

How to
Wish upon a
Star

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Dr. Jason Kunik is working on the most earth-shattering genetics project ever, DNA mapping of a new species, *the quickened*—dogs who can shift into human form. The problem is, no one knows the quickened exist and Jason can't betray them by publishing his studies. When he moves to Mad Creek to continue his research in a town full of quickened, all he wants is peace, quiet, and to be allowed to bury himself in his work. Perhaps if he figures how out the mutation is activated, he can silence his own inner dog forever.

Milo is a hospice comfort dog who has bonded with, and lost, many beloved patients in his life. He intuitively understands sickness and pain on a spiritual level most can't see. When he gains the ability to become a man, he thinks he finally has everything he ever wanted. But being a man isn't the same thing as being loved, and taking shelter in Mad Creek isn't the same thing as finding a home.

When a mysterious illness hits Mad Creek and threatens all the quickened in town, it's up to the scientist and the comfort dog to figure out what it is and how to stop it. Along the way they might discover that true love is possible—if you wish upon a star.

This is the third book in the "Howl at the Moon" series, but it can be read as a stand-alone.

Dedication

To Lola, who made me a dog lover.

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Cover by Reese Dante.

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How to Howl at the Moon

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FORWARD

It was frightening to realize that no documented knowledge about the quickened existed: no long-term health studies, no body of standardized facts, not even much of a clinical record. No one knows when quickened first evolved, if it was fifty years ago or if they have been around for millennia. No one knows what pathology might threaten this small and vulnerable species, if they can contract parvovirus or the bubonic plague. No one can say if the process of shifting puts morbid strain upon the heart, or if, with age and time, the man's mind must necessarily be lost to the beast.

—from "A New Species: Canis Sapiens", the unpublished manuscript of Dr. Jason Kunik.

Chapter 1: Interrogation Blues

Dr. Jason Kunik paused with his pen poised over his notepad, waiting for an answer. The old bulldog, Gus, looked aghast. His cheeks quivered indignantly.

"But I... that's not... how can you...?" Gus sputtered.

"It's a simple question," Jason said impatiently. "Your primary caregiver when you were merely a dog. Mrs—" Jason shifted his notes to see the name. "—Mrs. Anderson. I want you to assign a percentage to the emotions you experienced for her before you became quickened. The choices are: A. childlike affection, B. dutiful, C. worshipful, D. romantic, E. sexual, F. resentful, G. obligated, H. grateful, and I. hostile."

Gus had once been a sixty-pound bulldog addicted to the couch. But he'd become 'quickened' due to the deep bond he had with his owner. That is to say, he gained the ability to shift into human form. Now he appeared to be a gentle-looking older man with white hair, blue eyes, a round face, and a serious belly. His expression was one of deep confusion, as if Jason were speaking Swahili. Jason nudged the paper in front of Gus closer to his hand and pen, silently willing him to pick it up and write something. *Anything*. Gus didn't.

Jason gritted his teeth. "If you have difficulty with the concept of percentages, might I suggest a one-to-ten scale? For example, if you felt resentful toward Mrs. Anderson an average of three times a week, you might assign that category a 'two'. Three times a day would be an 'eight'. Oh, and sexual urges are defined as anything from an actual erection to obsessive licking. However—"

Gus covered his face with his hands, got up from the table in the Mad Creek diner, and stumbled to the door.

"Wait! I haven't gotten your blood and urine samples yet!" Jason called after him, standing up from the booth.

But Gus didn't turn around. He hurried out of the diner in an anxious trot. And now everyone in the place was staring at Jason like he had a

forked tail and had just composed the *Ten Satanic Commandments*. With a grumble, he sat back down and arranged his papers and notepad into a neat pile that paralleled the lip of the table. Then he took the unused forms he'd given to Gus and placed each one in its respective spot in the stack before neatening the pile again.

The problem, as Jason saw it, was the diner. It was ridiculous trying to do serious research work in a public setting like this. Totally unviable. How could he expect his test subjects to discuss sensitive topics here? Worse yet, he had no control over the environment, and thus he couldn't simply lock his subjects in until they responded.

Unfortunately, the small hotel room he occupied in Mad Creek was out of the question—there was no space and it had a lingering odor of wet cat. He spent as little time there as possible. The cabin he'd rented wasn't ready yet, and he was impatient to start his work. So he thought he could make do with the diner in the interim.

But so far, Gus was the fourth quickened to walk out on him without offering even a smidgen of useful data. It was hardly a propitious start to his critical research in Mad Creek.

"Excuse me."

Jason looked up to see a handsome young man standing at his booth. He had a baby girl with black hair and startlingly blue eyes balanced on one hip. The human infant carrier had long brown hair, diagonal bangs across his forehead, a narrow face, and hazel eyes. He was lanky and had an earthy vibe that Jason could smell.

No, not *smell*, for God's sake. Jason was a scientist, not a bloodhound. It was a mental impression, that was all.

"Yes?" Jason snapped, still in a foul mood.

"Um... Yeah. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Gus. I know it's none of my business, but... I wondered if I could talk to you for a moment? I'm Tim Beaufort, by the way. And this is Molly."

Tim waved the baby's little hand in a ridiculous manner. Jason didn't know anything about babies, but he could tell this one was a baby quick. Tim, on the other hand, seemed entirely of the species homo sapiens.

"Very well." Jason waved at the booth seat opposite him. He didn't have another appointment for thirty minutes anyway.

"Great. Just let me grab my lunch." Tim flashed a smile that looked forced, went and got a plate that had a salad and half sandwich on it, and slid into the booth. It was a bit of a juggle with the baby, and the plate tilted precariously. Jason grabbed it. The last thing he needed to cap off this wasted morning was dressing all over his papers.

"Thanks." Tim didn't look the least bit embarrassed about his clumsiness.

"So," Jason prompted, setting the plate carefully on the table.

Tim gave him an unfriendly look. "So. Don't you think—"

"Wasn't Gus just sitting here?" Daisy, the waitress, arrived at the table looking perplexed.

"He left. Sorry, Daisy," Tim said.

"Oh, don't be sorry, Tim! I'm glad you met our Dr. Kunik. Jason and I went to high school together. Didn't we, Jason? And now he's got a PhD and everything!" Daisy said this loudly, and Jason felt a wave of self-consciousness. He didn't like being the center of attention. It made his inner anxiety—his inner dog—grow restless. His fingers nervously straightened the stack of papers once again. Focusing on a neat and orderly environment was one of his coping mechanisms.

"Oh? That's nice." Tim didn't sound impressed.

"And Jason, have you met Tim before?" Daisy went on. "He's married to Lance! You know, Sheriff Beaufort? He was in school at the same time as us. And isn't Molly the sweetest, cutest, wabba-bubba, pookie-dookie...." Daisy's words disintegrated into an annoying babble as she tickled the baby's stomach and chucked under her chin, possibly checking for glandular irregularities. The baby gurgled happily. It sounded a little like a dog's excited whine.

Hmm. Jason wrote it down. His research was focused on the newly quickened, what he called 'prime progenitors', those who had been born ordinary dogs. So he hadn't given much thought to quickened children. But now that he was here in Mad Creek, all sorts of new opportunities for

research were occurring to him. There might be clues to the dog-human transition observable in the infants of the—

"Dr. Kunik?"

Jason looked up from his note-taking to find Daisy and Tim looking at him. "What? What did I miss?"

"I asked if you wanted to order some food?" Daisy said.

"No, no." Jason checked his watch. Sufficient time had passed to allow for another dose of caffeine. "I would like another cup of coffee, however."

"Sure thing."

Daisy left them alone. Jason wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be alone with Tim. But he was mildly curious about Tim's relationship with Lance Beaufort. Jason remembered Lance all right. He hadn't been a bully exactly, but he and Jason were far from friends. Jason's mother moved them to Mad Creek when Jason turned twelve. "You need to be among your own kind," she told him. Ha! As if Jason's inability to relate to others was because he didn't know other quickened. As it turned out, he wasn't any more of a social butterfly with the teenagers of Mad Creek than he had been with humans his age.

Lance had been in Jason's class back then. He was intense, unwelcoming, and xenophobic about outsiders, and he didn't like the new kid. He must have really changed if he'd ended up married to a human male.

"You don't know much about the quickened, do you?" Tim asked Jason in a quiet voice, as if not wanting the others in the diner to hear.

"I-I beg your pardon?" Jason sputtered. "I know more about them than anyone on earth!"

Tim looked dubious. "Huh. Okay. Well. First of all, if Lance heard you talking about the... you know... like you did with Gus, *in the public diner*, he'd pitch a fit." Tim looked around. "There's at least one couple in here I don't know. They're probably tourists. We're very careful not to let outsiders know about... things."

Tim was looking at a young couple, dressed like hikers, who were across the room.

"I wasn't speaking loudly," Jason huffed.

Of course he knew better than to talk about the quickened with outsiders. Then again, he hadn't noticed Tim earlier, either, and Tim was human and had been sitting right behind him. That wasn't good. He had to be more careful. He realized he felt at ease simply being in Mad Creek. It'd been years since he'd been able to discuss the quickened with anyone at all. He forgot not everyone in town was in the know. Still, he wasn't going to apologize to this stranger.

"Second," Tim went on, "I don't think Gus understood half of what you said. And what he did understand was a little...."

"A little?"

Tim sighed and leaned back against his seat. He shifted the baby in his lap and bounced her. She was currently gnawing intently on one fist. "Um... harsh? Gus works for me so I know him pretty well. He has very sentimental feelings about his previous owner, Mrs. Anderson. And he's still very emotional about it even though she's been gone for several years now. Your questions upset him."

Jason felt a flash of annoyance. "I assure you, my questions are both logical and necessary. I'm attempting to do serious research. But I admit, interviewing qui—my *subjects*—has been difficult. I sense I'd be better off trying to count a dump truck full of worms."

Tim smiled. It was a warm, genuine smile. "Yeah. The, um, people who live here can be a handful, that's for sure. Isn't that right, punkin'?" He bounced the baby, her tiny feet pushing her up and down on his thighs. Her fist fell from her mouth, stretching a long strand of drool as she grabbed for Tim's chin. But Tim didn't seem to mind.

Jason's temper waned as quickly as it had flared. Tim had a point. People skills had never been Jason's strong suit. He'd always been more comfortable with his test tubes, computers, and microscopes. But the time had come to collect data of the personal kind, and his work was too important to fail because Jason Kunik was an ineffectual communicator.

For the hundredth time, he lamented the fact that he was his own entire team. Most researchers would have staff for things like this. But the secrecy of his work left him without any such resources. Unless he could find some promising young science students among the quickened of Mad Creek, he was a one-man expedition into the vast uncharted territory of a new species. It was daunting, to say the least.

Daisy came and refilled his coffee. She brought Tim a fresh glass of water too. Then she tickled the baby's glands some more before leaving.

Jason neatened his papers again. He took a drink and sighed into his cup, discouraged.

"Let's start over," Tim suggested. He leaned over the table and held out his hand with a smile. "Hi, I'm Tim Beaufort. Sheriff Beaufort is my husband, and this little angel is Molly, our daughter."

Jason briefly shook the offered hand. Unlike most quickened, he avoided touch. "Hello, Tim. I'm Jason."

"Hi, Jason." Tim looked like he was getting ready to ask questions, but Jason had a few of his own.

"The infant," he gestured at the baby. "She's a qui—"

"Yes." Tim looked around nervously. "Yes, she is a... you know."

"And you are not."

"Nope."

"Also, you're married to Lance Beaufort. Not a uterus in sight."

Tim chuckled. The baby made a bright sound and reached for his throat as if she wanted to feel his laughter. "That's very true. As a couple, we are short one uterus. Molly was born to Lance's brother, Lonnie, and his wife, Truly, who are both... *you know*." His eyes sparkled mischievously. "It was Truly's second pregnancy. She had three babies the first time and this last time they found out she was expecting four. She was overwhelmed, to put it mildly."

Hmm. Interesting. Jason wrote it down. Now that Tim mentioned it, Jason recalled there had been quite a few twins and triplets when he'd gone to school here. Multiples were yet another canine trait and always of interest to a geneticist. If he could compare the DNA of one dog who had gotten the spark and become quickened with that of a litter mate who had remained an ordinary dog, it might help him identify the genes affected by the mutation. Litter mates were not identical twins, but even so, they'd have more similar DNA than two unrelated dogs.

Tim was still going on. "Of course, we didn't just say 'Hey, four babies! You won't need all those. Think of the college tuition!' But it was decided before they were born. Well. When I say *decided*." His tone was wry. He looked up at Jason. "Do you know Lily Beaufort?"

Jason tried to recall her. "No?"

Tim snorted. "You will. Believe me. She's Lance and Lonnie's mother. Anyway, it was more or less agreed upon before the babies were born that Lance and I would raise one of them. You'd think that would be weird, but we all live in the same town, and Molly gets to have play dates with her siblings. *Don't you, punkin'?* Plus, Lonnie and Truly have been amazing. They really wanted to help Lance and me have a family. And, oh my God, Lance? Mister 'I'm the Sheriff so I don't have time for a personal life'? He's the most ridiculously smitten daddy you've ever seen, from the very first second she laid eyes on us."

"That's.... Yes, good for you. But I really need to prepare for my next ___"

"And then this little devil appeared." He bounced Molly again, beaming at her. "She picked us to be her parents, that very first day at the hospital."

Jason couldn't help himself. "A newborn picked you. Did she say 'forsooth, I am your long-awaited child'?"

Tim laughed. "No. She opened those gorgeous blue eyes, looked up at Lance and me, and raised her arms as if she wanted us to pick her up. The other three couldn't have cared less that we were there."

"They can raise their arms when they're that small?" Jason was dubious.

"Swear to God." Tim gave him a dire look, as if the story was the stuff of myth and legend on par with the Epic of Gilgamesh, and he was committing blasphemy by doubting it.

"Perhaps it was a fortuitous bout of gas," Jason suggested.

Tim cocked his head and studied Jason's face. "I get it. Scientist. You don't believe in fate or magic."

"Not even remotely."

"Yet you are... you know... yourself. Aren't you?"

Jason could hardly deny that he was quickened. Most of the town knew his mother and her history. But it had been so long since he'd admitted it to anyone out loud. He blinked rapidly. "Yes. I am," he said tightly.

"So how can you not believe in magic? I've always found this whole place rather magical myself."

Jason huffed. "Qui— that is, *the condition of which we speak* is hardly magic. It's genetics. DNA. There's a perfectly logical explanation."

"There is?"

"Of course! Just because we can't explain it yet doesn't mean it's magic." Jason leaned forward. He felt so passionately about this. "The answer lies in DNA."

"Really? That's cool. How does it work then?"

Tim appeared to be genuinely interested. And Jason rarely got a chance to talk about his work. He spoke excitedly. "I haven't pinpointed the precise mechanism yet, but I have some promising hypotheses."

"Uh-uh."

"We know there are switches which determine if a gene is expressed or silenced, that is turned on or turned off. For example, everyone has a gene that, if turned on, would cause the growth of a vestigial tail in a human fetus. But only a tiny fraction of the population has the specific switch that turns on that gene."

"Really? So you're saying it's possible that all dogs have, within their DNA, the ability to um... *you know*... but only those who somehow have the right switch actually end up... you knowing?"

"It's not about *having* the right switches. Well, let me rephrase that. Those who are born canis sapiens, or quickened if you will, like Molly here, do already have them at birth. But for those who begin life as ordinary dogs, I believe their bodies evolve or manufacture the switches due to extreme circumstances."

Tim shook his head. "And you're going to figure out exactly how? Heck, that's ambitious." Tim smiled at the baby. "We say 'heck' now, don't we? *Yes we do.*"

"It is ambitious, but think of the implications! If we can understand the switches that turn on a powerful mutation like this, perhaps we can find others that stop aging or enable a person to regrow a severed limb, like our ancient amphibian ancestors."

"So what 'extreme circumstances' cause a dog to become... something more?"

"That's what I'm attempting to find out." Jason neatened his stack of papers, feeling the nervous excitement he always felt when he thought about his work. "I want to interview every first-generation subject in this town. There's got to be something they all have in common that caused the, um, change. We know emotions create a chemical response. For example, feelings of safety and bonding, like that of a mother and child, create the chemical oxytocin. Then there're hormones, pheromones, stress reactions, adrenaline.... There may be a precise chemical cocktail that opens certain genes and switches them on."

Daisy was walking by. She turned around and came back.

"Hey, Jason! Did I hear you ask for a cocktail? I'm afraid we don't have a liquor license. Lance refuses to give us one." She leaned in and reverted to a stage whisper. "Doesn't want strangers drinking in town, though it's a pain in the rear, if you ask me. A beer with lunch never hurt anyone!"

Jason pushed his glasses up on his nose. "No, Daisy. I wasn't.... I'm not asking for a cocktail."

"Oh. Okay."

Instead of walking away, Daisy tickled and blathered nonsense to the baby again. Tim seemed used to the parenting routine. He put Molly in the crook of one arm so she could play with Daisy while the other hand stuffed food in his face like he had two minutes to live. Which was about how long it took before Daisy moved on, Molly got bored, and the screeching started. The noise the infant produced was something like a blackboard scratch, an air-raid siren, and a parakeet all mixed together. There was nothing human nor dog about it.

"That's my cue." Tim smiled at Jason and wiped his lips on a napkin. "Time to go home for napsies. Her, not me. Though goodness knows I need

one. Hey, Jason, it was nice to meet you. Good luck on your work, and if there's ever anything you need.... Oh, and every Friday is the pack party and the last Saturday of the month is Howl at the Moon night. You don't want to miss that! Will I see you there?"

"No."

"Oh. Um. Okay, then. Bye."

Chapter 2: Finding Milo

Lily Beaufort was so dreading this trip. As Mad Creek's matriarch, mother and grandmother of the Beaufort clan, and a third-generation border collie shifter, she was not exactly unfamiliar with the role of group herder or with the task of running everybody's business. But this was different. She'd received a phone call telling her that her old mentor was in hospice in Fresno. Lily had to go and say good-bye to the dear old lady and that was that.

Sophie Andrews was one of the few friends Lily had ever made outside Mad Creek. The town had a desperate need to school the newly quickened, and that task did not fit in Mad Creek's K through 12 educational system. So Lily had taken it on herself to organize classes. She'd enrolled in a teaching certificate program in Fresno so that she knew what the heck she was doing.

Sophie had taught many of those classes, and she and Lily became genuinely close. Over the years, Lily often met her for lunch when she went to Fresno to shop. Sophie didn't know a thing about the quickened, not even that they existed, or that Lily was one. But she knew everything there was to know about teaching adults how to read and write.

Now Sophie had suffered a stroke and was in hospice. According to her son, she wasn't conscious of the people around her, but it was only right that Lily pay her last respects.

The hospice was housed in one wing of a nursing home called River Glen. Lily parked her old Subaru station wagon in the parking lot and checked her appearance in the rearview mirror. Her thick black mane, lightened by only a few silver strands, hung limply, as if even her hair follicles were grieving. Her blue eyes were puffy and red. She tried to force a smile, but it was no use. She just hoped she could get through the visit without completely breaking down. With a sigh, she got out of the car and went inside.

Lily checked in at the nursing station and was given a visitor badge. The receptionist said Sophie was in room 207. With a deep breath, Lily

pushed through the double doors that lead to the hospice wing.

The hallways had shiny linoleum floors and soothing gray-blue walls with paintings of sunsets and flowers. The decor was meant to be calming, Lily thought, but it bored her senseless. They should have photos of bunnies and other chaseable creatures if they truly wanted to take people's mind off their troubles. She passed a nursing station and then rooms 200 and 201.

An odd scent tickled her nose, and she stopped to sniff the air. There were a lot of smells in the hospice wing, most of them unpleasant. She smelled a heavy lemon cleaner, saltwater, the bitter tang of antibiotics, the copper of blood, hints of urine and feces, hand lotion, and the unhappy smell of sickness. There was a trace of the perfume one of the nurses wore and—

Dog. She smelled a dog. A male dog.

Lily looked around and thought she saw a furry face looking around the edge of the counter at the nursing station. But it was only there for a second. It had to be her imagination, what with that smell fresh in her nose. There wouldn't be a dog at the nursing station!

Shaking her head, Lily walked on, still looking for room 207. When she arrived, a man was coming out the door. He looked just like Sophie.

"Dillon Andrews?" Lily asked.

"Yes?"

"I'm Lily Beaufort, Sophie's friend. We spoke on the phone?"

"Oh. Yes. Thank you for coming."

He looked so down-trodden, Lily gave him a hug. When she pulled back, Dillon's eyes were wet. "I'm afraid Mom's not conscious."

"That's all right. Why don't you go get some coffee while I visit with her for a bit?"

"I need to go into the office for a few hours, actually. There are nurses around so... feel free to stay as long as you like."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for coming. Mom would have loved to see you."

Dillon left, and Lily steeled herself and went into the room. Her skin prickled with unease. The hair on her arms and neck stood up in alarm. But it was just Sophie in the room, after all. She looked small in the bed, a shrunken version of herself, her strong features more hawk-like than ever. She was deeply asleep, her mouth slack.

Lily pulled a visitor's chair close to the bed and sat down. She took Sophie's hand, ignoring the way it felt like dry paper. She proceeded to tell Sophie the latest gossip about her family and Mad Creek. Lily knew *a lot* of gossip.

The morning slipped by. Sophie never opened her eyes, but a few times she squeezed Lily's hand. Lily thought Sophie was truly interested in hearing all about Lance and Tim and baby Molly. Well, who wouldn't be interested! She also told Sophie about little Jason Kunik, who always was an odd duck but bright as a whip, and how he'd moved back to town to do research. He was a doctor now and everything! Several times, Lily could have sworn someone was at the partially-opened door to the hall. But every time she turned around to look, there was no one there.

Eventually, Lily ran out of things to say. It was time to let go. With a heart like a stone, she kissed Sophie's forehead. She was just about to leave when a nurse came in.

"Hey there!" the nurse greeted Lily. She was a big lady with a wide smile and colorful balloons on her aqua nurse's top. Her badge said 'Racine'. "Now, don't mind me! I just need to check a few things. I'm sure Sophie appreciates you coming to see her. Ain't that right, Sophie?"

"I'll miss her," Lily said simply.

"I bet you will. I can tell she was a wonderful woman. You can always tell by who comes to see them in the end, and how their family members treat 'em. You know, we all get here sooner or later. Best to live so you have no regrets."

"She was smart and honest and she taught me so much." Lily was about to tell Racine more about Sophie, but her ears heard the tiny squeak of the door hinges. She turned to see a long, furry brown face looking at her from around the door. *Oh*, *you sneaky thing. It's been you all this time*, *has it?* Lily narrowed her eyes and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Do you know that dog?" Lily asked Racine, very quietly.

Racine turned to glance at the door. A smile lit up her face. "Oh, yeah! That's Milo. He's our comfort dog."

"Comfort dog?"

"Mm-hmm. He visits with the patients and family members and comforts 'em. He's just a ball of love, that one. He's so gentle with the patients! We all think he's a little bit magic 'cause he always knows when someone's about to pass. More like than not, we find him curled up next to the ones who just slipped away. Milo makes sure they never go alone."

"Huh. Does he belong to one of the nurses or doctors?"

"No. Well, he belongs to all of us, I guess. See, a couple of years ago, the head nurse, Mrs. Barton? She read about using service dogs in hospice, how they can help ease stress and fear in the patients and all. So she called the local shelter and asked if they wanted to bring a few dogs by, see how it went. They brought several, but Milo's the one who stuck. The other dogs weren't all that interested in the patients and were too rambunctious. But Milo knew just what to do, who needed him the most, and how to be careful."

"Did he now?" Lily studied the cute face. The dog blinked at her. He was tall with curly golden hair, a lab-poodle mix, Lily thought.

"Uh-huh. So the shelter brought him by once a week. And the patients were always askin' for him. 'Where's Milo! How come he's not here today?' Then one day the shelter called and said they gonna put him down because he'd been there so long without being adopted, you know?"

"Oh no!" The very idea that shelters did that made Lily so sick and furious she wanted to bite someone.

"Oh, yes indeedy. So we had a meetin' and we decided to bring him to live here? He's got a bed in the staff room, and everyone takes turns walkin' him and feedin' him, all that. Ain't that right, Milo?"

An ordinary dog would look at a person who said his name, but Milo's gaze never left Lily's face. She looked deeply into his eyes, trying to see if her suspicions were correct. Those eyes were like a warm pot of misery stew. There was heartbreak in them, and resignation, fear, and curiosity. The intelligence in them was uncanny. Lily sniffed as discreetly as she could,

but the stale, medicinal tang to the air kept her from catching a clear scent of the dog. As if he realized what she was doing, he quickly ducked behind the door and she heard the faint click of his nails as he trotted away down the hall.

Oh no you don't, she thought.

"Thank you for taking care of Sophie," Lily told Racine. She bent over Sophie one last time. "Good-bye, dear friend."

Lily slipped from room 207 into the wide, quiet halls of the hospice. She had to find that dog! She was not leaving without speaking to him in private. She no longer heard the sound of his nails on the floor. He'd gone into hiding. His smell was simply everywhere, so it was hard to pinpoint where he was right then. And there were a number of rooms occupied by patients and their families. She couldn't exactly barge in!

Well, she *could*. She was Lily Beaufort. And she *would*, if she had to. But she'd try to be subtle first. She stopped in an empty hallway and took a deep breath. She spoke, her voice so low a human would only hear her if they were inches away.

"Hello, Milo. My name is Lily. I know what you are. It's okay, honey bunch. I'm like you. Will you please talk to me? Please?"

She stood there in the florescent light of the hall, hardly daring to breathe for fear she'd miss his response. As she waited, she couldn't help but wonder. Was Milo aware of what he was, what he could do? Had he ever met another quickened? She'd known dozens of dogs who'd gotten the spark. Heck, she'd helped their transitions into Mad Creek, and she'd heard their stories. The loneliness and confusion they felt before finding others like them just broke her heart. Like this poor baby.

How many dogs like Milo were out there? Quickened, but all alone, not even knowing others existed? Ugh. The idea made her crazy. They'd talked many times at pack meetings about starting an outreach program. But where did they even begin? These lost souls could be anywhere—anywhere there were dogs and owners who loved them.

After a few minutes, Milo appeared around a corner at the end of the hall. He stood there, keeping his distance and watching her.

"It's okay, hon. Is there someplace we can talk?" Lily whispered.

Milo gazed at her for another long moment, then he turned and walked away, glancing back over his shoulder. Lily followed.

Milo led her to a door and stopped in front of it. He jumped up and pushed the handle down with his paw. Inside was a storage room packed with linens and cleaning supplies.

Lily closed the door behind them. Milo backed up until he was pressed against a shelf. He looked young, and he was shaking like a leaf. Lily wanted to cry. *Oh*, *pup*, *what have you been through?*

She squatted down so she was at his level, and she made sure her hands were visible. She looked at his chest rather than directly into his eyes. Non-threatening. "It's okay, sweetie. I know it's been hard. But don't you worry now. I'm here and I know. I know."

Milo whined, the sound part excitement and part fear. And then... then he began to melt. No shift. He dropped to the floor on his side, his furry body heaving and stretching.

"Oh, no! Not here!" Lily whispered frantically, glancing at the door. But it was too late.

Milo was like a soap bubble ready to burst. He probably couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to. It was an intimate thing, watching someone shift. It was like watching someone change clothes, only much, much worse. And even though Lily had been through it herself a hundred times, and knew the pain was temporary, it was always harder for her to watch someone else endure it than it was to endure it herself.

Had Milo ever allowed himself to shift before, or was this his first time? Poor thing! It was terrifying if you didn't know what was happening. She sat down against the door both to block anyone from entering and to give him plenty of space. She whispered encouragements, told him he would be all right, that it was normal. She prayed they weren't found while he was in progress.

Goodness, Lance would have a heart attack if he was here!

The transition was unusually fast. It was probably no more than two minutes before the labradoodle was gone. Lily blinked, then rubbed her eyes for good measure. Lying on the floor of the storage room was a youth.

His dark blond hair was curly and close-cropped. He lay on his side, knees drawn up, eyes closed, and panting with exhaustion. His body was long and slender, like his dog form had been, and his skin glowed golden tan. The overhead light struck his bare thighs, which glinted with fine blond hairs.

Oh, *my*. He was beautiful as a man, wasn't he? Lily admonished herself not to go there. She was far too old for him, and anyway, that was not what Milo needed. But for goodness sake, she wasn't blind!

"All right now?" she asked.

Milo opened his eyes. He pushed himself up on two arms, gazed down at himself, and gave a quivery sigh. He looked up at Lily with big hazel eyes. "You hep. Me?"

"Oh, you sweet thing! Of course I will!" Lily scooted across the floor and wrapped Milo up in the juiciest, most encouraging hug her petite body could muster. "You're safe now. Lily's got you."

It wasn't the simplest proposition in the world, to get a naked young man out of a nursing home. Unfortunately, the supply closet didn't have anything that would do for clothes, so Lily had to leave Milo while she went out snooping. The good news was, Lily had snooping down to a fine art.

She located a staff locker room and confiscated a pair of old tan scrubs that looked like they might fit. She grabbed a pair of Crocs from another locker. When she returned to the supply closet, Milo was huddled in a corner, shivering. She helped him dress. From his utter awkwardness, it was clear he'd never been in human clothes before.

She didn't like the way he trembled or the way his eyes remained cast down. He seemed traumatized. Was it just that he'd been alone and scared? Or had he been abused? There was no time to get more of his life story now, even if he could put it into words, which she doubted.

When he was dressed, she rubbed his arms briskly. He looked cold, even though they kept it hot in the building. He was fairly tall compared to her.

She bent her head, trying to catch his down-turned gaze. "Milo? I'd like to take you home with me. I live in a town called Mad Creek, and most

of the people who live there are like you and me. They can be dogs or human. You'll have a place to stay, and food to eat, and we have a school where you can learn to read and write too. Would you like to go with me?" She wasn't sure he'd understand her words, but she had to try.

Milo raised his eyes and looked at her hopefully. "Home?"

"Yes. Home to Mad Creek. We wouldn't come back here. At least not for a while. Is that what you want to do?"

His face grew sad, and he seemed to think it over. Lily knew from Racine's chatter that Milo was valued at the hospice. But he was a quickened, for goodness sake! No one deserved to live in hiding like that, alone and confused, trapped in a dog's body when there was so much more. It was the right thing for Milo to go with her, Lily was sure. But she didn't press him.

Lance always said she was bossy. Well, it wasn't her fault she always knew best! But one thing Lily believed with all her heart—no one should be forced to do things against their will. Not a dog and not a man. She wouldn't steal this boy without his permission, even if everything inside her shouted that she should wrap him up and take him home right now.

Finally Milo nodded. "Home. I want... good-bye?"

Lily worried at her lip, but she nodded. Heavens knew what the hospice staff would make of it, but she couldn't deny Milo his chance to say good-bye.

So out they went. Lily had to help Milo open the door. His hands were uncoordinated and he walked in a shuffle, tilted forward at the shoulders as if it helped him keep his balance. No one seemed to notice his strange movements, though, because people couldn't look away from his face. Lily followed him around the ward as he went from nurse to nurse and room to room. He didn't say anything, but his eyes were full of sadness and love. He hugged everyone he saw, full-body hugs that looked soft and cozy and not at all rushed.

He cast a spell as he went. No one asked who Milo was. No one demanded to know what he was doing there. They accepted the hugs with the pure sincerity with which they were given. Even a stern-looking doctor in the hallway dropped his clipboard to the floor and accepted Milo's hug, a

smile tilting his lips. And the patients! Milo was so very careful, but he hugged them all, even the ones who were unconscious in their beds. Sophie too. The nurses watched him, ready to intercede, but they never did.

By the time Milo was done with his hugs, he had a train of five staff members following him. Milo went to the double doors that left the wing and turned. His eyes sought out Lily.

"Home?" he asked, his smile tentative but hopeful.

Oh darlin', what will Mad Creek make of you? Lily wondered. She took Milo's hand and led him out to the car.

Chapter 3: Of Pine Trees and Petri Dishes

Jason was in Mad Creek for an entire week before his cabin was ready. He arranged to meet Minnie there at noon to get the keys, but he was so anxious he checked out of the hotel and got there early. He parked three times before he was satisfied with the car's position in the driveway. He knew he was obsessing, but he couldn't help it.

The cabin was on Hope Street at the end of town where Mad Creek's downtown area gave way to woods. Hope Street looked relatively new and it had five cabins on it, the last two with backyards facing the forest. The largest of these was the cabin Jason had arranged to rent over the phone with Minnie, the real estate czar of Mad Creek. He wanted to be close to town so that it would be easy for him to interview his subjects without a lot of driving. And he didn't like the idea of being too far from civilization where snow might block his access to the post office, grocery store, or medical attention. His anxiety attacks had grown worse over the past few years, and he wanted as little to worry about as possible. He didn't want anything to distract him from his work.

He walked around the outside of the cabin to look it over. The building was fairly new, built with logs like some kind of life-sized Lego kit. With the pine trees silhouettes cut into the shingles and the dog's-head door knocker, it had a cutesy factor Jason didn't care for but could easily ignore. In the back was a cement slab porch with an overhanging eave, a small lawn space of grass and weeds, flower and shrub beds outlined with rocks, and the woods. He liked that he couldn't see any other homes from the backyard. It had the illusion of rusticity while still being close to services. Excellent. By the time he returned to the driveway, Minnie had pulled up. She was just getting out of her whale of a sedan.

Minnie herself was enormous for a human female. Of course, she wasn't a human female. She was a second-gen quickened descended from Newfoundland dogs—hence her size and lumbering, powerful gait. If Jason didn't know Minnie, and wasn't able to smell her, he'd still know she was quickened by her hair and features. Like Jason himself, she had an overabundance of hair on her head—black, super thick, and bushy. It sprang out

in a style too straight to be an afro, but it somehow gave that impression anyway. Her nose was large and dominant on her face. Her smile was huge, and she had that pleasant warmth about her that so many quickened had.

Except for Jason, of course. No one had ever accused him of being warm.

Like Minnie, Jason was a quickened who didn't look quite like any human race. He resembled his mother, who was Alaskan Malamute by descent. He might share his father's upper lip or suprasternal notch or something equally inconsequential, but it was difficult to tell when he'd only ever seen a single photograph of the man.

Jason's skin was a creamy white with a touch of yellow. His hair was black and so thick you could pick a lock with a strand of it. It was also absolutely straight, unlike Jason himself. His eyelids had a slant and the epicanthal fold found in Asian races. But his irises were pale blue ringed with a thick edge of black. His nose was long and Romanesque. His body was more Slavic with a powerful chest, shoulders, arms, and legs as if he worked out when he did no such thing.

Jason didn't care for his looks. He knew he wasn't unattractive. He got enough interest from men and women to prove that. But he didn't look normal. His freak flag flew no matter how much he might wish to hide it. Especially working in genetics, he often had people broach the subject of his descent with polite interest, and then he had to lie. He'd perfected the line: "Oh, our family tree is all over the place. I had a great-grandmother who was Chinese, and there's some Inuit and Swedish in there, and God knows what else." He'd had two offers to do a genetic profile from curious coworkers. Jason had declined.

No. He'd take the mousy, nerdy exterior shared by most of his colleagues over the weird physical expression he was stuck with. Unfortunately, that was not an option.

"I'm so sorry about the delay, Dr. Kunik!" Minnie opened the cabin's front door with a key and turned on the lights. "I swear we've just been overrun lately! I had to stick a couple of new arrivals in here for a few weeks. I know you'd already sent me your deposit, but I just didn't have any place else to put them. I found a spot for them, finally, and I had the cleaners in yesterday, so it should be all set now."

Jason had to restrain himself from pushing past her, he was so eager to finally move in. "The hotel was less than satisfactory. I'm afraid it delayed my work."

He didn't like to complain, but he had been inconvenienced. Things were done differently in Mad Creek, that much was clear. He had a feeling there was no such thing as 'in a rush' in the town's vocabulary.

Minnie ignored his complaint, happily bustling around the front room of the cabin, straightening this and that, and turning on lamps to create a welcoming glow. The room looked just like the photos she'd e-mailed him. It came furnished with a velour couch, rocking chair, braided rug, TV, and DVD player. The walls were plastered and painted white, but there were exposed logs along the ceiling that were reminiscent of a lodge in some appalling Western movie. A large window looked out over the cabin next door and a distant view of Mount Francis.

It was livable, if not exactly modern, but Jason spent all his time working anyway. He never worried much about his personal space. Besides, growing up, he and his mother had been rolling stones. The longest they'd ever lived anywhere had been their six years in Mad Creek. He'd learned better than to get attached to mere belongings.

"It's three bedrooms, just like I promised. Oh, I wanted to ask, Doctor, if you'd be open to having a roommate now and then? New quickened arrive in town without any notice, and sometimes we need to stick them someplace for a few days while we—"

"No."

Minnie straightened up from fluffing a pillow on the sofa and looked at him. "No?"

"No, I can't have anyone else staying here. I'll be working in this small cabin 24/7, and I can't have strangers imposing on my workspace. That would be most disruptive."

"Oh." Minnie blinked. "Of course. I'm sorry. I guess the way we do things here is a little unorthodox. It must seem strange to you. We get so used to just... making do."

Jason didn't bother to reply. Uncomfortable, he went over to a bookshelf and scanned the titles. It was full of Agatha Christie novels, dog

stories, a dictionary, and various elementary school primers. He'd have to box these up so he had room for his own books.

"We have pack meetings every Friday night at Lily's house," Minnie went on. "It's only a few blocks from here. And Howl at the Moon night is the town's big party where we all get to play in our fur! You'll love it!"

Play in our fur. Jason hadn't heard that euphemism since he'd left Mad Creek after high school graduation. What a ridiculous phrase. "I don't do that," he said stiffly.

"You don't what, hon?" Minnie's eyes were bright.

"I don't 'wear my fur' or, to be precise, degenerate my mind and body into that of a dog."

Minnie's face drooped as she took this in. "Not... ever?"

"Never," Jason said firmly. Honestly, it was none of Minnie's business. But it would save them all a great deal of trouble if he made his position clear up front so they'd stop inviting him to these things.

"But... doesn't your dog get... don't you miss it?" She looked bewildered.

"Miss acting like an animal? Why would I? Now, Minnie, since you're responsible for housing the new people in town, I was hoping you could assist me. I'd like a list of all of the first-generation quickened who live in Mad Creek. And when new ones show up, if you would be so kind as to send me an e-mail with their name, I'd be grateful."

"This is for your research?"

"Yes. I'm interviewing all the first-gen quickened. I suppose I *should* attend this week's pack meeting so I can complete my list. Would you meet me there and point out who's who?"

Minnie's smile was wide and friendly. "I'd love to! I don't suppose it really matters how this whole dog-to-human business works, but I can see it's important to you. I'd be happy to introduce you around."

Jason gritted his teeth. "Thank you."

"Now can I show you the kitchen, Doctor?"

"I'd prefer to see the bonus room, if you don't mind."

"Oh that's right! You wanted that for your work. Right this way."

Minnie led him through a hallway to the left. They ended up in a large room that ran the full length of the cabin in the back. The exterior wall was half logs and half windows, and it overlooked the backyard. The room was carpeted and warm, as Minnie had promised.

This was the humble home of his future lab. There was space enough in there for his desk and computers, several tall counters with lab equipment —his centrifuge, microscopes, electronic pipettors, slide banks, and more. In another part of the room, he'd set up a table, chairs, and a camera for interviews. A white board could cover the inside wall, Jason decided as he looked around. He'd have to improve the lighting—get some track lights installed in the ceiling. The windows would offer plenty of natural daylight and could be opened if the room got too hot. The back door would enable him to usher his test subjects in and out without them traipsing through his personal space. That was a significant advantage.

"Is it all right?" Minnie asked.

"It'll do nicely. Thank you."

It would do. He would *make* it do. But looking around at the homey space, he couldn't help but think with bitterness about his old lab at JVT. He hadn't appreciated it enough when he was there, clearly. And then suddenly —far more abruptly than he'd planned—that lab had been lost to him forever.

He'd always planned to return to Mad Creek to do research on real, living quickened. He'd put money aside toward that end. But when the moment came for him to leave JVT, it wasn't his choice, and there had been no good-bye party, bonus stock, or Kahlua-infused cake.

No. Thanks to Korgan Rainier, Jason had outright fled.

* *

Four weeks prior

It was nearly midnight, which was the best time of the day as far as Jason was concerned. During the day, he was a mild-mannered genetic researcher for JVT Labs. But by night... by night Jason worked on his own research. His very secret, hush-hush, mind-blowing research.

The quickened. Canis sapiens. If Jason could figure out how the dog-to-man transition worked, it would unlock the door to a thousand other areas of genetic research. And maybe, if he was very lucky, he might learn how to quiet the dog in his own DNA forever.

JVT Labs had good funding, access to the best research data in the world, and excellent lab equipment. He was lucky to be there. But at times he felt like such an imposter. He could pretend to be just like his coworkers — human. But the fact was, he wasn't one of them. Sometimes that truth was pushed home in a breathtakingly painful way—when one of them got married, had a child, or flirted with him. He felt hollow when one of them happily rambled on about their personal life and asked about his. He had to deflect, deny, divert. He couldn't let anyone close enough to see what he really was.

Because "by the way, I'm a third-generation Malamute shifter," was not a conversation he intended to have with anyone, ever. His own human father hadn't stuck around once his mother told him about the quickened. No doubt he'd thought Anna Kunik was insane. Jason would never risk it. There was no literal fur on his palms, but there might as well be. *Freak, monster, mutant. All of the above.*

Someday he'd go back and live amongst his own kind, once he'd made all the progress on his work that he could at JVT. But he had the sinking feeling he'd be just as out of place in Mad Creek as he was in the human world. At least there he wouldn't have to live in fear of being found out. Maybe then his anxiety attacks would ease.

He scanned over the test results from the previous night's batch run. He was 90 percent done mapping the genome from his own blood sample. He was hoping to find genes expressed in his own DNA that weren't expressed in either the dog or human samples he had for comparison. He was studying a flagged sequence when someone said into his ear.

"Thirty-nine chromosomes? What DNA sample are you working with, Jason?"

Jason jumped on his stool so hard, he nearly sent it toppling. Jesus Christ! He'd thought he was alone in the building! He resisted the impulse to turn off the monitor or hide the screen. That would only make him look guiltier. Instead, he plastered on a cool expression and turned in his seat.

