was a little—like some nights, after you go out. You told Darla you didn’t need a doctor, that it was just a scrape, and we just needed to get back to the motel. I gave her the address. Are you feeling dizzy?”

Jake had closed his eyes in an attempt to cope with the idea of Toby talking to people—well, one person—in a prolonged conversation, of his own initiative, when Jake had clearly been worse than useless. He opened them again and shook his head slightly, with better success this time. “No, Toby, it’s just . . . holy shit.” He grinned, but Tobias didn’t smile back. He looked just as serious and tense as he had when Jake first woke up. Jake’s eyes fell to the notepad in his lap. “What’s that for?”

Tobias smoothed the top sheet, running his fingers over the edges. “I’ve been keeping notes of any changes in your condition, in case . . . I wanted a record so I could show—the doctors, or whoever, at the hospital. Darla asked several times if we were sure you shouldn’t see a doctor, and she wrote down her number for us to call her to check in, no matter what.”

Jake whistled low. “Look at you go, tiger. You scored your first number, and I don’t remember a thing.”

Tobias bit his lip. “Maybe we should go to a doctor. Memory loss, that’s . . . that’s not good, could be a sign of something worse—”

“Nah, Toby, don’t worry. This ain’t the first time I’ve had trouble piecing together a night.” Jake tried for his cheekiest grin, and Tobias finally managed a wobbly smile, a poor imitation of the one just yesterday.

Jake took a good, hard look at him. Tobias was pale and pinched, but that wasn’t much different from how he generally looked, especially under stress, although Jake had just begun to think he’d helped fill those edges out.

Jake glanced at the other bed. Toby was always obsessively, neurotically tidy, but it didn’t look like he had even sat on the bed. “Did you get any shut-eye, or was I just that gorgeous to watch?”

Toby hesitated. “I d-didn’t want to miss anything, in case you . . .”

Toby’s chair looked pretty damn uncomfortable, and Toby agreed, if his hunched posture over the notebook was any clue. Slowly, stiffly, Jake worked his left arm out from under the sheet and patted the space beside him. “C’mere, tiger.”

Tobias hesitated for just a moment before setting the legal pad aside and moving quickly around to the other side of the bed. He crawled cautiously to Jake’s side, careful not to jostle him, and stretched out facing him, pressing his hands between his knees.

Jake gingerly turned on his side, wincing at the throb in his head. Tobias’s hazel eyes flickered. “Careful.”

“It’s okay, dude.” Jake reached for his face, and Toby’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment. Jake traced the line of his jaw, then smoothed his hair back, letting his hand follow down his neck and the length of his spine. “You did good, Toby,” he said softly. “You did real good. I’m so proud of you.”

Tobias shivered, the tightly repressed tension finally rising to the surface. “I tried,” he said in a low voice. “It wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be, with you . . . knowing what was at stake.”

“You did real good. Toby the Tiger.” Smiling, Jake started again at the top of his spine.

But Toby's breath caught, the scrunch in his forehead mirrored in his shut eyes and twisted mouth, his eyelashes already damp. "Hey, hey," Jake said, resting his hand on the back of Tobias's neck.

"I d-didn't do good." Toby took in a shuddering breath. "I didn't, because y-you got hurt."

"No, no. Dude, that's not how it works. Yeah, we watch each other's backs, 'cause we're a team—but if one of us gets KO'd by a baddie, it ain't the other one's fault, okay?" Jake didn't mention that he'd have one hell of a time forgiving himself if he let any more damage come to his beautiful, battered Toby. "Hunters get scraped up. It happens, even with the world's best partner. And as far as partners go, I'm not gonna get better than the one I've got."

"You could," Toby whispered, tear-streaked face half pressed into the pillows. "Any hunter would be better than a f-freak."

"*Hey.*" Jake's grip tightened on the back of Toby's neck. He immediately tensed, stilling right down to his lungs, and Jake swore silently at himself as he shifted his hand to Tobias's shoulder, rubbing circles. "Toby. That's not what you are, remember? No way. I know a freak when I see one, and you are *not* one."

Tobias's frame shook in near-silent sobs, but he let Jake draw him closer until his hair tickled Jake's chin. "I don't know—I can't do the things r-reals can. I'm not g-good. You sh-should have someone better."

"Toby." Jake closed his eyes. "I have the one I want, okay? You can do lots of things no one else can. Fucking impressive. Anyone else would have a hell of a time learning everything you have so far. No way they'd catch on so fast."

Toby's sobs quieted as Jake ran his hand through his hair, staring out the window across the room. Finally, his voice emerged, steadier. "I chose the hunt."

Jake let go of Toby's head, pulling back to look him in the face. "Yeah, and it was a damn good one. People were getting

hurt, Toby, and you helped stop it.”

Tobias let out one last, shuddering sigh, his tight grip on the front of Jake’s pajama shirt never loosening. When he opened his eyes, they were red but still full of that same unshakable resolve. It drove Jake crazy sometimes how Toby hadn’t a clue how strong he was. “I’ve never been able to save anyone before,” he said quietly. “Never anyone that—mattered. And it’s good, important, but it’s not worth . . . seeing you hurt.”

Jake wanted to pull Tobias close again, brush his hair and tell him that it would be okay, but the truth was that this was *hunting*. It was a dangerous, crazy, unstable job, and it wasn’t always okay, because most hunters died before they even knew what they were doing, and the rest died bloody because they could never stop. Jake didn’t know a lot about the world, but he knew what he was.

“Toby, what you got to understand is that I’m not doing this because you wanted us to.” Jake had to keep looking Toby in the eye, so he couldn’t pull him closer, but he could at least wipe away the smear of tears beneath his green-brown eyes. “I’m terrified for you every time you’re out there with me, every time we go up against some evil sonuvabitch. But if you weren’t here, I’d still be doing this. I stopped when I first got you out, when you were still getting your bearings, but . . . I’m a hunter. I would’ve gone after those . . . what’d you call them?”

“Fuath,” Tobias said, voice croaking.

“Yeah, the fuath. I would’ve gone after those furry bastards all on my own, and I probably would have gotten jumped just the same. Even if there wasn’t anyone to drag my sorry ass to the road or take down the one that knocked me out, I would’ve gone anyway. You *saved* me, because I’m just a stubborn fuck who’s gonna keep putting his life on the line until there’s something’s stronger, faster, better than me. Or until you tell me to stop. So, what do you say? You gonna keep my sorry ass in one piece, or should we go back to Boulder so I can try to teach myself how to survive in a job behind a desk?”

Tobias blinked, hard and fast, and then took a deep breath. “You mean that? That . . . that I helped you?”

“Toby, I wouldn’t be here right now without you.” And damn if Jake didn’t mean that in more ways than one.

“I’m just . . . I don’t want you to get hurt.” But Toby looked like he was wavering, like he thought that maybe he should be there too.

Finally, Jake could pull him close and press his mouth to Toby’s forehead, because that was as close as he could get to a yes. They were both still alive, and damn, it was good to have backup and to know that Toby cared, even if the manifestation of that care scared the crap out of him sometimes.

“I’ll do my best. But in the meantime, let’s help people. Hunt evil. Okay?”

Tobias nodded and reached up to wrap his arms around Jake too. “Okay.”

And if his hug was almost too tight, his breath still fast and shaky, Jake could understand the feeling.

Chapter Seven



They were at an ice cream shop just south of Conway, Arkansas—Jake insisted they share a banana split and a hot fudge sundae, even though it was Wednesday—when his phone buzzed. Jake twitched and jerked the device out of his pocket, but whatever he saw on the screen relaxed him. The smile that instantly suffused his face as he raised the phone to his ear reminded Tobias of how Jake had looked earlier when Tobias had said he preferred the hot fudge to the banana split.

His gut twisted in a funny, unfamiliar way. He loved when something he did made Jake that happy, and he didn't often see anything else draw out that same reaction, so it was strange to watch his face light up over the phone. But that was good, he told himself. Tobias shouldn't be the only one Jake had to make him happy.

“Hey, Rog,” Jake said cheerfully, and for once he didn't step away or look nervously at Tobias while saying the hunter's name. “What's up? Yeah, we're just outside Little Rock. Yeah, real good. We checked out the local toad races, you wouldn't believe the things they do for fun out here . . . yeah.”

There it was, the furtive glance that made Tobias's stomach clench. The only time Jake made him feel even a little like a monster was when Tobias knew the wariness in his eyes was about him. “Yeah, let me just check with him. We're about a couple days out . . . Hey! I drive the limit! Okay, yeah, I'll call again when we've got an ETA. You too.” Jake flipped the phone shut, set it down next to his ice cream, and took a deep breath. He'd picked up his spoon idly during the phone call, swirling it absently in his half-melted mix of banana and vanilla. “Hey, Toby, what do you think about swinging by Roger's?”

Tobias clenched down on the instinctive terror. Lessons from Freak Camp suggested that if Jake brought him to a hunter's home, Tobias would be interrogated, pushed to his knees, passed around. He didn't believe that. Indeed, he believed now that Jake would hurt anyone who threatened him. Whether that was because Jake thought of Tobias as his, and his alone—that would be nice, and some days Tobias was sure it was true, that he was Jake's and Jake would never leave him behind, would never stop treating him like a real—or just because Jake hated that behavior in hunters and monsters alike, Tobias didn't know.

So Tobias wanted to believe that Roger wouldn't hurt him (at least while Jake was around), and Jake never left Tobias alone unless he could handle it. When he went out at night to a bar, he always asked if he could leave, if Tobias would be okay, and if one time Tobias said that maybe it would be good for Jake to stay, he was sure that Jake would indulge him. And as long as Jake was there, he could be brave.

But more important than Tobias's abilities or lack thereof was the fact that Jake wanted this. Knowing that let Tobias smile as he looked into Jake's eyes, and say honestly that sure, they could go visit.

Jake's gray eyes crinkled in warm pride and pleasure, and he hugged Toby close.

The farther they drove west on I-40, the more Jake talked about Hunter Harper. It wasn't that he talked about him constantly or made a particular point of dropping the name, but more of his stories began with "so Roger called us about this job" or ended with "Roger called me a damn moron, but that just means he's glad I didn't get eaten."

Tobias didn't have a lot of experience figuring out who was important to Jake, but he used to talk about his father the way he'd been talking about Roger. "It'll be great," Jake said, grinning. "I mean, I haven't seen him in months, and you know, he's not real chatty on the phone."

Jake's smile and body language said that the visit would be no problem, but something running under the words, a forceful

overconfidence or the sharp edge of tension, made Tobias think it wouldn't be that simple. No, Tobias thought this would be hard, the way going to a mall, even on a weekday, was still hard. The thought made Tobias's hands tighten on his thighs, almost enough to bruise for just a second before he forced himself to let go. He had to remember that Jake would be with him, and that Jake knew it would be hard but was still confident they could work through it.



In Albuquerque, Jake stopped to fill the tank though they were just below the halfway mark on the gas gauge.

“Gotta run to the john. You wanna fill her up, Toby?”

Jake had shown Tobias how to pump gas the other week, and Tobias had done it once or twice on his own since—it wasn't the first time Jake had seen how the kid was scarily good at learning and memorizing directions, some kind of genius, maybe—but he still hesitated before giving a short nod, his jaw taut. As the miles sped away under them, drawing them closer to the New Mexico border, he had grown quieter and quieter, hunching his shoulders in a way Jake hadn't seen in weeks.

Foreboding prickled over the back of Jake's neck, and he tried to drive it away by telling stories of all the times he'd been to Roger's over the years, recovering from hunts and practicing with a crossbow while Dad was gone. Tobias listened—of course he did—but he didn't smile like he usually did during Jake's stories, and Jake often got that familiar twist of misgiving that his words were going to fuck them up in new and interesting ways.

As the first sign for Truth or Consequences appeared, Jake started drumming his fingers against the steering wheel as second thoughts itched their way under his skin. Maybe this wasn't the ace idea he'd thought. Maybe Tobias wasn't ready to meet Roger yet. Stupid worry. Roger wouldn't lay so much as a finger on Tobias; he'd cosigned the fucking release papers, after all. And if Tobias was going to meet anyone who

knew where he'd been, Roger was the best bet. Jake would trust him with his life and his Eldorado, and he could damn well trust him with Tobias. Just because they were both getting a case of nerves didn't mean the whole thing would go up in flames.

Still, it didn't hurt to do a little prep work. Which was why he was making a call where Tobias couldn't hear during their not-exactly-necessary pit stop.

"Hey, Rog."

"Kid. Don't tell me you got took a wrong turn and decided to swing by that Georgia O'Keefe museum in Santa Fe."

"Nah, nah, we're on track. Get there before three, I'd say." He ducked around the aisle to check on Tobias, the impulse as habitual as checking for his gun before a job. Tobias looked very thin and alone, standing by the trunk of the Eldorado with his head tilted down. Watching the pump, of course. "Hey, I have a favor to ask."

"Yeah?" Roger said guardedly.

"If you could just . . ." Jake hesitated, grappling with what he was coming to understand but could barely fumble into words. "Take it easy," he said at last. "Don't—don't crowd him or anything. It's all new to him, y'know?"

Roger's silence made Jake very aware of the whir of the slushie machine. Finally, he said, "Yeah. I hear ya."

Jake bit his lip, eyes still on Tobias. "He's come really far. Seriously. But new places can throw him off. They take some adjusting."

"Stop worrying, moron. I'm not expecting him to be Martha Stewart. I'll see ya in a couple hours."

"Yeah," Jake replied, but Roger had already hung up.

When he got back to the Eldorado, Jake put on his best grin and gave Tobias's shoulders a quick rub. Tobias watched him, like he tracked Jake the same way Jake tracked him, and it was unnerving and empowering. Jake hoped dearly he

wasn't about to fuck this up. "We're good to burn some rubber?"

"Yeah," Tobias said, still soft, and hurried to the passenger seat.

This would be fine, Jake told himself. Of course Tobias was worried, but that wasn't a harbinger of doom. Jake knew Roger. They had nothing to worry about.



When the Eldorado tripped the first early warning alarm pulling into his yard, Roger went out to meet the boys. He'd been fiddling with his bookshelf—not like he needed to sort his references again. He'd decided about the sixth time he lost Lotte Grimm's annotated bestiary that he had to put things where he could find them rather than how it made sense to anyone else. The system was already as organized as he could stand to make it.

The first glimpse of Jake was heartening. He stood tall and moved with that easy Hawthorne confidence that Roger had missed the last several times he'd seen Jake. Those had been rough days, rougher for how the kid wouldn't admit his own damn father had broken his heart, and Roger had grown wary of the restless, aimless energy that emptied his liquor cabinet.

This was Jake Hawthorne back in his element, flashing a grin at Roger as he leaned back against his smooth, spotless car (it was beyond Roger how the kid drove thousands of miles through Dust Bowl, USA and still maintained his machine in flawless condition), before glancing back toward the passenger seat.

Then Tobias got out of the car. Roger's gut clenched and his mouth dried up, one hand too steady on the knife at his belt. He recognized the reaction—his instinctive response on hunts when a monster could be around any curve—and that itself made him sicker.

He didn't know if he'd have recognized this Tobias if he saw him in downtown El Paso. Strange enough to see the boy

in ordinary clothes (let alone upright, not chained to the floor; *Dammit, how could you just walk away from something like that, Harper*), no collar around his neck, no dried blood streaking the floppy brown hair. Tobias Hawthorne, according to the paperwork; forever 89UI6703 according to the Agency of Supernatural Control.

Tobias moved slowly around the car, eyes skittering once toward the porch and Roger, then dropping to the gravel under his feet. Jake waited for him with a patience that Roger wouldn't have believed a few months ago. He had one hand open and half extended, as though he expected Tobias to grab it. Tobias didn't. Shoulder to shoulder, they walked up to the porch together.

Roger kept his hands in his pockets and a fixed cheery smile on his face. "Hey, Jake, glad you could finally make it up to this dried-up patch of desert."

"Hey, Rog." Jake faked calm well—kid wasn't legal to drink, and he had the swagger to be FBI, IRS, and ASC all rolled into one—but now Roger could see the subtle tension in his shoulders, down his back. Probably the kid even thought he was calm, but it was hard to say who was supported more by Jake's hand on Tobias's back. "I'd like you to meet Tobias."

They'd met before. Once in the yard, when Roger hadn't wanted to do more than assess the kid's threat to Jake, and once in the interrogation room. And dammit, Roger could see that moment now, the emptiness in the kid's eyes, the fear so complete and accepted, without hope, it didn't even make him shake; Roger wasn't sure he should ever forget, but it was harder to live with now, with the victim before him.

Then Tobias lifted his eyes, hazel peeking through his brown bangs. "H-hello," he said, the second syllable almost inaudible. That one word seemed to take all his courage, and his gaze fell again to his feet.

"Hey, Tobias," Roger said, and hoped his voice didn't sound as forcibly hearty as it did to his own ears. "Good to have you here. Come on in."

The boys followed him across the threshold with the antipossession wards painted on the ceiling and to the kitchen where Roger pulled out two bottles of root beer. Tobias's attention was still wholly fixed on the floor, so Jake took both and passed one to Tobias, who wrapped thin fingers around the neck as though he wasn't sure what to do with the bottle.

Roger motioned them toward the living room. "Go on, kick back." As they settled on the sofa, he took an armchair—gun hidden in the stuffing in back—and tried to look at ease. It didn't help his nerves to see Jake Hawthorne docilely doing as he was told without bitching, and more than that, Jake even looked nervous while Tobias didn't so much as glance up from the bottle cradled in his lap. Roger popped open the top on his own root beer, and his fist tensed around the neck of the bottle. The holy water test didn't work if the mark didn't take a drink. "So, you boys been traveling?"

Jake latched onto the topic like he would a pretty girl, launching into a rambling account of their zigzag from Colorado, across the Midwest, to the East Coast and back. Jake rambled even more than usual, glancing at Tobias as though waiting for his two cents, occasionally nudging his hand. The only time Tobias moved during the entire thing was when he lifted that same hand to take a drink.

The whole scene unnerved Roger. Yeah, he was grateful Tobias was passing the holy water test—he had no idea how he could run the rest of the standards, though given how long the kid was in FREACS, most of them had to be redundant—but watching Jake cater to the kid and get no response, that was familiar. Roger had seen it in nursing homes sometimes when a husband or wife was still hoping their partner would shake off the vegetative state and be themselves again.

Jake ran down after about ten minutes of aimless rambling. Roger was impressed. Not many kids his age could carry a conversation that long when no one else was participating. Roger tried to help him along, he really did, but it was hard to care about where the boys had been when there hadn't been a monster involved, and he couldn't force himself to forget the

possible threat in the room. Or the look in that same boy's eyes when he'd been tortured.

Eventually it became too much for any of them. When Jake stammered to a halt after a half-enthusiastic comparison of mom-and-pop chain french fries around the Great Lakes, Roger made a noncommittal noise and then cleared his throat. "Hey, you boys hungry yet?"

"Yeah," Jake said at once, with some relief. "Yeah, we could eat. We had an early lunch."

Roger clapped his hands on his knees and stood up, catching the slight twitch in Tobias's hands as he did. "Good, I'll go heat up the grill. Picked up a few steaks from the store last weekend, plus baked potatoes and corn, if that'll suit ya."

"Sure." Jake glanced at Tobias, who still hadn't lifted his head. "Feeling hungry, Toby?" He nudged Tobias's knee with the back of his knuckles.

Tobias peeked up under his bangs, barely enough for Roger to glimpse his eyes, and replied in an undertone he couldn't catch.

"Not a problem." Jake looked back to Roger. "Maybe just half of one for Tobias?"

"Sure thing." Roger was glad that grilling gave him an excuse to escape the house. There was a good possibility that there was nothing wrong with Tobias, and for all their sakes, Roger should get a little distance.

The coals had just reached a nice glow when Jake swung out through the porch screen door. "We got the table set, anything else you need done?"

Roger gave him a look, tempted to run the holy water test again. The last time Jake Hawthorne had been this helpful about the house was just about never. "I'll let you know."

Jake hovered on the porch a few moments more before returning—more slowly—to his charge inside. Roger exhaled, muttering to himself while laying out the steaks.



Jake had handed Tobias plates, silverware, and napkins, so Tobias had set them out—three sets of each, three places set at geometric angles on the table—with hands that shook only a little. He had prepared the dinner table for the Director and his guests, so he knew where the spoons went (ridiculously easy with only one knife, spoon, and fork per plate), how to line them up evenly. But no matter how straight and clean the settings were, the number didn't make any more sense. Neither Jake nor Hunter Harper had mentioned a third hunter in the house, and Jake had never once had Tobias set an empty place—he shouldn't try to anticipate, the Director had taught him that along with the name, use, and proper placement of a salad fork—and by that logic, the third place was for Tobias. To sit across from a hunter as they ate.

Or maybe he'd eat after Hunter Harper and Jake did. That would make more sense.

Jake always ate with Tobias, but surely that would change in the company of another hunter. Propriety, decency, and basic respect had already been pressed to the limit, if not beyond, just by allowing a monster in a hunter's home and giving him the privileges of a real, to sit on the furniture and drink with them. Some lines had to be kept. Maybe he would be allowed to eat at the same time but sit on the floor at Jake's feet. That would be a kindness. He could handle that. *Please.*

"Looks pretty impressive."

He jumped, realizing a second too late he shouldn't have. He hadn't flinched at Jake's voice for weeks. Jake wouldn't like it, and it was just another mistake at the wrong time and place.

"Whoa, whoa." Jake set down the chair he was carrying—a third chair for the three place settings, for three people, *please no, Jake*—and reached for him, slow and cautious. Tobias forced his breathing to even out, forced himself to be still as Jake touched his arms, rubbing them. "It's gonna be okay, Toby."

Though it made it impossible to control his breathing (*gasping, gagged, filthy monster doesn't deserve air*), Tobias made himself look Jake in the eye. Jake looked tired and sad, but his hands on Tobias's arms stayed slow and even and didn't let go. "You're doing real good, I promise. Nothing's gonna happen. We'll have dinner, take it easy tonight, and then get some shut-eye. You got nothing to worry about."

Tobias nodded mechanically. He wanted to answer Jake, tell him that he was listening and Jake's words weren't wasted, that he would always do what Jake said to the best of his ability (he was a good monster, really, he wanted to be), but he didn't trust his voice to say the words without making Jake even more upset.

Then Hunter Harper yelled from outdoors, "Could you grab me some plates?" and Tobias jumped, even with Jake's hands on him. He squeezed his eyes shut and tilted his head back, pulling in deep breaths.

Jake sighed and squeezed his forearms once. "I'll be right back."

Tobias was glad Jake hadn't asked him to bring them out, even if it should have been him. He'd caught one glimpse of the hunter stoking red coals with a long metal skewer, and the sight had been familiar enough to stop his breath. He didn't want to go outside. He could only hope he'd be able to eat whatever he was given.

Hunter Harper and Jake came in a minute later, carrying plates of charred meat, round brown potatoes, and corn on the cob, the last of which Tobias recognized from pictures. He stood uncertainly near the kitchen wall until Jake said, "Go ahead and take a seat, Tobias."

The three chairs at the table were the only ones in the room. Tobias couldn't pretend he didn't know what Jake meant. Hoping no one noticed his hand trembling, Tobias drew out the closest chair and slowly, stiffly sat down.

Jake crouched at the fridge, pushing around bottles. "Don't you got any A1 or 57 sauce? Anything other than that Worcestershire crap, Roger?"

“What I got is what I got,” Hunter Harper answered shortly. He rinsed his hands at the sink, came back, and dropped heavily into another chair.

Tobias bolted, throwing himself backward and nearly knocking his seat over. He didn't stop until his back found the wall, and then he stood there, shaking, unable to stop, eyes fixed on his hands. He couldn't stop anything. He knew he was disappointing Jake even when all he had asked from Tobias was to behave just a little like a real. Yet Tobias couldn't control his own body, the stifling panic that threatened to close his throat and that had made his body spasm as if he had just been touched with a cattle prod.

Monsters do not sit with reals.

The room was dead silent. Not a sound except Tobias's own breathing and heartbeat, pulsing loud in his ears. He shut his eyes as despair took him; that was it, surely. Jake couldn't overlook this demonstration of weakness and insubordination in front of another hunter.

Jake's footsteps crossed the kitchen and stopped in front of him. Tobias hadn't apologized yet today, but he couldn't even open his mouth to try to work his throat. He didn't deserve to beg.

Then one of Jake's hands closed over his, as gently as before, while his other warm hand settled on the back of Tobias's neck. “Hey,” Jake said, his voice pitched as low and soothing as when it was just the two of them and Tobias couldn't untangle himself from nightmares and the memory of so many other hands on him. “Hey, it's all right. You're doing just fine. Just you, me, and Roger, and the only thing we're gonna do is sit down for some dinner, okay? That's all that's going on. If you can't eat, that's okay too, we'll wrap it up for later. Can you come sit by me, Toby?”

Tobias exhaled shakily. He didn't know how Jake's touch and voice made it easier to breathe, but they did, and he could focus on Jake's directions instead of his horrible, unpardonable behavior. He nodded, still unable to raise his head, and Jake squeezed the back of his neck.

“Good,” he said, and incredibly he did sound glad, relieved. “Good, that’s good. We’re all right.” He led him back to the table and moved Tobias’s chair closer to his own, never lifting his hand from Tobias’s shoulder, but Tobias’s stupid feet still balked in front of his chair. Yet somehow Jake understood without rage, without pain, without recrimination. “You okay with Toby joining us, Rog?”

“Yeah,” Hunter Harper said. His tone was unnervingly flat, but he didn’t hesitate. “That’s just fine with me.”

At last, Tobias could force himself to sit. The first few seconds, he remained frozen and rigid as the wood pressed against his back. Jake’s hand slipped from his neck, but his knee bumped against Tobias’s, and Tobias focused on that and not his racing heart, nor the brown eyes watching him. Silverware clinked, voices rumbled quietly (no questions, no threats, no orders), and slowly Tobias forced his muscles to unlock. He breathed, flexing his fingers, and Jake passed him a small steak, half a corn on the cob, and a potato.

He was expected to eat. Compared to sitting with them, that wasn’t hard in the least. He picked up the fork and knife carefully and used them to cut apart the food on his plate. He had mastered those real skills, at least. His countless failures today made it clear he would never pass in any other way, but at least he wouldn’t disgust Jake now by eating like a freak.

