Book One of The Snow Adventures

Braxton Snow P.I.

Danny C. Estes

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A Fantasy Novel

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Chapter 1:

Jobs Come and Go

My place of business? That depended on who you asked. If you talked to any of the local residents, including myself, we'd all tell you North of Tigris street in Furlton City, a major metropolis at the south tip of Burrland, a semi-cold continent near the top of the world. But if you asked an old sect of scholars, whose arguable beliefs and low membership were fast becoming outdated by each newer generation of animals, they'd tell you the city of Furlton resided on a long dead ancient site known as Selfoss, Iceland, a city where the hairless apes once lived before they mysteriously vanished from life on this earth some ten thousand years ago.

So whether you called it Selfoss or Furlton, Iceland or Burrland, the name mattered not to me. Whatever the local mail service labeled my address was what I went by, that was if I wanted my mail delivered. Of course there were times I wished they would lose my mail. Anyway…I digress. My office, if you could call a janitor's closet an office in the twelve-story high rise, was on the fifth floor, south side, room 523 and ½. The other half of 523 was the male's relief station. I believe you can understand me now.

On this particular cool April night, I stood leaning on the window frame to look out the small open glass window by the use of my eggshell-tinted fingernail on the slatted blinds. It'd been one of those days where you wish you could take the law into your own two paws and shake the bejeezus out of it.

Some two hours ago, I'd finished my paperwork on Ms. Wibert's case file. She'd hired me last week to aid her fight against her ex-mate's claims on her four-year-old nestlings, a cute, male and female set of twins. Unfortunately, the

paperwork she'd signed before the wedding was unbreakable. The documents plainly stipulated whichever parent held the better job toward maintaining a stable lifestyle, in case of a divorce, would inherit any and all Owlets derived from their union. There were, of course, stipulations. If the Owl with the better job lacked the impulse to raise the chicks, then the ex-spouse would inherit the responsibility; however, the welfare still fell on the shoulders of the other. But in this case, Mr. Wibert clearly wished to claim the Owlets. Thus Ms. Wibert hired me to ferret out, pardon the pun, any exceptions to the written document she could use to keep her chicks. What I found in my investigation was that even though he was a bastard owl from an orphanage, with some bad habits, nothing in the stipulations applied to him. I can tell you I bent the written rules as far as they would go without breaking the law to meet up with one or two laws.

With a long sigh, I glanced at the bright sky above, partially obscured by passing clouds and a flock of geese returning from their winter retreat.

At eighteen hundred, there would be another three to four hours of daylight left. *Plenty of time for me to get home before night falls.* I lowered my gaze to the traffic below and smelled the cascading scents borne on the wind that swirled into my office through the opening. Canines, Felines, Birds, Bears, Rabbits, Horses, Raccoons, Weasels and a sprinkling of Pandas passed relatively peaceably by each other like ants on the pedestrian walkways in front of the office buildings. Walkways were for those not so flush to hire a rickshaw or those who simply wished to walk and enjoy the nice weather. On the cobblestone street, rickshaws aplenty awaited to transport those animals who were better off or with average-paying jobs. Lastly came the occasional lone carriage for the upper crust, who ultimately made up the laws that all of us had to deal with.

Not that I was complaining much, mind you. Most laws were honestly set for all animals to abide by, but there were those few laws meant solely to protect the rich. Such as harsher jail terms on convicted animals who dared overstep their bounds against the higher echelon. However, I would argue that an animal convicted of killing another animal in the commitment of a crime should get the

same sentence. Not a slap on the paw for harming an average animal while death sentences are passed out for harming the rich.

With a shake of my head to dislodge useless thoughts of local laws I held no hope of changing, I glanced up and down the street, feeling the cool air ruffle through the white fur around my muzzle, neck and exposed chest. Knock-off time for most working animals was seventeen hundred. For the most part, that was why I still lingered in my office. I really disliked shuffling around in traffic. Not that I was claustrophobic in any sense of the word. No, it was simply that I loathed the bombardment of scents that kept my primordial instincts constantly labeling threat or non-thereat due to the fact, in reality, I wasn't as civilized as the common animal living in the city.

Be that as it may, I was here and abided by their rules, unlike those my clientele hired me out to investigate. The second reason I still resided in my small office was the fact my office glass door advertised that I was open until nineteen hundred. But then, as owner and sole proprietor of my business–if you could call a lone wolf employee that–my hours were as I wished.

I straightened out my light blue denim waistcoat and turned from the view to sit at my pine wood desk. A pull of the first drawer brought out my long-stemmed, S-shaped pipe, which I inspected and filled with a blend of spearmint and caffeine leaves. A small habit I allowed myself as a gentle reminder of a primitive lifestyle I once had.

I struck a match and puffed. With a shake of my paw to put out the match I popped it in a glazed white clay cup I'd filled with water to make certain no ember remained alive to incinerate my small office and the accumulation of fifteen years of cases. A couple more puffs and then I bit on the stem to work paws-free at straightening up Ms. Wibert's case file before I slid it into an addressed yellow envelope for delivery.

I looked at the breakdown of fees for my time. Two fifty a day for six days. Seven fifty for information from corporations, neighbors and police records. Five hundred to loosen tongues. Another three twenty-five for an extra

animal to keep track of Mr. Wibert while I broke into his new nest, his office and female-friend's nest for an inspection of any items or documents that could be used against him. Add ten percent tax on total transaction to pay the city's emergency personnel and city officials. All told, three thousand three hundred eighty-three bank notes, less of course my fee of five hundred due upon accepting the job.

I set my pencil down and looked at the portrait of the four of them together when they were a happy couple, or at least seemed to be. They looked a fine family. Ms. Wibert's big yellow and black eyes looked to be glowing in the portrait. So filled with love and pride.

For a brief moment I recalled similar eyes. Deep brown eyes that were filled with such pride after I'd passed the test of adulthood two years earlier than the normal passage at sixteen. I removed my pipe and closed my ice blue eyes before I pinched my snout to exile the image of my mother, which brought on pangs of homesickness and my feeling of loss when I left my family.

When I succeeded in banishing her image back into the past, I took a couple puffs on my pipe before I glanced at my paperwork and fees. *All these bank notes wasted on me because Mr. Wibert wanted a younger Owlet companion with a better figure at his side after being promoted in his job.*

I sighed and looked off at the opaque glass door some three meters distance. *Owls were supposed to mate for life. So were a lot of animals, but that seemed to be a dying instinct.* I let a snarl roll over my lips at how he'd used Ms. Wibert's bank account for schooling to advance in his career while denying her employment anywhere in order to keep their nest clean and watch over their chicks. It was a tactic used by driven males to climb the ladder of success that often times led to the wives being dumped for younger ones, like Ms. Wibert, in this case.

"Oh hell," I said aloud, "I'm just a softy." I took up my bill to Ms. Wibert, stamped it *Paid in Full* and tossed this copy into my accounting file. I then wrote out a new receipt, all fees paid, signed it, and slid it into the yellow

envelop to be mailed to her on my way home. Although I could cheat myself out of my rightful fees, I could not do so with the city taxes. I wrote out a check for three hundred and eight bank notes, signed it and dropped it in the slot that would send it to the collection box downstairs. This would keep me in good standing with the city, but not with my bank account, which when I looked yesterday would cover the note but left me nearing double digits for the third time this year.

Annoyed at myself for my soft-heartedness, which was the real reason I left home when I was just fifteen, I sat back and puffed my pipe, allowing my eyes to unfocus and allow my mind's eye to bring up images of my parents and two younger twin sisters. Though my cub-hood had been relatively simple, as the years passed I found my disposition balking concerning certain clan activities.

I remained lost in those memories until a sound outside in the corridor had my right ear swivel to the noise. A second later I brought my eyes up to a silhouette that arose on my door from the outside corridor. Curiosity gained my interest and I happily forgot about my family to watch the silhouette coalesce into roughly a female form as it drew closer.

It wasn't until the knees were backlit that I saw the cut of a dress stopping at mid-thigh. She turned slightly, casting a shadow of small breasts. With her sex confirmed, I sniffed the air to determine her animal family, but as yet the air unit over my head gave little scent for me to analyze. *Of course it would help tremendously if the damn thing worked*, I grumbled. I gave the unit a glare with a curled lip at the inefficiency of the maintenance crew who'd promised they'd have it fix last February. Disgruntled, I rolled my eyes and lowered my gaze to the female who stopped at my door to examine my name, hours, and, lower on the door still, my fees. This last information I'd added to my door to turn away unsure prospective clients. Although my fees were not outlandishly high, the mention of five hundred bank notes up front tended to cool the heels of those who had not truly considered the costs of hiring a private

investigator.

I sat up and palmed my pipe. A glance on the clock to my left, slightly obscured by a growing layer of smoke, showed two minutes to nineteen hundred. She turned her wrist, obviously taking note of the time on her watch. Her long bushy tail twitched and I thought I caught movement of her ears, which poked out of shoulder-length hair, if I wasn't mistaken. Still figuring out her species for the sport of it, I nixed a raccoon, being her snout was too short. A red panda didn't seem to fit for the same reason. Which left the obvious Canine family, as she definitely wasn't of the Feline or Mustelid family, being her snout was too long. Of course the Canine family was big, about forty or so known variations of us in all. Including myself. But as most had tails as bushy as hers, I was left having to gain more visual clues. *Oh well…*

I puffed on my pipe, content to watch her as she turned her head and stepped closer to the glass door. She used her right paw to shade the light of the hallway from her eyes after shifting her hair out of the way, trying to see inside my office. Her ears laid back in annoyance when she straightened up. I could imagine a few choice words running across her mind. My glass door allowed me to see silhouettes in the corridor but denied the same type of information looking in, especially as I sat behind and to the side of my desk lamp, which put a glare of light between us to obscure my image. With a turn of her wrist to check her watch once more, she made a decision.

It's well documented that young females of every species learn how to manipulate males by observing their mothers in their daily manipulation of fathers with their soft eyes, shapely bodies and a lilting voice. This female outside my door proved her growing knowledge in these antics when she cupped her breasts to shift them up. She then moved her shoulder straps to her biceps to allow enough slack to pull her dress down to expose a larger portion of her breasts. She gave a quick shake of her tail and head to fluff out the hair and then she knocked on the door before she pushed the long handle down to open it. She leaned in at an angle that would allow any occupants to have a good view of her

cleavage.

“Hello, Mr. Snow? Are you in here?”

The small amount of light from outside my window and that of my desk lamp revealed she was of the Vulpes Genus. Specifically, a Red Fox, the most common species of her kind. Presently she wore her flowing red hair brushed over her shoulder with a little cascading over her left eye, a tint of green color covering several strands. She also used green highlights in a pinstripe across her brows that ran down and along her snout until contacting her small black nose, which she’d tinted green as well. Nose-dying was a cosmetic procedure the college females started five years ago. Her right ear held two gold and silver earrings. Around her figure she wore a bright yellow and white summer dress. Her lowering of the dress a third the way down her breasts allowed me to see her lighter yellow lacy bra and its straps going up over her shoulders. In effect, by simply lowering the dress she had changed her modest young lady looks to that of the modern teenaged female firmly in the phase of experimenting in the art of male control with feminine wiles. Her reddish brown eyes, whether real or tinted, shifted to the lower intensity of light in my office. She swung open the door, filling up the vacancy. I saw a brass ring and matching bracelet around her left middle finger and wrist. She also wore an ankle bracelet and middle toe sliver ringlet.

“Mr. Snow, I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

Her vulpes features stood out plainly with the obstacle between us removed. She stood an average height for females of her family at one hundred forty-five centimeters; males stood one hundred fifty-six centimeters on average. Her entrance showed her body covered in long, groomed, healthy red, brown and white fur, so I could assume she was moderately well-off. The tips of her ears sported long black strands of fur, while the underneath of her muzzle was bathed in clean white fur that plunged down her neck and disappeared inside the dress to reemerge on her thighs and end at her knees, where black and red fur flowed to the tips of her toes.

As she sought to charm me into taking up her case, I decided to see how committed she was by acting the part of a normal male.

“Not at all, kitten. Please come in and have a seat.” I stood to my full height of one hundred eighty-four centimeters, and indicated the chair opposite my desk. “Be so kind as to close the door, kitten.” The term kitten really referred to young teenaged felines, but of late it was a local term used for adolescent females of all families; Canines, Felines, Bears, Owls, and so forth. Why was any animal’s guess. With a mental shrug at the reason, I looked her over and placed her age as early twenties, so I watched for any irritation on her part in my use of the word. A flick of the tip of her tail and an ear twitch showed I’d hit the mark. *Now let’s see if she really wishes to continue this masquerade.*

She did as asked and tried to look nonchalant in her travels to the pine chair I’d indicated for my shorter clientele. She easily let her tail fall in-between the V in the chair back, and after using her paws to smooth her dress out, slowly sat down, purposely allowing my eyes a good view of how her breasts filled out her bra.

“Thank you Mr. Snow,” she said once settled and crossed her legs. “I’m at my wits’ end and really need someone’s help.”

“Help is what I supply, kitten,” I said and sat, taking a hold of my pipe to add more leaves. “So tell me, what can I do for you?” I drew a couple of puffs to ignite the newly-added dry leaves.

She folded her paws on her knee to draw my attention to her nice legs and the fact her dress had pulled up her thigh so I could see how toned she kept herself.

“It’s my uncle, Mr. Snow. He’s been missing for a month now and no one knows where he is.”

She moved her paws closer to her torso, feigning she didn’t know her paws rolled her dress a little further up her thigh in the movement.

“I’ve checked the hospitals, morgues, and all his staff with no luck. A couple days after he went missing, I tried the police. So far no animal has seen or

heard from him."

She shifted to the edge of the chair and brought up her paws to clasp under her breasts.

"Please, Mr. Snow. Lieutenant Barkly told me you've experience in finding lost loved ones. Could you please help me find my uncle?"

I puffed on my pipe, thinking despite her female distractions. *Lieutenant Barkly, huh?* An image of a fiftyish bloodhound sitting at his desk hours at a time came to mind. *Now there's a surprise.* I considered the ramifications. *That hound hates P.I.s, especially me for several reasons, one of which is for saving his life. A bit short-sighted of him, as far as I am concerned, but pride in one's abilities can do that. Yet to recommend a private investigator to this vixen means the legal trail has gone so cold only those willing to break miner laws can regain it. Save to give her my name means much more. Hmm…*

She was pushing out her chest in hopes of making her breasts more desirable. I ogled them as she wished, simply to enjoy the sight; after all, I'm an arctic wolf with normal male desires. However, knowing I was allowing her to distract me, I took a couple more puffs and continued to consider the matter. *In recommending me, Barkly was telling me the search was dangerous, and if this uncle of hers is to be found, I'm more qualified than the other P.I.s.* I rolled my eyes up to her large reddish brown ones. *Then again, the search could be so perilous I could get killed. This too could have been his reason. Heaven knows that bloodhound wouldn't mourn my demise.*

I took out my pipe. "Kitten, I'll take up your case under one condition."

"Yes?"

Her eyes shifted and one ear twitched. I sensed she was considering whether she had gone too far with her feminine show and now must decide how far she'd go should I demand a roll or two in the hay for a down payment. I estimated by her looks that I was near twice her age; such an outcome would not be objectionable. However, if it came to chucking our clothes for some hot and heavy breathing, it'd be because she wished it, not because I demanded it.

“You drop your play at seducing me into the job.”

She blinked and sat back in her chair, stunned.”I-I, you knew what I was doing?”

“Kitten, I’d be a poor investigator if I couldn’t read animals.” I reinserted the pipe in my muzzle, sat back and puffed. “If you’ll give me your name, I’ll drop calling you kitten and we can start the paperwork.” I shifted to reach the second drawer of my desk to extract a clipboard with a questionnaire concerning the animal I was to invest my time finding and laid it on my desk before her.

“Oh, uh, is it that easy?”

“Not quite. As you read on my door, my fee is two fifty a day plus expenses. Five hundred due before I start. As I may get out of touch a few days into my search, I also need to know up front how many days you’re willing to pay to fund my expedition.”

“Ha,” she blurted nervously and put a paw up on her breast. “Expedition. It’s funny you should say that. My uncle was all but set to go on one with his team before he went missing.”

She reached into her bra, unashamed, and withdrew a bundle of bank notes. She counted out and separated five hundred to lay on my desk.

I took up the bank notes, a bit surprised she carried so much on her without an escort, and flipped through them as she reinserted the rest into her bra and took up the clipboard.

“My name is Catharine, Catharine Nelson.”

“Braxton Snow.” I nodded and dropped the notes in the top drawer for the time being. I reloaded my pipe and stood to lean on the window frame in order to watch the world outside flow by until she was finished with the paperwork and ready to tell me her story.

“My uncle’s name is Mr. Sullivan. Oscar Sullivan. He’s a respected archeologist who works solely for the Cat-A-Mite Museum. He and a team of college students were set to travel northeast to a new dig site somewhere above the large glacier. Where, I’ve no idea. My uncle visited the archives of the

museum in search of an ancient map, so one of his staff claimed, and from there he disappeared."

"I see." I accepted the clipboard then flipped though the sheets. "You state here he lives with you?"

