

## Prologue

No one paid any attention to the feline on the sidewalk. He was a young man, young enough that any good bartender would have asked to see his driver's license. He couldn't find it now, his wallet was somehow missing though he couldn't figure out why or how he had lost it along with all the other contents of his pockets. He was long-limbed and slim, tall and slender and very noticeable with the tips of his ears and his fluffy white tail dyed an electric shade of green. But no one noticed.

He'd tried everything he could think of by now. At first he'd thought it was some sort of elaborate joke, but even after he'd wandered away from the school campus *still* no one would speak to him. They wouldn't even acknowledge that he was there. If it was a prank, it was the biggest one he'd ever seen. And it wasn't funny. Not in the slightest. He was almost twenty-two and was on scholarship for athletics, basketball more precisely. He shouldn't have been so close to tears. All he could think to do was keep walking until he got far enough away that he reached the perimeter of whatever horrible joke this was, and if he had to walk all the way back to Massachusetts to do that then he would. Surely his mother wouldn't pretend he wasn't there, even if his rotten brothers would probably be in on the joke.

"Say something you bastard!" he snapped at a man, canine, spotted, business suit, who'd almost walked into him before he noticed and dodged out of the way. He'd tried to grab people before and it hadn't worked. His reflexes were supposed to be excellent, how they managed to dodge his hands so effortlessly baffled him. "Hello!" he shouted again, trying to at least make someone flinch. Those stupid stories in the mandatory literature class about shunning as a punishment made a hell of a lot more sense now. This was *horrible*. He'd almost rather be dead-

"William?"

The young feline froze, twisting to find the source of the voice. His name. Maybe someone hadn't gotten the memo about the prank or whatever yet. God, he didn't care who it was, just anyone he could talk to for five minutes would be enough.

At first he didn't see anyone who might have been the speaker, they all seemed to be still going about whatever business they were using as a reason they didn't notice him. Talking on the phone. Window shopping. Drinking coffee, which he couldn't get the vender to sell to him even before he realized his wallet had disappeared. He couldn't figure out how even the businesses were in on it. Was this going to be on TV? Everyone was too busy, just as they had been all evening. Everyone except one canine.

He was not tall, perhaps scraping by at average if one were to be kind about it, and slender in that awkward way that promises just a bit more growth might be expected. His fur was soft gold and had grown out around his triangular ears to be fluffed and messy, and those ears just didn't quite stand up straight. Will's hope fell when he noticed the stupid Tealtooth poking out from under a clump of fur. Of course. He was just talking to someone else, like all the others were.

"Bet you think you're really funny huh?" he muttered, crossing the street to glare at the golden canine. A mutt, probably, he didn't look like any of the pure breeds Will knew about but then again Will never especially cared about that bloodline crap. He also didn't seem to be as good as the others at this prank because his path changed when Will moved towards him. Maybe he could get an answer out of this one then. He reached to snatch the Tealtooth off the canine's ear, expecting to be dodged in that odd, effortless way again. Instead, his fingers caught on the small canine's knuckles as he quickly covered the device on his ear with a hand.

"It's not funny, no," the canine said, his voice was still quiet but it was easy to pick up on the slow, thick accent coloring his words. The dog sounded like he'd wandered right out of some black-and-white gunslinger movie. He paused to readjust the Tealtooth on his ear as Will looked at his hand. The canine felt so much warmer than he'd expected. Not uncomfortably warm, it wasn't like he was hot to the touch or anything. Will had never had circulation problems, his fingers shouldn't feel cold in July. Maybe if he'd been able to buy a hotdog earlier he wouldn't be feeling so cold and unwell.