He had lost all control, and he hoped Jake would punish him later. Punish him how a hunter should, until the white-hot pain blotted out failure, shame, and fear. Until he felt nothing but the hard, unmerciful floor beneath him. Until he’d been reduced to nothing but the essential truths of what he was, where he belonged, and what he deserved. He shouldn’t have forgotten. It had been disastrous stupidity to ever put it aside.

For now, while he couldn’t meet Jake’s eyes, he could watch Jake’s hands without being caught, so he knew to lift the corn with his hands, bite down to the stalk. He didn’t dare look as far as Hunter Harper’s plate. The idea of catching sight of his face, seeing the contempt and disgust there, was as unendurable as the thought of looking the Director in the face.

He wasn't hungry at all. If he had thought about his stomach, he'd have said it was twisted into some unrecognizable shape that wasn't equipped for the challenge of food, but not eating wasn't an option. Seizing any opportunity to eat was too ingrained a survival instinct, and it overrode any other physical condition, no matter how sick or sore or exhausted the monster was or what kind of food was available.

So he cleaned his plate, stopping once to pour a small amount of dark brown sauce onto his plate from the bottle Jake nudged toward him and scoop it up with his neat bites of meat. No one spoke to him during the meal, and Tobias's attention was too wholeheartedly focused on managing the food to listen to a conversation not intended for him. Jake's knees bumped steadily against his—once or twice a minute, though Tobias didn't think Jake would want him counting—and occasionally rested his arm over the back of Tobias's chair to touch his fingertips to Tobias's shoulder. Tobias was indescribably grateful for those touches; the moment of contact temporarily washed out the panic, the fear, the acidic thoughts, and left him nothing but the relief that Jake still touched him kindly, even in front of Hunter Harper.

Like Jake, he left only the bare cob of corn and the steak bones. He assumed the meal had been very good, but he hadn't tasted any of it.

Jake cleared his throat and pushed his chair back. "Me and Toby got the dishes, Roger."

The Director had said it differently, but Tobias understood the suggestion under the words. When Jake grabbed the big serving dishes, Tobias took both their plates and followed. After Jake pulled out the trash can, Tobias scraped in the leftovers and then took the sponge Jake passed him. This was better. Small, simple tasks he could focus on individually, and cleaning was a familiar, safe activity for a freak.

Tobias almost wished that Jake would just leave the dishes with him. The way Jake was washing them—water barely hot enough to feel and only a tiny amount of bland detergent—couldn't possibly sterilize enough for Hunter Harper. After all, a monster had been eating off one of those plates.

If Jake went back to drink or talk or whatever he wanted to do with Hunter Harper—talk about Tobias, probably, and Tobias understood that, it was good for them to make sure Tobias wasn't doing anything wrong, wasn't hurting Jake without noticing it—then Tobias could crank the water hot enough to raise blisters on his hands, and this mess he'd brought to Hunter Harper's home just by *being* would be cleared up. He could pretend, at least for a few days, that he was a useful monster.

The hunter's chair scraped across the floor, and Tobias's whole body stiffened from his shoulders down, hands freezing in the act of drying a plate. Jake paused in his washing too, fingers twitching once as though he would touch Tobias, but he didn't.

"Here, Jake," Hunter Harper said, and Jake turned slightly, a moment later setting the third plate and glass in Tobias's side of the sink. Hunter Harper's heavy footsteps moved out of the kitchen, and Tobias realized he should breathe again. There was no reason for his hands to be shaking. Jake was right beside him.

"You're doing fine," Jake said, but it didn't sound like even he believed it anymore.

When they finished, Tobias followed Jake to the living room, where Hunter Harper sat behind his desk with a glass of amber liquid. He looked up as they approached.

"Hey, you boys look pretty beat," he said. "I only got the one guest room, but one of you want to bed down on the couch?"

"Nah, I'm gonna move us into the guest room, we'll both crash out later." Tobias saw tension stiffen Jake's shoulders, had to shuffle backward to maintain a proper distance when Jake shifted his weight. "I mean, if that's cool with you, it's just a lot more . . . The bed's better, and it's big, you know, and nothing's gonna . . . We're good, but thanks, Roger."

Hunter Harper narrowed his eyes, and Tobias dropped his own quickly, wishing equally that sharing the room wouldn't be a problem and that Jake had just let him sleep in the car.

“All right. I’ve got some notes to finish up, so why don’t you show the kid around, Jake? You know where the TV and DVD stash are if you want to watch something.”

“Uh, thanks, but I think we’re good. Might bring some books in from the car.”

Hunter Harper’s eyebrows went up. “You’ve traded in your DVDs for literature?”

“Nah, not for me. They’re Toby’s.”

Tobias couldn’t keep from flinching. There was a distant ringing in his ears, and he tried to focus on that instead of the dizzy feeling that Jake had buried his fist in his gut. How could he just give away something so important? The books weren’t Tobias’s, nothing belonged to the freak, but now Hunter Harper knew something Tobias cared about, something Jake had been kind enough to give him, and soon, much sooner than Tobias had thought, that gift would be taken away.

But Jake was still talking, his jaunty tone familiar from when things were so close to falling apart but he refused to let Tobias hit the ground. “Or we might just get a deck of cards. Toby beats me at poker all the time, we could play a game.”

“We’ll see.” Hunter Harper’s tone was guarded. Tobias closed his eyes, hoping the floor would hold steady under his feet if he couldn’t see the room. “Maybe once I get a working translation out of these texts.”

Jake grinned. “Feudal Japanese?”

Hunter Harper snorted. “No, it’s Greek.”

“You know it’s all—”

“Don’t strain your brain, moron. Don’t you have tours to give and bags to carry?”

“Sure do,” Jake agreed cheerfully. Then he glanced at Tobias, and the worry returned like a noose slipping over his neck. “Come on, Toby.”

They got their duffels from the Eldorado. Jake left his weapons in the car but nodded toward Tobias’s books, so he carefully picked two he’d read already (he hadn’t had time to

memorize them, but then again, he hadn't known he'd lose them so soon) and clutched them to his chest, his duffel slung over one arm. This was the first time Jake was presenting him to someone, and Tobias was disappointing him. He was a good monster, and he was under control, and he didn't want to do anything wrong, but he did again and again, and he couldn't even apologize any more, his tongue tied into knots, because just being in Hunter Harper's home was the most effective gag he'd ever choked on.

And what would be the point? Jake didn't want to hear it, Hunter Harper hadn't asked for it, and he shouldn't be such a stupid monster as to believe he had a place other than in the corner, on his knees, waiting for instructions.

He wanted that. He wanted to be out of the way (forgotten, ignored, safe) so badly that at times the desire to kneel seared almost like a physical pain. But then Jake would be sad, and Hunter Harper would look at him with that same blank stare as though he had yet to figure Tobias out, and he *could not do it*, not if he really wanted to be the quiet, obedient monster he had been trained to be.

Jake hesitated before the porch steps, turning to Tobias. He lifted his hand briefly but dropped it before touching him. "You doing okay?"

Tobias nodded quickly, and then, with a supreme effort, he pulled his head up to look into Jake's face. He could be brave enough to look at Jake and force his mouth into a smile, even though he didn't think he'd done a very good job.

The open worry and concern in Jake's face undid him, and he had to drop his eyes again. He couldn't see Jake's face, couldn't know Jake cared, and still reduce the world to the crystal clear lines of obedience and worthlessness that he needed to survive what was coming. He couldn't do that to Jake or himself.

"Toby," Jake said, his voice low and raw in a way Tobias hadn't heard often. Then he blew out his breath. "You're gonna be fine. Really. We'll take it easy tonight, and it'll . . . it'll get better."

Tobias nodded again because a response was expected, and they turned once more to reenter the hunter's house.



When Jake stepped into the living room after tucking Tobias into the bedroom with a book, Roger held out a glass one-quarter full of whiskey. "So, tell me how this is better."

Jake sighed explosively, tension draining out of him for the first time since they arrived, and took the glass. "It's not. It's not fucking better than anything. God, he hasn't been like this since—the first week. I don't know what the hell happened, he was doing so good just the other day, you wouldn't have fucking recognized him. He was smiling and looking at people, talking to them . . . and then we get here and . . . sue me, Roger, I didn't know being here would mess him up this bad."

"Really," Roger said flatly. "You didn't get the teeniest hint before you rolled in here. 'Cause I seem to remember a certain phone call when you were back in Boulder and skunk-drunk."

Jake made a wild gesture with his free hand, knuckles of the other hand white around his glass. "That was one time, and I thought we had it handled, and then we're here and he's flinching at tables and not looking at anything and I thought he was . . . How long should I have waited? It seemed like he was ready!"

"Yeah? And now?"

Jake swallowed, and his defiance cracked like a burning ghost. "Are you saying we shouldn't've come?"

"No, no," Roger said quickly. "I'm glad you did. Always good to see your ugly mug, and . . . I wanted to see him."

"It hasn't been this bad," Jake said again, looking and sounding younger without the usual easy arrogance in his voice. He started to take another drink and seemed surprised his glass was empty.

“I believe you.” Roger refilled his own glass and Jake’s. “So tell me what it has been like.”

Jake sure as hell hadn’t planned to treat Roger like his own personal shrink, but the last few months rushed out anyway, messy and jumbled, good times and fuckups weaving together into something that came nowhere close to what he and Tobias had together. He certainly didn’t spill everything—just barely caught himself before talking about that first nightmarish night, though Roger no doubt noticed when he abruptly changed directions—but hopefully enough to show him that Tobias *had* been better. Not healthy by any means, but not this fucking awful flinching and paralyzing terror.

Roger let Jake talk, leaning back in his chair, occasionally moving to refill a glass or nod agreement. He grunted, “Good,” when Jake mentioned how much of a goddamn lifesaver Roger’s book had been but otherwise gave nothing away.

“I mean it, you wouldn’t have recognized him compared to now. And then we were weaving south when you called, and I asked Tobias if he’d mind swinging up to meet you, and he said he wouldn’t.”

Roger snorted. “And that surprised you? How often does he tell you no, moron?”

“All the damn time,” Jake said, ignoring the hot flash of guilt. *But mostly when he thinks that’s what I want to hear.*

Roger had a way of looking at a man that came nowhere near letting him off the hook. Jake shifted and cleared his throat. “We work a lot on . . . boundaries.”

Roger’s eyebrows shot up. “That so?”

“Yeah.” Jake waved his hand in a vague gesture. “Making sure he tells me when he doesn’t like something or isn’t ready for it yet.”

“Uh-huh.” Seriously, Roger’s eyes could drill through solid steel. “Not that I ever wanted to chat with you about the birds and bees, but do those boundaries cover what goes on when you share a bed?”

Jake was not drunk enough for this conversation. Or even to pretend it was the alcohol making his face flush. “We got a PG rule. One of the first ones I made.” And he wasn’t going to think about why he’d made it, so he pressed on instead with the goddamn truth. “It’s just, Toby, he’s—he needs me close by. It helps him. And he doesn’t sleep that well, anyway, so it’s better if . . . I’m there when he wakes up.”

Roger huffed and raised his glass to his lips. “Well, at least I’ll be able to sleep tonight.”

Jake focused on emptying his glass in two more swallows, because it wasn’t like he needed reminding that even thinking about kissing a traumatized, underage kid was all kinds of fucked up. He knew, dammit.

“So, you got a lot of rules for him?”

Jake shrugged one shoulder. “Not that many. Just to help us both get by. And I told him, y’know”—he waved his hand—“that nothin’, nothin’ was gonna happen to him if he broke ’em.”

They drank in silence for a minute, the silence stretching out until Jake had no idea what Roger thought of him.

“That’s a start,” Roger said eventually. “But you gotta remember you’re goin’ against a lifetime of him getting beaten within an inch of his life if he so much as blinked wrong.”

Jake rubbed his forehead with both hands. “You think I forget that for a goddamn minute?”

“No. No, I guess you wouldn’t.”

Nodding, Jake reached to refill his glass, but Roger pulled the bottle out of reach. “I think you’ve had enough. You’ve got that kid to go back to, and I’m pretty sure he ain’t asleep yet.”

“Shit, you’re right.” Jake looked up the stairs and hoped Roger couldn’t read the apprehension on his face. Given Roger’s expression, he decided not to be that hopeful. “I’d better go.” Jake stood, hesitating for a moment at the table. “I know today was rough,” he said, looking Roger in the eye. “But it’s hardest when he’s adjusting to somewhere new. Tomorrow’ll be better.”

“Hope so.” Roger waved him toward the doorway. “Go to bed, moron.”

Chapter Eight



Tobias had honestly thought his fear would get better. Jake had brought him to plenty of places that had been frightening at first (terrifying, overwhelming, *Jake don't let them hurt me I'm sorry I'm sorry*), but he had always been able to force himself through it, and mostly, what he had been scared of turned out to be not so terrifying after all. In the places that lived up to his fears, Jake had dragged him out of there, had promised never to bring Tobias again, even though Jake didn't have to make promises to a monster.

It should have gone away, this fear that he would mess up (*still just a fucked-up freak*) or that Hunter Harper would tell Jake that Tobias should be on his knees, ass in the air, that Jake should thrash him every night because that was what a freak deserved. Nothing had gone wrong the entire afternoon—even dinner had been a near miss. Hunter Harper had done nothing worse than look at him like he might break and at Jake like he didn't know how Jake still had the energy to smile after dealing with Tobias day in, day out. And the entire time, Tobias had thought the fear would ease.

But it hadn't. Every time he drew a breath, he could taste old metallic blood, felt screams shivering down his skin. Hunter Harper had never hurt him—not when he'd walked into the interrogation room, never since they arrived—but Tobias couldn't shake the feeling that the hunter was biding his time. Now that he had seen Tobias, knew what a piece of shit monster he was, he would take Jake aside, and then gently, calmly, with one hand reassuringly on his shoulder, in that gruff voice that was all warmth when he talked to Jake, he would tell him what Tobias deserved.

All Tobias could do now was curl in the cold guest bed Jake had promised they would share, waiting for Jake to drag him out and beat him bloody over the tub in the bathroom,

somewhere Hunter Harper wouldn't see the evidence of a freak's blood, only the marks on his skin. Jake's hands would be steady on the belt or the whip, gray eyes hollow because he didn't want to be there, striping Tobias's skin with pain, but he had to because Hunter Harper knew how Tobias was wrong and twisted and that Jake had to beat him right.

When the door opened hours later, Tobias couldn't stop himself from flinching, legs curling tighter to his chest, his nightmares coming true in the hesitant shadow of Jake in the doorway. But instead of reaching down to yank Tobias out of bed, Jake changed slowly into pajamas and slid onto the bed behind him. He ran his hands down Tobias's arms, coaxing him to relax his legs, every movement smooth and soothing. "Hey, hey, it's okay, I'm here. Shhhh, you're all right."

Tobias hadn't known he was shivering until Jake touched him. Part of him wanted to beg Jake to take them away, to forgive him when Tobias was such a needy, broken monster; he wanted to be strong and good and obedient for Jake, but he couldn't, couldn't, couldn't . . .

Jake just pulled him tighter and put his lips against the back of Tobias's neck while Tobias did his best to force himself still, to relax into Jake's embrace. For the moment, at least, he was as safe as a monster could be without being dead.

When Jake stirred the next morning, Tobias moved away from him regretfully. He hadn't slept exactly, but he had found some measure of peace in listening to Jake's even breathing. Yet even that thin relief was vanishing fast, the sharp wrench in his gut just the harbinger of panic's return.

Jake smiled at him as he opened his eyes. "Morning."

Tobias smiled back, hoping Jake couldn't see through his tiredness to the terror beneath. "Good morning." And then because Jake looked like he was going to ask something more, Tobias sat up, turning to get out of bed. He didn't know if he could answer Jake's questions about how he had slept or if he was okay without lying or making Jake unhappy.

Jake didn't seem inclined to talk either; he just got up too and pulled on a change of clothes. Tobias noted absently that

they would have to stop at a laundromat again when they left and then clamped down on his dread—*When would they leave? Could he be good for that long?*—so he could follow Jake back downstairs as calmly as he was able.

Hunter Harper stood in front of the kitchen stove. The sound of fat sizzling in the cast-iron pans made Tobias twitch, his muscles tensing and stomach curling worse.

“Morning,” Jake called.

Hunter Harper grunted in response. “Go ahead and take a seat, boys. Eggs and bacon are almost done.”

Jake’s hand on Tobias’s shoulder guided him to the same chair he had had last night. Tobias sat obediently, willing his heart rate down.

“Need an extra hand with anything?” Jake asked.

“I’ve got it under control, but you can go ahead and pour the coffee.”

A minute later, Jake set a glass of milk and a small plate of eggs, bacon, and toast before Tobias, then sat down with another plate and mug of coffee. Tobias glanced up for some sort of affirmation that he should eat and saw Hunter Harper turn toward the table. Tobias hastily dropped his eyes to his plate, but it was hard to stare at the good, real food without feeling nauseated. He wasn’t in the same blind panic as the night before, and now that he consciously faced the idea of eating (taking food like he deserved it, like he had any right), he couldn’t go through with it. He knew intellectually that Jake had given him this food and therefore he was allowed to eat, but the thought of taking one more step outside his place (after wearing real clothes, sitting in a hunter’s chair at the same table as the hunter) knotted his stomach tighter and closed his throat. He couldn’t eat.

“Hey, Jake.” Hunter Harper’s voice was loud in the uneasy silence. Tobias almost dropped the butter knife he was using to divide his eggs into smaller and smaller pieces. “You remember that Buick I got last time you were here?”

Jake looked up, interested, a sliver of bacon swinging from his mouth. “The ’70 with the criminal rust job and the big-ass valves?”

“Yeah. I got a carburetor that fit her, but the damn thing’s still coughing like an eighty-year-old asthmatic smoker. Think you could take a look, figure out why it hates me?”

“Yeah, sure, though I doubt I can tell you anything you don’t already know. Didn’t you drive one of those? I mean, after you wore out that Model T.”

Hunter Harper feigned cuffing Jake on the back of the head. “Watch it, dumbass, I’m still young enough to beat the tar out of you.”

Tobias stiffened in his chair, his body a tense line against the old wood, his eyes snapping up to this sudden threat. *No, you won’t*. If Hunter Harper tried, Tobias would knock him to the floor. Tobias was a monster, and Hunter Harper could do anything he liked to him, but Tobias wouldn’t let him lay one finger on Jake.

With the adrenaline surging in his veins (ready to move and counter any threat, action, or attack, just like in camp when another monster had gotten too close), it took him a long second to realize the men had noticed his reaction.

Jake’s expression was somewhere between surprise, worry, and confusion, and his right hand moved closer toward Tobias across the table. Tobias reached back automatically, wanting that pressure, that reassurance, before he caught himself. Hunter Harper was watching too.

Hunter Harper eyed Tobias with the same mix of wariness and shrewd caution he had the first time Tobias walked into his house. Tobias could still remember the taste of the root beer on his tongue, knowing there was more in it than soda (maybe a drug to keep a freak down, maybe a test he would never pass) just by the way the hunter had watched him for the slightest hesitation.

Tobias ducked his head and tried to breathe. A new tension, almost danger, hung in the air, like the days the

Director was displeased with personnel performance and the guards were looking to punish anyone who gave them an excuse.

The moment stretched (a chain from collar to interrogation room wall, holding him still, braced for the pain) until Hunter Harper cleared his throat and reached for his orange juice. Tobias cringed; Jake shook his head (to clear it, or with regret that he hadn't chosen a better monster), and Tobias wished that he could be anywhere else.

“Roger . . .” Jake started, but Hunter Harper shook his head.

“It's fine. Now, if you're done eating the last of my bacon, you can get your sorry ass to work.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jake rested his hand lightly on Tobias's shoulder when he stood. Only then could Tobias snap to awareness—*trance* seemed too deep, *frozen terror* too extreme to describe what he had been in—and start to clear the dishes. He hesitated before reaching for Hunter Harper's plate, but the man got up without even glancing at him and headed for his study.

Somehow relieved, Tobias picked up the plate, still shaking from the adrenaline.



Roger tipped back in his desk chair and closed his eyes, keeping his hand off the handle of his blade by force of will more than anything else. It was probably too early for a drink, dammit.

Sleep hadn't come easily last night. He'd tossed and turned, his waking moments plagued equally by the thought that someone was sneaking up the stairs and the worry about how Jake and the kid seemed stitched together with hope and a prayer (except, you know, being a Hawthorne and a FREACS kid, probably not a prayer). His dreams weren't any better, haunted by the memory of his last visit to Freak Camp, when he'd seen that kid's face twisted by an emptiness that went

infinitely past pain. He'd been up early, figuring it was better to get ahead on the salvage yard's taxes than to fret about might-have-beens and half-formed fears.

When Jake and Tobias came down for breakfast, they looked about as shitty as he felt. Jake had smiled with dark circles around his eyes, and Tobias . . . well. Pale, silent, exhausted, the kid had barely eaten this morning. Jake hadn't asked what he wanted, just gave him a few spoonfuls of scrambled eggs and a piece of toast.

The kid ate the toast slowly and did little more than push the eggs around on his plate. After half a dozen hours around the kid, Roger could almost think of him as a victim, a civilian, and focus on bantering with Jake, eating his breakfast, and enjoying the morning.

But when Tobias snapped to attention in the blink of an eye, hands fisted and eyes locked on Roger with the dark intensity of a vamp who'd already spotted the stake or a shifter he'd already nicked with silver, he got the distinct impression the kid wouldn't hesitate to leap across the breakfast table to rip out his throat.

Reaching for his glass took steely nerves and a white-knuckled grip on his knife beneath the table. If the kid went for him or Jake, Roger wasn't sure he could take him—it would all come down to what kind of freak the kid was, wouldn't it?—but he'd be damned if he didn't fight like hell in his own home.

But instead of going for him (would have been a perfect time while his arm was extended), the boy had flinched, and Jake had reached for him, and Roger had felt old, lost, and not sure he wasn't messing these boys up even more than they already were.

It was reassuring, in some ways, to hear them working in the kitchen. Two sets of hands and voices meant that both those damaged boys were still alive and moving, holding it together, while he tried to figure out where he had gone wrong or right.

When Tobias had tensed up at the table, looked ready to go for Roger's throat, for the first time Roger had seen the monster—dangerous, violent, unpredictable—he had hoped he wouldn't find in the kid. Roger had never hesitated to put a monster down. But there was nothing about this situation that was so cut-and-dried. He had to tread as carefully as he would over a tomb of angry ghosts.

Jake had a voice that carried straight through the walls of the old farmhouse. Roger eavesdropped shamelessly. If Tobias's reaction was out of the ordinary, Jake would know better than anyone. And he knew Jake well enough to know if he was rattled.

“You know Roger wouldn't hurt either of us, right?”

The sound of dishes shifting stopped. The water was still running, but Roger could imagine the kid wasn't even breathing. He felt about the same.

When Tobias responded, it was too low to hear, even through the thin walls.

“I'm not angry, I just . . . Roger didn't mean that, okay? He's not gonna hurt you, he's sure as hell not gonna hurt me, and . . .”

This time Tobias's voice was louder, though still timorous. “Did he b-before?”

Roger heard a plate being set down, the rustle of fabric. This time even Jake's voice was almost too low to hear. “He's never laid a hand on me, seriously. He wouldn't do that.”

It all clicked. The kid's instant defensiveness. What had caused the response. Roger felt like a total jackass. The kid had been protecting Jake.

Roger let the rest of the conversation fade out. If he and Tobias were going to survive a few hours together while Jake wandered away to pound on cars, he would have to find something for the kid to do. For both their sakes.

By the time Tobias and Jake came out of the kitchen, Roger had set one of his more comfortable chairs by the window and found a couple of volumes on Eastern meditation

that he thought might be useful to Tobias, if not necessarily enjoyable.

Tobias looked calmer and less like he was going to shake apart, though he still looked that, poor damn kid. Jake seemed to have things more or less under control, and so Roger didn't even glance at his hand wrapped around Tobias's shoulder. He might never stop listening at doorways like an old woman (it had saved his life far too many times), but he could give them this much privacy.

Jake noticed the chair right away and gave Roger a grateful smile. Roger just nodded. Least he could do was not make it worse for the kid.

"See that car, Toby, the gorgeous yellow rust bucket?" Jake pointed out the window, other hand still resting on Tobias's shoulder. "I'm gonna be working on that one. You'll be able to see me about ninety-five percent of the time, when I'm not grabbing tools or digging around under her. You can sit right here and . . . breathe and stuff."

Tobias nodded curtly, eyes fixed somewhere between Jake's feet and the windowsill.

Not wanting to startle them, Roger cleared his throat. Jake jumped, then looked embarrassed; Tobias's head jerked slightly. "I've got some books you might enjoy too." Jake's appreciative smile and Tobias's complete nonresponse (unless a further tightening of his shoulders counted) made him feel even more uncomfortable for all of them. "They may be a bit technical for your taste, but maybe you'll get into them."

Roger wished he could stop seeing how the kid's hands clenched when he realized he was being addressed, how he kept his eyes on Jake's shoes like he had something to hide, because that wasn't helping.

So Roger handed Tobias his short stack of non-research books (he considered most of his books to be work *and* pleasure, with the exception of some of the more boring dictionaries) and then withdrew safely behind his desk where he could keep an eye on him and hopefully not scare the shit out of the kid. Before Jake left, he whispered something in

Tobias's ear and squeezed his arm. Tobias never raised his eyes even parallel with Jake's chest.

It went better than Roger expected, though he didn't make any advances with the research, as he paid most of his attention (as surreptitiously as he could) to the kid across the room. He thought he caught occasional flickers of Tobias's eyes toward him as well, though whenever he did look, Tobias's eyes were locked on his book or directed out the window to where Jake was pattering around with the car.



Tobias didn't remember a single thing he'd read, and distantly, through the panic and hyperawareness of Hunter Harper's every move, he thought might be a bad sign. But when Jake came in from working on the car ("Purring like a kitten, Roger, you just ain't got the touch anymore"), he'd taken one look at Tobias and helped him by the elbow out of the chair.

"Hey, I'm gonna show Toby the yard."

"Sounds good. You boys get outta my hair while I figure out what the hell this naga folio is talking about."

Jake had a smudge of grease over his cheek. Tobias had a fleeting thought to wipe it away, but the urge died almost at once. Maybe once, a few days ago, a period as distant as another lifetime, that would have been permissible, but never on another hunter's property.

Walking past the battered husks of old cars, the gray sky stretching over his head, Jake's hand in his, Tobias realized how exhausted he was. How shaken and shaky he was, how he did *not* have a handle on this. He'd hardly been able to eat anything that morning, and only away from the other hunter could he even start to feel hungry. Back in camp, he wouldn't even have noticed, but in this strange new life Jake had given him, even that low level of hunger was a rarity. Another thing to treasure, another thing he could lose.