"That's true. My brother and I. When we were but little kits, our parents were killed in an accident. As our father's marriage to our mother was not approved by his family, my mother's brother was the only one who'd take us in. Since then we've become a family."

"Hmmm, okay. Are you free tomorrow morning?"

"I'm still a student in college but I can miss a day if need be."

"Good." I removed the pipe and dropped it in my cup of water to extinguish the embers. "I'll be over at eight. I'll start by going over his room and any office in your home he used. After that, I'll see to his office at the museum, after you present me to the managing curator."

"Am I to accompany you until you find my uncle?"

I saw a light spark in her eyes as if she'd relish a chance to go beyond the confines of her normal life.

"No, Ms. Nelson." I smiled, dashing those hopes. "As a relative, you can legally gain me access to the two places I've mentioned. Mayhap after introductions to the curator of the museum, the animal may allow me into the archives where your uncle was last seen."

She slipped her dress straps back up onto her shoulders during our talk and rolled down the hem of her dress. When we both stood, she looked the respectable modern vixen she'd grown into.

"Mr. Snow, you don't know how much this means to me. Anything you need, just ask."

I nodded. A glance at the clock showed an hour had passed. Darkness spreading out over the sky in the distance through the window meant dusk was well on its way; not a recommended time for females to be out on their own. *I'd best see her to a rickshaw.* "As it's late, I'll accompany you out to the street and

see you settled in a rickshaw." I stretched out my arm to escort her down to the street.

"You're very kind, Mr. Snow. But there's no need. I've a driver awaiting me."

"As you wish." I followed her to the door. "Still, to be safe, please ask the security guard to follow you out and see that you're safely installed in the rickshaw."

"I will." Ms. Nelson turned at the door and took a hold of my arm and squeezed. "Again, thank you." She looked as if she would tiptoe up to give me a kiss, but instead she gave me a bright smile and padded out.

Once she was through the door and well on her way to the elevator, I closed and locked the door. Briefly I stood there and considered escorting her to the street anyway, but remembered Espen was tonight's guard and he would make certain of her safety. Mind set at ease, I thought, *Time to pack it in and get a bite to eat.* After I cleaned my pipe and stowed it away in its silver birch case, I pulled the five hundred out. With a fold of the bank notes I slid them into my front blue jeans pocket. After one glance around the room to make certain all my file cabinets were locked, I palmed my keys, and then heard a sound outside my door. Three shadows overlapping each other stalled in their travels to my door. One stood about one hundred forty centimeters, while the other two were a good two meters, in height, bearing considerable girth to round out their statures. This had my senses jumping. I'd been around the block enough times to know such threesomes in my line of work normally meant a modest-I.Q. lackey accompanied by muscle animals.

The time was fifteen after twenty hundred. I parked myself on the corner of my desk to consider if I'd left any signs of my investigation of Mr. Wibert for him to figure it out and take measure against anything I might have found. I rubbed my muzzle in contemplation of this as one of the bodyguards leaned into the door to try to ascertain if I was presently within the office. He stood back up straight with a shrug of large sloping shoulders as I came to the conclusion I'd

covered my tracks pretty well. *Still, I'm not infallible,* I told my ego. I picked up Ms. Wibert's envelope and with a key opened the first file cabinet at paw and slid the envelope inside. This in turn made enough noise for the smaller shadow with big ears to hear. At a gesture from him one of the bodyguards knocked.

"I'm closed for the day," I threw over my shoulder.

"Mr. Snow, I'm here on behest of a client of mine," The I.Q. said close up to the door. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"I've work I'm finishing up. Leave your name at the guard station downstairs and I'll look you up tomorrow."

"Tomorrow would be most inconvenient. I'm here now. I promise to make it worth your time."

For a moment I considered possible scenarios. *I let them in and possibly get beat up, a little painful and costly if it warrants a trip to a local emergency ward. I say no and end up having to pay for a new door after my possible costly trip to the hospital ward. Or he means as he says, and they're here to offer me a job. Having my lights put out is not at all to my liking in either case. Neither is paying for a new door. Presently I can't afford the same quality door as I currently have.* So it came down to bank notes, which I was lacking in abundance. I rolled my eyes, laid back my ears momentarily and walked up to the door to unlock it. Once the door was open, I stared at two polar bears barely out of their teens and a fennec fox. Now fennecs were mostly nocturnal vulpes, not really suited to the arctic regions, however, they were clever animals and were currently weaseling themselves into the night life here about, pun intended.

"Good evening, Mr. Snow," the fennec fox offered, dressed in a tweed, three-piece suit. He doffed his tweed alpine hat as he walked into my office. His big black eyes took in my small office in a second, his large, alert ears shifting to isolate sounds around him. The two polar bears ducked their heads to follow the fox but bumped into one another trying to enter the door at the same time. The fennec lowered and turned his head slightly to their mumbled words at each other. A sigh escaped the fox's lips before he looked back at me. His face

radiated irritation as did his twitching ears and tail.

“I hope you’ll forgive my bungling, adolescent companions.”

They continued their heated mumbles at each other while trying to enter at the same time. The fennec laid back his ears, having lost any true intimidation by their antics. Not that they couldn’t still clean my clock.

“Hedrick, Olsten,” he snapped. “Why don’t you both do me a favor—go up to the roof and jump off!”

The two polar bears dressed in black cotton vests and pants looked at one another. Both looked back at their boss with disbelief plainly written on their faces. One asked, “Truly boss?”

“No, you dimwits.” The fennec growled. “Just stay out there and try to look intelligent, even though I know that’s impossible.”

One looked about to question his words but the fennec held up a paw displaying one finger, which clearly meant “Shut it.” The two looked at each other, glaring, then folded their arm and took up positions to either side of my door.

The fennec sighed, raised his ears and stilled his tail before he turned his attention to me. He looked at the hat in his paw as if seeking to remember where he was in his greeting.

“My name is Mr. Uchi, and I represent Mr. Nelson.”

When I didn’t react to the surname, as it was commonly used, he clarified.

“A Mr. Bryn Nelson, whose younger sister, Ms. Catharine Nelson, you met some moments before I arrived.”

I decided not to stand for whatever came next, so I rounded my desk and sat. “A Ms. Nelson. Yes,” I acknowledged, as there was no point in denying she’d been in my office as her scent was still highly prominent in the air. When I didn’t elaborate any further, Mr. Uchi approached my desk with his arms behind his back.

“Mr. Nelson employs me to watch over his younger sister as she is,

well...” He rubbed his muzzle. “How may I put this delicately? Uh, prone to excitability.” When I didn’t react, he continued. “Yes, well, to the point. Because of her eccentric uncle’s profession and habit of disappearing for months at a time without leaving word of his whereabouts, she has cost Mr. Nelson a considerable amount of bank notes in unnecessary fees from the police and private investigators like yourself. Because of this, and as Mr. Nelson pays for her upkeep and welfare, I’ve been authorized to come in behind her and cancel any investigation into her uncle’s affairs she may have begun.”

“I see,” I said. “May I see this authorization?” I stretched out my arm and set my elbow on the desk, awaiting the legal form.

Mr. Uchi gave me a look of indignation, as if I impugned his honor in questioning his words, but he acquiesced and opened his jacket to withdraw a thrice-folded paper.

I accepted the document and took note its well-used condition from being transported, unfolded and folded by other paws like my own. With the paper unfolded, I read the legal words contending to just what I’d been told, with a footnote in highlight. *All bank notes obtained from Ms. Nelson without Mr. Nelson’s knowledge or authorization are to be returned to the bearer of this letter.* I looked for the watermark that designated the document was from the city legal affairs office and ran a finger over the notary stamp in the lower left corner as extra verification.

“Well,” I began, holding my poker face steady to hide my disappointment in losing a paying job. I refolded the paper and passed it back. “This all seems in order.”

“I appreciate your understanding in this matter,” Mr. Uchi said, placing the paper back into his inner jacket pocket. Once it was securely tucked away, he reached out. “Now, if you please, I’ll accept her down payment.”

I would prefer to return the bank notes to Ms. Nelson herself, but the two hall boys outside my office would object to such an idea if Mr. Uchi told them to. Besides, the legal paper he held gave him the right. Thus, with a mental shrug

and a wish not to visit the emergency ward tonight—over a matter I'd clearly lose in court—I stood, withdrew the notes from my pocket, and gave them over.

"Your candor in this matter is appreciated." Mr. Uchi counted up the notes, then separated out a single twenty note and placed it on my desk. "For your troubles."

With our business concluded, he donned his hat and walked out, closing the door behind him. As for myself, I dropped back into my chair in disgust and watched the three silhouettes walk off toward the stairs and elevator. I sat back and steeple my paws under my muzzle. *It's possible Ms. Nelson is as Mr. Uchi implied. What bothers me is why Lieutenant Barkly sent her my way if there wasn't any truth to her story. That bloodhound would never willingly send me an easy gig.* I pondered this some time to allow Mr. Uchi and back-up to descend the five levels in the elevator and leave the building.

I stood and took a gander out my window, noting dusk was in full swing. A half-moon had already risen, and in its own way was chasing the sun as we all chase our tails. I sighed and allowed my tail to droop. *Without any kind of payment, I simply can't afford to give the matter my time.* I re-closed and locked my window, regained the letter for Ms. Wibert, picked up the bank note and locked my door on my way out. Since the building owners charged their tenets five notes for elevator usage after the seventeen hour, I took the stairs as normal.

"Good night, Espen," I said in passing the night guard, a very capable black bear working his way through college.

"Good night, Mr. Snow," Espen acknowledged and marked me off his sheet of present tenants before he returned to his studies.

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Ms. Catharine Nelson

Chapter 2:

Once Tweaked, Curiosity Guides the Nose

Out in the open, I took a deep breath. *Ah, fresh air.* Being cooped up in my small office could be claustrophobic after six hours, even for those of us not affected by the psychosis. I put my wrists in the center of my back and stretch my spine, leaning back. After this I leaned forward and touched my pads with my fingertips, noting I needed to clip my toenails lest I inadvertently scratch a certain lovely white-tail jackrabbit, whose own toenails would do far more damage to me if she were of a mind to use them on me.

I stood and smiled at myself for how fate had played us into our present involvement before a deep yawn took over my jaws. I closed my mouth and shook my head to bring myself back to the present. Then I looked both ways along the lamppost-lit street. At this time of night there were still animals around, though far fewer in numbers. Mainly males out for a stroll or on last minute errands, some couples headed to a local park for some alone time from parents or family. But as the clubs and restaurants were some blocks over, the street was fairly clear.

The local rickshaw distribution had equally subsided, leaving only those who preferred the night life or those who had yet made enough bank notes to call it a day. One such owner was Tanner, an Amish Clydesdale with a malformed left arm, a side effect that can happen with the special pills pregnant hoofed animals took so their offspring developed two paws instead of four hooves. Because of his deformity, Tanner worked the night shift, as animals roaming the night had far fewer choices in transportation if in need.

“Hello Tanner,” I called across the street.

Tanner's big dark eyes looked my way and he smiled. "You're working late, Mr. Snow. Need a lift?"

"I could definitely use one." I had no desire tonight to walk the kilometers to my den.

Tanner picked up the rickshaw pull bar, which had been adjusted to his condition, and looked both ways before he crossed the cobblestone-paved street. Once across, he set the pole down for me to climb aboard.

"Where to, then?" he inquired as he took my prepaid fare card.

"To Millie Ann's Moonlight Café."

"Right you are." Tanner nodded, remembering Millie's location after a second of thought. Like all the good veterans, Tanner figured out the distance in his head. "That'll be seventeen kilometers, give or take four hundred meters. At half a bank note per kilometer, that's nine notes after rounding up."

"Make it ten," I said, and mounted up on the comfortable cushion.

"As you say." Tanner smiled thanks, using his teeth and fingers on his good paw to stamp his rickshaw number on the appropriate one-banknote sections of my card to indicate to the dispatch office when I turned it in that he was due payment. Once I was settled in, Tanner nodded to the yellow envelope. "Do you need to drop that off?"

"There's no hurry, it'll keep until morning."

"For another note, I'll swing by the post office for you."

If it were any other rickshaw owner, I'd have said no, but Tanner had long ago earned my trust. "Why not? It'll save me the trip. Thanks, Tanner."

He smiled and stamped the note on my card, and then gave it over. Besides the obvious advantage in a rickshaw ride, if you got the right owner, like Tanner, he or she would douse you in the latest news, being they wandered through out Furlton City every day. This Tanner gladly supplied me with news as we traveled to Millie Ann's Moonlight Café.

After I disembarked his comfortable rickshaw, I shook his paw and bid him a good night. Tanner reciprocated and set hooves to street in search of other

customers.

I looked up at Millie's sign. The place had started out as a small café, but over the years the diner had grown into a nighttime hot spot for the nocturnal animals who sought out a reasonable meal at a fair price before heading home like I was.

Standing in front of the doors in, I breathed deeply the enticing odors of pan-seared or BBQ meats, from un-evolved pheasants, rabbits and squirrels to ocean fish like red snapper, grouper and cod, and then followed my black nose inside to take up an available counter seat.

"How's it going, honey?" Joann stepped up in her blue waitress apron with pad and pencil ready to take my order.

"Only so-so," I remarked, and took note she'd dyed her hair light blue sometime after I left for work this morning.

Joann was an old paw at this. Fresh out of high school, having no bank notes for a college education, she hopped from job to job for twelve years until she landed this gig three years ago. Not exactly a lifestyle for a white-tail jackrabbit; Millie's serves several kinds of meat, including a distant ancestor of her kind, though separated by thousands of years. Maybe she didn't see them as part of the leporidae family, as they took a different path and never developed in stature and intelligence. Regardless of her reasons, I hadn't ordered rabbit since getting involved with her, even though I'd never seen her get squeamish to serve up rabbit or any other kind of meat to carnivore customers.

"So what's the occasion?"

"Hmm?"

I gestured toward her head. "Your hair."

She looked up and patted her short cropped hair, understanding, and smiled crookedly. "No occasion. The store was out of pink dye, so I decided to wash it out and try another color."

I tilted my head and motioned her to turn hers left and right for a better overall view.

“I like it better,” I said truthfully. “The pink always seemed a bit loud and the yellow you wore before you dyed it purple didn’t seem to suit you either.”

After a moment Joann frowned and planted her paw on her hip. “You could have told me you didn’t like the yellow color when I changed it to purple.”

“How was I to know it wasn’t Millie who requested that you dye your hair? Every time I come in, the other waitress’s hair is always the same color as yours.”

Joann looked across the room at a young Sand Cat, whose name coincidently was Sandy. Joann’s facial expression turned to disdain.

“Oh her…she’s still trying to find herself. She’s got no imagination, so when I dye my hair she does the same the next day.” Joann eyed me. “I guess if I’d dyed my whole body pink you wouldn’t have said anything either.”

“In point of fact, I would have. Your natural coloring is far more fetching, in my eyes.”

Joann’s eyes held irritation. “My coloring is commonplace and you know that.”

“That’s true.” I smiled. “But you wear it so well.”

She rolled her gray eyes, still miffed. “Fine, whatever you say.” Noting a customer along her counter needed help, she quit our familiar banter. “So what’ll it be tonight?”

“Hmm, oh, uh, how’s the cod today?”

Joann looked over her shoulder at the daily posted board. Her long, brown, black-tipped ears were pinned down her back to keep from being hit by the ceiling fans above our heads that kept the air circulating.

“Latest catch was brought in nine hours ago. So it’s already cleaned and ready to drop in the fryer.”

“That’ll do.” I smiled.

Joann nodded and turned to the order window, already distancing herself from our banter to better serve her customers. This afforded me a nice view of her furry bare back, strong legs and short white and brown fluffy tail. The owner,

Millie, had all her waitresses wear simple halter tops and tight-fitting shorts, a simple tactic used by a lot of places to draw in the male working class. Joann returned, set a tall glass of milk before me, and walked away. Although I hadn't ordered milk, it was what I normally ask for.

With the cod and milk finished and Joann too busy with the homeward-bound evening shift, I exited Millie's and strolled the three blocks to my apartment complex. The building stretched four blocks wide and three blocks deep. Yes, I did say my complex, or better said, at some point it might be mine, as ownership had been in limbo for six years. The deceased, a Mr. W. M. Levy, passed away presumably without any living relatives, or so he thought. I, having befriended him some years before his natural death, was given sole inheritance of the complex in his will. However, once the news of his death hit the papers, five well-off felines and their spouses hit the courts with legal documents showing them to be distant relatives, and therefore entitled to the property by blood relation over someone like myself, who wasn't even of the same species. Since that time, since I had no funding to hire a lawyer, the courts provided me with one who had made certain all profits from the apartment building's monthly rent were paid to him first to cover his exorbitant fees and lastly to counter-sue on my behalf while the courts sorted through the seemingly endless deluge of legal documents and liens concerning the property.

As for myself, I don't really care. I'm not the managerial type. If Mr. Levy's relatives had only talked to me before going this route, I would've signed over the place so long as I got a free room for life. However, they didn't, so I'd instructed my lawyer to keep the title in limbo until purgatory swallowed us whole or Mr. Levy's relatives ran out of bank notes.