Dr. Korgan Rainier stood behind him. Korgan was the head of research for JVT. What was he doing there so late? Jason must have really been lost in his work not to have heard Korgan enter the room.

He struggled to think of something to say. "It's nothing. Just a hypothetical."

Korgan's eyes were fixed on his screen. "The label says 'Sample JK-23.' Where's that sample from?"

Korgan's expression was intent and all too keen. It made the hair on the back of Jason's neck stand straight up. He clamped a palm over his nape and rubbed it to hide the evidence. "This is, um, my own research. Done after hours. I was just finishing up, actually. So if you'd—"

Korgan's sharp brown eyes snapped to Jason's face. "You're using JVT space and equipment. Surely you understand that any claims of personal ownership are murky at best."

There was an edge of steel behind Korgan's words. A sense of dread blossomed in Jason's stomach. It was true the equipment all belonged to JVT. But it was understood, as a professional courtesy, that they could use the lab for extra-hours research. Jason and his colleagues were encouraged to publish papers often and widely—for status and in order to "stay relevant."

So what was Korgan playing at? Inside, Jason's dog bristled, angry and hostile. It was late, he was tired, and Korgan's attack had come from nowhere. Jason had to tread with a great deal of care. He took deep breaths in through his nose.

"Jarvis knows about my after-hours work. If you're concerned, you should take it up with him."

"I'm not asking Jarvis. I'm asking you. What are you working on? Is there a reason you won't tell me where you got that sample?" Korgan was back to a friendly tone, but Jason's instincts weren't fooled. A silent growl started somewhere below his solar plexus. He suppressed it ruthlessly and kept his mouth shut.

Korgan Rainier looked to be in his forties, and he was in good condition. He gave off a studied attractive-smart-competent vibe that was

part salesman and part administrator. But at the moment, there was something else Jason sensed in him. *Ruthlessness*.

Korgan wandered over to the whiteboard. His hands were clasped behind his back as he looked them over. "My mother once told me an interesting story. She picked me up from school one day—I was eleven at the time. She was white as a sheet, her hands shaking. Just like this." Korgan held up his hands and made them visibly tremble. "I asked her what had happened."

Korgan wandered over to a stack of books and scanned the titles. "She said she'd driven into the city to look for my older sister. I'm afraid she had a drug problem. And there, in an alley outside of a shady bar, my mother witnessed something extraordinary. She heard cries and went around to see what was in the alley, expecting to find someone injured. Instead she saw a dog."

Korgan stopped his deliberate scan of the lab and looked at Jason. The dread Jason had felt in his stomach grew into roiling nausea as his gut clenched tight.

"She saw a dog writhing around on the dirty alley bricks. Only it wasn't completely a dog. She said it had an arm. A human arm. And as she stood there watching, horrified and glued to the spot, she heard bones break and the dog's legs grew and the hair receded...." Korgan shook his head in disbelief. "My mother fled at that point. She couldn't watch anymore."

"Now. You could dismiss what she'd seen as an illusion or trick of the light. Maybe it was a homeless person in a fur coat. Maybe there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. But she was so completely shaken. So *sure*. Eventually she grew to doubt herself. She never wanted to talk about it. As for me, I never had time to devote to the matter, though I have run across similar stories here and there."

"Yes, the internet is full of just about any crazy theory you care to name," Jason said coldly.

Korgan ignored him. "Until a few weeks ago, when I happened upon a report of tests run here at the lab. I noticed someone was doing chromosome comparisons between dog and human DNA. Then a third sample surfaced that had a convoluted mix of dog and human genes. And somehow—I remembered my mother's story."

"I don't know what you're implying," Jason said in his most dismissive tone. "Sounds like hogwash to me, no offense to your mother." He closed his work screens and shut off the computer. His heart was pounding, and he felt like he might pass out. A crevasse had opened beneath his feet, and he had to get to safe ground. He was very close to a full-blown panic attack. He couldn't let that happen in front of Korgan.

But when he got to the door, Korgan was standing in front of it, blocking the way with his broad shoulders and folded arms. He studied Jason's face, his eyes narrowed. He smiled, but his eyes remained cold.

"Jason, we don't need to be at odds over this. I'm open-minded. I have great contacts and resources. There's even a possibility that if your after-hours work is of sufficient interest—and I think it is, Jason, I really do—I can get funding for it. You'd be able to work on it full-time, be team leader. You'd like that. You're a man with ambition. I can help you achieve great things."

Jason swallowed. "That's... an intriguing idea, Dr. Rainier."

Korgan looked satisfied. He relaxed. "Tell you what: be at my office at ten a.m. I want an overview of your research. Don't worry about preparing anything, it's just a chat. We'll see where we go from there. All right?" Korgan slapped a manly hand on Jason's shoulder. "You're a good scientist, Jason. I know the system. Together, we could make history."

Jason made his lips stretch into a grin. "I'll be there at ten."

Korgan let him leave.

Jason chewed a tablet of Xanax as soon as he was out of the building. That and the dry night air of Las Vegas—not trapped, free, space, moon, no threat, no threat here—eased him off the incipient panic attack. He drove around for two hours, waffling from fear to disbelief to actually considering Korgan's proposition.

What if, for the sake of argument, he did team up with Korgan? Admit what he was and what he was working on? Could he really get funding for a major project? Be team leader, maybe even head up a new lab? He knew his research had the potential to be ground-breaking. World-shattering, even. He'd have plenty of resources to do his work then, a much higher salary, fame, and prestige. He could imagine himself, Dr. Jason Kunik, heading up

a billion-dollar research lab on the canis sapiens, a new species *he'd* discovered. It was a scenario that lurked in the vainest, most "pie in the sky" corners of his mind.

But even as he considered the idea, he knew the foundation was rotten. If Jason gave Korgan the proof he needed of the quickened, he might just as easily be cut out of the picture, even locked up and analyzed himself. And that didn't begin to touch on the darker possibilities of what could happen to all the others. He'd like to believe the quickened would be treated with respect and dignity, that he could somehow guarantee that if he were "in charge." But he knew there was no way he could control that. His mother and his years in Mad Creek had drilled into him the need for secrecy. He didn't dare cross that line.

Damn it! Jason had a sweet thing at JVT. He wasn't ready to let it go. There was so much more he'd hoped to accomplish there before he was ready to move on.

But none of that mattered now. Instead of driving home, Jason turned around his car and headed back to JVT. At three in the morning, no one was there but night security. Jason spent the next three hours moving his personal work to the cloud, destroying his biological samples, and packing up his personal things.

When it was done, he sent his e-mail resignation to JVT, citing a personal emergency, and left the building.

With any luck, he would never see Korgan Rainier again.

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Chapter 4: Buffet Surprise

Jason checked the knot on his tie three times as he walked over to Lily Beaufort's place for the Friday night pack meeting. The tie felt like a small, paisley-patterned noose. After much internal debate, he'd gone for a work casual look tonight—jeans and a button-down Oxford and tie. He wanted to make it clear he was attending the party for business reasons, but he didn't want to look stuffy. The people in Mad Creek did not dress up.

God, he hated this!

Lily's house was only ten blocks from Jason's cabin. He figured he could use the walk—to calm his nerves if nothing else. He dreaded social gatherings, and one at which everyone was quickened just sounded so... rowdy. Would there be shifting into dog form and, and... sniffing? Licking? Wrestling? The thought made him shudder. The town hadn't had this venerable tradition when he'd lived here with his mother, so he had no idea what to expect. But he had to attend. He had to make the effort, no matter how much he dreaded it or how much he'd rather work on his research notes.

It turned out, his high failure rate at interviews could not, after all, be blamed on Daisy's diner. He'd set up the interview space in his cabin comfortably enough. And he had all the privacy in the world there. But he'd yet to have a session where he got useful data. It was so frustrating! It was making his insomnia even worse. He lay awake for hours trying to figure out a solution to the problem. And he was consuming antacids by the boxful to soothe his stressed-out system.

The problem wasn't that the quickened were stupid or didn't have the language skills. They could chatter incessantly enough about other things. But as soon as he asked them pointed questions about their past lives and owners, and tried to get them to define what might have led up to them getting the spark, it all went to hell faster than a pole dancer in a nun costume. One highly strung poodle named Penny had even burst into tears, which nearly got Jason's ass kicked by her boyfriend, Deputy Charlie

Smith. Another subject, a Jack Russell terrier quickened named Simon, dove out an open window to escape the interview.

Seriously! The window! As if Jason wouldn't have unlocked the door if Simon had asked politely. And filled out at least one form.

Ugh! Jason was getting worked up again as he walked to the party, his inner dog growing agitated. That wouldn't do. Quickened were more attuned to feelings than humans, so it was harder to hide frustration and anger. He had to relax.

When he arrived at Lily's, the place was lit up like it was Christmas. There were even white fairy lights on the porch. Cars were arrayed haphazardly, some poking into the street and the lawn, as if the drivers weren't clear on the etiquette of parking. It made Jason's skin crawl and his hands itch to repark and straighten each and every one. But no. No. The cars were not his problem. He wiped his palms on his jeans nervously, pushed his glasses up his nose, and went inside.

At first glance, the pack party looked perfectly ordinary. Lily's house was full of bodies, but they all looked human. There were families, couples, older people, and young. There were kids running around like regular kids do. There was a table laden with perfectly edible-looking food. Not a dish of raw liver in sight.

On second glance, any human would know they were in a strange place indeed. He saw people sniffing each other's necks and chests. Some shimmied their butts with happiness as they chatted. And the quickened in Mad Creek had a habit of rubbing arms or chests against one another in greeting to transfer scent and show acceptance. He heard low grumbles that were almost growls. And some of the laughter bordered on yips.

Jason wanted to turn around and run. It was too much... doggieness for him to handle.

God. Why? Why did he have to feel so out of place here too? He'd never belonged in the human world. You'd think surely he could find a sense of belonging among the quickened. But he wasn't one of them. They loved their dog natures and embraced them; he hated his. He'd suppressed his dog side for so long, the quickened of Mad Creek were foreign to him, as foreign as if they spoke another language. Well, they did, he supposed. It

was a body language, a dog language, but it was a language all the same. And he seemed to have lost his personal copy of the codex.

"Jason!" Lily spotted him from across the room and hurried over.

Jason forced his hands to unclench. "Hello, Lily. Thank you for having me."

"Nonsense! It's a pack party. You're pack, aren't you? Of course you are!"

"Well, I—"

"How is your mother? I haven't seen Anna for ages!"

"You know my mother. She never saw a road she didn't want to follow to its end."

"Yes, she always did have the travel bug. Where is she now?"

This was a safe subject, and Jason relaxed a little. "Northern Canada. Over by Montreal last I heard. She said she'd come for a visit in the fall."

"Oh splendid! Won't that be fun? Gosh! And what about your father? Hmmm? I don't recall ever meeting him." Lily tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Jason's nerves immediately returned, and his back stiffened. "He was never in Mad Creek because he left my mother before I was born."

"Oh! I remember now. Anna must have told me that ages ago." Lily looked not at all sorry for bringing up a sensitive subject. "Oh, goodness, there are so many people for you to meet! By the way, I think you need to get your ears checked. I stopped by your cabin the other day and knocked and knocked! I thought for sure you were home since your car was in the driveway."

Jason's cheeks grew hot. "Well. Sometimes I walk to the diner."

"Oh, no. You weren't there. I'd just *been* to the diner!"

In fact, Jason had ignored Lily's knocking the day before, leaving his lab to ignominiously hide out in his bedroom. In his own defense, he'd been in no mood for company, and he'd heard enough about Lily to know she'd talk his ear off and outstay any drop of patience he had for social interaction. She'd been born a third-gen quickened, so she wasn't on his list

of interview subjects. What other possible point could there be in talking to her?

"I'm rather private and very focused on my work," he said firmly.

"Oh fiddlesticks! Your dog needs companionship like it needs air. Not to mention a mate. Have you met Janice? She's a lawyer and so, so attractive! Why, two professionals like you would make the cutest, smartest baby quicks in the whole world!"

"We could," Jason said with a razor sharp smile, "if it weren't for that unfortunate thresher incident. No children for me I'm afraid."

Lily blinked at him, her mouth hanging open. "Oh. Um...."

"Excuse me." Jason smirked to himself as he walked away. It felt good, like he'd scratched a particularly irritating itch. Served her right for asking about his father. But he knew it was a stupid thing to have done. The gossip would be all over town by morning.

He ran into Lance Beaufort who was watching him with distrusting eyes. "Jason," Lance said coolly. He held out his hand.

Jason shook it. "Hello, Lance."

Lance hadn't changed much. He looked intense and serious, but he'd been that way even in high school. That was fine with Jason, he'd been a serious boy himself. But Lance was narrow-minded too. He seemed to think only Mad Creek and the quickened mattered, as if the rest of the world didn't exist. As a teenager with big dreams, Jason had no intention of burying his head in the sand of Mad Creek for the rest of his life, and he let everyone know it.

"Thresher incident, huh?" Lance's blue eyes bored into his.

"Um...."

Lance broke into a grin and jabbed Jason in the ribs. "Good one. Wish I'd thought of that when Lily used to bug me about getting married. 'Course she knew my medical records, so it probably wouldn't have worked. Hey, have you met my husband, Tim?" Lance looked around. "Tim! Babe! Come here a minute."

Tim was a few feet away, chatting with a woman with dark hair. He excused himself and came over. "Hey, Jason!" Tim smiled.

"You've met?" Lance sounded suspicious, like maybe they were having secret rendezvous.

Tim's eye roll was subtle. "Yes, dear. He was in the diner the other day when I was there with Molly. I introduced myself."

"Where is Molly?" Lance looked around again. Jason recalled that the Beauforts were descended from border collies—always the herders. It was amazing how the dog traits persisted. He made a mental note about a new chapter for the research paper.

"Lonnie wanted to hold her for a bit," said Tim. "He took her and gave me Mikey. So I had Mikey, but then Gus took him. It's like pass the baby around here! Everyone's gotta get their snuggle time. And they say it's good for infants to get used to the scents of the pack." Tim was a little sweaty and glowing with happiness. When Lance wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him tight, he looked into Lance's eyes adoringly.

Jason couldn't help but feel a pang of envy. Who knew glowering Lance Beaufort would end up with such a lovely family? Then Jason reminded himself that he had no use for a family, lovely or otherwise.

He cleared his throat. "Well, I'd better—"

"Wait," Lance ordered sharply. "I wanted to talk to you. I hear you're interviewing a lot of the new residents. And you're doing some sort of work looking into the quickened mechanism or something?"

"Yes." Jason frowned.

"Uh-huh. Well, I want to hear more about that. I'll stop by next week, and we'll have a long chat. I hope you are aware, *Doctor*, that whatever work you're doing, you can't share it with the outside world. So I'm not really sure what the point is."

"Lance!" Tim scolded.

"The point," Jason said with a brittle smile, "is knowledge. And even, if we're lucky, practical applications that might save lives. Not that I'd expect you to concern yourself with *knowledge*, being in local law enforcement and all."

Lance narrowed his eyes and his chest puffed out. "Any lives that need to be saved here in Mad Creek, that's my job. And I can't see how your

research would apply to anyone who didn't live here because they're not quickened. So, once again, pointless."

The horrible thing was, these were thoughts Jason had himself. How was he ever going to share his work with the broader scientific world? And if not the scientific world, who was his audience? The first-gens couldn't even stand to be interviewed. None of the others seemed particularly interested in hard science.

But he replied snidely. "Well, you are the final authority on the entire breadth of scientific work, past, present, and future. That explains why I see your name in every science journal I pick up. 'By authority of Lance Beaufort!' Oh no, I've got that wrong, don't I? You didn't even pass twelfth-grade chemistry."

"Listen, Jason—" Lance began with a growl.

"Oookaay!" Tim interrupted by literally inserting himself between Lance and Jason. "I think that'll do. Lance, maybe you'd better go find Molly. I can't *see* her and, well—"

Before Tim had finished the sentence, Lance was off, intent on hunting down his baby girl. Tim turned slowly to Jason and gave him a stunned, wide-eyed look as if to say *Oh my God*, *you did not just go there*. Then he went after his husband.

Jason should have felt guilty that he'd pushed Lance. Probably. But he didn't. In fact, he was hyped up and energized. Fucking Lance Beaufort! Jason had had a crappy week, he was stonewalled with his work, and he found he was precisely in the mood for a knock-down, drag-out fight with someone strong enough to fight back. As long as it was only verbal, of course. He wasn't going to resort to being brutish and physical. Even if that sounded appealing at the moment. His skin itched, his dog instinct rose up and wanted out. OUT! He wanted to stretch and run and pounce and snarl and....

Crap. What the hell was wrong with him? There must be something about the smell or the vibe in Mad Creek that tested his twelve-year ban on his dog nature, brought it closer to the surface. Why had he even come to this stupid, stupid party?

Oh. Right. He'd come to get introductions to the newly quickened from Minnie. For *work*. That's what he cared about; that's what mattered. He was going to have a drink and a plate of food and hope that took the edge off enough to be able to accomplish his task. He headed for the buffet table.

Jason loaded up his plate. As he ate, his body gradually calmed down. The best dish was an outrageous eggplant dip that was signed "Tim's Mad Veggies." It had bacon in it. Holy God that was tasty!

He observed the crowd as he ate. He noted a higher number of same-sex mates than one would expect in a similar human gathering. Besides Tim and Lance, there was a big man in a deputy's uniform—his name tag said Roman—and his attractive male partner, who was fully human. There were two older female quickened who were practically joined at the hip, an openly kissy younger couple of female second-genners, one with purple hair and one with piercings in her lip. And two young teenaged boys held hands and fed each other bites at the buffet table. Jason made a mental note of it. Was it a common trait with canis sapiens? If so, why?

It was bad form to hypothesize without all the data, but if he had to guess, Jason would say it was a bisexuality similar to his own. He was attracted to both men and women but only certain ones. It wasn't about beauty. He'd been attracted to both beautiful and plain people. It was some sort of response to their demeanor as a whole, personality included, the way they carried themselves, the tone of their voice, their eyes, their scent. If the person was attractive to him, they simply were. Their gender was a secondary characteristic.

Was that a canine trait, Jason wondered? Or was it tied to the process of becoming quickened? Did the same chemical triggers that turned on the quickened mutation also turn on open sexuality? Or turn *off* a hard-coded preference for the opposite gender? He added it to his list of a million questions he wanted to answer.

After he ate, he was finally able to corral Minnie. She took him around and made introductions. There was a muscular man named Barend who'd been in town two years and been born a Rottweiler. He was raised in Germany and, interestingly, had a German accent, even though he hadn't become a man until moving to the US. Another woman named Toni, white haired and sweet-looking, had been in town only six months and quickened

for slightly longer than that. And there were another half dozen new arrivals that had been around for only a few months. He typed names and contact info into his phone, though addresses were often things like "staying at the cabin with the red roof on Broad Eagle Drive" or "living with the Essels." It would be a pain to track them down, but Jason typed it all regardless.

"Have you interviewed Roman Charsguard yet? He's first-gen." Minnie pointed to the large and frankly intimidating man in the deputy's uniform.

"Oh? Swell. I'll put him on my list." At the end of the list, Jason decided. In case Roman Charsguad took offense at the interview questions and ended up breaking a few of Jason's bones.

"Do you keep records of new arrivals at the real estate office?" Jason asked Minnie. "We could graph them and see if there really are more newly quickened arriving now than there were in the past."

Minnie's eyes brightened. "That would be interesting, wouldn't it? Might help us plan better too. We just sort of scrape by, I'm afraid. We've been building three cabins a year using volunteer labor and what funds the town collects from property taxes and whatnot. But it's really not enough. Maybe you could help us with that graphing business, Jason? Bet you're good at that sort of thing."

Jason hadn't been volunteering to become the town's historian, but he supposed if he was ever going to have the data, he'd have to be the one to do it. "Fine," he said with a resigned sigh. "But from now on, you really should keep a log of everyone who arrives in town with the date, where they're from, how they arrived, and so on."

"I'll do my best. You're so logical about everything, Dr. Kunik. I'm afraid that's just not my nature, but I am good at following directions."

Jason wasn't sure if he should feel flattered or discouraged.

"Now then! There's a brand new quickened named Milo that you might want to meet. Heck, I want to meet him myself. Lily found him just a few days ago." She looked around the crowded living room. "I'm not sure what he looks like, but I've heard he's quite young."

"He walked into town or...?"

"No. He was living at a hospice as a service dog, if you can believe it. Lily found him. Maybe I should ask her where he is so we can—"

"He was living at a hospice?"

"That's what Lily told me."

Jason blinked in confusion. "But surely he had one specific owner."

"From what I understand, he didn't. He'd been sort of adopted by the entire staff."

"No," Jason insisted. "He must have had one significant person in his life, or he wouldn't have become quickened."

"Well, I only know what I heard. I guess you can ask him yourself if ___"

"Quiet please!" The voice was loud and imperious, and it shut everyone up. It was Lance, of course. He stood on a footstool in the middle of the room, and its added height put him a head above everyone else. That should have been amusing, Lance on his little throne, but it wasn't. The way Lance looked around at the crowd intently and the alert stance of his body put him immediately in charge. Even Jason couldn't deny it. "It's time to start the meeting. Gather around. Come on. Move in! We've quite a few things to discuss tonight."

Like a herd of obedient sheep, everyone crowded in a deep circle around Lance. Lance had baby Molly against one shoulder, fast asleep, yet he still managed to look like a hard-ass.

"Right, then. Okay." Lance looked at a page he held in his free hand. "The new class schedule for the spring and summer has been put up at the post office along with sign-up sheets. Please sign up so the teachers know how many books and supplies they need to order."

"Second item—the spring clothes drive is next week. If you have any items to donate, please drop them off in the box by city hall. Frannie is driving down to Oakhurst and Fresno on Tuesday to pick things up at Goodwill, so if you want to go along, meet in front of the diner at 9am."

Apparently a lot of people wanted to go, because there were spontaneous oohs and hands waved madly.

"Third item—new pack members. We have a couple of people to introduce tonight. First is Dr. Jason Kunik. Some of you may remember Jason since he went to high school here. He moved away to college and became a scientist. Or something. Anyway, he just recently moved back to town."

Lance raised an eyebrow at Jason, and Jason, feeling like an idiot, waved his hand. He was not going to draw this out by correcting Lance—*a geneticist, thank you very much*. No, the attention on him needed to end instantly, thanks.

He glanced around the room. When his gaze met Penny's, she burst into tears. Jason lowered his hand guiltily.

Lance cleared his throat. "All right. There's another new member. Milo." Lance looked around. "Is Milo here?"

"I'll get him," Lily said in a loud stage whisper. She did an exaggerated tiptoe over to the buffet table, lifted the tablecloth, and peeked under it. "Milo, honey, can you come out and say hello? Come on, it's all right."

Jason wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't the creature that came crawling out from under the table. He was young, first of all. His human form looked no more than mid-twenties. That was highly unusual for a first-gen. He'd probably been no more than two or three years old as a dog when he'd gotten the spark. Most dogs took years to bond with their owners sufficiently to get "activated." And that made Jason remember what Minnie had said—that Milo was owned by the staff of a hospital. That didn't make any sense at all.

There was no doubt Milo was newly quickened, though. His shoulders were hunched up as if he wanted to hide, and his gaze was shyly downcast. He held himself stiffly, like he'd borrowed the body for the night and it was ill-fitting. He was also exceedingly attractive with wavy dark golden blond hair cut short, a tall thin physique, a delicate face, and a small, pointed chin. He was obviously uncomfortable, and Jason's gut twisted up with sympathetic nerves.

"Come on, Milo!" Lily tugged him forward until they were standing next to Lance. Milo kept his chin tilted down, but he looked up from under his lashes, his gaze moving around to peer at all the faces. He stared at Jason for a long moment before moving on. Milo's eyes were hazel in color and so sad. Ugh. Jason's heart heaved a meaty *galumph*.

"Right. So this is Milo, everyone," Lance said.

"Hi, Milo!" said everyone. Several of the first-gens shimmied their butts, as if they were excited to see the newcomer.

Milo smiled, but it was wobbly. He clung to Lily's hand so tight she winced. She patted his arm reassuringly. "It's okay, Milo. I told you, we're all one big happy family here. We'll find you a place to stay, and I'll see you all the time. You've got nothing to worry about."

Milo's gaze dropped back down, and he seemed to curl in on himself a little more. Something in Jason's chest broke. It was the weirdest sensation. He wasn't a sentimental man. Far from it. But there was something about Milo made him... *feel*. Jason shifted uneasily on his feet, wishing Lily would just let Milo go back under the buffet table, if that's where he was comfortable. Why did they have to put him through this?

"We need a bed for Milo," Lily said loudly, still patting his arm. "I'd love to keep him here, but I already have three staying with me. And the cabins are all full, right, Minnie?"

"They're packed," Minnie agreed, fanning herself with a magazine. "And the new cabin won't be done for another two months. He's on the list for a room there, but we need someone to take him in between now and then."

"So that's just a few short weeks," Lily said, as if it were nothing. "And he's the nicest, sweetest boy!" Lily smiled at Milo encouragingly, even though his eyes were still downcast. "Really, he's not even an eensy weensy bit of trouble."

A tremor went through Milo. Sadness and shame reeked off him, and Jason got pissed. Why the hell were they discussing this with Milo standing right there? Couldn't they have discussed his housing arrangements privately?

"We've got a spare room," a deep voice spoke up. It was the big man with the buzz cut, Deputy Roman.

"Yeah, Ro. We can take him," agreed his male partner.

Milo peeked up at them from under his lashes.

"That's very generous of you, Roman," said Lily. "But you and Matt both work long hours. Right now Milo needs a place where there's someone around during the day."

Milo's gaze shifted back to the floor.

"I've got a spare couch for a week," someone said. "Then my aunt's visiting."

"What about Mable? She's home during the day," said someone else.

"We have eight in our cabin, but we can take one more if no one else wants Milo!" Simon spoke up.

Everyone started discussing what should be done with the new kid. It got loud. Like quickened conversations often did, it got sidetracked into an argument about the need to build more cabins. And all the while, Milo stood in the middle of the crowd, looking smaller and smaller.

Jason couldn't take his eyes off Milo. So he sensed, seconds before it happened, what was coming. Milo broke away from Lily and ran for the front door. Jason was three steps ahead of him. He reached the door just before Milo did, and when Milo crashed into him, it seemed like the only possible recourse was to gather Milo into his arms. Milo was stiff for a moment before he melted into Jason's heavy chest, burying his face in the paisley tie.

"What is wrong with you people?" Jason asked loudly.

Everyone stopped talking and stared at Jason and Milo.

"Milo?" Lily asked with a frown. "What's wrong, honey?"

Milo didn't look up. He trembled against Jason's chest.

"What's wrong?" repeated Jason mockingly. "You're discussing where he's going to go like he's a... a...." He wanted to say "sack of laundry," but he didn't want to do that in front of Milo, didn't want to make him feel any worse. Instead, Jason straightened his spine and lifted his chin. "For God's sake, *I'll* take him."

Minnie looked surprised. Lance shook his head, a deeply worried furrow on his brow.

"Oh. Okay then!" said Lily, oblivious.

But inside, Jason was having a civil war. He'd said what?

One part of his brain, dressed in a white lab coat, was coolly writing a list on a whiteboard of all the perfectly logical reasons why he should take Milo. It would be convenient to have a test subject, especially someone as newly sparked as Milo, right in his own home, where Milo couldn't possibly escape. Jason could observe his behavior 24/7.

Another part of Jason's brain had noticed the trembling, vulnerable creature in his arms, and all the messy commitment, responsibility, and emotional entanglements that implied, and was skywriting NOOOOOOO!!!! across his brain in letters ten feet high.

Interestingly, neither of these points of view held the upper hand. What Jason felt at his core, in an unusually calm and centered way, was that Milo needed someone to step up. And it made sense that Jason was that person. He had spare bedrooms. He worked from home so he wouldn't have to leave Milo alone for long hours. Milo would have peace and quiet. And he even had a job Milo could do, being a subject for the work.

But mostly, Milo touched something in Jason. His heart, maybe? Dear God, don't let it be his heart! The thing was: Jason knew what it was like not to belong. And no one deserved to be treated like some... some unwanted gift at a white elephant exchange. He didn't think Lily and the others meant to be cruel. They were simply oblivious.

"Milo, do you *want* to stay with Jason for a while?" Lily asked matter-of-factly.

Milo didn't look up, but he shrugged then nodded. Lily took this for a yes. "Okay then. Lance, can we move on to the next item on the agenda?" She dropped her voice to another loud whisper. "I don't think Milo is comfortable with all the attention." She spoke normally again. "Besides, I have brownies in the oven and I want to serve them warm."

"Brownies!" gasped at least three different people.

Lance was watching Jason and Milo worriedly. "Hold on, Mother. Jason, are you sure you're prepared for this responsibility?"

"I can't imagine I'm less prepared than anyone else," Jason said haughtily, which might be the dumbest thing he'd ever said. He had no experience with the newly quickened whatsoever, other than the disastrous interviews. Clearly he wasn't a natural at communicating with them. Still, he wasn't about to reject Milo now or back down now in front of Lance Beaufort.

"I'll check on them," Lily insisted. "*Often*. I found Milo. You know I won't let anything bad happen to him." She shot Jason a warning glare.

Lance blew out a resigned breath. "Fine. Just... make sure you do, Mother. Jason, please let Lily know if you have any questions. Now, moving on. We needed to discuss the work schedule for the new cabin. Simon, do you have the volunteer sign-up sheet?"

The meeting continued, but Jason had had enough. More importantly, he thought Milo had had enough. Keeping an arm around Milo's shoulder, Jason led him from the house.

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Chapter 5: Pinky Meet String

Milo walked behind Jason back to his place, but he didn't say a word. He walked closer than a human would; close enough to nearly trip Jason every few steps.

Jason stopped. "Milo, could you just..."

Milo scooted closer still, his gaze cast down at the sidewalk.

Jason sighed. He took Milo's hand and maneuvered him to walk alongside instead of behind, and that worked better. It was weird walking down a residential street at night holding a man's hand. Jason didn't do things like stroll around holding *anyone's* hand. But then, Milo wasn't exactly a man and Jason had already given up expecting normalcy of any kind in Mad Creek.

By the time they reached Jason's cabin, he was having serious doubts. What had he been thinking? He'd told Minnie there was no way he was sharing the cabin. And he'd meant it! Yet at the very first pack meeting, the first time a quickened needed a home, there was Jason volunteering like a soft-hearted idiot. He wasn't soft-hearted, damn it! He prided himself on being a no-nonsense hard-ass!

He'll be useful for your research. And it's only for a few weeks.

Jason let go of Milo's hand to open the cabin door. Milo stayed close as they went inside. Jason had worn a light jacket, which he removed and hung on the hook by the door. He turned and assessed Milo.

Milo didn't have a coat. He stood with his arms in front of him, hiding his body like a shy teenager. One hand held the wrist of the other. He wore a blue wool V-neck sweater that looked like a hand-me-down. It had probably belonged to one of the Beaufort brothers long ago. It would have brought out their blue eyes, but on Milo it washed out his golden tones. It was too large and bagged around his waist. His jeans were quite large as well, held up by a tightly-cinched belt. He had on second-hand Converse tennies, which were stained and dingy white.

He needed new clothes. Would that be Jason's responsibility too?

Milo stared at Jason. He appeared calmer now. In fact, there was an excited light in his eyes.

"This is home?" Milo asked, looking around and then back at Jason with eager expectation.

"Only for the time being," Jason explained. "Until the new cabin is ready."

Milo's face fell, and he blinked rapidly, then looked back down at the floor.

"How long have you been human, Milo?"

Milo shrugged.

"I see. Well." Jesus, this was awkward. "How about I show you your bedroom and then make us some hot tea?"

Milo nodded. So he apparently understood basic English. Or so Jason hoped.

He walked down the hall. Milo stuck close to him like they were attached. Jason opened the door to the only guest room that actually had a bed in it. He'd had a spare room in his condo in Las Vegas, and he'd not bothered to throw out anything when he moved. He just told the movers to pack it all up. The guest bed, however, was unmade.

"Well, this won't do. I'll get some sheets and blankets." Jason grabbed the items from the linen closet and started making the bed. He fussed with the corners of the fitted sheets. He hated it when they wrinkled. He pulled them tight, smoothed them, pulled them tighter. He tucked in the edges of the fitted sheet so the surface was immaculate. He lined up the top edge perfectly. The whole time, Milo stayed close to him, only inches apart, following him around the bed as if he was worried Jason would get sucked into the mattress and disappear. Jason did his best to ignore it, but it made him nervous.

He knew he was obsessing. He forced himself to step away from the bed. He put his hands together and rubbed them with false cheer. "Okay! And there we have it. Do you, um, have some personal belongings? Maybe at Lily's?"

Milo stared at him.

"No? Oh. Well. That's all right. I probably have a spare set of pajamas."

Christ, had they really brought this poor man into the pack and not given him anything but the too-large clothes on his back? Surely they had some kind of "new arrival" package. Maybe Lily would have given him some items if they hadn't left the party early.

"So. This is your bed," Jason said, as if that hadn't been made utterly clear already. He pressed down on it with his fingertips by way of demonstration.

Milo sat on the bed. He bounced on it a few times, then stood up again.

"Right. How about that tea?" Jason suggested lamely.

They went into the kitchen where Jason put the kettle on. He pulled out a chair, lined it up on an exact parallel with the table, and pointed at it. "Milo, could you please sit down?" He was getting anxious with the way Milo kept standing so close to him.

Milo sat down. Jason made them both cups of lemon-ginger tea and took them to the table. He sat opposite Milo and studied him. Milo was perfectly adept at lifting the hot cup, blowing on it, and taking sips. And Jason realized he was woefully ill-informed about the process a newly quickened went through. How much had they absorbed by watching and listening to humans during their life as a dog? Did it vary from quickened to quickened? Obviously they couldn't do things like read, drive a car, or balance a checkbook. Mad Creek provided classes for those things. But how basic was their skill set? He'd never been around one as green as Milo.

He felt a flush of scientific interest, and his fingers itched for a notepad. He went and got one and sat back down with it. He started making a list of things he wanted to know about Milo and skills he wanted to test. Milo drank his tea and watched him with eyes so open and trusting it was disconcerting. Jason considered his first question carefully.

"How well do you understand speech, Milo? Can you talk?"

Milo shrugged then nodded.

Jason felt a wave of disappointment. How would he be able to interview Milo if he didn't know even basic communication? "Okay, first of all, when you do this—" Jason made an exaggerated shrug. "It means 'I

don't know.' And when you do this—" He nodded. "It means yes. So which one is it?"

Milo blinked. Then he shrugged. "I don't know 'how well' I understand. Not good like dictionary. But I understand you." Then Milo nodded. "Yes. I can talk."

Milo's voice was rough, as if his vocal chords were raw, but his words made perfect sense. Jason felt a little bubble of laughter at his own failed assumptions. He managed to keep a straight face.

"That's good. Very good. Do you remember when you first realized you'd gotten the spark? That is, when you got the ability to become a man?"

Milo's eyes darkened with something like sadness. He nodded slowly.

"Can you tell me about it?"

Milo looked away, uninterested, then he yawned. He drank the last of his tea and yawned again, hugely, and without a trace of self-consciousness.

"Are you tired, Milo?"

In answer, Milo dragged his chair around the table and haphazardly placed it next to Jason's. He sat in it, leaned his head against Jason's shoulder, and closed his eyes.

Jason huffed. His watch was on the arm that Milo wasn't leaning against, so he checked the time. It was only ten o'clock, but Milo had probably had a stressful day. Tomorrow morning was soon enough to start work, Jason decided. There was no point pushing it. He needed Milo's cooperation long-term more than he needed answers right this second. And Jason was rather tired himself, now that he thought about it. His restless nights came back to him in a rush of exhaustion. Unfortunately, even if he lay down, he knew he wouldn't sleep.

"All right, Milo. Let's get you to bed."

Milo stood up. He yawned again and watched as Jason fastidiously straightened both chairs and washed and put away the cups. He followed along when Jason walked to his own bedroom. Jason took an older pair of flannel pajamas out of his dresser drawers. He turned to find Milo stretched out on the bed, his eyes closed.

"Nope! Not there. This is my room. Come on." Jason tugged on Milo's hand to get him back on his feet. He led Milo to the guest room and pushed the pajamas at him. "Here you go. Change into these if you prefer. Though you don't have to wear anything if you.... However you want to sleep, whatever's comfortable, is fine. Right. That should do it. I'll, um, see you in the morning."

Jason left Milo in the guest room and shut the door. He went back to his own room and had just taken off his shirt when Milo came into the room and crawled onto the bed.

"Milo!"

Milo looked up at him innocently, his face placid. He looked far too comfortable on Jason's bed. And then... Milo smiled. It was the first time he'd smiled directly at Jason, and it felt like a reward he didn't deserve. It was such a sweet, happy thing, that smile. So guileless. And he looked so... comfortable and snuggly on Jason's bed. For a moment, Jason was awfully tempted to let him stay, his quickened instinct *wanted* Milo to stay. But no, *begin as you mean to go on*. If he let Milo sleep there tonight, he'd never get rid of him.

"No, you can't sleep on my bed," Jason said firmly. "That's why I made the bed in the other room. That's *your* room, Milo. *Your* bed. You have your very own bed now. Isn't that nice? Come along."

He took Milo's arm and tugged lightly to get him back on his feet. He led Milo to the guest room again.

"There. See? Doesn't this look like a comfortable spot?" Jason took Milo's shoulders and steered him to sit down on the mattress. "You're a man now, and men sleep in their own beds. Alone."

That wasn't the whole story, but no way was Jason getting into that conversation tonight.

"Okay? Milo?"

Milo stared up at him, his expression unreadable.

"Can you say 'okay'? It's helpful when you speak, Milo. I can't read your mind. I need to know you understand me."

"Okay," said Milo.

Jason's heart thumped extra hard at how adorable Milo was, but he kept a blank face. "Very good. Thank you. Now good night, Milo. I'll see you in the morning."

He turned and left the guest room, shutting the door behind him. He half expected Milo to follow him back to his room, so Jason lingered in the hallway to prevent it. But Milo didn't come out of the guest room. Relieved, Jason went back to his own room, changed into his flannel pajamas, and went to bed.

Unfortunately, sleep remained elusive. There was nothing worse than being unable to sleep. Usually it was because he was worried, but tonight he was too excited to shut off his mind. So much had happened so quickly. He'd gotten a roommate and a full-time research subject in one neat blow. He'd gotten... *Milo*.

In the dark of his own room, Jason could admit that he found the young quickened intriguing and... a little intimidating too. That was ridiculous but true. Naturally, he was Milo's superior in every way, but there was something about Milo's openness, the way his heart was written all over his face, the depths in his hazel eyes, that made Jason feel... uneasy. Challenged, in a way? As if he had to be honest right back. As if he had to be careful because Milo could be so easily bruised or broken.

He felt overwhelmed at the idea that Milo was dependent on him, that he was responsible for teaching Milo to stand on his own two feet. God knows, he'd never even successfully cared for a potted plant.

You're not responsible, though. Lily and Minnie and the whole town will take care of Milo. They have classes, and they've been through this many times. They've only asked you to give him a place to stay, not be his mentor.

That was probably true, but that's not the way Jason felt. He *felt* responsible. And the idea of teaching Milo was not entirely unappealing. In turn, observing Milo's progress would help him with his work. Watching the transition from dog to man, in real life, might help Jason understand the role of genetics and abstract chemical phenomena in a way a microscope never could.

And he was even not adverse to having company. Perhaps it was simply a matter of missing what small social interactions he'd had at JVT.

But in that all-too-human world there had been politics, jockeying for position and funding, one-upmanship, and rather dull company gossip. And he'd had to be so careful not to reveal his true nature. The situation with Milo was completely different. Milo already knew that Jason had this... dog... inside him. He wouldn't think Jason was a freak.

Jason perked up his ears, wondering if Milo was going to try to sneak back into his bed. Perhaps he didn't like being alone. Dogs were pack animals after all. Being in a new place, and with all the major changes he'd been through lately, he probably craved the reassurance of contact. But the house was quiet.

Jason settled back on his pillow with a sigh. There was so much to think about and do! He'd type up his list of questions in the morning and make a spreadsheet. Of primary importance was establishing who might have been Milo's caretaker and what Milo could recall about their relationship. A dog became quickened only after their beloved and bonded owner died. Jason had a good theory as to why, though it was unproved. He suspected it had something to do with the chemical process of grief. He'd been reading up on the subject. Grief could cause tremendous stress on the body. It was even possible to literally "die of a broken heart." Those chemical and physiological changes had to play a role in the activation of a dog's shifting genes. The key was—

A soft sound reached Jason's ears. His brain stuttered to a halt as he listened.

Crying. Milo was crying. It was a soft, muffled sound, but Jason's ears were quite powerful and the house was otherwise quiet. It sounded something like sobs and something like a dog's throat-whine.

Aw. Hell.

Jason huffed and turned over onto his side, rearranging his pillow. He tried to ignore the noise. But it was so... *present*. He put another pillow over his upturned ear to block out the sound. Sometimes he hated his oversensitive hearing! It certainly didn't help his insomnia.

He heard the noise anyway. "Oh, for God's sake!" Jason sat up in bed. With an annoyed grunt, he flung off the bedclothes and got up. He marched to his door, then down the hall to the guest room.

He knocked. "Milo?"

The crying stopped. Jason waited in the hall for long minutes, hoping Milo had settled down. But the sound started again.

Jason opened the door. The lights were off, but he could make out Milo's form. He wasn't even under the covers. He was sitting on the bed with his feet on the mattress, knees raised, and his face pressed to them. He was wearing Jason's pajamas. His face turned to Jason expectantly, a dim outline in the dark.

Jason's resolve disintegrated. "Yes! Okay! Fine! You can sleep with me. But it's only for tonight."

Milo's butt wiggled on the bed in excitement, but quickly stilled, as if he wasn't sure Jason meant it.

"Well, come on!"

Milo bounced up happily and pushed past Jason. He trotted down the hall. Jason went back to his room to find Milo already under the covers.

"Oh, good God," Jason muttered in self-disgust. He was such a pushover. He got into the bed.

Milo tried to snuggle up against him, but Jason held him off a few inches with a hand on his chest. "*No*. Absolutely not. Right there is fine. And this is just for tonight, Milo. You need to sleep in your own bed tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," said Milo.