The half-broken cars and the sound of Jake's footfalls beside him were reassuring, unlike nearly everything about

Hunter Harper's house, from the smell (fried food and old books accented with gunpowder and herbs for anti-hex charms) to the sounds (floorboards creaking as the hunter moved around in the morning, pouring water in the coffee pot and swinging open the front door to pick up the paper). Tobias wanted to hold on to this moment, this safety, forever in the same way that he never wanted to let go of Jake's hand. Tobias knew he was probably holding on far too tight, but he couldn't let go, even when he willed his hand to release.

Peace was a fleeting sensation. The first cold rush of fear returned as soon as they crossed back over Hunter Harper's threshold.

When they got to the living room, Jake squeezed his hand and let go. Only now, when Jake had made it clear, would Tobias release his hold. "Hey, I'm a hot mess. Mind if I wash up quick? Then maybe we can raid Roger's fridge, get a sandwich or a beer or something."

Nodding quickly, Tobias folded his hands together tight. He wasn't a burden that would hold Jake back from anything he had to do. Besides, Jake had left him for much longer periods. Tobias could be brave enough to manage without him.

Tobias tried to breathe while Jake was gone, to focus simply on the oxygen moving in and out of his lungs, but it was dangerously hard. He returned to his chair from that morning, where the stack of freak-approved books still waited on the end table. He picked one up and opened it in his lap, trying to remember the content and where he'd left off.

In the adjacent office, Hunter Harper spoke suddenly with sharp annoyance, and Tobias's whole body flinched. "Only a grade F hunter looking to be freak bait would think a silver bullet would work against a wendigo. No, I know it's called a silver bullet, but that don't mean—you know what, I don't often say this, but call the ASC to clean this mess up. You're gonna end up wendigo chow with half a dozen more civilians, and then they'll have to come out anyway. Call the fucking Director if that's what it takes. At least he knows what he's doing."



When Roger finally hung up (these damn fools' obituaries should at least be good material for the next Hunting 101 textbooks), he turned around and found Tobias kneeling on the floor in a corner of the living room with his head tucked down to his chest.

Roger swore. "Kid? What're you—uh, Jake?" He pitched his voice louder.

Tobias didn't move from the corner. He was utterly motionless, and it was creepy as fuck. Roger found himself gripping the hilt of his knife sheathed at his belt, unable to look away.

Jake bounded downstairs in big leaps, saw Tobias, and an instant later was on his knees at his side. "Toby, hey, what's wrong? I got you, you're okay. Dammit, Roger, what happened?" The last was directed over his shoulder, though he didn't look away from the kid hunched on the floor who still hadn't raised his head.

"How the hell should I know? I didn't do anything to him —" Roger stopped, remembering the call he'd just been on. Maybe he hadn't used the most tactful wording for a lifelong inmate of Freak Camp to hear.

But Jake appeared to have forgotten him. He had an arm around Tobias's back, his other hand cradling the back of Tobias's head, touching his cheek, soothing him with hands and voice in a way Roger had never known Jake Hawthorne was capable of. Where the hell had he learned that? Certainly never from Leon, with his tough love and buck up orders. In contrast to his father, Jake wouldn't have noticed now if a herd of rhinoceroses charged in and settled down for a tea party.

This wasn't the first time Jake had done this.

Roger watched, holding onto that detached, observant part of himself that kept him alive when other hunters were throwing up and promptly getting disemboweled for their trouble. The cool head and indifference that always got him

through the threat before letting himself feel. Better that than thinking of the bile in the back of his throat and the itch in his fingers for the nearest bottle of Jack.

Being around Tobias reminded Roger why he'd never wanted kids. The last thing he'd ever wanted was to make a kid cower the way Roger's own father had tried to make him cower.

The manifestation of that fear was before him now in maybe a hundred pounds of malnourished, traumatized teenager, now shaking in Jake's arms. The kid who was so damn afraid of him, expecting to be slugged across the face at any second, just for being in the way. He didn't just think that Roger was capable of that violence; he expected it with every breath, glance, and flinch. Roger could remember that fear and helplessness too fucking well.

It was all too fucking close to home. And whatever effect the kid was having on him, Roger reckoned the one he had on Tobias was just as bad, or worse.

After a couple more minutes, Jake drew Tobias to his feet. Without another glance at Roger, he hustled him upstairs to the guest room.



Once inside the guest bedroom, Jake sat Tobias down on the side of the bed and didn't let go of him. Tobias buried his face in Jake's shirt, shoulders shaking in hitched sobs.

"I'm s-sorry," Tobias whispered, eyes closed while Jake combed out his hair with his fingers and tried to think soothing thoughts. "S-so sorry. D-Didn't mean to . . ."

"I know, it's okay."

"Tell him I'm s-sorry, I d-didn't mean . . ." Toby's shoulders spasmed, and Jake recognized a silent sob, pain struggling up and Toby giving it nowhere to go.

Jake swallowed. "He knows, Toby. It's fine."

"You'll t-talk to him? T-tell him I'm—"

“Yeah, but not yet. I’m with you right now.”

“Y-you don’t h-have to. I’m not—”

“Toby.” Jake had to stop and breathe. He didn’t think he could take hearing how Toby might’ve finished that sentence. “Just relax, okay? I’ll take care of it, I promise. Roger’s not mad at you.”

“I’m sorry,” Toby whispered again, wrecked like he hadn’t been since Boulder.

It had been so long since their last really bad attack. Yeah, Toby got spooked sometimes, locked up, needed to step outside restaurants if they got too noisy, but he hadn’t had anything that left him shaking and sobbing in weeks.

One fucking day with a hunter Jake trusted, and that was blown all to hell.

Jake stroked a hand through Toby’s hair while the kid fell asleep, and wished he could fix this, really and truly, not just put a Band-Aid on it or look away from what was happening. He’d thought that because Toby hadn’t had nightmares last night he was maybe doing better today—but if he was honest with himself, he’d hoped that but never really believed it, not with how Toby reacted around Roger, reacted just when Jake mentioned his name. Now, he suspected Toby just hadn’t slept. He didn’t have nightmares when he was awake, other than the panic attacks.

Jake wanted to kick himself in ways that weren’t technically possible. He hated this—hated that he’d been wrong to bring Tobias to the home Jake had always loved best, the place that had been his home more than any other in his life. Roger wouldn’t hurt Toby, but Toby couldn’t see that, and nothing Jake tried to say would help. It fucking sucked.

“Hey, you wanna lie down, see if some shut-eye helps? I’ll stay here with you.”

Toby didn’t disagree, curling up under the covers. Jake lay down next to him on top of the blanket, one arm wrapped around him, listening to Toby’s breathing until it slowed down, deep and even.

Finally, Jake got up and dragged himself down the stairs.

What he found at the kitchen table was about the most reassuring thing he could find, given the circumstances. Roger with a plate of leftovers, a half-empty bottle of Jack, and two glasses waiting for him.

“How is he?” he asked when Jake strode to the table.

Jake downed half a glass before answering. “Not great, but . . . breathing.”

Jake ate, and after he was done, Roger refilled his whiskey glass.

They drank with silent intentness for about ten minutes, Jake grateful for a silence not filled with Tobias’s soundless sobbing, until Roger sighed, walked to the sink, and filled his mug with water.

Jake hoped that wasn’t a sign that he was getting cut off from the whiskey. The world was blurring a little around the edges, but not nearly enough.

Roger sat back down. “That happen often?”

Jake sagged into his chair. “No. I mean, yeah, it’s happened, but not for a while, and it hasn’t been that bad since . . . We were doing okay, Roger, seriously, I’m not lying to you, don’t think . . . I don’t even fucking know, but he was doing fucking great—”

“Until you brought him to a hunter’s home.”

Jake swore. Low and under his breath as though Toby could hear him, like he thought Roger would care. “It doesn’t make sense. I mean, he knows you’re cool, you signed the papers, I’ve talked about you and made it damn clear you wouldn’t hurt him. And it still doesn’t make a difference, like he can’t trust me—”

“Moron, look at me.”

Jake raised his head without meaning to. That was the voice Roger had used on his—on Leon more than once, and on Jake when he was being a complete idiot kid, and on civilians when they had to listen or else get their faces eaten by

whatever monster was bumping around in the dark. So Jake looked, and he almost wanted to cringe away from the sympathy and understanding on Roger's face. "You got him out. That would make you better for him even if you hadn't been visiting him for ten damn years and treating him like a person, and you've got to know you're probably one of the only people who ever did."

"And that's so fucking wrong, Roger, because Toby—"

"I'm not saying it's right, and I fucking agree it is wrong, but it is what it is. And at this point you gotta look at what you've got to work with and not at what you want, and then you gotta figure out what your options are. You saved that kid's life, Jake, and I'm proud you did, but you gotta face the fact that you might not be able to fix him. That boy's been screwed so hard in the noggin that no matter what you want for him and what you do for him, he's not gonna change in a day or even a year. He may not . . . he may never be a normal kid, or comfortable around people, or God knows what because let's face it, there's a lot of shit in his past he's never gonna shake off. We ain't had it easy, Jake, but that kid has had it a heck of a lot worse."

"I've seen his scars, Roger, it's not like I don't fucking know that." Jake picked up the bottle for a refill.

"Yeah, well, sometimes you don't act like it. You've got to keep that shit he went through in mind, and you have to figure out what the best thing you can do for him is, realistically speaking." Roger stopped and took a drink, and when he continued, his words were slow, deliberate, like he was reading an unfamiliar incantation. "And I may not know much, but I know that being here ain't doing him any favors."

Jake looked back up, something heavy dropping in his chest. "What're you saying?"

"You said he was better before you got here, and I can't judge that because to put it plainly, he's screwed in the head around me. I think you should go."

It was suddenly hard to keep his hand even while pouring the whiskey. Thankfully there wasn't a lot of whiskey in there

to spill. “You’re kicking us out?” He hated how his voice squeaked at the end, how he sounded like he was five years old. But if Roger was saying what he thought (*get the hell out and don’t come back*), then Jake didn’t really know what he was going to do. First D—Leon, now Roger, and fuck, Jake didn’t have anyone else who would so much as let him crash on their couch, much less try to help. No one.

Roger’s eyes were serious, worried; even as Jake’s stomach dropped, it was almost reassuring that he looked as miserable and at the end of his rope as Jake felt. “I’m not saying don’t darken my doorstep. This ain’t even about you or that kid shaking apart in my guest room. But it’s been less than two days and you’re run ragged, my blood pressure feels like a pack of hellhounds are chasing me, and he’s . . . well, this ain’t exactly a soothing environment for anyone.”

“Don’t talk shit, Roger, this is about the most soothing fucking place I’ve—” Jake cut himself off. Because yeah, Roger’s salvage yard was home to him, always one of the most reliable safe houses Leon had hit if a hunt went wrong and they needed to lick their wounds, but Tobias hadn’t been there for that. Tobias didn’t know the Roger who had chased his father out the door with a shotgun pointed at his head and had let him back the very next week when he had a concussion. He hadn’t known the Roger who had played catch with him, told him to treat girls right, and watered down Leon’s whiskey when he went off the rails. All Tobias knew, and all Tobias could see, was the hunter—and that fucking hurt, but it was true.

“This is the only place I can fucking trust,” he said instead. “I ain’t got anywhere else. You know that.”

Roger nodded, his face shadowed with an even mix of sympathy and fatigue. He hadn’t looked that tired when they’d driven into his yard yesterday. Jake reached for the bottle again and realized that it was empty.

Roger followed his gaze. “You’d better switch to water if you’re heading out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jake pushed away from the table, standing up. He swayed a bit, but the world wasn’t a complete blur. He could probably still shoot straight, and the stairs wouldn’t be any kind of fucking issue. No way.

The shadow of a smile on Roger’s face was enough. Not the best, but enough. “Need help getting upstairs?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Jake turned away, hoping absently that Tobias was still asleep but not betting on it, then turned back. “Roger, thanks for everything. And sorry.”

Roger shrugged. “Don’t apologize, son. You’ll be back.”

“Yeah.” Jake let himself smile. He didn’t think it looked that good. “Sure.”

He found their room and bed without too much trouble, his feet knowing the steps better than his head. Not surprised to find Toby curled into the same ball of alert tension he’d been in last night, Jake tugged him close (*Toby likes being held, he said so, this is for him, not for you*) so he could whisper in his ear. “We’re leaving in the morning.”

He wasn’t too drunk to feel Tobias twist further in misery. “But you w-w-wanted—to s-stay longer—”

“Nah, Toby. Just however long we wanted to stay, and this is it.” He patted Tobias’s arm. “It’s gonna be okay. Go to sleep.”



The alcohol let Jake sleep deeper than he had the previous night, though he woke up at what felt like a god-awful early hour, bright sunlight beaming through the window and stabbing his throbbing head. He groaned, lifting one hand to block most of the light, and caught sight of Tobias lying still, head on the pillow beside him, watching.

“Didja get any sleep?”

“Yes, Jake.”

Jake sighed, settling. He wouldn’t ask how much.

Dressing was more of a challenge than it should've been, and he was more grateful than he could possibly say for how Tobias handed him everything he was looking for, sometimes before he knew what it was. Bags mostly packed, Jake clapped a hand on Tobias's shoulder and decided to leave it there as they went down the stairs.

"Coffee," he groaned as he entered the kitchen, where Roger sat at the table with his newspaper open. "Strong as Virginia moonshine."

"On the burner where it always is," Roger grunted.

Tobias helped him pour a mug, and Jake squeezed his shoulder. "You're a lifesaver, Toby. Got any cereal, Roger?"

"Just the kind you always complain about 'cause it don't clog your arteries with sugar."

"I'll take it." Jake waved vaguely toward the cabinets, and Tobias took out the cereal box, bowls, and spoons, while Jake pulled the milk out of the fridge.

"Have a seat," Roger said, and Jake smiled in relief.

They sat down across from Roger, and Jake leaned his knee against Tobias's. The coffee helped his head more than the food, though he ate too, mostly to set a good example for Tobias. The kid managed to swallow more than a couple of bites this morning, and that was something to be grateful for.

When he reached the bottom of the pot, he looked up at Roger and tried his best for matter-of-fact nonchalance. "So, we'll finish throwing our bags together, then roll on out of here."

"All right," Roger said, his tone impenetrable. He glanced up to meet Jake's eyes. "Stay in touch, ya hear? Don't be a stranger. And you can always turn back if you need a place to crash."

"Thanks," Jake said. He couldn't get out much more than that, but he figured Roger would know what it meant.

When they came down with their bags, Roger called to Jake from his study. Jake handed his bag and keys to Tobias

and gave him a smile. “Can you set us up in the Eldorado, Toby? I’ll be out in a sec.”

Tobias gave him a tight nod (still not meeting his eyes) and took both bags to the car while Jake turned back to Roger’s study.

“Got a favor to ask,” Roger said, looking him in the eye the way Jake was afraid Toby might never again. “Go from here to Tucson. Alex Rodriguez gave me a call yesterday about something that sounds awfully like a poltergeist raising hell in one of her church member’s homes. I figured you can sort one of those out in your sleep, so I told her you’d stop by.”

Jake nodded. He didn’t know about taking on anything big with Tobias right now, but he could at least handle a poltergeist.

Roger went on. “Look, there’s a reason I told you to go to her when you were looking for another reference for your application to get Tobias out. She has experience with kids who’ve had it rough. She’s good with this sort of thing. A helluva lot better than me. And she’s not an active hunter.”

“Sure, we can stop by.” Alex had been damn nice when he’d met her last year—really listened and put her trust in both him and Tobias, even though she’d never met him—but he didn’t have much faith that Toby would be any more comfortable there than he was here. Still, he appreciated the spirit of the offer. At least Roger still cared. “Thanks again, Rog. For, y’know. Letting us stay and all.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t say it was a picnic, but it’s not the worst trouble a Hawthorne’s given me.” Roger gripped his hand. “Just remember what I said last night, all right? About keeping realistic?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jake was suddenly impatient to go. Just him and Toby in his car with nothing but the open road beneath them, the sure safeguard of solitude, no one with leverage over them (seriously, who did the highway patrol think they were kidding?), and time to rebuild what had fallen apart. “We’ll see you later sometime.”

Once out the door, he all but leaped down the porch stairs like he had when he was a kid. Tobias was already waiting in the passenger seat. Jake stopped for a quick wave to Roger, leaning against the door frame, before getting in and swinging the door shut. As he started the engine and spun the car around the gravel drive, he became aware of the silence, how Tobias was huddled against the passenger door, his body radiating misery in a way Jake hadn't seen in weeks.

He didn't know what to say, how to apologize or explain, if he could or should. He didn't know where they stood after a setback (more like a colossal fuckup) like that. Jake just turned the steering wheel toward the highway and hoped they'd find somewhere between here and Arizona to lick their wounds.

The drive away from Roger's was quiet. They drove straight west on I-10, no bypasses or divergences, Jake surrendering to wherever the road took them. They didn't pull out the map, and Tobias didn't read, sitting with his knees drawn up and arms loosely wrapped around them. Jake tried twice to turn on a tape, but he shut it off both times before the first song ended. They'd had days like this before, he told himself, and they would again.

Lunch was nearly silent, with some burgers that were too greasy even for Jake's taste, but Tobias ate his without any complaints, faces, or changes in speed, and Jake couldn't make himself ask how it had been, in case Tobias answered yes, it had tasted rancid, but he had eaten it anyway because it was food Jake bought him. Jake had never known all the ways he was a coward until Tobias.

And if he kept thinking cheery thoughts like that, the day was sure to take a swing for the better. He could always recognize a winning strategy, usually right before he blacked out for the night.

They had just gotten back on the highway after lunch when Jake spotted a roadside vendor and pulled over. He wanted something to wash the taste out of their mouths, and he was desperate for anything that might start a conversation, get a word out of Tobias, or earn him a smile.

The back of the truck was loaded with watermelons and cantaloupes—new to Tobias, but Jake didn't feel like bringing out his machete and massacring fruit on the side of a public highway—but there were also baskets of strawberries. Tobias was still tight-lipped sometimes about what he liked, besides that one time he had said he liked sticking around Jake; Jake had to remember that now when a dark part of him wondered if they wouldn't both be better off anywhere else. But the first time he'd bitten into a strawberry from a gas station fresh fruit cup, he hadn't been able to hide his wide-eyed delight. And that strawberry had been a pale, preprocessed imitation of the ripe, red, irregular fruits the withered old fruit seller had to offer. Jake bought a couple cartons and took them back to the Eldorado, beckoning for Tobias to join him on the hood.

Tobias climbed up carefully, never planting his shoes directly on the metal, and Jake set the strawberries between them. "Dig in," he said, then added with a valiant attempt at lightheartedness, "You better not make me eat more than half of these."

A flicker of an almost smile flashed over Tobias's face, and with thin fingers he plucked a small berry on top. Even the hint of a smile warmed Jake through far better than the sun; he hadn't realized how much he'd braced for the worst, afraid he'd broken or damaged Tobias or what they had between them. A close call—too fucking close—and another chance Jake didn't deserve.

Despite all Jake's fuckups, Tobias was doing better. Almost three months since he'd pulled Tobias out, and his face had more color; his bones were still stark and protruding, but Toby looked overall less like a skeleton with skin. But most of all, he looked . . . calmer. Even happy some days. Jake caught that smile more often now, and Tobias was comfortable enough to lean back against the windshield instead of hunching forward. His eyes were raised and wandering easily over the fields, nervous only when another car pulled up to the fruit seller's truck or when a semi barreled by.

"These are the real deal," Jake said. His throat was a little dry from the silence, and his heart did a funny, nervous flip

when Tobias's hazel eyes flashed to him, but at least he could get words out again. He held up a berry. "No pesticides or hormones or any of that weird chemical crap. All-natural." It didn't matter what he rambled about; it could have been the history of dictionaries, and Tobias would have followed with the same rapt attention. But he liked to talk and have Tobias's eyes on him. See him smile. Feel that they could talk again. "Not as pretty as the ones you get in the supermarket, but way more authentic."

As he talked, Jake watched Tobias's hands. They picked out a new strawberry, twisted off the leaves, and brought it to his mouth for two clean bites. Something about the gesture niggled at him, but it wasn't until the third time that he realized what he was seeing: Tobias nudging aside the fat, bright strawberries as he dug out the smaller, bruised ones.

Jake stopped midword, and his hand fastened on Tobias's wrist, catching him halfway over the carton. Tobias didn't flinch this time, but he froze, his breath audibly hitching.

Jake's heartbeat was making his ears ring, but he said quietly, "Stop that."

Then he reached with his other hand, as gently as possible, to uncurl Tobias's fingers. The malformed strawberry rolled down the hood, and Jake pressed the biggest fruit he could find into Tobias's palm in its place. He looked up to Tobias's eyes, praying he would see comprehension there instead of that awful blank confusion.

At first, he thought bewilderment was all he would get, but then he saw something light in Tobias's eyes: it could have been acceptance, realization, understanding, but Jake didn't get a chance to figure it out. The next second, Tobias turned his hand over, folding Jake's hand over the strawberry, lifted it, and pressed his lips to the back of Jake's hand.

Chapter Nine



Jake had only been to Sahuarita, Arizona once before, and it hadn't been under the best personal circumstances. His father had just disowned him because Jake declared he was getting Tobias out of Freak Camp, and Roger had let him crash with him but hadn't entirely managed to keep Jake from half-drowning himself in liquor and bad decisions most nights. Finally, he had told Jake to go meet Alejandra Rodriguez to ask for help with his ASC application to save Tobias.

As a Hawthorne, he didn't have much trust in anyone, but he'd gone because Roger asked him and because he was completely out of options. As a Hawthorne—or at least with the example Leon Hawthorne had set for him all his life—they didn't hold onto many numbers.

Alex Rodriguez hadn't at all been what he expected: a nonsense woman who preached to her own congregation, who listened to him like she heard more than what he was saying, and who most of all believed him when he told her Tobias wasn't a freak.

As he and Tobias approached Iglesia de Gracia y Fe this time, he found himself compulsively glancing at Toby (still leaning against the door, gazing out lost in thought, but not huddled as miserably as he had for the first half of their drive out of New Mexico). Toby was here now, with him, no longer shut up in that government-sponsored hellhole.

They pulled up outside the single-story adobe building and were greeted with a small church sign—no pastor's name, the service info underneath written in Spanish. Jake parked the Eldorado, then sat there without reaching for the door. Tobias might've looked less miserable than he had when they first left Roger's, but he didn't look any more eager than Jake to go and announce themselves.

Then a side door to the building opened, and a teenage girl emerged. She peered in their direction, then started jogging toward them. She had long black hair, light brown skin, and wore jeans with a bright pink spaghetti strap top.

A little reluctantly, Jake rolled down his window as she approached. A few steps away, she put her hands on her knees, bending down to peer at him curiously. “Te llamas Jake?”

“Sí. Y tú?” he asked.

“Gabriela. Alejandra me dijo que llegarían un par de gringos. Vamos adentro.” She beckoned him to follow, then turned and walked back to the church without another look.

Glancing back at Tobias, Jake offered a wry smile. “At least you’ll get to practice the Spanish I taught you. And we don’t gotta stay long.”

Toby offered him a faint smile in return—he was so fucking brave, like Jake hadn’t just walked him into a complete disaster a few days earlier—and they got out of the car.

Inside, Gabriela led them through the dining room where Jake had first met Alex, into the large connected kitchen, which was bursting with noise and people. A dozen Hispanic women, ranging in youthfulness from Gabriela to a stooped elderly woman whose face was made up entirely of cheerfully crinkled lines, were grouped in different stations preparing food. Some mixed masa in large bowls, others chopped tomatoes and peppers, and one woman dropped dried corn husks into a large pot on the stove, which immediately gave Jake a craving for tamales. A radio in the corner played a jaunty Mexican tune that some of the women sang along to.

Alex was in the middle of them, her hands deep in a bowl, mixing shredded beef with red sauce. She looked up as Jake and Tobias stopped in the doorway, offered them a smile, then returned to what she was doing for another minute, talking to the woman next to her with a long gray ponytail, before finally stepping away. She moved to the sinks to wash her hands, then beamed at them as she approached.

“You’re just in time for dinner later. Let’s go to my office, we’ll be able to hear each other. Jarritos?”

Jake nodded his assent, and she stepped over to the fridge to pull out two glass soda bottles.

In the dining room, she turned to Tobias. “Hi, I’m Alex. Mucho gusto.” She extended a hand to him, and he haltingly took it. “Is it Tobias or Toby?”

He swallowed, eyes darting away. “Tobias,” he said, very quietly.

“Tobias,” she repeated with a smile. “That’s a good name. Let’s go this way.”

They followed her through the dining room to another hallway, and finally to a small office with a missing door. A handwritten sign taped to the left side of the doorframe read Open Door Policy.

Inside, the wooden desk looked old and beat-up, every visible surface covered in scratches, but also well-loved. Jake thought he recognized the blue cloth-covered chairs from another church or two he’d passed through. Maybe they were mass-produced for churches everywhere.

They took a seat, and Jake pulled out his keys and bottle opener to crack open their bottles of soda. Alex pointed at a trash can in the corner, and he tossed the caps in.

Alex leaned forward, propping her elbows on the knees of her blue slacks. “I appreciate you coming out this way. Roger told you about the poltergeist?”

Jake gave a nod. “Yeah, he mentioned something about that. Happy to help if I can.”

“You’ll laugh at me, but I’ve gotten rusty, and I’ve seen what happens to rusty hunters.” She grimaced. “It’s probably a basic exorcism, maybe a nasty object somewhere in the house too. I’ll get you more details tomorrow. Where are you boys staying?”

Jake shrugged a shoulder. “The best two-star motel Sahuarita has to offer, unless you’ve got a recommendation.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “A motel? No, no, not in my town. Not while I have a room to offer, especially if you’re here to help clear out Jose’s unwanted guest. It’s the least I can do. I’ve got a garage apartment behind my home, nothing fancy, but it’s got a decent shower and bed. Just a twin, though I can throw in an air mattress too. Are you okay with that, Tobias?” She looked to him.

Tobias twitched slightly, twisting his hands together. Jake felt defensive and a little stunned; as far as he could recall, that was the first time anyone besides him had specifically asked Tobias’s permission or input.

Tobias swallowed, his eyes lifting for a fraction of a second before dropping again. “Yes. Th-that’s okay.”

Alex smiled. “Great. I’ll give you the address, and you can meet me there. But let me give you a tour of the church first.”