I took the stairs to my third floor studio den. After dropping keys on a walnut table by the door, I locked the door and stripped off my clothes to dump them in the hamper on the way to take a hot shower. Bachelorhood had many advantages. No one was up waiting to unload her day on me, and I need not worry as to when I came home. A female-friend, however, was another matter.

She did put restraints on my time, but not being married, I could always say no. After a good grooming in the bathroom to make certain no fleas or ticks had made me their home, I checked the hour, set my alarm for seven in the morning by habit, not out of need, and lay down on the floor mattress.

Sometime in the night, a soft pair of paws uncovered my shoulder and Joann awoke me with gentle kisses on my shoulder and cheeks.

"Mmm…"

The kisses moved to my muzzle and I reciprocated, turning to lie on my back.

"Mmm…so how was your day?" I asked.

"Tiring," Joann whispered in my ear, her whiskers tickling my skin slightly. "I could really use a strong set of paws to massage my back muscles."

I shifted onto my forearms, waking further with a wide yawn that displayed my sharp canine teeth, without thought as to how they may look to an herbivore. "You know, I sometimes think you only stay with me because of free rent and my strong paws."

"Not so," Joann whispered with a smile.

I could see by the light of a street lamp she was sitting on her haunches, looking down at me. Her long brown ears, no longer pinned behind her back, rose high over her head. She took up her halter top and pulled it over her head, allowing my eyes to freely roam over her soft, fur-covered bare breasts. She shook out her blue hair and turned herself around to present me with her back. After a shift, she looked over her shoulder.

"Please, honey, your paws do a lot more than a hot shower could ever do."

I yawned again. A glance at the wall clock, illuminated by the street lamp, told me the time. "It's two in the frigging morning?" I complained, laid-back ears telling Joann I was annoyed.

"Please…" She squeezed my leg through the blanket.

How am I supposed to say no to those beautiful gray eyes? I rolled my

own, sat up on my legs and did her bidding, kneading the soft brown fur around her shoulder blades.

“Mmm, yes, that’s it.” She pushed her back into my paws. “Harder...yes, right there. Aww…” She put her paws on her thighs and pushed harder as I continued.

Now that I was awake, I leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “As I have solved your problem, what are you going to do for me?”

She turned her head enough that her whiskers played with my muzzle and gave me a coy smile, exposing her upper four and lower four sharp incisors. “I’m going to take a hot shower, as I smell like a slaughterhouse.” She playfully fingered my black nose and stood.

I slumped as she headed for the bathroom. “Now you’re plain being mean. You get me all fired up by the feel of your soft, warm skin and leave me hanging.”

There was silence in the bathroom for a moment then she leaned out holding the door jamb with one paw and tossed me her shorts with the other. “I did nothing of the sort. I told you what I was going to do. I never said you couldn’t join me.”

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The alarm clock went off hours too soon, at least I held out hope it did. Disentangling myself from the warmth of Joann’s body, I hit the snooze button and briefly lay on my back. Joann’s breathing changed. She rolled into my side and snuggled up. I eyed her arm that slid across my chest then had to shift my head, as her long ears covered my face when she laid her head on my bicep. The alarm went off a second time, this time getting a reaction from her.

“Turn that blasted noise off,” she ordered in muffled words.

“I was about to,” I remarked and did just that.

“Humph,” she snorted. “Why you, of all animals, would have such an

inconvenient thing in the first place is beyond me."

"It's called a job." I smiled down on her and lightly pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"You call what you do work?" I heard her say through a deep yawn.

I used a finger to lightly play with her whiskers. "Unlike some animals who have male-friends to mooch off of, I have to work to make a living."

Joann wrinkled her nose and batted my paw away. She rose up and kissed my nose. "We'll talk about your inadequacies later."

She playfully rubbed her nose on mine with a smile before she looked me in the eyes with her own sleepy ones. "If you're going to leave me all alone in your bed, do so, so I can get some sleep."

Before I could contrive a rebuttal, she lay down and rolled away, pulling the covers off me. The cool morning air within my apartment rolled over my fur, sending a chill up my spine. "Joann?"

She giggled, planted her pads on my outer thigh. "Get moving, buster, before I kick you out of bed."

A threat like that coming from any other class of animal would normally leave me shrugging it off, but coming from Joann, whose leg muscles were strong enough to lunch a bear across the room, I took the threat in earnest and rolled until I gained my pads. Once erect, I gave Joann a half glare as she shifted for better comfort. A yawn took over my face and I stretched, reaching for the ceiling. I smacked my lips and stretched out each leg as I stepped into the bathroom. After a quick shower to wash off the scent of last night's sex, I flossed my teeth and brushed out my fur. Once I was out of the bathroom, Joann sat up, the covers pulled up to her chin and her large gray eyes watching my every move.

"My sister wants to show off her new male-toy, I mean"—she giggled —"friend, this afternoon. Are you working a case or can you make an appearance?"

"I'm uncertain." Which was true.

During the few hours of sleep I was allowed, my mind crawled over Catharine Nelson's request for help. Despite her brother's interference, I considered that Lieutenant Barkly did not recommend animals to seek out private investigators if he believed the case a hoax, and he certainly did not recommend me. This in itself demanded I have at least a cursory look, if nothing else. I opened my closet and took note Joann had shoved all my clothes to one side to make room for more of her stuff.

"I hope you don't mind, Menagerie clothing store had a fifty percent off sale, as summer's just around the corner. I couldn't pass it up."

I shot her a look that said, "as if I have a choice" and searched out my dress shirt and pants combo. "When was this?"

"Yesterday, while you were at work, or so you say." She pulled up her knees, placed elbows on knees and chin on paws, and then dropped her ears to give me her best innocent look.

I eyed her for that last jab. "Did you get me anything?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." Her ears rose as a mischievous smile worked its way out on her lips. "It's in the long box leaning on the wall on your side."

I eyed her and playfully said, "My side?" I gestured to the closet. "The whole closet is my side."

Joann wiggled her nose. "Fine then." She lowered the blanket to allow me to see her mouthwatering breasts. "If you want to have it all to yourself, I can leave."

I raised my paws in surrender. "Okay, okay, you have a side. But could I have a little more room than a single paw's width?"

Joann's eyes twinkled, her ears high in the air telling me she was enjoying our banter. "What need do you have for so much room? You only wear one kind of outfit." She pressed her paw to her breasts. "Whereas I must have several different clothes to make you look good when we take a stroll in the parks."

I bent and picked up the thirty-by-sixteen-by-five centimeter box,

knowing we could play this game for hours, yet I didn't have the time. I pulled the string off and unveiled a white tie with a black silhouette of a very shapely, long-legged rabbit bowing slightly, blowing a kiss. I rolled my eyes. "Seriously?"

"I think it's becoming. Try it on." She dropped her paw in her lap to join the other.

Joann's playfulness could, if I allowed it, end up with me back in bed with her. But I'd have to take another shower afterward, which would push back checking up on Ms. Nelson's story until tomorrow. That fact alone made me toss the tie up on the shelf, as I don't like unanswered questions. "Mayhap later. Today I need to look more dignified."

"Hummph, see if I buy you anything ever again." She playfully pouted, lowering her ears and head.

"As our tastes seem to be different, that might be a good thing."

"Oh you…" Joann threw her pillow at me.

I ducked, then donned my cotton black slacks and slid on a white cotton short-sleeved dress shirt with black tie and vest. Lastly, I pulled out my best white flat cap and used the mirror on the closet door to check out the impression I was presenting.

Joann stood. She tied the blanket around her to cover up her lovely body from the slight cool air, and put her paws on my shoulders. "You look beautiful, honey, so what's the occasion that can't keep for a few hours?"

"A case I may pick up." I turned to give her a firm hug and kiss, ever so glad she understood me. "It may not work out, so where do I find you, if I can meet up, to see this friend of your sister's?"

"In Green Squirrel Park, at the north entrance." Joann playfully pulled down my cap and swatted my rump before heading to the bathroom.

Joann tossed our blanket away so I could eye her lovely figure, which included a shapely butt, white and brown tail, and strong legs. She swished her hips in a deliberate display to emphasize the pleasures she'd be willing to grant

me if I were to stay. I licked my lips to such an alluring display of her femininity but forcefully turned my head away, reset my flat cap, raised my tail high, and then locked the door on my way out.

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It was eight thirty by the time I hit the street. I glanced up at the bright and cloudless day. Enjoying an easterly breeze that would keep the air clean, I headed to my office on foot, stopping off at a rickshaw outlet to turn in my used prepaid card and pay for a new one. Once inside my office, I unlocked the bottom drawer to my desk and opened a locked box. From inside, I pulled out my tranquilizer dart gun and took time to inspect the empty chamber before I ran a cleaning rag through it. Then I laid the gun on the desk. Next out was the revolver cartridge cylinder. After I ran an oil rag through each cylinder, I pulled out the spare and did likewise. With the gun checked, oiled and ready, I had a look at the tranquilizer dart box top to confirm the darts were still good, and found their expiration date to be another two months away. I extracted one for each open chamber and reconnected the cylinder to the pistol then gave it a spin, listening to the free rolling cylinder until I stopped it. Next out were the CO2 cartages. After a check of their expiration date, I opened the palm grip of the pistol and inserted one. Closing the palm grip, I made certain the safety for engaging the CO2 was on. Last out was my shoulder holster. I stood and took off my vest to slip the holster on. A check of my license to carry the weapon showed it was good for three more weeks before I'd need to renew. A slight shift of irritation rolled along my lip as that meant three hundred notes plus prequalifying at a target range at my expense.

The extra loaded cylinder slid into its holder, as did two extra CO2 cartages, and then finally the pistol. With all in place, I donned my vest. Why the hardware, you ask? Because I learned long ago that when on the job, it's better to be prepared than empty-pawed.

As this was a fact-finding excursion, I also took out my lock picking tools and slipped them in a hidden pocket in my vest. After which I dropped the leftover supplies back in the desk and lastly slipped a notepad and pencil into my pocket before I locked up.

I made a quick check of the Cat-A-Mite Museum's address in the building city directory by the front doors of my office building. A rickshaw ride left me at its front entrance by eleven-twenty. "So much for meeting up with Joann," I mumbled, slightly bothered, as I did like her younger sister.

I padded up the ten stone steps to the double doors of the nine-story marble building. Just inside the entrance, a tiger security guard stood watching the floor. To his right was a bored Dalmatian custodian who accepted my donation of five notes to gain entry and gave me a brochure that showed the floor plans and the museum's exhibits. Twenty steps across the floor brought me to the information booth, for animals who needed more than the brochure offered. Here, an older leopardess sat, dressed in a conservative, long-sleeved summer dress of reds and yellow. Before her she was reading the latest magazine on May to mid-June vacation spots on the greater outer banks of the Farmark coastline. Farmark was our closest continent east of Burrland. Though the northwest neighboring continent Snowflurry was closer geographically, it did require an animal to have long thick fur like mine or wear something equivalent. Most travelers preferred Farmark.

Even though the leopardess could not miss my standing at her counter when I stopped before her, she refused to acknowledge my presence until I placed a paw on the counter. Upon my blatantly obvious wish for information, she laid her magazine down, pushed up her eyeglasses and gave me a bored look of irritation for disturbing her.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Apiyo," I began, having read her name plate on the countertop. "My name is Mr. Snow. I'm here on a matter concerning one of your employees. Could you direct me to the office of your curator, please?"

“Mr. Gatura is a busy lion.” She picked up a pad and pencil and set them before me. “Leave your name and address, whom you wish to have a discussion about, and a letter for an appointment date and time will be mailed to you.”

Her tone of voice told me she didn’t particularly like anyone in the Canine family. If this was true, I wondered at her placement in a booth that necessitated assistance to the general public. Of course I may be over analyzing; she could just as easily have noted my pistol and have a dislike for law enforcement, security guards or P.I.’s, as we are the only animals allowed, with an updated license, to legally carry weapons.

I ignored the pad and pushed my luck with her. “Ms. Apiyo, I’m a private investigator commissioned to investigate Mr. Oscar Sullivan’s disappearance. In light of this, could you direct me to Mr. Gatura’s office or at least let him know I’m here?”

Her dark blue eyes narrowed, but she picked up a two-way radio, adjusted the dial and depressed a button. “Mr. Gatura, there’s a P.I. here who wishes to speak with you.” She released the button and we waited a few seconds. The speaker in her radio crackled.

“Tell him or her to leave their name, as I’m busy right now.”

I sighed, as the leopardess was being difficult on purpose. “Ms. Apiyo, could you please inform him my being here is in regard to Mr. Sullivan’s disappearance?”

She grimaced but depressed the button again. “Mr. Gatura, he says his visit concerns Mr. Sullivan.”

“Inform the investigator that Mr. Sullivan is currently unavailable, but if he’ll leave a name and address, I’ll send him a letter when Mr. Sullivan is made available.”

I sighed in irritation and considered dropping the whole issue, but Mr. Gatura’s response was perfectly understandable, as Ms. Apiyo was refusing to pass on any true information. Taking a chance, I reached out and snatched the radio from her paw, an act which set her off. She stood, claws extended, and took

a swipe at my arm as I stepped back to avoid the attack.

"Give that back!" she demanded, alerting the security guard by the door.

I depressed the button and quickly said, "Mr. Gatura, I'm here in regard to Mr. Sullivan's disappearance." With that said, and before the muscular security guard could take three steps my way, I tossed the radio back at the difficult leopardess, who caught it.

Ms. Apiyo nearly slammed the radio down as she leaned on the counter and angrily demanded, "Get out, before I have you tossed out on your ear!"

"Is there a problem here, Marsha?" the tiger inquired.

"Yes!" she snapped. She was about to point me out as her problem when Mr. Gatura's voice came out over the radio's speaker.

"Ms. Apiyo, please inform Mr. Snow I'll be out to see him shortly."

Ms. Apiyo looked down at the radio then shot a heated glare at me, baring teeth that would have had any herbivore ducking for cover. As neither I nor the tiger were herbivores, I stood my ground.

The tiger inquired yet again, "Marsha?"

Ms. Apiyo kept her angry gaze on me as she told the guard, "Apparently, not at the moment." She pointed with an outstretched arm. "There's a bench to your right against the wall. Park it there and don't move, or I will have Xavier throw you out!"

As I wished not to be thrown out, I did as instructed and parked my butt on the bench. I sat back and made certain my fluffy tail had room to move in the void of wood behind my back. I next crossed my legs, laid my arm out on the bench back, and contented myself to look around the lobby without showing any victory dance on my face.

Xavier watched me sit, after which he looked at Ms. Apiyo, shrugged, and then retook his position.

My wait for Mr. Gatura wasn't long. A tall lion dressed smartly in a pinstriped gray and white cotton business suit came out to the information booth, where Ms. Apiyo pointed me out without looking up. He looked my way then

said something only for her ears, which gained him a reluctant nod from her. He took up his waistcoat and pulled it taut before he padded over.

"Mr. Snow." He held out a welcoming paw. "I'm Avery Gatura."

I stood and accepted his paw. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Braxton Snow."

"Please, let's go to my office so we may talk in private."

Mr. Gatura gestured and led the way into the main museum proper, where a pack of full-sized mannequin tigers with long, curved saber-shaped canine teeth stood on rocks. Rounding the exhibit, Mr. Gatura guided me to an office door, partly concealed by a large display that accurately depicted the Felidae family evolution over the past ten thousand years from the simple, four-legged animals they used to be to their present day stature of intelligent, bipedal animals. Similar displays of other animal families could be found elsewhere in the museum as well as in their own family museums around the city. Lower down, I saw a plaque indicating, "The above diagram depicts the last ten thousand years. The family of Felidae, as far as research has determined, goes back more than two million years. However, due to recent discoveries unearthed in ape habitats, there is a growing consensus that our knowledge is millions of years off."

He opened his door and walked in. Mr. Gatura's office was both functional and personalized with artifacts generously applied around shelves, file cabinets and on his desk. Two oil paintings were hung on the wall opposite his desk depicting prides of lions, one of which could only be his immediate family, as I recognized a younger version of him standing behind a lioness and two cubs.

Mr. Gatura took his seat and indicated a chair for me. "Please, Mr. Snow." Settled, he put his elbows on the arms of his chair. "How is it that you came to know about Mr. Sullivan's disappearance?"

"A Ms. Catharine Nelson contacted me last night and asked if I'd have a look into the matter."

"Ah, yes, Ms. Nelson. A very pleasant young fox. I know her very well."

Mr. Gatura scratched his jaw line with a sharp nail. “Oscar is very proud of his niece. His nephew, I’m sure you know by now, is another matter entirely.”

“Mr. Bryn Nelson,” I clarified.

“Yes, quite. He’s rather a disappointment to Oscar in regard to his chosen field of work.” Mr. Gatura dropped his paw onto his desk; his face indicated Bryn was not well liked. “I take it you’ve had a visit from Mr. Uchi?”

“He did drop by,” I said without any flux in my voice to indicate how I felt about the fennec fox, so I could watch his expression.

“In that case,” he began, his tail twitching behind his chair while his tone plainly displayed Mr. Uchi was not well received either, “I must ask why you are here. Surely by order of Bryn, that fennec canceled any investigation Catharine may have asked of you.”

“In point of fact he did,” I admitted. “However, as Ms. Nelson told me a certain police detective recommended she look me up, I decided to have a look into the matter regardless. So tell me, does Mr. Sullivan disappear for long periods of time without leaving some notice as to what he may be doing?”