Jason sighed. He gave it a 10 percent chance that Milo would ever sleep in his own bed while he was under this roof. But at the moment, he was too tired to care. Tired? Yes, by golly he was. He was suddenly very tired. He settled down, expecting to go back to his mental ruminations. But the bed felt warmer with Milo in it, and it was reassuring to know Milo was right there, and fine, and wasn't somewhere in the house alone and upset. It was... comforting.

Jason's body relaxed. It was like being tugged down into sleep by an undertow. Tomorrow... tomorrow he would learn all about his mysterious guest.

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Chapter 6: The Comfort Dog's Tale

In the morning, Jason woke up first. Milo had backed up against him in the night, as if seeking warmth, his slender back and not-so-slender behind pressed to Jason's left side. It was very comfortable, and Jason felt remarkably rested after getting a full night's worth of sleep.

He got up and made eggs and bacon for a treat, waking Milo only when it was ready. When they sat down to eat, Milo moved his chair right next to Jason's as it had been the night before, and Jason didn't comment on it. Afterward, Milo disappeared for a few minutes while Jason put the dishes in the dishwasher. When Milo returned, he'd changed back into the clothes he'd worn the day before. Jason was pleased he'd done it without any prompting.

"We'll see about getting you some new clothes you can keep in your dresser," Jason said.

"Home?" said Milo doubtfully.

Jason wasn't sure what he meant by that. "Extra clothes in your dresser in *your* room. Like I said last night, this is your home for the time being. In a few weeks, you'll have your own room in a brand new cabin. I'm sure it will be quite satisfactory."

Milo looked down at the linoleum. He worried the baggy leg of his jeans with his fingers.

Jason cleared his throat. "This morning, I was hoping we could work for a while. I want to show you my lab. Agreed?"

"Okay," said Milo.

In the lab, Milo went around methodically looking at everything and sometimes sniffing them too. He seemed interested in the microscope, so Jason decided to give him a little lesson and see how much he understood. Jason pricked his own finger to draw a drop of blood, smeared the blood on a glass slide, put another clean slide on top, then put it under the microscope and had Milo take a look. He looked for a long time.

"It's a magnification of my blood, Milo," Jason explained.

Milo pulled back and ran his fingers over the microscope appreciatively. "Better than dog eyes. Better ears here too?"

Jason smiled at that, pleased that Milo got it so quickly. "Not in this lab. But they do make machines that hear better than dog ears, yes."

Milo nodded as if not surprised and moved on. Jason was impatient to get to his list of questions, but he let Milo explore. The more comfortable Milo was in the lab, the better. Finally, he got Milo to take a seat at the interview table. He turned on the video camera, opened his laptop to his spreadsheet, and sat down across the table from Milo.

Jason poked his glasses up with one finger, quite eager to begin. "Now then, Milo! I want to ask you some questions. It's important that you give me as much information as you possibly can. All right?"

"Why?"

Jason paused, fingers on the keys of his laptop. "Er... well. I'm doing important work, you see. And if you answer me honestly, and in as much detail as you possibly can, that will help me in my work. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Milo? Helping me in my work?"

Milo stared at Jason, giving nothing away. "Okay," he finally said.

"Good! Now." Jason peered at his spreadsheet. "When Lily found you, you were living at a hospice center. Is that correct?"

Milo nodded.

"Would you mind speaking your answers out loud? It's better for the camera."

Jason waved at the video camera, but Milo didn't bother to look at it. "Yes."

"Right. Now before you lived at the hospice, did you live with someone in their home?"

"No. I live at shelter." Milo frowned. He stood up, picked up his chair, and moved it around the table so it was planted next to Jason. He sat down on it and pressed their thighs together. He sighed in relief, as if that was a big improvement.

Jason, however, didn't like it. "Milo, it isn't convenient for us to sit like this when we work. It's bad for the video camera angle and I just... I can't see your face as easily. Please go back to the other side of the table."

Milo turned his head to look at Jason's face. Then he put his head on Jason's shoulder.

Jason clutched his laptop with both hands and made himself breathe through his rising emotions. This did not bode well—a battle of wills at the very start of his interview with Milo. He could see it all go down in flames just as his past interviews had. What should he do? He couldn't fail so quickly!

He should probably press the issue, establish who was boss, who was the alpha. Only Milo wasn't challenging him exactly. He wasn't staring at Jason's eyes or puffing himself up. In fact, his body was lax and his head on Jason's shoulder was submissive. It was damn confusing.

It was also confusing that it felt rather nice, if he took his ego out of it.

Jason opened his mouth to insist that Milo move. Closed it.

The goal, he reminded himself, was *data*. He needed to get useful data from Milo. The goal wasn't to dominate Milo unless that was required to get the data. He decided he was willing to go along with this, provided Milo would actually talk. Hell, he'd stand on his head if that's what it took.

With an annoyed huff, Jason got up and moved the camera so it was pointing at him rather than at the empty spot where Milo had been sitting. He sat back down again, and Milo laid his head on Jason's shoulder at once.

"Back to the questions, Milo. You said you lived at a shelter before you lived at the hospice."

"Yes."

Jason typed it in. "And before the shelter?"

"No place 'before the shelter."

Jason frowned. "You... you went to the shelter when you were still a puppy?"

Milo nodded, his head shifting on Jason's shoulder. Then, as if remembering to speak, he said, "Yes."

"Hmm. I see. Was there someone at the shelter you were very attached to? That you liked a lot? Someone who spent a great deal of time with you?"

Milo shrugged.

"There had to be someone special, Milo," Jason insisted, impatience creeping in.

Milo's fingers began to worry at the fabric of his jeans. He raised his head from Jason's shoulder and looked down at the tabletop, but his leg remained pressed against Jason's thigh. "I was in a... box? They make dogs and cats die sometimes. I was scared."

Jason swallowed a sour lump in his throat. His impatience dried up instantly. "I'm... sorry, Milo."

Milo's fingers tugged at the denim on his thigh.

An idea occurred to Jason. "Were you... were you already quickened when you lived at the shelter? Maybe you were born like that? With the ability to become a man?"

Milo looked sideways at Jason and shook his head. "No."

"No? Do you remember exactly when you got the ability to become a man?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"I live at the hospice all day. No more shelter." Milo's face grew perplexed, then frustrated, as if he couldn't find the words.

"It's all right. Take your time. So you were living at the hospice when you got the spark. How long had you been there before that happened? A year? A few months?"

Milo gave Jason a befuddled look. Crap. Milo probably didn't have a good grasp of the units of time yet. Jason racked his brain, but everything that occurred to him to use as a substitute—meals, moon cycles, sleeps, all seemed overly simplistic. And it all came back to counting too. Would Milo have any concept of what "50 sleeps" meant? Maybe he could get records about Milo from the hospice or interview the nurses there. He should be able to find out exactly when Milo had gone there to live full-time.

"You definitely were *not* able to become a man when you lived at the shelter?" Jason reiterated, just to be sure.

Milo nodded firmly.

"That only happened after you'd lived at the hospice for a while?"
"Yes."

"All right, Milo. We'll get back to that later. For now—"

But Milo's spine suddenly straightened, and he sat up, looking excited. He held up both hands closed tight into fists. "Jason listen: Janice, Holdson, Bill, Mrs. Arbight..." With each name, Milo extended one finger. "Miller, woman with cuts on face, Li Li, Parker, Sam, Liz White..." Milo reached the end of his ten fingers, went back to fists, and started again, saying a name for each finger. He went through ten more fingers and names and started over with fists a third time.

When he got to the end of his list, he had raised a total of twenty-five fingers and said twenty-five names. He looked into Jason's eyes. "*Lily* next," Milo said with emphasis, and he raised finger number twenty-six. Then he did something extraordinary. He started putting fingers back down, saying the same names again, only backward this time.

Jason blinked, amazed. Seriously? Not many humans could recite something backward without having to pause to think about it, not even something as familiar as the alphabet. But Milo easily said all the names in reverse order, and he never hesitated once. Sometimes the name sounded a little garbled, as though Milo had never said them out loud before. But Jason got the general idea.

When Milo got back down to his eighth finger, which he'd named Parker, he paused and tapped it. "I become a man here. After Parker."

Milo looked extremely pleased with himself, a smile on his face and his eyes brightly proclaiming: *Didn't I just do a good thing? Aren't I clever?* And Jason rather thought he was.

Hell, he was amazingly clever. Milo didn't have the concept of days, or hadn't had while at the hospice. So instead, he was using names to signify the passage of time. But what did the names refer to, and why did Milo associate them with time? Whoever they were, Milo claimed to have gotten the spark after the eighth one of them, someone named Parker.

Excitement tingled in Jason's stomach. "That's very good, Milo. Very good indeed! But who was Parker? Who was he to *you*?"

Milo dropped his hands. "Parker was... nice man, gray hair." Milo fingered his own short locks. "He like trucks. Had pictures son came. He play with my ears. Parker sick here." Milo rubbed a hand up and down his side. "Cancer. Too here." He pointed to his neck. "Tumor in lymph nohs." His eager expression faded, and he blinked rapidly at the pain of the memories.

Jason got a chill. *Holy shit*. Understanding flooded through him.

Parker had been a patient at the hospice. All of the people Milo named must have been patients there, except Lily of course. They were people Milo had known, maybe even been attached to. Milo was recounting the passage of time by naming all the patients who had died while he'd been at the hospice. One by one.

Jason's throat burned. He thought he might be ill.

"Jason?" Milo looked concerned. He rubbed Jason's shoulder with his own in a comforting gesture. And that about did Jason in—that Milo was trying to comfort *him*.

He cleared his throat. "That's, um, very good, Milo." His voice was rough. "I, uh, I have some other things I need to take care of this morning, but we'll start again later. Okay?"

"Okay."

Jason stood up. His hands were shaking so he stuffed them in the pockets of his lab coat. "You did very well, Milo. Exceedingly well. I'll make us lunch soon."

He left the lab quickly and shut himself up in the master bathroom. He ran water in the sink and tried to breathe. There was a sharp pain, just above his diaphragm, that almost felt like a heart attack. He popped a Xanax from the medicine cabinet and rubbed his breastbone to get relief.

Poor Milo! First he'd lived in the shelter where he'd been in constant fear, aware they were killing animals in the building and expecting his turn to come at any moment. Did all animals in the shelter understand that, on some level? Even though they weren't quickened? What a horrible thought!

Then Milo had gone to live at the hospice, where the people he'd bonded with, or tried to bond with, died, one after the other. Jason's chest *ached*.

He was feeling empathy, he realized. God! Why was he feeling empathy? It sucked! He hardly knew Milo. It was a tragic story, of course it was. But lots of people had sad stories. His own wasn't exactly all apple pie and ice cream. He shouldn't let it affect him during an interview. He was a scientist!

Jason washed his face, splashing it with water as cold as the tap could produce until he felt he was back under control. He patted himself dry.

He could do this. From a purely logical perspective, Milo was an excellent case study. Maybe grief was a much stronger part of the "chemical cocktail" that switched on the quickened genes than Jason had previously theorized. Clearly, Milo had had more grief in his life than most dogs, and he'd gotten the spark quite young as a result.

It would be helpful, though, to get a better picture of how much positive bonding Milo had experienced as well. It didn't sound like he'd bonded with anyone at the shelter. But maybe there'd been a nurse at the hospice. Or the patients themselves. Was it possible that even though Milo had had a short time with each of them, deep bonding had occurred? Maybe being close to death caused the patients to have more attention and love to give to a dog, however briefly. It probably intensified everything, and perhaps made a deep bond possible in a matter of days or weeks. It was worth looking into.

There was so much more to learn. But the good news was, Milo seemed willing to talk to him. He put effort into bridging the communication gap. And that—that was everything.

Feeling much better, Jason went out to make himself and Milo some lunch.

* *

On Wednesday morning, Lance Beaufort was in his office, filling out requisition paperwork. There was a knock on the door. "Sheriff?"

"Come in."

Leesa opened the door. Her puffy blonde hair bounced as she skipped into Lance's office. Her face looked worried. "I just got a call."

Lance put his pen down and looked up. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Simon and Ruth were on their way out of town to go pick up some supplies in Oakhurst, and they saw a dog on the road. Ruth thought he looked familiar, but they weren't sure. She called to see if someone was available to go pick him up. Said he looked real tired and sick and was limping as if he couldn't walk much farther, poor thing!"

Lance was already out of his seat. "I got it. He's on 41?"

"Yeah, near milepost 930," Ruth said. "Sure you don't want me to call Roman or Charlie?"

Lance's deputies were good men. But he'd sent Roman to check on a report of rowdy campers about an hour ago and Charlie was on routine patrol.

"Nah, I'll go." Lance headed for the doorway, and Leesa backed up to let him out. He went to the coat rack near the front door of the police station and grabbed his sherriff's department jacket.

"Want me to call Doc McGurver?" Leesa asked.

"Good idea. Let him know I'll be bringing in a dog that needs immediate attention."

"You got it."

"And don't call my mother. She doesn't need to hear about this yet."

"Me?" Leesa squeaked innocently, which meant she absolutely was going to call Lily the moment he walked out the door.

Lance huffed but figured it wasn't worth wasting time arguing. He left the building.

As he drove out of town in his white and gold sheriff's SUV, he mulled over Ruth's message. The dog looked familiar? Was he quickened? Someone who lived in town? If so, what was he doing in dog form out on the highway? It was worrying. Not that Lance didn't get worried easily—he did. But he particularly didn't like the sound of this.

It was a dreary May day with patters of chilly rain. He found the dog just after mile marker 929. It was a large, shaggy gray dog that looked a bit like a wolfhound. He was walking listlessly toward town, head down, as if he couldn't take another step but had to anyway. Lance's sympathy was immediate. And he recognized the dog too—or thought he did. He pulled his vehicle onto the shoulder and braked hard.

He got out of the SUV and looked both ways before crossing the road. The dog stopped and watched him. When Lance got close, he saw the dog was trembling all over.

"Wilbur? Is that you?" Lance asked, his voice low and urgent.

The dog let out a whine that might have been relief and collapsed to the road.

Lance got a wool blanket from the back of his SUV and wrapped the dog in it. He was heavy, but Lance managed to pick him up and carry him across the road. He got him into the back of the SUV. With the dog lying inside and the back lift gate raised to block most of the rain, Lance leaned in for a good sniff. There was a lingering odor of vomit on the dog's fur, and he smelled of mud and of something like desperation. But Lance still recognized Wilbur's scent. He checked Wilbur out, running his hands over the furry body. He didn't see any wounds or obvious broken bones. Wilbur lay panting, eyes closed.

Lance used the radio on his belt. "Leesa? I've got the dog. Pretty sure it's Wilbur Riven. He lived in town a few years back. He's not in good shape. Tell Bill I'll be there in ten."

"Got it! Careful with him, Lance."

Lance shut the lift gate, got into the driver's seat, and turned the vehicle around. He was at the vet's on Mad Creek's main drag in under ten minutes. Bill McGurver and his assistant Floyd, a strongly-built second-gen pit bull, ran out to the SUV as Lance pulled in.

Bill McGurver was the town's only vet-slash-doctor, and he was fully human. He'd met Jane McGurver, a quickened, when he was in vet school in Fresno and she was in college nearby. They'd fallen in love, and Bill had started his practice here. He was a great friend to the pack, and an invaluable asset to the town. Lance liked him personally as well and counted him a good friend.

"Let me check him first," Bill said, as Lance opened the lift gate. He leaned in through the back and checked Wilbur's eyes, lifting the lids, looked in his mouth, and felt his limbs. "He's really warm. Let's move him inside."

Bill stepped aside so Floyd could pick Wilbur up. He handled Wilbur without complaint, though his big muscles bunched and strained. Lance followed them inside the vet's office and into an exam room.

"What's wrong with him, Bill?"

"I'm not sure." Bill frowned and shook out a thermometer. He inserted it in a place Lance didn't care to think about. He looked away.

"His temp's 106.3. That's not good. He's dehydrated too. Floyd, let's get IV fluids into him right away. Start with LRS, antibiotics, and a steroid for the fever, and let's run a blood panel stat."

"I'm on it," Floyd said, leaving the room.

"Why is he in dog form?" Lance asked.

"I don't know. But he's pretty sick. That could prevent him from shifting."

The very idea was awful. Lance wondered how far Wilbur had walked to get to Mad Creek. He was a nice man. He'd lived in the town for many years and had helped coach boy's football when Lance was in high school. Wilbur had left town years ago—Lance couldn't remember why. Had he come back because he needed help?

"Is he going to be okay?" Lance asked.

Bill was listening to Wilbur's chest with a stethoscope. He pulled it out of his ears. "I don't know, Lance. I need to do bloodwork to see what's going on. Right now, my main concern is getting this fever down and figuring out what's causing it. If he has some kind of infection, it could be fatal unless we get it under control. Can I call you later?"

It was a dismissal, but Lance figured Bill was right. Lance's intense hovering would not help Wilbur or Bill right then.

"Okay. Thanks, Bill. Please do call as soon as you know anything."

"I will."

Lance left the vet's office and got back into his SUV. There was a waft of a foul odor in it. Poor Wilbur. Was there anyone in town Lance should notify? He couldn't remember who had been close to Wilbur when he'd lived there. Maybe Lily would remember. She'd know about Wilbur, period. She would have been more of an age with him than Lance.

Lance called Leesa to let her know where he was going and then headed for his mother's house.

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Chapter 7: Angels and Other Fairy Tales

Jason made progress with Milo over the next few days. Milo told him about all of the people he'd named that first day—what they looked like, things they said or did, and how they were sick. He knew a lot about their illnesses, which Jason found most surprising. Milo even knew quite a bit of medical jargon, having heard the doctors and nurses talking. And he could point out on his own body exactly what had been wrong with each one of the patients.

Jason wondered why Milo paid so much attention to the patient's problems and symptoms, but when he asked him why, Milo didn't understand the question and only shrugged.

His speech was initially halting, but it improved rapidly. At first, Jason didn't correct Milo, preferring to hear his speech develop naturally. But Milo tried so hard to communicate, concentration writ large on his face, and it was painful to hear him struggle. Jason started to repeat back what Milo told him, adding in the proper tenses and adverbs and pronouns. Or he'd suggest words Milo was grasping for. Milo listened, watching Jason's lips, and then he'd repeat it back. He was an excellent mimic, and he remembered and incorporated the corrections.

Frankly, Jason was astonished at his progress and intelligence. He knew those born quickened could be as capable as any full-blooded human. He himself was third-generation and his IQ was exceptionally high. But he thought of first-gens as relatively simple creatures—good-natured but not exceptionally bright. Milo thoroughly tested this assumption.

Nevertheless, when Jason tried to establish how deeply Milo had bonded with the patients at the hospice, Milo didn't understand the concept. So on the second day, Jason tried to establish a better metric.

"Let's try this, Milo. There are three ways you can feel about something. You can *like* something, you can *love* it, or you can *dislike* it. Is there a food you don't care to eat?"

"Bananas. They smell bad." Milo wrinkled his nose.

"Right. So you dislike bananas. Now, let's think about *how much* you dislike them." He held up his ten fingers since Milo seemed comfortable with the idea of counting on them. He waggled the pinky on one hand. "One means you don't like bananas very much, but you will eat them." He waggled the other pinky. "Ten means you hate bananas so much that you'd throw-up and want to cease existing if you had to eat them."

Milo laughed and pointed to Jason's third finger.

"Good! You dislike bananas a three. Is there a food you dislike more than bananas? Something up here?" Jason waggled his high-count fingers.

Milo thought about it. "Poop. A dog at the shelter ate that. I would not recommend it, Jason."

Jason suppressed a smile. "No, I suspect I wouldn't care for it. Very good."

They went through the concepts of love and like too. Milo loved bacon, cheese, the sofa, sleeping in Jason's bed, and tennis balls. He liked Mad Creek, Lily, television, broccoli, oatmeal, and a nurse named Sandy, but he only liked broccoli a one.

By the end of an hour, Jason was able to confirm that Milo had "loved" all the patients he'd listed from the hospice. Milo had a difficult time quantifying "how much" he'd loved each patient, though he generally put them in the five-to-seven range. That was a difficulty anyone might have, Jason reasoned. How do you put a number on the love you felt for someone who had died?

It was progress.

* * *

By the end of the third day, Milo grew bored with sitting at the interview table and answering Jason's spread-sheeted inquiries. He was sitting next to Jason, as always, and he put a hand over the keyboard as if to break Jason's never-ending focus.

Milo frowned. "Why ask so many questions, Jason? What is the work to do?"

"Do you mean, what is my work for? What am I trying to accomplish?"

Milo smiled, amused. "Yes. 'Accomplish.' That's a funny word."

Jason tried to at least hit CTRL-S to save his progress in Excel, but Milo threaded his hand through Jason's, holding it tight. By now, Jason was so used to Milo's touch, he didn't think twice. Milo's body temperature ran warm and touching him was like touching a man-shaped heater.

"Well, Milo, I'm glad you asked me that question. It's good for a man to be curious about what's going on around him. And I'd like it if you took an interest in my work."

Milo gave him a *duh* look. "Jason, I answer every question."

It was remarkable how adept Milo was at throwing shade without even trying. Jason couldn't hold back a smile. "You've already shown an interest in my work. Quite right. Well, to answer your question, the point of all this is that I'm trying to determine how an ordinary dog, like you were, Milo, gains the ability to change into a man. What triggers that process."

"Oh, that. I already know how it happens," said Milo, very matter-of-factly.

Jason chuckled. "Well, that would be nice, Milo. But I don't think you really do know. Not the way I mean."

"How do you mean?" Milo squeezed Jason's hand as his feet started to kick under the table restlessly.

"I mean the actual scientific process, what happens inside the body." Jason waved his free hand up and down to indicate Milo's physique. "Inside the cells. And, perhaps even more importantly, in the body's chemical system and DNA."

Milo looked befuddled. "Oh. I don't know that. But I do know *why* it happens."

"Why do you think it happens, Milo?"

Milo leaned in to whisper, as if it was a great secret. "You make a wish upon a star."

Jason turned his face away and pretended to look out the window. Laughter bubbled inside him, and he had to swallow hard to keep it down. It wouldn't do, as an interviewer, to laugh in Milo's face. But he was so serious. It was adorable—if Jason were the sort of person who found things adorable. Which he wasn't.

Milo continued, pointing toward the window. "You go outside at night and pick a good star. You look at it and make a wish. That's how I became a man."

Obviously, Milo was not educated enough to understand the difference between fantasy and reality, or cause and effect. Maybe he had made a wish and assumed it came true. Still, it was odd. No dog, no matter how smart or sensitive, would think to look up in the night sky and "make a wish." Did dogs even know what wishes were? Maybe in an "I wish for more food" kind of way. But something abstract like this? The whole thing sounded like baloney, but Jason knew Milo didn't lie.

"This is important, Milo," Jason said carefully. "You're sure you looked up at a star and made a wish before you ever shifted into a man's form, or before you had any symptoms of it? The itching under the skin? The compulsive need to stretch? The noticeable change in the ability to think or understand speech?"

Milo considered it. "I could understand what people said sometimes. But I was just a dog."

Jason hummed. "Who suggested such a thing? Did you hear one of the nurses talking about it? Or one of the patients?"

Milo's lips somehow turned up and down at the same time, resulting in a sad little smile. "An angel told me to."

"What?"

"When she came for Parker. I was so, so, so sad." His lower lip trembled, and he blinked rapidly. He looked down and picked at a thread on his jeans. "She told me: 'Oh little pup, don't cry. Make a wish upon a star, and if you want something badly enough, it will happen.' It came into my head what she meant. How to do it. So later, when Sally took me for a walk, I saw a star in the sky and I made a wish."

Wow. That was.... Jason rubbed his forehead with his fingers. Sad. But also more than a little crazy. Where did he even start? "Milo... first of all, there are no such things as angels."

Milo looked at Jason with his thousand yard stare. "But I saw them."

"You saw them."

"At the hospice. They come when people die."

Jason felt a flash of annoyance. Probably some nurse at the hospice had talked about angels and heaven and all that rubbish, and Milo had bought it hook, line, and sinker. Of course he had. He was a dog. He would believe anything a human said.

"You, personally, saw angels? I suppose you can describe what they look like?"

Milo wrinkled his nose. His eyes looked past Jason as he tried to remember. "You don't see them here." He pointed to his eyes. "You see them here." He tapped his belly.

"You saw angels. With your stomach," Jason said flatly.

Milo tilted his head and bit his lip. He looked at Jason from under his lashes, guiltily, as though he could tell he'd said something wrong, but he didn't know what.

Jason took a deep breath and reminded himself to be patient. There would be time to teach Milo the difference between what was imaginary and what was real. It wasn't Milo's fault.

"Right. So an angel told you to make a wish upon a star. And you wished for what, to be a man?"

"No," Milo said immediately.

"No? Then what did you wish for?"

Milo looked down at his lap and picked at the fabric of his pants again. He shrank back minutely in his chair, removing the side of his body from touching Jason's. He was clearly embarrassed now and didn't want to say any more about it. And really, what did it matter what silly little wish Milo had made? It wasn't like it was actually responsible for his transformation.

"It's all right. You don't have to tell me. That's, um, yes. Thank you for letting me know about that, Milo."

"I want some cheese," Milo said. He stood up and wandered off toward the kitchen.

That afternoon, there was an insistent knocking on the front door. Jason went to answer it and saw Lily standing there with a large plastic tub. She breezed in. "I meant to get over here sooner, but things have been in such a kerfuffle lately! There's more in the car. Jason, would you bring them in?"

Jason wasn't exactly thrilled at Lily barging in and treating him like a porter, but he did it with only a low grumble.

When he came back carrying two more tubs, Lily was standing in the living room looking around. "Where's Milo?"

"He was right behind me. Milo?"

There was no answer. Jason went back out to the lab, but Milo wasn't there. He looked in the bedroom, which was empty, but his dog senses caught something. He looked under the bed. Milo was there, tucked back against the wall.

Milo bit his lip and looked at Jason pleadingly.

"Uh... Milo, Lily is here to see you."

Milo's shoulders went up, and he shrank back. He looked like a frightened turtle.

Jason considered him, wondering what the problem was. "You told me you liked Lily."

Milo blinked.

"Milo?" Lily's voice came from the doorway, unconcerned and cheerful. "I brought some clothes for you to try on. Don't you want to come out and see them?"

Milo stared at Jason. He worried his lip some more, looking torn. And Jason understood. He felt a wave of pity. *Damn it*. He spoke quietly. "She's not going to take you away, Milo. She's just here to visit. You're staying right here with me. Okay?"

"I've got peanut butter cookies!" Lily cooed. She turned and walked back out into the living room.

Milo crawled out from under the bed and bounded after her.

Lily opened a Tupperware container of cookies, which Milo and Jason both indulged in. Then she started unpacking the bins. Within seconds the front room of the cabin looked like a Walmart tornado had struck it. There were clothes laid out all over the sofa and old shoes of various sizes, types, and hygienic soundness on the floor. There were bath products on the coffee table, brushes, books, and all sorts of items Jason thought were utterly and completely useless.

"I like this," Milo said eagerly, holding up an alarmingly bright purple silky button-down shirt. He rubbed it between his fingers. "I like it a six! Feels soft. Feel it, Jason!"

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. "That's okay, Milo. I know what polyester feels like."

Milo's face drooped a little.

"That looks too big for you. What about this one?" Jason picked up a tan long-sleeved T-shirt that wasn't too hideous.

"That looks practically new, doesn't it?" Lily chimed in. "The size looks right. Try it on, Milo!"

"Okay." Milo stripped off the old sweatshirt of Jason's he was wearing, revealing his slim, golden chest and muscled arms. He moved the tan T-shirt this way and that in his hands, tongue poking out in concentration, as if trying to figure out the best way to approach the small neck opening.

Warmth tickled in Jason's belly, and he studiously looked away. "So..." he said to Lily. "Right. Yes. Do these clothes belong to the town then?"

Lily hopped up from where she'd been kneeling by the couch. She grabbed a red hoodie and lifted it to her nose, sniffing it with a loud inhale. "Yup! Some of these things have been around the block so many times, they smell like half the pack. This one was last worn by Penny. Here, smell!"

She shoved the hoodie at Jason's nose, and he took a step back. "That's not necessary. I believe you."

"Of course, we wash them. But I have a very keen nose."

"I'm sure you do."

"Which reminds me! It would be great if you could find a spare moment to go through your own things and make a pile to donate to the town. We'll take anything, anything you think you or Milo won't wear."

"Well, I am a bit busy at the—"

"And we make runs to used clothes shops in the city. Old Navy has some terrific clearance sales online too! But the more we can get for free, the better. We're really challenged for cash. That's the way Lance says it —'challenged for cash.'" Lily imitated his deep growl perfectly. "Isn't that funny? Like it was a race or something."

"That's funny!" said Milo. His voice was muffled by the T-shirt he had over his head but had not yet pulled down.

Jason resisted the urge to help him, making fists to still his itchy fingers. Milo had to figure these things out on his own.

"So we need to pick out three outfits for Milo—shirt, pants, underwear, and socks. And he'll need a coat and two pairs of shoes in case he gets one wet or muddy." She leaned toward Jason with a stage whisper. "They always do! I swear, the rainy season is the bane of my existence!"

Jason looked at the arrayed clothes with distaste. Most items were wrinkled and out of date and some were downright tattered or stained. *Challenged for cash?* He'd never really thought about it before, but how did Mad Creek provide for the quickened that arrived on their doorstep? They came with no money and not exactly rife with job skills. Not that there were jobs to be had in Mad Creek, other than jobs the town managed to invent or a few consistent roles like sheriff or those who worked at the diner and the local shops.

He wanted to say he'd take Milo shopping himself. It wasn't like he couldn't afford it. True, his savings were all he had until he figured something out, but a few hundred dollars for clothes wouldn't break him. But when would he have time to take Milo to Fresno for shopping? The very idea of missing an entire day of work made him shudder. Besides, Milo needed clothes now. Jason had dug up a few things, but Milo was much thinner than Jason's large-boned frame and they didn't fit well.

Milo had his head through the shirt now, and he stood with his arms held out so he could look at the sleeves. They were an inch short on him.

"That one works!" Lily said briskly. "You look very nice, Milo. Now what else? See anything you like?"

Milo looked over the lot and started toward a bright pink prom dress with glassy eyes and an "Oh" of wonder.

Jason stepped in and hurriedly grabbed a few neutral shirts, a gold sweater, and a pair of jeans that looked like they would fit. "Try these, Milo."

Milo already had the dress in his hands. He looked at Jason questioningly. Jason shook his head. "That doesn't look very comfortable for every day, does it? Try these on."

Milo sighed in resignation, as if the world was just too cruel but he'd accepted that long ago. He took the clothes Jason had picked and started trying them on, one by one. It took him *ages*.

"How, um, how does the town provide all this?" Jason asked Lily, waving his hand at the piles. "And food too, I suppose. And the cabins."

Lily shrugged, with a beatific, Madonna-like smile. "We have to manage, so we do. We get groceries in bulk at the Cosco's in Fresno. And everyone pitches in what they can in time and labor. Cash donations. Tim raises a lot of food at his place, and we all help plant and harvest it." She shot Jason a raised-brow glare. "Well, *most* people help out. Some are just too busy working on their own personal affairs."

Jason ignored this. "The town doesn't have any industry, does it? Have you thought about trying to get some kind of manufacturing plant in here? One that would have work most quickened could do?"

Lily snorted. "A manufacturing plant! Lance would have a conniption."

Jason frowned. Lance Beaufort. Again. "It's not only Lance's decision, though. If the town needs jobs—"

"Look!" Milo modeled a black, short-sleeved T-shirt that was fairly tight.

"Aren't you handsome! Isn't he handsome, Jason? Hmmm?" Lily batted her eyes. The woman was insane.

Jason purposefully gave Milo no more than a glance. "That looks fine, Milo. You should keep that one."

Milo pulled it over his head and picked up the next shirt. "Hiding your body is a big lot of trouble," he commented to no one in particular.

"If not a manufacturing plant, what about tourism?" Jason suggested.

"What a great idea! You should take that topic up with Lance. I'm sure he'd love to hear your ideas for bringing in more tourists," Lily said sweetly.

"It's not precisely my area. I don't have time to delve into it in addition to my own research. I thought—"

"Look at me when you are stopped talking," said Milo.

Jason was more than happy to stopped—er, stop—talking immediately. He turned to regard Milo. Jason had grabbed a gold sweater from the heap, some part of him thinking the color would suit Milo. He wore it now. It was made from a soft ribbed material that clung to his body without being obviously tight, and its mustard color brought out Milo's... everything.

Jason swallowed. "It's perfect." The words escaped from his mouth, much to his horror.

Milo smiled at him happily. His eyes did that thing where they warmed the room by ten degrees.

Lily sighed with what sounded like contentment. "I'm never wrong. No, never. Now, Milo! Why don't you keep that pretty sweater on and come sit down on the couch with me for a minute? We need to schedule your classes."

Merely out of scientific curiosity, Jason observed as Milo and Lily looked over the schedule. Milo would go to Lily's Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings for reading and writing classes. Another class Lily called "Human 101" was on Saturday mornings. That one supposedly taught a new quickened how to avoid "dog tells" when in mixed company. It was an awful imposition on his and Milo's work time, Jason thought, and some of it he could have taught Milo himself. But he kept silent on the matter. He supposed Milo really ought to interact with others in Mad Creek. He wouldn't be living with Jason for long, after all. It would be good for him to make friends.

The thought made Jason feel anxious. His stomach roiled and his adrenaline kicked up. The longer he stood there listening, the worse he felt. His breathing grew constricted, like he was on the verge of a panic attack. It was the first time he'd felt this upset in several days, and it was shocking how quickly it came over him. He sat down in the rocker and took calming breaths.

How could he be sure Milo would be okay? How could he trust this crazy town with Milo's well-being? After all, Lily had basically sold him at auction at his first pack meeting. She was so oblivious. What if she said or did something that hurt Milo in class? Milo had experienced so much turmoil and sadness in his past. He was extremely sensitive and bright enough to pick up on the most subtle slights.

And, God, but the living room was a mess! Lily's clutter was suddenly oppressive, even ominous. Jason felt light-headed like he might pass out.

Milo was apparently growing weary of the visit too. Lily was going on about reading levels and primers, but Milo got up from the sofa and walked around to Jason. He plopped himself into Jason's lap on the rocker and slumped there, cheek resting on Jason's clavicle, arms limp. Milo let out a huge, shaky sigh.

Milo was warm. Very warm. The tightness in Jason's chest eased. He sat there motionless as the ugly tension and heebie-jeebies slowly leached from his system.

Lily had stopped talking mid-sentence. She regarded the pair of them with an unreadable expression. The strength returned to Jason's limbs, and he felt better—well enough, in fact, to be embarrassed. Hopefully neither Lily nor Milo had been aware of the episode.

He patted Milo's back awkwardly. "Someone's tired. I think that's enough for now," Jason said, attempting cool briskness and falling short by a mile. "So Milo should report for class this Saturday morning? Or does he need to wait until a new session begins?"

"Let's start him right away." Lily tapped her chin thoughtfully. "He'll be two weeks behind the others in the class, but he can catch up."

"Of course he can," Jason said loftily. "He's extraordinarily intelligent. I doubt anyone else in the class is even close."

Milo heaved another deep sigh against Jason's chest.

"Well! I can see we're done here," Lily said smugly. "I don't suppose I can get a certain someone to help me pack up all these clothes again? Hmmm?"

"I will!" Milo emerged from his slump with loads of energy, like an electric car that had been topped off in the power outlet. He started picking up clothes and shoving them into the plastic tubs.

Lily said nothing, but she pointedly picked up a shirt and lightly folded it before putting it neatly in a tub. Milo watched her and tried to mimic her actions. His folding skills sucked, but his acting chops were convincing.

"I'll make us lunch while you see Lily out, Milo."

Jason was relieved to escape the room and Lily's all-knowing look. The woman was clearly deranged. He just prayed Milo didn't let it slip that he was sleeping in Jason's bed, or they'd never hear the end of it.

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Chapter 8: Milo's Magic Hands

On Thursday morning, Jason woke up with a particularly acute sense of well-being and contentment. He should feel alarmed how quickly he'd adapted to having Milo in his bed. But the truth was, Jason was finally sleeping, and sleeping well. The presence of another body had a calming influence on his inner dog. And Jason had fought insomnia for enough years to value decent sleep as if it was the holy damn grail.

He sighed into Milo's hair, eyes still closed. Though they always went to sleep with a good foot between them, they woke like this, with Milo backed up against Jason. Jason's body had started to join in the party as well. He'd never been a fan of sleeping on his side, but now he woke up that way, with Milo's back against his chest, Milo's bum snuggled into Jason's lap and both their thighs bent a little. At least Jason was always the big spoon.

This morning there was a new development, however, an insistent one that was thankfully trapped tight in Jason's underwear. *He won't know what it is*, Jason told himself sleepily. *I'll take care of it when I get up*.

Unconcerned, he drifted off again. The next thing he was aware of was breath on his lips. He opened his eyes to find Milo facing him, their heads on the same pillow. Jason's arm was slung over Milo's waist.

Jason drew back slightly, blinking fully awake. "Good morning."

"Good morning." Milo smiled. "You look soft when you sleep."

"Soft?" Jason smiled at the unlikely adjective, then remembered that there was something about him that was far from soft. He mentally checked. Yes. His morning wood was still present and now introducing itself to Milo's belly.

"Er...." Words failed him. He should extract himself and go make coffee.

But Milo didn't look alarmed, or even aware that anything was amiss. He was such an innocent. And the bed was comfortable. And Jason had everything firmly under control. It was nothing personal, just biology. He'd take another moment then.

Jason yawned and relaxed. Milo seemed to relax too. He reached up to touch Jason's jaw. "Soft. No worry here." He touched the corner of Jason's mouth. "Or here." He slid his fingers up over Jason's cheekbone. "I like you soft, Jason."

The words were silly and quaint and utterly without sensuality, but the brush of Milo's fingers was a different story. It started a hot, dizzying spin low down in Jason's stomach. He tensed up again, swallowed. His heart started thudding so loud in his chest it was audible, and his erection throbbed. Suddenly, Jason didn't feel in control but rather like he was in a tailspin, tumbling wildly in midair.

Milo's nostrils flared and his eyebrows drew together in curious confusion. He studied Jason's face with those deep hazel eyes, then he looked down their bodies as if he could see under the blankets. His little frown of perplexity grew.

Jason was suddenly wide awake and aware that the situation was treacherous. Epically erroneous. Not at all a good idea. He scrambled out of bed, nearly landing on his ass on the floor as his feet tangled in the blankets.

"Jason?"

"I'll, um... make coffee. And breakfast!" Jason said with forced cheer. He moved his arms in front of his body to hide the tenting in his PJ bottoms.

"What's wrong?" Milo asked worriedly. "What is that?" He pointed at the very thing Jason was trying to cover.

Oh God, I am not having this conversation with him. Not now. Not ever. Please, God, let Lily have a class for this.

"It's nothing," Jason huffed irritably. "And private, if you don't mind. Not everything must be discussed, Milo."

Milo blinked, looking exceedingly skeptical. Fair enough.

"I'll make coffee." Jason turned and grabbed his robe. *And take a very cold shower.*

Jason made coffee and took a very cold shower, but he decided to take Milo out to Daisy's diner for breakfast. They'd been in the cabin all week, and they could use a change in scenery. Besides, their little morning drama had convinced Jason that they were getting too intertwined, literally and figuratively. Milo's time with him was short-lived. Even if Jason continued to work with Milo after he moved into the new cabin, which Jason sincerely hoped would be the case, Milo would still have a life outside the lab. He needed to set Milo up for success by broadening his base of experiences.

Jason walked into the kitchen still buttoning his cuffs. Milo was standing at the sink looking longingly out the window. "Milo, I thought we might go out for breakfast this morning. To the diner. Would you like that?"

To his surprise, Milo shrunk back against the counter and chewed his lip worriedly.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to go out?"

Milo looked at the window desperately. It was a nice spring morning and even Jason felt the pull of his inner dog to go out and bask in the sunshine.

"Where do I live after the diner?" Milo asked, his voice so quiet it was a strain to hear him.

Jason hesitated, his heart tripping. He must have made Milo feel bad this morning. He forced a smile. "After we have breakfast at the diner, we'll come back here. You still live here, Milo. This is just a trip out. Nothing's changed."

Milo studied Jason's face as if wanting to make sure he wasn't lying. "Like a walk?"

"Er... yes. I suppose so. It's like taking a walk. In fact, after breakfast we can take a walk in the park, if you like, and then come back here."

Milo's face relaxed. "Okay." Then he brightened, as if he'd gotten a great idea. "Will you play with me in the park? We can be dogs together!"

Jason blinked. Holy hell. Milo looked so hopeful. Jason pushed his glasses up his nose self-consciously. "Milo... uh, no. I don't do that. You're correct that yes, I have the capacity to become a dog. But I don't."

Milo's face fell. "Why?"

Jason stiffened his spine and stuck out his chin. "*Because*. I prefer to be a man, with all the cognitive powers—that's brains, Milo—and ability to use my hands, and work and... and everything else that being a man entails. I have no desire to function as a dog."

"But... it can be fun?" Milo said doubtfully.

"Perhaps. But it's simply not something I care to do. However, if *you* feel a need to... to do that, after breakfast, you may do so. You can't shift in public, though, so we'll have to come back here first."

Milo looked out the window, his mouth pursed as if he was thinking about it. "I don't want to if we don't play together," Milo decided.

Jason was relieved Milo wasn't going to press the issue. "Fine. Good. Then we'll just... not do that today. Why don't you go put on something nice to wear to the diner?"

"Okay." Milo skipped from the room.

What Milo considered appropriate diner-wear was a screaming pink and orange polka dot button-down shirt, silky royal blue gym shorts that were two sizes too big, and the old Converse tennis shoes he'd arrived in. He must have snuck the shirt and shorts from the tubs Lily had brought over, because they definitely weren't the things Jason had helped him pick out. Jason decided to bite his tongue. The only people who were going to see Milo were other quickened.

"Right then. All set? Let's go."

Milo ran to the door and looked at it. His hand went to his throat with a frown.

Dear God. Sometimes, Jason forgot how newly human Milo really was. "You don't need a collar and leash. You're a man now, Milo."

Milo grinned. "Okay." He opened the door and bounded out.