They followed her back into the hall and through a side door that opened to the outside. Then Jake saw the actual chapel with its pointed roof and adjacent bell tower. It wasn’t particularly grand, but it looked solid in the Southwest style.

This wasn’t Jake’s first church, but it was one of the few he’d walked up to without an ulterior motive. He’d broken into more than a handful in his time to refill his holy water or grab some blessed silver; most churches offered supplies to hunters in daylight hours, and he’d heard of guys who had gotten their hands on bones and relics by flashing the ASC ID, all very formal and legal and politely morbid, but where was the fun in that? Besides, it was never a great idea to put up a big flag letting the community (and monster) know a hunter was in town. He’d found one church so resigned to reality, the storeroom had been barely locked, with a big box of supplies close enough to the door to trip over and a sign reading For Hunters—Please Clean and Return, God Bless Your Mission. It was so thoughtful, Jake had broken in again the next night to do just that.

He was about to follow Alex up the stairs when he realized Toby was no longer beside him.

Turning, he saw him stopped on the gravel path at the foot of the stairs, gazing up at the cross mounted on the steeple and the figures carved on either side of the adobe front wall. As best Jake could read it, his expression held a mix of awe and apprehension.

“This is a church,” Tobias said, slowly, a hint of a question in his voice. At Alex’s nod, he took a small step back. Jake’s heartbeat tripped at that, but Tobias didn’t look panicked or even particularly upset. If anything, his voice was matter-of-fact. “I can’t go in.”

For a moment, Jake didn’t understand. Then he looked to Alex, whose brow was creased with something not quite pity, just concern and a grave sadness.

It wasn’t like churches meant a lot to Hawthornes beyond being useful supply closets and the occasional sponsors of a one-time-only-needed soup kitchen. Not like he thought Tobias had been missing out because Jake hadn’t rushed him to Sunday school when they blew out of FREACS, so Jake wasn’t sure why he felt the same cold rage-depression as when Tobias looked astounded by Jake offering him an extra jacket on a cold night.

Alex took two steps back down and beckoned Tobias closer. “Sure you can, Tobias. Everyone’s welcome no matter where they come from. You no less than anyone else.”

Tobias blinked and looked to Jake. No terror written in his eyes, just uncertainty, nerves, and a hint of something else beneath the surface.

Jake pulled on his best carefree smile, jamming his hands in his pockets. Lying with his eyes had never been this hard, before Tobias. “Dude, if they let me through, you’re a shoo-in. No sweat.”

Tobias hesitated again, glancing between them, before slowly mounting the steps to Jake’s side. Alex swung the door open and held it to let them pass. Jake entered quickly, just to show Tobias it really was okay, and turned to see him squeezing his eyes shut, fists clenched as he stepped over the threshold. Jake tugged Tobias’s hand into his, sliding their

fingers together, and Tobias's eyes snapped open, meeting his suddenly, too wide but still not over the edge.

Alex crossed the small entrance hall and pushed open the doors into the sanctuary. Tobias stopped again in the doorway, but this time the expression in his wide hazel eyes as he slowly raised his head was nowhere near fear. Jake had to look twice to see what was so impressive about the little church.

The ceiling's open wooden rafters arched overhead, the walls were whitewashed, and there were a few small stained glass windows spaced apart on either side. Jake had never given church decor much thought before, but now he saw it all through Tobias's eyes: an airy space of light and quiet, wooden pews splashed with ruby, gold, emerald, and sapphire light . . . it was something. And nothing at all like Tobias had experienced before.

“What do you know about churches, Tobias?”

Tobias's hand twitched in Jake's, and Jake blew out his breath, wishing Alex would stop sneaking up on him, physically and figuratively, with her questions, her kindness, wishing he'd stop being surprised already by someone else talking to Tobias. It should happen all the time, and just because it didn't—well, he shouldn't feel like a threat when it was a good thing, finally, for Tobias.

Tobias swallowed nervously, his hold tightening. “They . . .” he began, and as soft as his voice was, it echoed through the hall. He stopped, stared upward for a moment, and then began again, quieter, almost reverent. “Widely considered holy, they are consecrated ground where obedient monsters may not—many monsters cannot enter. Humans go to them for protection, supernatural and otherwise, for reflection, and for so-called communi—because of—to be c-closer to a higher power. Blessed objects such as rosaries, scapulars, medals, silver, water, salt, and in some cases relics have been shown effective against supernatural threats, and thus churches rate as a vital resource in the war against supernatural evil. They're very important.”

Jake watched him with surprise. He had expected Tobias to quaver and stutter, but he had spoken almost entirely with flat precision, as though reciting.

Alex had turned to give Tobias her full attention as he spoke, though he didn't look at her, and she nodded. "That's all true. But they're also places of worship and of sanctuary for *any* who seek it." The emphasis didn't slip past Jake, though he wasn't sure if Tobias understood it. If he noticed, he showed no reaction. "They are places to pray, to reach out to God, though he is everywhere, and places to share knowledge, understanding, and faith." Tobias's hand twitched again inside Jake's, his chin tucked close to his chest, eyes on his shoes.

Alex watched them for a moment. Jake had no doubt she'd noted their clasped hands, the tension but not panic in Tobias's shoulders. After a second, she tipped her head up and took a slow breath, though whether to soothe herself or Tobias, Jake couldn't tell. "And Tobias," she said at last, and Tobias's head snapped up into some middle distance, where he could watch Alex out of the corner of his eye without looking at her directly, "I promise that you are welcome in this place. Do you believe me?"

Tobias hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. Does it—is it yours?"

She smiled crookedly. "In a manner of speaking. It's owned by the community; they just let me use it, though that didn't happen without some drama. It's a long story I can tell you over dinner, if you don't mind joining me."

"I never turn down a free meal." Jake glanced at Toby. "If you're okay with that?"

Meeting his eyes, Tobias smiled. "Yeah. Sounds nice."

Alex's home was a single-story adobe construction, the garage apartment a newer add-on. Jake wasn't used to parking the Eldorado on a long driveway like this one; it'd be hard to make a quick getaway, at least not without taking out the bushes lining the side.

As they got out of the car, Alex waited at the back door of her house. "I'll give you the tour first," she called, then waved

them over to a garden spaced between the two buildings. “This was my third year trying to keep plants alive and the best so far. I got tomatoes, all kinds of peppers, and some zucchini.” She shook her head. “So much zucchini. Hopefully you’re not as picky as Jake about veggies.” Jake realized with a slight jerk—like changing gears on a bad highway—that Alex was talking to Tobias again. Tobias was looking at the earth with interest, the toes of his tennis shoes scuffing at the edge of the dirt rows.

Finally, she led them up the stairs on the side of the garage and unlocked the door. The apartment was pretty cozy, Jake had to admit, with a couch facing a small TV and a kitchenette to the side. The bed in the corner was neatly made with a colorful quilt spread across it, and Alex opened a closet and rummaged around before bringing out a tightly packed air mattress and pump to inflate it.

“This worked just the other week, so you shouldn’t have any trouble with it.” She set them on the sofa, then rummaged in her pocket and came up with a key that she offered Tobias. “Dinner won’t be ready for another hour, if you want to settle in and rest up.”

Once the door shut behind her, Tobias glanced at Jake, who blew out the breath he didn’t he’d been holding. It was one thing when he crashed at Roger’s—that had happened often enough since before kindergarten that he didn’t think twice about slinging his bag into a corner and rooting through cabinets until he found a spare tube of toothpaste or whatever. But Alex’s garage apartment was new territory for them both now. Maybe that was a good thing. They were on the same page for once, and Jake was pretty sure he deserved at least a taste of Tobias’s trepidation.

He stepped into the bathroom to check out the cabinet (extra toilet paper, half-empty shampoo and body wash containers) and turned to find Tobias by the doorframe. He caught Tobias’s hands just as he was about to retreat, his eyes hovering uncertainly around shoulder height, as Jake moved back into the bedroom and leaned against the wall.

“Hey. Sure you’re doing okay?”

Tobias nodded, hesitated, then closed the inches between them to lean against the wall too, bending his head to rest on Jake's shoulder. Jake let go of one hand to rub Tobias's neck, running his fingers absently through the soft brown curls at his nape. Kid needed a haircut.

“What's your feel about Alex so far? Say the word and we're out of here.”

Tobias shook his head. “She seems nice. Not that Hu—R-Roger wasn't, I mean, it was just . . .” He swallowed. “Sometimes my body doesn't—I hate it, I'm sorry.” That last word came bitterly and deliberately, with all the consciousness of one of Jake's first rules (*apologize just once a day, Toby, not for every single thing*) introduced for both of their sanity.

“Hey, I get it. Don't feel bad. It's not your fault. Not anyone's fault.” Except maybe Jake's for parachuting them into a situation Toby wasn't ready for. Jake squeezed Tobias's shoulder, focusing on the here and now. “I bet dinner's gonna be awesome.”

A shy smile lit Toby's face. “Even better than Los Bandidos in El Paso?”

“Betcha the next day's driving music it is.”

When they went downstairs and knocked on Alex's back door, she called for them to come in. She was standing at the stove in her kitchen, stirring a large pot. “We've got chicken tortilla soup tonight. Jake, mind setting the table? The silverware drawer's right beside me and glasses are in the cupboard overhead. Tobias, I'd appreciate it if you can chop these limes into quarters.” She waved him toward a cutting board with a few limes beside it.

Tobias hesitated, looking to Jake with worry in his eyes, and Jake offered a bracing smile. Tobias swallowed and stepped forward, hands clenching once before he reached for the knife.

Jake withdrew a fistful of silverware and three glasses, taking them to Alex's circular dinner table with cotton place mats. He kept a surreptitious eye on Tobias just to make sure

he wasn't triggered, but Tobias seemed okay, handling the knife and each lime with infinite care and precision. When he was done, Alex waved him toward a bunch of cilantro she'd rinsed in the sink, requesting that he chop them up as well.

Jake's next task was to go to the fridge to pull out a large jug of sun tea, queso fresco, a jar of salsa that looked homemade, and a couple of avocados.

"Final thing is the bowl of tortilla chips in the pantry, Tobias," Alex told him. "Our abuelita Carmen makes them every week and brings me some on Sunday. They're damn good. Here, put them on the counter, we're going to add them before the soup."

Then she took out big ceramic bowls with painted flowers inside, handed over a bag of tortilla chips to crumble into the bowls, and invited them to serve themselves ladles of soup.

"Thanks for all this," Jake said, a little awkward. He wasn't used to anyone making him meals other than Roger, who never made a big deal of it, like he just happened to be making enough food anyway to share with Jake.

She beamed at them. "De nada. I'll tell you a secret—this is Carmen's sopa too. I can throw together decent huevos rancheros, which is what you'll get if you stick around in the morning, but I don't even try with sopa. It takes more time than I've got, unless I'm working in the church kitchen with all the ladies who really know what they're doing." She nodded toward the table. "Go on, have a seat."

Tobias met Jake's eyes, silently asking permission, and Jake nodded at him and led by example, pulling out his chair. Toby copied him, letting out a careful breath after he'd sat down.

They both followed Alex's example of squeezing in lime juice, spooning in the cheese, and sprinkling cilantro. Jake had never had homemade tortilla soup before. He didn't think of himself as any kind of soup man, but once he'd tried the first spoonful, he was ready to sign up as a convert for la Iglesia de Sopa, if it existed.

“This is really good,” Tobias said, hesitant and quiet, and Alex grinned at him.

“I’ll pass your compliments on to Carmen.”

Dinner conversation proceeded with a strange kind of awkward and normalcy. Alex directed most of her comments and questions at Tobias, asking him how he’d liked Boulder, what his favorite tourist stop had been, if he had a fast food preference yet. Nothing more recent than the last few months since Jake had gotten him out, and gradually Tobias’s shoulders relaxed and he answered more easily without looking to Jake first each time.

Before he’d gotten to the bottom of his first bowl of soup, Jake started to fully appreciate what Alex was doing. As much as Toby hated attention, it was good for him to be included, to be treated normally. That was something Roger hadn’t done, as much as Jake hated to admit it.

“So, how’d you get the church anyway?”

Alex grinned. “Ah, yeah, my last great hunt. I guess it was about five years ago now. I’d just moved to the area from Texas and heard about this church having trouble. Members swearing there were snakes in the walls, hissing and whispering, or they could see them running under the pews, but nothing was ever caught. The old priest did his best with an exorcism, but nothing helped. Then they got the ASC to come out a couple times, though it was a hassle each time. Usual bullshit with them thinking Latinos were crazy and making it up.” She rolled her eyes. “So I came in to see what I could do, and I found an old hex bag stashed behind the drywall in the priest’s office, but it was too late. No one really believed it was gone, and they’d already found a new building to move to. But I asked if I could stay, and a few families heard me speak and decided to stick around too. Then they stayed, and here we still are.”

“Huh.” Jake eyed her. “Why’d you quit hunting?”

She shrugged, spreading out her hands palms up. “I knew it was time. It happens to some of us before we wind up dead.”

I knew this was where I should be, more than out in the field. So I was at peace with it.”

Jake shared a glance with Tobias. He couldn't imagine making a call like that: just sit back and stop taking hunts even if they walked right up to him. Maybe if some real heavy shit went down, something that made Toby ask him to stop, or if Jake had to quit hunting to keep him safe, he might give it up. But it wouldn't be easy, not as long as he had the use of all four limbs and his noggin.

When they emptied their bowls a second time, Jake was almost startled when Tobias spoke up again. “Thank you again—can I help you clean up?”

She gave him another enormous smile. “Sure, you and Jake can lend a hand. Go on and carry these bowls over to the sink, and Jake can help me pack up the leftovers.”

Back in Alex's garage apartment, Tobias helped Jake figure out the air pump and inflatable mattress. It was a better bed than many he'd had, but when Tobias sat down on the quilt-covered actual bed and gave him a crooked smile with a tilt of his head, Jake immediately plopped down next to him. They leaned back against the wall, their knees knocking together.

Tobias yawned, slipping sideways onto Jake's shoulder. “Almost as good as Los Bandidos.”

Jake gave an incredulous snort, and Tobias lifted his head to show him an honest-to-God mischievous grin, which nearly made him snort again. He brushed his hand through the back of Toby's curls, lightly scratching at his scalp. “I won't tell Carmen you said that.”

Tobias's shoulders shook in a slight laugh, and Jake smiled against his hair.

Breakfast with Alex the next morning was just as good as dinner had been. The eggs came from a parishioner's chickens, she told them as she scooped healthy portions of tomatoes, beans, and peppers onto their tortillas. “It's as good a meal before a hunt as it is before working outside all day.”

As they ate, she peppered Jake with questions about his usual routine for poltergeists, which he almost took offense to but allowed that she was just doing her job before sending two hunters she didn't know to a case.

An hour outside Sahuarita, they met Jose at his trailer, not unlike one of those Jake had occasionally stayed in as a kid with his dad when they hadn't had a better rental or short-lease apartment.

Jose was an older man with a shock of white hair, his hands gnarled from age and use. He only spoke a few words of English, but Jake got the full rundown about all his grandkids and the diablo that had the cajones to move in. Alex had called ahead to let him know they were coming, so he didn't put up much of a fuss before leaving to visit a neighbor's house the rest of the day. Then, he told Jake, his daughter Angelina would pick him up after she finished work and take him back to her apartment where he'd been staying since the trouble at his trailer started.

Tobias and Jake went through the sparsely decorated trailer, performing a routine search for any suspicious objects, then planted their antihex bags in the corners. It always felt a little too easy to Jake without an actual showdown with a spirit, but as nothing showed itself, they turned back to the Eldorado. Jose had assured them he'd call Alex again if the shrieks and banging started up again.

On the way back, Jake took a scenic route Alex had recommended that stopped by Madera Canyon. He'd never thought much about national parks other than as hidey-holes for wendigos and other nasty supernatural critters too fond of human flesh or souls, but Alex had looked at Tobias when she made the suggestion.

As he pulled into the small parking lot, it clicked, and Jake was pretty sure he was the dumbest idiot still alive.

Toby liked trees. Toby liked city parks. Toby loved watching the forest and mountain scenery they drove by. Actual wilderness parks were *made* for him.

From the parking lot, they slowly walked down a gravel path, through a trail in the trees, and to a viewpoint marked with a sign. They stepped to the edge of the canyon, a sturdy metal railing keeping them from the sheer drop, and the full extent of the park sprawled out at their feet.

As far as the eye could see, the land stretched out in patches of green and brown, covered in a range of scrubby desert plants, until they rose into mesas, buttes, and finally mountains in the far distance. Their peaks and outlines were sharply visible as they met the blue sky.

Not another soul was around, human or animal or otherwise, except for a couple of large birds sailing at a high altitude in the far distance. The silence was perfect, broken only by rocks shifting under their shoes and Tobias's slow exhale as he leaned onto the metal bars framing the overlook. His eyes shone bright, face mesmerized by the expansive, untamable terrain.

Jake leaned close, their shoulders and arms touching. Without looking away, Toby took his hand, intertwining their fingers.

Finally, Jake said, "I think I saw something about a secret waterfall on the park sign. Let's come back and track it down."

The smile Tobias turned on him was blinding in its delight.

They returned to Alex's just in time for dinner, and she rewarded them with an enormous pan of enchiladas verdes she'd just finished reheating in the oven. The meal was another gift from a parishioner, she told them cheerfully.

As they finished eating, she asked, "You don't mind staying another day or two to make sure everything's gone quiet at Jose's, do you?"

With a glance, Jake checked with Tobias. "Yeah, no problem. Especially if you keep feeding us."

Her brown eyes gleamed. "Not a problem, though I may set you up with a couple of nonsupernatural assignments. Roger told me you've got a knack with car engines, Jake, and my cousin Elena's truck has been acting up. It's the only car

they've got, and she needs to get to work in Tucson every day, so if you can figure out what's going on before it dies completely, you'd be a hero."

"Sure, no sweat."

Alex turned to Tobias. "We're going back to the church kitchen tomorrow to make a bunch of tamales for an event this weekend. Come give us a hand?"

Tobias only looked briefly at Jake before answering. "Yes, that . . . sounds nice. If I can help."

"Absolutely. We'll get you going as fast as Carmen before you know it."

The next morning, Alex asked if they'd give her a ride to the church so they could go together from there to Elena's, and Jake hesitated.

It was a little weird, but he hadn't had anyone in his car but Tobias for well over a year. Before then, it had only ever seen whatever pretty hookup he'd picked up in a bar, and even that had been pretty rare. He didn't like exposing his Eldorado to strangers.

But Alex had made it possible to get Toby out of Freak Camp. Plus, she'd fed them some incredible meals, so she'd probably earned the right to at least a short ride.

"Toby's got shotgun," he said at last, and she beamed again.

"I appreciate it."

Inside the church, the three of them found a group of women assembling ingredients in the kitchen. Alex made the introductions—Carmen, Maria, Rosa—and Toby haltingly said, "Hola, mucho gusto, me llamo Tobias. Gracias para la comida, es muy bueno." He'd practiced the lines with Jake the night before.

"De nada," they all chorused.

Jake nudged Toby's arm and spoke into his ear. "You sure you're okay hanging out here for a while?"

Finally, a little amusement showed in Toby's smile. "I think I can manage."

"Okay, okay, just checking. You've got your phone on you?"

Toby pulled it out of his pocket to show him—a near-full charge as always—and Jake patted his own in his pocket.

Alex chatted to the ladies for a little longer in Spanish before ushering Toby forward. Carmen waved him over and began pointing and naming ingredients in Spanish, Toby repeating them after her.

Alex cleared her throat beside Jake. "You ready to go? If you think you can trust the abuelitas."

"Yeah, yeah." Jake made himself turn away.

Alex gave him directions to an apartment complex in the middle of Sahuarita, and Alex took him upstairs to meet Elena: a pretty woman in her thirties, her dark brown hair pulled into a ponytail. The three young kids behind her were making enough noise for a whole classroom. Alex made the introductions, and Elena thanked Jake profusely for his help, offering two water bottles along with the keys to her truck.

Out in the parking lot, Alex pointed out Elena's truck to him. She'd brought along a bag of tools from a mechanic friend of hers, and it was enough for Jake to test all the basic components to see where the trouble was.

Alex leaned on the side of the hood, watching him. Out of nowhere, she asked, "When'd you start hunting with Tobias?"

Jake shot her a look. "About a month ago."

"How'd you know he was ready for it?"

He straightened to meet her eyes, biting back his first retort. She'd been damn good to them, especially since she'd signed off on getting Tobias out before she'd even met him. So he chose his words carefully, giving his best attempt at honesty. "I wasn't sure at first. But we talked and then took little jobs, working up to bigger ones. He's good when shit

goes down—it's way easier for him than making chit-chat with strangers.”

Alex nodded slowly, her expression thoughtful and distant. “I guess he's used to fighting monsters.”

Jake pressed his lips together, looking back into the engine. “You can say that.”

Alex let him work a few more minutes before speaking again. “He wasn't just fighting monsters in that camp, was he? I mean, he didn't get to fight back much.”

He paused from checking the oil and looked at her without answering.

Alex's face was grave, more serious than he'd seen yet. “This has a point. 'Cause you got to know when he can't fight back. You know what I mean?”

Jake's hand clenched around the oil dipstick, and he carefully set it down before taking hold of the car frame. The metal was warm in the sun, bordering on too hot. “Yes.” He wished he didn't, but he did.

“Do you really know what he's been through, Jake?”

He swallowed, looking away. “I've seen the scars on his back.”

“That's not what I'm talking about. I've heard about what happens in Freak Camp. Has he been sexually abused?”

Jake abruptly turned away, hand gripping around nothing, which was probably a good thing because he'd probably have sent a wrench through the windshield of the car next to Elena's. He wished he could shatter every pane of glass around him rather than face that question.

No, fuck that. Jake Hawthorne wasn't a coward, and he always manned up to do what he had to do. Especially for Tobias. He knew that running from this conversation would just be another way of letting Toby down.

Maybe he could break all the glass in sight and then answer the question.

He forced himself to say, “That isn’t something we’ve talked about.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if he had been,” Alex said, undeterred. Her tone was measured, cool. “What do you think? There’d be signs like negative or too-pliant reactions to sexual content, certain assumptions he’d make about your behavior and those around you. Have you noticed anything like that?”

It took a minute before he trusted himself to speak. Alex waited patiently, unmoving. “I asked,” he said at last, his voice strange and mechanical to his own ears. “Once.”

He hadn’t, really. He’d been too much of a coward at the time to get even the key words out, but Tobias had reacted strongly enough to make Jake certain that he’d understood. Though now, looking back, maybe he should have been certain of other things. He cleared his throat, still glaring at the asphalt before him. “He swore there was nothing like that.”

Alex sighed audibly, shaking her head as she turned away, and the sympathy and conviction in the movement sparked an unreasonable flash of anger out of his numbness. “He doesn’t lie to me.”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “if he’s choosing to lie about this—if he doesn’t want to tell you—that’s his right, and you shouldn’t force him into anything he isn’t ready for. But keep in mind that he may not even understand that what happened was assault. Victims often don’t. They’re ashamed or blame themselves or make excuses for their attackers.” Alex looked grimly across the parking lot. “I’ve run a survivor group for almost ten years now. I know what I’m talking about.”

He took a long minute before he dared speak again. “And you’re really sure that’s what happened to Toby?”

“Yes,” she said flatly, without a moment’s hesitation, and Jake turned and slammed his fist hard into the side of the car. It didn’t dent the metal, but pain shot through his bones from his knuckles down his arm, and he welcomed it.

“Watch that fucking temper of yours,” Alex said coolly. She hadn’t moved from her position on the other side of the

hood.

“Excuse me if I’m not a fucking Zen master about this,” he snapped. “What do you want me to do, get on my knees and pray until I’ve forgiven the sadistic fucking pedophiles and invite them over for tea?”

She grimaced. “Jesus, no. I mean, he wouldn’t want that either. He took a whip to empresarios in a temple, I think he’d be more than a little on your side. This sure as hell’s not a turn the other cheek situation.” She sighed. “Look, you have a right to be angry—*really* angry—but you can’t bring that shit around Tobias. It won’t do him any good, even if you tell him you’ll never lay a hand on him. He’ll always be terrified you’ll take it out on him because that’s what always happened to him before. And then he’s going to hide even more from you. He loves you, right? Long term, you gotta choose between getting revenge and really helping and being there for him. And you love him too, don’t you?”

It wasn’t a question he had to think about. Jake nodded, his jaw clenched tight.

“Okay, then. This is the hard part with any kind of kid you have in your life, someone you love and you’re responsible for. Figuring out what’s best for them over what you want.”

Jake turned to stare across the parking lot. A family with a dog emerged from a minivan, laughing and shouting as they headed to their apartment.

“We’ve been getting better,” Jake said abruptly. “You might not believe it, since—Roger’s didn’t go as well as I hoped, but—we’ve come leaps and bounds the last couple of months.”

“I do believe you. That’s good. But I don’t want to fool you. That kid’s damage is lifelong, Jake. It’ll never be further away than those scars you’ve seen on his skin.”

Jake took a few slow, deep breaths the way he’d heard he should. It still didn’t clear the rage before his eyes, the thrumming in his veins. Finally, he spoke, still not looking at Alex.

“So tell me this. If there’s such a nice, merciful God in charge of everything the way you all say, how the fuck does he let kids like Toby go through years and years of fucking torture and be treated like they’re goddamn nothing? Where’s the justice in that? How can the universe have some kind of perfect divine being and *that* at the same time?”

Alex sighed. “If I knew that answer, I’d be one rich lady.”

“Oh, thanks for that. For a minute I thought you were going to give me a bullshit answer.”

She huffed something short of a laugh. “What, you think I’m hiding the real one from you? You think anyone’s got the secret locked away? A bunch of people smarter and better educated than me have spent thousands of years trying to figure out the answer. They’ve tried and failed, started whole wars and lost souls over that question. But if you want to know how I see it: God’s ways aren’t ours, and we were never meant to fully understand him. Scripture helps me understand as far as I can. Of course we’re going to question his plan and rage at injustice. That’s natural. It’s necessary. But I keep my faith because while I see evil in the world—and there’s a hell of a lot, I’ll never pretend otherwise—there is also good. There is grace. I see it in chance, and fate, and luck, and people choosing every day to be less monstrous than they could be, sometimes even good. It’s those things, big and small, that let me believe that there is a greater power at work who loves us, in spite of all I’ve seen, the damage from supernatural creatures and humans alike. And that’s what gets me to sleep at night and gets me out of bed each day.