Mr. Gatura looked uncomfortable. His tail stilled and he rubbed his other arm. “To be honest, yes. But only on his own time. He’d never vanish after the college assigned him a class of students.”

“I see, umm, might he have forgotten or cancelled the class without notifying your office?”

Mr. Gatura’s voice took on a defensive tone. “Mr. Sullivan is held in very high esteem by the local colleges as well as being an honored archeologist amongst his peers. I say this so you’ll understand when I tell you he’d never take off during this time of year when classes are formed. The study of archeology and passing on to young intelligent minds his beloved craft has ever been a passion of his.”

“I meant no disrespect, Mr. Gatura,” I assured him. His mane rippled in agitation, though his face remained unchanged, a sure sign of his professionalism. “I’m merely inquiring to ascertain his mental ability and

habits.”

Mr. Gatura settled. “Of course, sorry. I’m afraid I’m a little touchy, as Oscar’s a good friend of mine.” He reached for a pitcher of water. “Might I pour you a glass?”

“Thank you, but no.” I passed as he poured one for himself.

Mr. Gatura took a sip to wet his throat. “So what can I tell you?”

“You pretty much have given me a mental image to start with. I would, however, like to talk with his students if they’re still around, and have a look in the area he was last seen.”

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Gatura stood, pulled his waistcoat down, and led the way. “His students are in the lab.”

The lab was of course in the back, opposite the storage room and loading dock and through a set of large double doors. A group of eight animals were spread around the room, each involved in some project—whether cleaning, scraping, writing or reading—all busy, some even cracking jokes while others looked more serious.

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Hedrick & Olsten

Chapter 3:

One Book, One Archeologist. What's Wrong with this Picture?

"Good afternoon, class," Mr. Gatura said as we entered. "May I have your attention, please?"

All the animals looked our way, some setting down tools, other taking seats if they stood.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Gatura."A male lynx dressed in simple black cotton pants and gray short sleeved shirt spoke up first. His words were followed up by similar vocal gestures of politeness from the others, something a lot of adolescents seemed to be missing these days. I often wondered if manners were even taught anymore in school or had it become passé.

"Mr. Vetrov." Mr. Gatura nodded, and went on. "Please everyone." He motioned everyone to draw near with his raised paw. "This is Mr. Snow, a private investigator. Mr. Snow has graciously donated his valuable time to look into the disappearance of our own Mr. Sullivan. He would like to ask some questions, after which, Mr. Vetrov, if you would be so kind as to show Mr. Snow the document archives?"

"Not a problem, Mr. Gatura." The lynx nodded with a light smile.

"Very good then. Mr. Snow, I'll leave you with these capable young animals, as I've a lot of work to do."

After I shook paws with Mr. Gatura, I looked over the group as I pulled out a notepad to take down names, for Mr. Vetrov had already taken it upon himself to introduce me to everyone, starting with the females. There was Kaia Sundell, a snow leopard, Cerise Vasser, an arctic hare, Milena Ludlow, a polar bear, Yukiko Taira, a sea otter, Filip Cupar, a sable, Juan Sosa, an oncilla and

Neil Deville, a snowshoe hare.

“Right then.” I slapped my paws together. “So how many of you have spent time with Mr. Sullivan?”

Mr. Vetrov volunteered, “All save Filip and Neil have been with Mr. Sullivan for three years. This is their first year. As for myself, this is my forth and last year.”

“Great. Now, please be candid and hold nothing back. Does Mr. Sullivan have any quirks, female-friends, habits, gambling or drug problems, or anything else that may help me determine a starting point for discovering his whereabouts?”

The group looked at each other, eyes roving. Two of them seemed to indicate they knew something but were unsure or unwilling to speak up.

“Please, Kaia Sundell,” I chose her over the others to start with. “You look like you know something.”

Kaia’s ears rose, her startled hazel eyes looking at me.

“If you’re asking if she’s heated up the bed sheets with Mr. Sullivan, “Mr. Vetrov began, “I can answer positively no.”

“Are you saying Mr. Sullivan’s tastes tend for males?” I arched an eyebrow.

“Absolutely not. I—”

“Then let Ms. Sundell answer for herself.”

Mr. Vetrov’s hackles rose.

“Don’t, Mitch.” Ms. Sundell walked over and put a restraining paw on his shoulder. Mr. Vetrov cast a questioning look at her, but the snow leopard shook her head no. “You’re right that I didn’t, but I do know something he asked me not to talk about.” Ms. Sundell turned to me. “You see, my family is well-off, Mr. Snow. Oscar, I mean, Mr. Sullivan, came to me a week before his disappearance. He asked if he could obtain a loan or grant from my family to further his pursuit on a project of his that his predecessor passed down to him.”

“Oh, that again…” Mr. Vetrov rolled his eyes.

I looked at the lynx, who elaborated without being coaxed.

“For years Oscar has been chasing ghosts. Although archeology seems to be the same thing, when bones or artifacts are unearthed, these ghosts become fact. His theory, which the museum and the colleges have both politely asked him to drop, concerns one old volume out of many in the archives he claims proves the hairless apes who came before us just one day packed up and used some sort of transportation to leave our world.”

“Hmmm, and you don’t buy into his theory?” I asked, as a thought came to mind. *I read something similar in an old history magazine, though if I remember correctly, the idea was quashed as soon as it hit the shelves.*

“Not likely. It’s well documented by over five hundred years of proven archeology finds of hairless apes’ unearthed skeletal remains that they died out quickly from some sort of disease. Besides, have you ever seen any evidence they had any kind of flight capability?”

Because Mr. Vetrov seemed to disdain the theory out of paw, I wondered if he also held a dislike for Mr. Sullivan. To better understand the lynx, I thought I’d tweak his conviction. “They built buildings that towered many times over any that our civilization as been able to construct,” I quoted from my history lessons. “How was that possible?”

“In theory or fact?” Juan Sosa the oncilla inquired.

Mr. Vetrov waved him off. “The point, Mr. Snow, is Mr. Sullivan is chasing his tail concerning this hairless ape theory.”

“Regardless of how you feel concerning the unpopular theory, it sounds like an important issue with Mr. Sullivan,” I pointed out. “Which is exactly the kind of thing I need to know.” I eyed the group. “Now, does anyone else have anything? Mr. Deville?” I inquired of the second student I sensed had something to say.

Everyone looked at the snowshoe hare as he scratched his long white ear. “Well, uh, does it matter at all that Mr. Sullivan dated my older sister?”

“That would depend. Is he still doing so?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Possibly. Giselle is nothing if not discrete in her many affairs.”

“But you seem to know about them,” I said.

“Well yeah.” Mr. Deville shrugged. “That’s because I lived with her a few months until I found someone at college to room with.”

“Fair enough. How about giving me her address? Perhaps I’ll call on her.” I looked around the room but didn’t spot any others with obvious information. “Well then, if there’s nothing more, Mr. Vetrov, do you know where this book you mentioned is?”

“Yeah, but so does Juan.” He turned to the oncilla. “Why don’t you take him? Perhaps you two could talk about your theories about the hairless apes.”

Translation, I mused, *I got under your fur and you don’t want to deal with me anymore.*

“Sure thing, Mitch. Mr. Snow, if you’ll follow me?” The oncilla gestured with an outstretched arm, walking past me to the entrance.

I thought of irritating Mr. Vetrov more by insisting he guide me, as Mr. Gatura had specified he’d do so; however, I felt nothing more could be gained from the lynx, so I followed the first-year student. “So tell me, Mr. Sosa—”

“Juan, please, Mr. Snow.”

“As you wish. So Juan, how is it you know about this volume Mr. Sullivan is convinced holds some sort of revelation of the past?”

“In truth, anyone who works with Mr. Sullivan does.” Juan rubbed the back of his neck as we walked. “I didn’t know at the time, but learned later that Mr. Sullivan runs that volume past anyone who’ll listen, especially his students.” Juan looked over his shoulder before saying softly, “Truth is, Mitch is jealous of Mr. Sullivan.”

“How so?” I asked just as softly.

“Well, you know, Mr. Sullivan is not even of the felidae family, and yet the museum backs him on all his excavations.” Juan’s large dark blue eyes looked back over his shoulder. “Something about that really irks Mitch.”

“But it doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it? Mr. Sullivan’s reputation for sniffing out dig sites that yield valuable insights to the past is near-on legendary among the halls of my college. That’s why I’m here.”

Juan came upon a door. A check of his front pocket revealed a key which he used. “Here we are.” He pushed open the door and allowed me to walk into a large room filled with twenty rows of wooden filing cabinets that towered over our heads.

I whistled. “An animal could get lost in here.”

Juan smiled. “Not really. Just hike it to one or the other end of the rows and you’ll soon come to the right door out.”

“As in there are other doors out?” I questioned as he replaced his key in his pocket and closed the door, which locked automatically.

“Of course. Fire regulations demand two exits in such a large room,” Juan reminded me.

“Yes, well, being everything in here is important to learning our history, I wouldn’t suppose the other door leads directly to the outside of this building?”

“It does,” Juan admitted. “But you’d need to push through two sets of doors with different locks on each.”

“Two sets of keys, smart.” I watched Juan walk up to a clipboard hanging on the side of the cabinet row before us.

“Let me sign us in and I’ll show you the book.”

After Juan finished I took up the clipboard and ran a fingernail up the page. “I see you and the others of your team come here often.” I flipped the page, still looking.

“Yes, well, although we are a team gearing up for a site, Mr. Sullivan gives all his students small projects to investigate. Nothing hard, just research that helps the group learn where everything is in the museum. At least that’s what I’ve been told by the others.”

“Mmm…” I flipped several pages and found what I was looking for. Mr.

Sullivan's signature. The date: March seventeenth. *Okay, I now have a date to work around.* I let my fingernail travel down the page and onto the next page until it showed some days had passed before Mr. Gatura signed in the police to inspect the room. *Mmm…March twenty-fourth. Mr. Sullivan had been missing seven days before any authorities started a search. But this doesn't quite jive with Ms. Nelson's statement. She said she'd reported him missing two days after he went missing.* I glanced at Juan a moment, then at the door in. *By rights the police should have been here by the fourth day.* I scratched my neck, thinking. *Ms. Nelson wouldn't have recanted her statement, so why the three days' delay?* I flipped the pages back and forth to make certain I hadn't missed anything and that's when I noted the day after the police signed in, a Detective Zoe Pierpont signed in. Not exactly unusual, as detectives have a lot in their dinner bowls, but I thought Lieutenant Barkly had caught the case. I took another whiff of the page and looked off into space to run over the lingering scents and the name together but came up empty. Not that I knew all the detectives in the city, but I'd had a few run-ins with them in my work, as well as a few street cops, and not all were peaceable. I pulled out my notepad from an inner vest pocket and wrote the name down to make certain I had it right and then re-hung the clipboard. With mounting questions and no answers, I nodded to Juan and followed him as he led me to row thirteen of the twenty rows.

"So tell me, what did you think of Detective Pierpont?"

"Who?" Juan glanced at me, having misheard, or more likely so tied up in his own thoughts he had not heard me.

"The detective from the police department assigned to locate Mr. Sullivan."

"Oh her," Juan clarified her sex as he found the row and turned down the aisle. "She seemed okay."

"What questions did she ask?" We passed thirty-seven file cabinets on either side of us before he stopped at one that was three cabinets from the end.

"Not many, really. When was the last time we saw him. What drew his

interest in this room." He shrugged. "Not much else."

"So she didn't consider any of you as viable suspects in his disappearance?"

Juan gave me a perplexed look as he pulled over a tall ladder. "Why would any of us do anything to Mr. Sullivan? We all admired the fox."

I ventured a guess. "Jealousy is a powerful force."

"Jealousy?" Juan climbed the ladder to a drawer ninety centimeters, over my head and pulled it open. "Of what?"

"You tell me—you were the one who said Mr. Vetrov was jealous of Mr. Sullivan."

Juan's eyes grew big and his tail swished in agitation as his ears laid back. "Uh oh." He looked at the drawer he'd opened and those near to it.

"Something wrong?" Asking this question after such a reaction seemed stupid, but many animals didn't elaborate on the problem they'd discovered unless it was asked.

"The book. I'm sure it was in this drawer." Juan reevaluated his position and pulled the drawer all the way out.

"Try the ones above and below."

Juan did, without success. "Mr. Gatura is not going to be happy about this."

"That goes without saying."

Juan got down so we could trade places.

"So tell me, who was the last animal to see the book?" I eyed the felt next to the book label and took a deep whiff of the fabric, the wood sides of the drawer and lastly the wooden drawer knob to allow my olfactory to imprint all the odors. I closed my eyes to aid in distinguishing the team of college students I just met. With these tagged, I noted two scents that had signed in on the clipboard were present. One, of course, had to be Mr. Sullivan's. Yet the other couldn't be from one of the investigating officers. If Juan didn't know the book was missing, neither did the staff. This meant the police wouldn't know to have a

look in this drawer. So someone else in the museum must have looked at the book. Another scholar, perhaps? With eyes still closed I remained a little longer, taking regular breaths to allow these scents time to declare which of them held the most depth. This scent I separated out and reasoned it to most likely be Mr. Sullivan, as according to the college students, he'd been all over the book many times.

Juan scratched his chest. A grimace covered his face as he considered he was the one who had to bring the unhappy news to the curator.

Confident I held Mr. Sullivan's scent, I got down and took a hold of the Ocilla's arm, as he was panicking. "Juan!" I snapped and gained his attention. "Who was the last animal to see it?"

"How the hell should I know?" Juan said excitedly.

"If you'll settle down and think about this, we might be able to figure that out."

Juan wrung his paws before him, his tail twitching a mile a minute.

"Do you know if it was there when Mr. Sullivan last signed into this archive?"

Juan shrugged.

"Okay, let's try it this way. Mr. Sullivan would have had a fit if it were missing, right?"

Juan nodded slowly.

"Thus it had to have been still here the day of his disappearance. So, have you sought to look at it any time after that date?"

Juan shook his head no. A moment more and his eyes got big then his tail stopped. "I'm not at fault!" Juan's exasperation relaxed. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Snow. Oooh," he let out a long breath. "That's a relief." He fell back on the cabinets for support.

"All right, with that established, do you know who might have seen the book of late? Perhaps the other scholar?"

"Other scholar?" Juan looked puzzled. "No other animal bothers with the

ape books. That's why they're in the back of this archive."

"I see, hmmm…." *If that's true, what's this other scent doing here?* "Juan, does a custodian ever come in to dust off these cabinets?"

"Not really. Mr. Sullivan's the only one who pays any attention to the ape books. Anything of value is kept closer to the beginning of each row."

"All right. How about checking out the log and tell me if you think anyone you see on the sheets might have looked up this book."

Juan ran a paw through his head of yellow-and brown-tinted white hair. "If someone from this museum has it, there would be a card left in its vacant spot with a name, department and when it was removed."

"Not exactly what I asked, but good to know. Still, if you could humor me on this?"

Juan nodded and padded past me. He reviewed the clipboard as I drew near but found no animal he could be certain of listed on the sheets.

I sighed, "Fine. Let's look at the emergency door before we head back to your group."

"Shouldn't we let Mr. Gatura know about the missing book?"

"Eventually. But as I want to look at the door before Mr. Gatura turns this place upside-down in search of the book, a few more minutes won't cause any harm."

"You really think he'll do that?"

"I'm being facetious, Juan."

"Uh?"

"Exaggerating."

"Oh…"

After a long walk between tall wooden cabinets, Juan gestured to the solid oak back door as we approached. "I'm afraid my key doesn't fit this lock. Without it, the alarm will sound if it's pushed open, so be careful."

"Gotcha." As I wanted to see if the doors had been picked from the other side, I turned my back to Juan and sought to remove my tool kit, but thought of

something. *As excitable as Juan is, it might be best if the oncilla doesn't know how I open this door.* I glanced over my shoulder at Juan and said, "As deniability has saved more hides then I can count, you might wish to turn your back until I say you can look."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Juan." I sighed, as he was distracted to the point of being slow-witted. "To give a convincing denial, you can't know."

"Oh."

He didn't turn, and I remained looking at him over my shoulder with a bland face, ears squarely oriented on him.

After a moment, his eyes grew wide and he said, "Oh…" with more depth, and then turned his back.

With my only witness made a non-witness, I squatted. I opened my vest, felt for the double seam, and pulled out my lock picks. Nimble fingers with my tools had the door unlocked in moments. I replaced my tools to keep them out of sight, as they were illegal. I gave a quick check on the oncilla to make certain Juan's back remained turned then I opened the door. I swung around to the other side to first eye the lock for obvious picking-tool scratch marks before I gave it the whiff test to detect any oddities in scent. As the doorknob had not been cleaned with a germ killing solution, I came away with several scents, but no metallic scent that shouldn't be there, like the tools I'd used on the other side of the door. Combining this information with the lack of tool marks, I deduced no entry had been made by a competent burglar. Ergo, no unauthorized entry. This opened an alternative theory of the crime.