Clearly, Jason should have taken Milo to town before now, because he was bouncing off the sidewalks with excitement. He ran ahead, then back. He hugged a tree like it was a long-lost friend. He found a rose bush fascinating, inhaling the blooms with a rapturous expression.

He was so damn happy. It made Jason feel guilty. He'd been so focused on the work since Milo came to live with him. *Had it really only been six days ago? It felt so much longer.* As cooperative as Milo had been, it had to bore him. He was young and full of energy. Jason resolved to provide Milo with more distractions from now on. After all, he was getting excellent material for his research. He could afford to take some time off to keep his principle subject happy. And Milo deserved to have fun. Jason couldn't help but think Milo deserved a hell of a lot of everything, far more than he got living with a stuffy man like Jason.

Milo surprised him again when they got to the diner. He'd been so shy at the pack party, hiding under the table. Jason had expected him to be shy there too. He was wrong. The diner was nearly full with locals enjoying breakfast. Milo wanted to meet *all* of them. He went from table to table saying "Hi," "Hi," "Hi, I'm Milo!", "Hi!" Everyone greeted him back just as enthusiastically. There was a lot of hugging and sniffing. Milo seemed very fond of hugging.

Jason stood by the door, feeling uncomfortable and wondering if he should put a stop to it. Daisy came over, a smile on her face. "Hi, Jason! Gosh, Milo seems to be doing well. He must really like living with you. He's such a sweety!"

"Is, um, is there anyone here we need to be careful around?"

"Nope! It's all pack here right now. He's fine. Don't worry. Why don't you take that booth over there in the back?" Daisy waved at an empty booth and then winced as if the movement hurt her.

"All right." Jason raised his voice. "Milo? Do you want to sit down now so we can eat?"

Milo stole a french fry from someone's plate. He grabbed two more before bouncing over to Jason. When they sat down, Milo slid in beside Jason instead of sitting on the opposite side. He sat close, his shoulder against Jason's and his legs spread wide enough for them to touch thighs.

Jason had given up trying to get Milo to stay in his own space. Milo wanted touch constantly. He seemed to need it. And Jason didn't really mind. If he was honest, it had a calming effect on him too. His inner dog had been much less restless and anxious lately. Other than that bad moment

during Lily's visit, he hadn't had a panic attack since Milo moved in. He was feeling quite well actually.

Milo was munching on the french fries he'd grabbed.

"Milo, it's not polite to take food off someone else's plate," Jason explained patiently. "You should wait until we order. Then Daisy will bring *your* food."

Milo looked at the half-eaten fry guiltily. "But I'm a man now."

Jason had a clear mental image of Milo, as a dog, sitting beside a table watching humans eat food they wouldn't let him have. It made him smile. "Yes. You're a man. That means you can have any food you want, but first you have to ask for it and wait until it's brought to you. Those fries belonged to someone else."

Milo's guilty look deepened. He got up and slunk back to the table where he'd gotten the fries. He laid the chewed remnants back on the plate. Jason heard a muttered "sorry."

He had to put his face in his hands and get his grin under control before Milo returned. It was horrifying how cute he found Milo. Most undignified.

Milo sat back in the booth with a plop. "I like potato sticks," he said chattily. "One time a man at the hospice had them and let me eat three sticks! Can I get potato sticks for me?"

"They're called 'french fries,' and yes, you can get some."

"I like french fries a lot. I like them an eight."

"We'll definitely get lots of fries then." Jason smiled, looking at the menu.

Daisy came to their table to take their order. "Hey, Jason! Hey, Milo! What can I get you to eat?"

"Pancakes with a side of fruit for me," Jason said. "Milo, would you like to try pancakes?"

"Cheeseburger please!" Milo said quickly. "I like cheese."

"Is that right?" Daisy smiled at Milo, then winced. She blinked rapidly. "Do you want fruit with your cheeseburger, hon, or fries?"

"Fries!" said Milo and Jason at the same time.

"Make that a double order of fries for Milo," Jason added. "And two waters please." He'd learned Milo had a strong, and not entirely helpful, reaction to caffeine.

"Got it." Daisy went to put their order up.

Milo got out of the booth and followed her.

"Milo!" Jason called out, but Milo ignored him.

With a sigh, Jason got up to go after Milo. Did he think he had to follow Daisy to get the food or what? He stopped in his tracks when he saw what Milo was doing. He'd followed Daisy behind the counter and he stood there touching her head. Daisy went still, dropping her arms and allowing Milo's touch. He felt around her head with the flat of his palms, his face a picture of concentration. Then he placed his hands on either side of her head and started massaging her temples with his thumbs.

Daisy heaved out a shaky breath.

Jason continued to the counter and leaned against it. "Milo?" he asked quietly.

"Shhh. I'm helping."

"Oh. Um...." Jason had no idea what to say, so he just watched.

Daisy's body grew laxer, tension going out of it. Her hands came up to hold Milo's waist. "Oh, that is nice, Milo," she sighed. "I had such a bad headache today."

"Shhh," Milo said, still rubbing.

It was clearly *a moment*, so Jason went back to their booth and let them be. Gus, who'd been eating at a table with two other quickened, got up and collected some plates the cook had put up. He delivered them to the tables. Then he took the coffeepot and broth pot around and refilled cups. No one bothered Milo and Daisy. In fact, the whole diner got very quiet.

Gus brought Jason a clean cup, and Jason signaled that he wanted the coffee and not the broth. Gus filled his cup with the black brew and left. Jason sipped it and tried not to feel so... so....

What did he feel? Not happy. He felt... unsettled. This whole outing had not gone the way he'd planned. Envisioned? Hoped? He'd thought they'd have a fun meal out and maybe a short walk before getting back to work at the lab. Milo would hang on Jason's every word and be grateful. Jason would be a mentor in the mysterious ways of restaurants and navigating town streets. Instead there'd been that whole greeting-hugging thing when they'd entered and now this. Hell, Milo didn't even know Daisy! And there he was touching her like they were intimate friends. How had he known what she needed? And where did he get the confidence to just... act?

How did these social interactions come so easily to Milo when they'd always eluded Jason? And there was something else making him uneasy, almost... hurt. It took him a moment to identify it. Milo appeared to like everyone. Ergo, the fact that he liked Jason meant nothing at all.

It was also annoying the way Daisy was hanging onto Milo's waist, standing close. Right there! In the diner! True, the quickened were physically affectionate as a rule. But just looking at it on the surface, the two of them standing there, Daisy was a pretty blonde female in her twenties and Milo was a very handsome young man. It looked a little shady, in Jason's humble opinion.

Yeah, like Milo sleeping in your bed every night doesn't look shady. Like waking up with an erection this morning wasn't you being creepy.

Jason took another drink of coffee and banged the cup back into the saucer harder than he meant to. The sound was like a gunshot in the quiet diner. Milo glanced over his shoulder at Jason, and Daisy gently pushed him away.

"Thanks, Milo. The pain is gone. I feel loads better."

Determined, Milo placed his palms on her head again, his tongue sticking out as he focused. "It is better," he proclaimed, satisfied. "Not so hot."

"Thank you. I'd better get back to work now."

"Okay," said Milo.

He returned to the booth and slid in next to Jason, sitting as close to him as before. "I'm hungry!" he announced.

"Milo, where did you learn how to do that?" Jason asked, keeping his voice low.

Milo picked up Jason's cup and took a drink. He made a face.

"That's my coffee, Milo. You should wait for your own cup. Besides, you don't like coffee."

"I dislike coffee a five," Milo agreed, making an exaggerated grimace.

Gus brought a cup of broth to Milo, and gave him a big smile and a ruffle of his hair. "That was real nice, what you did for Daisy."

"It helped. Thank you for the broth."

Gus left.

"Milo? Can you tell me where you learned to do that? That thing you did with Daisy?"

"Okay," Milo agreed. "There was a nurse at the hospice. When patients had pain in the head, she did that. It makes the pain crawl back deep inside and go to sleep. I can do it now too because I have thumbs!" Milo held them up proudly.

Jason rubbed his chin. "I see. But how did you know Daisy had a headache in the first place?"

Milo gave Jason a disbelieving look, like he was joking. Daisy came by and put a plate of fries and a bottle of ketchup on the table. "You'll get more fries with your burger too, but these were done, and I heard Milo say he was hungry." She rubbed Milo's cheek with the back of her hand, looking at him fondly. Milo smiled up at her. She walked away to take care of other customers.

Jason gritted his teeth at the familiarity. Was Daisy flirting with Milo? Couldn't she see that he was too innocent for that sort of thing?

"Milo? How did you know Daisy had a headache?"

Jason had learned that sometimes Milo would avoid questions, much like the other quickened had done. But if Jason persisted, Milo always tried to answer.

Milo looked at Jason, biting his lip thoughtfully. Jason reached out and tugged lightly on Milo's chin. "Don't hurt yourself."

"It doesn't hurt."

"Maybe not. But it looks like it hurts and so I worry."

"Okay." Milo stopped it. He sighed. "I just know. Don't you know when someone has pain?"

"Not really. Even if I'd noticed Daisy had a headache, I wouldn't have thought to help, except maybe to offer her some aspirin."

Milo absorbed this and ate a french fry. "These sticks—french fries—are really good."

Jason ate a fry too. It was pretty good—hot and salty and not overly greasy.

"You are very smart, Jason," Milo said. "You think about work all day. So you don't have empty room in your head to see people." His voice was matter-of-fact, as if he'd figured it out and that was that.

But Jason didn't like this picture of himself. He saw other people! He thought he'd been pretty damned sensitive to Milo, actually.

"That's not true. Just because I think about my work a great deal, that doesn't mean I'm insensitive to the needs of others. For example, I've allowed you to touch me as much as you wanted because I know you need it." He waved his hand between them, pointing out the fact that their shoulders and knees were connected.

So there. It wasn't exactly gallant of Jason to point it out, but Milo had upset him. He thought he deserved a little more credit.

Milo stared at him in surprise. Then he laughed. It was just a little growl-sounding chuckle, but the mirth behind it was clear.

"What?" Jason demanded.

Milo composed his features. He shrugged. "I don't know."

"You do know! What was funny about that?"

Milo drank his broth and took a few more fries and began chewing on them. His legs swung under the table restlessly.

"Milo?"

Milo sighed. He put his partially eaten french fries on his plate and half turned to look at Jason, studying his face. "Is it good to ask too many

questions? I think no."

"It's 'I think not.' And I wouldn't ask you a question if I didn't need the answer."

Milo shrugged. "Okay. I will answer." He sighed. "Jason, *you* need this touch. Not me."

With that, Milo turned back around and ate another fry, his face placid.

Jason opened his mouth to protest. Closed it. When Daisy brought their plates, he took a bite of his pancakes, even though his appetite had vanished and he felt a little shell-shocked.

He needed the touch? *He* did?

Milo was right. Maybe it was better not to ask so many damned questions.

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Chapter 9: A Big Lot of Trouble

On Friday night, Milo was very reluctant to go to the pack party until Jason promised him repeatedly that they'd return to Jason's cabin afterward, and that no one was going to be discussing Milo, either to find a home for him or anything else.

Jason hoped to God that was the case. He considered pulling Lily aside to remind her how sensitive Milo was, and how any more conversations about his future should be done in private. But then he caught himself thinking it, acting like some kind of overprotective parent or... or... something, and he decided he was being ridiculous.

Besides, Lily would never let him get out of a conversation like that in less than two hours and the very idea made him woozy.

"I think it's best for you if we attend the pack parties, Milo," Jason explained as he shut off the interview camera for the evening.

"Why?" Milo asked. He had his feet up on the seat of the interview chair, and he hugged his knees. Jason recognized this by now as a comfort-seeking gesture, as if Milo's own legs were a teddy bear to squeeze, or maybe it was a way of subconsciously hiding his vulnerable core.

"Well, because... because you enjoy being around other quickened. And you should make friends besides just me."

"Are you my friend?" Milo asked, surprised.

Jason paused in his fussing with the camera. "Yes, Milo. Of course I'm your friend."

Milo smiled a secret smile, looking pleased with himself. Then his smile faded. "A friend is not the same thing as a home."

"Well, no. That's true. You can have a lot of friends, but you only have one home."

"Or no home," said Milo softly.

When they got to Lily's house, Milo lingered by Jason's side even though he looked anxious to go mingle.

"It's all right, Milo. I won't leave without you. You can go say hello."

Milo bounded away, his face alight. Jason watched him walk around hugging people. Milo seemed to prefer a hug to the usual pack greeting of rubbing chest and arms. Everyone seemed perfectly happy to hug him back.

Jason's throat tightened as he watched. Milo was going to be fine. He'd be as welcome in Mad Creek as a box of peanut butter treats. Once he moved into the new cabin, he'd have roommates there and a multitude of new friends to spend his time with.

Jason, on the other hand, would have his work. Which was just the way he wanted it, he reminded himself. After he'd collected all the data he could on Milo, he'd have to—want to—spend months collating and testing, revising his theories and finding ways to prove them. And he had to get back to his hardcore DNA work sooner or later.

"Dr. Kunik?" A man approached Jason with a worried expression. "I'm Bill McGurver, the local doctor."

"Oh, hello." Jason shook the man's hand. He was fully human, Jason surmised, and not very old. He appeared to be in his early 30s. When Jason had lived in Mad Creek years ago, his mother took him to see the town doctor for shots and once for a bad cold. But that doctor had been an old man. He was probably retired now.

"Do you have a minute?" Bill asked seriously.

"Well... yes. Of course."

Bill nodded his head toward the front door, and Jason followed him out. They'd no more than stepped onto the porch when the door opened again and Lance Beaufort joined them. Jason felt the first stirrings of worry. Why was he being corralled by the town doctor and sheriff?

"Is there a problem?" he asked curtly.

Bill glanced at Lance then back at Jason. "I know you're a research scientist, Dr. Kunik, but I was wondering if your education included any practical anatomy or medical training? Even lab work would be helpful, blood tests, things like that."

Jason blinked in confusion. "Well... some, yes. I performed the standard roster of blood tests in school, though I haven't done most of them for years. I'm certainly comfortable drawing blood. I work with it frequently in the scope of my research. As for the rest... I'm familiar enough with anatomy to stabilize a bone fracture or bind a wound in an emergency, but I wouldn't presume to practice medicine."

Bill's mouth was set in a tight line and his eyes were grim. "I ask because I'm the only doctor in Mad Creek, and I'm really just pinch-hitting here. My education was as a veterinarian, not a human doctor."

"You're a good doctor, Bill," Lance put in firmly.

"I know what I am and what I'm not." Bill shook of his head. "Unfortunately, given the secret nature of the quickened, the town can't just hire another doctor. There's a quickened girl currently in medical school in San Francisco."

"Edith Barker," Lance put in proudly. "Smart girl." The name meant nothing to Jason.

"But she's got three more years before she can return and join the clinic," said Bill with a sigh.

There was something here Jason wasn't getting. There was a low thrum of anxiety in Lance—yes, even more than usual. He smelled ever so slightly of fear. And the hair on his arms where he'd pushed up his sleeves was raised, as if he was stressed. Bill, being human, was less easy to read, but he seemed upset.

"Is there some reason you're concerned about finding another doctor right now?" Jason asked.

The front door opened, and Milo peeked out. "Jason?" he asked timidly.

"It's all right, Milo. I'm just having a conversation. I'll be back inside in a minute. I won't leave without you. I promise."

Milo nodded and went back inside.

Bill and Lance exchanged another look. Lance spoke. "We don't want everyone in town to know about this, but... we had a quickened arrive two days ago. Not sure if you remember Wilbur Riven, but he helped with

coaching when you and I were in school. Well, he walked into Mad Creek in dog form on Wednesday, and he's been sick ever since."

"High fever," Bill put in. "Chills, loss of appetite, severe dehydration, and lethargy. His heart rate is elevated, probably due to dehydration and pain. At first I thought it was a bacterial infection, but his white blood cell count isn't that high. It may be a virus, but if it is, he isn't fighting it off. I've never seen anything like this. I don't think he..." Bill looked again at Lance.

"You don't think he what?" Jason prompted.

"Uh, I don't think he's all there. He hasn't been able to shift back, and when he's awake, I've tried talking to him. There have been few brief flashes of recognition, but for the most part, I don't think he understands where he is or who we are, or even..." Bill swallowed. "...language."

Jason pushed the glasses up on his nose. Inside, his dog grew anxious and wanted to pace. Jason urged it down, trying to stay logical. "Are you saying he has brain damage?"

Bill shrugged and shook his head helplessly. "I just don't know. This is really above my training. I'm not even sure if I'd know what to look for on a CAT scan or MRI, even if we had that equipment, which we don't. Do you think a high fever could cause a loss of faculties? His temp was 106 when he came in. That's not as high for a quickened as it would be for a human, but it's still high. No way of telling how long he'd been like that."

"It's possible. Brain damage in general, I mean, from fever. Are you saying he's acting like... like a regular dog?"

Bill looked a little relieved. "Yes. That's what has me so concerned. He's acting like just a regular dog."

"And you're sure he isn't one? That he is this quickened named Wilbur?" Jason looked at Lance. He found it hard to believe.

"Of course we're sure!" Lance snapped irritably. "I know all the pack by smell, and my mother does too. She confirmed it. It's Wilbur Riven all right."

A thought occurred to Jason, at once fascinating and horrible. Was it possible for a canis sapiens to *revert back to being merely a dog*? If it was, that had significant implications on his research. Most genetic mutations

were not reversible. And from a strictly personal point of view, he couldn't imagine anything more terrifying.

"Where is Wilbur now?" he asked tightly.

"At the clinic. I have him on a saline drip with ibuprofen and antibiotics, since I'm not sure what he has isn't bacterial. Every time we've tried to back him off the drip, his temperature has spiked again."

Something was bothering Jason. Well, plenty about this was bothering him, but there was something dire that hovered just out of reach in his mind.

"Anyway, Dr. Kunik, I'd appreciate it if you could stop by the clinic first thing tomorrow morning and take a look at him. I know you're not a medical doctor, but we're rather short on those and, frankly, I'm at a loss. Anything at all you might suggest, tests we could run...."

"We have to all pull together in Mad Creek," Lance said in a preachy tone. "We can't rely on outside help, so... so—" His words cut off as he made a strange face, his nose crinkling. Then his head reared back and he let out a mighty "PSCHOO!" He was mindful to put his face into the crook of his elbow with the sneeze, but even so, Jason could practically see the germs in the air.

He took a step back, going down one step on the porch. Dread washed through him.

Lance shook his head. "Sorry. I was saying that we need to pull together, use what skills we have in the community." His voice was scratchy.

"Lance, did you have exposure to Wilbur?" Jason asked, his voice calm.

Lance frowned. "Sure. I picked him up off the road. Why?"

But Bill's face went white with understanding. He put a hand on Lance's forehead. "God, Lance, you're burning up!"

"But I never get... shit." Lance suddenly looked afraid. "Shit."

"Do you think it's communicable?" Bill asked Jason. "Is my staff at risk too?"

"Yes." Jason saw no point in mincing words. "You absolutely should be treating it as such, at least until proven otherwise. Anyone with symptoms, and anyone who's been exposed to Wilbur, should be isolated. That includes Lance."

"But I have to work!"

"Not unless you want to endanger the lives of other people," Jason snapped.

"But even if Lance did catch a bug from Wilbur, that doesn't mean the outcome will be the same," said Bill adamantly. "Wilbur's, um, current confusion could be due to how long his fever went untreated."

"True, but do you really want to test that theory on the entire town?"

Lance looked at Jason. There was a mix of dread and gratitude on his face, as if Lance was grateful for Jason's help for the town's sake, even if he himself was fucked. It made Jason feel selfish. He'd never cared about anything that much.

Bill tried to reassure Lance. "Hey, you're going to be fine. But it probably is a good idea for us to be extra careful until we know more. You should stay home for a few days to avoid exposing others." Bill looked at Jason. "Tim's human. He shouldn't be in any danger, right?"

"I have no idea. Sounds like you've been exposed for as long as Lance has. Do you have any symptoms?"

Bill pressed the back of his hand to his own forehead. "I don't think so."

Jason checked Bill's forehead, but he felt cool. "Some viruses can pass from species to species, but most don't. It's possible humans won't catch this, but only time will tell."

Jason himself, however, was quickened and therefore as vulnerable as Lance. *And so was Milo*. The thought made his mouth go dry. "All right. Here's my advice: Break up the party and send everyone home with strict instructions to call the clinic if they have symptoms of a cold or fever. Lance should be isolated at home, and Wilbur should be kept isolated at the clinic. Limit the number of people treating him, and make sure everyone wears gloves and masks and uses disinfectant afterward. That includes you."

Jason was no expert on infectious diseases, but he'd had to work on viral samples over the course of his career, and he knew the drill. He met Lance's eyes. If any of what he suggested were to happen, Lance had to approve it.

Lance's blue eyes watched him, his jaw set. He reluctantly nodded. "I don't like it but... yes. Better safe than sorry. I'll let Roman know he's in charge for a few days."

Bill snorted. "Like you won't be running everything from your phone."

The attempt at levity fell flat. They all stood there awkwardly for a moment.

Bill spoke first. "Lance, I can go get Tim to drive you home if you want to wait out here. I don't think—"

"Oh God. *Molly*," Lance groaned, his face slackening in fear.

Bill hesitated. "Right. Want me to ask Lonnie and Truly if they can take her for a few days?"

Jason could see it pained Lance terribly. He grimaced as if the mere idea ripped his chest open. But after a moment, he nodded. Then he looked away, hiding his face.

"I'm sorry, Lance," Jason muttered as he followed Bill inside.

Everyone was having a good time, which suddenly felt wrong to Jason. He saw Milo across the room and went straight to him. He was in a group watching Deputy Roman's partner, Matt, tell a funny story, waving his fingers over his head in the universal symbol for *idiot pretending to have antlers*.

Jason took Milo's arm gently. As much as his instinct told him to get Milo out of there fast, he didn't want to alarm him or the crowd. "It's time to go home, Milo," he whispered.

"But...." Milo looked around in confusion. "I have to hug more people! And eat the purple stuff. And some of the potatoes. There are three different kinds of potatoes!"

But anxiety had taken hold in Jason's gut, and all he could think of was not safe, not safe, not safe. "No more hugging tonight. Okay? We need to go. Will you come with me, Milo?"

Milo frowned and studied Jason's face as if trying to see if he actually meant it. He apparently decided Jason did because he sank, giving in. "Okay."

"Good. Thank you. Let's go. I'll explain on the way home."

Milo was not exactly sullen after they left Lily's house, but he wasn't happy. He walked farther from Jason than usual. Finally Jason took his hand and pulled him closer. "I'm sorry we had to leave, but someone there is sick, Milo. And I was afraid if we stayed, you might catch it. Or I might."

Milo stopped in his tracks, resisting Jason's momentum like a brick wall. "Sick? Who is sick?"

"Lance." Jason gritted his teeth. Clearly Milo wasn't going to be put off without hearing the full story. He sighed. "A quickened came into town a few days ago who was very sick. And now Lance is sick. So it's probably the kind of sickness that can pass from person to person—or rather, quickened to quickened. We need to be careful so no one else in town gets it. We decided to send everyone home from the party early. That's what I was talking to Lance and Dr. McGurver about on the porch. Do you see?"

Milo let go of Jason's hand, turned on his heel, and started walking back toward Lily's house with a determined stride.

"Milo, no!" Jason grabbed his arm.

"I can help!" Milo raised his voice defiantly. His eyes pleaded with Jason.

Jason took a breath to calm himself and took both of Milo's upper arms in his hands. He rubbed soothingly. "Listen to me, Milo. Do you trust me? Do you trust what I know about the quickened body?"

Milo looked confused for a moment, then he nodded. "Yes."

"All right. This type of sickness isn't like the things the patients had at the hospice, and it isn't like Daisy's headache. You can't help. And you'll get sick if you try. That's the truth, Milo."

"I can help even if I can't make it better," Milo insisted.

Jason blinked. "Yes, I know you're good at comforting people, Milo. But in this case, you would get sick too and that wouldn't help you, or me, or Lance, or anyone."

Milo studied Jason's face for a moment, then he relaxed in resignation. "Okay."

"Good. That's settled. Let's go home. Tomorrow I'll learn more about what's going on."

Jason took Milo's hand and walked him to their cabin. He tried hard not to worry about the way Milo kept glancing back over his shoulder.

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Chapter 10: Cold Calling

For the first time since Milo had moved into his bed, Jason didn't sleep well that night. He couldn't keep his brain from hashing through what he'd learned at the party. It was ridiculous, because he didn't yet have all the facts, and it was useless to anticipate results. But the mere idea of it, of a quickened being stuck in dog form, *reverting*, was incredibly significant. It was not only significant in terms of his DNA research, but it struck deep on a personal level, on the level that had a stake in his own self-preservation and, now, in protecting Milo.

Around 2 a.m., he admitted that he was also worried Milo would sneak out and try to "help" and get himself in trouble. Jason kept waking out of a light doze to be sure Milo was still there. Around 3 a.m., Milo rolled closer in his sleep, his back to Jason's chest, and Jason left him there. In fact, he slung an arm around Milo's waist so he could be sure Milo didn't get out of bed. And finally, with Milo's body secured, Jason was able to fully sleep. He fell into a black pit, and by the time he woke up, it was nine am. He panicked to find himself alone. But Milo was in the kitchen in his pajamas eating cereal.

"Hi," Milo said when Jason walked in. "You slept a lot." His voice was grumbly from sleep, and he looked like he hadn't been up very long either.

Jason resisted the urge to rub shoulders with him or give him a hug. He *didn't* need the touch. He'd been fine for years without it. It was getting to be an addictive habit, that was all.

"It took me awhile to go to sleep," he explained.

Milo had made coffee, even though he didn't drink it, which was a nice surprise. Jason poured himself a cup. It was perfect.

"Good job on the coffee," Jason told him with a smile.

Milo smiled back. "We are working today?" He licked some milk off his thumb.

Jason started to respond in the affirmative, then remembered last night. "I'm not sure. I need to call Dr. McGurver."

"Because people are sick?" Milo asked immediately, his gaze studying Jason's face.

"Because of my conversation with him last night, yes. There's nothing for you to worry about."

Jason took his coffee and his phone into the other room and made the call. Bill McGurver sounded like the sooner Jason could pitch in the better, so he decided to go to the clinic, look at Wilbur, and pick up a blood sample. He was anxious to take a look at the sample under the microscope. The question was: what to do with Milo? It was Saturday morning, and Milo was supposed to have a class at Lily's. But Jason didn't want Milo socializing with the pack, and particularly not the Beauforts—not until he could verify whether or not the sickness was communicable. In fact, Jason hoped Lily had cancelled the class entirely.

There weren't a whole lot of other options. No way was he going to leave Milo alone.

Before he could decide what to do, Milo wandered into the front room and plastered himself to Jason's back, cheek against his shoulder blade. The touch was awfully grounding. A painful knot of dread loosened in Jason's chest. He patted Milo's hand where it had wrapped around his waist and allowed himself to relish the contact for a moment. Milo's touch did relax his inner dog, he admitted to himself. Given the pills and techniques he'd tried over the years, with little success, that was quite a miracle.

"Milo, I need to go see Dr. McGurver at the clinic. You'll go with me and wait in the waiting room. All right?"

"Okay." Milo hesitated, tensing. "Oh. Do I have to get a shot?"

Jason smiled. "No, this visit isn't for you. Don't worry."

They both showered and dressed. Milo put on his black T-shirt and jeans, which was a nice change from the screaming colors he usually preferred. Jason decided to drive to the clinic, though it was close enough to walk. Today didn't seem like a day to waste any time.

At the clinic, Jason was grateful that the waiting room was empty. He didn't want Milo exposed to anything while he waited. The receptionist was an older woman who looked vaguely familiar. She was quickened, though probably not a first-gen.

"Can I help you?" she asked as they walked in.

"Dr. Kunik here at the request of Dr. McGurver," Jason said.

"And I'm Milo, here just because." Milo walked close to the counter and leaned over like he wanted to give the lady a hug. She responded with a big smile and held out her forearm for a rub.

"Aren't you cute? Hi, Milo, I'm Doris."

"Hi, Doris!"

"I'll just let Doctor McGurver know you're here." Doris winked at Milo, ignored Jason, and picked up the phone on her desk.

"She's Doris," Milo told Jason, pointing at the receptionist. "She's not sick. There are so many people to meet in Mad Creek!"

"Mmmm. Milo, I want you to stay here with Doris while I go talk to Dr. McGurver. Okay? Don't leave."

"I wouldn't leave without you!" Milo rolled his eyes like Jason was being silly.

"Er... good. And if anyone comes in who looks sick...."

Milo tilted his head, his eyes growing worried, and Jason knew anything he said to discourage Milo from talking to or touching the person would be a waste of breath. "Just... come find me, all right? As soon as you see them. Will you do that for me?"

"Okay."

"You can go through the door marked 3, Dr. Kunik," Doris spoke up. "Doctor will see you right away."

Bill was in the small exam room when Jason entered. He looked tired and grim. "There's been no change in Wilbur since yesterday. He's a little stronger thanks to the IV fluids, but he's still behaving like a dog. There's no sign of him being able to understand anything we say now."

"Hmmm. Do you have vials of his blood I can examine? The earliest sample you took, along with the most recent, would be ideal."

Bill nodded. "I drew some for you just a few minutes ago, and we still have about a half-vial of the first sample we took on Wednesday."

"Excellent. I'd also like a sample of your blood."

Bill looked uncomfortable. "But I'm fine. There's still no sign of fever."

"I realize that. But if I do find something in Wilbur's blood, it would be useful to know if you have it as well, but are asymptomatic, or if it's not present in your sample at all."

"I suppose..." Bill allowed. "I'll have Floyd draw it."

He left the room and returned with a vial marked with his name. He handed it over. "Promise me you won't use this for Voodoo."

"Pardon?" Jason asked before realizing it was an attempt at humor.

"Nevermind."

Jason felt stupid, the way he always did when he missed someone's joke. He pushed up his glasses and changed the subject. "Have you heard from Lance?"

"I spoke with Tim this morning. It doesn't sound good. I was going to drive over there if you want to go with me?"

Bill sounded desperate. Jason was tempted to remind him that he wasn't a real medical doctor. But he remembered their discussion last night, Lance saying how everyone needed to pitch in in Mad Creek, and Lily's discussions of the town's limited resources. Bill didn't have anyone else to consult with. And Jason felt a niggle of responsibility.

"I should really have protective gear if I'm going to be exposed to patients," he said.

"I'll take you to our supply room. We have the basics, but if you need something specific, let me know and we can probably order it."

"All right."

Jason pulled a number of things from the supply room—gloves, a paper gown and clear plastic rain poncho, a nose and mouth mask, paper booties, and hair cap. His own glasses would at least keep any spray from hitting his eyes. He insisted Bill wear the gear too. They didn't know yet whether or not the sickness could pass from quickened to human.

They went into the exam room where Bill was keeping Wilbur. He was lying in a padded cage in the corner, an IV in his arm. He looked up and

wagged his tail for a single beat, but was too sick to rise. Jason examined him, but other than seeing that the dog was very sick, he couldn't tell much.

They left the room, and Jason pulled off the gear and stuffed it in a garbage can.

"Shall we go see Lance now?" Bill asked.

"I guess we should."

They grabbed fresh supplies and went out to the waiting room. Milo was chatting away with Doris, half draped over the registration counter. He straightened up at the sight of Jason, an easy smile on his face. Jason's heart did a soft thump. What would it be like if that smile was just for him instead of Milo's friendly reaction to everyone?

"We need to drive over to Tim and Lance's place," Jason explained. "But you'll have to stay by the car. All right?"

"Okay," said Milo.

Jason followed Bill's van up Broad Eagle Drive. He pulled into a rutted gravel road that led to a cabin. There was a greenhouse behind the cabin, and it glittered in the bright May sunlight. Bill parked and got out. Milo was out the door before Jason could get in a single word.

Jason intended to order Milo to stay with the cars, but before he could say a word, Tim burst from the cabin. He jogged down the steps from the porch, wiping at his eyes. He looked distraught.

"Bill! I just called your office. He's worse. Oh my God."

"What happened?" Bill asked.

"He had a bad fever all night. Shaking, chills. He had to keep getting up to go to the bathroom to be sick. I gave him aspirin like you said, but I'm not sure how much he kept down. Then this morning, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully, so I left him in bed." Tim's voice shook and he wiped again at his damp eyes. "Bill, I checked on him and he's shifted. He's Chance, and he... he seems so sick and... why did he shift when he's so sick? Isn't that hard on his body? And why would he *want* to?"

"I don't know, Tim. But don't worry. We'll take care of him," Bill reassured him.

Jason thought that was naively optimistic. He felt confident that with the blood work, he could get some idea what was going on. Curing it, however, was another matter. Tim was right. There was no good reason why Lance would have shifted after being ill all night. *Unless he had no choice*. Why would his body force him to shift? Jason couldn't think of a single reason that wasn't ominous. He put a hand on Milo's shoulder to keep him from getting any closer. Now he wished he hadn't brought Milo along.

"We should take a look at Lance," Bill told Jason.

"Yes. Just let me get the gear on. You should dress too."

"Dress?" Tim asked worriedly.

"Jason thinks it's a good idea for us to take precautions, at least until we have a handle on this thing," Bill said.

Tim was shaking. He put his hand over his mouth. "Is... is Molly going to be okay?" His voice was very small.

Milo twisted away gently but firmly from Jason's hand and went to Tim. He wrapped Tim in a hug, not even trying to use words.

"Milo—" Jason bit his tongue. There was no way he was going to be able to control Milo completely. Probably the best he could do was keep Milo away from Lance. He had to pray Tim and Bill, being human, were not infectious.

Tim seemed surprised at first, but then he put his arms around Milo and hugged back, his hands closed up in white-knuckle fists on Milo's back, his face haunted.

"Can you please stay here with Milo while we examine Lance?" Jason asked him, pulling his pile of makeshift protective gear from the car. "I don't want him exposed."

Tim nodded.

Jason donned the gear, using white medical tape to seal the seams between his gloves and the rain poncho then putting on the hat and paper mask. By his car, Bill did the same. When they were ready to go in, Milo pulled back from Tim to look at Jason quizzically.

"Milo, you need to stay here."

"Lance is sick?"

"Milo, *stay here*," Jason repeated in a sharp voice. He felt like a heel, being all authoritarian with Milo, but he had to understand.

"Stay with me, okay, Milo?" Tim said, tightening the hug.

"Okay," Milo said quietly, but he didn't look happy about it.

* *

Jason and Bill found the family pet, a Bernese mountain dog, pacing in the hallway outside the bedroom. He was anxious and whining at the door, as if he was afraid of whatever was in there. Jason and Bill gave each other a worried look, and Bill opened the door.

Lance was in the bedroom in dog form—a large, coal-black collie. He was huddled in a corner as though he was trying to hide.

"Lance?" Bill said in a quiet voice.

Lance looked over his shoulder and licked his lips in a show of anxiety. He ducked his head.

Oh my God. Jason's heart pounded sickly. Jesus Christ. Was Lance aware of what was going on at all?

"Lance, do you know me?" Jason asked, taking a slow step forward and keeping his hands in view.

Lance watched Jason, his tongue now hanging out in a stressed pant.

"Lance? It's Bill." Bill stepped closer too.

Lance let them approach. He didn't drop his eyes, but Jason wasn't sure if he saw recognition there or not.

"I need to check your fever," Bill said, placing a gloved hand on Lance's shoulder. "All right?"

With a heave, Lance stood. He was in rough shape. His front legs shook as though he was terribly weak. If he'd been as sick as Tim implied, then shifted on top of that, he was probably dehydrated.

But Lance's cooperation, the way he turned his body to the side to allow Bill to take his temp, showed intelligence. He knew what Bill wanted. That was hopeful. Lance didn't even seem to care as Bill inserted a rectal

thermometer and looked at his eyes and ears, listened to his heart with a stethoscope.

He removed the thermometer. "It's 105. He probably didn't keep the aspirin down. We need to get him on a drip right away."

"Agreed," Jason said. "He does seem responsive to you."

Bill nodded. "Lance, can you understand me?"

Lance turned his head to look at Bill. He whined forlornly.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Bill with a sigh. "Did you mean to shift, Lance?"

Lance panted. There was a weary shake of his head.

Bill's lips tightened into a grimace. "Fuck. But at least he does understand. Thank God."

Yes, thank God. It was bad, but not as bad as it could be. And if Lance retained his cognitive function, hopefully he'd be able to shift back once the virus or whatever it was had run its course.

"Do you need to take him to the clinic to get him on a drip?"

"I could do it here, but I'd prefer to have him in town where I can monitor him. There's a cage room at the clinic. I've been thinking that would serve as an isolation ward."

"And if you get more patients than that room can handle?"

Bill gave Jason a glare for suggesting it. "I can handle a half dozen. If there's more than that, God help us."

"I'd like a blood sample from Lance. I'll test it along with Wilbur's as soon as I get home."

"Thank you," Bill said sincerely. "If you can figure out what this thing is, we'll forever be in your debt. Or if you have any other ideas at all... I'm all ears."

"Let me take a look at the blood samples. Then we'll see where we're at."

Jason could have drawn the blood, but he didn't object when Bill did it. The less contact Jason had with Lance, the better. Lance didn't fight the

procedure or even wince. He leaned against the wall, still trembling. Bill handed the vial to Jason.

"Do you need help getting him to your van?" Jason asked.

"I think I can manage. If you can get the doors and corral Tim and Milo, that'd be helpful." Bill murmured reassurances to Lance, squatted down, and managed to lift the heavy dog. Jason hurried ahead of him to open the doors.

When they emerged from the house, Jason called out to Tim. "Keep Milo back, please!"

He went over to Bill's van and opened the back door. There was a large crate inside and he opened that too.

"Where are you taking him?" Tim asked anxiously. He held onto Milo's arm, but he looked like he wanted to hurry to Lance's side.

Bill laid Lance gently in the crate. "To the clinic," he answered calmly. "I need start him on an IV for his fever and dehydration. You can come along."

Tim hurried to the van and got in. Jason managed to grab Milo before he could follow.

"Lance?" Milo asked, eyes fixed on the van.

"Dr. McGurver's looking after Lance. You and I are going to help by running some tests in the lab."

The van backed up and took off in a hurry.

Jason held on to Milo's arm until the van disappeared from sight. He hadn't even had time to take off his protective gear. Damn it. If this really were a dangerous pathogen, they'd be scoring a D- on the procedural scale so far. It was all happening so fast, and they didn't have the proper gear or bleach or enough bodies to help. But Jason hadn't touched Lance, so hopefully his gloves were free of germs. He stripped the gear off by the car and tossed it into the trunk.

He smeared both himself and Milo with anti-bacterial lotion he had in the car. It was comforting to massage the lotion over Milo's forearms and slender hands. It placated the building worry inside Jason, knowing he was doing what he could to stave off the germs. Even Milo relaxed under the simple touch. But Jason didn't linger. Touch therapy was all well and good, but he needed to get to the lab and take a look at that blood.

He needed to know what had attacked Mad Creek.

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Chapter 11: Et Tu, Jason?

It was a virus.

Viruses were too small to be seen with anything less than an electron microscope, so Jason sent a sample of Wilbur's blood to an old grad school colleague, Elizabeth Stubben, who now worked for the Centers for Disease Control in Washington.

In the meantime, however, Jason could detect the *presence* of a virus in his own lab by testing the blood for certain proteins common to viruses, like hemagglutinin. He found it in overwhelming amounts in Wilbur's blood and in Lance's. It wasn't present in Bill's sample.

Hypothesis A: The virus directly or indirectly switches off the genes that enable the mutation from canine to human, forcing a reversion to the original state.

Hypothesis B: The virus causes hyper proliferation of the canine genes causing them to overwhelm the human ones.

Hypothesis C: The virus directly or indirectly damages the higher cognitive [human] functions. The body automatically reverts to dog form when this happens.

Hypothesis D: The higher cognitive functions and ability to mutate are temporarily disabled due to chemical changes within the system caused by the body fighting the virus.

If D was correct, Wilbur, and by extension, Lance, might fully recover in time. But Jason didn't hold out much hope that was the case. Much more study was required. It was exciting in a purely clinical sense, and most assuredly had profound implications for his primary DNA research. But at the same time—

There was a loud clatter. Jason looked up from his microscope to see Milo staring down at the camera tripod, which he'd obviously just knocked over.

"Milo, why did you do that?"

Milo pouted, refusing to look at Jason. "I'm hungry!" he said defiantly. He turned to go to the door and knocked over a chair at the interview table. It fell to the floor with a loud screech, which Milo ignored.

"Milo!"

Milo left the lab in a huff. Jason tried to focus his attention back on the microscope, but he was distracted now. With a sigh, he used the tongs to remove the slide, place it back in a petri dish, and seal it. He took off the gloves and paper face mask he was wearing, tossed them in the garbage, and went out to make sure Milo got something to eat.

Not that Milo wasn't perfectly capable of feeding himself. He was. He'd gotten the hang of cereal, cold sandwiches, and of dumping the contents of cans into bowls and heating them in the microwave. But he was in a foul mood. Jason had never seen him act like that before.

Jason found Milo in the kitchen. He had one hand on the knob of the open pantry door and was banging it repeatedly against the wall as he gazed sullenly at the pantry's contents.

"Milo, stop that right now!"

Milo stopped banging the door but didn't look at Jason. His shoulders were tense, and his body radiated displeasure. His hair was puffed up, bristling at the roots. He was definitely disturbed about something.

Jason took a breath to calm himself. He spoke rationally. "Milo, I've got to get this work done. But I can make you something quick. Do you want a ham sandwich? Or we can put some fries in the oven."

"I don't want to eat. *Nothing*!" Milo yelled. He slammed the pantry door shut in a fit of pique and pushed past Jason, exiting the kitchen.

* * *

Jason followed Milo into the living room, his temper rising. "Milo, what is the matter with you? You're acting like a child! I have to work on this virus!"

Milo spun to face Jason. His body was tight with anger. His hazel eyes had darkened with emotion to a flashing, volatile chocolate. "You. You,

you, you!" He was so angry, he couldn't even talk. His voice sounded choked. His fists were clenched and shook at his sides.

Jason blinked, taken aback. Holy shit. Milo was really upset. Jason ran back over the day in his mind, trying to ascertain what had caused such strong emotion. *Ah*.