That, Will realized, must have been why everyone was dodging him now. He must be all worn out and hungry. With a growl, he reached to snatch the Tealtooth again, or at least grab the canine who was slower than all the others so that he could *make* him talk. The canine startled and ducked, but Will caught a handful of that fluffy fur and one of his ears and watched with satisfaction as dog winced. "Not right now. I'll meet you at the park okay?" he said, his fingers fumbling

over the grip Will had on his fur, "I have to go, alright?" he added, a note of pleading entering his voice now. Will yanked and twisted, drawing a small hiss of pain as a clump of the fur came free.

"Talk to me! I know you can hear me!" Will roared, well past caring that he could get in trouble for being rough with someone. An assault charge would require people to talk to him.

"Yes, at the park. You know, the one with the waterfall near-" The dog's voice squeaked up a pitch as his brown eyes began to water in pain. "Near East 51<sup>st</sup>."

"You better mean me," Will growled, letting go and watching the blonde stumble half a step.

"Of course. Talk to you in a bit," he finished, tapping the Tealtooth and brushing a hand gingerly through the spot Will had gripped. Slowly, with the green-dyed feline all but treading on his heels, the canine wove his way through the predawn city. Even at this hour it was still busier by far than the town Will had grown up in. He just couldn't get used to this place, no matter how familiar some of the streets became. Once he was finished school he was going straight back to Massachusetts to find a job there. New York was too crowded, and most of the people that made it crowded seemed to be weird or unfriendly or both.

When they came to the park it was a surprise to Will. It really did have a waterfall, along with trees and bushes. How had he never seen it? Three years of school in this city and he never found this tiny, perfect little spot of green. Will startled when he realized he had stopped, it was a pretty park but he wasn't about to lose his one person by staring like a moron at the hidden garden. Luckily, the canine didn't seem to be trying to lose him. He'd stopped to idly play with the leaves on a bush while Will stared around like a tourist. The dog only finished ducking around a tree into a small alcove of green once Will had nearly caught up with him.

The canine settled onto a small wooden bench, then slid over a bit more as though he was actually making room for Will's long legs. "You going to tell me what the fuck's going on?" he demanded as he sat beside the stranger, half afraid that the canine with the cowboy accent was going to join the others in pretending Will didn't exist.

"You're not going to like it," the canine admitted softly, his brown eyes on the ground. He swung his foot as he spoke, he was just short enough to actually manage the childish action without banging his toes by accident.

"What, is this some stupid hidden camera show?" Will spat, folding his arms as he stared down the small canine.

"No."

"Well then how do you know my name, huh? I've never met you before," Will pointed out triumphantly. Puppy hadn't thought of that now had he, Will was sure he'd caught him there.

"Yes you have. Chemistry 100 over the summer. Professor Blaum at *god why* in the morning, he would drone on and on and if we didn't need a science to graduate I'd probably have slept straight through lecture hall. You used to sit on the middle-right," the canine added, and Will glowered.

"So what, you just remember the names of everyone you see? We never even *talked*, I don't remember anyone else from that stupid class."

"I'm good at faces," the canine said, looking up at Will again then. "My name's Jake." His eyes slid shyly away from the feline's unwavering stare. "Mostly everyone calls me Cowboy, but I really do rather Jake."

Will knew which name he'd have gone with, listening to the little canine talk like he did. But it was more important for him to stay on the dog's good side, for now. "Fine. *Jake*. I still don't know why you're the only one talking to me. Even my damn friends wouldn't."

Jake cringed slightly, fiddling with a bit of fraying thread on the knee of his jeans for a moment. "Ah.... William... what were you doing when this all started?"

"The hell does it matter?" Will demanded, though when Jake didn't say anything he rolled his eyes and answered. "Was meeting my lousy friends for a drink. Must've forgotten my wallet. I thought they were giving me a hard time over it

but I have no idea how they got everyone else to do it the whole damn night.”

“It's not a prank William-”

“Will, not William, gah.”

“...Will. It's not a prank. You... you're...” Jake fumbled, fingers digging into the fabric of his jeans until they trembled with the strain of his grip. “I'm so sorry. You're dead.”