I put knuckles to the floor and stretched out my back to get my nose close enough to the second doorknob to take a big whiff without stepping into the space between the doors. The smells hit my olfactory and I came away with four scents. The first being Mr. Avery Gatura, which was only natural, as he was responsible for the museum. A second and third scent I could not identify layered with Gatura's, but if I had to guess, I'd say the janitor and security guard.

The forth and last odor, however, stood out.

I retracted, swung back inside, and closed the door then stood. That last scent had been the strongest scent back inside the file cabinet. In my book, this meant Mr. Sullivan had left the museum by way of these two doors. As for the other animal who'd left scent in the drawer, I'd found no trace on the doorknob, but that didn't clear this other animal from part of the crime nor did it mean the animal was even involved. I turned to Juan to see if any facts could be applied in aid of my hunches.

"Juan, did Mr. Sullivan have a set of keys for these doors?"

Juan glanced my way, took notice I was facing him and turned. "Not that I know of." He tilted his head. "But then, he is the main archeologist for this museum, why do you ask?"

"I'm trying to establish whether he left by these doors or by another way out." I looked left and right while I readjusted my shirt and vest.

"There is no other way out of this archive," Juan assured me.

"Then I'm done here." I motioned for him to lead the way back and asked. "As I do not yet have anything with Mr. Sullivan's scent on it, could you lead me to his office?"

Juan glanced at the door behind us, gave me a curious look then started off after one last look at the door. "I'm afraid Mr. Sullivan doesn't have an office."

The sound of the entrance door opening had Juan and I looking ahead of us. Muted voices could be heard, after which I saw a fluffy red tail with scattered strands of black and white protrude from beyond the last file cabinet. A whiff of the air said nothing about the owner of the tail, as the scent had yet to circulate around the large room. It wasn't until the owner backed up that I recognized Ms. Catharine Nelson, who today wore an off-the-shoulder, pullover, bell-sleeved olive green dress. Her guide, wearing a simple denim, knee-length bib overall and a white t-shirt, next appeared as we drew close enough to talk with them without raising our voices.

“Ms. Nelson,” I greeted. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Both Catharine Nelson and Kaia Sundell the snow leopard turned to my voice.

“Mr. Snow, how is it that you are here?” Ms. Nelson glanced back and forth along the aisles as if looking for someone. “I thought my brother had talked you out of looking for my uncle?”

“I wasn’t talked out of anything. A business partner of your brother’s, a Mr. Uchi, rescinded my services after you left, on behalf of your brother.”

Ms. Nelson lowered her head. I swiveled an ear to catch her mumbled obscenity. She saw this; her ear twitched in embarrassment over being heard as she eyed me. “Then why are you here?”

“In point of fact, I’m here to see if there’s any validity to your story, and though I see no foul play involved, I have discovered he may be made unavailable do to a breakthrough on his special project.”

Both Juan and Ms. Sundell looked startled, while Ms. Nelson sputtered. “His theory the hairless apes could have flown?”

“As farfetched as that may seem, yes.” I made a paw gesture to the oncilla. “Juan has been kind enough to give me a clue to this theory while I found another.”

The three animals looked at one another.

Juan asked, “I did?”

“Quite right. The disappearance of his favorite ape book.”

“What book?” Both Ms. Nelson and Ms. Sundell chimed in simultaneously.

“The book he’s had all of you look over,” I said watching their reactions.

Ms. Sundell reacted first. “You say it’s missing?” She glanced at Ms. Nelson. “But why? No one can read it. Not even learned scholars. The ape language is so full of convoluted hieroglyphics that change from one book to another, it defies reason.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say he’s had a breakthrough in that field, which

leads me to one of three clues."

Ms. Sundell looked puzzled. "Three clues?"

"Indeed. You yourself gave me the first clue, though at the time I didn't know it."

"Come again?" Ms. Sundell inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Tell me, Ms. Sundell, did your family turn Mr. Sullivan down when he asked for that loan?" I watched her eyes to see if they shifted to the upper left, indicating she was lying. Instead they went upper right, which told me she was remembering.

"I'm not sure." Her ears and the tip of her tail twitched in a display that told me she was irritated. "Daddy had me leave the room."

I waved that aside. "Don't get upset over it. The particulars of how much money was asked for is irrelevant. However much he may have gotten was enough for him to drop everything and take off, even if it's not his wont to abandon his students."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Snow, but I can't believe that," Ms. Nelson defended her uncle. "My uncle is a dedicated fox. He would no more abandon his students then he would abandon me and Bryn. Someone had to have abducted him. There's no other reason that I can see."

"Such a belief would have found a place in my mind as well, save for my discovery that Mr. Sullivan had keys to the backdoor exit of this document room."

"How can you know that?" Ms. Nelson demanded, showing us all she was miffed at my accusation by her ears flatting as she set her paws on her hips and twitched the tip of her tail.

"By my inspection of this room's two exit doors. It's apparent no one has picked the lock from the outside to get in. Add this to what Juan has provided—that the fire alarm will go off if you exit by those back doors without the use of the keys. This leads me to believe Mr. Sullivan left secretly with his special book on his own accord by way of the emergency exits with the use of two sets of

keys he must have acquired or made over time."

"When you say it that way, it kind of makes sense." Juan rubbed his neck, looking sheepish.

Ms. Sundell gave Juan's ear a slap. "Be still! You don't know nothing."

"Oww! Kaia?" Juan rubbed his ear in complaint.

Ms. Sundell looked at me. "I can't see him dropping out of sight for that single book. This museum has over a hundred of them. And not a one would fetch over a hundred bank notes."

"Understood." I nodded. "But did he pay any real attention to any of them?"

"As a matter of fact he has," Ms. Sundell enlightened me. "Oscar has spent any number of nights poring over every ape book in this museum and any he could find in other museums. You can ask anyone who's worked with him."

Well now, that is interesting. Also it aids in my hypotheses that missing book has become more to him than anything else. Hmmm. I rubbed my chin in thought as the three animals argued in Mr. Sullivan's defense. *He must have discovered a cipher that helped him to decrypt enough of the hieroglyphics in that book to make it more valuable than anything else in his life.*

"Not to be disrespectful to any of you," I cut into their argument. "As I've been doing this for some time now, I'll go with my own belief that that book and his disappearance are connected."

Ms. Nelson shook her head in denial. "Mr. Snow, you may be over-seeing the picture. Although the loss of the museum's book is tragic, perhaps my uncle was holding the book when he was accosted and just held onto it as he was forced out by the emergency doors. That would explain its disappearance."

"That theory would hold if it weren't for the door in this room also being locked. I noted Juan here used a key to get in." Ms. Nelson looked ready to refute my perception, so I superseded her position. "Before you argue more, consider these facts. If your uncle were accosted, the likelihood of him being forced out still holding the missing book is very remote. Abductors are prone to

make certain their mark hasn't anything to fight back with. Also, if he were forced in here to get that book, Mr. Sullivan would hardly be allowed to sign in on the clipboard. No, Ms. Nelson, I'm afraid the current scene doesn't support an animal-napping."

Ms. Nelson stared at me for a moment, after which her ears flattened as she crossed her arms in defiance. "Well, it matters not what you think. I know he was animal-napped and I intend to prove it so I can get the police back involved into finding my uncle."

It was my turn to be surprised. With a raised eyebrow and ears swiveled to her I asked, "Back involved? Are you telling me the police have stopped looking for him? But why?"

Ms. Nelson looked at the other two before she huffed. "My brother, of course. I found out he had that damn fennec fox cancel the investigation the same day I reported my uncle missing."

"Mr. Uchi, you mean," I clarified.

Ms. Nelson laid her ears back and answered with teeth showing. "Yes." She looked into my eyes. "I only found out he'd done so a few days later when I inquired as to what they'd discovered. When I heard the investigation had been declined by request of my brother, I inquired as to who was their best investigator. And he, uh—"

"Lieutenant Barkly," I supplied.

"Yes him. He said his paws were tied, but he knew of a P.I. who didn't always follow the rules yet was good at his job." She gave me a look of disappointment. "Apparently the lieutenant was wrong."

I ignored her jab to rub my chin, working out the events. *This explains the delay in police involvement. After Ms. Nelson's second visit, Lieutenant Barkly sent in a courtesy detail, probably guessing Mr. Nelson would once again cancel any investigation. How and why he knew this is another question.* I looked at Ms. Nelson. "So if Lieutenant Barkly gave you my name, what took you so long to ask for my help?"

Ms. Nelson looked guilty by the shift of her eyes and a twitch of her tail. “My school year started up. I had to pour over my studies to get placed in the college courses I wanted this year.”

“Well, that answers that,” I said with a sweep of my eyes to included Ms. Sundell and Mr. Sosa. “Regardless of what you may think of me, I’m going to follow my nose until it’s proven wrong.”

Ms. Nelson dropped her arms to her sides and looked at me in puzzlement. “Why would you continue to look for my uncle when you’re not getting paid?”

I passed my eyes over all three animals and saw Juan’s dark blue eyes looked mystified, Ms. Sundell’s hazel eyes were thoughtful, and lastly, Catharine Nelson’s reddish brown eyes held challenging stubbornness. “Although that will be a factor in what I’ll be capable of investigating, the fact is, I’m lacking work at present and while I wait for a paying job, there’s no harm in looking into a matter that lacks real criminal involvement.”

Ms. Nelson’s ear twitched. I knew by other body movements she didn’t like my reasoning. However, I’d just said I’d look for her uncle, and as no other animal was…a thought passed through her eyes which I saw. She turned to Ms. Sundell and motioned with a finger for them to get closer. Ms. Nelson spared me a glance and leaned into the snow leopard’s ear and whispered.

I eyed the snow leopard’s black spotted white tail as it went from a simple movement of back and forth to a mischievous twitch, a telling sign the two were up to something. The two separated, and Ms. Nelson touched her green-tinted nose, cleared her throat, and said, “Kaia, you know, I just realized you recently had a birthday.”

“Why yes,” Ms. Sundell answered in what was clearly an act. “Just last week. It’s nice of you to remember.”

Ms. Nelson eyed Juan and used her finger in a circling motion. “Juan, would you be so good as to turn around?”

The oncilla looked curiously on the fox and snow leopard while Ms.

Nelson brought up both her paws to the top of her dress. I could only imagine he derived a misconception of what Ms. Nelson was about to do. As I had not been asked to turn around, the oncilla gave me an envious smile as he did as asked. Ms. Nelson glanced at me, pulled on the elastic of her dress top so she could get her other paw in between her breasts and bra to withdraw a bundle of notes. I speculated the fox hadn't ask me to turn around as she decided to put our disagreement aside to better flirt with me, possibly to entice me to keep her around as I looked for her uncle. Of course I could easily be wrong; after all, Ms. Nelson had no problem gaining her bank notes in this same manner back in my office last night without blushing. Regardless of the fox's reasons, she took out the notes and spent only a moment to count out five hundred and placed the rest back in the bra below the dress's neckline.

"You can turn around now, Juan," Ms. Sundell said with a smile.

Juan did so, quick-like, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Ms. Nelson's breasts. Eyes only for her, his face gave off disappointment briefly to find her properly covered before he found her paws holding the notes.

Ms. Nelson cleared her throat once more and said to Ms. Sundell, while she looked at Juan, "I know this is a bit late, but here is a belated birthday gift." She gave over the bank notes to the snow leopard.

Ms. Sundell pressed her right paw to her white t-shirt in fake surprise. "Why, thank you, Catharine. That's awfully nice of you."

Juan scratched his head, looking on.

I, on the other paw, having already figured out what was about to happen, folded my arms with a smirk on my face, knowing Ms. Nelson just circumvented her brother's legal document.

Ms. Sundell made it a point to count out the notes so Juan would see and hear. Ms. Sundell winked at Ms. Nelson and turned to me. "Beg pardon, Mr. Snow, it occurs to me it would be bad manners on the part of Mr. Sullivan's students to see you do all this work without any compensation whatsoever." The snow leopard looked at Juan to make certain the oncilla was watching as a

witness. “Therefore, I wish to donate these notes in aid of helping you find Mr. Oscar Sullivan.”

To make the issue perfectly clear to Juan, Ms. Sundell and Ms. Nelson, I asked before accepting the notes, “Am I being hired to pursue the whereabouts of Mr. Sullivan or is this a donation as a ‘Thank You’ for my time in investigating his disappearance on my own?”

“As I can’t afford such a luxury on a student’s income, consider this a donation,” Ms. Sundell said.

“Then I accept, and thank you.”

Ms. Sundell gave me the notes, which I folded and stuffed in my pants pocket.

Juan looked between us and I saw the instant he realized what Ms. Nelson had done reflected in his eyes. *Juan might be slow, but he isn’t stupid.*

Ms. Sundell noted this as well, and raised a lone finger against her lips in an age-old request to be silent about how this transition came about.

“Well, gentle animals.” I slapped my paws together. “As I’ve gained all I can here,” I announced, not meaning the notes. I looked at Ms. Nelson. “Would now be a good time to look into Mr. Sullivan’s study? That is, if he has one in your den, Ms. Nelson.”

“Please, Mr. Snow, call me Catharine.” She smiled up at me.

“As you wish.” I glanced at the snow leopard and the oncilla as a thought occurred to me. “Tell me Catharine, does Mr. Sullivan have an office in your den?”

Catharine smiled. “Of course he does.”

“Great.” I turned to Juan and Ms. Sundell. “It would be of great help if the pair of you came along as well, that is”—I looked at Catharine—“With your permission.”

Though Catharine’s eyes showed puzzlement, she nodded.

Juan asked, “What do you need us for?”

Ms. Sundell’s lips curled in mild irritation and she slapped the Ocilla’s

shoulder. “Quiet.”

Juan jerked to the rebuke, rubbing his shoulder.

I half smiled. “No, Ms. Sundell…”

“Kaia, if you will.”

Again I smiled. “No, Kaia.” I nodded. “Juan’s question is relevant. As you two are acquainted with Mr. Sullivan’s...” I sought a more polite word than obsession. “Let’s say hobby, it’s likely you’ll see something I’d miss.”

“What do we tell Mr. Gatura?” Mr. Sosa asked to another slap on his shoulder from the snow leopard, evidently a playful expression of denouncing his words or actions Kaia had grown used to making.

“The truth. Though mildly edited.”

“How so?” Catharine inquired.

“We tell Mr. Gatura that at present it doesn’t look as if Mr. Sullivan was animal-napped. What did happen has as yet to be revealed, however, it appears a book is also missing and it’s quite possible his disappearance and the book’s disappearance are part of one event.”

Juan’s eyebrows lowered in thought. Catharine’s ears drooped and her tail twitched, looking as if she still wanted to argue her uncle was animal-napped.

To stall any further debate with Catharine, I motioned with my paws we should get going. “Remember, this is simply my opinion. Until I’m proven right or wrong, it’s what I’m going with. As for any thoughts you have, I’ll not denounce them, for in truth anything is possible.”

****

Tanner

Chapter 4:

A Room of Clues

We all caught a rickshaw outside the museum. After forty minutes, we turned up a street of well-to-do dens. After disembarking a little more than halfway up the street, I looked at a decorative two-and-a-half meter wrought iron gate and rock wall that stood before a five-bedroom den. *Apparently,* I mused, *Ms. Nelson's brother is doing real well, or came into it through the death of their parents or even by the uncle. Either way, by the looks of the place, Catharine could well afford me and four to five other private investigators.*

Catharine used a key to unlock the gate before a spacious, eight-meter-wide front yard along the length of the den. We stepped beyond the gate and rock wall. Springs forced the gate to lock behind us. I could tell Juan and Kaia had yet to visit Catharine at her residence by their wondering eyes of awe. Catharine, accustomed to such looks, led us up along a fine white gravel pathway to the white brick two-story den. At the decorative door that had a relief inlaid of a father, mother and two kits, my sensitive nose picked up the old lingering scent of an animal with the same scent I'd concluded to be that of Mr. Sullivan.

Mixed in with his scent were others, of course. However, there was one newer scent that seemed out of place. One which my memory and nose told me had been present at the museum. *But where?* This had me taking a deeper whiff of the lingering odors, and with that, I had it. *This animal held the clipboard and had been in the drawer of the missing book back in the document room*. I eyed Kaia and Juan; though both seemed familiar with Catharine, neither had ever been here to her den, I was sure of that. This led me to surmise Mr. Sullivan

never brought any of his students here either. Which begged the question why this scent was present. *Could my theory of the crime be wrong? Could Ms. Nelson's suspicions be right?* My questions led me down two roads. *If Mr. Sullivan was animal-napped, why is the animal-napper here? Could Mr. Sullivan have stumbled on an artifact that was worth a lot of bank notes? Perhaps Mr. Sullivan was being difficult in revealing its location so the animal-napper had come here to acquire Ms. Nelson as leverage.* I gazed upon the façade of the front wall. *Of course I could be over thinking the matter. The scent could belong to a colleague. An animal who'd come by earlier and picked up something.* Like an itch you can't scratch, I considered caution would be prudent.

"Tell me, Catharine, has your uncle ever invited anyone from the museum to visit him at home?"

Catharine had by now changed out her gate key for her den key and eyed me. "No, never, why do you ask?"

The hackles on the back of my neck stood on end and I clamped down on her arm a moment before her key hit the lock. "By any chance is your brother at home?"

"Not likely." She laid her ears back. "My brother's a workaholic. Unless an illness requires hospitalization, he'll be at work until twenty-one hours tonight."