"You're angry with me because I wouldn't let you comfort Lance," Jason suggested. He was surprised Milo would get this upset about it, but he was coming to understand that Milo had a strong need to comfort those in pain. Pathological even? Perhaps it stemmed from the fact that his salvation from the shelter, and what was certain death, was due to his being recruited into the hospice. He probably thought that his only possible worth was in the act of—

"Jason, for a smart man, you are very stupid sometimes!" Milo was glaring at him with the angriest *duh* expression ever.

"What? That's not why you're mad? Then why are you—"

"You tell me it is dangerous! You say I can catch sick at the clinic. 'Stay with Doris, Milo.'" He mimicked Jason's voice. "Then *you* go behind the door. You tell me I can catch sick from Lance. 'Stay with Tim, Milo.' Then *you* go in the cabin and see Lance." Milo's eyes grew bright with tears, his face a blotchy red. He stamped his foot on the floor. "Now you get sick too! No!"

Oh. Oh hell. An intense emotion bubbled up from Jason's belly that was wonder and surprise, guilt and a speedball of joy that Milo cared about him this much.

"You're worried about me," he said quietly.

Milo rubbed his eyes impatiently and gave another half-heartedly little stomp. "You die too! It hurts."

"Oh, no, Milo, no." There was nothing that could have stopped Jason from striding to Milo and gathering him into his arms. His heart felt cracked open like a coconut cleaved by an ax, and all sorts of uncomfortable juices were in danger of leaking out.

Milo clung to Jason, his hands grabbing on to Jason's shirt, angry and desperate.

"No, no. I took precautions, Milo. You needn't worry."

"What?"

"Precautions. You saw all the things I put on? The gloves and the mask and all of that? The sickness is tiny, and it spreads through the air. I put those things on so I didn't catch the germs."

Milo's face turned into Jason's neck. The damp on his cheeks felt electric against Jason's skin. "You won't get sick?" His words were muttered against Jason's carotid artery.

"No. Well, probably not. There's actually a well-established protocol, but I wasn't able to—"

Milo whimpered. Okay. Maybe he didn't need full disclosure. Jason shut his mouth and pulled Milo closer, so close the heat of Milo's body baked through his clothes. Milo was overly warm, even warmer than usual. He'd gotten himself so worked up.

"Milo, calm down. I want to help Lance and the town, but it's very important to me that I protect you. And myself too, naturally."

God. This was... unprecedented. Jason's heart hung out there, exposed, enlarged, and throbbing with feelings for Milo, albeit metaphorically. A small part of his brain marveled at how attached he'd gotten to Milo—so attached, and at how fast it had happened—so so fast.

Of course, Milo was lovable. Everyone could see that. You couldn't dislike giggling babies or daffodils in the spring or beautiful sunsets. Milo was definitely in that category of things that were spontaneously wonderful. Even so, it was ridiculous how easily he'd wrapped Jason around his little finger. He thought of himself as a tougher nut than that. As for Milo, Jason figured Milo merely tolerated him. Or rather, was good-natured with him simply because he was good-natured, period. Milo had admitted he touched Jason so much because he thought Jason needed the touch. But now Milo was really upset at the idea of losing Jason. Did that mean he cared about Jason particularly? At least a little?

Milo nosed along Jason's jaw, a gesture of affection, of intimacy. And Jason's inner dog prompted him to nose back, trailing along Milo's jaw. And then Milo's lips were right there. And then Jason kissed them.

He hadn't *meant* to, for God's sake. He hadn't consciously intended a come-on. Sex was the furthest thing from his mind. Well, not the furthest, not with Milo in his arms, but he truly hadn't had deliberate seduction in mind. His relationship with Milo wasn't like that.

His body, however, had its own ideas about its relationship with Milo. He felt Milo's lips, plump and hot and a bit salty from tears, and wanted more. He pushed against them, and Milo pushed back. Somehow their bodies became perfectly aligned, thigh to groin to chest, with Milo's arms clinging around Jason's neck and Jason's hands on Milo's waist. It was clear Milo had never kissed anyone before and wasn't quite sure what it was all about at first. But Jason swept his tongue across Milo's lips, sucking and tasting, and Milo went up like a pine forest soaked in gasoline. He made a growl-whimper in his throat, opened his mouth hungrily against Jason's, and attempted to climb his body, one long leg coming up to hook over Jason's hip.

With a shock, Jason realized what was happening. He disentangled them with a bit of a shove. Milo was intent on coming back in and doing that again, his eyes wide and dark, his mouth panting, his hands reaching. But Jason held him off with his palms on Milo's shoulders.

"Milo, stop!"

Milo stopped. His mouth closed, and he blinked at Jason, aroused and confused. Damn it, he was beautiful. *And aroused. Definitely aroused. Oh God, what have I done?*

"That's not... I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean for that to happen," Jason stammered, the words tripping out against the jackhammer of his heart.

"Why? I liked it. I liked it a lot." Milo was enthusiastic. "Jason, I *loved* it."

Inwardly, Jason growled. God, he was tempted. So tempted. He'd give anything if he was free to pull Milo back in and ravish him, just go with sensation for once. But. This was wrong.

"We can't. I'm your guardian, Milo. I can't take advantage of you like... well, that's *sex*. And sex should only be undertaken between mates. Do you understand what a mate is?"

Milo stared at Jason, but his hands slowly fell to his side. "Home?" he suggested.

"Well, to a certain extent, yes. When you have a mate, you typically live with them and the two of you make a home together."

"But not Jason and Milo?" Milo's face was unreadable, guarded. Did he want that? Or was he merely confirming that it wasn't going to happen? Even if Milo thought he wanted it, Jason knew how badly Milo longed for a home. And wanting a home, any home, wasn't the same thing as falling in love or bonding with someone because they were your first choice.

And then there was Jason himself. He was clearly very emotional about Milo and getting more attached the longer they were together. But that wasn't the same thing as romantic love either. Milo was an innocent. Jason had to be the mature one here. What, ultimately, did he and Milo have in common? Even if he gave in now, what would their prognosis be in the long-term? Jason had always thought that if he bonded at all, it would be with a human, or at least a born quickened on his own intellectual level, someone who liked opera perhaps.

You hate the opera.

Someone who could be a part of his work at the very least. Another scientist, a scholar. Someone who read *Cell* and *Annual Review of Genetics*, someone with whom he could discuss his research.

You worked with other scientists for ten years at JVT. There wasn't exactly romance busting out all over there.

Jason shut his eyes and took a breath. This was so damn complicated! It was too complicated and way too distracting. He couldn't get derailed from his work, especially not now with this sickness in town adding to the pressure on him and his list of things to do. Beyond that, he had to put his own feelings aside and consider Milo. He didn't want to hurt Milo by rejecting him, but he couldn't let Milo make a mistake either.

God, no wonder he'd always avoided this emotional folderol. How draining. When he opened his eyes, Milo was staring at the floor, that sad pall back over his face. A twinge of guilt twisted in Jason's gut.

"Milo, you only just became a man. There's so much you need to learn first before you take an important step like mating or bonding or... or sex.

Maybe there is someone in town you'll like better than me, someone with whom you'd be better suited."

"Suited?" Milo looked up at Jason, a spark of curiosity in his eyes.

"That means the two of you are a good fit. Generally when you, um, bond with someone for life, it's good to have things in common, or for the two people to be alike in ways that are important. For example, either you both want children or you both don't want them. Or you both like to stay home and watch movies or you both prefer to go out. Do you see what I mean?"

Milo studied Jason's face. "Or both are smart."

Jason's insides quivered. He swallowed a lump in his throat. How did Milo always manage to go right to the heart of things? "Yes. That's certainly one important factor. Look, this is all new for you and, well, for me too, being someone's guardian, and.... I'm sorry I kissed you, Milo." Jason tried to get a grip on what he wanted to say. "The point is, I regret scaring you today. I should have explained what I was doing. You don't have to worry about me. I'm being very careful around the sickness. I'm not going anywhere, I'm not leaving you, and everything's fine. All right?"

Milo sighed. His shoulders slumped under Jason's hand as if he were exhausted. "Okay."

"You've had a hard day. Do you want to lie down for a bit and take a nap?"

Milo nodded. He turned and went to the bedroom on his own. Jason returned to his work studying the blood samples and researching viruses. But it felt like it took hours for the heat of Milo's lips to leave his mouth or for his palms and chest to stop tingling where he'd held Milo tight.

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Chapter 12: Emergency Planning

The next morning, bright and early at 7 a.m., Jason and Milo pulled up in front of the old brick building on Main Street that acted as city hall. Jason had only had a few hours of sleep. Milo had been quiet since their illadvised kiss the day before. He'd slept on and off, wandered in and out of the lab, and even made Jason a sandwich during the night, which he'd eaten while still seated at his microscope.

When they walked into city hall, they found Tim Beaufort, Bill McGurver, Lonnie Beaufort, Deputy Roman Charsguard, his partner Matt, and Minnie already in the room.

Bill stood up. "Dr. Kunik, thanks for coming. Hi, Milo."

"Hi," said Milo. He must have been keyed in to the deathly serious mood of the group, because he slipped into a chair in the circle and didn't try to approach anyone.

Jason put his briefcase on a chair. "Is there a projector? I have some images you'll want to see. If not, my laptop will have to do."

"I've got it." Tim looked like five miles of bad road, but he got up and left the room. He came back a moment later with a small projector, and he set it up so the screen of Jason's laptop was projected on a blank white wall.

"Before I start, do you want to give us an update on the patients?" he asked Bill.

Bill nodded and wiped at his face. "Yeah. There hasn't been much change in Wilbur since yesterday morning. His fever is down as long as we keep him on the drip, but he sleeps most of the time. He doesn't seem to recognize us or understand us when we speak. Physically he's too weak to stand and won't take any food by mouth. I worry about organ failure. I'm not sure how much longer he can last. We have three other patients at the clinic right now. We cleared out an older room of crates and have made that our isolation ward. So far, we have Lance there, Lily, and my assistant, Floyd.

Jason's heart sank. Lily was sick too. That was terrifying. She interacted with everyone in town.

"Lily was directly exposed to Wilbur? And Floyd was too, I assume?" Jason asked.

Bill nodded. "The day Lance brought Wilbur in, he stopped by later with Lily so she could confirm his identification. And Floyd worked with Wilbur from the time he arrived. I'm sorry, I didn't think about it being contagious. I should have put Wilbur in isolation immediately." Bill sounded miserable.

"It's easy to see things in hindsight, Bill," Tim said.

"Have they all shifted into their canine form?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," Bill said, the single word was fraught with tired frustration.

"I want to talk about this isolation thing. I want Lance *home*," Tim said adamantly. "I don't care if he's in dog form or not. I can't stand to see him in a cage."

"I can't monitor all of them if I have to drive from house to house, and he needs to be on that IV, Tim." From Bill's resigned tone, this wasn't a new argument.

"He can be on the IV at our house."

"Unless you restrain him, he might pull it out."

"He wouldn't do that! He knows what's going on!"

"Can we hold off on that discussion for the time being?" Jason suggested, pushing his glasses up his nose. His anxiety was rising and that would not be helpful. "There's a lot to cover. Is there anyone else in town with symptoms? Fever? Chills? Vomiting or diarrhea?"

"Not that I've heard," Bill said. "But that's one thing we need to discuss. There are a lot of rumors, but nothing's officially been announced. If we need quarantine, we need everyone to know about it, and we need to come up with a list of procedures to follow, numbers to call, symptoms to look for, things like that. For example, am I in danger of taking germs home to my Jane and Samantha? They're both quickened."

"We've got seven kids under the age of five at our house," Lonnie put in. "Including Molly. I need to know if they're in danger. And are Lance and Lily going to be okay?"

Roman spoke up, his voice firm. "If you make a list of rules, Bill, I'll make sure they get distributed to everyone in town, and that they're obeyed. I've got Charlie and Leesa full-time, and I can enlist volunteers as needed."

"Wait a minute," Matt interrupted. "So far the people who have got it have been first responders—Lance and Floyd. I'm concerned about putting more people at risk like Roman and Charlie."

"It's my job, Matt," Roman said with finality.

"But you didn't get sick, Bill. Right? And Tim hasn't."

Jason knew where Matt was going with this and concurred. "Bill, you still don't have any symptoms?"

Bill shook his head. "No, nothing. I've been stressed out, naturally, and haven't had much sleep. But no sign of fever or congestion."

Jason nodded. "I'm not surprised. I looked at your blood sample and didn't find any virus protein in it. My best guess right now is that this virus only affects canis sapiens. It's not unusual for humans to be impervious to dog viruses, and it's possible this one has canine origins. Of course, it's early days. I can't guarantee anything for sure. We should keep all the precautions in place." There was so much to learn, Jason thought, and not nearly enough time.

"Fine. So the best guess we have at the moment is that it isn't dangerous to humans," insisted Matt. "Which means we need to put our humans on the front line in this crisis, not our quickened."

"The entire sheriff's office is quickened," Roman said flatly. "And with Lance down, the responsibility for the town falls to me."

"Hang on," Jason said. "Before we get to who should do what, I'd like to go over the results of my lab tests."

"Yes, please, Jason," Bill agreed, leaning forward on his elbows.

Jason brought up a slide showing the virus. "I confirmed the strong presence of a virus in Wilbur's blood. So I sent a sample to a colleague at the CDC to get a look at the virus with an electron microscope. This is it. I'm calling it CASP-1 for Canis Sapiens Pathogen 1."

CASP-1 had an oblong, figure-eight shaped body. Fine hemagglutinin pili fringed the outside. It most closely resembled pictures he found of the SARS virus, but SARS was round while this definitely had a subtle hourglass shape and a thicker outer wall. It almost looked like a child's rudimentary drawing of a daisy, but it was far more sinister.

He showed side-by-side comparisons of CASP-1 with SARS, the Mexican swine flu, a common human cold virus, and CCV, the canine coronavirus, which was not communicable to humans.

"My CDC contact, Ms Stubben, hasn't seen this virus before. She promised me she'd run it through their database of known pathogens. They keep records of thousands of viruses from all species, including dogs. Still, she said odds were good there wouldn't be a match. Viruses mutate all the time, especially when they migrate to a new species. Chances are this virus hadn't met any canis sapiens before. It's even possible it mutated inside Wilbur. Or if not him, then maybe he picked it from some other quickened."

Tim's head dropped into his hands with a shudder. "Oh my God."

"There's no reason to panic yet," Bill said, patting Tim's back.

But there was every reason to panic, and Jason knew it. What Tim was probably thinking was that if this virus was limited to canis sapiens, there wouldn't be a lot of help forthcoming. And he was right about that.

"That just proves my point!" said Matt. "We need to protect the quickened in town. They shouldn't get anywhere near this thing. We need to be brutal about quarantining anyone who's been exposed."

Jason cleared his throat. "I've been processing Lance's DNA. Once it's mapped, I'll be able to check it against mine to see if any of the genes related to the canis sapiens mutation have been silenced in Lance's sample. That would explain why he can't shift and perhaps tell us if it's permanent. But since I'm still in the midst of trying to identify all the canis sapiens genes, it will take some time." *A lot of time*. Jason didn't say that.

"In the meanwhile, is there anything else we should be doing for these patients?" asked Bill.

"There's not a lot you can do for a virus other than rest, fluids, keeping the fever and inflammation down with aspirin and the like. What we really need is a vaccine. And for that we need antibodies." Tim sat up straight and pushed his hair back, looking hopeful for the first time since Jason had arrived. "Can we get antibodies?"

"What about Wilbur?" Bill suggested.

Jason shook his head. "His blood doesn't show he's developed antibodies. The amount of virus in his blood has grown, not subsided."

"Then where?" Tim asked in an urgent tone. "If the virus isn't dangerous to humans, could we infect one of us, and maybe our bodies would develop antibodies that we can then give to Lance?"

His face was desperate, and Jason felt a stab of sympathy. It was only a few weeks ago that he'd met Tim and baby Molly in the diner. They were so happy. And now Tim was facing losing his husband forever.

Jason suddenly felt cold and his heart beat too fast. He had a rush of longing for Milo, to have him close, touching. But Milo sat in his chair, listening to the discussion with a rapt face, and Jason wasn't about to pull him in like a damn security blanket in front of all these people, no matter how much it might soothe his inner dog.

"I don't think that would work," Jason admitted reluctantly. "If the virus doesn't take hold in humans, then it won't proliferate in the body to the point where antibodies are generated. Unfortunately, we don't know where Wilbur got the virus. Let's say it began as a dog virus he picked it up somewhere out there." Jason waved a hand at the wall. "An ordinary dog might be able to fight off the virus, might develop antibodies. But there's no way of following up on that since Wilbur can't tell us where he was infected."

"Can we infect a dog here in town? A regular dog? And see if he develops antibodies?" Bill suggested.

Jason nodded. "Yes, it's worth a shot. We don't know for sure that the virus is less harmful in ordinary dogs, but it's a possibility. If a dog did develop antibodies, we could transfuse its blood or even create a vaccine for CASP-1. I'll be able to test blood for antibodies in my lab using something called a Western Blot analysis."

"Great! Let's do that!" Lonnie Beaufort said.

"That sounds good to me," said Roman.

Everyone else agreed.

"The down side is, that will take some time," said Jason. "Possibly as long as ten days for the virus to incubate in a dog, for the dog to go through the process of being ill and developing antibodies before we can extract them. And I need to consult with my colleague at the CDC about what all we need to do to the blood before its safe for use. This really isn't my area."

Bill's face was grim. "Jason... we don't have ten days."

"We don't know how much time we have," Jason said reasonably. "We don't know if the virus leads to permanent damage or how long that takes."

"We can't take that chance!" Tim insisted. "I agree with Bill. No way can Lance be this sick for another ten days. He won't make it back. God! We have to try *something*! And it has to be fast."

"There's no other way to get antibodies unless we can find out where the virus originated," said Jason. "Is there any hint at all where Wilbur might have been?"

Everyone looked around at each other in despair.

"What about tracking Wilbur's scent?" Roman suggested. "Charlie's a strong tracker. He might be able to track Wilbur's path back to where he came from. Maybe there are dogs there that have these antibodies."

"What if he traveled for weeks to get here?" Tim asked. "It would take Charlie forever to track the scent on foot."

Bill spoke up suddenly. "Wait a minute." He looked like he'd just remembered something. "When Wilbur came in I did a full-body scan. I noticed he'd been microchipped, which I thought was odd."

"Microchipped?" Lonnie Beaufort repeated with horror.

"I have a microchip," Roman put in.

"Yeah, Roman, but you're first-gen," said Lonnie. "Wilbur was born quickened."

"How old was the microchip?" Jason asked.

"Pretty new, actually. The scar was still red and highly visible."

"Can you get any information off it?"

"Yeah. I'll ask Doris to scan it and look it up in the system." He pulled out his cell phone and made the call.

"Why would he be microchipped?" Tim asked, more to himself than anyone else.

"If he was sick for a while, maybe he got picked up as a dog," suggested Roman.

There was nothing else to say until Doris called back. Jason checked email on his phone in case Elizabeth, his contact at the CDC, had sent an update. She hadn't. He looked again at Milo. Milo was watching him, his eyes serious and worried. Jason itched again to have Milo at his side, to feel the calming effect of his touch. Ridiculous. He turned away and futzed with his phone some more, glowering.

Bill's cell phone went off. He answered it and listened. "Thanks, Doris."

He hung up, his face hopeful. "The registration on the microchip was made just two weeks ago. The address is a shelter called Hold My Paw in Drake, Arizona."

Tim stood up. "That's great! We should go, right? Can we go?"

"We need a plan, Tim," Bill said gently.

"I know but... we should go. Right?" Tim looked at Jason, his eyes pleading for some kind of assurance that this was the right path.

Jason tried to be realistic. "It's only going to be useful if we can locate dogs there that had the same virus as Wilbur, *and* if they have antibodies in their blood. But... yes. It's our best lead. I'd recommend we start other courses of action at the same time, infect a local dog with the virus, if Bill can find a good candidate. The stronger and healthier, the better."

"I'll go with Tim," Matt said. "I can take a week off work. Like I said, I think our humans need to be on the front line with this thing. Lance is sick, and for all we know, Ro already has the bug. Even if he doesn't, I know there's no way I can convince his stubborn ass to stay home."

"I can't just stay home," Roman said firmly. But his hand snuck out to intertwine with Matt's in a silent show of mutual support. They clearly loved each other a great deal, just as Tim was practically vibrating with frantic concern over Lance. What would it be like to have someone like that in a time of crisis? Someone who had your back?

Jason felt a pang of envy, and his gaze drifted to Milo instinctively. Milo was leaning forward, a frown of concentration on his brow as if he was thinking hard.

"Honestly, Matt has a point," Jason said. "We should enlist the humans in town. Maybe they can distribute flyers for the sheriff's office and help transfer anyone with symptoms."

"Yeah," said Lonnie. "I know everyone in the area. I can help Roman coordinate human volunteers."

Roman spoke up. "How will Matt and Tim know which dogs were sick in Arizona if they made these antibodies and aren't sick anymore?"

It was a damn good question. Everyone looked at Jason, and he saw the answer in a dreadful flash. He opened his mouth but hesitated before saying it, running it through his mind one more time to be sure. But there really was no viable alternative.

"I'll have to go. The only way to know for sure is through blood testing. Neither of you have experience at drawing blood, and even if you could, there'd be turnaround time mailing the samples here. If I'm on site, I can check samples there."

"That puts you at risk, Jason," Bill said.

"I can take the same precautions we've—"

Milo stood up abruptly. "No! I want to go. Jason, I will go."

"Milo, *no*," Jason said adamantly, his stomach clenching at the very idea.

"Yes! I know which dogs have this virus. I will save a lot of time. You cannot test all the dogs."

"No. It's too risky. And it's not necessary."

But Tim broke in. "How can you tell which dogs had the virus, Milo?"

Milo blinked at him. "I know. Its smell and... feeling." Milo moved his hands vaguely around his own body. He looked at Jason with an intently

stubborn stare. "Jason, I'm not smart like you. But this is what I can do. Please let me help."

I don't want you near this virus. Please, Milo. For me. That's what Jason wanted to say. What he wanted to do was drop this whole thing, load Milo in a plane, and take him somewhere far away where nothing could hurt him. But he could hardly say that, admit that, in front of Bill and Tim and the others when their loved ones were in danger. And he couldn't quite find it in himself to abandon the town either. They needed him and that was... good. As horrifying as this virus was, Jason had a deep sense of the quickened community for the first time in his life, one that was personal, one that included him. It was something he couldn't turn his back on. And how could he deny Milo that same feeling of being useful?

"Please," Milo pleaded, his big eyes soft and irresistible.

"You've been kept away from anyone who has this sickness. How do you know you can detect it? This isn't like a headache," Jason asked, his voice gruff.

"I want to try. Can I see Lance? And Wilbur? Please?"

Jason didn't like it. At all. But he held out hope that Milo would decide he couldn't detect the virus after all. It was a microbe, for God's sake. How could he detect that?

In the end, they all trooped over to the clinic. Tim and Matt put on masks, just in case, but Jason insisted on putting as much protective gear on himself and Milo as they could find in Bill's storage room, and Bill did the same. Roman and Lonnie stayed outside the clinic on the sidewalk while Bill, Tim, Matt, Jason, and Milo went into the isolation room.

It was heartbreaking. The building has obviously once been a purely animal vet clinic. The isolation room had six built-in cages along the wall, a lower row and an upper row. Four of the cages were fixed up with bedding and were occupied. All four patients were in their dog forms and had IV lines taped securely to shaved forelimbs. Jason had never seen Floyd in his canine form before. He had short gray-blue hair and the square head of a pit bull. He raised gold eyes to watch them but didn't try to move his head. Lily, a delicate-looking black collie, was curled up asleep. Lance lay on his side stretched out, eyes closed, tongue out and panting. He looked the sickest. Wilbur was large, rangy, and shaggy like an Irish wolfhound. He

rose up onto his front paws when they entered, but lay down again after just a minute.

Jason gripped Milo's arm, keeping him by the door. Tim went right to Lance and reached through the bars to stroke him, murmuring words Jason's ears could hear but his brain thought best not to acknowledge.

"Let me," Milo said softly.

Against everything inside him, Jason let Milo go.

Milo went to Wilbur first, then each of the others. He stared at them through their cages and reached out a gloved hand to touch them lightly in one place or another. Jason gritted his teeth. Bleach. Good Lord, he wanted so much damn bleach.

But Milo's protective coverings stayed in place and he didn't try to look in the patient's mouths or do anything else that involved fluids. Thank God.

When he was done, he nodded at the others. "I can smell it. Can you smell it?"

All Jason smelled was sickness in general, a dry-soul tang that was unpleasant and worrying. "Let's talk outside," he suggested, anxious to get Milo out of danger.

Tim stayed behind with Lance, but the rest of them left the room. Jason insisted on seeing the protective coverings binned and a bleach sanitizer liberally applied before anything else. But finally they were back out on the pavement outside the clinic with Roman and Lonnie.

"I know this sickness now," Milo said confidently. "I will know if a dog has it."

"Even if the dog has recovered?" Matt asked. He put his arm around Roman's waist and hugged him tight, clearly shaken by what he'd seen in the clinic.

"Yes, then too," said Milo. "Sick smells last a long time."

"But how do you know? What does it smell like?" Jason asked.

Milo looked at him calmly. "Jason, I know."

Jason huffed but didn't argue. He supposed even microbes might have an overall effect in the body that was unique and might be detectable by scent. If any dog or quickened on earth could actually sense something like that, it would be Milo.

"So we have a plan," Matt said. "Tim, myself, Jason, and Milo will go to this clinic in Arizona. Milo will identify a dog that's recovered from the virus, assuming there is one. Jason will confirm the dog's blood has antibodies, and we'll get a supply of blood back here to administer to the patients ASAP. Then Jason can make a vaccine for the rest of the town. Does that about sum it up?"

Jason scoffed. "Not really, no. I must emphasize again that we know approximately one drop in the uncharted ocean that is this virus. We don't know for certain that Wilbur caught it from a dog. Even if he did, we don't know if that dog was at this shelter in Arizona. Or the dog could be long gone by now, adopted out or whatever. Then there's the issue of whether the dog did develop antibodies, and if they did, if I'll be able to find them. I'm not a virologist. And if I do find them, we don't know for certain if our patients will respond to those foreign antibodies or not. Also, you can't just stick any sort of blood at all into a person. There are blood types and we've got multiple species going on here, just to name a few of the complications."

Matt gave Jason a flat, hard stare. Roman did too. Jason was suddenly aware that both of them were alpha males not unfamiliar with violence, and he, himself, was a geek. His inner dog ducked its head and put its tail between its legs.

Jason took off his glasses casually and polished them on a sleeve. "However," he went on in a milder tone. "As long as we all understand those limitations. What you said is, um, the plan."

"Good," Matt snapped. "Then let's get cracking. It's probably faster to drive. I have a Wrangler that would fit us all. Dr. Kunik, I'm assuming you'll need to get your lab gear to take along?"

"Yes. And Milo and I need to pack."

Milo came up to Jason and put his warm hand in Jason's palm. He seemed more relaxed and happier now that he knew he was going with them. Jason wished he could feel the same, but all he felt was dread. He

wished he could think of some excuse to keep Milo in Mad Creek. But he didn't have the right to make that decision for Milo or for the town. Besides, Mad Creek wasn't exactly safe either.

"Jason will fix it. He's very smart. You'll see," Milo told the others confidently.

Jason hoped to God that was true.

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Chapter 13: There are no Virgins in Foxholes

The team pulled out of Mad Creek at 2 p.m. that afternoon. It was a ten hour drive, and Tim and Matt wanted to get there tonight so they could visit the shelter first thing in the morning.

Milo and Jason sat in the back of Matt's Jeep Wrangler while Tim rode shotgun. Soon Milo fell asleep against Jason's chest.

Jason was the one who'd gotten two hours sleep the night before, but he couldn't close his eyes. He watched the landscape go by. He watched Milo.

Last night, as Milo had slept in his bed, and Jason had worked through the night, he'd had the thought that Milo would need to sleep in the guest room from now on. The kiss had shattered the illusion that Milo was too innocent or Jason himself too in control for bed-sharing to be a problem. No. It was far too easy to see how waking up pressed to Milo could lead to temptations that would be too difficult to resist, on both their parts. The way Milo had responded to that kiss....

Jason had caught Milo looking at him a few times today with a heated, befuddled look in his eyes. He'd definitely stirred some things up there. Holy hell.

But the irony was, sitting in that car, Jason couldn't imagine anything he wanted more than to be able to be with Milo as they had been—platonic, touching, bed-sharing and all—with nothing more dangerous or upsetting in their lives than Jason's slow research on the quickened. It was a luxury he'd taken for granted, the simple ease of knowing Milo was safe, that they both were safe and together.

What if Milo caught the virus in Arizona? And what if Jason couldn't "fix it"? What if he failed? People were putting so much faith in him. Jason had emphasized the risks, damn it. He hadn't promised anything. Even so, all Tim and Bill and Matt and the whole town wanted to hear was that Jason could magically produce a vaccine out of his ass to save them all. What if he couldn't?

What if it wasn't Lance Beaufort lying in that cage at the clinic, but Milo? And what if Jason couldn't make him well?

He slipped his phone from his pocket, careful not to disturb Milo, and made another call to Elizabeth at the CDC. He'd lied to her about the particulars, talked about it as purely a dog virus. Thankfully, she was an animal lover, so she was still invested.

"We're on our way to find some dogs that had the virus and recovered. Can you walk me through the procedure for looking for blood antibodies one more time?"

* * *

They drove into Drake, Arizona just after midnight. Milo was tired of being in the car, and he was restless in the backseat—shifting this way and that, leaning over the center console, and in general testing the limits of his seat belt in every direction. Jason was exhausted. He hadn't been able to do more than lightly doze in the car, and he seriously needed sleep.

He'd found a motel using his phone and booked them two rooms—both with two queen beds. Matt and Tim would have to deal with rooming together. Jason wasn't letting Milo out of his sight.

"There might be someone at the clinic right now," Tim argued, not for the first time. "Some kind of night shift."

"Can you drop Milo and me at the motel?" Jason suggested. He doubted anyone at the shelter would let strangers see the dogs in the middle of the night, even if someone was on duty. And right then, he needed sleep and Milo needed to get out of the car.

"Yeah," said Matt, who was driving. "We'll drop you off, and Tim and I will go check it out. Worst case, we'll know exactly where the shelter is in the morning."

At the motel, Milo ran around the room and the tiny bathroom, looking at everything. He was like a Jack-in-the-box that had finally been sprung. All Jason wanted was a hot shower and bed, in that order. He felt sweaty and gross from the long ride. He turned on the TV and found an old sitcom.

"I'm going to take a shower," Jason told Milo. "You can watch TV."

"Okay," said Milo, bouncing on his toes.

Jason went into the bathroom and shut the door. The door was old, and the lock didn't work. He sighed, hoping for the best, disrobed, and got into the shower. The warm spray felt heavenly. He wasn't all that surprised when the shower curtain moved and he felt Milo get into the shower behind him.

Jason placed his palms on the tile wall below the showerhead and tried to breathe. He refused to look. "Milo, you can't take a shower at the same time as me. You need to wait your turn."

"But I want to be with you, Jason. If I wait, you won't be here."

Jason had to admit, Milo's logic was unassailable. And then a very wet, very naked Milo pressed up against Jason's back, arms clasping around his waist. Jason hissed in a breath, unable to move. His heart pounded in his throat as though he'd swallowed a bullfrog. He should force Milo off *immediately*, make him leave *in no uncertain terms*. But his voice refused to work and his body was not moving.

Oh God.

He could feel every muscle in Milo's wiry chest and stomach. His hip bones made parentheses on either side of Jason's ass. He felt the softness of Milo's groin, the springy hair there. And he felt that softness firm up and grow as Milo ran his nose along Jason's shoulders. "You are so strong, Jason. I love that."

Milo's hands ran over the bare muscles on Jason's arms. "I love kissing you," Milo murmured. "Not like. *Love*. I thought about it and thought about it and thought about that time you kissed me. I love it an eight! Kiss me again, Jason."

"Milo," Jason warned, but his voice was a whisper.

Milo's erection grew rock hard in seconds, or so it seemed. It was larger than Jason would have anticipated, resting against one cheek of his ass, and it was a million miles away from innocent. Jason looked down at himself. His body was in the same state. Arousal coursed through him in a chemical rush so strong, he could believe it might alter a person's very DNA. *So much want*. He groaned and panted, trying to figure out his next move, while Milo peppered his back with kisses and started moving his hands on Jason's chest and stomach in dangerous ways.

Jason shouldn't do this. He couldn't promise Milo they would be mates for life. *How could they? Seriously? They had nothing in common!* Yet his emotions were so tied up in Milo. Jason had come to care for him far too much; he'd gotten so attached. And he felt protective and scared about the virus, and Milo was so appealing to him, physically. If Jason was honest, he'd wanted to kiss Milo a hundred times while they were in the car. He was just....

A growl of frustration roared in his throat. As if it was just *done* with his mental dithering, his inner dog spirit took the wheel and his body turned of its own accord. He grabbed Milo and pressed him back against the tile wall. Milo laughed, bright and happy, for the few seconds it took for Jason to press full up against him and stop the laugh by covering Milo's mouth with his own.

Heaven. It felt like heaven. Like awakening from a nightmare to find you were safe and sound. Like pulling into port after an endless journey. Like plugging into a battery source when you are about to run dry. *Like Milo*.

Milo was as enthusiastic as only he could be. A steady stream of pleasure sounds came from the back of his throat, driving Jason wild. He brought up one leg to hook high on Jason's hip so he could press closer. And when Jason responded by clasping Milo's pert little ass in both hands and *grinding*, Milo let out a keen and tried to lift the other leg as well, nearly sending them both sprawling in the slick tub.

Jason grabbed at the shower curtain, pulling it off a few hooks. When he turned back, he found Milo had spun around so his front was against the tile wall and that beautiful, golden-skinned back and high plump ass was facing the stream of water.

Milo looked over his shoulder, his eyes dark and his mouth open, looking completely lost in desire. "Please," he said.

Jason shuddered, so gut-punched by the sight that for a moment he couldn't do anything.

Mate, *mate*, *mate*, his dog brain chanted, even while his higher functioning neural pathways voted for making a mature decision and getting Milo in a bed where they were unlikely to kill themselves on slick porcelain. Jason shut off the water.

"Jason?" Milo was not happy.

"Shhh." Jason pulled him around and kissed him deeply to show that he wasn't saying *no*. Milo eagerly went back to kissing full frontal, his arms tightening around Jason's neck.

Jason pulled back. "Let's dry off and go to bed. It's more comfortable there."

Milo hesitated, his eyes searching Jason's face.

"We can kiss and... and fool around in bed. It's better than the shower."

"Okay," Milo agreed.

Milo started giggling as Jason rubbed him down with a towel. He was so ticklish. They made their way to the bed, half wrestling, half snogging, and Jason stripped off the cheap coverlet with a yank.

"*Jason*," Milo said, as if just uttering the name was sexy. He pulled Jason down onto the bed and onto him.

Jason decided he was going to enjoy this moment, the feeling of holding, touching Milo, and he wasn't going to worry about anything. Life was short, and it might well be shorter still in the immediate future. With so much at stake, why shouldn't he take what pleasure and love he could find and give the same to Milo?

Obviously, Milo had never had sex before, at least not as a human. And it had been a good five years since Jason had indulged. Yet nothing could have felt more natural. Milo was a glorious kisser, all heat and intensity, as if nothing else could possibly matter. Any time Jason tried to pull back for a moment, perhaps to kiss somewhere else, Milo's mouth followed him with desperation. He tasted good too, fresh as sunshine and air, as if he wasn't made up of earthbound molecules at all. Most importantly, he felt so good. Touching Milo had always felt good, even when it was a brush of a shoulder or thigh. But this full-body, skin-to-skin contact was like a triple shot of endorphins. Glorious warmth radiated out of Milo as if he had a full store of bliss and Jason was being bathed in it.

It was lovely just to kiss and hold each other tight. They rolled on the bed, first Jason on top and then Milo. They rutted against stomachs and hip bones, or cock to cock, hands clutching bare skin. But after a while, the

sounds Milo made grew needier, and Jason decided reaching climax was a desirable end for both of them—and soon.

He rolled Milo onto his back and got his hand between them, raising up on one elbow and breaking the kiss. Milo lifted his head, trying to follow, but Jason turned his face away. "I want to look at your eyes."

He wrapped his hand around both of their lengths, and Milo's head fell back on the bed with a soft thud.

"Jason," he groaned, looking up into Jason's eyes.

"I'm here."

He would have liked to go slow, but they'd been making out for a good while and they were both too close to the edge. Add the new and fantastic feeling of Milo's hot, rigid shaft held tight against his own, and Jason knew he'd be counting the strokes in single digits.

Milo made a frantic noise and pushed his hips up into Jason's hand. He was so stunning like this, so purely *what he was* with no artifice and no hiding. Milo's face was full of love and Jason's heart was squeezed like a sponge. All the feelings he'd been storing up inside, denying, poured out like water overspilling a dam.

Beautiful creature. My Milo.

Milo gasped, arched rigid, and came. Heat splashed over Jason's hand, and the added humidity slicked his palm just so. Pleasure jolted into an almost painful peak. Something... there was something there that was more than sex. Sex alone did not feel like this, did not ache like this, did not make his eyes hot and his insides turn to surrendered jelly. Jason had the wits left, barely, to worry about what it all meant.

He lay on top of Milo, both of them sticky with perspiration and come, and contemplated it. Milo pushed lightly at him, reminding him he was imitating a sack of cement, and Jason rolled to the side.

Milo bounded up out of bed and onto his toes. "That was *great*!"

Jason couldn't contain his grin. "Yes. It was."

"Are we mates now? Or...? No?" Milo's smile froze as if he regretted the question and didn't want to hear Jason's answer.

Jason, in full avoidance mode, got up and wet a washcloth with warm water in the bathroom. He came back and cleaned Milo's stomach and groin. Even in this state, limp but still slightly plump, tired and happy, Milo's uncircumcised cock made butterflies swarm in Jason's stomach. Milo watched him.

"There's so much going on right now," Jason said with a tired sigh. "Let's just get through this trip, and hopefully, *I pray*, through the process of making a vaccine. When we get home and things are... better... then we'll talk about it. Okay?"

"Okay," said Milo, still watching him carefully. But it was just a word Milo had learned. Jason knew it wasn't really "all right" at all.

He leaned forward and kissed Milo chastely. He rested his forehead against Milo's for a moment. Part of him regretted what they'd just done. It made things so complicated. But mostly, he couldn't deny the pull he felt to Milo, even now. He would have to work through this entire situation with logic and... and pros and cons lists. Maybe even a mind map diagram. As soon as he had the time.

For now, they just needed to survive.

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Chapter 14: An Empty Nest

They were in the Wrangler on the way to the shelter by 7:30 the next morning. Milo had somehow snuck the orange and pink shirt he loved into his bag, and he looked a bit like a Popsicle in it. A delicious-looking sherbert Popsicle. He sat close to Jason, but his gaze was fixed on the desert scenery outside the window.

Tim reported on their visit the night before. "It was dark and there was no one there. We didn't even hear any dogs." He was obviously worried.

"They'll be there this morning," Matt said confidently. But he was tense too.

In the backseat, Milo leaned against Jason's shoulder and stared out the window. Jason clutched a backpack with all the protective gear he'd brought from Bill's clinic. It seemed so inadequate now. What they really needed was full hazmat suits. But it would have to do. What would the people at the shelter think of Milo going in there dressed like he was attending a zombie apocalypse party? Would they even let them inside?

It turned out, that wasn't the problem.

The shelter was set off a rural road in a desert landscape. A sign with "Hold My Paw, an animal refuge" was at the end of the driveway. It looked hand-painted and was embellished with a sketch of a happy-looking dog. The main building was a pre-fab, single-story ranch that was run-down and bleached a pale peach color from the sun. Behind it was a large play yard surrounded by a chain-link fence, and a cement block structure that probably contained kennels. There were assorted toys and ramps and shade shelters in the play area. But there were no dogs. A lone Jeep was parked in front of the building.

Matt parked next to it. They looked at each other worriedly after they got out of the car. "Should we all go in?" Matt asked Jason.

Jason hesitated, then nodded. He doubted they'd run into dogs in the lobby, not from the look of the place. And he wanted to keep Milo with

him. Silently, they all headed for the front door.

The lobby had fake-wood paneling and new linoleum in a muddled gray. Half-dozen blue plastic chairs were along one wall. There was a counter with a sliding glass window and a door that led to the back. There was no one around.

Jason spotted a bell on the counter and punched it. It produced a hollow ding. Almost at once, a guy pushed through the door from the back.

He was not what Jason expected. He looked like a biker. He was wearing a ragged white T-shirt that was missing its sleeves, old Levis, and a studded black leather belt and boots. His arms were covered in tattoos. He had brown hair cut short and a full, bushy beard. His chocolate brown eyes sported long dark lashes. His ears wore multiple pierced earrings, and he had a silver loop in the corner of his lower lip. He also looked pissed as hell.

"Yeah, we're closed. In case it wasn't obvious that this is a huge fucking disaster area."

Milo seemed oblivious to the guy's foul temper. He went up to him immediately, looking at his skin with fascination and a big smile. He ran a finger up the man's bulging forearm.

"Oooh! Pretty!" Milo said.

Jason bit back a groan. "Milo."

Milo ignored him. He and the bearded man stared at each other. The bearded man looked confused and taken aback, but Milo's smile was steady and bright. "I like these pictures," Milo told him. He reached a finger out to touch part of a red rose that stuck above the neck of the man's T-shirt. "I like color a lot. I'm Milo."

The man blinked. "Um... hi. Hi, Milo." The vitriol melted, leaving the man looking merely frustrated and a little curious.

"You need a hug," Milo said.

He started to put his arms around the man, but Jason, worried about lingering germs, not to mention the inadvisability of hugging large strangers with tattoos, stepped forward and put his arm around Milo's shoulder.

"Let's, um, let's just... stand over here. Okay, Milo?"

Milo gave Jason a look, as if asking what he'd done wrong, but he let himself be pulled away.

Matt stepped closer to the man, puffing up a bit. "Hi, I'm Matt Barclay. This is Tim, Jason, and Milo. We found a sick dog and this shelter was listed on his microchip. We'd like to ask you some questions, if that's all right."

The man perked up, his face intent. "Yeah? Which dog was it? What'd he look like? You said 'he'—it was a male dog?"