“Mira, Jake.” She waited until he looked at her. “I can’t tell you why God let Tobias end up in that camp. But I believe you were part of his plan to get him out.”

Jake turned away, shaking his head. He couldn’t weigh in on most of what Alex had said, but that part—well, if he were going to believe in a god, it sure as fuck wouldn’t be one that counted on him for any scheme, let alone for something as important as getting Tobias out of FREACS.

After a minute, Alex asked in a lighter voice, “Haven’t you gotten that engine fixed yet?”

He threw her a look. “It’s the alternator. Needs to be replaced.”

“Bueno. First step to solving any problem is an accurate diagnosis.” She picked up the tool bag and gestured for him to close the hood and follow her. “Let’s tell Elena, then go get Tobias.”

At Elena’s apartment, Alex helped Jake fill in the words to explain the engine issue. Elena thanked them profusely and offered to bring them in for dinner, but Alex declined, explaining they had hot food waiting for them.

On the drive back to the church, Jake decided he’d have a better chance of looking at himself in the mirror that night if he found the balls to ask a professional the mother of all questions. “You think I’ve actually got a shot, Alex? That he’s ever gonna get better? Or am I just fucking fooling myself?”

Alex took a moment, almost long enough for Jake to regret asking, before she answered decisively. “Yes, I think you’ve got a shot, and a good shot at that. I haven’t spent that much time with you, but I can see that you two are the world to each other. And like the good book says in Corinthians: you can have faith, hope, and love, but the most powerful of those is love.”

Jake released a long breath. He focused on the road ahead of him, not giving away how a boulder in his chest, one that had been there since they were at Roger’s or maybe even before, had just broken into pieces and tumbled away.



They found Toby in the church kitchen with a mostly empty plate of tamales before him, the rest being packed away in plastic containers and then into the fridge. His cheeks were bright pink, his smile nonstop. He looked healthy and happy in a way Jake hadn’t seen in what felt like ages.

Carmen, sitting at the table with him, turned to Alex and burst into a torrent of Spanish Jake couldn't keep up with, though he heard *Tobito* and couldn't hide his grin. Abuelas were his favorite, for real. They didn't need to be able to talk much with Toby to know he was someone to feed and love.

Alex waved at Jake and Toby to leave without her, but Carmen pressed another large Tupperware container of tamales into Toby's hands, beaming and insisting and completely ignoring Jake's attempts to tell her they already had plenty of food at Alex's and it would just go into her fridge anyway. They gave up at last, Tobias repeating his thanks as they turned to leave.

A couple of hours later, back in Alex's garage apartment, Jake came out of the shower to find Toby sitting cross-legged on the bed, reading a book set before him on the blanket. For a moment, Jake stood watching him, the curve of his neck, how his pajamas still hung too baggy over his skinny shoulders and bony knees. He thought about all that sixteen-year-old kid had survived (more than Jake knew or could even begin to imagine) to be safe with him now.

Then he crossed the room to sit in front of Toby, who looked up at once. Jake could have predicted every part of that motion, from the graceful straightening of his spine to the way his wide-eyed attention immediately transferred to Jake.

Jake crossed his own legs, taking Toby's hands in his own.

"Hey." Like he didn't already have Toby's complete attention, but he needed a minute to think. He knew what he had to say, but that didn't mean he had the words. "You may not believe me," he said at last, looking into Toby's deep hazel eyes, "but I've fucked up a lot with you. And I want you to know that I'm sorry, and I'm gonna do better, because you deserve that."

Tobias blinked at him once, twice, and his grip on Jake's hands tightened. He didn't understand, Jake could see that, along with the first flicker of fear in his eyes. Jake leaned forward and pressed his lips to Tobias's cheek, moved one

hand up to grip his opposite shoulder so they could brace each other.

Even if Jake had to spend every day of the rest of his life working on it, he would show Toby that he didn't have to be afraid.



Tobias dreamed that night of open skies, soft wind on his skin, and endless vistas of land with no walls or fences in sight. He woke only once to feel the smooth, cool quilt under his arms and to listen to Jake's soft breathing from where he slept close by on the air mattress.

He didn't know why it was so much easier to be here than at Roger's. Maybe it was because nothing about Alex screamed *hunter* to him the way Roger had, with every inch of his skin knowing what hunters did to freaks like him.

But Alex knew what he was, and she wasn't afraid to look at him or talk to him. She'd even left him in her church with the nice old ladies—*abuelitas*—to make food, like he could be trusted around them and to prepare meals for other reals to eat. He would've felt guilty for lying to them, for exposing them to an ASC-certified freak without their knowledge, but Alex knew. He could trust her judgment, especially when it came to the safety of her people.

Tobias had never made any kind of food like that before. In Freak Camp, he'd been on rotation in the mess hall many times, but preparing meals for freaks was nothing more than shaking out bags of stale, moldy bread or pouring into bowls some kind of half-liquid thing he'd learned in the real world might've been called a stew or soup, though with no ingredients he'd yet recognized. On the best days, it wouldn't have any taste at all.

But today there had been so many ingredients, every one of them lovingly chosen. Each step was like a sacred ritual that was part of the church next door, steps they knew so well they didn't need to look or think about them, but they wanted to teach them to him. They'd had him taste everything, smiling

as they asked *Bueno?* like they wanted his approval, like it meant anything.

In the morning after breakfast, Alex requested Jake to run over to a mechanic she knew to pick up the part needed for the car job he'd worked on yesterday, and then she turned to him and asked if he'd help her out in the garden. Tobias agreed and only realized a few minutes later he hadn't even needed to check with Jake first.

He liked being outside, working in the ground, learning the names of the plants that were grown on purpose and others that intruded and needed to be pulled out. Alex had given him a worn, baggy pair of gardening gloves, and he knelt across from her on the other side of the small garden plot.

They worked in easy silence for several minutes, and then Alex asked without looking up, "Do you like traveling and hunting with Jake?"

He glanced up in surprise, then returned to the weeds. "Yes, I do." Maybe he should have been afraid to admit that, but he wasn't afraid of Alex. He didn't think she could take him away from Jake, and he was almost as sure she wouldn't try. Not unless she thought Tobias was harming him.

"Good," she said simply. "Has it all been getting easier?"

"Yes. Jake teaches me a l-lot. He's sh-shown me . . . so much, in the world. He's very, very good to me." He kept himself from adding *I know I don't deserve it, but I try to. I try to do better, to be better.*

"Jake's a brave kid," Alex said quietly, and Tobias bent his head closer to the earth. Jake was the bravest and most wonderful person in the world, he'd known that all his life, but he knew it in a different way now, the way Alex meant it. Jake was brave enough to take a monster out of Freak Camp and let him act like a real. "And determined too. Stubborn like his father, I hear, though with more sense."

Tobias said nothing to that. It wasn't for him to comment on Hawthornes, even if Jake had named him one. The thought of Jake giving him his name, as always, sent a thrill through

him, filling his chest with warmth. He barely kept his smile to himself.

“Do you remember anything from your life before the camp?”

His smile dropped, and he shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

Alex sighed. “This world’s a big, complicated place. I wish I could tell you all of it will be better than what you’ve known, but the truth is, some parts and people aren’t so kind. There’s good and evil everywhere, though I pray that nothing comes close to that camp.”

Tobias hoped so too. After all, there were more reals than monsters in the world, and hunters worked tirelessly to remove the monsters there were. They were sent to places like Freak Camp, just as Tobias had been (*because that was where he belonged*, but he told that voice to shut up because Jake had taken him out and Jake knew best), and that was why there was so much evil in Freak Camp: so there would be less everywhere else.

“Do you know the difference between good and evil, Tobias?”

Tobias’s hands stopped over the soil. The Director had never asked a question like that, and he wasn’t sure how to answer it. At last, he reached for another weed and said slowly, “Evil is what m-monsters do. Hurting people. Good is”—*what Jake does*—“taking c-care of people, giving them f-food. Making them w-warm and safe.”

“That’s a pretty good definition,” Alex said. “Have you ever wanted to hurt people?”

She voiced it like any other question, including that morning when she’d asked Tobias if he wanted a second helping of eggs, but Tobias caught his breath in horror. “No,” he said, and couldn’t keep that same horror out of his voice. “N-no, n-never.” His hands clenched around a plant, failing at what they should be doing, forgetting what they had been taught.

“Good,” Alex said, and she didn’t sound surprised or like she’d expected to hear anything else. She hadn’t stopped digging in her side of the garden. “Then I don’t believe you’re a monster, just as Jake doesn’t. A supernatural ability doesn’t make you a monster. Being accused of being supernatural doesn’t make you a monster. Even wanting to hurt people who’ve done bad things doesn’t make you a monster,” she added. “Jake’s hurt people, and I imagine he wants to—and will—hurt quite a few more who are doing evil things in the world. I’d tell him to stop first and use wisdom and restraint, but that doesn’t mean he’s always wrong.”

Tobias wasn’t entirely sure he understood all of that. He needed time to think, to parse everything Alex had said and what she meant, but she seemed content to give him that. She kept his eyes on her own work, not where he’d frozen. Tobias’s hands slowly remembered their task, and he started searching out the weeds again.

“I would also define evil,” Alex continued, “as any harm done to a child or anyone defenseless. Any act of violence, manipulation, or withholding basic needs—such as food, water, and shelter—is evil. There is *never* any excuse.”

Tobias wondered at the emphasis. The premise seemed true, even obvious, as far as it went, but monster children didn’t count as children. And even if he fell under Alex’s and Jake’s definition of supernatural without being a monster (which seemed more and more likely), that still didn’t qualify him as a real. He wasn’t and would never be pure, clean, and whole the way reals were. Not after the choices he had made in camp, and not after the Director had explained it so carefully, burned the knowledge into his skin.

A phone rang inside the house, making Tobias jump, and Alex muttered to herself as she got to her feet. “All right, I think that’s good enough for today. Come inside for some iced tea and a snack.”



“Do you believe?”

Back in Madera Canyon, Jake and Tobias walked down a wooden bridge that ran through a section of the park. It led them through a maze of trees that alternated between the white bark of sycamores and the brown ponderosa pines and silverleaf oaks. Jake was learning more about trees than he'd ever known in his life, thanks to Toby's enthusiasm for stopping and reading every single nature plaque.

Jake kicked at a pebble on the bridge, trying to think of some non-God-related way Toby might have meant the question.

"I don't know, Toby. You talking about . . ." He made a vague circular motion up toward the treetops and the crisp blue sky. "The whole shebang? The church and steeple, hymnbooks and altars and rosaries? 'Cause I'm not sure if you caught on, but the way Dad—the way I grew up, that shit was useful only as far as they helped finish a hunt."

"No," Tobias said simply and ducked his head just for a moment before looking back at Jake. "God."

Jake knew he owed it to Toby to meet his eyes, but he couldn't. He had to figure this out first because he knew now how much weight Toby put in his words. Far more than they should for anyone, let alone for Toby. If he told him the truth now—that he'd never found a reason to believe there was anything out there looking out for those who mattered (*not for Mom, not for you, Toby*)—there was too much of a chance that'd be it for Toby too. He might accept that wholesale, just like he did with everything Jake said, even the jokes that Jake had realized ten minutes later he should never have told.

It was bad enough that Toby had never had the safe illusions of childhood or any of the standard security blankets every kid was supposed to have. Forget about Santa Claus; this was believing that your parents would always be watching out for you, that they were invincible. Millions of people, even smart hunters like Alex who had seen firsthand the fucked-up evil in the world, still believed and found comfort in the idea that some kind of godlike being was in control (over what, he wanted to know). If that worked for Toby, Jake couldn't take that away from him.

“I dunno, Toby,” Jake said finally. “That’s Alex’s area of expertise, not mine.”

Toby gazed at him a moment longer before looking away. Jake had an absurd urge to reach out and touch him, like he could check his faith-temperature or something, make sure he hadn’t just demolished the last chance for belief that Toby might have—though it didn’t seem possible, shouldn’t be possible, that there could be anything left for Jake to destroy, not after what Toby had been through. Jake hoped all the same because what else could he do?

“There could be,” he offered, and sure enough, Toby turned back toward him, hazel eyes so damn smart and trusting. “I mean, I sure as hell haven’t seen all there is to see. And I’m not always fast out of the gate. You shouldn’t rule it out.”

Toby blinked at him slowly, as though taking his measure. His gaze shouldn’t have chilled Jake to the marrow, but he was thankful when Toby returned his attention to where the bridge was leading him.

Thank fuck Toby didn’t have any follow-up. That he didn’t ask again, with that unavoidable directness, *What do you believe?*

Truth was, there had been a time—less than a year ago, even—when Jake had tried. Really and truly tried to believe in a divine power, because he had dropped off the ASC paperwork into his cousin Leah Dixon’s hands and driven away, and he couldn’t cope with how some human bureaucracy might be the last insurmountable obstacle between him and fulfilling his promise to Tobias. That this huge, indifferent, incomprehensible evil (damn, he hated paperwork) he had no control over had the final say on whether he ever saw Toby again. Whether Toby lived.

And since it hadn’t been too long since Leon had told Jake exactly what he thought of him, and Roger was eyeing him warily like he thought Jake might snap (and Jake wasn’t sure he wouldn’t)—yeah, Jake had been kinda desperate. Willing to give anything a chance. So he had tried, in those empty

yawning nights when the universe seemed depthless and indifferent, when the sheer act of prayer seemed defiant to reason. He had prayed, yeah. Tried to do it every day, though maybe sometimes those prayers took the form of a bottle or a bullet, because this was more important than anything he had ever done, more important than his own life, and he didn't know how not to fuck it up. He had nothing to lose except everything. Maybe whatever was on the receiving end of those desperate pleas and promises understood anyway, because they'd come through: he'd gotten Toby.

He *had* gotten Toby, and that should have answered all his prayers, right? Proof right there of the benevolent creator, because Jake Hawthorne had gotten what he'd wanted.

Except by the time he'd gotten Toby home, he knew nothing was going to be like he'd expected, and that even Toby was a different person entirely from the one he remembered. Even before Jake had seen the scars on his skin, he'd begun to realize things had happened to Tobias that Jake might never be able to deal with—as though Jake's fucking feelings were at all important when he was responsible for the most broken, terrified kid he'd ever seen. Broken in ways he could still barely comprehend. And he was supposed to acknowledge there was some god who'd allowed Toby to endure that? Yeah, Jake would rather believe there was fuck all out there than that.

“Okay,” Toby said. He sounded thoughtful, but not like Jake had broken the last piece of him that could hope. “I won't.”

When his fingers closed around Jake's, strong and shy, his anchor and his heartbeat, Jake knew that was probably the closest he would get to faith.



Alex announced that night that she needed to make an overnight trip to a sister church in Tucson, and while she invited them to stay at her place for the rest of the week and

check out the Sunday service, both Jake and Tobias knew it was time to go.

“Well, you’d better swing by every now and then,” she said, shaking both of their hands. “You’ve got my number, don’t be afraid to use it. And the abuelas will be hurt if you go too long before visiting, Tobito.”

Tobias’s face went pink, and he looked down, but Jake caught his grin.

They packed the next morning, and Jake took their bags out to the Eldorado while Toby did one last check over the apartment for anything they might have missed. Jake came back in to find him dawdling by the kitchenette counter, looking at the notepad and pen they had found there.

At Jake’s inquiring look, Toby said slowly, “I was thinking . . . we could write her a note to say thank you. A thank-you note.”

“Sure,” Jake said, startled. It hadn’t occurred to him, but he shouldn’t have expected any less of Toby. “You want a shot at it?”

Tobias nodded, picking up the pen.

Dear Alex,

Thank you very much for letting us into your home and giving us good meals. We had a nice time, and I liked making tamales with the abuelas and helping you with your garden.

Sincerely,

Tobias and Jake Hawthorne

Chapter Ten



“Honey, I’m home!” Jake swung the door shut, brandishing an oversized plastic bag. “And I brought home the bacon!”

Tobias blinked, looking up from the laptop before him on the small motel room table. “Bacon? Do we have . . . a hot plate?”

“Nah, tiger, the other bacon. Your kind of bacon.” Jake overturned the bag on their second bed that held their duffels. Out rolled bright, shiny textbooks, with those sharp corners that stabbed like a bitch, and then a backpack from the bottom of the bag. “Honest-to-God schoolbooks, from a real McCoy schoolbook supply place. You wouldn’t believe it, Toby, those guys spent a good forty-five minutes trying to talk me into buying a gross of these babies, just because they’re the real shit they use in schools and everything. They’ve got homework assignments and worksheets and lesson plans, even the answers in the back. I got a set for ninth and tenth grade, figure you can start out there. I’m betting dollars to donuts it’ll be a piece of cake for you to catch up, but anything else you need we can scrounge for as it comes up.”

Tobias’s lips parted, and he stood, stepping closer to the bed. He moved his fingers slowly over one of the glossy covers, then turned to Jake. “All these . . . are for me?”

“Well, I sure as hell ain’t gonna fight you for them.” Jake cleared his throat. “Got you a backpack too, just like all the kids carry their books in.”

For a moment, it looked like too much for Tobias. He blinked fast, his breath halting. Maybe this hadn’t been such an awesome idea after all. Then Tobias turned, and Jake was almost knocked over, staggering back from the force of Tobias’s hug. In the squeeze, Tobias’s lips pressed to his cheek

with a whispered, “Thank you,” before he stepped back, overcome with emotion and shy once more.

For the next few weeks, Jake had a difficult time peeling Tobias away from the books any time they weren’t actively working on their next hunt. He had to coax Tobias into leaving them in the Eldorado during meals or to put them away for bed. Tobias had no attention to spare for the television he was cautiously starting to enjoy or for fiddling with the laptop. All his hours were spent poring over the books, flipping through each one as though he couldn’t decide where to start. Then Jake got him a notebook and some pens and highlighters (barely restraining himself from a packet of gold star stickers), and Tobias seized them with unprecedented glee. He built a schedule for himself, charting out an hour per subject for every day, and kept to it with an almost religious devotion. Jake hadn’t seen anything excite him for this long before—not libraries, successful hunts, or even other books.

The unexpected fervor took him aback a little—though don’t get him wrong, he wasn’t complaining about seeing Tobias this goddamn radiant, practically bouncing with energy each morning to crack open his books. He’d even started arguing with Jake more, new defiance and obstinacy in his voice when it came to anything that detracted from his studies. The first time he snapped, *I’ve got homework, Jake*, it actually rendered Jake speechless and blinking long enough for Tobias to start looking uncertain and worried, but Jake pulled on a grin and threw up his hands in mock defeat.

It only clicked a couple weeks later, when Tobias was chattering away about the latest chapter in his biology textbook, and the waitress came over for a refill and Tobias gave her this brilliant, totally blinding smile. Jake remembered other times Tobias hadn’t been able to talk about school, had frozen at the mere mention of it. This was part of blending in, of ditching that *I’m a freak* mindset that Jake tried to chip away at every turn and that kept reappearing in nightmares, on hunts, in the basic day-to-day interactions that Jake had stopped thinking about by the time he was five and knew Leon wasn’t going to tell him why they’d really left home and Mom had gone away.

Jake got it. Tobias studied and researched freshman algebra with the same focus and intensity he brought to every hunt, to every strategy Jake taught him to stay safe out in the real world. And Tobias saw those books, that classroom experience he couldn't even fathom, as one less thing that separated him from other kids his age, from those skeptical and curious looks that made Jake want to draw his knife and wake up the sleepy diner.

Tobias wanted to feel normal, to fit in, even though no normal kid Jake had ever met took that sort of unearthly delight in biology (he certainly hadn't). Jake couldn't give him the whole normal-experience shebang, but he would sooner shoot himself in the foot than deflate Tobias's "isn't school *great*?" balloon.

Jake had always known Toby was a genius. It hadn't even really surprised him when Toby had picked up a big-ass Shakespeare anthology from that first book sale and actually made sense of it. All the books and even movies referenced Shakespeare, he told Jake. He wanted to know what they were talking about.

"That's not English, that's gibberish," Jake told him one night as they were getting ready for bed. He'd sat down next to him on the mattress and propped his chin on Toby's shoulder as he squinted at the tiny columns of text. "Are we sure this Shakes guy wasn't just drunk all the time and everyone just pretended they were smart enough to get it?"

Toby angled his head to meet his eye, making a face that didn't quite hide his grin. "There are footnotes that explain what words used to mean. It's like a code. Or a puzzle. There's actually a lot of dirty jokes everywhere. You'd probably like it."

Jake snorted. "You gotta translate for me, then."

And Toby did over the following weeks, walking him through the dramas of *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV*, into the nonsense of *Twelfth Night*, and then the surprisingly gnarly *Macbeth*.

Romeo and Juliet had started out raunchy as hell, but Tobias had gotten quieter as he got further into the play, his forehead knitting and expression absorbed. They were on a long drive through never-ending Texas with all their stupid dry counties and asshole sheriffs who loved to lower the speed limit from eighty to twenty in the space of half a mile, just to rake in tickets to fund their stupid rodeos or whatever they called their animal circuses.

When Toby fell quiet, Jake figured he was in a particular deep-sea dive of Shakespeare decoding. But close to dinner time, when he'd just looked over to ask if Toby was in the mood to try something local or if he wanted to stick with more reliable fast food, he saw that Toby had shut the anthology and was staring out at the window, looking too much like he had the time he'd found out that humans could be just as fucked up as supernatural monsters.

Jake frowned. "Hey, Tobito, what's up?"

It took Toby a moment to look at him, and even then he missed the half grin, half glower that Jake usually got when he used that nickname. "I didn't expect it to end like that."

Jake winced. "Shit. I should've warned you."

Toby shook his head. "I knew some of them are tragedies, but with *Much Ado About Nothing*, everyone gets married at the end. This one was just . . . really sad."

He stayed distracted through dinner, and it wasn't until they'd checked into their motel for the night that he brought it up again. He and Jake were in their pajamas, Jake lying on his stomach as he idly flicked through TV channels with the sound nearly muted.

Tobias said, "I guess I should've seen it coming. *Romeo and Juliet* were both so . . . intense, and the footnotes pointed out how young they both are. Younger than us." Some thought startled him, and he glanced at Jake as his cheeks went pink.

Jake aimed a crooked smile his way. "First teenage heartbreak always feels like the world's gonna end."

Tobias picked at a thread on the pillowcase. “Was it like that for you?”

“Me?” Jake sat up, turning off the TV as he rested against the headboard next to Toby. “Nah, it was never that serious. I always knew it wouldn’t last.” Sometimes that had hurt, or at least it might’ve if he’d let himself think about it. He’d known deep down there hadn’t been anyone who would’ve stuck around with him.

He wanted to say something about how it wouldn’t be the end of the world for Toby either when someone stole his heart, but the words stuck in his throat. He didn’t think he was ready for a conversation like that. Not tonight, anyway.

“Oh, hey. Thought of a song you might like. Hang on.” Jake rolled off the bed, shoved his feet in his boots as he found his keys, and went out to the Eldorado. He returned a minute later with a cassette and their Walkman.

“Dire Straits,” he told Toby, who leaned over on his elbows, interested. Jake set the headphones on the blanket between them and set the volume to max, as they did when listening to music in their room.

The guitar chords began, Mark Knopfler crooned, “A lovestruck Romeo sang the streets a serenade,” and Toby breathed, “Oh.” His eyes lit up just like they did for his Beethoven and Mozart, and he hardly breathed as he listened to the rest of the song, until the end and Jake rewound it to start again.

Two hours later, Jake was still awake. Like the cassette, he replayed all of Toby’s pretty smiles in his mind, the ones that ranged from shy to dazzling, the spark of pure joy when he discovered something so wonderful he couldn’t have imagined existing.

Someday, maybe soon (he should hope it’d be soon that Toby would be ready for something like that), Toby would find someone who made him light up in a different way than Jake did. There’d be someone Toby would feel safe with, would want to spend time with, wouldn’t mind touching or being touched in return.

Jake would be so fucking happy for him on that day. Downright ecstatic. He didn't know exactly how he'd get there—maybe at a bar across town—but he would.

All the next day, they played the Dire Straits album in the car, though Toby always reached over to replay “Romeo and Juliet.” It had taken a long time for him to dare to touch the tape deck, no matter how often Jake had told him he had just as much control over it as Jake did, and “driver picks the music” didn't really mean anything except that he'd choose the first tape of the day.

That night after dinner in Nacogdoches, they were quieter than usual in their motel room. Toby flipped through one of his textbooks without any real focus, humming some of the Dire Straits' songs. Jake lay on his back, staring at the ceiling as he twirled the TV remote in his hands.

Maybe Toby would want to take the Eldorado out on that first date. Jake should be okay with that. He should absolutely be okay with that. Toby always deserved the best, and the Eldorado instantly made for the best and highest class of dates, and Jake was *not* going to think any more about it right now. There had to be some Toby-appropriate action flick on TV right now—

“You like girls, right?”

Jake dropped the remote onto his chest, then sat up slowly, blinking at Tobias. The question had come out of nowhere.

Tobias peeked out from behind his bangs (which were getting too long again, and Jake should not find that cute, he should be finding him a damn barber). He had abandoned reading his textbook for smoothing the edge of their bedsheet, running the seam between his fingers. “I mean—not that it's any of m-my business—just, I thought that s-some of the nights you w-went out, you—”

“What? No. I mean, yeah.” Jake mentally shook himself. “I like both. Girls and boys. They're, uh, hot in different ways.” The discomfort in his chest grew, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe he shouldn't be having this conversation with Toby at all. Maybe not for the reasons Alex had reminded him

of. But who else could Toby talk to? Jake didn't want to lie to him either.

And then the next question came out of his stupid mouth before he could stop it. "Do you know who you like? Girls more than boys, or whatever?"

Tobias's fingers stilled on the sheets. He was absolutely motionless, and Jake was going to staple his mouth shut, holy shit. Maybe they needed to start getting separate rooms. Maybe they never should've slept side by side on the same bed, even if nothing happened, even if they just breathed and slept and Jake was there for Toby's nightmares.

But then Tobias spoke.

"I—I don't know," he said slowly, not looking up. "But I—I like you." He looked up then, his eyes meeting Jake's. But there was no smile, no warm flush on his cheeks. He was pale with apprehension, eyes dark in his face. "I don't know if that's okay. But I thought you should know." He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, and Jake understood belatedly that he meant it as a warning.

For a moment, Jake couldn't breathe. He didn't know what showed on his face, and then he realized Tobias wasn't breathing either. He automatically took Toby's hand in a light grip, hopefully reassuring or at least enough to keep Tobias from bolting for the door and into the night.