Instincts born in my younger days demanded separating the lingering smells around the door, specifically the scent of gun oil on my paw pistol and that of the oil used on the door. I signaled all to silence with a finger to my lips and took two deep whiffs, which found a third oil scent mixed with the new animal scent. This brought two possibilities. Mr. Avery Gatura sent someone to pick up museum supplies Mr. Sullivan may have borrowed or a dangerous thief and/or animal-napper was behind her door, and given a colleague had no need of a gun, I had to assume the worst for everyone's safety.

"Please, allow me…" I motioned for the three to back up as I relieved Catharine of the keys. I drew my own weapon, activated the CO2 cylinder and

flipped off the safety. Their looks of surprise and worry fell into the back of my mind as I worked the lock quietly and held my pistol at my leg. Gently, I pushed in the well-oiled door and peered into the revealing entranceway decorated mostly in white with black accents to give the eyes some contrast to understand the room. Nose working overtime, I let my olfactory categorize the scents that invaded my nostrils as I sought the intruder I was sure had been or was still present.

Again I indicated to the three behind me to stay put outside with a raised paw. I worked my way to the closet in the hallway on silent pads, where after another squared-off opening, I had a choice to go either into the living room in front of me or take a short walk to the kitchen on the left, hidden behind swinging redwood doors. Another option open to me was the first floor relief center on the right side beyond a circular staircase going up. A long and drawn-out whiff of the circulating air told me the intruder had spent some moments in front of the study but ultimately took to the stairs.

A newly familiar scent had me turn my head to see Ms. Nelson a few steps behind me, eyes wide and paws nervously holding her tail before her. This in turn led me to Juan and Kaia, both in the doorway searching the interior with nervous eyes that took in the splendor of the foyer. I wanted to yell at them “What the hell are you doing? Get back!” but such would alert Ms. Nelson’s uninvited guest and probably be useless, as I was sure youthful curiosity and a morbid fascination of the unknown was egging them on to follow me.

With little choice in discouraging them from further stupidity, I spared them a quiet snarl and bared my sharp teeth while I flatted my ears in a look that meant serious business. Juan and Kaia took the threat as it was intended and backed out of the doorway. Ms. Nelson, however, stiffened up and replied to my silent request with her own look that said, “This is my house and I’ll go wherever I please in it.”

I rolled my eyes and considered for her safety a well-placed dart would put her to sleep and out of harm’s way if any action was required on my part. But

the sound of Ms. Nelson's indignation to my action would undoubtedly alert the uninvited guest. Wishing for some alternative to dissuade her from following, I had to abandon the time it would take. I was wasting enough time standing there while the air system in the den circulated our fresh scents throughout the place.

Without a choice in the matter, as I wanted to question whoever was here, I ascended the carpeted stairs, sliding my left paw along the inside mahogany rail until able to see the next level. A glance and sniff told me the animal had unerringly turned to the closest door two meters away on my right, ignoring the hallway of four other doors to my left.

The door being closed will be a problem. I sought other avenues for access. *Any animal adventurous enough to commit an unlawful entry should have keen hearing to worn of possible discovery.* My hearing had certainly saved me a time or two. A glance behind me showed Ms. Nelson four steps behind, which meant a frontal approach was my only option if she wasn't to get run over by the fleeing intruder. Grimacing, I pulled back the hammer slowly under my left paw to muffle the sound and padded quietly up to the door. I leaned an ear close to the wood to establish if any sounds of movement could be heard. A sound did filter through the wood to my ear but not a quiet one meant to maintain secrecy.

"Damn!" I said under my breath, understanding I'd been made somehow. I tried the door lever and found it locked from the inside. "Shit!" I said aloud and stepped back to give the door a strong kick under the handle. The doorjamb splintered, allowing the door to slam against the inner wall. On quick pads I darted in, pistol held for a target, but none presented themselves. A scuffle outside the window revealed a grapple and rope supporting the weight of someone descending the wall. I flew to the open window in time to see an arctic fox dressed in dark pants and a gray blouse hit the ground running and scurry across the lawn. I noted in some envy her quickness and professionalism in that she wasted no time in looking back, but pulled out a second rope and grapple from a satchel off her arm and neck and readied it to ascend the rock wall to

make her escape. I eyeballed the distance and knew it to be already beyond any accurate shots from my pistol. I drew in my head, turning to sprint after her, but Catharine stood in the doorway right in my path.

"Damn-it all!" exploded from my mouth. I'd have to plow over her to have any chance of catching up with the arctic fox. Without a choice, as I had to move, I uncocked the hammer to my pistol and shoved the gun in the holster as I took up the rope and forced my larger size out the window to descend after the arctic fox. One meter down the side, the rope meant for a lighter animal snapped at the grapple and I found myself free-falling five meters to the ground. Able to turn enough to hit the ground pads first, I twisted into a shoulder roll to minimize any damage to my bones by spreading it out over my frame.

The tactic worked in that I didn't break any bones, but I let out a howl, as it hurt like hell. Had I been ten years younger I would've gotten up regardless of how I felt and charged after the fox; however, I was older and heavier, so instead I fell back on the grass, thankful I hadn't landed in the thorn bush centimeters away.

Juan and Kaia were the first to my aid, both blabbering on, "Are you okay?" "What happened?" "I think that was Detective Pierpont." "Why'd she run away?"

I threw pride to the wind gritting my teeth and allowed the two animals to help me up, knowing Joann would find the bruising and possibly give me her lecture again of changing my line of work. *Not that she would ever propose we tie the knot to keep me grounded, and not that I would accept.*

I brushed myself off and did some twists and bends then checked my pistol. With no danger imminent, I flipped on the safety and discharged the CO2 cartridge to insert a new one. Catharine arrived as I was doing this, asking again the questions Juan and Kaia had asked. I hadn't answered, partly because my mind was swatting down my own questions. Questions like, *That was detective Pierpont? What the hell was she doing here? Why did she run?*

I gave Catharine my best glare but included Juan and Kaia for good

measure. “If you had stayed outside, my path to the open door would have been clear. With you in the way, I might have hurt you, Ms. Nelson, so I pursued her the only way still open to me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Catharine apologized.

Juan found my flat cap and gave it a wipe off before offering it to me.

“Never mind.” I replaced my pistol in its holster and gave Juan a courteous nod for my hat. “The opportunity’s lost.” I looked at Juan. “You’re sure that was the detective who interviewed you back at the museum about Mr. Sullivan?”

“I can’t be absolutely sure, but she sure looked like her.”

“Oh, that was her alright,” Kaia said in disgust, her tail twitching, as she folded her arms to look daggers at Juan. “How you couldn’t recognize her is beyond me, what with all the fawning you and the other males were doing. You’d have thought you’d never see a female before.”

Juan shook his head in denial. “That was Mitch, Filip and the males from other departments.”

Kaia stabbed Juan in the chest with a finger. “And you…”

“Your meaning is taken, Kaia,” I jumped in before a full blown argument developed. “Regardless of how they treated her, the matter will wait upon another time when I’ve time to inquire about Ms. Pierpont, if that’s really her name.”

“What do you mean if that’s her real name?” Juan asked, puzzled.

I looked the group over as I donned my flat cap. “The police do not break into anyone’s home without a warrant. Nor do they do so without backup. As she chose to jump out a third story window, this leads me to believe she’s either a thief or a P.I., and neither one would be so dumb as to give their real name.”

I looked at each of their faces to see if they understood me. When it seemed as if their minds were working it out, I said, “Let’s have a look in Mr. Sullivan’s room and see what she might have missed.”

Catharine, Juan and Kaia explored Mr. Sullivan’s combined office and

bedroom while I stood in its center eyeing everything to get a better feel for the fox while I allowed my olfactory to cauterize the resident smells to match them up with those I smelled in the drawer at the museum.

Around the walls were maps on maps, from paw drawn to road maps obtained in any travel agency. Penciled notations, thumb pins with yarn stretched between them to indicate routes, or off the maps linked to torn pieces of paper or photographs with names, places or objects. On chairs and a single desk were open books on books or more maps. Large standing vases held rolled old maps, some with countless holes. I found newer replicas on the wall.

By their confused expressions, none of this was for any of the archeology digs Juan and Kaia had been on. It all conveyed Mr. Sullivan's obsession with the idea that monkeys could fly. I rubbed my muzzle, wishing I had my pipe and a chair to sit down and make sense of it all.

After a few minutes, Catharine confessed, a little sheepishly, "I know this all looks kind of bad. As if my uncle really is obsessed. But it's not true," she defended him. "He had a life, female-friends, and as you know, he's respected by all his peers."

I nodded, as if accepting her words, for what I believed of the fox was immaterial. I approached one of the pictures on the wall and pointed it out to Catharine. "I take it this is the most recent photograph of Mr. Sullivan?" The picture I indicated was one of Mr. Avery Gatura with an arm around a fox at a black tie affair.

"Yes." Catharine walked over and laid a finger on it.

"May I?" I indicated I wished to remove it from the wall.

"Please…" She nodded.

I removed the thumb pin and looked at the picture. Mr. Oscar Sullivan was a lean but fit fox. He had no discerning tattoos, piercing, or marking which I could see that made him stand out in a crowd. He looked distracted in the photograph, as if he had something on his mind.

I next caught sight of a photograph sticking out from under a drawing of

the lower half of the large glacier. The picture was a group shot of a clan of backward arctic wolves. Ten in all, including the alpha male and female, decked out in seal skins, spears and necklaces of teeth or claws of dangerous animals that proved the prowess of the wearer. I pulled this off the wall and flipped the photo over to note it been taken seven years ago. I looked back on the photo of wolves, running a finger across the picture before snorting in irritation, and then put the two photographs together and stuffed them in my vest pocket. Stepping back, taking it all in, it dawned on me that even though the entire continent was laid out on the walls, a lot of the yarn lines dealt with places surrounding the large glacier.

"If I remember correctly, Catharine, you said your uncle's next excavation was somewhere above the large glacier?"

"That's right." She nodded after a glance at Kaia.

I turned to Juan and Kaia. "Can either of you point out where this new dig might have been?"

"Sure." Kaia walked up and pointed below the town of Seal Swallow, about halfway between the town and the glacier.

I noted the spot was not marked on his map. This brought up a question. "Looking on all of this, have any of his digs been to any of these sites?"

Juan scratched under his jaw. "I spent half a semester studying archeology sites before volunteering for his team. According to a required book of reading, ten of these sites are listed." Juan pointed them out.

I looked at the dates. None were newer than ten years ago, and nowhere near the glacier. It was my time to hold my muzzle. *At first his quest had been open for all to see. But now with the schools and museum asking him to drop the issue, he's kept it to himself, except to ask for funding.*

"Does any of this help find my uncle?" Catharine asked hopefully.

"I won't be sure for some time yet. I've other things to check out." A look at a working wind-up clock told me it was seventeen hundred, and I'd yet to have a meal outside of breakfast. I turned for the door and then had a thought. I

turned back and indicated the clock. “Catharine, do you have staff who’ll come in here and clean?”

“What’s that got to do with my uncle’s disappearance?”

“Nothing, but humor me, please.”

“My brother hired a bobcat to clean every Tuesday and Thursday. He joked about it at the time he did, saying at least her tail wouldn’t knock things over.”

This earned a smile from Kaia.

“But does she come in here?” I pressed.

“No,” she said, and then looked sideways in some embarrassment. “Even though this is my uncle’s den, and we are his guests, my brother told the bobcat to never come into this room. Why do you ask?”

“You were worried everyone believes your uncle’s obsessed with his theories. Well maybe he is or maybe he isn’t. This room tells me his theories hadn’t taken over his mind. Regardless of the paraphernalia around the walls, tables and shelves, this room is clean of filth. The rug is clean, there’s no cups or bowls laying about with food still left in them and the wind-up clock is still working. Someone with an obsession tends to let everything about them go to the wayside while they concentrate on their goal.”

Kaia slapped Juan’s shoulder. “See, I told you he wasn’t crazy.”

“Ow, jeez Kaia, I never said he was,” Juan argued. “Mitch was the one who said Oscar was three sheets to the wind. I merely withheld any arguments to keep the peace.”

Catharine’s ears shifted back, which made her look indignant, and she huffed. “He did, did he? Well he can expect no bank notes from my uncle’s charity in funding an expedition of his own, I can tell you that.”

That admission froze me in my tracks. “What a minute, funding? What funding? I thought Mr. Sullivan was hurting for bank notes. If that’s so, where are the bank notes for this charity coming from?”

“I’m sorry,” Catharine said. “I guess I never told you. My uncle isn’t

really rich. His parents were. They set up a trust fund to give him a modest monthly allowance, most of which goes to the bills on this den and a small portion to a charity to help fund dig sites of his choice. They did this because an expedition to a dig site can be very costly, so to make certain he didn't plow through all the family savings, or his inheritance as it became, they made certain he would always have a place to call home."

"So his parents are dead as well?"

"Yeah. They were on the same ship that sank with my parents."

I looked off into space, postulating. *Both Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Nelson's parents were well off, and coincidently both sets went down on the same ship. Not at all truly suspicious, but when bank notes are involved…* I let that trail off, as that was another matter.

"What do we do now?" Kaia asked.

"We…do nothing." I looked at each of them. "You two go back to the museum and continue whatever it was you were doing before I arrived, and you"—I indicated Catharine—"go back to your studies in college. It's now up to me to check on a couple of things on my own."

"But I want to help," Catharine objected, her eyes pleading that I let her continue to follow me around.

"Believe me, you have. All of you have, but I work alone for a reason, one of which went out that window when we arrived." I pointed out the window as I started for the door, willing to leave them to their own speculations as I worked out which lead might bear better fruit.

Juan followed me out while the girls remained inside talking. He ran a paw over his head and glanced up at me nervously. "So, ah, if you need anything…"

"I know where you are, thanks, Juan." I left Juan outside the gate and scanned the street for a rickshaw. With none in sight I put my paws behind my back and started off in the direction that might promise a café or restaurant. Not that I could really afford much on this side of town, but it would tie me over

while I did some thinking.

A good half hour later I came across a promising diner. It was just on the cusp of being on the wrong side of the street, save the hired help who worked the housing behind me as maids or gardeners or repair-animals needed somewhere close by where they could get a bite to eat. I pushed open the glass door to see a room full of blue collar workers, most of whom were talking dirt about their employers while winding down after a long day slaving away for the well-off. I will admit there had been times I was so desperate for work I'd hang out in such places to gain prospects for jobs. Besides, with a careful ear, a private investigator could glean many a good tidbit in such places as this.

I noted a barstool at the counter open and sat to look up on the simple fare offered on a menu board above the order window.

"What can I get you, honey?" A well-endowed Brown Fish-owl asked of me.

"What's fresh?" I asked, since I didn't like the taste of frozen meat.

She leaned on the counter, forcing her apron to work overtime to keep her endowment covered and whispered, "In truth, I'd have the fried ground squirrel. Every time I open the icebox, the damn things keep propositioning me." She stood back up with a smile on her beak, enjoying her own humor indicating the squirrels were real fresh.

I grinned, understanding her joke, very much glad some animals never took the path of growth and intelligence, as eating one whose ancestors developed into modern, upstanding animals gave me nightmares of bygone days when I was a pup. "Ground squirrel it is."

She nodded, "Good choice." She made a note on her order pad and turned to the window that separated the diners from the kitchen. "Harold, dunk a GS." She also picked up a bottle of BBQ and ketchup and set them before me. "And to drink?"

I was about to ask for milk when the glass door opened. Two street patrol Dobermans came in and surveyed the place.

The Brown Fish-owl looked over and set a feathery paw on her hip and snapped, “What the hell do you two want now?”

“Keep your girdle on, Nastya,” the skinnier of the two said without humor. “We’ve had a complaint from an animal someone’s walking around waving a pistol about.”

Oh, for crying out loud… I moaned within as my ears rotated back in a show of annoyance, for I recognized the skinny street cop. As I expected, once his beady black eyes landed on me his ears stood tall. He grabbed his utility belt, gave it a tug to set it better in place, and then walked in.

“Well, well, well,” he said loud and clear so all would pay him attention. “Look what the weasel dragged in on my turf.”

I turned my face forward and snorted in annoyance. Had I known Azzo Fulke worked anywhere near here, I would’ve left the area as quickly as possible. Not that I was afraid of him, not by a long shot. No, sometime back, a little before he passed the police academy course, I was on a job that proved his father, then a well-liked sergeant on the force, was taking bribes. This single embarrassing event in his young life made it harder on him. Not that it was my fault his father was on the take, but he had never seen it that way.

Azzo strolled up behind me and leaned on the counter. “If it isn’t the convict Braxton Snow.”

“Fulke!” Nastya snapped, folding her arms. “If you don’t quit harassing my customers—”

“Stow it, Nastya,” Azzo pointed a finger at her. “Or I’ll start checking work cards. You wouldn’t want me to start doing that, now would you?”

The threat didn’t faze Nastya. She took a deeper breath, making herself look even bigger, shifted her head side to side and snapped, “You’ll do no such thing if you want to keep walking the streets here about.”