"That's right," Tim put in anxiously. "He's a big dog, gray hair, shaggy, like a wolfhound. He was really sick when we found him. We need to know if any other dogs here are sick. It's incredibly important."

Matt put a hand on Tim's shoulder as if to reassure him.

"That sounds like Ferg," the guy said. "Where is he? Did you bring him with you? Can I get him back?"

Tim shook his head impatiently. "No. That's not.... He's being well taken care of at a clinic. What we need is to know if other dogs are sick." Tim glanced at Jason, asking for help.

"Right. I'm Dr. Kunik. And you are....?"

"Rav. Rav Miller. I founded the shelter. It's pretty much me and a few volunteers." Rav held out his hand to Jason for a shake, apparently deciding these intruders were worth dealing with after all.

Jason hesitated. If Rav had contact with infected dogs, he might have the virus on his person. But the risk of contagion was probably a small one, and they needed this man's cooperation. Jason shook Rav's hand.

"The dog you call Ferg we know as Wilbur," Jason said. "We're trying to learn more about the virus he's carrying. It's unusual and potentially dangerous. We were hoping to get a look at other dogs that might have been housed with Wilbur. As Tim said, it's extremely important."

Rav pushed both hands through his short hair in a gesture of frustration. "Great. Now there's a dangerous virus. This week just keeps getting better and better."

"Where *are* the dogs?" Matt asked.

"There are no dogs here," Milo said, confirming what Jason had sensed. Hell, it didn't take dog instincts to figure it out. There hadn't been a whisper of a bark or any other noise in the building since they'd arrived.

Rav gave Milo another curious look. Then he checked Milo out, head to toe, not even trying to be subtle. Milo smiled at him.

Jason wanted to growl, but he suppressed it. "The dogs, Mr. Miller?"

Rav glowered at him. "I heard you the first time, *Doctor*. He's right." He tilted his head at Milo. "They're not here. Someone let all my dogs out last Sunday night. I had forty-two rescues here, and, yeah, every single fucking one of them is gone." His voice cracked. He was clearly distraught about it, and Jason felt guilty for disliking the man.

Matt went into cop mode. "I'm sorry to hear that. What exactly went down?"

Rav shook his head. "I'm here sixteen hours a day, but my apartment is in town. Sometimes I have volunteers who'll take the night shift, but most of the time, I just don't have the staff. A week ago Wednesday, I made sure everyone had food and water and was in their cages and I took off about ten p.m. When I got back at six on Thursday morning, they were gone. The clinic was locked, but someone broke in through a window on the side of the building. Or maybe a couple of people, I don't know. But they used the keys in my office and opened up all the cages, let the dogs out." He crossed his arms on his chest, causing his large biceps to bulge. It was hostile body language, but his eyes were grief-stricken. "Fuck. Some of my dogs wouldn't have left, even if they'd been let out of their cages. They would have hung out and waited for me. So who ever did it, they must have driven them off with cars or even guns.... Fuck. Fucking assholes."

"Did anyone hear shooting?" Matt asked.

"No. But this place is so goddamn isolated. That's the only reason the town hasn't shut me down, because me and the dogs are too far out to bother anyone. Double-edged sword, right?" He took a shaky breath. "I didn't find any blood or anything, so I don't think they actually shot any of my dogs. Thank God."

"So this happened, what, about ten days ago?" Tim looked at Matt and Jason. "Wilbur showed up five days ago, so he must have been let out that

night with the other dogs, and he headed right for Mad Creek."

"Mad Creek?" Rav asked. "Is that in Arizona?"

"That's in California!" Milo said helpfully.

Jason squeezed his arm. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't entirely trust Rav, even though he seemed like an animal person. Or maybe he just didn't like the way Rav looked at Milo, like he was doing again right then. His eyes held a curious, examining look and also a little heat. There was no doubt he found Milo attractive. Jason had to fight his instinct not to pull Milo closer.

Instead, Jason cleared his throat. "Wilbur—Ferg—must have been sick when he was here. Were you aware of it?"

"Of course I was!" Rav glared at Jason, which was a big improvement over him ogling Milo. "That's why I got him. I had a call from the vet in Sedona. Someone found Ferg and took him to the vet. He was sick, but the vet couldn't hold him indefinitely, and he didn't have any tags. So they called me to see if I could take him. I picked him up along with some meds and instructions. He was only here about a week before the break-in." Rav swallowed. "Ferg was a good dog. Gentle. The vet didn't think it was anything terminal, but he wasn't sure what it was."

Jason did the calculation in his head. Wilbur had been sick for almost three weeks. And he hadn't developed any antibodies to the virus yet. That wasn't a good sign. And that was the period they knew about. There was no telling how long Wilbur had been sick before someone found him and took him to the vet. Why wasn't his body able to fight off the virus? Did it have something to do with Wilbur being quickened?

"When he was here, did any of the other dogs come down with what he had?" Jason asked. "I assume you don't have the facilities for isolation."

Rav's face reddened. "He was in his own cage. That's the best I could manage. Like I said, I usually have between forty and fifty dogs here at any given time. And none them have any other place to go."

"Look, we're not here to blame you for anything," Matt put in. "We just need to know if any of the other dogs were sick."

Rav shook his head, calming a little. "Maybe. Yeah. I don't know. Nothing like what Ferg had, but it seemed like there was something going

around. A couple of the dogs weren't as active as usual. Looser stools. Off their food. Things like that. Nothing bad enough for me to call the vet, but I was keeping an eye on the situation."

"What difference does it make?" Tim asked impatiently. "Whether the dogs were sick or not, they're gone now."

"Hey, maybe we can find them," Matt told Tim, with a reassuring rub on the shoulder. He turned back to Rav. "Who would have let the dogs out, Mr. Miller? Do you have any idea why someone would do that?"

Rav scratched his chin. "I, um... shit. There're a lot of people who don't like me. I've busted up a number of puppy mills, and there are local breeders I ride pretty hard. But it was probably related to a dog fighting ring in the next county I helped take down. I went undercover and everything. So yeah, I have enemies. The cops don't seem all that concerned about finding out who did it. I'm just praying, whoever it was, they didn't take out their hatred for me on the dogs, that they didn't...." He sighed, the words too unbearable to utter. His fists clenched at his side. "Like I said, I didn't find any blood or signs the dogs were harmed. The cops didn't either. So there's that at least."

"You have no idea where to find them?" Tim asked.

"You don't think I fucking looked? I spent the last six days driving the roads around here and calling out names. Nothing. I put out notices on all our social media, and my followers are on the lookout too. But no one's seen 'em."

At this news, the strength seemed to go out of Tim. He stumbled to the wall and sank down into one of the plastic chairs, his head in his hands and his face reddening with suppressed tears. Milo pulled away from Jason to go sit next to Tim and put an arm around his shoulder. He nuzzled Tim's shoulder with his nose, offering comfort.

Rav watching them, frowning. "Who the hell are you people, really? Why is Ferg so important to you? Because you're starting to freak me out."

Matt ignored him, addressing Jason instead. "I'm going to look around, see if I can find out anything useful about the break-in and the perps. Can you call the vet in Sedona? See if there's any point in following up over there?"

Jason nodded. "I'll call them."

Matt looked at Tim and Milo. "Tim? I swear, we're going to find what we need. Don't worry."

His voice was firm, in charge. Honestly, it did make Jason feel better even though logically he knew Matt could guarantee no such thing. Tim nodded, not looking up. He was holding Milo's left hand now. Milo's right arm was around Tim's shoulder in a hug. Milo had his inscrutable expression on, his worried eyes moving between Jason and Rav.

"Come on," Matt told Rav. "Show me where the perps got in." Jason stepped out the front door to make the call.

* * *

They left the shelter an hour later without having learned anything helpful. Jason's call to the vet's office in Sedona wasn't encouraging. They'd thought Wilbur—aka Ferg—had Parvo, a nasty dog virus. So they'd put him in an isolated room. Their tests had come up negative for Parvo and all other common dog viruses. When Wilbur hadn't gotten better within a few days, they'd called Rav. As far as they knew, no other animal or human had gotten sick from Wilbur while he was there.

This left the dogs at the Hold My Paw shelter, the forty-one dogs that were now missing. Matt walked through it all with Rav, and looked over the inside and outside of the building, but he didn't find anything that indicated what had happened to the dogs. The shelter sat in the middle of a flat, open area of desert. The dogs could have taken off in any direction.

As they were getting in the car, Rav followed them out. He called Milo aside and said something to him, their heads huddled together. Jason was about to intervene when Milo left Rav and came bounding toward the car.

"What did he say to you?" Jason asked, as they got buckled into the backseat.

"Rav asked me what my last name was."

Jason glared out the window at Rav as Matt pulled out. "What did you say?"

"I said I was just Milo. He asked me for a phone number. I said I didn't have one of those either!" Milo happily waved buh-bye at Rav through the back window.

Jason gritted his teeth. "Then what did he say?" He hoped Rav thought Milo was blowing him off.

"He said I could call him because he has a phone number. Look!" Milo took a business card for Hold My Paw out of his pocket and showed it to Jason proudly like it was the Queen's own calling card.

Jason wanted to snatch it and rip it up. He refrained. Milo didn't understand what Rav wanted, but Jason sure did.

Well, why wouldn't he? Milo was a very attractive young man. And he had that indefinable something, that lightness of spirit, that golden *thing*. Of course Rav found Milo special enough to want to see him again, even after only meeting him briefly. There would be a lot of others who were attracted to Milo too. Hell, maybe Milo should start a fan club.

"Maybe Rav would like to be my mate," Milo said. He blinked innocently at Jason.

Jason gaped at him. Oooh! Oh, the little shit! So he did know what Ray wanted after all.

"I hardly think that would be an ideal match," Jason snarled. He glowered out the window.

His self-absorbed jealousy was put in its place, however, when he heard Tim's soft and trembling voice from the front seat.

"He's not responding to you at all? Did you mention Molly?" Tim was on the phone, probably with Bill McGurver. There were tears in his voice. "Oh God. No, we haven't found anything yet."

Milo put his face in his hands and trembled, clearly overwhelmed by the sad emotion that suddenly pervaded the car. Jason put his arm around him and decided he needed to forget about Rav Miller and keep his head in the game. There were worse things than someone ogling Milo. Far worse.

Like losing him entirely, the way Tim is losing Lance.

Tim was on the phone all the way back to the hotel, so the rest of them didn't talk, just listened to the conversation and tried to pretend they weren't

hearing Tim's heart shatter.

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Chapter 15: The Free and the Brave

At the motel, they all piled into Tim and Matt's room. They opened the connecting door to Jason and Milo's room to make it less claustrophobic. Matt went to the lobby to grab some coffees, and Milo went to help him carry them while Jason set up his laptop. A few minutes later, they were sitting on uncomfortably hard chairs in a circle looking at one another. Milo didn't like his chair, so he sat on the carpet instead and leaned up against the wall by the connecting door. Jason wondered briefly if Milo was distancing himself. Was he upset about what they'd done the night before? The sex? Was he honestly interested in Rav? But Milo's face was placid and Jason drew his attention back to where it belonged.

"Okay," Matt began, his voice tight. "So. We don't know where Wilbur was before he got picked up and taken to the vet in Sedona. And it doesn't sound like there are any leads there, at the vet's. We also have no idea if he ran into other dogs or humans between Arizona and Mad Creek."

"So Hold My Paws is all we have," Tim agreed firmly. He was back in fighting mode, which was good, but Jason could hear the strain in his voice.

"Yup. What about testing Rav for antibodies?" Matt asked Jason.

"I didn't see any sign of the virus in Bill's blood, but he was just one sample. It's possible humans get the virus but are asymptomatic, so yes. I should test Rav. Tim too, for that matter, but Rav was exposed weeks ago, so if anything was going to develop in him, it would have happened by now."

"Good," Tim said. "But what about the dogs? There are forty-one dogs missing if you don't count Wilbur. We should be able to find at least a few of them."

"Find one, find all. They are together," put in Milo from his spot on the floor.

Tim and Matt looked at Milo and then at Jason, as if for confirmation about this doggie insight. Jason shrugged. He was so far removed from his inner canine, he was clueless about how real dogs thought.

"Why do you think they're together, Milo?" he asked.

"The shelter was a good place. I feel it." Milo tapped his chest. "The dogs had no better place to live. Rav said they were scared away. They will hide together and come back when it is safe."

"So... they'll just show back up at the shelter?" Tim asked.

"Yes. But I don't know when." Milo shrugged apologetically.

"How far do you think they would have gone?"

"As far as they needed to," Milo said helpfully.

"If Charlie were here, he could track them. They're probably no more than a few hours away. Aren't there canyons near here?" Matt asked.

"And hills and rock formations," said Tim. "You can see a row of orange hills from the shelter."

There was a weighted silence. Matt and Tim exchanged a heavy look. Jason knew what they were thinking as if they were screaming it. In this situation, it was a disadvantage that they hadn't brought more quickened along, someone like Charlie. They probably were thinking either Jason or Milo should shift and track the escaped dogs. But Jason had a serious problem with that idea.

"We can't risk you, Jason," Matt said. "You're the only one in Mad Creek who can run those blood tests and find the antibodies."

"Well, that's swell of you, Barclay, but as it happens, I don't shift anyway," Jason said testily. "And no, absolutely not, we are not sending Milo." His temper flared up, and he could feel a deep itch inside. His dog was pissed at the very idea.

"That's up to Milo," Tim said firmly. "We don't have many options."

"No! If he goes after them as a dog, he won't be able to wear any protective gear whatsoever. And chances are good that some of those dogs have the virus."

"But once you have the antibodies—" Tim began.

"We don't know that it'll work!" Jason spat out. "What part of 'I'm not a virologist' did you not understand? I told you the chances of me producing a successful vaccine are modest at best!"

"Jason—" Matt began.

"No! This is absurd! We don't even know for certain these dogs developed antibodies. It's all pure hypothesis! We're not risking Milo's life on a theory!"

Tim was glaring at him, his jaw set stubbornly. "Do you think I *want* to ask Milo to do this? But if we don't, we'll risk losing Lance and Lily and the entire town! If the dogs didn't even get the virus, then Milo won't be at risk."

"Yes, but we don't know that!" said Jason.

"We need to find them so we can test them and know for sure. That's the point!" argued Tim.

"Guys!" Matt yelled.

They both looked at Matt. He nodded toward the adjoining room. "Milo is gone."

"What?" Jason sprang out of his chair and ran into their room. He checked the bathroom and even the closet. Milo wasn't there.

He opened the door and ran into the parking lot, looked around frantically. Tim and Matt joined him. "Why didn't you say something?" Jason accused Matt angrily.

"I didn't see him go. I just noticed he was gone. I tried to interrupt."

"He can't have been gone long! A few minutes at most!" Jason looked around again. The motel had separate buildings built in a three-sided square around a parking lot. It was difficult to get a far view of anything. "Well, let's look for him!"

"Right." Matt pointed. "Jason, go west. Tim, north. I'll take the east side."

Jason ran to the buildings on the west side. He ran around the back where the burnt brick of the buildings met the orange dirt of the desert. The rear of the property was undeveloped and dry. In the distance was the highway. There was no sign of Milo.

He headed north and around the corner of the property. Tim was walking toward him, holding something. Jason stifled a cry. It was Milo's clothes.

Tim held them out as Jason approached, his face troubled. "Jason, I'm sorry. I didn't intend to make Milo feel like he *had* to go. But I do think it was his choice."

Jason couldn't speak. He took the clothes, that crazy orange and pink shirt and a pair of tan shorts, and held them to his chest.

He swallowed down emotion, his eyes scanning the area. "He wasn't gone that long. He has to be close by."

"He must be able to shift really fast," Tim said.

"Yes." Jason thought he probably could. It hadn't been that long ago since Milo was a dog all the time. And now what? They could take the car and look for him, but if he'd taken off across open land....

Of course he did. You know exactly where he's going.

"He'll head to the shelter first," Jason said. "He's got to pick up the scent there. Let's go."

* * *

Jason scanned the landscape as they drove back to Hold My Paw, but he didn't see a trace of any dog, much less Milo. When Matt pulled in at the shelter, both Tim and Jason were out of the car before he'd put it in park. Ray came out to meet them.

"Have you seen Milo?" Jason asked, before he realized his mistake.

"Milo?" Rav looked confused. "No. Was he coming back here?"

Damn it. Jason was an idiot and far too emotional to do a damn bit of good.

Matt tried to cover. "We saw a dog—a tan labradoodle, and Milo was trying to, uh, catch it. We thought it was heading this way. Have you seen a dog like that this morning?"

Rav raised his eyebrows and rubbed his beard. "Yeah, I did, actually. Just about ten minutes ago. He was sniffing around outside. I tried to get him to come to me, but he took off. Seemed intent on whatever he was smelling."

"Which way did he go?" Jason demanded.

Rav pointed out across the desert toward some low hills. They were made of the orange rock that seemed endemic to this area. "That way. I thought about going after him, but he looked like he was okay. I figured he belonged to some campers. Hikers camp out in those canyons all the time."

Matt, Tim, and Jason looked at each other, unable to say what they were thinking with Rav there.

"Why are you after the labradoodle? Does he belong to you?" Rav sounded suspicious. "Does this have something to do with the virus you were talking about? This would go a lot better if you just tell me what the fuck is going on."

Matt said something calming and Rav said something sharp back and then Tim, Matt, and Rav were arguing. But Jason wasn't paying attention. He walked a dozen paces in the direction Rav had pointed and shaded his eyes, scanning the landscape. *Canyons*.

Milo was headed for the distant hills and canyons to find Rav's missing, potentially virus-laden dogs. In the sun and the heat. Alone.

Jason's chest burned and something hurt, scratched his insides like claws working their way up his esophagus. Something deep inside was rising up like a tide. And Jason couldn't stop it and didn't care about Rav or Tim, or anyone else. Milo was out there and that was all that mattered!

He threw back his head and howled.

* *

The ground was hot and dry as Milo sniffed it for scent. He tripped along on four light and limber legs. It was nice to move as a dog again! He felt in balance on four legs and chock full of time, like he could run for a whole year.

A distant sound caught his attention. He froze in place, head tilted, listening to the howl.

It was a howl. It sounded like a dog howl, but it was a human making it. There was something familiar about the sound. It made pleasant currents swim in Milo's chest. But it was back the way he'd come, and it wasn't made by the dogs he was looking for. He had to "stay focused," as Jason would say. He had work to do!

Milo put his nose back down and went on tracking the scent. He began to climb, the soft dirt becoming hard stone, and all of it the same color of egg-gold. All of it smelled hot. It was easy to follow the scent of the dogs. He found lots of places where one or more of the dogs had peed. It was almost like they were marking the path. Silly Rav! His nose must be so dull if he couldn't find them. When Milo was human, it felt like he had a cold in his nose, and it was closed up even though it wasn't. But he thought he'd be able to smell this, even in human form.

He found a prickly plant with a little blood on it where a dog had gotten poked. There was a pile of poop that smelled like dog-food-in-a-can. Farther on was a dirt hole in between rocks where a dog had dug. Milo, too, smelled the faint trace of some small rodent there. But he didn't dig like the other dog had. He moved on.

Milo was happy. This was easy! He'd never tried to track a dog, so he hadn't been sure he could do it. But look how easy it was. It was very hot, though, and his fur started to itch. The rocks were hot on his paws and the sun beat down like it was mad at him. But the smell was so easy to find! It was like dots across the land. It was like someone slowly dragged a toy across the desert to entice him to pounce.

Here and here and here. On and on and on.

Rav's dogs went a long way.

A long. Way.

Hours passed. It got hotter and hotter until Milo was dizzy. He was very thirsty. He found a place where jutting rocks shaded a flat rock below. The pack had been here for a while too. So Milo lay down in the shade and rested. The rock felt cool on his flank. It was nice to get off the pads of his paws. They were dry and cracked from the heat.

He lay there, and without the scent-trail to occupy his mind, his thoughts drifted.

Jason would know he was gone. What would he think? He didn't want Milo to track the dogs. But Jason didn't want Milo to do anything "risky." Milo understood why. He didn't like Jason around the sickness either. But Milo was stronger than Jason knew.

Milo knew what he had to do. He was sure!

He had to help Tim, who was so sad it made Milo sick. Tim was sad because Lance was Tim's mate, and Lance had the virus.

Jason needed to take blood from a dog that had the virus. Then he could make a shot called a vaccine and it would fix Lance and anyone else who got sick. It would be like the shots they gave people at the hospice, only this one would work good. They wouldn't die. They would get better.

Milo had to find that dog.

Then Lance would be fixed. Tim wouldn't be sad.

And Jason would see that Milo was brave and smart and a worthy mate.

He had to make Jason see that. Milo thought they would be excellent mates. He wanted it very badly. He loved Jason *a lot*. The first time he saw Jason at Lily's, he thought—Wow! Wow, wow, wow! He looked so handsome and smart. Then Jason picked him, and Milo thought his wish had come true.

He loved Jason's nice face and his glasses. He loved how wide and strong Jason was in the chest and arms. He could squeeze a body nice and tight. Milo loved Jason's thick black hair, so soft to pet. He loved Jason's human skin and his blue eyes. He loved the way Jason talked—he was very smart and used big words. It was *adorable*! Lots of times, when Jason said things, it was so cute and funny that Milo had to tell himself not to giggle.

Jason was adorable all over, the way he tried to be tough on the outside. He was so serious. But his body spoke louder than his words. His body never pushed Milo away. It loved to touch. Jason's body curled into him and took as much love as Milo could give and wanted more. Jason was all "no" "no" with his mouth and "yes" "yes" with his heart. He made Milo's insides smile and sometimes flutter too.

And he kissed Milo! And they had sex! Sex was *amazing*!

But. Jason didn't see it. Jason wanted Milo to go live in the new cabin when it was done. He wanted Milo to make friends with other quickened. He didn't want to bond. He was afraid of it, afraid he would get tired of Milo someday and not want him around. He didn't think Milo would be a good mate. And if you were going to be mates, sadly, both had to agree.

Why? Why did no one want Milo to stay? When he'd made the wish upon the star, and then found out he could become a man, he thought that was everything. He thought his wish would come true, that he would finally get everything his heart longed for. But that wasn't what happened. It didn't matter if Milo was a dog or a man, not being wanted was still not being wanted. Maybe it was even worse, because Jason wasn't going to die soon. He would send Milo away *just because*.

Milo thought Jason did love him—but not enough. Not enough to keep him forever.

It was true, Milo never went to school, so he didn't know all the things Jason knew. If you counted only school, Milo was not a good mate for Jason. But Milo knew other things, things Jason didn't know. He knew about people's hearts and souls and about what you regret in the end. He knew about bonds and how they survived age and trouble and pain and even death. He knew sickness. He knew sacrifice. He knew the magical power of touch. He knew patience and stillness, and he knew how to give those to people even when you didn't feel like being patient or still.

He knew love. Not like "I love chocolate" either. Milo knew the boundless kind that is bigger than you, so big it spills out and is part of an invisible flood of love that is everywhere. It spills out even when things are hard. Especially when things are hard. He loved Jason like that.

But Jason had closed off his dog, shut him up in a tiny little cage inside his body. Milo didn't know why Jason feared his dog, but he made himself sick. If you bind up a paw too tight and leave it that way, the paw will die, making the whole body sick. There was a dog at the shelter like that, poor boy. Some mean person had bound his paw and it got infected.

That's just what Jason was doing with his dog, only he didn't see it. Milo tried to help. Touch soothed Jason's dog, but it wasn't enough. Jason needed to let the dog out.

Jason was very stubborn, though. Milo didn't know what to do about it.

If Milo found Rav's dogs, and he could show Jason which one had been sick, maybe Jason would see how *good* it was to be a dog sometimes! Jason respected things that were "useful" and "productive." He would see how useful it could be to use your senses, to run, and track. If it saved lives, he would have to respect it.

It was the best to be a man. But it was also the best to be a dog! One was not bester than the other. How could Jason be so smart and not see that?

Milo got too tired to think, so he slept. When he opened his eyes, it was dark out and the air was cold. He hadn't meant to sleep so long! The heat was harder on his body than he'd thought. He had work to do. He had to find Rav's dogs. People were depending on him.

Anxious now, Milo jumped up. It took him some sniffing to find the scent again. The pack turned a little to the left here.

Milo followed.

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Chapter 16: On Four Paws

Milo tracked the scent for another long way. Stars rode the black sky in a million, billion dots. And it was cold. He ran to warm up when he didn't have to stop and find the scent. His paws were dry, cracked, and aching. He grew very tired, but there was no good place to rest, and the scent was getting stronger. *A little more*, he told himself. *A little more*.

Then he found the pack. They were in a narrow canyon between two sloping walls of rocks. There were a few trees and scrubby bushes down there, and a long thing that was made of wood. Men had been there at some point, but not for a long time. There was no scent of them at all. Milo only smelled faint traces of desert creatures and the strong smell of dog.

The barking started when he came down one wall of the canyon, limping on his paws. Milo barked back. It's okay. I'm a friend. I'm happy to find you!

Soon he was surrounded by dogs. Milo held still, his head up, while a dozen dogs sniffed him. He kept his body in a tense posture that said he wanted to play, but he could move fast if they tried to bite him.

But the dogs weren't defending their territory. They were cold and very hungry, and when they discovered he did not have food and there were no people with him, they left him and slunk back to the bottom of the canyon. Milo went too.

He smelled water and found it without help. There was a crack in the rocks, a depression that was filled with water. He drank from it with intense relief, his mouth sore and dry. His body soaked up the water inside. He drank so hard he emptied the little basin, but it was already filling up again. There was a tall metal device nearby with a man-made handle. Men had once used the water out there, something to do with that wooden structure. But that happened very long ago. The smell of man was completely gone.

The pack had been there for days and days; Milo could smell it. Maybe they did not want to leave the water. It was a very long walk back to the shelter after all. When he had finally drunk enough, Milo remembered his purpose. He'd found Rav's missing dogs! These were the dogs who had been at the shelter with Wilbur. These were the dogs that might have that special thing in their blood, antibodies, to help Jason make a vaccine.

The dogs were laying around the bottom of the canyon in small groups, huddled for warmth. Milo went from group to group, sniffing each dog carefully. They were hungry. They were all so, so hungry! They had found a few rodents and lizards to eat, but it was not enough food. He felt bad for them.

Why had they not gone back to Rav's by now? True, they would have to leave the water, but if Milo had made it, so could they. Could they not find the way?

Then he found a small dog with huge ears and short hair that was black and tan and white. Something about her scent intrigued Milo. He got very close, nose on skin. The dog rolled over onto her back in surrender. Milo sniffed. He sensed she was not sick now, only hungry. But she *had* been sick. She had the smell the virus made in Wilbur's body. She'd had the virus too. Milo had found one!

Milo spun around in a circle with delight and barked at the small dog, trying to get her on her feet. If he could get her to follow him back to Rav's.... But how? She wouldn't get up. She looked at him with a leave-mealone stare and then shut her eyes, wanting to sleep.

Before Milo could try again, he heard a noise nearby, a low, mournful cry. Milo listened and it came again. He went to find the source. When he found it, he understood why the dogs had stayed by the water.

One of them was trapped. There was a crack in the rocks that was even darker than the night, and it lead to a small tunnel. Maybe something had burrowed in there, years ago. But it was a trap now, and one of Rav's pack had gotten stuck in it. The dog was large with black fur. He smelled male. He stank of stress and fear.

As Milo peered down, he saw the whites of eyes looking back up at him. The dog was panting and there was a defeated slump to him, visible to Milo even in the dark. It was a look he recognized. The dog was dying. He was waiting for the end. But oh, it hurt, and he was so cold and so hungry and so, so thirsty and scared and....

One of his legs was hurt, down there in the darkness. *Bone snapped*, *pain*, *blood*. Milo could sense it. And he also sensed it hurt the dog to breathe. A rib had been broken in the struggle to get free, so the dog didn't struggle anymore.

Sorrow washed over Milo. He could almost feel the injuries as if he himself were caught. He lay down at the mouth of the hole and whined. The dog looked up and whined in reply, then gave a short, exhausted bark. *Save me. Leave me. Save me. Leave me.* The dog wanted to live, but mostly he just wanted the waiting to end. The dog tried to change position and growled in pain.

Milo whined again and barked. *I'm here*. *I'm here*. *You're not alone*. He paced outside the hole, distressed. Water. More than anything, the trapped dog needed water. But how could Milo transport water from the hole without a bowl or a cup or hands?

I have hands, Milo thought.

He knew what he needed to do.

* * *

Jason waited for Milo to come back. And he waited. After he'd howled at the shelter, he'd stood there for long minutes, hoping to see Milo's form emerge from the desert glare. But Milo hadn't heard him. He hadn't come back. And Rav had looked at Jason like he'd lost his ever-loving mind.

So they'd returned to the hotel. Matt and Tim tried to calm Jason down, tried to look at the bright side. They expressed their inner commitment to positive outcomes. No doubt, a mutually beneficial series of events would be experienced by all, leading them and Mad Creek down the primrose path to future health and happiness.

It was utter crap. Truth: Milo was alone in the desert in the heat and sun, and now in the chill of night, with no protection. What if he didn't find Rav's dogs? What if he did find them, and they had the virus? What if a human picked Milo up and held him against his will? Or some redneck used him for target practice? Milo was so trusting. He was the gentlest soul in the world. He would go to anyone.

Milo.

By the end of the day, Milo still hadn't returned and Jason was too anxious to engage with Matt and Tim anymore. He went out behind the motel and sat against the brick building where he could see the—pointless, empty, hateful—landscape. He wrestled with himself, feeling utterly grim. The logical, scientific part of his brain tried to be objective about it all. What was going to happen would happen. Milo was responsible for himself. He made his own choices. Jason hadn't asked him to go. He'd either get sick with the virus or he wouldn't. Jason would either make a vaccine or he wouldn't. There was no point in being emotional about it. That would only be counterproductive. He should be doing more research on vaccines right this minute. That was the only thing that might actually prove beneficial.

But his heart, though, oh his heart! His heart felt like it was being pushed through a wringer, squeezed flat and gushing grief. He'd never felt so heartsick in his life. He knew it was nonsense, but he felt as though his dog were dying inside. That part of his being he'd ignored and pushed aside as much as possible could not be ignored now, any more than a broken leg could be. The dog spirit inside him felt bigger, stronger than he'd ever believed possible, and it was clawing at him in distress.

Yes. Fine. All right. He got the message. He loved Milo. His dog loved Milo. He wasn't going to be able to fumble along through life anymore, blissfully focused on work and closed off from other living beings. No, Jason's dog wasn't going to put up with his bullshit anymore!

He would secure Milo permanently. He would. Just as soon as Milo came back, Jason would make sure Milo knew his intentions were serious. But Milo didn't return.

Darkness fell, and the sunset was creepy, red as spilled blood across the sky. Jason told himself it was not a bad omen. That was completely illogical. It got cold. Then it got dark, as dark as any dark Jason had ever known. There weren't any big cities nearby, and the lights of man were feeble here. The open sky was overwhelming and inky black. He could see the sweep of the Milky Way. The hotel building was still warm against his back where the brick had baked in the sun, even as his front was chilled. And still he sat there.

I wished upon a star, Milo had said. He'd been so matter-of-fact about it.

"What did you wish for, Milo?" Jason now asked out loud. There was no one there to answer.

Jason knew what *he* would wish for. And what the hell. It wasn't like it could hurt.

He picked a bright star out of the tapestry of lights and focused on it. When one wished upon a star, did one speak aloud? Or was it imperative to the hypothetical make-a-wish process that said wish remain unspoken? He decided to say it out loud. In for a penny....

"I wish Milo was back safe with me. Not sick. Not hurt. Safe."

That wasn't too much to ask for, was it? Small potatoes as wishes went. Compared to world peace or a million dollars, it was a no-brainer, surely. But almost as soon as he heard his own words spoken, Jason knew what he had to do. There was only one way to make sure that wish came true. He couldn't sit around and wait and hope for Milo's return anymore.

He got up and went back into his motel room. The connecting door was still open. Tim was lying on the bed in his and Matt's room. He was curled up on his side, his phone in his hand as if he'd just been on it or was waiting for someone to call. He looked at Jason and sat up slowly. Matt was on his laptop on the room's wobbly little table.

Matt glanced up, his face intent. "I found a guy online who does private desert tours. I figured in the morning—"

Jason held up a hand to stop the speech. "No."

"What is it?" Tim asked.

Jason cleared his throat. "I've made a decision. I'm going after Milo. I'm telling you because, honestly, I'm not even sure the shift will work. It's been so long. So you should know in case something happens to me. But

assuming I make it, we should rig me with my phone so at least you can track GPS coordinates. Matt, I saw some bungie cords in the back of your Wrangler. We can create a little back pouch or something."

Tim stood up, his lifeless face getting some color back into it. "I have a toiletries pouch with a zipper. I bet that would work."

"No!" said Matt firmly. He stood up, hands on his hips. "Jason, we already agreed that you can't go. If you get the virus, it's over, for all of us. We can't risk that."

Jason stared right back at Matt. "Turns out, I'm not asking for your permission, Barclay."

"Damn it, Jason! Let's at least give Milo twenty-four hours. That's what we said. And we should try going out in a vehicle first!"

They'd debated the point earlier. Jason didn't hold out much hope of any vehicle being able to get into those canyons except, perhaps, a helicopter. Tim looked torn, like he didn't know who to back. Matt was working from his background in tactical military training, but Tim's hope was irrational and he was willing to grasp at straws. In the end, it didn't matter what either Tim or Matt wanted. Jason knew what he had to do.

"I'm going after him," Jason said flatly. "Unless you care to knock me unconscious and hog-tie me, you're not changing my mind. I'm going to attempt the shift in my room right now. You two figure out how I can carry my phone and maybe some water. Then I want you to drive me out to Hold My Paw. I'll start from there."

"Jesus Christ." Matt ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Can you at least wait until daylight? Then we can follow you as far as possible in the Wrangler."

"No. I have to go now. My coat... well let's just say my dog wasn't built for the desert. It will be cooler at night. Besides, time is of the essence if any of this is going to matter at all."

The use of his nose didn't require daylight. And if his memories from his teenaged years were to be trusted, he saw pretty well in the dark in his dog form too. He'd waited too long already.

"He's right," Tim told Matt. "Every hour counts. And Jason is smart, he can minimize risk." He turned to look at Jason. "If you—when you find

Milo, if he's with the shelter dogs, you'll keep your distance, right? Either lead them home while staying well ahead of them, or come back and tell us where they are. Don't take any chances. Please. Matt's right. We need you, Jason."

Tim's words were sincere. They plucked at something in Jason's chest, pulling his eagerness back a little toward sanity. Yes, Tim and Mad Creek needed him to be careful. Milo did too.

Jason nodded. "Agreed. When I find them, I'll keep a safe distance. Right, then. I'm going to...." He jerked his thumb back toward his room, trying not to betray his nerves. He went back inside and shut the adjoining door.

God, this was going to hurt like a motherfucker.

* * *

Jason removed his clothes and folded them fussily. He took the hideous coverlet from one of the motel beds and placed it on the floor, aligning the edges precisely with the mattress and the wall. He knew he was being entirely too human about this, but it soothed his nerves. Finally he got onto the coverlet naked on all fours, feeling more than a little humiliated. He closed his eyes and breathed. He tried to relax and initiate the shift.

At first, he couldn't find the doorway. Or rather, he knew where the door was, but he couldn't remember how to open it. He'd trained his body for so long not to take those pathways. But after a few minutes of picturing his dog, of imagining his hair growing and bones becoming thick and short, something clicked. It began in the back of his neck as an excruciating tightening, and it spread down his spine. It felt hot and wrong, like his spinal cord was infected and throbbing. He fell onto his side, in too much pain to stay on his hands and knees.

There was a series of pops in his joints, like mini explosions. God fucking hell, it hurt! He gritted his teeth but pain-noises escaped his throat anyway. He couldn't help himself. He rolled around on the coverlet, trying to ease the tormenting ache in his muscles. His flesh was burning up!

Milo. Think of Milo.

Will you play with me? Jason should have taken the opportunity to shift then. Why hadn't he shifted then? Transitioning would have been much easier with Milo there.

Jason had forgotten what it felt like, it had been so long. And he wasn't sure it had ever felt like this, this tight, this rust-corroded, this desperate. Now that the shift had begun, it felt like his dog was literally clawing its way out of his belly, teeth snapping, like that scene in *Alien*.

Oh God, what if he couldn't control it? What if his dog was mindless? What if he couldn't return to human form? What if it killed him? But it was too late to stop it now.

Snarls and growls filled the room. His hips collapsed and rebuilt themselves higher, his thighs tucking under. He could feel his internal organs shift, a slippery, slithery, disgusting sensation. He tasted blood and bile in his throat. Everything was pain, the world was pain! Finally the sharp agony faded, but only because he was fuzzy and dizzy from shock. Everything went gray and cottony and numb. Then there was nothing.

He came to with the sound of his name in his ears. Tim and Matt. Jason opened his eyes. He was on the floor, and they were both hovering over him. They looked different—less colorful, their dimensions compressed ever so slightly.

Right. I'm a dog.

Jason sat up gingerly, but the pain was gone completely. He felt... okay. He got to all fours. It was weird being in this position, weirder still for it to feel natural. His muscles trembled, thrumming with energy.

"Jason?" Tim smiled at him. He reached out a hand out to stroke Jason's head. "Look at you. You're beautiful like this."

"He's not a pet," Matt grumbled, looking at Jason with a hint of wariness.

Tim withdrew his hand. "No. I know. Sorry."

But Jason didn't mind Tim's touch. It was grounding. He paced around Tim and Matt, rubbing his fur against them. *Pack*. They were part of his pack, and he loved them. Why was that so difficult to acknowledge when he was human?

Tim seemed to understand. He held up his palms and touched Jason's thick black fur as he passed, letting Jason control the touch. Then Matt did too.

"Roman is like this," Matt said in a voice choked with gruff tenderness. "When he shifts. God, I miss him."

Tim nodded. "Me too. They're so special. We can't let anything hurt them, Matt."

"Over my dead body," Matt agreed. There were bright shards of glass in his words.

Tim and Matt were nice, but they weren't Milo. Jason went to the door and barked once.

"Hang on," said Tim. "We rigged a pack."

He'd taken a clear plastic pouch with a zipper and punched a hole in it. Inside was a phone Jason didn't recognize, a bottle of water from the hotel, and some items from the motel's vending machine—a few packages of crackers and three trail bars. A bungie cord was threaded through the pouch, and Tim got it secured around Jason's chest just behind his front legs.

"I put my phone in it instead of yours," Matt said with an unhappy grimace. "I've got satellite nav thanks to the forest service. You probably wouldn't get a signal on yours out in the desert."

That was smart thinking. Jason barked once in agreement.

"That's okay? Not too tight?" Tim asked, adjusting the pack.

Wearing the pack was awkward, but he'd deal with it. Jason went to the door and barked.

"Okay, hero," Matt said. "Let's go."

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Chapter 17: Crumbs of Hope

The desert at night was a forbidding place. There was something about the open, empty darkness that felt watchful, as though Jason was the only large moving target visible for miles. Jason ignored the feeling and moved on, anxious now that he could smell Milo's track.

He wasn't very adept at using his dog senses, but he could smell Milo—recognized the sugar-dirt-musk of him. He also smelled something he thought of as "other dogs," which was probably the trail Milo had been following from Rav's pack. Sometimes he couldn't smell Milo for a mile or more, but there was always that other scent, and Milo's smell always cropped up again.

To Jason's surprise, he was perfectly able to think in this form. His mind was clear and his reasoning was intact. But sense-instinct was strong, and he was easily distracted by movement, sound, and smell.

Mouse. Coyote. Snake. The desert had a lot of hidden life in it, and his dog had a hard time ignoring it. Farther on, he sensed a cool spot in the ground that was probably a buried spring. He had to resist the urge to dig. Once he felt a warning thrum in his blood and looked up to see a predatory hawk soaring overhead. Despite the distractions, his mission remained clear. His heart beat one tune: *Milo*, *Milo*, *Milo*. *Find Milo*.

He ran all night, pausing often to sniff and make sure he was on the right track. He went up rocky hill formations and down into cold, black crevasses. No way would the Wrangler have been able to follow the trail. His muscles grew sore—they were out of shape. His joints stiffened. He ran anyway. Christ, how far had Milo gone? Jason ran for *hours*. There were rocky hills and canyons and miles of open desert. He passed a million snake holes in the desert floor, flew past nocturnal hunters, tiny and not so tiny. But none of them would mess with him, not with his size, not with his burning focus. *Find Milo*.

Dawn began as a gray veil. Then a glow of light appeared at the eastern horizon, the one he was running directly toward. The light was a soft tangerine that spoke of warmth, even though the desert was still cool.

Even in the dark, Jason was hot in his heavy black fur, his muscles overheated, sore, and tired.

Then he saw it. At first it had the blurry unreality of a mirage. But as he ran closer, the figures resolved from blobs to distinct outlines. Dogs. Coming toward him was a pack of dogs, at least thirty or more. And in the middle of them walked a tall figure, a human.

Jason was so struck by the sight he stopped and stood there, panting to catch his breath. Against the crack of tangerine at the skyline, and the deep blue above it, walked a bizarre cluster of silhouettes. In the middle was a human man, tall, thin, and naked. His head was bowed, and he carried a dog across his shoulders like an ancient shepherd carrying a sheep. He walked —slowly, inexorably, wearily on bare feet. And on either side of him walked dogs of all shapes and sizes, some alert, some limping, and some in such bad shape they could barely put one paw in front of the other.

Oh my God.

After a long moment of stunned watching, Jason's back legs coiled and he all but flew across the desert, running as fast as he could. He remembered at the last minute that he wasn't supposed to get close to the pack. He forced himself to stop and stand his ground. His dog's muscles quivered with the need to get closer to Milo.

They were still a hundred yards apart when Milo looked up and saw him. He stopped and the dogs stopped too. None of them barked, oddly enough. Most settled down to the desert floor in exhaustion the instant Milo stopped walking.

Milo stared at him. The weariness and blank determination on his face morphed into a hopeful smile. There was the sound of a gasp catching in his chest. "J-Jason?"

Jason barked once. *Yes, it's me!* He could feel his ass wiggling hard as his bushy tail went bonkers. *I found you! It's me!*

"Jason!" Milo's voice cracked with joy. He carefully lifted the wounded dog off his shoulders and lowered it gently to the ground.