"It's okay," Jake said at last. His brain wasn't working right, like he'd just gotten clocked upside the head by one of Roger's mountain trolls. He had no idea what the right thing to say was or where to go from here. He should probably call Alex on some kind of hotline. But right now, the most important thing was for Toby to know that this was okay, that he was okay. They were still okay.

Toby still watched him as though waiting for the other shoe to drop. "Is it? I don't think—" He drew an unsteady breath, then said in a rush, "I wouldn't—I'm not going to do anything, of course. I wouldn't, ever. And I understand if you don't want to sleep near me anymore. Or touch me." He bit his lip, looking down at their hands folded together.

“No, wait—hold your horses, tiger.” Jake grappled for sense, for priorities. “Look, what’s most important is that however you feel is okay, all right? About anyone. It’s not bad or wrong or anything else you’ve been told. I’m not upset. I just, um. Want to do right by you. So it’s okay to have feelings. I’m just gonna—keep respecting you. You don’t have to do anything different. I don’t want you to. Do anything different, I mean.” He was talking in circles like an idiot.

Tobias’s eyebrows drew together. “You should find someone else,” he said quietly. “Someone else to spend time around. I don’t think it’s good if it’s just me.”

Jake threw him a look of disbelief. “Wait, what? What does that have to do with anything?”

Tobias hunched his shoulders. “It’s not good—even if you say I’m not a, a—there are b-better people for you to be around. Who w-want you.”

“Toby.” Jake closed his eyes for a moment. “Look, leave that to me, okay? I know who I want to spend time with, and right now it’s you. Not that we’re gonna start doing anything different,” he added quickly.

Toby studied him with an intensity that was almost painful, like he could see through Jake’s words to every time Jake had wanted to touch Toby’s lips, an urge he hadn’t wanted to admit even to himself. “Okay,” he said at last.

“Okay.” Jake tried another smile.

They got into bed a few minutes later, but Toby turned tight in on himself on the edge of the bed, and Jake respected his space. Like he always would. That was a promise as sacred as the one he’d made to get Toby out of Freak Camp.



When the phone rang, Jake checked the caller ID out of habit. His greetings for Roger and Alex were vastly different from those reserved for girls he had been drunk enough to give his real number. And lately, he’d had problems with hunters who thought his cell was a good way to harass him and Tobias.

Fucking hunter gossip traveled worse than any group of snotty suburban soccer moms. A bunch of his contacts now had asterisks next to them (asterisk for *asshole*), and Jake didn't pick those up. Most of them only got up the courage to call after they were drunk enough to forget that he'd remember their names in the morning. If they needed his help so goddamn badly after what they had said about Tobias, then they could damn well call Roger.

Maybe this was how Leon had started, gradually weeding people out of his life after they made one too many comments about Sally or his personal obsessions. Jake couldn't decide if trimming his contacts list was petty and vindictive or a completely logical decision. Tobias mattered to him more than anything, more than breathing and guns and double bacon cheeseburgers, but he couldn't think about the way he felt about Tobias or the way Dad had loved Mom—obsessive, compulsive, angry, ardent—without feeling a little queasy. He'd loved his mom, but loving Mom and living with the hole she'd left in his dad were two different things—or supposed to be, but sometimes they got kinda tangled up.

And the name flashing on the phone now was *DAD*.

Jake stared, shocked. They hadn't talked in a hell of a long time, not in person since . . . no, not even by phone since the miserable six months when Jake had been waiting for Tobias's paperwork to go through. Leon had called once every few weeks—more if he had been drinking—and every conversation had left Jake wanting to shred something, beat the shit out of someone, shoot something.

And since Tobias, silence. A silence that Jake knew didn't mean Leon had forgotten or forgiven—fuck, when had Leon ever forgiven anything?—but that he couldn't or wouldn't bring himself to communicate in any way with the son who had turned his back on him.

Jake hit the answer button on the phone.

“Dad?” he said. Tobias looked up. Jake suddenly, painfully, wished that Tobias were not there, were anywhere

but here. He could feel it coming, the bile and anger rising in his throat, the way his hand clenched on the phone.

“Jake, tell me it’s not goddamn true.” Leon’s voice was exactly as he remembered it. Rough, angry, cutting.

Jake’s old anger surged. Easy to forget Leon when Tobias slept safe beside him every night, when he had the Eldorado, hunting, Roger, and the road—*fuck, when did it get easy to forget Dad?* But it was easy to remember how it felt to want only one thing in his life and be told over and over again by the only person he had always trusted with everything that it was dirty and horrible and twisted to want it.

“Tell you what’s not true?” he asked. There were a lot of things Leon could mean. *You sleep with that kid? You get hot looking at him? You put him in danger?*

“Tell me you did *not* lose your goddamned head so far as to give that *freak* our name!”

Tobias was clearly trying not to listen, but Jake knew that he heard everything. Hell, Leon was shouting loud enough that Jake could have held the phone at arm’s length and still heard every word just fine. Which meant that Tobias heard every word. Jake saw the flinch, a big one, and abruptly wanted to kill something. And the only thing he could break in the room was the phone.

Tobias stood, gesturing at the door. “I’m going to . . . I need . . .” Shaking his head skittishly, he grabbed his coat and a door key and let himself out.

Jake was dimly glad that Tobias had remembered that much. It wasn’t that cold yet in Alabama, but he hated it when Tobias didn’t care about himself, didn’t seem to realize that cold and heat and rain and sun were things that he could and should protect himself against.

With Tobias out of sight, Jake’s attention snapped back to what Leon was shouting into his ear.

“I thought it was just sons of bitches messing with me the first couple times with ‘Jake named his pet after you’ and ‘You giving freaks your blessing now, Hawthorne?’ But then I went

to the fucking Crossroads Inn and fucking Alan Dubois told me that he heard you've been introducing the freak using our name."

"Tobias is not a freak," Jake snapped. "And he's mine. I got him out. So that *is* his fucking name."

Leon showed no sign of listening or even pausing while Jake spoke. He never listened, and Jake had never seen that before because it had never occurred to him that Leon should listen to him, because he had always been *Dad*.

"Tobias fucking Hawthorne, Jake? That's *our* name. That was your mother's name."

"Really?" Jake said. "Because it seems to me that her name was Sally fucking Dixon. That's what the textbooks say."

"You do not swear with your mother's name, you ungrateful little bastard," Leon snarled. "Not when you've been fucking a freak that killed her."

"Tobias is *not* a freak, and he was less than a year old when—"

"I don't care what perverted things he does to you. That boy creature is a monster, and that's the fucking enemy."

Leon was wrong and stupid and *wrong*. They'd done nothing. Tobias had done nothing. Jake tried not to even think of kissing or anything else because it had to be wrong (when, despite all the progress and all the bickering about how important homework was, he was afraid that Toby would sure as hell still do anything he said if Jake asked the right way).

But he couldn't deny to himself now he *had* had those thoughts, even if just a few, and that was why it hurt.

"Tobias matters to me. Why can't you understand that?"

"It's a toy," Leon snapped back. "I don't care what jollies you get out of playing with an abomination like that. Maybe it's got two assholes for all I fucking know. But we both know you can't share a single fucking thing that's important with a monster. You can't be family with a monster. I wouldn't have

given you the fucking Eldorado if I thought you'd end up spreading a freak in the backseat.”

Jake choked, anger and shame tangling up inside him. It was already bad enough that he couldn't stop touching Tobias, holding him when the nightmares got bad. He couldn't stop, not when Toby looked at him like he was his entire world, like he'd lose everything if Jake left him, and Jake was all he had to hold on to and believe in. It hadn't been that long ago that Jake had known the kid was so brainwashed he would've done anything—*anything*—Jake might've asked him to.

Even now Jake was afraid that Toby didn't really know what he wanted, that he couldn't yet. How could he want Jake when there were plenty of better options out there, all the people Toby hadn't even considered yet who were way less fucked up?

“Tobias and I don't . . .” he began and had no idea where to go from there.

Leon sensed the weakness. Whether it had been a chink in someone's emotional armor or a monster's lowered guard, Leon always knew when to go for the belly. That was what made him an exemplary hunter. But fuck did it hurt when Leon went unhesitatingly for his throat.

“So it's not the fucking backseat, and you're not trying to make it family.” Sarcasm dripped from Leon's voice. “I don't care if you're riding the freak in a bed or it's riding you, but you can't let monsters get under your skin. They'll rip it off and wear it like a coat. Didn't your mother's death teach you fucking anything?”

“It taught me that people *leave*,” Jake snapped. “But you could have taught me that just fine without her.”

Silence, long enough for Jake to realize what he'd said and wonder if he'd gone too far. Then Leon started again, quiet, choked fury in his voice: “You dishonor her name. You disgrace her life and her death. She staked evil. What the fuck are you doing, sucking it?”

“Go fuck yourself, Dad,” Jake choked out. He wished he could mean it. He wished he had the balls to hang up the phone.

Leon’s voice was suddenly gentler, angry but calmer, coaxing. “Just put a bullet in its brain and come back, Jake. It doesn’t really matter. It’s not family, and it can’t really share your life. You can’t share anything important with a monster. It’s not human and never will be.”

Jake stared at his hand on his lap, stared at his shoes, stared at the floor. He was glad Tobias wasn’t here. So fucking glad that Tobias wasn’t here. “No,” he said. “I could never hurt Tobias. And I’ll never let you hurt him.”

“It’s just a freak. A fucking freak.” Leon’s voice broke on the snarl or some kind of sob.

“Tobias’s as human as I am, human as you are,” Jake said. *Not saying much, fuckups that we are. Sick to put us in the same class as Toby when he’s so much better.*

“That’s just what it fucking wants you to believe, you goddamned idiot. You little shit, I raised you smarter than this!”

“You didn’t fucking raise me, you absent, fucked-up—”

“Don’t you talk to me while your whore is probably licking your—”

“You don’t have the fucking right to talk to me about Tobias when it was your fault Mom—”

“You bring up your mother and I’ll come shoot you myself!”

“I’d like to fucking see you try,” Jake snarled.

“You’re not my fucking son.”

“You’ve said that before.”

Leon paused, and Jake panted, struggling to catch his breath through the blind rage. What had been said, what he had said, and what that meant sank slowly, horribly into him.

That silence hurt more than anything Leon had said to him because in it, he saw the end.

“Yeah,” Leon said. “But this time I mean it. You’re not my fucking son. I see you, I’m putting it down and you with it. Enjoy your whore.” He hung up.

Jake sat on the bed and looked at the phone. He was shaking. When the fuck had he started shaking?

He looked at the phone and scrolled down the list of contacts. *DAD* was right there, all caps. He highlighted it and thought about changing it. Thought about deleting it. Why should it still say *DAD* when that wasn’t true anymore? It should be something else. Leon, maybe. Or Hawthorne, if Jake didn’t count himself and Tobias—but he did because Leon had had no fucking right to say Tobias couldn’t have a goddamned name of his own when he’d had nothing his entire life. It wasn’t like they owned the fucking name. There were fucking trees named Hawthorne that were worth more than Leon and Jake combined. Maybe he should have found Tobias another name, a better one, because right then, Jake was sure that being a Hawthorne was more a curse, more the brand of stupid dicks and killers than anything to be proud of.

In the end, Jake didn’t change Leon’s contact name, didn’t delete it, because seeing the word that used to represent his whole world and knowing that it represented nothing . . . that hurt. And Jake deserved to hurt, for Mom, for Tobias, and maybe for the ghost called Dad.

He flipped the phone shut, snatched his jacket, and slammed the motel door behind him.

Jake almost collided into Tobias after turning the first sharp corner. Tobias had been leaning against the brick wall beside the soda vending machine, hands tucked in his pockets, eyes fixed on the ground. He brought his hand up when Jake barreled into him, fingers barely brushing Jake’s shoulder before Jake swore and took a step back. Tobias started, first stepping away, then timidly toward him. Jake wanted to bolt, take off in another direction and not look back until he could

fight down all this destructive emotional shit he shouldn't be exposing to Tobias. Tobias wasn't supposed to see this.

"Hey," Toby said, and Jake forced himself to look him in the face.

His first thought was *fuck*, he'd done it again, scaring the crap out of Toby. It had been ages and it was Jake's fault again, always fucking things up, always making Tobias flinch and cower. But then he realized this wasn't the same blind terror he knew too well. Tobias was worried. Intensely worried. Maybe . . . for Jake, rather than because of him.

Christ, he was a fucking mess.

"Jake," Toby said, very softly. "Are you okay?"

Jake ran a hand through his hair, twisting around to catch sight of the Eldorado, gleaming where it was parked in front of their room. "Tell you what, Toby. I gotta go out tonight. Wanna come? I think . . . I think I could use you watching my back because I'm not . . . yeah, I'm not, so if you could . . . You cool with that?"

Toby drew a quick breath, but he didn't hesitate for so much as a second. "Yeah, Jake. I'm cool."



Jake started off the night with a double shot of Jack Daniels and kept going full speed from there.

Tobias watched, nursing his Coke and trying to keep his eye on the rest of the bar. They'd gone to bars before, usually in the afternoon or early evening, so he wasn't completely unfamiliar with the smoke and noise and press of people laughing, increasingly loose-limbed and clumsy, but tonight was a magnitude greater, louder and less controlled. Maybe this was a busier night or a different mood, or there was a party. Maybe it was the way Jake drank like he was burning straight alcohol to fuel his smile and shoved back at anyone who gave him the smallest excuse when every other night he had glanced at Tobias and deflected.

It was getting easier to be around reals. Mostly because he was pretty confident that he wasn't the center of attention here; no one seemed to take any notice of him, in fact. He wasn't giving off any freak vibes because he'd learned how to blend in, at least for this kind of situation. Sure, he was much younger than everyone else in the room. But he was safe with his innocent, nonalcoholic drink and by pretending to be a real like them, he could stand up for himself, especially when doing anything less would make more trouble for Jake.

Tobias didn't know what Leon had said, except that it had been about *him*, and that had enough guilt wracking his stomach that he had been relieved when Jake forgot about dinner. Jake certainly had a right to be upset with him, to do many worse things that Tobias had almost stopped thinking about every day, but while Tobias could tell that Jake was upset, it wasn't yet directed at him. All the same, Jake's behavior now worried him. It reminded him of the first times Jake had returned drunk to the apartment or motel, how Tobias hadn't known what to expect. But at least there it had just been them without other reals to get involved. And he hadn't had to watch Jake barrel toward that stage of inebriation.

Not that Jake ever left him, really. No matter how many drinks went down his throat, Jake circled back to him, squeezing his shoulder, going on about this chick he'd been chatting up, or a guy giving him the stink-eye from across the room (*I could take him, Toby, wouldn't cost me more than a half a minute and a couple lungfuls of air, you know*). Tobias nodded, smiled, let himself clench the edge of Jake's jacket in a bone-white grip. If Jake noticed, he never said. Every time Jake started to slide off the barstool and back into the crowd with another drink, Tobias let him go.

By one a.m., Jake had lost two games of pool, almost stabbed a guy in the eye trying to throw darts, and was slurring so badly Tobias could barely pick out anything but *Toby* and *'nother drink*. The bartender interpreted every gesture as a demand for another shot.

When Jake started flirting with an equally drunk woman who had earlier been hanging off a muscular man, Tobias

pressed his lips together, paid the tab from Jake's wallet—Jake had pressed it into his hands sometime after the dart game but before he started flirting with anything that moved—pushed his way through the crowd, and caught Jake by his sleeve. “Jake, we should go.”

Jake looked at him and flushed, jerking his hand off the woman's neck, where he had been kneading the line of skin between her see-through black top and hairline. “Toby,” he slurred. “I din' mean to . . . Gawd, it doeshn't mean. Ahh, fuck, I din' mean . . .” Jake swayed, his eyes blanking, expression lost. “M fucking washted, Toby.”

Tobias saw a dark head leaving the bathroom, and his grip tightened on Jake's jacket. The boyfriend was coming back. “Jake, we need to get out of here,” he said, low and urgent. “C'mon, let's go.”

Too late. The boyfriend—taller than Jake and heavier by about fifty pounds—tapped Jake hard on the shoulder, while his girlfriend stared at him and gasped dramatically. “You messing with my girl, punk?” he demanded.

Jake looked at the guy, then at the woman. “She really didn't sheem much like yours, dishclout. An' you're not my fucking dad.”

Yeah, Jake, Tobias thought as the guy growled and threw a wild haymaker at Jake's face, *that would be the first coherent thing you've said in an hour.*

Maybe Jake couldn't hit the side of a barn with a dart right now, but he dodged the fist okay and punched the guy in the jaw. The boyfriend stumbled back, crashed into the table behind him—the table held, but the beer bottles didn't—and got up with a roar. The fight spread, the boyfriend's buddies jumping in, along with the men who had lost their beer, and Tobias suddenly stopped giving a damn if they were reals if he had to break some fuck's arm to stop him from cutting up Jake with the jagged edge of a bottle. No one here knew he was a monster, and it was always easy to go for the throat when Jake was on the line.

Tobias picked up a pool cue.

When he heard the distant wail of police sirens and the boyfriend was knocked out beneath a table, the girlfriend nowhere in sight, Tobias decided it was time to, in Jake's words, blow this joint. He grabbed Jake before he could get brained with a broken piece of barstool and towed him out the back door.

At the Eldorado, Jake stumbled to the door, half slouched and half fell into the seat, and fumbled the keys into the ignition while muttering about his swollen eye and people who brought beer bottles to a fist fight. "I kin do thish, Toby. Promishing, promishes, promishory promintary . . ."

The entire time they drove, Tobias kept his eyes closed and his hand on Jake's thigh, feeling the muscles tense and flex beneath his jeans as Jake braked abruptly, accelerated in jerks and starts, and swore.

They didn't get very far. Jake had barely pulled into a mostly deserted Walmart parking lot before he killed the engine and put his head on the steering wheel.

The longer he just sat there, the jumpier Tobias felt. Jake was drunk. Really, *really* drunk. Drunker than Tobias had ever seen him, and Tobias hadn't researched nearly enough to know if Jake would be fine, or if he needed food, water, blankets, or an emergency room, or if he needed something Tobias didn't even know about.

When Tobias had just decided to reach out, feel for a fever or shaking and bleeding at the very least, Jake spoke without looking up from the wheel. "I'm so fucking sorry, Toby."

Tobias jerked back. "It's okay. I'm okay. You're okay. We're good." He tried to smile, wishing Jake would look up, meet his eyes.

"Yeah." Still not looking at him, Jake opened the door, took three steps away from the Eldorado, and emptied his guts across the asphalt. Then he straightened shakily, walked back, closed the door, curled up, and went to sleep.

Tobias stared, swallowed, and then very cautiously brushed his fingers through the edge of Jake's hair before

tucking himself up against the window and bracing his arms over his knees to watch Jake sleep.



The next morning, Jake woke up, groaned, and poked gingerly at his right eye where he was sure he was developing one hell of a beautiful black eye. He felt hungover and shitty like . . . well, like several people had tried to beat in his face with what was on hand in a drinking establishment.

“Fuck,” he said. Tobias, slumped over in the passenger seat, jerked awake, and after blinking at Jake groggily for a moment, he began rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Jake was relieved to see that Tobias looked fine, except for a small scratch on his cheek. Fuck, how had that happened? Who had done it? Jake was gonna kick their ass, as soon as he could walk without throwing up.

He was pretty fuzzy on the fight or what had started it, though he had the feeling he deserved every bruise. He also had a hangover to end all hangovers—the entire world pulsed in time with his heartbeat, Tobias’s wide eyes expanding and contracting in his vision like some kind of cartoon dog’s—but he could still remember how they had gotten to the parking lot last night. Or rather, waking up in the driver’s seat with the Eldorado’s keys in his pocket told a pretty convincing story.

“Toby, I need food,” Jake rasped. “And Tylenol. Maybe morphine.”

Tobias blinked, shook himself, and then reached over the backseat for the first aid kit.

Jake caught his elbow. “Joking, Toby. You okay?”

Tobias smiled, briefly. Jake was a fucking idiot for coming so close to messing this up. “Yeah, Jake.”

“Good. Let’s get breakfast, and then I’m gonna teach you how to drive.” He dragged himself out of the Eldorado and then waited, leaning against the door while Tobias worked through the freeze, the panic, whatever he was thinking about now. Much as Jake wanted to do this right, he didn’t have the

energy to look up right now. And he wasn't going to argue about this.

“Jake—” Tobias began, one white-knuckled hand gripping the top of the Eldorado's door.

“Nope, breakfast,” Jake said. He tried to smile, but it probably didn't come out very well. The leading edge of dawn light coming up behind him hurt like a mother, and he fumbled for his sunglasses. Tobias liked to think that he didn't argue, that he didn't have an opinion. Jake sometimes enjoyed being enough of a pain in the ass to prove him wrong.

He started off to the Walmart where chips, coffee, and hopefully extra-strength Tylenol awaited, while Tobias followed close at his heels, watching like he expected Jake to fall over any second.

They didn't make a habit of touring grocery stores, as they usually found whatever they needed at truck stops and convenience stores, but Tobias had gotten comfortable even in the bigger ones and lately even department stores. Jake's hangover this morning might not have promoted the clearest of thinking, but he was willing to bet that the preoccupation of driving would distract Tobias from his usual produce section nerves.

The morning staff in Walmart glanced at them with tired suspicion when he staggered through the doors but left them alone when Jake snagged beef jerky and Tic Tacs off the shelves.

“Toby,” he said, “I won't say this often, so listen close.” He could feel Tobias's gaze on him, but he kept going, picking up a can of salsa off the shelf and weighing it in his hand. “Sometimes, I am a fucking dumbass who does dumbass shit. Like last night. Yeah, last night was a grade A dumbass, shining Jake-Hawthorne-fuckup moment. And I know you know that, you're plenty smart enough to tell when I'm flying off the fucking rails.”

Jake had to stop, take a shaky breath, consciously set the salsa jar back down. “And last night was the worst that . . . just the worst. I know that. And I'm gonna try to be better. I'm

gonna be better for you, Tobias, but I need . . . I'm gonna want . . . What I'm trying to say is that you're allowed to say, 'Jake, stop being a fucking dumbass.' Fuck, I'd be grateful. Just knock me out or something, all right?"

For a second, Tobias stared at him as though he'd never seen him before. He had that same old horrible look in his eyes as though he thought that this was a test with no right answers, and Jake's stomach—already roiling from too much alcohol and not enough common sense—clenched hard around his spine. And then Tobias ducked his head, not really smiling, but no longer holding that pinched desperate look of borderline terror. "Yeah, Jake. I got it."

"Good." Jake exhaled, rubbing his eyes under the sunglasses and grabbing a couple boxes of Pop-Tarts off the shelves. "That's another reason you're learning to drive—no, don't look at me like that, I'm not gonna argue about this with you."

Tobias crossed his arms and gave him a narrow-eyed look. "I thought I was allowed to argue whenever I wanted."

Jake winced at the sound of his own words and then cast Tobias a look of grudging approval. "Yeah, well—we can argue later, but . . . Christ, not while my head feels like it's got a marching band with a double drumline bashing away inside. We can hash this out when it's a fair fight, just . . . let me get some coffee. And some grease." Jake picked a can off the shelf near the flour and blinked at it for a second. When the "Crisco" registered, he hastily fumbled it back onto the shelf. "Not that much grease. Fuck it, look at me, Toby, I don't even know what this *is*." He held out a bag of potato starch with the plaintive air of a child who couldn't get Legos to hold together.

Tobias took the bag carefully, turned it between his hands, read the ingredients, and then handed it back to him. "It's used to thicken soups and stews."

"You are a fucking lifesaver." Jake sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "But seriously. I know you don't want to drive. I know that that's a . . . a lot. I learned when I was, like,

seven or something, so it's like second nature, but I know that it can be huge, but . . . I'm asking you to do this for me. Thinking about how wasted I was last night and what could have happened . . . I could have crashed us, you know? Hurt you or me or my car. It would mean a lot if I could count on you to get behind the wheel if I get hurt, or wasted, or just need to take a couple winks while we're on the road but we gotta keep going. I'm not asking you to say right now you'll get us through downtown Chicago without breaking a sweat, but just—baby steps, like everything else we've been doing. We'll start easy, and you'll let me know when you've had enough for one day, and that'll be okay. Can you . . . give that a try with me?"

Tobias took a slow, careful breath, his eyes closed. When he opened them, they were sober and sad. "I don't want to drive."

Jake dropped his head into his hands. "Fuck, Toby, I don't want you to do—"

He stopped when Tobias grabbed him by the wrists, tugged his hands down. "I don't want to, but to help you, to help keep you safe—I will." And there was no fear in his eyes, just grim determination, and Jake felt a slow, exultant grin spread over his face.

"Toby, this is so awesome, you have no idea. We're gonna take it slow, baby steps, but I'm sure you're gonna win Safest Driver in the State wherever the hell we might happen to be."



Tobias knew Jake was trying to support him, to boost his confidence. Worse, Jake really did believe Tobias could do all these real things to a degree that honestly scared him. He was going to let Jake down sooner or later, and he really, really didn't want it to be while he was behind the wheel of the Eldorado.

But true to his word, Jake started him out with small challenges, and he let Tobias take his time reading driver's manuals and motoring safety until Tobias said he was ready—

or as ready as he would be, seeing how Jake wasn't changing his mind.

Jake took them to a big, mostly vacant parking lot before handing over the keys for the first time. A couple of empty cars were parked at the other end of the lot, but no one was in sight. No one to watch Tobias attempt something he definitely should not be doing, to witness the consequences and place a call to the ASC to report the freak seriously out of bounds.

He and Jake stepped out of the car into the cool fall air to switch places, and Tobias gave him a long look before he got into the driver's seat.

Jake didn't rush him. He let Tobias sit and breathe and finally adjust the mirrors to the slight difference between their heights, then touch the controls and name them one by one.

"If you just want to sit here today, Toby, that's all you got to do," he said, and Tobias shot him a look before gripping the keys in the ignition. The engine roared to life underneath him, and Tobias took a few more deep breaths.

Slowly he began tapping the accelerator and the brake, experimenting with how much pressure was needed to inch forward and to come to a quick stop. Then he tried the steering wheel, gingerly rotating it one way and then the other. The Eldorado shifted in slow angles, nowhere near enough for a ninety-degree turn.

Jake sat calm and at ease next to him, like there was nothing at all dangerous about putting a freak in charge of any large steel machine capable of high speeds, let alone his precious car. Like there was nothing wrong about him being in shotgun seat instead of Tobias.