Translation, I worked out her threat, *the well-off animals living in the nearby homes don’t like losing their under-the-table labor and will demand the local police department transfer Azzo somewhere else.*

Azzo had started to turn his attention on me when she announced that threat. Azzo's lip curled in irritation at his own folly but decided to ignore her for better sport…me. "Convict, you wouldn't by any chance be packing?" Azzo picked my flat cap off my head and let it fall behind me onto the floor.

"Careful, Azzo," I warned. "A badge on your breast doesn't mean you're untouchable." My temper was showing, and it did me no good.

"That statement could well be perceived as a threat!" Azzo growled and stood straight. "Paw it over, convict!" Azzo held out a paw, having either seen or smelled my pistol.

At this point I held no choice. Part of the legal deal to carry a pistol was that any officer, no matter who it was, could ask for my weapon at any time. Still, I'd rather not give it to him, but a glance at his partner behind and right of me showed he was ready to pounce if I did anything threatening. That would give Azzo cause to arrest me. Knowing this was his ultimate goal, I planted both paws on the counter and said, "It's under my vest on your side."

Azzo gave me a hateful smile and pulled the vest. He found my vest buttoned up and planted a paw on my shoulder. With the other, he took hold of my best vest and yanked hard, snapping off the buttons.

I closed my eyes to this, regretting the bank notes it would take to either repair or replace the vest.

"Now don't move…" Azzo warned unnecessarily. "I wouldn't want my partner to misinterpret any move you make, convict."

I'll admit his calling me "convict" was getting on my nerves. I concede now and again I'll spend a week or so in the city jail for minor infractions of the law, but they never amounted to anything, as my lawyer could attest.

Azzo reached in and began to slowly pull my pistol, breathing down my neck on purpose.

Unable to keep my mouth shut any longer, I hinted he was an idiot. "I believe you need to retake a refresher course on criminal proceeding. Only those sent to a county jail for a violent crime are called convicts. I've never been there.

So unless you want to face defamation of character charges, you'll address me by my last name, or not at all!"

"*Tsk, tsk*." Azzo pulled my pistol out and held it a second where I could plainly see that he activated the CO2 cartridge, while others might not. "So you want to play with me do you?" Azzo stood back away from me and showed his partner. "It's loaded and the cartridge is activated."

To prove his point, he pointed the pistol up and pulled the trigger. A measured amount of air was released and a tranquilizer dart in a cylinder flew out the muzzle to stick in the ceiling.

I ducked my head, shaking it. I was angry over the situation, but more so at myself for goading him.

"Just look at that, illegally carrying a charged weapon around public streets. That'll cost you thirty days in the pen and the loss of your weapons license." Azzo leaned into my ear at that point and whispered, "You want to keep fucking with me, I can arrange for more charges to be brought up."

By force of will, I kept my mouth shut.

Azzo stood back. "I thought not. Now stand up slowly and put your paws behind your back. You're under arrest for carrying a charged weapon on a public street."

With nothing I could do but add real charges to his bogus one, I did as told and felt his partner lock the cuffs in place.

"Hey!" Nastya directed her anger at Azzo. "He ordered a meal, you going to pay for it?"

Azzo glanced at her then looked at me. A new smile of malice covered his lips. "He did, did he? Well now, we wouldn't want to add petty theft to his charges." Azzo opened my vest and said in my face, "Would we?" He found the portraits instead of bank notes. Miffed that they weren't notes, he dropped the pictures without care and searched my black cotton slacks, discovering the five hundred in my pocket. "I wonder what poor slob you stole this from?" He eyed me then shrugged. "Not having seen the crime, I guess I can't haul you in for

that, but as you seem to be well-endowed with notes, you most certainly would've wanted to leave a large tip." Azzo counted out sixty and dropped it on the counter. "Keep the change, Nastya. Mr. Snow, here," he said with a nasty inflection in his voice, "won't be needing to pay for any meals for some days to come." He put the rest in his upper pocket and patted his shirt. "I'll just hang onto the rest until after booking."

Nastya eyed me while telling Azzo, "If you're trying to bribe me into silence, you best paw the rest of that over!"

Azzo stalled long enough in thought to question his mind if she might have seen him activate the CO2 cartridge. His face belayed his thoughts to which his partner gained his side and I heard him whisper, "This is a legitimate bust, right? Because I won't be a party to a false arrest just because you hate P.I.s."

"Ulrich," Azzo hissed. "Now's not the time to discuss this."

For a brief second I considered telling Ulrich that Azzo had activated the CO2 cartridge in my pistol, but a look on Azzo's face as he considered lying to his partner shut my jaw tight. One word from me and he'd proceed with this farce, leaving me to call my lawyer from jail, paying out more notes that I couldn't afford and still possibly losing my license to carry a pistol.

Ulrich reached his own conclusion a second later and pulled the cuff keys from his utility belt. "Mr. Snow, my partner was just telling me he may have tripped the CO2 cylinder when he pulled your pistol out. Whether he did or not, we've agreed to err in your favor." Ulrich unlocked the cuffs and gave over the pistol with a stiff warning. "However, next time we find a cartridge in your weapon, primed or not, you're going to jail." He leaned into my ear and growled. "Understand me?"

"Fully, officer." I nodded, knowing full well that wasn't how the laws were stipulated in the books. Even if his threat was carried out, my lawyer would have me out in no time, but that wasn't the intent of the threat. The intent was to waste my time dealing with the court system while spending bank notes on my lawyer. In the meantime, the whole incident would be added to my record, even

though the arrest was bogus. With a sigh of irritation, I checked the pistol and found Ulrich had already removed the cartridge.

Azzo looked as if he wished to say something in his defense but Ulrich stared him into silence. He made certain those seated around them saw him remove the banks notes Azzo purloined from me and then dropped them on the counter before he propelled Azzo out the door.

As for myself, I shoved my pistol back into its holster while exhaling a breath I was holding to keep my muzzle shut. I pocked my notes before I bent to pick up my pictures and flat cap. I was shaking with slowly released anger. Nastya saw this and patted the counter.

“Here, honey, sit your tail down.”

I eyed her, nodded, and sat.

She turned briefly to run a tap and then gave me a beer. “This will help calm you down.”

Again I nodded, knowing Nastya had saved me hours to days waiting for either Azzo to release me on account his arrest being bogus, or days until my lawyer tore apart his story with the use of witness statements. I downed half the beer in gratitude.

Nastya laid down my plate alongside the sixty bank notes. “I’m no thief,” she said. “But I will accept a nice tip.” She winked and walked away to her other customers. I looked at the notes and added up my bill, which amounted to fifteen. I ate my fried ground squirrel, finished off the beer, pocketed a twenty and strolled out.

Outside, a nice cool breeze flowed over my fur. I readjusted my flat cap, checked the pictures in my pocket, stretched, feeling every developing bruise from the fall outside Mr. Sullivan’s window, and set my sights for home and a hot shower.

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Joann South

Chapter 5:

Things Always Happen in Threes

I lay on my stomach with the bedside light on. In one paw I looked at the picture of the wolf clan. My eyes, though roaming, kept centering on the four wolves in the middle of the ten, the alpha male and female and their two daughters proudly accepting their parents' paws resting on their shoulders. *They both have grown so much.* My thoughts suppressed the years that had gone by. *And my parents still look more then capable*. I ran a nail around the image. A noise outside my door had my ear twitching and I turned to watch as Joann entered and then locked the door behind her. She took note of me on the mattress, still awake. She looked wrung out, her ears drooping.

Joann gave me a half-hearted smile and walked into the bathroom. By her shoulders and her silence I knew she'd had a bad day. I rolled and put the picture in a drawer of the bedside table and sat up with a twinge or two from the bruising. "Bad day?"

"You could call it that." Her clothes flew across the open space of the doorway, headed to the hamper for the dirty clothes pile.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Only if you can talk me out of quitting." The water turned on in the shower.

"Aw shit, not again…" I mumbled and got up to cross to the bathroom. "What happened this time?"

Joann was checking the water temperature and glanced at me in the doorway. She sighed and turned fully to me, blurting, "Do I look like a piece of meat?"

I raised an eyebrow. *More ways than one*, I wanted to say aloud but stifled those words in my throat, as her face and ears told me this was not the time for levity.

Her shoulders stiffened and her eyes turned hard, seeing my face which I didn't control. "Oh, get out if you're not going to be serious." She stepped into the tub and pulled the cotton shower curtain closed with a jerk.

I dropped my shoulders, feeling remorse, and came up to the curtain. "Joann…"

"Go to bed, Braxton." Her tone was harsh.

I watched her distorted form through the white fabric curtain as she stood face first in the shower spray, ears laid back and paws held under her chin.

I sighed and leaned on the wall. "You knew perfectly well why Millie hired you. So what's changed between then and now?"

The curtain jerked aside enough so she could see me. "This is not the life I wanted," she snapped. "I have hopes and dreams. I want a career that means something, not a paycheck for the way I can swing my hips and wiggle my tail." She pulled the curtain back in place and I heard her mumble, "and a family."

I understood the underlying message. *Aw, so that's it. Her sister hadn't simply shown off her latest male-friend, she'd shown off the animal Joann felt her sister was serious about.* I grimaced, knowing as long as Joann stayed with me a family was an impossibility, as different species can never have a litter unless they adopt.

My ear picked up on her first sniffle under the spray and knew she needed more than words. I opened the curtain and stepped in, ignoring the hot spray to hold her tightly against me. At first she fought half-heartedly to free herself, calling me an idiot and worse names. After the initial struggle her angry frustrations melted away and she snaked her arms around my back and pressed her face against my chest to start crying in earnest.

When she seemed to settle or run out of tears, I helped her out and set about drying her off. When my face was close enough to her shoulders as I dried

her back, she turned her head and used a paw to gently turn my muzzle to her lips and kissed me. I returned the kiss, feeling her turn fully to press up against my chest as her passion rose. Though I had not intended this, I gave as good as I got, pressing her to me with the strength of my arms and paws as I breathed her scent in deeply. Primordial lust spilled over us as if she were in heat. My paws slid up and down her back, digging into her damp, silky soft fur. Her arms under mine, her paws flowing over my back, told me she needed this more than anything right now. I lowered my paws to her firm buttocks and squeezed her cheeks before I bent slightly. Her arms came out from under mine to wrap around my neck as I took her full weight with ease until she wrapped her long legs around my waist.

Our lips never left each other in the movement of my lifting her off the floor, until I raised her high enough to taste her breasts. Joann adjusted her paws to my shoulders and leaned over enough to lay her head on mine. I caressed her luscious mounds with lips and tongue and heard her moans of pleasure as she caressed the back of my neck. Heart pounding, rushing oxygen-infused blood to active muscles and other parts, I lowered her slowly to lock my mouth around her neck, pressing my teeth ever so slightly on her skin while rolling my tongue along her jugular vein to feel her pulse of life a bare centimeter below. In the depths of my mind, a surge of power enveloped extinct memories, bringing forth an undefinable excitement that heightened my sexual arousal. Joann’s moans heightened as I increased the pressure of my jaws. Her heart sped up and she tilted her head away, making certain I had full access while her breath flowed hot and heavy in my ear.

My jaws closed to the point of severing skin and remained so for the count of several breaths, before she whispered in my ear, soft and gentle but filled with longing, “Enough preliminaries, lover. Take me to bed.”

I let go of her neck and she melted over me as if we were one until I reached the bed. Kneeling, she let go and layback, her gray eyes finding my ice blue ones. Her soft paws came up to my face and she pulled me down to her lips.

Shifting under me, her luscious leg rubbed my own in shifting so her pad could slide back and forth over my calf. I pushed up to gaze into her hungry eyes as I moved my hips around until the tip of my engorged organ found the lips between her legs. Her eyes closed in delight to my penetration. Her back arching, her pelvis pressed up into mine to take me up to the hilt. She grabbed my forearms with strength in her paws. Her mouth opened. Her face contorted in pain and pleasure.

The heat of her body flowed into me as I began to love her. With passionate eyes, I watched her. Her long graceful ears, her beautiful eyes, her small cute nose and lastly her lively mouth, which aided in showing me how much she was enjoying my administrations as I slowly moved in and out of her. Her throat worked, her lips pulled back from ivory incisors. Her head rolled to either side as my rhythm increased. She shifted her pelvis working to aid in the building sensation of euphoria between her legs. Then her thighs locked on my downward thrust, her claws dug into my forearms and she arched, her jaw tightening. Incomprehensible sounds escaped her throat.

Still able to move, sensing my own climax coming, I lowered my head in concentration. Gritting my teeth so I could ram myself faster and deeper inside her, I heard her outpouring breath of gratification, which caused my pleasure to heighten and explode in a powerful orgasm. Exquisite sensations flowed over my skin as muscles constricted to pressure seeds in my sack to exit my body like a geyser within her vagina. Animal instincts to aid the seeds in their journey to her cervix had me ram myself deep within her for three more powerful thrusts until she fell flat on her back and I, finally spent, lowered myself over her.

Breaths labored to fill lungs. After a short time, she pushed on my shoulder that I might roll onto my side, whereby she cuddled up, her head below mine, her long ears laying on my neck and her arms pressed to my expanding chest. Kissing her blue hair, I laid an arm over her shoulder and shifted a leg over hers. Hearts slowing, breath slowing, moments before we both fell asleep, I heard her whisper.

“Thank you for being here.”

I thought up several responses of endearment to this but knew none would mean more to her then sighing in contentment and holding her close.

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I stretched, and immediately regretted it. “Ow, shit!”

Joann was lying on her stomach and opened an eye. “Such a remark is normally what I say the morning after sex. What’s your beef?”

Her speech was so clear that to derail her from learning my problem, I asked, “How long have you been awake?”

She adjusted to lay her head on her arm. “About an hour.”

I turned my head to look at the clock. It was eight in the morning. She’d slept maybe five hours. I rolled to face her. My bruises complained but I sought to leave it off my face. I used two fingers to push aside her blue hair to better see her eyes. “Care to talk about it?” I knew she’d been lying there thinking of her life and where she meant it to go from here.

She laid her paw on my arm. “You know I love you.”

“But?” I asked, knowing what was to come but feeling an ache in my heart nonetheless.

She sucked in her lip and looked down the length of my body before she turned and sat up, pulling her knees up to her chest, both ears drooping. “I want a family, Braxton, but I know you’re not the marrying type.”

I sat up, mirroring her pose. “And we can’t have a litter together,” I finished for her.

Joann slid an eye my way and nodded. “There is that.” She turned her face away so I wouldn’t see her eyes moisten up from checked tears.

I sighed in regret. “We both knew this day might come.”

She used her paws to clear her eyes before she looked at me, her expression sorrowful. “Truth is, I hadn’t thought about it until yesterday.” She

leaned into me and I put an arm around her.

My heart began to pound. A heat wave flushed over my body. My throat froze and it took me three tries to clear it. *I have to be nuts!* flashed in warning lights in my mind. “Would you consider an adoption?”

Joann stiffened beneath my arm. She slowly pulled away to stare at me, ears rising.

I closed my eyes and swallowed, then looked into hers. “We’d have to see about a bigger den.”

Her paw came up to her mouth, eyes going wide. “Your, your—” Tears spilled from her eyes. “Oh yes. Yes I’ll marry you!” She engulfed me in an embrace that had me cringing both from my bruises and from the fear of being responsible for someone other than myself.

Her excitement at my oddly-worded proposal led to hugging and kissing, followed closely by overflowing passion, ending only after heart-pounding orgasms. Chests expanding as we sought to resupply our bodies with needed oxygen, Joann, perched on my hips, slowly laid herself on my chest. I wrapped my arms around her as her fingers idly made circular motions around one of my nipples.

“Tell me truthfully,” Joann said, once she could talk without hesitation. “You didn’t propose to me simply to have sex to work out the soreness of your muscles from the bruises you gained yesterday?”

Surprised, I used my forearms to push up. “How did you know?”

She smiled. “Black and blue discoloration on your skin is easy to see under your white fur.” She playfully nipped at my nipple.

“Ow…Joann?” I complained.

Her smile broadened and she patted my breast. “Besides, you kept adjusting our weight off your right side.” She became serious. “Braxton, if we are to wed, you’re going to lay off jobs that could be dangerous. I don’t want to worry about your welfare every time you go to work.”

I thought about her request and suggested, “You could come work for

me. Be my secretary and do other odd jobs I pay other animals to do. In this way you could keep an eye on my doings and if it bothers you, you can tell me."

Joann shook her head negative. "One of us has to keep a steady paycheck coming in." She laid her head down on my chest and for a heartbeat remained quiet. "Besides, the adoption agency will look at such things."

"I could always tell my lawyer to settle on these apartments. That ought to give us enough bank notes to satisfy them."

She murmured something I didn't catch, then pushed up and got to her feet. "Whatever we do, we don't have to rush into this. In any case, I guess I need to keep my job for the present time. So you need to go to work and I need to get some sleep to keep mine."

I sighed and she kicked my pad.

"You best take a shower before you leave, I don't want the whole world thinking you're a gigolo." She smiled and headed into the bathroom to start the water.

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Dressed in denim blue vest, pants and blue flat cap, I walked up to the security doors to the local police department and surrendered my pistol. The entrance I used was for the public; a side entrance out of sight of the public eye was used by the officers and any criminals apprehended.