That's why Milo had taken so long to come back. One of Rav's pack had been injured, and Milo wouldn't leave him behind. It was a black lab, and he was in very rough condition. Milo stroked the wounded dog and whispered quietly to him as if reassuring him. The black dog licked Milo's chin and thumped his tail twice on the ground in a grateful wag. Then Milo stood up and walked toward Jason. He was completely naked and unsteady on his feet. And now Jason could see Milo's injuries too. He was shivering with cold. He'd been walking barefooted for miles across the desert. His feet were swollen and there was blood on them from small cuts. His skin, in the growing light of dawn, looked red—either from cold or possibly sunburn. When had he shifted back to human form? At least as a dog, his skin was protected by his fur. But Milo couldn't carry an injured dog unless he'd resumed human form.

Jason wanted badly to go to him, but as Milo got closer, his face eager despite his exhaustion, Jason took a step back. He barked, once, and then whined.

Milo stopped, frowning in confusion. "Jason?"

Jason spun around, showing his eagerness, then backed up a few steps. He stopped and barked again.

Milo's smile faded. "Oh. You can't touch me. I remember. The virus." Jason barked in agreement.

"Okay. You changed into a dog to find us? You didn't have to. But I like seeing you. A lot. Your dog looks very nice. I need to rest now." He glanced back at the pack, but they were already lying down. So Milo sat down on the dirt right where he stood. He drew up his knees and rubbed his arms, shook like a leaf. He looked so damn vulnerable naked like that in the night air.

Oh God. Nothing had ever been harder in Jason's life than having to keep his distance from Milo at this moment. He wanted to go to Milo and comfort him, rub his warm fur against Milo's cold bare skin, give him love and strength. He wanted it so badly, he was strongly tempted to ignore the risk of the virus. His dog was certainly of that opinion. Yet enough of Jason, the scientist, was in control to hold him back. It would be comforting to both of them right then, but in the long-term, it could cost them their lives. If Milo had gotten infected, Jason had to be well enough to find the cure.

"Is it far to walk?" Milo asked, looking up. "When I came out, I was smelling a lot, and I was a dog. It was a long way, but I don't remember how far."

Yes, it's far. Jason whined and tilted down his head. He figured he'd left Hold Me Paw at least eight hours ago.

Milo sighed but said nothing more.

Leave the pack, change back to dog, and follow me. We can bring Rav back later to get the others. Jason would suggest it if he could talk. But even if he could, he didn't think Milo would willingly leave the pack and especially not the injured dog. Jason whined again, unsure.

"Oh!" Milo looked up and smiled. "Jason, three of these dogs had the virus. They are better now, but they had it. I can smell it!"

Jason barked brightly.

"That's good, isn't it?" Milo asked hopefully.

Jason yipped and wagged his tail. *Very good, Milo. Very good.* That was excellent news. If Milo was right, and the dogs had the virus and recovered, they probably had antibodies in their blood. But were they still contagious? Was Milo harboring the virus even now? And how could he get Milo and the dogs back to safety? Jason had run all night. On two feet, Milo would take twice as long at least. And those would be daylight hours. Milo would be exposed to the sun with no protection and trying to carry the injured dog as well. He wouldn't make it.

Jason could shift back to help carry the animal. But if he did that, they'd both be slow, not to mention naked and exposed. And again there was the problem that Jason shouldn't get too close to the dogs, much less carry one on his shoulders as Milo had been doing.

Jason thought about it, pacing. What he really wanted was for Milo and the pack to stay put, preferably under shelter. They couldn't walk much farther. What if they waited here and he went to bring help? That seemed like the best plan, but how could he be sure he could find them again? A vehicle wouldn't be able to take the path he took.

Then he remembered his makeshift backpack. The phone.

Jason barked to get Milo's attention. He twisted around and tried to look at the pack.

"You have something to carry. I see it," Milo said.

Great. Now Jason just had to get it off and get Milo to understand what to do with it. It would be simple if he shifted back to human. But the transition had been terrifying and hard on his body. Being a dog wasn't something he could shift in and out of like a jacket. And he needed to be a dog to get back to the shelter in any reasonable amount of time.

He turned to show Milo the pack again. Looked at him and barked.

"I can take it off," Milo said quietly. "I'll be careful."

God, Milo was so damn smart. And sensitive and kind. God, Jason loved him.

Milo got to his feet, moving stiffly. Jason let him draw close. This was one risk Jason had to take. But Milo was careful. He looked at the pack for a moment, then reached out and undid the cord. The cord slid around Jason's furry chest and then the thing was free. Milo hardly touched him at all.

Milo looked at the pouch. His stomach made an ominous rumble. "Food! Food is good. Do you want some?"

Jason's bark was sharp and insistent. *Not me. I'm fine. You need it.*

Milo studied him for a moment, then smiled. "Okay. Thank you. And water! I love water. There was water where the dogs were living, but I didn't have anything to carry it. And a phone. Do you want that back?"

Jason barked once and backed up, bending down a little in a bow. Keep the phone. Stay here. Find a place nearby with shade. Don't try to walk anymore. I'll be back with help. We'll find you via the phone.

Jason couldn't say any of that. But he tried to convey it as best he could with yips and growls and pawing at the ground. Milo watched him carefully, his eyes big and serious. "We follow you?" he asked doubtfully, taking a step toward Jason.

Jason barked hard. No! Stay here.

Milo nodded, as if that's what he had suspected all along, but he'd wanted to confirm it. "You want me to stay here with the pack."

Jason yipped excitedly. Yes.

Milo looked relieved. His shoulders relaxed. "And you'll bring help?"

Jason yipped again. He spun in a circle. He stared at the phone in Milo's hand.

Milo followed his gaze and held up the phone. "I keep this?"

Jason yipped again. He ran a few feet away from Milo and ran back. Good, Milo! You're so smart! Is that a plan? I'll go and I'll come back as soon as I can. Got it?

Milo, thank God, was much more adept at dog language than Jason would ever be. If their positions were reversed, he never would have figured this out. But Milo understood. He looked at the phone then at Jason.

Milo breathed a sigh so heartfelt it sounded like he'd just been given a last minute reprieve on death row. "Good idea, Jason. I don't think the dogs can walk fartherer. Hurry."

Jason barked and looked at Milo intently. *I will hurry*. *I love you*.

Milo smiled, but it was a sad smile. He turned and walked back to the pack, still holding the pouch. He looked tall and lean and earthy without a stitch of clothes on, like some primitive being. He bent over the wounded dog and stroked his head, said something low in a comforting voice. He dug the bottle of water out of the pouch while the tired dogs gathered eagerly around him. Jason knew at that moment that his pitiful offerings would be shared among all of them. That was frustrating. It wouldn't be enough to help any of them survive. But maybe a swallow of water and a few crumbs of a trail bar would be enough to give all of them hope.

Jason could have stood there and watched Milo forever. His dog did not want to leave. But nothing would improve unless Jason made it so. It was like tearing open an infected wound. He turned his back on Milo and ran back the way he'd come, moving as fast as he could.

* * *

By the time Jason got back to Hold My Paw, it was late afternoon and so hot out, he felt like he was dying. His thick black Malamute coat was absolute torture in this climate—really, it ought to be adopted by the CIA for interrogations. Because Jason would tell or give anything to anyone to make it end. Even his long-trapped dog was ready to shift back to cool human skin. He ignored the heat as best he could and ran. The way felt endless. When the shelter finally came into view, along with Matt's Wrangler, it was such a relief, Jason whimpered in gratitude.

Tim and Matt must have been watching for him, because they ran out of the shelter to meet him, trailed by Rav.

"Jason!" Tim went to his knees to gather Jason in. Jason could hear Tim's heart thudding in anxious booms in his chest.

Jason collapsed against him, the contact reassuring. He was back. He'd made it. *Thank God*.

"He's overheated. He needs water and cool air now! Bring him inside," Rav ordered, his voice tense.

Jason didn't want to take the time to recover, but he had no choice. As soon as he got inside the shelter, his limbs collapsed and refused to support him, as if only the knowledge that he'd die out there in the desert had kept his nerves and tendons and muscle fibers going. He collapsed to the floor but managed to lift his head enough to drink the lukewarm water Rav provided. He growled when Rav took the bowl away.

"You have to take it slow," Rav told him quietly, stroking his head. He spoke as if he knew Jason could understand, but he probably talked to all dogs like that.

Rav set a cold fan next to Jason and began wiping down his face and paws with a cold wet towel. His touch was gentle and nothing like Rav's rough exterior. Jason was dizzy and weak, so he lay there and allowed it, even though he could hear the clock ticking in his head. Tim stayed by his side, stroking Jason's coat, while Matt paced.

"You guys are full of shit," Rav told Tim and Matt while he worked. "What the hell is going on? Where did this dog come from? And what about the other one you were looking for, the labradoodle?"

Tim and Matt exchanged a look. Jason saw Matt shake his head minutely.

"We're still trying to find your dogs. That's all we can tell you," Matt said in a tough-guy voice.

"By what, sending out other dogs? That's pretty fucking weird. Then you have a dog named Milo and one named Jason when the guys who were with you were named that. What the hell are you playing at?" Rav's tone was rude. He clearly didn't like Tim or Matt, but when he looked into Jason's eyes, he exuded nothing but kindness and worry.

Jason thought Rav liked dogs better than people. Rav might be one of the few human they could trust with their secret. But he couldn't say so, and Matt didn't seem willing to take that risk.

"The names are sort of an inside joke," Tim muttered with a fake smile.

Rav glared, not buying it.

"Is he going to be okay?" Matt asked, glancing at Jason worriedly. "His fur must have been murder in the sun. Does he have heatstroke?"

"I don't think so. The sun here can kill a dog, but it's not common. Dogs are amazingly adaptable and smart enough to seek shelter." There was an insult in there somewhere, but Jason was too tired to care. "If he's not better in ten minutes, we should take him to the vet."

Ten minutes. Jason had to pull it together. Rav gave him another bowl of lukewarm water, and Jason drank it gratefully. He was still weak, but his inner sense of urgency was taking over. He pushed himself to his aching feet and barked once at Tim.

He needed Matt and Tim to go get Milo. But how did he communicate that? He could shift back to human now. But finding a private place to do it, and then showing back up as a naked Jason Kunik, would make Rav suspicious as hell. Then too, he wasn't sure he should attempt the transition when he was already weak. Then too again, what if he needed his dog's nose when they went to find Milo?

So that was a no, then. He had to somehow communicate the plan as a dog. Brilliant.

"Can you, um, get him something to eat?" Tim asked Rav, clearly getting the idea that Jason needed to tell them something in private.

Rav looked from Jason to Tim with a frown, but he nodded. "Yeah. I'll be right back."

He stalked away. The moment he was out of sight, Tim and Matt closed in.

"Your backpack's gone. What happened to it?" Matt asked.

"Did you find Milo?" asked Tim.

Jason nodded at Tim and tried, not very successfully, to stand up on his back legs to indicate that Milo was upright—human. But in his weakened state he only managed a half-assed little hop.

Tim and Matt looked at each other.

"Someone had to take off the pack," Matt said. "It was well secured."

Tim bit his lip and looked at Jason. "Did you run into a stranger while you were out there? A human who took off the pack?"

Jason shook his head back and forth. *No, not a stranger.* He spun in a circle and barked impatiently. *Ruff, ruff, ruff.* Jesus, he couldn't believe he was having a "Timmy's in the well" moment. When had his controlled, highly intellectual life come to this? It should be humiliating, but honestly, all he cared about was getting his message across ASAP.

"Was it Milo? Milo took the pack?" Matt guessed.

Jason gave a sharp, agreeing bark. He nodded and wagged his tail.

"He found Milo!" Tim said, excited.

"Thank God!" Matt looked at Jason. "If Milo took the pack off.... was he in his human form?"

Jason nodded and barked. Yes.

"I wonder why," Tim asked Matt.

"Maybe Milo ran into trouble," Matt suggested.

Jason barked. *Not trouble exactly. He found the pack.*

Unfortunately, Rav came back with a bowl of food right then. He was definitely suspicious. He placed the bowl in front of Jason and glowered at

Tim and Matt. "What's he barking about?"

"Not sure," Tim lied.

Jason looked at the food. It was kibble—unappealing brown circles that probably contained butchering byproducts, cheap grain, and chemicals. His stomach growled regardless. He needed the calories. He needed strength if they were going back out there. Figuratively holding his nose and literally closing his eyes, he ate the food as fast as he could. It was disgusting. *The things I'm doing for you, Milo, I would never do for anyone else*.

When he was done eating, Rav put down some more water and Jason drank it to get the kibble taste out of his mouth. He shuddered in disgust. He looked up to find Rav watching him with narrowed eyes. Tim and Matt were huddled over Tim's phone.

"We have a signal," Matt said, glancing up at Jason.

"A signal on what?" Rav asked.

Matt and Tim exchanged a look. "Maybe we should take the dog back to the motel," Matt suggested.

Oh for God's sake! Jason understood the need for secrecy, but right then, there was a very vulnerable human, Milo, as well as forty dogs stranded out there in the desert, possibly dying of exposure. Enough was enough! He barked angrily at Matt, showing his displeasure.

"What?" Matt asked, bristling.

Jason ran to the front door of the shelter and barked at it. Tim came over and opened the door. Jason ran out and the three humans followed him.

Jason looked at Matt's Wrangler and then ran around the side of the shelter to see what else was available. There was an old Jeep packed near a pre-fab garage. The Jeep had heavy-duty, over-sized tires, open sides, and only a framework top.

The Jeep would be better at navigating the open desert than Matt's Wrangler, but Jason doubted even it could handle the hills and canyons between the shelter and Milo. Maybe there was another way around? But even assuming they could get to Milo, the Jeep was too small to hold all the

dogs they needed to transport. Hell, they needed a flying, air-conditioned bus.

Jason ran around the Jeep, his eyes searching. There was a trailer hitch. Was there, possibly, a trailer? Jason ran to the garage door and barked at it impatiently.

"What's he want?" Rav asked. "What's he looking for? I just gave him food."

"I'm not sure, but let's see what he does," Tim answered. His voice was tenser now, picking up on Jason's urgency. *Finally*. "Would you please open the door?"

Rav shook his head, like this was stupid, but he opened the garage door. Jason ran inside. There was a lot of crap stored here—old dog houses and crates and bags of food. There was also a long tan and white horse trailer with an iron hitch pull.

Jason had no idea how many dogs would fit in the thing, but quite a few, he thought. He circled it, barking. He gave Tim an intent look.

"You... want us to get horses?" Tim guessed, his brow wrinkling.

Jason rolled his eyes. He growled, the sound rumbling in his throat. Why on earth would I want horses!

He ran out of the garage to the Jeep again. He circled it, barking, ran to the trailer hitch, and barked at it, doing a play bow at the thing. He felt like a total idiot. He had a PhD for crying out loud!

"He wants us to take your Jeep and attach the trailer," Tim said. "Is that right?"

Jason barked once. Yes!

"Oh come on! Why the hell would he want that?" Rav scoffed.

"Yeah, why the hell would he want that?" Matt asked. His arms were folded over his chest and his lip stuck out as he thought about it. "Because... we need a place for isolation? For a certain party?"

Jason gave Matt a thousand yard stare and growled.

"No, that's not it," Tim said impatiently. "Are you sure about the horses, Jason?"

"I thought that was a good guess," said Matt.

Jason let off a round of furious barks.

Tim held up his hands. "Okay! Okay, no horses."

"So the trailer isn't for horses or for isolation...." Matt hesitated. "You want the trailer because... we need more space?"

Jason yipped and jumped up on his back legs. Hell yes!

Dear Lord. He was never going to take the ability to speak for granted again. One more clue. He sighed and walked forward, dragging one back leg along as though it didn't work. He felt like he was pantomiming Frankenstein's Igor or something. Whilst in his dog form. God, he'd never live this down.

"Someone's hurt and can't walk?" Tim guessed.

Jason nodded and barked once.

"Milo?" asked Matt sharply. "Milo's injured?"

Jason shook his head back and forth deliberately. He stared intently at Tim, willing him to get it.

"Not Milo. Another dog then? Milo's with Rav's dogs and one of them is injured?" Tim guessed, sounding unsure.

Jason nodded as big as he could and barked wildly in agreement.

Tim's expression solidified to resolve. He turned to Matt. "Right. Milo is with Rav's pack and they need help. That's why we should take the trailer. If Milo was right, and the dogs stuck together, there's a large group of them."

Jason ran in a circle, barking loud. *Yes.* Jesus F. Christ. It was about time.

"Milo? The guy who was with you yesterday? He's with *my* dogs?" Ray asked in disbelief.

Jason barked sharply. Yes. Now let's hurry! Come on!

"Why?" Rav asked. "And how could you possibly know that? What the hell is this?"

"Does it matter?" Matt asked impatiently. "Look, Rav, I know this is strange, and I know we're asking a lot. But believe me, this is important. If Milo's found your dogs, we need to go pick them up."

"Hey, no one wants to find my dogs more than me!" Rav insisted, his voice getting louder. "But if you'd just tell me what the fuck is going on, this all might make more sense! Just a suggestion!"

Jason had about had it with this waste of time. He went to Rav, stood in front of him, and stared up into his eyes with the most intense glare he could summon. *Just do it!* Rav had apparently never seen that look on a dog's face before, because he blinked in surprise and studied Jason as if trying to figure it out.

Rav huffed in surrender and ran a hand over his beard, tugged on the little ring in his lip. "Fine! You know what? Whatever. If you think you know where they are, then let's go."

Tim passed Matt his phone, and Matt punched some buttons. "We have a GPS signal. If Milo's with your dogs, this is probably where they are. But it doesn't exactly look accessible." He brought something up on his screen.

"Let me see it," Rav grumbled. He went over and looked at Tim's phone. He pinched his thumbs over the screen to zoom out.

Jason waited, panting anxiously and pacing behind the Jeep.

"The dogs are here? Are you sure?" Rav asked.

Tim looked at Jason, who barked once again in confirmation.

"The dogs are there," Tim said firmly.

Rav let out a shaky breath. "Christ, you guys are completely cracked and so am I for believing this. But what the hell. It looks like if we drive around to the east on Fire Road 186 and then 175, we can get close to the signal. As long as there are no big ravines or hills between the road and the signal's location, we should be able to take in the Jeep. Won't know for sure until we get there."

"That's a hell of lot closer to them than here," Matt said. "Let's do it."

"Great!" Tim agreed.

Jason barked in agreement. Yes. Now!

"I'll get the trailer hooked up," Rav said, still looking doubtful. "We should take some water along too. And a first aid kit. And blankets. And, *shit*, dog food in case we really do find them. We can put everything in the trailer."

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Chapter 18: Found and Lost

Jason was anxious for the full two hours it took them to drive around on the roads and approach the phone's GPS signal. What if they ran into a ravine they couldn't cross with the Jeep or on foot? How was Milo faring? Had he found a shady place to rest and wait? Were he and the dogs doing okay without a source of water?

Jason wanted to ask Matt about the signal. He wanted to verify that it wasn't moving, that Milo wasn't walking. He wanted to know exactly how far away it was every few minutes. But he couldn't ask those questions, because he couldn't speak. He could only catch glimpses of the phone in Matt's hand and glean hints from the way Matt directed Rav to drive.

The thought of Milo being out in that relentless bright sun, in his weak human skin, made Jason sick. And he was worried about Rav's dogs too. And it was midafternoon by now. What if they didn't find Milo by nightfall?

As it turned out, they were able to get pretty close to the phone's signal with the Jeep. They drove about five miles off road and were finally stopped by a rise of spiked and rounded rocks. It wasn't exactly a mountain, but it was daunting.

"Yeah. No way the Jeep's going over that," Rav confirmed, looking out the windshield. "I can drive north or south, try to get around it."

"Looks like the signal's only a few miles away," said Matt, staring at the phone. "Directly east."

"Let's just hike the rest." Tim was riding in the backseat with Jason, and he peered out the window. "I don't see an end to the rocks."

Jason barked in agreement, impatient to go find Milo now that he was only a short distance away. When Tim opened the back door, Jason flew over his lap. His paws hit the desert floor, and he turned to look back. *Are you coming?*

"You go with Jason," Matt told Tim. "Just head due east. Call me if you find them. We'll drive around and see if we can get past this. If not,

we'll park here and start on foot behind you."

"Got it," said Tim.

A moment later, Jason was leading the way up the pile of rocks.

The heat began to bake through Jason's fur within the first few minutes. He was anxious to move ahead, but he didn't want to leave Tim behind. Tim jogged, trying to keep up. He took advantage of Rav's absence to fill Jason in.

"I spoke to Bill McGurver about an hour before you showed up," Tim said, huffing as he jogged. "There are now nine quickened down with the virus in town, three in the past day alone. It's still spreading."

Jason whined. *Not good news*.

"But no humans have gotten it. So I guess it really doesn't affect us."

Well. That was something to be grateful for.

"When you saw Milo, did you get any idea if the dogs he was with had the virus?" Tim asked.

Jason barked once. Yes. So he said.

Tim sighed in dissatisfaction, obviously not understanding and knowing there was no way he'd get the answers he wanted while Jason was in dog form.

"God, I hope they're okay, and I hope you can get antibodies."

Jason didn't answer. He just trotted forward and back. He sniffed at the ground while waiting for Tim to catch up, but he couldn't smell anything. Milo and the pack hadn't walked this way, and he'd have to get pretty close before he could smell their scent on the air.

Another five minutes on, he caught a whiff of what he thought at first was coyote, but it was too strong and too familiar. It was dogs, a large number of them. It had to be Rav's pack.

Unable to contain himself, he barked to Tim and ran forward at full speed. *Milo*.

The desert here was more diverse. There were outcroppings of boulders, yellow and red, and sparse patches of thirst-immune sage. He smelled the dogs strongly but couldn't see them. Then he saw one lone dog,

a dark-haired mutt, come around a group of boulders. It barked at him, an anxious warning to stay away.

But staying away was the last thing Jason had in mind. He headed for the outcropping at full speed.

Can't get too close. Can't get too close. He reminded himself in his head. But he had to get close enough to see Milo. To look Milo in the eyes. To know he was okay.

Jason rounded the outcropping in a wide arc. And there they were. The rocks provided only a little shade at this time of day, a few scant feet of shadow on the desert floor. Milo had his back against the rocks, knees draw up and head tilted to one side, asleep. In his hand was Matt's phone. Rav's shelter dogs were arrayed around him, splayed here and there on the rocks, like a drunken party. They all looked hot and thirsty and far too thin. But they were alive.

Jason barked in relief. He barked for Milo.

Milo blinked awake. His gaze found Jason. The smile that lit up his face was pure trust and joy. "Jason!"

Jason barked, the sound raw. We're here. We're here now. You did good. You did so good, Milo. You did just what you needed to do. Brilliant, brave Milo.

Milo stood and stretched. Despite the less-than-ideal situation they were still in, Jason couldn't help but appreciate the long lines of him. He didn't look too sunburned, thank God, or hurt. "Can we go with you now?" Milo asked with a yawn. "The dogs need food and water. A lot."

Jason felt a thrill of joy at seeing Milo so matter-of-fact, so unharmed. He barked in agreement. *Yes, help is here*.

Tim rounded the rocks. He stopped short, arrested by the sight of Milo and so many dogs huddling together in the modest shade. Then he rushed forward. Jason tried not to hate Tim as he went straight to Milo and hugged him, holding Milo's nude form tight. It wasn't sexual, Jason knew that. But he would have given his balls, or at least one of them, to be able to hold Milo like that right then.

"Are you okay?" Tim asked, pulling back to arm distance and looking Milo over. If his cheeks blushed a little at how much he saw, he was man

enough not to let it distract him.

"Yes. I'm very thirsty. So are the dogs," Milo told Tim. "Guess what? I smell the virus on three of the dogs. So Jason can make the vaccine!"

Milo sounded so excited to be able to tell Tim that. Tim gasped, an involuntary and desperate noise. "Really? Oh, God, Milo. Thank you!"

Tim hugged Milo again, and Milo happily hugged him back. It went on a little too long. Jason barked at them, annoyed.

Tim disengaged himself and looked at Jason sheepishly. "Yeah, Lance wouldn't like it either."

"Lance wouldn't like what?" Milo asked.

Tim shook his head. "Nothing, Milo. I'm just... so happy to see you. God, this is good news."

"I know! Did you know that's Jason?" Milo pointed at Jason, smiling at him. "He let his dog out. That's good news too!"

Tim laughed. "Yup, he sure did. He helped us find you guys. And I bet you're all dying to get out of this heat! Rav and Matt are right behind me, and we have a trailer and some water and food. We'll get you all home. Okay?"

Tim's voice was shaky with relief. He removed the long-sleeved shirt he wore over a T-shirt and gave it to Milo to put on. He even removed his cargo shorts and gave them to Milo, making do with his boxer briefs.

By then the dogs had roused themselves to greet him and Tim bent down, petting as many as he could reach and murmuring reassuring words. "How are you guys? You doing okay?"

Jason sat down on his hind legs, unable to do anything but watch—watch and try to send as much silent support to Milo as he could. Milo's gaze stayed on him, a smile on Milo's lips, so he was pretty sure Milo got the message.

Matt and Rav would be there soon. And because rescue was imminent, Jason's mind was already springing ahead. Milo and the dogs were going to be safe, but the ordeal was far from over. There was so much to be done. First order of business was to test the dogs Milo thought had the virus and see if they carried antibodies. They should overnight blood samples to

Elizabeth at the CDC too, in case Jason had trouble identifying the antibodies. She could also get the blood typed and help figure out if it was safe to administer to the CASP-1 patients.

Jason was dying to be back in human form, in his lab, with all his gear and hopefully Milo by his side. As a dog, he was fairly unremarkable. But as a scientist.... Yeah. It was time to kick some viral ass.

* * *

It was dark by the time Matt and Jason arrived back at the motel and Jason could finally shift. The last few hours had been surreal. On the trip back from the desert, Milo and the dogs had ridden in the trailer, while Jason, still in dog form, had been in the Jeep to avoid contact with them. As soon as they got back to the shelter, Matt hustled Jason into the Wrangler so he could return to the motel and change. Tim stayed with Rav to help with Milo and the dogs. Jason hadn't wanted to leave Milo, but he needed badly to be human again.

The pain of the shift was less grinding this time, but the nausea and dizziness were worse. Jason ended up weak as a kitten, clammy, and shaking on the bathroom floor in his motel room. He lay there for some time before he was able to get up and turn on the shower. By the time he came out of the bathroom, he felt human again. He felt so human, in fact, that the past twenty-four hours might have been a fevered dream.

Matt was sitting at the little table in Jason's room, tapping away on his laptop. "Tim called. Milo's positive that three of Rav's dogs had the virus. I assume you'll want to go draw blood with your protective gear on?"

"Yes. What about Milo?"

"Tim says he's fine. He was dehydrated, but they've been giving him food and water. He's taking a nap, Tim said. I got some of his clothes to take over there."

"What? Why? Won't he just be coming back here anyway? We can get another room so there's no chance of me getting infected."

Matt looked up and met his eyes. He studied Jason's face. "We need to talk about that. I was just looking at flights. I was hoping you could draw blood from those three dogs, we'll come back here to verify that the blood

has antibodies, then we'll get on you a flight back to Fresno tonight. There's an eleven p.m. Do you have enough time if I go ahead and book the flight?"

Jason pushed his glasses up on his nose. Glasses! Nose! God, he'd missed that. "Why wouldn't I go back in the car?"

"Milo has been exposed. We can't risk you getting close to him until we're sure he doesn't have the virus."

Of course, Jason knew that, but he resented that Matt, who was neither a scientist nor a doctor, was making that call. Jason wanted to argue, but he knew the stats. Most viruses took at least two days to incubate, but a person could be contagious during those two days.

"I could wear the protective gear in the car," he tried halfheartedly.

"Why take the risk?" Matt insisted. "Tim's anxious to get back to Lance anyway. I figured you and he could fly back tonight and be there in just a few hours with the samples. Someone from Mad Creek will pick you up in Fresno. Milo and I will follow in the Wrangler."

Matt unexpectedly reached out and grabbed Jason's arm. His expression was sympathetic. "Look, this whole thing has been hard on everyone. I know it sucks that you were so worried about Milo and then you aren't even able to—"

"I wasn't worried about Milo," Jason insisted stiffly. An utter lie.

Matt shot him a bemused look. "The point is, you're the only one who can help us now. You already took a huge chance doing the whole dog thing."

Jason snorted. "If I hadn't, we might not have found them."

"Yeah. I get that. But at this point, there's no need for more risk. So please. *Please*, Jason. Focus on the cure." Matt's voice was suddenly thick. He swallowed. "You want to hear me beg? I'm scared to death for Roman, and that's the truth. He says he's okay, but he's been picking up some of those new patients in Mad Creek and driving them to the clinic. Hell. We all have so much to lose."

He dropped Jason's arm, and Jason wiped his face with his hands. For pity's sake, all he wanted was a little quiet time with Milo. A few minutes. An hour. But Matt was right. That wasn't his priority right then.

He sighed. "Book the flight. My test for antibodies isn't that fast. It'll take about twenty-four hours. But I trust Milo's sense of smell on this thing. I'd like to draw the blood and get samples off to the CDC immediately. Then I'd just as soon get back to my own lab to run my tests. That way, while I'm waiting for the results I can start blood typing and digging into all the other things we'll need to do if the antibody test is positive."

"Sounds good to me. Thank you, Jason," Matt said sincerely.

Jason shook his head. There'd be time for thanks later. Assuming they survived.

* *

Three days later, on Saturday night, Tim and Minnie entered Jason's cabin through the back door. People had been coming in and out for the past few days, and they no longer bothered to knock. Jason barely glanced up from his microscope.

"We brought dinner," Tim announced. He placed a bag of take-out from the diner on the interview table. Jason's nose picked up the smell of hamburger, and he felt a sharp flare of hunger followed quickly by nausea. God, he was so tired. But he didn't want to stop working. He was looking at a sample of treated plasma that had just arrived from Elizabeth's office at the CDC in Washington. Matt had driven the plasma up from Fresno's airport himself.

They'd confirmed the presence of CASP-1 antibodies in the blood of the three dogs Milo had identified. But it turned out the process of using the antibodies was taking way more time than Jason had hoped. They couldn't simply give whole blood from the donor dogs directly to CASP-1 patients.

For one thing, the three donors from Rav's pack—three perfectly ordinary dogs who'd been infected with, and successfully fought off, the virus—were all relatively small dogs. Only so much blood could be collected from them. And then there was the difficulty of matching blood type and antigen, not to mention cross-species concerns. Dog's blood types were based on proteins called DEA—dog erythrocyte antigens. Human blood had different proteins that fell into three blood groups: A, B and O.

Quickened blood, Jason found, could be in either group. Lance, for example, in his current dog form, tested as DEA 1.1 blood type, which was supposed to be able to take blood of any other dog type without triggering a life-threatening Hemolytic Transfusion Reaction. But could he really? Or would his quickened system reject it? There was simply no data. No one had ever tried this before.

Of course, all the quickened patients had some dog DNA, but Lance and Lily and several of the others had full humans in their ancestral tree as well. Besides the issues of compatibility, Elizabeth had strongly advised against exposing the patients to whole blood. There could be other infectious agents in untreated blood, like hepatitis. Jason could cure them of CASP-1 only to expose them to something else equally deadly.

Elizabeth had been helpful in finding a solution. Giving the patients plasma instead of whole blood still required blood type compatibility but not antigen match. Then the plasma had to be virus-inactivated via a solvent treatment. That had to be done at the CDC lab since Jason didn't have the proper equipment. He was now testing the resultant plasma on slides of blood cells from Lance to see if there was hemolysis—the rupture of blood cells due to combining incompatible blood types. That would not be good.

"How's it going?" Tim asked anxiously, sidling up to Jason's elbow. "Is it ready?"

Jason took a deep breath and turned the dial to look at a different portion of the slide. He watched the blood cells swim about normally. "So far Lance's blood is reacting well to the new plasma. But I need to test the samples from all the patients. I need more time."

"We don't—" Tim began sharply. He stopped, forcing his voice to a calmer register. "Jesus, Jason. Lance doesn't recognize me or Molly. I took her in yesterday and we watched him through the glass. He has no idea who we are. Hell, he's *living* only because of liquid Bill's dripping directly into his veins. He's nearly comatose, he's so goddamn weak." Tim's voice was wrecked.

"I'm doing the best I can," Jason's voice snapped with a mix of guilt, sympathy, and irritation. He felt the pressure keenly—to fix things, to not screw up, to save Lance and all the others. But he didn't want to make a mistake and kill the patients. Jesus, he might as well go bury himself in a

cave if that happened, because even if the town forgave him, he'd never forgive himself.

But he was reaching the end of what he could reasonably test in any sane amount of time. Anything more sophisticated would take months, if not years.

"We know there's risk," Tim insisted. "Lance... Lance would know that. He would try anything, anything at all, to come back to me and Molly."

Jason nodded and drew back from the microscope with a sigh. He glanced at his watch, hesitated. It was almost 6 p.m. "If none of the blood samples have a negative reaction to the new plasm by seven...." He sighed again. "You know I can't guarantee anything, Tim. I wish I could."

"I know. It's not your fault. Now eat your damn hamburger before you collapse too."

Minnie had already unpacked the to-go bags, helping herself to plates and drinks from Jason's kitchen. She had the meal laid out on the interview table.

"Dr. Kunik, you know we all appreciate everything you're doing," she said kindly as they sat down. "You and Doc McGurver both. I don't know where we'd be without you."

Jason gave her a tight smile. He appreciated her attempt at encouragement, but he hadn't saved anyone yet. He picked up his burger. Since the food was there, he might as well eat quickly so he could get back to the microscope and not have to think about nourishment for another twenty-four hours. Oddly, he wasn't hungry at all now. The smell of the food was unappealing, like it had been sitting for too long in someone's car.

"How's Milo?" he asked Tim.

Tim and Minnie exchanged a look. "He's fine," Tim said. "He keeps asking about you."

Jason felt a pang of longing. Shit, it had been three days. Surely it would be safe to bring Milo home soon. "No signs of weakness or fever?" Jason prompted. "Have you been taking his temperature? When was the last time you took it?"

"About noon. There's been no rise in temp at all," Tim said patiently.

"Thank God," Jason murmured. He forced himself to take a bite of the hamburger. If he could chose only one lucky break in this entire thing, Milo not getting CASP-1 would be it.

"Rav has been calling him. Milo really got invested in Hold My Paw," Tim continued.

"What?" Jason spoke around a dry bite of bun and meat. He took a sip of seltzer so he could swallow. "How has Rav been calling? Milo doesn't have a phone."

Tim looked uncomfortable. "Well, Milo called Rav from my place to check on the dogs. So now Rav has our landline number."

Great! Thanks a lot! Jason didn't say it, but he wanted to. Here he was working around the clock trying to save Tim's spouse, and Tim facilitates handing Milo off to the first guy who's interested.

"I can't eat this." Jason pushed the food away. He suddenly felt very nauseous and warm. Food... food was definitely not happening right then.

"Something wrong, Doctor?" Minnie asked.

"I have to get back to work." Jason stood and took a step toward the microscope. The room swam, and his legs, which he'd noticed were tired earlier, suddenly hurt. Really hurt. They ached like a sore tooth deep down in the muscles. He stopped midstride, putting his hands out for balance.

"Jason?" There was the clatter of a chair, and then Tim had one hand on Jason's waist and the other steadying his arm. "Are you okay?"

No. Oh hell, no. This could not be happening. But it was. Jason knew immediately what this was. There was nothing else that could be this strong, this quickly debilitating.

He felt Tim's hand on his forehead. "Shit! You're burning up."

Not the virus. Not now. I was so goddamn careful! I gave up so much—comforting Milo in the desert, having him here at home. I gave up being with him so I wouldn't catch it. It's not fair!

"Call Bill!" he heard Tim shout through a veil of cotton wool.

"The microscope," Jason said, his voice tinny. "I need to check the samples. I can still work."

"You need to lie down," Tim said firmly.

In the background, Jason heard Minnie talking on the phone.

Tim tried to guide him toward the door to the bedrooms, but Jason refused to go. He shook his head to clear it. "Tim, *stop*. I can still work. Another few hours at least. Please. We have to get this plasma ready to inject."

Tim hesitated. Jason felt the first true stirring of fear. It was not the anxious, stressed-out worry he'd had all along. No, this was a stark, primal, death terror. What if the plasma didn't work?

What if he reverted to a dog forever?

"Okay, Jason. Okay," Tim said quietly. He helped Jason over to the microscope.

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Chapter 19: The Bestest News

Milo heard a car approach Tim and Lance's place. He hurried to scramble over the couch and look out the window. His hope faded along with his smile when he saw who it was. It was only Simon. Not that Simon wasn't nice. Simon was fine. He was a nice quickened. But Milo had hoped for a second that it might be Jason.

Silly. Everyone knew Jason was sick and in the clinic with the others. Even if Jason wanted to see Milo, he wouldn't come today.

Simon got out of his old car, springing up like a rabbit from a hole. He had been born a breed called Jack Russell, he'd told Milo. He was compact and wiry. His hair was pure white and cropped to a short velvety fuzz on his head. His blue eyes were bright, and he was very energetic. Milo would be patient and try not to mind Simon's enthusiasm, even though he was feeling sad today and he wasn't in the mood to play.

Simon knocked, and Milo opened the door.

"Hi, Milo!" Simon said loudly. "Hi, hi, hi!"

"Hi, Simon."

Simon rubbed against Milo's chest and arm in greeting. "Guess what? I saw Tim in town, and he said I could come see you. I have so much news! Good, better, and best news! I can't wait to tell you!"

"Do you want to come in?" Milo asked, even though Simon was already inside the door. It was what Tim always said to visitors.

"Yes! Thank you. Do you want to hear the news?" Simon bounced up and down on his toes.

"Yes, please."

Simon's grin was huge, and his eyes said he loved having a secret to tell. "Lance is better! And Lily too! And Floyd and Wilbur and Ruby! But Lance is the betterest of them all! Tim said Lance ate food and drank on his own. And he understood Tim when he talked! He's still wearing fur, because he's still weak, but he's *lots* better. And Doc McGurver says he will

soon be well. The stuff Dr. Kunik made works! Isn't that the best news you ever heard in your whole life?"

Simon wiggled his fingers and his hips shimmied as he tried to control his desire to wag his tail.

Milo agreed it was very good news. He smiled. "What about Jason? Is he better too?"

Simon blinked. "I don't know. Tim didn't talk about Dr. Kunik. Is he sick? Oh, that's a shame. Welp! If they are all getting better, then he will get better too! So that's okay. Oh, my goodness. I have more news to tell you too!"

"Okay."

"Do you want to hear it?" Simon stared at Milo with excited expectancy.

"Yes, Simon. Please tell me."

"We can move into the new cabin!" Simon blurted it out as if it were the happiest surprise in the world.

Milo's smile faded, and a lump came into his throat. "What do you mean?"

"The new cabin! The one we built! It needs some work on the inside walls and things still, but mostly it's done. There's a new kitchen and bathroom and everything! And Minnie put some beds from storage in there. We can move in today!" Simon grabbed Milo's arms and gave it a happy shake. "We're going to be roommates, Milo! And we have our very own rooms. Isn't that good news?"

Milo didn't think it was good news. In fact, he thought it was *awful*. He blinked hard, trying to understand. "Minnie... Minnie said that? She said I should move to the new cabin?"

"Well, sure! There are five bedrooms, and one is for you! Don't you remember?" Simon tilted his head and looked at Milo curiously. His excitement faded. "What's wrong? Aren't you happy? You have your own room now. You can stay there as long as you want. And roommates! Me and Louise and Pickles and George. It will be lots of fun!"

"Okay." Milo forced himself to smile though it felt more like baring his teeth. He still found it strange to *pretend* to be happy when you weren't, but Jason had told him sometimes you had to be polite. Simon was so excited. Milo couldn't tell him he hated the idea.

The smile made Simon relax and bounce again on his toes. "Okay! Do you want to go get your stuff now? I have a car. You can bring anything you want to the new house. Do you have anything here? And we can stop at Dr. Kunik's and at Lily's if you need to. We can take all your things over there right now!"

Everything was happening so fast. Why was this happening so fast? "What about Tim?" Milo asked. "It's not nice to leave him alone and not say good-bye."

"Oh no, Tim is great! Lance is getting better and soon Lance will be home and baby Molly too. I told Tim the cabin was ready, so it's okay, you can leave with me right now. Today!"

"Oh."

"Can I help you pack?" Simon asked. "Many hands make light work!"

Suddenly, Milo couldn't bear Simon's company another minute. It was too hard to hide how bad he felt. "No thank you, Simon. Can you wait outside for me?"

"Sure thing! I'll be right outside."

Simon jogged out, happiness in every step. Milo shut the door behind Simon and leaned on it. Then he sank to the floor. *Pack your things. Hurry. Leave now.* He shuddered, feeling very alone and unimportant.

Moving into the new cabin wasn't a bad thing, he told himself sternly. It was nice of the town to give him a room. Very nice! That was the plan. It had always been the plan. He could tell himself that. But that didn't make the crushing pain in his chest go away.

Being at Tim's was supposed to be "temporary." He didn't know he would never go back to Jason's again. He didn't know he had left Jason for good. But that was how it was. Jason didn't want Milo. He was being moved off *again*.

Why didn't Jason want him? In that motel in Arizona, they had shared each other's bodies—kisses and touches, soul to soul. Milo had thought there was something like glue between them, even though Jason was fighting it. And then Milo had gone after Rav's pack, tried to show Jason how brave he could be, tried to show he was worthy. Jason had come after him, as a dog too! Milo knew Jason *hated* being a dog. But he had done that for Milo. And then.... Since then, there had been nothing but distance between them.

Milo knew Jason had to be careful not to catch the virus. Tim had told Milo that again and again. Milo understood it. But. Jason hadn't come and hadn't come. He had not called Milo, even though Rav did call. He had not said he wanted Milo to stay. He had not asked him to come home.

Jason had told Milo before—he was supposed to go live in the cabin when it was ready. That was what Jason wanted. He didn't want Milo forever. He didn't want Milo for a mate.

The ache in Milo's chest grow bigger and bigger. His heart felt soft and hot. And then sounds were coming from his throat and his face was wet.

It's okay, he told himself. It's okay. But it wasn't.

One more loss. One more person who left him. One more time starting over. It should get easier, but it didn't. This was the worst leaving ever.