But Tobias knew how to focus. He had learned harder lessons under worse conditions before. He put his mind to the task, gripped the wheel at ten- and two-o'clock positions, and asked, "What's next?"

Chapter Eleven



Victor Todd paused outside the Director's iron-enforced door and took a steadying breath before knocking.

He was very aware of the camera at the corner of the hall. He would have composed himself somewhere without observation, but after the Director's most recent push to seed the facility with CCTVs, the places a man could have a hundred percent chance of privacy had sunk to a handful, tops, and even those had . . . specific uses.

Safer to steady himself out here, where at least nerves were understandable and the odds that he was being actively observed (and that the observer would note his sign of weakness and care) were low.

Though not completely zero.

The Director's clear "Enter!" came almost immediately, and Victor stepped into Jonah Dixon's office.

The place was larger than a usual office, with a corner that was at least half library and had every item in its proper place, down to the Director himself. At his desk, files were stacked neatly on the edge closest to the guest chair, and others were scattered over his desk, along with various sheets of paper crumpled and piled haphazardly in some system that Victor couldn't parse without staring too long.

"Mr. Todd, please take a seat." He gestured at the padded chair before his desk, and Victor sat gingerly and kept his hands on his knees. He might have been watching too many late-night horror movies, but he could imagine restraints springing from the armrests that would lock him up tight as a freak in interrogation. Paranoid? Yes, but if anyone could make it happen, it was the man in front of him.

"Of course, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?"

The Director gestured at the files nearest Victor. “How would you evaluate this selection of freaks?”

Victor glanced into the Director’s cold brown eyes and then picked up the files.

They were heavier than they should have been except for the occasional souvenirs pasted onto the pages: a coin, pendants, bits of bone, or other small artifacts. The numbers ranged from 95UI8398 to 20WI7182 and included a large variety of species. Day-to-day, Victor didn’t usually think of the freaks as numbers, so it took him a minute with each photo to realize who he was looking at. 97VP2378 was Sucker, the vampire who looked about ten and was probably the biggest blood-slut in the entire mini-nest, willing to do just about anything for a couple drops of O neg. 20WI7182 was Screamer, the newest witch arrival who hadn’t shut up from the moment he got dragged out of the van until his voice wore down to a broken thread (Victor thought he was with Karl even now). All of them were young or appeared young, but as far as Victor could tell, they had nothing else in common.

“Evaluation, sir?” Victor said, trying to put the question in his voice without actually asking it.

“What’s your feel for them? What can you tell me about them as individuals and not just members of their species?” The Director watched him with calm, calculating eyes.

Victor realized his right knee was bouncing and stopped it. “Do you have any . . . criteria?” Somehow, he didn’t think that the man cared who gave good head.

The Director steepled his fingers, mouth pinched in thought. “What has Mr. Sloan told you about my little project with the unidentified freak Jake Hawthorne removed?”

“Sir?”

The Director smiled. “Please don’t pretend ignorance in defense of Mr. Sloan. Rest assured I wouldn’t have told him anything that was not appropriate for him to know. And I assume that as the two of you are . . . close, he may have shared more than a little.”

Victor's palms broke out in a cold sweat, and he resisted the urge to wipe them on his pants. He ran a half dozen options through in his head, from denying that he had any fucking thing to do with Crusher to trying to defend the asshole's absolutely nonexistent honor, but he settled on "We work well together, sir," and stopped, waiting to see which way the Director would jump.

His smile never wavered. "I have noticed. So beating around the bush would be counterproductive. What do you know about the project Mr. Sloan assisted me with until that unfortunate . . . night of overenthusiasm?"

Victor remembered hearing about that night as a mix of nasty fun and bad choices, followed by a dressing-down in his presence that had convinced him that if he ever fucked up something Director Dixon valued, he was about as likely to just disappear as lose his job. He remembered less of what Crusher had told him before, except the somewhat breathy pleasure with which the other man had told how he had "helped," or the badly hidden pissiness at the things he hadn't been allowed to do.

"With Pre—with that freak, Hawthorne's freak, you were . . . training him, somehow. Getting him good at research, trained to follow orders and do . . . whatever you needed." And just because what the Director needed hadn't been what most hunters or guards demanded of a monster didn't mean that Victor couldn't appreciate the cold-blooded artistry and skill that went into the process.

Pretty Freak had been Crusher's obsession, not Victor's, but Victor had to admit there had never been another freak like him before or after. He still couldn't name whatever quality it was about him that had Hawthorne cock-struck for so many years, but no inmate had learned better than Pretty Freak how to survive and avoid trouble—at least until Crusher got hired.

"Hmm." The Director frowned. "I am continually reminded of Mr. Sloan's lack of vision. Supernaturals are a plague on humanity, something that infiltrates, corrupts, slaughters, and conceals itself, nearly undetectable within our society until it strikes. My goal is to take that perverse talent,

that ability to pollute, and turn it back on the supernatural source. You could say I am researching a vaccine. You could also say that I want, above all, to make these monsters useful, and it is clear to me that means turning them to the service of the human will. Now, in that light, Mr. Todd . . .” He leaned forward and tapped the files that Victor had returned to the desk. “How would you evaluate these freaks as viable subjects for my project?”

Victor picked them up again and leafed through them, thinking not so much about what they could do for him or other guards as how they reacted, which monsters he believed when they shied away, which ones reminded him of Pretty Freak. Not in looks or . . . amiability, but in something deeper, something maybe best described as adaptability without cunning.

“This one,” he said, dropping 98UI4982 on the table. “She’s biddable without being . . . broken. Another unidentified.”

The Director hummed and began to peruse the file while Victor went back to the others.

At the end of an hour or so, he’d pulled four names out of the dozen or so in the pile, and the Director was nodding thoughtfully and making little marks in the margins with a pencil nub. He looked up and smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Todd, you’ve been very helpful. It’s always good to get input from the men on the ground.”

Victor nodded, but the compliment unsettled him in a way he couldn’t define. “This has been enlightening, sir.”

“Perhaps if I have need of your experience and good eye, I will bring you in for the more hands-on applications.”

“I’m not—” It would have been a lie to say that Victor didn’t like the violence, the fucking, hitting the freaks around a little and knowing they couldn’t do a damn thing about it. But one of the last things Victor wanted was to be handpicked by the Director for a project like this, to be under the man’s eagle eye even more than usual. “From what Cru—Sloan’s told me, what you need might be outside my skill set.”

“Brutality is only one way to break down a freak, Mr. Todd. I think you would excel at many of the other methods. You have the eye.” The Director stood and stretched behind his desk. Victor could hear bones creaking from even where he stood, the ever-present reminder that hunting was no profession for old men. “I’m sure you have other things that need doing, and I have some things to mull over.”

Victor stood as well. He almost bowed, caught himself, and changed it into a weird kind of half head wiggle. “Yes, sir. Glad I could be of help.”

“I never doubted you would be.” The Director gestured at the door, and Victor took the opportunity to get the hell out of there.

He made it to the break room before he had to sink down onto the couch, lean his head back, and breathe. It took a few minutes before he realized that he hadn’t locked the door or turned the cameras off (fuck, the Director had probably seen every moment of that, maybe making careful notes in yet another file). He relaxed again when Crusher came into the room, shaking out his hands and rubbing his wrist.

He paused on his way to the bathroom. “You okay, Todd?”

Victor rubbed his face. “Just got out of a fucking meeting with the Director.”

“Cocksucker,” Crusher muttered. “Still can’t believe he stopped my playing with Pretty Freak, then gave him the fuck away. What’d Dixon want?”

“You don’t want to know.” And he didn’t, because if Crusher knew that the program was starting up again, he would get dangerously pissed at anyone else who got attention, praise, and permission to hurt freaks in new and inventive ways under the benevolent eye of the Director.

And then Victor realized that if anyone was going to get drafted into the program on the guard side, it would probably be himself.

“Hey, I’m gonna”—Crusher gestured toward the bathroom—“and then I’ve got a freak to fuck. Wanna come?”

Victor swallowed painfully and tried to return the smirk. “Nah. Thanks, though. Who’s up?”

“Lucky,” Crusher replied, grinning wolfishly. “Not so lucky today.”



Kayla was used to seeing a guard shove a freak into or out of the barracks, especially for trying to get off without permission. True or false, it didn’t matter. What did matter is that all the other monsters had to watch the punishment for masturbation, usually at the next assembly in the bright light of day so they all could see what happened to bad little freaks. Kayla was well-practiced at keeping her eyes fixed on the scene but drifting away inside, noting the other monsters’ flinches with detached derision. Just another normal day at Freak Camp.

It wasn’t so normal, though, for it to be Lucky.

Guards and freaks alike called the shifter Lucky because everyone knew he jerked himself off on a regular basis but never got caught. Lucky got lucky with himself most nights and never got anything worse than the shit beaten out of him because none of the guards could nail him on it, and he put out enough that they didn’t want to press the issue.

“Finally caught you, Lucky boy,” Crusher said, pinning both of the shifter’s wrists above his head with one hand. He played with the bright green tag shot through his arm. The old wound bled slowly, the skin sloughing around the entry point. “You know what we’re gonna do to you, don’t you? Boil those hot hands of yours. Though it doesn’t seem like quite enough, does it? Maybe we should clean off your dirty cock too.”

The shifter was shaking against the wall, so terrified that his skin started to slip and sag.

Crusher leaned closer. “Maybe we should shred a little silver in the water so you really feel it. ’Cause you’ve been feeling it real good, haven’t you, Lucky?” He grinned. “On the

other hand, you're a shiftie, so maybe we can cut a deal. You ready to cut a deal, Lucky boy?"

Lucky nodded, hard and desperate. "Yeah. Yes, sir."

Crusher's breathing got heavier, his voice rougher. "You remember the Pretty Freak?"

Lucky swallowed. "Tobias the Wh—yeah. Yeah, I remember the slut."

"Yeah." Crusher smiled, slow. "Tobias the Whore. Think you can take his shape? Think you can bend over and make hot little noises while I fuck you? 'Cause if you can hold that boy's sweet ass while I ride you the way I want, then I'll forget I saw you jerking yourself. Maybe I let you jerk off while I'm inside you. Sounds like your lucky day, doesn't it, Lucky?"

The shifter swallowed. Monsters had died getting fucked the way Crusher liked it. But Kayla guessed he knew that if he tried to say no now, Crusher would probably fuck him, then have him dipped for touching himself anyway.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I can be Tobias."

"Good." Crusher licked his lips. "Come on, tonight's gonna be a private little party. Follow me nice and I might not even nail you down. And close your fucking pants, Pretty Freak."

Trembling, Lucky tightened the drawstring on his pants and followed him. Kayla watched him go.

The next day, Lucky came back to the barracks wearing some other face—neither the one he left with nor, thankfully, Tobias's—while the rest of the monsters were outside working or loitering in the unforgiving Nevada early winter cold. When they came back inside for the night, he was huddled on his cot, an extra blanket draped over him.

He didn't move the next day either, just lay there shaking, but managed to get up the day after and hobble into the yard. He didn't meet anyone's eyes.

Kayla watched him without looking like she was watching. Crusher had made her offers, telling her that if she would just be Tobias for a night, he'd stop touching her for a year, he'd get her food and blankets without needing to suck anybody off, she'd have no interrogation for weeks and weeks if she would just pull on his Pretty Freak's face and let him ride between her legs.

Kayla smiled when no one else could see her, a bitter, hard smile. She'd always suspected that any deal Crusher made would be worse for her than just saying no over and over again. Other guards might keep a promise, might lack the creativity to hold to their word without making her regret it, but Crusher would have no problem promising her the world and then making sure she didn't survive the night.

Just another accident with a monster. Another crushed rib cage, another slow wound that would kill without anyone noticing until it was too late to get her to Special Research.

She settled easily into the belief that it was only her goddamned sense of survival that kept her from saying yes and that it had had nothing to do with the particular ass Crusher wanted. Tobias was gone, gone, gone—maybe dead by now, wouldn't that be nice?—and thinking about him was just a chink in her armor, like Hawthorne had been a gaping hole in his.

“You wanna be Pretty Freak for me?” Crusher whispered in her ear. “I'll make it worth your while.”

She just looked at him blank, hollow, stupid, like she had no idea who he was talking about, what freak he could possibly mean. She kept her mouth shut, except when the things he did made her grunt or cry involuntarily. Eventually, he got bored, convinced that the years had made her as stupid as she pretended to be, and went away.

Then, and only then, could she think about Tobias.



Jake had never thought there was any chance he'd be confused for a mother hen, but he had to be honest with himself. Even when his quiet, thoughtful, nervous Tobias was being his most badass—looking people in the eye, bashing ghosts through the head, driving onto a highway for the first time—Jake worried about him. He worried about him most during hunts, when the monsters were coming hot and heavy and he thought that any second Tobias might get cut open or blasted and Jake wouldn't get there in time. That featured in his nightmares more often than not.

That fear that Tobias would break at the first solid blow lasted until they fought the spider-yeti duo in the Appalachians.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't a yeti. Jake thought that yetis lived in the Himalayas and were Buddhist or something (and Buddhists were peaceful, weren't they?) but it certainly looked the part: massive, hairy, hunched, arms corded with muscles that would put Schwarzenegger to shame. Maybe it had eaten so many monks that the orange robes and happiness had gone to its brain.

The lair was easy to find. Most hikers in the area had left travel plans with the local rangers, which had given them a general area to search. And the yeti had left a noticeable groove in the earth leading up to its cave. After a quick recon of the area, Jake crouched and peered into the cave.

“Hey, keep an eye out. I'm gonna check it out inside.”

Tobias gave him one of those looks that was growing more familiar: the worried, slightly skeptical expression that cast doubt on Jake's sanity and ability to maintain his own safety. Jake saw that look every time he handed Tobias the keys to the Eldorado for a driving lesson.

The look made Jake grin as he shifted his grip on the flashlight and improvised phurba and took a first tentative step into the encompassing darkness.

He felt his way with one hand on the rough wall, sweeping his light over the cave floor and opposite wall, which faded out of reach of the light's beam within half a minute.

Jake had no idea how far the cave went or what might be watching him from its depths. He didn't like the idea of spelunking too far and letting something cut off his exit (or get Tobias where he waited at the entrance), so he wasn't planning on going far. Just enough to get a sense of how big a cave he was looking at, whether this could be the right one.

Hyperalert for the slightest noise or rustle echoing across the cave, Jake lurched sideways when his hand slid from rough stone to nothing. He clawed for balance, stumbled, swore as his ankle twisted in a hole like a fucking socket wrench around a screw, and fell. He'd expected to hit a wall, something hard to answer the fresh throb in his ankle, but instead he hit some kind of springy, stringy material and bounced gently, inches away from the jagged wall.

His first response as he reached out and his hands promptly stuck fast to the strands was *What the fuck, spiderweb?* The second reaction, rising up like a wave in response to a deep, low growl from across the cave, was *Fuck, no, Toby.*

He had kept his hold on the phurba, but the flashlight had slipped from his fingers, catching on a lower part of the web, splashing its light over a section of uneven floor. Jake struggled against the web, but that just wound the strands more thoroughly around his jeans until he had about as much chance of pulling away as he'd had escaping that clingy cheerleader back in Tampa.

"Son of a bitch," he snarled, and a second later the same throaty rumble he'd heard before answered, accompanied by the shuffle of feet echoing across the cave.

Then, just to complete the nightmare: Tobias's hesitant voice called, "Jake?" from the cave entrance twenty feet away.

"Toby!" he shouted, torn between telling him to stay back and to hurry over and cut him loose. The yeti probably wouldn't be considerate enough to lean over and shove its throat into Jake's tiny phurba. "Toby, watch out!"

The yeti (Jake couldn't see shit, but he was willing to bet his ass that nothing good could come snarling out of a dark

cave) growled louder, its heavy footfalls moving ever more quickly toward its prey.

A second flashlight shone from the entrance, roaming across the floor to where Jake's light fell, just in time for the yeti to step into view.

It was eight feet of shaggy, matted fur (dirty with shit and mud, but pale under the stains), the flashlights glimmering off the long yellow fangs protruding from its lower jaw and glowing red from the small, beady eyes Jake saw fixed on him.

Then Tobias, moving swiftly and decisively, crossed the cave to place himself between Jake and the yeti.

Jake had told him that hunts would be dangerous. He had told him that if they ever went south, Tobias should run like hell and get a rocket launcher, that he should *not* stick around to get dead.

What a fucking bad time for Tobias to stop following his directives to the letter.

But then again, the boy Jake saw from his twisted stance spider-glued to the damn wall was nothing like the Tobias he thought he knew.

The yeti, discovering closer prey, growled again. Tobias didn't so much as flinch, his head tilted slightly as though he were Jake considering nothing more challenging than a choice of cereal in the supermarket. Then he slowly crouched down, set his flashlight on a slanted rock where it would illuminate the area between them, and took a step forward, shifting his grip on his six-inch knife.

"Hey, cocksucker," Tobias called, voice strong without a single stutter or hesitation. He was standing tall—no hunching, no cowering—and holding the phurba Jake had given him with easy confidence. In fact, every bone in his body radiated confidence, his shoulders taut yet almost relaxed in readiness, and the look on his face . . . Jake would have killed to see that cocky self-assurance on Tobias's face every day.

The monster lumbered forward. When it blinked, its two sets of eyelids moved at slightly different speeds, like a

camera closing its shutter a second after pressing the release. It blinked toward Tobias once, twice, and then, as though it had found something it liked, its lips curled up to reveal rows and rows of curved, vicious teeth. This time its low-throated growl was enough to vibrate Jake's body, make him jitter against the stones.

At that point, Jake Hawthorne would have gone for one hell of a bigger knife.

But Tobias Hawthorne just smiled and adjusted his footing. "That's right, you ugly son of a bitch. I'm right here."

When the yeti charged, Jake jerked forward uselessly. He might have screamed Tobias's name too, but he needn't have bothered, could have saved that heart-wrenching panic because Tobias dodged the blow as though they had choreographed it for years and then brought the knife around to slash at the yeti's gut.

This wasn't the same kid who on bad days wouldn't look Jake in the eye, flinched away from casual touches, and hyperventilated in supermarkets. This was someone calm, competent, a flash of speed, a casually brutal application of force. This was *his Tobias* as Jake had never seen him: vibrantly alive, relaxed in his own skin, taking on a monster that topped him by three feet and hundreds of pounds. It was terrifying, invigorating, and one of the hottest things Jake had ever seen.

Every swipe of a claw sent Tobias spinning backward, smoothly evading every blow, only for him to dart forward and shove his slip of a blade into the monster's thick hide. Every time the beast snapped toward him, Tobias was simply *gone*, coming around for another attack, at another angle, often with an ingenuity or straight up ballsiness Jake couldn't have imagined himself.

While the monster suffered dozens of wounds—tiny things that nevertheless left red streaks across its hide—Tobias picked up nothing worse than ruffled hair in the backdraft from those massive, yellowed claws. He was the smoothest, gutsiest, best damn hunter Jake had ever seen.

Jake wanted to hug him. He wanted to sell popcorn and tickets and cheer Tobias on. But more than anything, what he wanted was to get free of the fucking sticky web and *fight*. Monsters had a hell of a lot of endurance and were a hell of a lot less breakable than most humans, and in a battle between a boy alone and a beast, the odds were in the beast's favor.

And underneath the giddy delight from watching Tobias be awesome, worry grew that the faint skittering from deeper in the cave was whatever had created the web in the first place.

Then it happened, everything that Jake had been dreading from the first second the web wrapped around him. Tobias stepped—just as smooth, just as easy, but *wrong*, so fucking wrong, *Toby, no!*—directly into one of the yeti's blows. Jake's heart seized, and he threw himself against his restraints even though he knew it was too, too late to see anything but Tobias bleeding out across the floor. The yeti roared in triumph, Jake screamed as, finally, too fucking late, the webbing around him started to give. Then Tobias, his lips pressed together in a silent, thin line, used the yeti's blow as leverage to shove his phurba into the monster's throat.

The yeti's roar of triumph turned into a desperate gurgle, and Tobias, mouth fixed, eyes focused and clear, used one arm to pull himself higher on the yeti's body and then twisted the phurba hard to the side.

Somewhere between when Jake had thought Tobias was going to die and the moment when he became *pure motherfucking awesome*, Jake's heart had stopped, and he wasn't sure that it was beating even now as he stared in mute awe. Even from where he had stopped struggling, he could see the white bone of the beast's spine glinting out from the parted fur.

The yeti thrashed, twisted, whimpered, and Tobias rode the death throes all the way to the ground. When the thing was utterly still, unmoving, he cut the rest of the way through the neck, shoulders flexing with the force, and kicked the head away.

There was a minute of silence save for the sound of Tobias panting and Jake's heartbeat pounding in his ears. Tobias was slightly hunched, one arm pressed to his side, but his face showed no sign of pain, nor of triumph. He looked over the yeti's body, registering nothing but cool disdain and a little disgust, then glanced once around him before turning toward Jake. "Are you all right?"

Jake was still struggling to find the words for what he'd just seen (the *transformation*, the most badass scene he'd ever witnessed, including anything in movies), when the second monster rushed out of the dark behind Tobias.

Jake saw its limbs scurrying, a bulbous body, too many sets of eyes, and he sucked in breath to shout a warning that would've been too late. But Tobias spun, threw himself forward on the ground, and then the knife flashed upward to gut the Labrador-sized spider from eyes to thorax.

The spider let out a high-pitched keening and toppled over, limbs twitching feebly in death throes. Tobias rolled to his feet, swaying slightly, and then stumbled over to Jake.

"Jake, are you hurt? Can you focus? I'm here, I've got you."

Jake had said those exact words to Tobias more than once, but it was strange from the other side. Tobias's hands ran lightly down his limbs and torso, checking for injuries. With the same blade he'd used to gut the yeti—blood still dripping off the iron—Tobias hacked at the webbing around Jake's arms. As sharp as it was, the knife couldn't cut through the stuff easily, but it scraped enough away from the walls that Jake could pull himself free.

"I ... I'm awesome." But Jake wasn't just awesome, he was reeling from the Tobias he had seen. The competent, confident person who had just kicked spider-yeti ass left him in awe, and he wanted that fearless Tobias next to him every day. Though maybe without the kamikaze monster love-fest next time.

And he really, really wanted to take Toby's face between his hands and kiss him. But not while they were still in the

murder cave. Probably after they'd both showered. Spider and yeti goo was deeply unsettling and probably unsanitary, and he knew that if he started to kiss Toby he'd never want to stop. Instead he asked, "What about you? Fuck, Toby, I thought it gutted you before you took it down."

Tobias shook his head quickly. "Just a scratch. Come on." He pulled Jake up, draping one of his web-covered arms over his shoulders, and started dragging both of them out of the cave. "Did you break your ankle? Hit your head?"

"Nah, Toby, just a sprain."

Tobias was breathing hard, and Jake could feel him shaking, but it read as adrenaline rather than fear or nerves. Jake wasn't so steady either, still half high just from watching the fight.

They stumbled together out of the cave beneath a sky bright with stars, framed by the dark silhouettes of trees reaching above their heads. But by the time they reached the Eldorado, the kick-ass Tobias had submerged again beneath the quiet, hesitant boy Jake lived with every day. Tobias loaded him into the backseat, fussed at his feet to find the swollen area, and began cracking an ice pack. He removed Jake's boot and wrapped the bad ankle skillfully without raising his head, touching only lightly and never because he wanted something.

Jake had to say something. He didn't think he could kiss Tobias now. Maybe not ever. Maybe he could excuse the impulse as a combination of gobsmacked wonder and the smoking hot irresistibility of badass competence in a fight. But he didn't want that marvelous stranger to slip away—amazing, still, to think that had been *Tobias* out there.

He grabbed Tobias's hands as he was about to put the first aid kit away, and Tobias froze, looking down and away and anywhere but at Jake's face.

The words Jake had wanted to say (*you're amazing, you're beautiful, you're everything*) stuck in his throat. Even if he said them, could the Tobias that wouldn't meet his eyes understand, or would those words drive him even farther

away? So he coughed instead and switched to the most important point. “Are you sure you’re not hurt? I could have sworn those claws . . .”

Tobias shook his head. “It’s nothing. I can patch it when we get back.”

“Let me check.” Jake scooted deeper into the Eldorado’s backseat and pulled Tobias in with him. He felt a disturbing, pleasurable, and *wrong* lurch from Tobias’s body pressing in above him, his back against the familiar leather, but he pushed that out of the way and pulled Tobias’s shirt up.

Easy to think about nothing but Tobias’s health when he saw the fresh claw marks scored into the already scarred skin of Tobias’s chest. *That’s not fucking nothing*. Sure, not death-by-punctured-organs deep, but they’d need stitches, and somehow Tobias had been not just walking, but hauling him along like he was in the peak of health. The only time he reacted was when Jake pasted one of the bigger bandages over the wounds and gently pressed a towel over his stomach to sponge up the blood oozing toward his waist.

“We’ve gotta stitch those up.” He kept the growl out of his voice by the skin of his teeth, knowing the implied anger would just shut Tobias down harder. “But not here. Should last until we get back to the hotel.” He reached into the first aid box beside Tobias, pulled out the Vicodin bottle, and shook two into his hand. “Here, take these.”

Tobias leaned back slightly, posture relaxed, but still refusing to meet his eyes. “Jake, I could just use Tylenol, those are expensive—”

“No.” Jake pushed the pills into his hand and snagged his half-full water bottle from the front seat, offering it to Tobias.

Tobias swallowed both his pills dry and hesitated over the water bottle—like it mattered that technically it was Jake’s—but took a sip to wash them down.

Jake knew he shouldn’t just be sitting there when Tobias needed to be stitched up, but he couldn’t quite stop himself from touching Tobias across the cheekbones, brushing his

fingers below the eyes that he wished would meet his as fearlessly as they had met the yeti's. "Come on, let's get back."

On the ride back to the motel, Jake couldn't stop glancing at Tobias, trying to find the confidence he had seen just minutes ago in the teenager sprawled in the seat beside him.

"You doing okay, Toby?" Jake asked halfway there. "Pain gone down a bit?"

"I'm fine," Tobias said, almost in wonder. "Fine, fine, *wonderful*." He took a shaky breath and then gave Jake one of those rare, heartbreakingly sweet smiles. Jake's hands clenched on the wheel.

"You were rockin' out there, tiger," he said. "I . . . damn, you just blew me away. You took that sucker *down*."

Tobias shrugged, but he glowed softly at the compliment. "I'm not the kind of monster that heals quickly or has enhanced reflexes, so I had to get good, I had to be smarter than the rest of them or they'd . . . I had to get smart. Not too smart, not real people smart, but smart enough. They underestimated me, never expected me to be able to take them down. Every time I put one in the dirt—didn't happen every time, but often enough—they were so damn surprised."

Them and me both, Toby.



Tobias was floating high, but even before the drugs kicked in, dissolving the pain from the long gashes across his ribs, he'd been feeling surprisingly warm, safe. Good adrenaline burned through him, the fighting high that only came on nights when the hunt was hard and easy at the same time, when Jake looked simultaneously so scared and proud as Tobias helped him up over the body of another monster that would never hurt anyone again.

Tonight, if he'd been a hair slower, the yeti's claws would have disemboweled him instead of just leaving marks that would probably fade into all the other scars. Every time, it

amazed Tobias (and touched him, and made him feel like maybe he was just as good as Jake always said he was) how worked up Jake got over the possibility of one freak killing another if the other was Tobias.

Now he was stretched out on the motel bed, warm and safe and just as happy as he'd ever been, as Jake's hands (just as warm and just as safe, cautious yet confident over his already-scarred skin) stitched him back together.

Hunts were good. Drugs were good, and Jake's hands were good. The only thing that didn't fit, the only flaw in this happiness, was the still-panicked edge under Jake's voice as he talked, the tight lines of tension around his eyes as he looked down at Tobias's skin closing up beneath the needle, blood slowly welling through the gap where before it had been freely flowing. He was talking on and on, and Tobias couldn't follow, not with the dim painless haze in his head, but he understood that Jake was upset, unhappy about Tobias being hurt (but not angry at him). That was just silly.

"Jake," he said softly, soothingly. "Hey, Jake. It's okay. It's all okay. Shit happens, right? And it's not our fault. You told me that."

Jake's mouth twisted a little, amusement fighting through the concern. Maybe Tobias had said it funny because of the drugs. Maybe he hadn't made sense at all and that was what Jake was laughing at. That was okay. Tobias didn't mind how he made Jake happy, not when there were so many other things Jake wouldn't let him do.

"It's not okay," Jake said quietly at last, holding Tobias's gaze. "I'm supposed to take care of you. You're my responsibility. I did not get you out of that camp just to take you places where you'd get sliced open."

Tobias started to laugh. It was a full, body-shaking laugh, all helpless mirth, and he could barely feel Jake's hands holding his sides and hear his alarmed voice saying the stitches weren't tied yet, "calm down, Toby, breathe." He tried, he really did, but it took several moments and long gasps of breath before he could regain control.

Then, not sure where the words came from, he said, “Shut up,” affectionately, catching Jake’s neck with his arm to pull him down, close enough to smell sweat and leather and *Jake* at the crook of his neck.

“Oof,” Jake muttered. “Hold your horses, tiger, gotta get this tied off. Damn, who knew Vicodin would turn you into a Tobiaspus.”

“Wha’s a Tobiaspus?” Tobias asked, hugging him closer.

“Like an octopus, but with more Toby.” Jake shifted, though he could have easily broken Tobias’s hold. “No, seriously, I got to get this wrapped up, just a minute, I promise.”

Tobias reluctantly let him go, but true to his word (*Jake always kept his word, most reliable thing in Tobias’s world*) Jake returned a moment later to stretch out along Tobias’s uninjured side. Tobias nuzzled his shoulder. “I like you,” he said decisively.

Jake laughed, low, still a little sad but better now. “Thanks, Toby. I like you too.”

“No, I mean it. I like you. An’ I like you even when you make me drive and brake hard and hit you when we spar and don’t let me do things for you. I like you. Not just for gettin’ me out. And that’s important.”

Jake’s hands traced the outline of his face, then slid down to his back, steady and warm. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess it is.”



It got easier. Everything got easier, really: hunting, talking to people, driving, and even just looking over at Jake while he drove with the windows down and smiling without thinking about it, without being afraid. Some days he could almost believe Jake was right and Tobias truly was a real, like Jake, laughing in the face of that wind, helping people and hunting evil.

Then without warning, he'd hear echoes of the Director's words. They seized his throat, crawled down his chest, and then he couldn't breathe, couldn't lift his head, could only shake and think how very useless he was here, no matter how many monsters he killed or textbooks he read, because he was a freak.

Until one night, after a hunt for a nasty marsh monster in Louisiana, when they were both drained and battered; Tobias was exhilarated (the thrill of shoving a stake through the slimy thing's heart and knowing it would never hurt someone again) and Jake was stumbling into trees and the side of the Eldorado, his flashlight and gun held in shaking hands.

They had hunted together, they always hunted together, but Jake had insisted on taking more watches, had told him over and over that Tobias could sleep, that he should rest (his voice strained, his eyes dark hollows after looking at one too many pictures of kids with their guts ripped out). Tobias had slept even though his dreams were filled with monsters inside and outside the walls, his eyes opening every hour just to check that Jake was still there, that the pictures hadn't reached out to devour him yet.

So Tobias was rested, relatively, while Jake stood by the driver's side door, head down, shoulders rising and falling as though even breathing were a struggle.

Tobias knew what he had to do, what he should do, what Jake might have asked him if he had been thinking straight, though Tobias was beginning to understand that Jake would sooner walk naked into a vampires' nest than admit he was unfit to get behind the wheel of the Eldorado. Even if he was staring at the Eldorado's polished chrome as though he'd never seen its like in his life. Tobias took a deep breath—unsteady for a reason beside the hunt they had just finished—and walked around the Eldorado.

"Jake," he said. "You can take shotgun. It's just a country road, I can get us back to the highway. For practice."

Jake stared at him for a second. "Yeah," he said at last. "Yeah, that's a good idea, Toby."

He fumbled the keys out of his pocket and nearly dropped them handing them over. Tobias was suddenly grateful and almost sick with terror-relief. If they had crashed with Jake behind the wheel, Tobias would have known he might have prevented that, even if Jake would never blame him for not taking the keys. He had come to value even his own life because he knew that it mattered to Jake. He valued himself now if only because of how much every bruise of his seemed to cause Jake pain.

Imagining Jake hurt, injured, or dead didn't bear thinking about. So he didn't. He just nudged Jake gently into the passenger seat and then settled behind the wheel.

There, he sat and shook for a while. He wanted to believe it was just the adrenaline, the comedown from the hunt (the latest in a line of hunts, the latest hour when he had felt good), but he knew that wasn't it.

In some ways, it would have been easier to drive if he didn't give a damn about himself, if Jake had been the destination and not the companion. Easier still in the bad old days, when the only thing at stake for a task was pain or no pain. Now it was Jake, Jake's happy smile, Jake's sad smile, Jake's hurt look, Jake's wild eyes. Tobias's life now had shades of good and bad, success and failure; everything was an Impressionist painting of colors and emotion where once it had been only black-and-white, cutting angles and the flat of a blade.

Most of the time, Tobias reveled in that difference because Jake made him safe enough to feel, safe enough not to miss the days when only the Rules (and obedience to them) had stood between himself and agony. Other times, the welter of variables and ramifications and everything he had to lose terrified him.

Turning the key in the ignition with Jake already sound asleep next to him was one of the hardest things he'd done yet because he had to believe Jake was right to trust him.

The engine jumped and purred under his touch like it did for Jake, just like it had for him every time Jake had him

practicing stop and go and drive. Tobias forced his breathing and his heartbeat to slow. He was okay. They would be okay.

Driving wasn't hard, except that Tobias worried. He worried about the brakes giving out. He worried about animals (or another swamp beast, they had probably gotten them all but you never knew for sure with freaks) running into the road even though Jake had said it would just be bad luck if it happened while Tobias personally thought it would be fate. He worried about all the things he couldn't imagine reaching out and sending this car and her cargo careening off the road and into bottomless chasms or unyielding surfaces.

Jake laughed at his worries, though there was that broken edge in his eyes while he did it, as though he too thought about these things. He told Tobias that he worried too much, that Jake had been driving for a decade with no accidents (sure, he'd *hit* things, but that had been on purpose), and that Tobias shouldn't sweat it.

The echo of Jake's steady reassurances steadied him. Sure, his hands were clenched so hard he was surprised he wasn't leaving indentations on the wheel, but he could do this. He had done this. And just because Jake was asleep beside him—trusting Tobias enough to sleep while Tobias drove his precious Eldorado through empty backwoods roads—instead of awake with a hand on his shoulder, didn't make Tobias any less capable. Jake was still there.

Dawn was surely only minutes away, but Tobias couldn't see any hints of it through the pounding rain. Those same thick, black storm clouds had dogged them through the entire hunt, had threatened to dump on them a hundred times but had never quite managed. But now the water came down like a sheet, a waterfall, as though the tension of the hunt had been released (or, as Jake would probably joke, the universe was taking a petty vengeance pissing on the Hawthornes).

Tobias slowed to a crawl, wipers going at top speed, waves curving away from the Eldorado's wheels.

He had driven in rain before, but never rain like this, when sometimes the only reason he could see the road was lightning

outlining the trees in a jagged electric halo.

Tobias, shaking from the adrenaline and the thunder and the fear, would have pulled over in a heartbeat to let the storm pass them by, but there was nowhere he could stop and be sure they wouldn't sink into the soggy ground or get hit by an unwary driver who couldn't see the black Eldorado in the greater blackness of the night.

And Jake was still asleep beside him, limp and exhausted with his mouth slightly lax. Even over the rattle of the rain, Tobias could hear his easy, deep breathing.

Tobias's hands ached from his grip, but he could not stop and could not fail. *We must be following the storm*, he thought.

They had reached better roads—paved and gentler, more visible in the waning dark—before the rain began to slake, and Tobias found a gas station at the side of the road and pulled off. The shop and bathrooms were closed, the station run-down enough that Tobias wasn't positive it was even functioning, but the battered awning above the pumps offered some shelter.

Tobias turned off the Eldorado and forced himself to breathe, to listen to Jake breathe. He listened to the rain and massaged the tension out of his hands. He thought of how good it was to be alive, to have Jake alive, and to have brought them through that mess of wind and rain and lightning with nothing more than a new skill he hadn't had even a few weeks ago. Simple, easy, terrifying.

How strange his life had become, to be filled with small triumphs instead of bare survival. To cautiously look forward, every day, to a good day—a day in which he had the power to make decisions that would leave them safer, happier. To live a good day every day. He didn't know if it would ever stop surprising him.

The rain was a mere trickle, more a half-hearted splattering than a solid sheet, by the time Jake finally yawned and rubbed his face. "Where are we, Toby?"

“Twenty miles from Lafayette,” Tobias answered. There had been a sign on the road right before he’d turned into the gas station’s parking lot. He still remembered these things.

Jake blinked at him. “Damn, weren’t we near Houma before? That’s . . .” Tobias could see Jake trying to do the math in his head and the sleepiness getting in the way. *One hundred and two miles, Jake.* “A heck of a long way.”

Tobias had just enough time to have a flash of anxiety (Should they not have driven that far? Was there another destination Jake had had in mind?) before Jake scooted across the seat and pulled him in close for a hug, his chest solid against Toby’s, breath warm against his neck.

Only an hour past dawn, with no sleep, barely escaped from a storm from hell, and it was already a wonderful day.

Then Jake glanced over his shoulder and grinned even wider. “Would you look at that, Toby.”

“What?” Tobias twisted around.

He didn’t have to ask again.

The gas station was in the middle of nowhere, the bog and trees stretching endlessly around them. The view splayed out the withdrawing storm, the cliff of cloud moving slowly, darkly into the distance. It was a powerful force, like the monsters they hunted, but clean in a way that monsters could never be. Alone, the retreating storm would have been enough to awe Tobias.

But the double rainbows made it beautiful.

One was vividly bright against the dark clouds, its jewel tones more pure, more honest than representations in any television program. Its paler twin arched above it, half-buried, half-consumed by the monstrous storm.

Tobias knew, scientifically, that a rainbow was nothing but light refracting off water droplets in the air and splitting into base colors. The same effect could be achieved with a garden hose and a light source or a correctly angled mirror. He’d been fascinated the first time Jake had tilted his compass back and

forth beneath bright sunlight, sending thin stripes of color dancing across the Eldorado's ceiling.

But this was so much more, the colors and the beauty even more striking, resonating, after the rain and the storm and the worry. It was like some cosmic award for believing—and doing—what Jake had always said he could.

As though aware of his thoughts, Jake wrapped his arms around Tobias, his smile and a day's worth of stubble rubbing into Tobias's neck where the camp collar used to be.

They stayed there, watching the sky, until the last drops of rain fell away, the rainbows faded into sunshine, and the gas station door was opened by a gruff, rickety old man who glared at them once and then pumped their gas tank full without a word.

Chapter Twelve



“You don’t think it’s cheating?” Toby asked for the fifth time, and Jake pulled his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose, far enough to give him a look.

“Dude. Did you look up the answers when you were taking the test? Oh wait, I was right here beside you and no, you did not do that.”

“But shouldn’t I have waited longer or something? Between the last assignment and the test? It’s got to be harder for real kids in school, right? I’m missing something—”

“You are not missing a damn thing except how enormous your whole nerdy brain is, tiger. You got As in all your subjects according to the grading in the actual geeky teacher’s rubric that came with all of these. You’ve blown ninth grade out of the water. I think you’d kick any valedictorian’s ass already.”

“But no one actually judged my essays,” Toby protested. “We’re only talking about the multiple-choice answers or questions with only one right answer—”

“And you wrote the essays anyway, even though you got no one but me to read them. Do you know how many times I wrote a fucking essay, Toby? Fewer times than I’ve got fingers on one hand. Maybe even fewer essays than hands.”

Tobias glowered at him, though it looked like he was fighting a smile. “But do you think it’s—”

“If you say *cheating* again, I’m telling everyone we meet your actual name is Tobito and your middle name is Burrito. Tobito Burrito Hawthorne.”

Toby made a noise that sounded like a snort-laugh, though sadly he’d buried his face in his arms, so Jake couldn’t quite

tell. But when he reappeared, his cheeks were a ridiculously cute pink.

“Fine,” he said at last. “I’ll just start on the tenth-grade books.”

Jake wagged a finger at him. “Uh-uh. We’re celebrating the end of the school year and enjoying a summer vacation first, and no, I don’t care that it’s November. We’re going to the beach. No more homework until we’ve had some fun.”

Toby’s eyes brightened. “The beach? Like, by the ocean?”

Another first for Tobias, something he should’ve had ages ago, something that should’ve been his without question. But Jake couldn’t quite be mad at himself about that because they’d been taking care of a bunch of other important firsts before now, after all.

“Yeah, the ocean,” he said, and grinned. “Just you wait.”

They had lunch at Talladega National Forest in Alabama with a fast food picnic, though honestly Jake thought that Whataburger was in a class of its own. He had made a point of stopping whenever they could at anything labeled a viewpoint or a state park. This one had seriously paid off with its deep blue reservoir, gentle rolling hills covered in pine and oak trees, and even some honest-to-God waterfalls. They’d seen a couple deer, to Toby’s delight, and Jake had made a mental note to find a zoo worth visiting.

After finishing their meal and balling all the trash together in the paper bag that Tobias would insist on carrying out with them, they found a couple massive smooth rocks by a running creek and stretched out side by side. It was November but still warm in the Alabama sun, especially with the radiating heat of the stone beneath them.

They lounged in comfortable silence. At some point, Tobias’s fingers found Jake’s, or the other way around, and they intertwined easily, natural as could be.

Jake licked his suddenly dry lips. “Hey, Toby.”

Tobias angled his face to him, his hazel eyes sparkling with colors that couldn’t possibly be ones Jake had never

noticed before. “Yeah?”

Jake had to close his eyes before he could go on, choosing his words deliberately. “You know how we talked before about it being okay to like who you like? I mean, the Romeo and Juliet way, but less batshit and bloody, no accidental suicides?”

“Yeah.” This time the word was softer and did something inside Jake’s belly.

He swallowed and made himself continue. “I just wanted to say, ‘cause I’m not sure I did back then. It’s okay to make the first move, whenever you’re ready. I mean, you can kiss whoever you want, as long as you’re getting a signal they like you back. There’s all kinds of signals, but the clearest ones are when they say, ‘Yeah, I like you too. I wanna go out sometime.’” He paused, then spoke each word like an incantation for protection, for safekeeping. For love. “And I do like you too, Toby.”

After a moment, Toby’s fingers squeezed his. Jake didn’t know what would happen next, what should happen, or if he’d officially gone off his rocker and should be taken away in a straitjacket, but he didn’t regret saying it. This felt okay. This felt right.



For the last few hundred miles, Tobias had listened to Jake talk about it nonstop: the ocean, the beach, how it was gonna be like nothing Tobias had ever imagined before, not even close to when they crossed the Mississippi or glimpsed the Grand Canyon. It was enough to cautiously, guardedly, raise Tobias’s expectations, though he most enjoyed listening to Jake talk, how he gestured and glanced at Tobias every few seconds for his reaction.

They had coasted I-20 east into South Carolina, where it would still be warm enough even in November, Jake said. Warm enough for what, he didn’t say, and perhaps Tobias could have asked, but he didn’t mind waiting to find out. Tobias liked what he saw of the state, though that had been

true of everywhere they'd gone since leaving Colorado. He could never tire of the green, wide-open spaces, the thick forests or tan fields, the Southwest's craggy red-brown desert.

They had lunch in North Charleston, then headed south of the city, where crowds would be even sparser on a weekday. Tobias caught glimpses of the blue-gray water but was content to lean back and watch the palm trees passing, waiting for Jake to pick the right place to show him *the ocean*.

Jake finally parked in a grassy lot off of the road. The moment Tobias opened the door, he inhaled a strong, unfamiliar scent, sharp with salt and other odors harder to identify. He was so preoccupied with what his nose was telling him, he didn't notice at first the different type of earth shifting under his feet. Where they had parked it was mixed with grass, but farther out he could see it plainly: tan and fine-grained, packed at first but then sinking under his feet. Sand. This must be sand. It would be very difficult to run across, Tobias noted. He could also hear a muted, continual roar that he tried, in vain, to compare to some of the noises he'd heard in Intensive Containment. Jake didn't look alarmed, though, so Tobias supposed the sound was usual for this area, a part of the ocean no one had mentioned in the various resource documents when he had read about marine supernaturals or that one book about whales.

They walked a ways across the sand, past the small hills (*dunes*) and a few ramshackle houses and sheds on stilts, the steady roar and tangy saltiness of the air growing louder and stronger, until there was nothing but flat sand before them. Then Tobias lifted his eyes and looked at the ocean.

He had known the Atlantic Ocean was second only to the Pacific in size. He could name most of the countries it bordered. The Vikings had crossed it in the north from Greenland, and the Portuguese in the south to Brazil. He even recalled reading that the Atlantic Ocean was the saltiest of the five oceans, which accounted for how he could taste it in his mouth now. But nothing he had read had prepared him for what it actually *was*.

The ocean was vast. Vaster than the highways and plains that seemed to stretch to infinity when he first walked out from Freak Camp's walls, because for the first time Tobias had an uninterrupted view of the horizon, that line dividing water from sky, cutting between and sealing the boundary between them. He couldn't even begin to estimate how many miles stretched between him and that line, because the more he moved toward it, the farther it would recede. It was easy to believe then that the ocean really was infinite. That was simpler, easier to grasp than the idea of more oceans, continents dwarfing the one that lay behind him, and the countless people dwelling in them, beyond what his eye could see.

Tobias wasn't aware that he'd started shivering, his arms crossed tight over his chest, until Jake stepped close enough that Tobias could feel the warmth of Jake's chest against his back, solid and reassuring. Slowly, Jake wrapped his arms over Tobias's, pulling him back and holding without confining.

Tobias let out a long, shaky exhale, feeling himself unwind. He was not alone, even in the vastness of the world. Jake was with him and never letting go.

They stayed there for a few more minutes. Tobias was more at peace than he had ever been or thought he could be, feeling the steady beat of Jake's heart against his back, but he felt he had to say something, some acknowledgment that Jake had given him this day. More than that, Jake had given him everything, and *grateful* was too hollow and weak a word.

"You're right," he said at last. "I couldn't have imagined this."

Jake released him, but he caught Tobias's hand as he dropped his arms, and he was smiling as he stepped forward to stand beside him. "C'mon. You haven't really been to the ocean until you get your feet wet."

Tobias blinked. "Is—that allowed?"

Jake laughed, but he ducked and turned his head in a way that was unlike him, like maybe he didn't want Tobias to see

his face. “Of course it is. Let’s go.” He tugged on Tobias’s hand again, drawing him after.

When they were close enough for Tobias to see the whitecaps of the smaller waves racing fast and faster, overlapping each other, and crests crashing at the shore, Jake stopped to unlace and kick off his boots, followed by his socks, and rolled his jeans up to his knees. Tobias copied him. The texture of the sand under his toes startled him; he would have stayed there longer to analyze and adjust, to see if it was easier or harder to move across the sand in bare feet, to run, to tumble, but Jake was moving steadily to the waterline, and Tobias was drawn inexorably after him.

He stopped again as they reached the wet sand—packed differently, though it still sank under his feet, every step leaving its mark behind—where the leading waves stretched farthest, as though yearning to touch him, before being sucked backward. *The moon*, he thought. *The moon’s gravity draws the oceans, creating tides*, and he could not look away from the water, away from the next filmy wave rolling in. He couldn’t even have said where Jake was.

Then he heard a whoop, which broke the spell, dragging his head up. Jake was wading into the waves beside him, kicking at the water. “Not too bad!” he yelled. “It won’t freeze your toes off, Toby, c’mon!”

Tobias took one step forward, closer to the smallest waves, and watched his toes sink halfway into the wet sand. He could probably bury his whole foot in it if he tried. It likely wouldn’t be difficult to pull out. He took another step forward, realized he was holding his breath, and forced himself to exhale and inhale. He didn’t know why this seemed so monumental. Seawater was no different from tap, apart from its high salinity. Perhaps because this water moved unceasingly, waves churning back and forth as though each curl of propelled water was sentient, with a will of its own, obedient to the greater, endless whole.

Tobias’s eyes were fixed to the nearest, flattest outpost of waves, tracking their pattern as they overlapped and receded, where the most ambitious one would touch next. He took

another step in, then another, planting his feet carefully where the waves had already been, until he was deep in their territory and there would be no retreat. He would choose, however. He would choose where they took him.

He set his foot into the next V where two past waves had left a faint foamy outline and let his foot yield to the soft suction of the sand, grounding and bracing him. He wouldn't flinch. He was ready.

The next wave roared up, cresting, spilling, rushing forward with its remains, a half-inch thick when it smacked directly into his ankle.

He didn't audibly gasp, but his mouth opened, watching in amazement as the clear water rushed over his foot—both his feet—then sucked back again. It was chilly, but it felt good in a way that caught him completely off guard. He could have watched the waves for hours and never have predicted that it would feel like this, cool and sharp and smoothly embracing his bare skin.

Without thinking, he took several quick steps forward, eager to feel it again. The next wave obliged him, breaking forcefully over his feet, and he felt the churning energy of the water. He was part of it, part of the ocean.

Tobias lifted his eyes to meet Jake's and saw him grinning at him in the water. A giddy exhilaration filled Tobias unlike anything he'd experienced before. Perhaps it came from stepping out of the land he had known all his life, walking on a natural power he had never conceived of.

Tobias turned once, swiping his foot over the surface, watching the arc of water it formed. The droplets flashed in the sun, a beautiful thing Tobias had created, and he was laughing as if he had never laughed before in his life. Not a low, quickly stifled sound, but something full-bellied and made of sheer delight. It sounded like it came from outside him—perhaps from the deep, resounding crashes of the waves, landing one after another in an infinite and unstoppable cycle, pounding yet painless—but the laughter too was part of him now, and he couldn't hold it back.

He splashed forward, seizing Jake's hands. Maybe Jake grabbed his. It was hard to say with the roar of the waves and the roar of his heart making it hard to hear, hard to breathe without laughing, hard to talk without smiling. Jake's face was lit up too with understanding, or perhaps it was merely a reflection of Tobias's. Either way, he looked younger than Tobias could remember seeing him since those distant, precious visits at Freak Camp and more brilliantly beautiful, almost impossible to look at directly. But Tobias did, until he laughed again and spun away, kicking up more water before racing across the shore without conscious decision. The cascading waves beckoned, and he knew he wasn't really leaving Jake behind, that Jake would keep up with him.

Tobias darted in and out of the waves, skipping ahead of one, crashing directly into the next, welcoming the spray of water over his arms and chest and face. When he got knee-deep, the water slowed him, dragging him back, and Jake caught up. They circled each other, splashing and kicking and chasing, and through it all, Tobias laughed.

He had been out of Freak Camp for four months. For the first time, he understood what it was to be free.



At sundown, the water glimmered with light reflected off the other side of the sky. Jake had said they'd wake up early tomorrow, if Tobias wanted, to see the sun rise over the ocean. They left the beach with sand-coated feet, carrying their shoes, their jeans soaked almost to the waist.

Even when the golden light on the waves had dimmed, the exhilaration sang in Tobias's veins like a second ocean, so when Jake handed him a motel towel for his turn to dust off his feet, Tobias stepped closer, right against Jake's chest, and tilted his head up to touch his lips to Jake's.

Their mouths met effortlessly, drawn by straightforward alignment. It was a still, sweet kiss, and after a moment, Jake's hand settled on the back of his head.

Kissing Jake was nothing like Tobias could have imagined. It threatened to knock out his knees (he was grateful for Jake's arm wrapping around his waist) and heated his belly with a warm glow, like hot chocolate. But this was indescribably better, because now Tobias was kissing Jake, and Jake was kissing him back, and he understood that Jake was good. Not just in the way he'd always thought before, but because he knew Jake *cared* for him: he saw the extent of his patience and resolve, his unwavering commitment. Jake was with him tonight and would be with him tomorrow, and nothing and no one could change that. Jake would make sure he had three good meals a day and hold him close if he fell sick, and every day he would look for ways to make Tobias happy and drive away anything that tried to hurt him. For all this, he asked for nothing from Tobias in return but his honesty.

Tobias knew there was nothing he could do over his entire life to repay that. He even knew that Jake wouldn't like the phrasing of that—*paying back, making up to*—because he had never asked for that in the least. But Tobias would try, and he would seek to make Jake happy, even if that meant playing real or learning to stop being so damn afraid.

He didn't know that he could do it. He didn't know that he could repay (reward, return) the kindness and care he received every day from Jake, but he would try. And he could kiss Jake now.



Thank you for reading Freak Camp!

It would mean so much to me if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. I love to read every one.

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