His wish upon a star hadn't worked. He hadn't found the one thing he truly wanted. What good was being a man if he still lost the one he loved?

* * *

Jason became aware of something tapping his face. He tried to ignore it and remain in thick, comfortable sleep, but it was.... It was fucking annoying was what it was. He opened his eyes with a growl.

Lance Beaufort, looking starched and unreasonably presentable in his sheriff's department uniform was sitting in a chair next to the bed. He flicked Jason's chin with his finger and thumb one more time.

"Oh, look. It lives."

"Knock it off," Jason complained, and for a moment, it was like they were teenagers again. Only his voice sounded raw and Jason was definitely no longer a kid at Lance Beaufort's mercy. He tried to sit up. He was in his bed. *What*?

"You got the virus. Better now," Lance filled in succinctly, as if reading Jason's mind.

"I gathered that. What are you doing here, Beaufort?"

Lance's face softened. He cleared his throat. "That, um, that plasma you came up with worked. We... hell, Jason, *I* owe you a lot. Not sure I could ever repay it, in fact." He shrugged, uncomfortable. "Guess you might have had a point about all that science stuff after all."

It was probably the closest Lance Beaufort would ever come to admitting there was anything of value beyond Mad Creek. Jason was just relieved to hear the news. "Thank God. It worked? On everyone?"

"Every single patient we had. You included, in case that wasn't obvious."

Jason breathed out a heavy sigh as if he'd been tense all this time even though he'd actually been asleep. Something in his chest eased. Slowly, the past few weeks were coming back to him.

"So there were no adverse reactions to the plasma? No rejection?"

"Not that I know of. Everyone's recovered and doing well. You can ask Bill about all that medical stuff."

Jason pushed himself up to sit against the headboard. He was wearing his pajamas, which was a bit weird. His muscles were weak but didn't ache. Had there been aching? He rather thought they had, bad aches too. Instinctively, he looked at his hands, back and front. They looked entirely human, maybe a little pale. There was a small red mark on his wrist where a cannula had been inserted. He had a vague memory of an IV being inserted into his shaved forelimb.

He looked up to find Lance watching him. "Any lasting effects of the virus? Reduced faculties? Issues with speech? Anything?"

Lance rubbed his jaw. The man was so innately dark, his stubble showed like a blue blush along his chin even though he was clean-shaven.

"Well, Tim would probably have an opinion about my 'faculties', before and after, but I seem to be fine. I don't remember a lot about being sick, though."

"Oh? What's the last thing you remember?"

"The party with you and me and Bill talking on the porch. It's all fuzzy after that."

Jason blinked. That was quite a lapse. "You don't remember getting sick?"

"I have some hazy memories of *being* sick, but no. How 'bout you? Do you remember making the plasma?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "One doesn't *make* plasma. It doesn't come in a Lego set. The *body* makes blood, which is where plasma comes from. All we can do is separate it and clean it."

"Yeah, whatever," said Lance, bored. "You don't remember working on the plasma then? I hope you wrote down what you did. In case we need another batch someday."

Jason tried to think back. What did he remember? He remembered driving to Arizona with Matt and Tim and Milo. He remembered Milo coming into the shower and... yeah, that was definitely a memory worth saving. He remembered that Rav's dogs had escaped. He remembered that Milo went looking for them....

"Milo?" Jason asked abruptly. "Where is he?"

"He's fine." Lance stood up and stretched. "Never got the virus at all. Well, I should let you rest."

"Is Milo here? Where is he?"

Lance frowned at him. "Jason, you've been out of it for almost a week. The new cabin was completed, and Milo moved into his room over there. I told you, he's fine."

Jason stared at him.

"He's good," Lance said. "Don't worry so much. Everyone's fine." Lance swallowed. "Thanks to you and Bill anyway." He leaned over to place a hand on Jason's shoulder. "We won't forget it. The town. The pack. We won't forget." His voice was gruff.

Lance straightened up again, looking embarrassed. "So, um, Lily left some food for you in the kitchen. And when I say 'some food', I mean don't open your refrigerator door too fast if you value your life. I've gotta get back to work, but Minnie's in the other room in case you need anything. I imagine Bill will be by shortly too. I just wanted to say... you know." He waved his hand vaguely in the air.

"You're welcome," Jason said.

"Yeah. So... we're glad to have you back in Mad Creek. See ya, Jason."

Lance left, and Jason sat in bed, feeling a little stunned. He was recovering, Lance was fine, the plasma had worked, and he should feel relieved. At the very least, they'd bought the time to make a proper vaccine. But the quiet of the room felt off and there was a cold chill sinking into his skin. He realized this was the first time he'd been alone in this bed since Milo had dropped into his life. The bed felt very big and very, very empty.

Milo was gone? He was gone. While Jason was sick, Milo had moved on with his life. Jason felt a sense of crawling dread, as if Lance had said, "By the way, while you were ill, the Earth slipped out of its orbit. But don't worry, scientists think it'll be okay."

Okay? No, things were very much not okay.

He could see it. Milo moving on. Milo was a loving creature. He was so open and affectionate, despite the pain of what he'd been through. Yes, anyone would love Milo. And Milo could love... Rav, for example. Jason had a vague memory that Rav had come to see Milo or... called him? Something like that. Rav had definitely been interested. Then there were the quickened of Mad Creek. They all thought Milo was downright swell. He was probably already bonding with his new roommates. Or perhaps he'd even mated someone. Someone else.

Hell, Milo had even been able to love a cantankerous, anxiety-attack-ridden, work-focused scientist. He could love anyone at all.

Jason's eyes stung. God. He'd hoped he could tempt Milo to stay. He'd thought there for a while that their temporary arrangement could become engraved in stone. Like Matt and Roman. Like Tim and Lance. *Mates*.

But it was too late. Jason had lost the chance. Milo was gone.

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Chapter 20: Home

For three days, Jason moped around his cabin. Well, to be fair, he was still recovering from his illness. It was perfectly reasonable for him to take some downtime. He didn't feel like working. He was physically weak and his mind was a little fuzzy. Mostly he felt... depressed and bereft. He sat on the grass behind the cabin and absorbed the summer heat. He stared at the trees as if they might give him friendly advice. He rearranged the stones that outlined all the flower beds in the yard by size and later rearranged them again by porosity.

Minnie and Lily kept pestering him with food and their need to "check in." He ate what he was given, complained about different foods on the plate touching each other, and was an all-around shit patient. He took short walks to regain his strength, then longer walks to forget. His dog was a big, black furry mound of misery in his chest.

On Friday, Lily grabbed the plate out of his hand as he sat eating dinner in the backyard.

"Hey! I wasn't done with that."

"Oh, one more bite. What does that matter?" Lily popped the piece of fish stick that was left on the plate into her own mouth and swallowed it. "There. Now you're done. You need to take a shower, or we'll be late for the party."

"What party?"

"The *pack* party of course." Lily rolled her eyes, as if he was being willfully stupid.

"I'm not attending a pack party," Jason said stiffly.

"Yes, you are."

"No. Go on and go. Leave me alone."

With the hand that wasn't holding the empty plate, Lily reached out and pulled the folding chair out from under him. Jason landed on the grass. "Hey! You can't do that!"

"Shower," Lily pointed toward the house. "Hop to it, Jason."

"I've been ill! In what universe is it acceptable for you to dump me out of my chair?" He stood up, brushing himself off huffily.

"You've been in those sweats for forty-eight hours. It's not as though a grass stain will ruin them now. Go take a shower."

"I have no intention of attending any party this evening." Jason pushed his shoulders back stubbornly and met her glare. "You can't make me." Lord, he sounded like an eight-year-old talking back to his mother.

"We're celebrating tonight," Lily said through gritted teeth. "Celebrating beating the virus. You're a big part of that, Dr. Jason Kunik. You and Milo and Tim and Matt and Doc McGurver too. You're all heroes, and you're going to damn well act like it! So go take a shower or I'll... I'll..." A gleam came into her eyes. "I'll tell everyone you bathe with a rubber ducky."

Jason gasped in shock. "I do not! That... that was Milo's!"

Lily's eyes narrowed in disbelief.

That was the problem with having these persistent women in his house. Who had asked for their help? Not him! Yes, there was a ducky, but that was only because his mother had raised him with a ducky in the bath, and it had become routine. The stupid thing soothed his inner dog, who did not like water one bit. It was a purely mechanical means to expedite a mundane task like bathing. He had no reason to be ashamed of it. Whatsoever.

Lily pointed once more at the house in silent demand. Jason went to take a damn shower.

Lily all but dragged Jason by the ear to her house and up the front steps. When they got there, the pack party was in full swing. The house was brightly lit, and Jason could hear the chatter of voices from a block away. Once again, cars and bikes and even skateboards were strewn haphazardly around the house like they'd run out of gas during a zombie apocalypse.

He didn't want to go in. The idea of seeing Milo was... terrifying. He couldn't take seeing Milo chattering happily with other people. People who

weren't him. He didn't need to witness a *moved-on* Milo. He would rather shove hot pokers in his eyes.

Lily ignored the way Jason dragged his feet. She pushed him up the steps with surprising strength and through the front door of the house. Then there was no escape.

She hadn't been kidding about the party being a celebration. There were puffy streamers in purple and gold, and it looked like a glitter bomb had exploded on the scene. There was a gigantic, three-foot tall cake swaying precariously on the crowded food table. It had white icing and huge purple candles poking out like sticks of dynamite. The minute Jason was spotted, the crowd acted like they'd been waiting for him.

"Yay! Dr. Kunik!" Simon called out.

"Yay!" was the general consensus along with some vigorous "Hip hip hoorays!" and "Good boys!"

Jason was inundated with quickened wanting to shake his hand and rub against him in greeting. Everyone said "Thank you" and "Great job" and "We couldn't have done it without you" and "Do you have any cookies?", the last of which Jason ignored.

Bill McGurver came over and gave Jason a hug, even though he'd been by the cabin just two days earlier. Tim was right behind Bill, and he about squeezed the life out of Jason. "Thank you for saving my husband," Tim whispered in Jason's ear.

Jason nodded, unable to say anything in return.

Matt pounded on Jason's back and made a joke about how Jason didn't have to come down with the virus himself in order to research it. And Roman Charsguard approached him with a stiff spine and stoic face, which was frankly intimidating as hell, only to collapse onto him like a pile of logs and snuffle wet words of appreciation into Jason's shoulder.

It was all quite gratifying, if overwhelming. Jason was reminded of how close they'd all come to disaster—serious, genocidal sort of disaster. They were incredibly lucky. But even with so many people demanding his attention, he couldn't help looking for Milo. His stomach remained clenched in anxiety at the idea of seeing him.

And then there he was. Milo stood in the doorway to the kitchen, huddled up a little, looking small. Their gaze met across the room, and Milo gave him an awkward wave in greeting. Jason's heart cracked a bit more. That was it? That was all he was going to get? Wasn't Milo going to come and fawn over him like everyone else? Why not?

Milo looked down at the floor, and his hand fell to his side. He appeared sad and lost. It reminded Jason of the first time he'd seen Milo, right there in this living room, when Lily had dragged him out from under the buffet table and asked who would take him in. And suddenly, Jason didn't want to be there anymore. It hurt too much.

He tried to extract himself from the huddle and make his way toward the front door. But Lance blocked him, placing a hand on Jason's shoulder and droning on about the food people had brought and how the cake had been specially made and other incentives to stay that Jason could care less about.

Then Lance looked over Jason's shoulder, and Jason felt the tension coil in his belly. Around him, the room went quiet. He slowly turned to find Milo right behind him. Milo didn't look any happier to be there than Jason was, but Lily had an arm firmly around his waist and a very determined look on her face.

"Milo," Lily said sweetly. "Don't you want to say hello to Jason?"

Milo reluctantly looked up at Jason's face. "Hi," Milo said.

Jason's stomach ground in anxiety. "Hi, Milo. Uh... how are you?"

"Okay." Milo gave Jason the fakest smile in the history of fake smiles, all bared teeth and stretched lips, then looked back down at the floor. His shoulders were high and tight and his face was pinched in pure misery.

A doubt crossed Jason's mind. Why did Milo look so unhappy? If he'd wanted to move to the new cabin, if he was doing great there and had friends and Rav and everyone else who *wasn't Jason*, then why did Milo look like someone had stomped on his heart?

Lance stepped on Jason's foot. "Ow!" Jason yelled, shooting him a glare.

Milo looked up worriedly and seemed to force himself to speak. "I'm... sorry you got sick, Jason. I'm glad you're better now."

"Thank you, Milo." Jason rubbed his throbbing toe along his calf to ease the pain.

Milo took a deep breath. "You did good. I knew you would. You're the smartest friend we could ever have. The town, I mean. Okay." Milo turned to go and even Lily couldn't hold him. He slipped from her grasp with a desperate move and started pushing through the crowd, head down and clearly upset.

Jason blinked rapidly, watching Milo go and trying to figure out what it meant, and what he should, or possibly should not, do about it.

Lily smacked him lightly upside the head.

"Ow! What is it with you Beauforts and physical violence?"

"Jason Kunik!" Lily tsked. "You may be the best-educated quickened in Mad Creek, but you, sir, are an idiot."

"What?" Jason looked to Lance for help, but Lance just shook his head with a disgusted expression on his face, like Jason was beyond all hope.

"Go *after* him." This advice came from Tim, who gave Jason a little shove.

Suddenly it clicked into place. Lily, Lance, and Tim weren't trying to torture him. Not that they *wouldn't*, but that wasn't what this was about at the moment. They were all trying to tell him something. And Milo looked so unhappy.

Hope is a dangerous thing, and love is merely a release of evolutionary-useful chemicals if you looked at it from an objective point of view. That didn't keep any of it from feeling less real as both hope and love crashed through Jason's body. His inner dog perked up eagerly.

"Milo, wait!"

Jason went after him, and Milo stopped and turned. They came face to face again in the middle of Lily Beaufort's living room. The entire pack was crowded around them, watching, but they all disappeared as Jason gazed at Milo. Milo's eyes, dark with unhappiness, stared back into his.

Jason swallowed. "I woke up from being sick, and they said you'd moved out. Did you... did you want to move to the new cabin, Milo?"

Milo huffed. "You said I should move there."

"No," Jason insisted. "Well, yes, maybe. Before. At one point, I had said that, yes. But... did you want to move there?"

"Oh for God's sake," Lance muttered in the background.

Milo's lips pressed into a line. "No," he said quietly.

Jason's heart did a ridiculous flying high dive from somewhere above his ribs. "Oh. Well, *I* didn't want you to go. I didn't know that was happening, Milo. I was completely out of it when I was sick."

Milo blinked at him. He fidgeted with his hands, twisting his fingers in front of him. He looked unsure. Hopeful, but unsure.

You're an idiot, Jason thought. You're the one with a lifetime of experience being human. Step up to the plate, Jason Kunik.

He cleared his throat. "So... good then. If you'd like to come back. Live with me, I mean. I would like that. It's up to you, Milo."

"For how long?" Milo asked, his hands twisting themselves tighter.

Jason's heart *rat-a-tat-tatted* in his chest. He felt light-headed like he wasn't getting enough oxygen. "Um. Well.... Forever, Milo. If you want. That is." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, Milo was staring at him, his hazel eyes pleading. Fine. Jason was all-in now. It was time to go all-in. His voice was shaky. "I love you, Milo. You're the most unique, most generous, most magical person I've ever met. And I'd like it very much if you stayed with me forever. In our home. As my mate."

There were murmurs and aws all around them, but they were like a cushion of supporting air, unreal. What mattered was the look of desperate happiness on Milo's face, the way his smile lit up every cell in Jason's body. Milo jumped, and Jason caught him, arms going around Milo's thighs. Milo's lips crashed down on his.

"Forever?" Milo asked between breathless kisses. "Do you mean it, Jason? Forever and ever and ever?"

"I've never meant anything more in my life. Forever, Milo. Always."

* *

They didn't stay at the party long. Lily insisted on cutting the cake right away, perhaps sensing an early exit was in Jason's future. Jason and Milo both had a slice. It was made with sweet potatoes and raisins and had cream cheese frosting and was very tasty. But Jason didn't notice much after the first bite, not with Milo plastered to his side, his dexterous hands roaming under Jason's shirt. He pulled the button-down from Jason's waistband to get to his skin. It looked tremendously undignified, and Jason secretly *loved* it. He'd never felt so desirable in his life.

When Milo pressed his erection against Jason's hip, he knew it was past time to leave. They said their good-byes and started walking back to Jason's cabin. *Our cabin*.

"Will I have my own room, or will I share your room?" Milo asked giddily as they walked, arms around each other's waist.

Jason laughed. "You never slept in a separate bed before. I don't know why you'd start now that we're mates."

"Mates! So your room is my room?"

"Yes. It's our room now. You can have half the dresser and half the closet."

"And half of you?" Milo teased, his hand sliding over the front of Jason's pants.

Jason gave an undignified gasp. "No, you can have all of me." He caught Milo's hand. "Though we should wait until we get home to, um, implement that."

"Okay," Milo said agreeably, nuzzling Jason's neck.

Jesus, had there ever *been* ten longer blocks? It felt like crossing the interplanetary void. But finally, they were at the front door. They burst into the cabin, and Jason was ready to tear Milo's clothes off. It had been forever since they'd been close, and his skin, his psyche, craved Milo's touch so badly it was torture. He wanted everything, every inch of Milo pressed to every inch of him, preferably for hours and hours.

Of course, Milo decided it was the perfect time to talk. "I missed you! I wanted to see you when you were sick, but they wouldn't let me."

Jason backed Milo up against the front door, his hands on Milo's hips, and kissed his neck. "I missed you too." He sucked in Milo's sweet scent. The smell alone triggered feelings of bliss in his chemical pathways and made his inner dog squirm with joy. "I wanted you here with me after Arizona, but we couldn't risk it. I'm sorry that you ever thought—"

Milo dropped to his knees, slipping down the door and through Jason's hands like he was made of quicksilver. Whatever Jason had been about to say flew out of his head. Milo nuzzled Jason's crotch.

Jason gasped. "Oh, um... hmm...."

"I wanted you. A lot. The whole time. I thought about what we did at the hotel."

"Me too," Jason whispered as Milo undid his belt with determination if not finesse. He opened the zipper and pressed his cheek to Jason's underwear-clad erection like it was the most precious thing on earth.

"I love this," Milo sighed, running his nose along Jason's shaft. "Simon told me about human sex. It made me—"

"What? Simon told you about sex?" Jason pushed back enough to look down into Milo's face.

Milo looked up at him, his eyes soft with want. "Yes. I wanted to know."

Jason hated the bitter jealousy he felt. At least it hadn't been Rav. And he couldn't blame Milo for anything he might have done while they were apart. He spoke carefully. "Did Simon, um, show you, or...."

Milo rolled his eyes. "No! That's not a very smart question, Jason. I want *you*."

"Oh. Well, that's fine then."

"He told me about things I wanted to try. Like this." Milo pulled down the elastic on Jason's briefs and sucked Jason's erection into his mouth.

Jason's knees went weak. He scrabbled to find purchase on the door. He leaned forward to prop his forehead against the wood and closed his eyes. One hand went down to Milo's soft curls. Oh. Hrmm. *Wow.* That was an incredible sensation. Oh *hell*.

It was clear Milo had never done this before, but he was gentle and he trembled with his own excitement. Milo experimented with sucking and nuzzling and with running the flat of his tongue along the underside of Jason's cock. Jason tangled his fingers into Milo's curls. He moved his hips slightly back and forth, and Milo made happy noises in his throat. It was perfect. It was too perfect. The rocket launch was in danger of going off prematurely, and that would be terribly anti-climatic. Jason wanted to welcome Milo home properly.

He allowed himself to enjoy Milo's mouth for a moment longer. Milo ran his hands up and down Jason's back, tugging his pants down farther so he could skim his palms from thigh to buttock to ribs and back down. Jason had missed Milo's touch so desperately. It was heaven. Finally, Jason had to pull away or face the immediate consequences.

"Oh. Milo, *Jesus*, come here."

"Was it okay?" Milo asked as Jason hauled him to his feet.

"Okay? It was a ten. No, a twelve."

Milo giggled. "You can't say 'twelve', Jason."

Jason kissed the laughter out of his mouth. He crowded Milo against the door again, loving the way he tasted of both of them now. Milo should taste like both of them, *smell* like both of them forever. Jason thumbed open the button on Milo's jeans and lowered the zip. His erection felt like a rod of white-hot steel when Jason wrapped his hand around it. It felt as though it would burn his palm. Milo arched into the touch with a cry, and he grabbed Jason's hips.

"Let's make love in *our* bed," Jason suggested, murmuring the words into Milo's ear.

Milo shivered. "Yes!" He slipped out from between Jason and the door and dragged Jason down the hall by the hand.

When they reached the bedroom, Jason reached for the hem of Milo's shirt and tugged it over his head as Milo kicked off his pants. God, he was beautiful. Everything about him was appealing. Jason could hardly believe this extraordinary creature was his.

"What else did you hear about sex that you want to try?" he teased breathlessly.

"This." Milo crawled onto the bed on all fours and looked over his shoulder at Jason. He suddenly looked shy. "I want you to cover me. I want you all over me on the outside, and I want you inside me too."

Jason swallowed. The fullness in his groin surged at the words. "That's, um, not as easy for human males as it is for females. We'd have to prepare you."

Milo frowned. "Oh. Do you know how?" "Yes."

Milo stared at him, biting his lip worriedly, as if wondering what Jason was waiting for. Or maybe afraid Jason didn't want to. But Jason did want that. Exactly that. He wanted to join with Milo, right then, and in the strongest possible way.

Milo looked so long and lean, posed naked on the bed like that. His thighs were surprisingly muscular and the bottom of his feet looked tender and soft where they were turned up against the duvet. His ass was sweet and plump and perfectly designed for Jason's hands. His forearms trembled where they propped him up—not with strain but with desire. He was still very hard, his erection angled like a counterweight between his thighs and belly. His face was turned to look over his shoulder and his eyes were open and unguarded, and so full of unfiltered love it was almost frightening.

Jason would have given anything to be able to take a photo of Milo like this, of this precise moment, to keep for all time. He stored one in his heart instead.

He took a deep breath and moved. He stripped off the rest of his clothes so there was nothing between them. Then he slid his hands up Milo's legs and kissed his back.

Everywhere. He wanted to kiss Milo *everywhere*. He kissed his way up Milo's spine, marveling at his golden skin. It was ridiculously soft, as tender as a newborn's. He kissed Milo's shoulders, which necessitated crawling up behind him and curving around Milo's back.

Milo groaned and arched, trapping Jason's cock between their bodies. A primal urge to penetrate—*now*—washed through Jason and left him panting and shaking. He struggled to push it aside.

Patience. Patience.

He nuzzled Milo's neck, drinking in the strong scent behind his ears, then kissed his way down Milo's back again.

"Jason," Milo gasped. "Want you."

"Want you too," Jason murmured, though he had no intention of hurrying up.

He dipped his tongue in the shallow dimples at the base of Milo's spine, felt the gorgeous curve where ass met thigh, and pulled Milo open a little with his thumbs revealing a sweet-looking pink core. He was so perfectly made! For a moment, the scientist in Jason's brain couldn't help but marvel over how such a lovely human specimen could have evolved from what was once all dog.

It was a miracle, Jason thought. How had he ever doubted it?

"Jason, touch me!" Milo complained impatiently, pressing back into Jason's hands.

Very earthy magic, apparently. Well, then.

Jason bent down and licked from Milo's balls, over his perineum, and up to the dip in his spine. Milo squeaked in surprise, but Jason was pleased to note he held very, very still and didn't pull away. Jason did it again, more slowly, wriggling his tongue, tasting. The sound Milo made this time was a long, drawn-out groan. His arched his back farther, offering himself up with a silent plea. His breathing was loud and labored. He tasted of cinnamon and clean skin and of something dark and sexual and primal that made Jason's hands tingle as more blood left his extremities.

He gripped Milo's hips and held him tight for a long, probing taste. The more he worked his tongue and teeth, the more Milo gasped and wriggled. And the more Milo wriggled and moaned, the more Jason wanted to eat him alive.

Milo was moving so much, lost in pleasure, that Jason could feel the heavy weight of his erection bobbing around. And that made him crave it, *need* it. He reached around and let it bob against his fingers with the motion of Milo's hips. *Oh God. Yes*.

He couldn't resist it any longer. He pulled back, panting, and stroked Milo's thighs. "Lay on your back, Milo. I want to see you."

"But..." Milo protested shakily, obviously thinking he was in the ideal position already.

That made Jason smile. "We're still going to do that, Milo. But do this first, for me."

Milo moved higher up the bed on all fours before turning and flopping down on his back. He had a dark red flush from his sternum up his chest and neck, his eyes were half-lidded, and the plum-colored head of his erection had fully emerged from the foreskin. He looked wrecked and so very real. He seemed weighted, as if time had stopped there, at this moment, and Milo had gained an extra dimension. He could never be more or less than he was right then, could never age a day. And anything that was not-Milo was totally insignificant.

Jason swallowed a lump of emotion in his throat. *This is what true love feels like*, he thought. He'd had no idea a mere emotion could be so big and so real. He fumbled with the bedside table and took out a jar of Vaseline. His fingers felt like they didn't belong to him as he opened the lid and coated two fingers.

Milo watched him, utterly trusting, as Jason knelt over him again. There were no words to be said as Jason's jelly-coated fingers slipped to where his tongue had just been. Milo put his feet on the bed and parted his legs wide. He put one knuckle in his mouth and bit it. With the other hand, he reached for Jason.

Jason took Milo's wrist with his free hand, but he bent his head to Milo's belly. With great care, Jason allowed himself to taste Milo's cock while he used fingers to open him. He wanted to taste him deeply, but he didn't want Milo to come from this, and he could tell Milo was close. There was a copper flavor to his precome that spoke of desperation, and he was utterly rigid. Milo dug his heels into the bed and lifted his hips, silently asking for more of everything. A stream of broken sounds came from his throat, utterly without shame or self-consciousness.

The heat of Milo's body was intoxicating. His temperature ran a few degrees above normal at all times, but in his arousal, it was compounded. His shaft was searing against Jason's lips, and the smooth heat of his inner walls was like an oven. He opened to Jason's fingers with moist, warm give.

Jason made himself pull away. Too shaky to say a word, or even give Milo a reassuring smile, he rubbed his cock with Vaseline, pulled up Milo's thighs, and sank home.

He tried to go slow, his eyes locked with Milo's. But Milo was soft all the way in, his body welcoming, and Jason bottomed out in one long thrust. He felt weak, momentarily overwhelmed. He lowered to his elbows, bracing them on either side of Milo's ribs. Milo wrapped his calves around the backs of Jason's thighs and his arms around his shoulders.

"This," Milo gasped. "Jason."

"I know."

They didn't last long, but Jason made love to Milo with all that he had, touching him everywhere he could reach and stopping often to lean down and kiss him. When Milo took that roaming hand and placed it over his too-hard prick, Jason didn't resist but tugged him firmly. And when Milo came, the sound of bliss in his mouth, Jason was more than ready to join him. He closed his eyes and felt the strong contractions of his orgasm pulse with Milo's ebbing ones like two beating hearts. It had never felt like this—pleasure tightly wrapped with emotion, and all of it as bottomless as the night sky and as bright as the stars.

He slumped to the bed. Milo's release was sticky between them, and Jason half rolled, pulling Milo tightly into his arms. As if he couldn't be close enough, Milo wrapped one arm and leg around him too, his face in Jason's hair.

"I love you. The most. Is that what people say?" Milo murmured.

Jason smiled against Milo's chin. "That's what people say. I love you too. Please don't...."

"Don't what?"

Jason took a breath, trying to find his logical voice. "Don't ever leave me, Milo. No matter how stupid I am, or how cranky, or how much I work, or if I say something that hurts your feelings, or put the milk back in the cupboard instead of the fridge because I'm distracted. I don't function well without you."

"I will never leave you," Milo said solemnly.

"And I will never leave you, Milo." Jason promised. He meant it with all his heart. Nothing had ever been as important to Jason as Milo was. Not the work, not anything. And nothing ever would be.

Jason had almost dozed off when Milo got up and bounded out of bed. He returned with a large glass of water and sat cross-legged, sipping it. He offered it to Jason. The cold liquid and the excitement in Milo's eyes woke Jason up, and he pushed up to sit against the headboard.

"There are jobs for me," Milo said, as if they'd been in the middle of a discussion. "I can help make cabins or clean things. Or Bill says I can help at the clinic with people who are sick."

Jason didn't love the idea of Milo being gone all day at a job. But he would certainly support him if that's what he wanted to do. "Is that what you want?"

"I would like to help people. Sometimes I miss the hospice."

"We could go visit the hospice if you want."

Milo looked sad. His fingers picked at the sheet. "They don't know me like this, only in my fur. And it's a far drive."

Jason nodded. "I'm sorry. But you could do a lot of good working at the clinic here."

"Okay. But... I want to work with you too."

"With me?"

Milo bit his lip nervously, as if he was afraid Jason would say no. "You always have so much work to do. And it's very important work. I can help."

Jason felt a glow of pleasure at that. "That's true, Milo. There is a lot of work to be done to solidify my research. And it is important work. I suppose I'm just starting to understand how important it really is, and for whom."

"How many years of school would I have to make to catch up to you?"

Jason smiled. Milo was so cute when he was being serious. "It's not necessary for you to catch up with me to help me in the lab."

"How many?" Milo insisted.

"Well. Let's see. I had twenty years of schooling. But some of those years did more for the university's coffers than they did for me."

Milo's eyes grew wide. "Twenty years! That's a long time."

Jason set the glass on the bedside table and pulled Milo close. "You wouldn't have to do all that. Right now, just focus on your reading and writing. Eventually we can work on getting your GED, and you can take some extra science classes. If that's what you want. You don't have to do that for my sake."

"But if I did, then I could help you?"

"Milo, you already help me. You've helped me to understand the importance of grief in the process of becoming quickened. And you help me stay calm and focused. And you help in many other ways besides."

Milo made a dubious face. "I want to learn how to make the columns like you do on the computer and use the microscope and camera and *everything*."

"We can work on that." Jason playfully tugged on a lock of Milo's hair.

He thought about how he'd felt when he left JVT, that studying the quickened was such an enormous task, and he was so alone in it—no help, no assistants, no one who cared. He hadn't even known who he was doing the work for. He didn't feel that way anymore.

"I'm not sure how much I can pay you," Jason said. He only had so much in savings, and at the moment there was no new income on the horizon. He should probably look for something part-time, something he could do remotely. He thought about the town too, and how they desperately needed a source of funding.

Milo frowned at him. "Pay me? What do you mean?"

Jason opened his mouth to explain. He was going to tell Milo how things worked out in the real world, about employers and employees and benefit plans. He could tell Milo about salaries and biannual raises, about the unfortunate exchange of giving up hours of your life to something you found tedious in exchange for the cash you needed to live.

Then he realized Milo didn't need to know all that. Mad Creek wasn't like the real world. It didn't have that harsh economy. Everyone here did

whatever was necessary to take care of the town and each other. And the town found a way to take care of them all. It shouldn't work, and it was frustrating as hell to an organized man like Jason, but in a way, it was freeing too.

He drew a finger down the long curve of Milo's shoulder. "I tell you what. We'll live together and work together and be happy. The rest will come. Okay?"

"Okay," said Milo. He bit his lip and looked at Jason from under his lashes. "I have another question. It's very important."

Jason felt a pang of worry. "What is it?"

"Do you think... maybe... if this is my home now... I could have a dog?"

Jason pulled back to get a better look at Milo's face. "A dog?"

"Jack." Milo nervously picked at the sheet with his long fingers. "He's the dog who was hurt in the desert? I promised him he could live with me if he got better. I know I shouldn't promise him, because I didn't have a home then, but he needed a reason to live, Jason."

Milo looked so hopeful. Jason could hardly refuse. "Milo, this is your home now. If you want Jack to come live with us, that's fine."

"Really?" Milo's face lit up with joy.

"Of course."

"Yay! I have to call Rav and tell him!" Milo jumped up, naked as a summer day, and ran off to make the call.

Jason had a sudden intuition that he and Milo would end up with a *lot* of dogs.

Well. There were worse things in life than a mate with a generous heart.

Jason sank down into the bed, still smiling. He had no trouble at all going to sleep.

Epilogue

Two Months Later

Jason was on the computer looking at new research on agnatha DNA. The jawless fish, or agnatha, was one of the few non-insect species to undergo a physical metamorphosis in its lifetime. In agnatha, the mutation process was controlled by the thyroid hormone. There was intriguing new data showing which genes the hormone switched on.

He was also half listening to Milo, who was filming an interview with Gus at the interview table.

"Uh-huh," Milo said. "Did Mrs. Anderson ever yell at you and make you feel sad? Right here?" Milo rubbed a spot under his breastbone.

"One time. She yelled at me because I growled and tried to bite a man who came to the door. It wasn't fair that she yelled at me. He wasn't a nice man. I could tell!"

"No, huh-uh," Milo agreed. "That would make me sad too." He typed a few computer keys, checking off the columns on the Excel sheet Jason had rigged up with symbols and emoticons. "That was the only time she made you sad?"

"The only time," Gus said fervently. "She was the best!"

Milo took Gus's hand. "I have to ask a hard question now. Did you know she was sick before she died?"

Gus drooped like a wilting flower. "Yes. She was sick for a while."

"For how long? How many nights? Do you remember?"

Gus shrugged. "A few weeks, I think?"

"Were you scared?" Milo asked sympathetically.

Jason turned back to his research, pleased at what he'd heard. He put in his earphones so he could focus on his own work. He was still struggling with the "newly in love" desire to be with Milo, or to simply watch him or listen to him, all the time. Fortunately, things were slowly normalizing.

They'd been able to get detailed histories from their subjects lately. Two things had helped. First was a shift in attitude in the town. Jason had an unspoken respect since the virus outbreak, and more quickened now understood there was a good reason behind his work, that it was important to understand their community as much as possible. The second thing was Milo. He was infinitely better at communicating with other quickened than Jason had ever been. He was able to speak to them without insulting them every other sentence or making them sob uncontrollably. That was a plus.

Milo was also being called upon now and then to help Bill McGurver at the clinic when he treated a painful injury. And Lily took him along to the birthing of the Sweeney's baby. Ruth Sweeney told everyone who would listen how much Milo helped with her pain and fear. Jason didn't begrudge Milo's comfort work, but he did miss Milo when he was out of the house, even if it was only for one of Lily's classes. Jason's dog was hopelessly smitten.

After Gus left, it was time for lunch. They put their black lab, Jack, on a leash and walked down to the diner. It was a gorgeous summer day, hot and sunny, so after they ate, they strolled through the town park.

The park was busy, as usual. Everyone greeted Milo and Jason by name. Milo hugged them all, and because Jason was with Milo, he got hugs too. He didn't mind. Even when he wasn't in the mood to be social, and was feeling bristly or distracted, hugs put him in a better temper. As Milo would say, that made Jason more productive, which meant hugs were *useful*. Milo was very good at convincing Jason of things. Anything, really.

They came across Tim and Lance having lunch on a park bench. Baby Molly was playing at their feet while Renfield, their dog, lay under the bench in the shade. Milo hugged all four of them before plopping down to play with Molly and Jack. Molly grabbed handfuls of grass in her fists and offered the torn bits to Milo. He pretended to eat them.

"Want some tomatoes?" Tim asked Jason, offering a Tupperware bowl of small orange orbs.

"We just had lunch," Jason said. He hesitated. "Are these Sungolds?" "Yup."

"Mmm." Jason took two. Tim's Sungold cherry tomatoes were the best things at the Mad Creek Farmer's Market. They were bright orange, sweet as candy, and popped when you bit into them like a mini explosion.

He grabbed another tomato and fed it to Milo, who was still seated on the grass. Jack gave him a baleful look because he didn't get one.

"Milo, Lily tells us you're already reading in a second-grade primer," Tim commented, his voice fond.

"Yes," Milo said with a pleased smile. "Jason put a game on his phone that helps me learn to read, and I play it a lot."

"Which is why we're getting you your own phone," Jason said dryly.

"And how's *your* work going, Doctor?" Lance asked. He had his arms along the back of the bench behind Tim, and his face was tilted to take in the sun. He didn't even bother to open his eyes.

"Quite well actually." Jason pushed the glasses up on his nose. "I've been testing the effect of various hormones on the expression of certain genes. Also, it was recently discovered that so-called 'junk DNA', which researchers always thought was non-coding and meaningless, can actually become coding with the right inducers. That's opened up several new hypotheses. If you want to hear about them, we could arrange a small symposium, maybe at city hall."

Tim had a glazed look. Lance opened his eyes to give Jason a blank stare.

"Molly got three new back teeth this week," Tim said helpfully.

"She did?" Lance sat up anxiously. "I only saw two. When did she get the third?"

"It's right here," Tim put a finger in his own mouth to show the position. "She muth ha grroot it lath ni."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lance looked hurt.

"Hon, I didn't think about it. I'm sorry."

God. *Parents*. Raising offspring apparently degraded one's mental acuity. That probably deserved a scientific study as well, but Jason was happy to let some other sucker do it. He glanced down at Milo, who was

being taught patty-cake by Molly, and wondered if he would be as inane as Tim and Lance, were offspring ever to happen to them.

Well, granted, it wasn't going to just *happen* to them, seeing as how they were both males. But at this point, Jason had given up trying to predict his life, especially his life with Milo.

"Who's that?" Lance's voice was sharp.

Jason followed his gaze to an expensive-looking sedan that was creeping along the street by the park.

"I don't recognize the car," said Tim.

Lance hopped up and stalked toward the slow-moving vehicle with a glower. Jason caught a glimpse of the driver's face when he rolled down his window to talk to Lance. And for a moment, the way the sun fell on his features, he almost looked like....

A shiver went through Jason. But the moment passed. The man ducked back inside to get his license and registration.

"What is it, Jason? What's wrong?" Milo stood up and put his hand on Jason's waist.

"I thought I saw...."

"Who?"

Jason shook his head. It couldn't be Korgan Rainier, the head of research for JVT. It was just a trick of the light.

"Nothing. Never mind."

He gripped Milo's hand and forced a smile. But somehow, the bright sunshine of the day was dimmed and the happy atmosphere in the park felt ominous, like the calm before the storm.

There was still danger out there for Mad Creek, and Jason's subconscious had just reminded him of that fact. Jason shivered against a cold creep of dread. *Shit. No wonder Lance is so driven all the time*. This was followed swiftly by *Thank God for Lance Beaufort*.

Jason shook his head, astonished at the thought. Perhaps the constant dose of oxytocin, dopamine, and other "being in love" chemicals was having an effect on *his* intellect.

Baby Molly let out a high-pitched screech-babble, explaining something to Jack as she held out her fist to him. Jack carefully nosed her chubby fingers as if he understood. The slow-moving car pulled away, and Lance walked toward them with a satisfied smile.

And the tension broke. It was, after all, just a beautiful summer day in the park in Mad Creek. And Lance Beaufort was still annoying. Whatever was waiting down the line for them, today was a very good day.

Jason looked up at the sky. The sun was a star, technically speaking. He closed his eyes and thought hard. Then he pulled Milo in and kissed him soundly on the lips.

"What did you wish for?" Milo asked with a knowing smile.

"I can't tell you, because then it doesn't work."

"That's not logical, Jason," Milo said seriously.

Jason laughed. "No, but I still won't tell you. What do you say we head back to work?"

Milo appeared to consider it. "I think you need a sex break when we get back to the cabin." He squeezed Jason's ass. "You're too tense to work."

"You think so, do you?"

"That's my opinion as a scientist," said Milo without a trace of irony.

And who was Jason to argue with that?



About Eli Easton

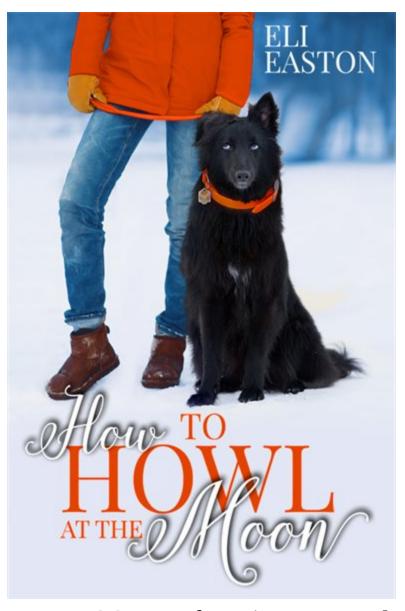
ELI EASTON has been at various times and under different names a minister's daughter, a computer programmer, a game designer, the author of paranormal mysteries, a fanfiction writer, an organic farmer, and a profound sleeper. She is now happily embarking on yet another incarnation, this time as an m/m romance author.

As an avid reader of such, she is tickled pink when an author manages to combine literary merit, vast stores of humor, melting hotness, and eye-dabbing sweetness into one story. She promises to strive to achieve most of that most of the time. She currently lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with her husband, three bulldogs, three cows, and six chickens. All of them (except for the husband) are female, hence explaining the naked men that have taken up residence in her latest fiction writing.

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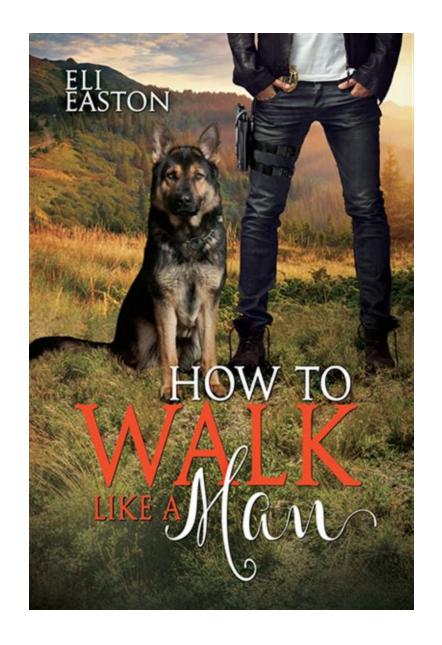
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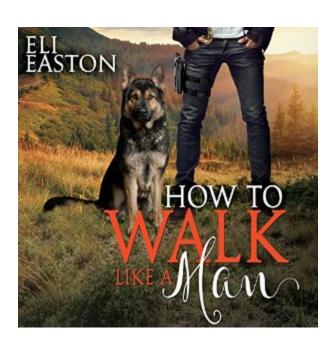
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