The bulldog behind the glass labeled the weapon with a check on my license for good measure before he asked, "Who do you wish to see?" Using a pencil as a pointer, he pointed to a printed sign above my head.

I read each. *Complaints. Report a crime. Talk to a detective or Turn yourself in*. That last almost had me bust out in a laugh; it was a new addition and more likely meant as a joke. I suppressed my smile and said, "I'd like to talk to Lieutenant Barkly."

He made a note and gave me a green card. "Show this to the sergeant

inside. She'll direct you to the stairs and have an officer take you up. "He looked past me and said, "Next!"

I glanced behind, having smelled a Ringtail Raccoon, Long Eared Owl, and what most animals called a mixed breed, a mutt comprised from a mating between a Doberman and a Dalmatian. The woman was softly crying. As for myself, I thought the word mutt was demeaning. A lot of animals intermingled in their own species and produced some very good-looking females. This mating, in my opinion, did not. Of course I simply could be biased, as I didn't like Dobermans. Perhaps because the ones I'd met were bad-tempered street cops. I shrugged off my thoughts and saw the sergeant.

I followed a honey badger four flights up. He found Lieutenant Barkly's door at the end of the hall and knocked.

"Enter…" came the gruff voice of Fergus Barkly.

"You've a visitor, Lieutenant," my guide announced and then allowed me to walk past him.

Lieutenant Barkly's office looked far worse than mine. Though it was larger by three times the size, every nook and cranny was crammed with file cabinets and law books, every wall plastered with pictures of the city, criminals, suspects in a crime or old photographs of him and high city officials. His desk was somewhat neat under the clutter of case files. Four books of mug shots between bookends. A small blue card file with the lid closed. A pencil holder, with six pencils and one sharpener. A photo of his four teenage pups. Two folders, one set on top of the other, both open for flipping through, and overlooking it all, two light bulbs glowing brightly above his head.

Fergus looked up from his desk, pushed his glasses in place, and sat back in his chair with a scowl. "What the hell you want, Braxton?"

"It's good to see you too, Lieutenant," I said in a bland greeting as the door behind me closed.

"Like hell it is." Fergus snorted, his black eyes filled with hate. He flipped the case files closed. "Don't even bother sitting down. I want you to ask

your damn question and get out."

"Fine," I snapped since he was in a foul mood. *Why fight it?* "I need to talk to your partner, detective Zoe Pierpont."

"Partner?" Fergus barked. "I ain't got no damn partner by that name. Where the hell you come by this?"

That's not good. My mind held up a red flag. "You did send Ms. Catharine Nelson to me, right?"

"You know damn well I did," he confessed with a glare for reminding him he did so.

At least she didn't lie to me. "Well, I was at the museum and a Detective Zoe Pierpont had signed in to look over the crime scene. I assumed you assigned her to it."

He snorted. "You of all animals know where that'll get you." Fergus stood and went to a file cabinet. He yanked open the second drawer and started looking through files. "Pierpont, you say?"

"Ms. Zoe Pierpont," I corrected.

Fergus slid his gaze over at me then pulled out a file. "As usual, you have everything wrong. Detective Pierpont is male and deceased as of six years ago." He shoved the file back in place and turned on me. "So what the hell's this about?"

"Apparently, about a female arctic fox who's masquerading as a detective."

That caught his attention. He re-pulled the file, opened it and then scanned the pages. I wanted to have a look but knew he'd never allow it, so I tried to inch my way over, which of course didn't work. Fergus shifted the folder so in no world would I be able to see unless I could fly. He shoved the folder back and looked darkly at me. "Mmm." He rubbed his jaw. "Forget about her." Fergus looked put off, as if he was about to do something despicable as he walked back to his chair. "Tell you what." He pulled out the top drawer of his desk, shuffled through his case files and brought one out. "I'll give you what we

got so far on Mr. Sullivan's disappearance."

Share? Him? With me? Apparently I hit a nerve. "Sure…" I said as if I wasn't going to. I reached for the file and he put his paw on it.

"Your word, Braxton. You forget her name and any other reference to her."

I halted my paw. Eyed his hard stare. "My word." I sort of lied. *Sure, I'll drop anything concerning her at this point. But if we cross paths again, I'll put her right up there on my list.*

Fergus nodded and slid the file over. "But know this. I hear one word you've been asking about her and I'll have you arrested for stealing police records. Do we understand each other?"

"Since when do I not?"

Fergus grumbled and sat. He started to open his case file and glanced up at me. "What the hell are you still doing here? Get lost." He pointed to the door.

In truth I thought he meant for me to read the file here, but with a raised eyebrow, I stuffed the file behind my back into my pants and pulled my shirt over it. Closing the door behind me, I eyed the door, his name clearly printed in black block letters, and I had to wonder as I walked along the hallway and down the stairs who this female was. *This Ms. Pierpont must be a family member to the late Detective Pierpont. No other scenario seems to fit. The way she went out the window, crossed the yard and over the wall means young and athletic. Someone in her twenties.*

I secured my pistol in its holster after a cursory inspection before leaving the building. Although I'd never had a problem with the police holding my pistol, I considered it a bad habit to trust someone else with my gun without a good once over. Still, I wouldn't be happy until I'd taken it apart. Pads in motion, I headed to my office for a more thorough inspection and possibly a few puffs on my pipe as I read over the police file.

Once in the office building, I nodded at a twentyish something Jaguar by the name of Rodrigo, who was presently the daytime security guard with

aspirations of advancing to chief of operations in the city. Rodrigo nodded back and went back to his reading of current affairs as I made my way past him to the stairs, where I caught a whiff of a familiar scent. I stopped before the door and tracked the layer of scent to the elevator. With deeper breaths here and eyes closed, the scent became two. I had it, and snapped my eyes open to look around. *What do they want?* I asked myself concerning the polar bears, Hedrick and Olsten. *And where is their boss, Mr. Uchi?* I grimaced and turned to Rodrigo.

"Excuse me, Rodrigo, did you see two polar bears with a fennec fox come in recently?"

Rodrigo lowered his paper, his mind working. "The polar bears yes, a couple of hours ago. But no fennec fox, Mr. Snow."

"Thanks…"

"Is there a problem?" He dropped his paper and picked up his two-way radio in too much eagerness, as if he was looking for a good fight. "I can call for backup."

I dashed his hopes in waving my paw negative. "No need, thanks."

His face fell, though his voice still sounded hopeful. "Well, just remember, if you need help just push the panic button in your office and I'll be right up."

"That's good to know." I waved over my head, opening the door to the stairs. *That animal is dying to get into a brawl to prove his worth.* I shook my head once the door closed and headed up. I reached the fifth level and pulled my pistol, checked the darts and slipped in a CO2 cartridge but didn't activate it as yet. Once the pistol was holstered, I worked the door open slowly only enough to peek down the hallway. The two bears were stationed on either side of my door, arms folded and eyes closed as if slumbering, standing up. *If I'm quiet*, I considered, *I might get past them without either one waking up.* I sighed at my stupid notion and shoved the door open to head for my office. The door slammed closed loud enough to wake one, who blinked, startled in seeing me boldly

walking down the hall. He made a fist and hit his partner in the arm, who startled awake as well and at first sought to return the punch when the other pointed me out.

Both reset newly-acquired black vests, by the smell of them on the air, and waited. I pulled my keys and kept my eyes on them and the door. They both started to talk as I approached. Both glared at one another and tried again as I put key to lock. Both grumbled at each other over my head as the door opened and I walked in to close the door without a word to either. The closing of the door must have caught their attention, as they stopped arguing. However, they started right up again. I shook my head, giving half an ear to their argument of who was to do what, and pulled the file out from the back of my pants. I dropped this on my desk and pulled my pistol while I sat down.

Hedrick and Olsten came to an agreement and one knocked on my door. “Mr. Snow?” one asked.

I set about a complete inspection of my weapon and without looking up said, “The door’s open.”

It opened and one polar bear filled the doorway. “Mr. Snow, our boss—”

“Don’t say that, you idiot.” The other bear cuffed the one in the doorway.

The bear in the door turned his head and growled, “Don’t you don’t me!”

“Well, do it right then!”

“What’d I do wrong?”

The bear in the doorway stepped back out and closed the door as they straightened that out. I, on the other paw, brought out my toolkit and laying a cloth down set to work dismantling the gun. I’d gotten a third of the way done when one polar bear knocked on the door again. I gave my clock a sideways glance in annoyance. “It’s still open.”

The other now stood in the doorway and said, “Mr. Snow, Mr. Uchi would like to see you as soon as you come in.”

I looked at the polar bear. “As you can see, I’m in the middle of something.”

He eyed the pistol. “Uh, so?”

“So, once I’m finished I’ll look him up.” I pulled out the rebound slide spring.

“Uh.” He looked at his partner. “Uh.” He looked back at me. “Mr. Uchi said as soon as you came in.”

I dropped my arms on the desk and glared at him. “Do I work for Mr. Uchi?”

He looked at the other bear but asked me. “Do you?”

“Obviously I don’t, as I didn’t jump when you told me he wants to see me. However, if you’ll wait outside, I’ll go with you once I’m finished here.” I slid the spring back with a bit of oil and reinserted the stud. “Please close the door.” After a second, the door closed. I looked up and rolled my eyes. *A real couple of bright animals…*

Once the pistol checked out, I slid in a new CO2 cartridge and snapped it into the holster after adding a new dart. After a quick wipe-down of my desk, I pulled out my pipe and fed it a woody-flavored tobacco and leaned back to go over the police report, enjoying the smoky scent.

Hmm. Mr. Oscar Sullivan, missing March seventeenth. A Red fox. An archeologist. Yeah yeah, I know this. I flipped the page. *Interviews. Ms. Catharine Nelson, Mr. Bryn Nelson denied an interview, Mr. Avery Gatura, Mr. Mitch Vetrov and his team, Xavier Kozuch the Cat-A-Mite Museum guard, and other employees. Ms. Giselle Deville, page eleven. Hmm, that’s right, Neil Deville’s older sister.* I flipped to the page. *According to her statement, she saw him the day before he went missing.* I frowned. *So why are there holes in this statement?* I drummed my fingers on the desk. *There should be some detail as to the visit, but all I see here is a timeframe when he saw her and when he left. Nothing of real use.* I looked up on my office door, seeing the two outside just standing like statues. *I’ll need to visit her.* A glance at the clock showed the time minutes past fourteen hundred. *It’ll probably take an hour to see what the fennec fox wants.* I considered Ms. Deville. *A snowshoe hare might feel better relating*

her relationship and activities with Mr. Sullivan to another female. Another hare, to be precise. I eyed the clock again. *Joann would be at work now. If I could talk her into it, perhaps tomorrow would be best.* I rubbed under my muzzle. *Before I ask, I'd best check with Neil to ascertain when would be a good time to visit his sister. Joann might get put off if I dragged her there and Ms. Deville wasn't in.* I put in a new leaf and puffed, igniting the leaf. *Because of the time, I'd best check with Mr. Deville before I see Mr. Uchi.* Deciding so, I took a couple more puffs, cleaned my pipe and filed away the police records before leaving the office.

After locking the door, I signaled to the polar bears. "I've a stop to make before I see Mr. Uchi."

"That'll have to wait," the one on the right said, gaining a nod from the other. "We're late as it is."

I took a stance. "Mr. Uchi hasn't hired me, nor has he given me an advance on a future job. Therefore he's a low priority on my time. I am currently working a case that is paying. If you wish to pay me two hundred and fifty notes on my time for the rest of the day, I'll be happy to accompany you now."

Both polar bears looked at one another. One actually checked out how much he had in his pocket. Their eyes met and the one on the left said, "We don't carry those kind of bank notes."

"Then if you like, we can head to the bank and you can make a withdrawal."

They looked at each other, looked at me, and then one shrugged as if saying. *What do we do? The boss did say he wanted to see him as soon as possible.*

The one on the right snorted. He knew something wasn't right but couldn't figure it out. "All right. We pay you these notes and you come right away with us, right?"

"Now you're talking." I started for the stairs. "There's a lovely bank across the street from the Cat-A-Mite Museum. While you're in the bank I'll pop into the museum for a moment and meet you outside the bank in a few minutes."

“Isn’t there a bank closer?”

“Sure, but as I have business inside the museum, it’ll save time for the both of us if you make the withdrawal inside the bank while I inquire inside the museum on a matter concerning my present case.”

Whatever the two thought, I didn’t look back to see their faces. I knew I was taking a chance, but it seemed to be working. Once on the street I saw Tanner and his rickshaw across the street and signaled him. “Hey, Tanner.”

“Mr. Snow,” he exclaimed. “Fancy seeing you at this time. Do you need a ride?”

“I certainly do.”

Tanner came across and took note of the two polar bears, who stopped on either side of me. “Er, sorry, Mr. Snow, I can’t pull all three of you.”

“No problem, they can catch another rickshaw.” I looked at both. “Can’t you?”

“Uh, hmm.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess?”

“Good. Now if you’ll pay Tanner here for my ride to the Cat-A-Mite Museum, then call over another for yourselves, we’ll be on our way.”

I didn’t really think that would work. Imagine my surprise when the two polar bears, after some exchanged looks and Tanner holding out his right paw for the fare he requested, the two searched through their pockets and paid my fare.

Just before Tanner started off, one of the polar bears complained, “Mr. Snow, uh, we haven’t enough notes for both of us to ride.”

“No problem, only one of you needs be there to make the withdrawal and take me to Mr. Uchi.” Before they could digest that, I signaled Tanner to take off. Settling in the rickshaw as Tanner filled me in on the day’s happenings, I shook my head at how naive the two polar bears were. *Apparently no one ever looks past what the pair of them could do to an animal.*

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Ms. Marsha Apiyo

Chapter 6:

A Bad Call

It was fifteen thirty by the time I stepped out of the museum and saw one of the two polar bears outside the bank looking worried and a little put off. I crossed the street when traffic was clear. He saw me and padded down to meet up with me.

“Here, Mr. Snow, that’s all I have.”

I took the notes he hastily shoved at me and counted out a hundred and sixty-two.

“If we’d gone to the bank near your office—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I slapped his back in a gesture of friendship. “You can owe me.” I looked for Tanner, whom I’d asked to hang around before I went into the museum earlier. “Let’s get us a rickshaw and be on the way.”

“Umm, like I said, that’s the last of my notes.”

A rickshaw owner saw a chance for a fare and cut Tanner off. “You two gentle-animals need a ride?”

Tanner snorted, but before he could argue that he was waiting for me, I said, “No thanks, I’ve a ride waiting.” I guided the polar bear from him to Tanner. To the polar bear, I said, “That’s all right, I’ll add it to the notes you already owe me.”

As this was a verbal exchange on a contract, I had Tanner quote me a fare and added that to the amount missing and said as much in front of Tanner as a witness. Now, if I wished, I could bring the matter up before the courts and be awarded the bank notes.

A little after sixteen hundred we arrived at the Golden Eagle office building, where the offices were pricier than the building I rented in. The outside façade held an overhang standing on rounded stone pillars to protect those coming in from the weather. The first two meters of the building surface was polished granite while the rest was normal brick. The front entrance held a revolving glass door, slightly opaque to obscure those inside the building from those passing by on the sidewalk or street.

Outside the building, leaning on the granite façade was the other polar bear, looking very antsy. Seeing Tanner coming to a stop and the two of us inside, he jumped off the wall like it stood in the hot sun and came forward.

"Oh, finally. The boss is livid!" he exclaimed. "He wants Mr. Snow brought up immediately upon arriving!"

"How mad? Mad mad or really mad?" the other inquired as he climbed out after me.

"Madder then mad. Possibly madder than he's ever been."

"Gosh, that's not good." The polar bear grabbed my elbow as I waved goodbye to Tanner.

"Hey, keep your paws off!" I demanded.

"You don't understand," the bear said, taking up my other arm. "Our boss is really mad."

"I'd already gathered that from your posture in climbing out of the rickshaw."

The two hauled me up to the revolving door where they stopped, as all three of us couldn't fit at the same time.

"If you'll let me go…"

"No, no…" the bear on my right complained. "You don't understand. The boss said not to let you go until you were inside his office!"

"I see," I said seriously, while inside I was laughing. "Had you waited until I was inside that might have been a possibility. However, unless you wish

to break down the door, you'll both have to let me go."

The two looked at each other as if breaking down the door was an option.

I knew these bears were idiots, but how stupid can one get! Before they gave that a try, I offered, "Look, I promise I'll keep your having to let me go to get through the door a secret between us, okay?"

"You swear?"

"Yes, of course." I nodded.

"Gee, Mr. Snow, that's awful kind of you."

"Just trying to be helpful. Besides, I'm working with you for now, as you've paid for my time."

"Ooo, that's right. Gee, that's really helpful."

They let me go, but once those two reached the lobby my elbows were seized again and I padded up to the elevator.

On the tenth floor we stepped off into a large lobby. The polar bears didn't wait for me to become familiar with the room as they pulled me to the left and down a hallway to the fifth polished, tan, wooden door on the right side. One bear opened the door and I was hauled through a reception room three times as large as my office. We passed a young female raccoon hard at work on a manual typewriter. Add this up with two body guards, dimwitted or not, a secretary, a reception area in a plush office building and it all said Mr. Uchi had bank notes to burn. Which made me wonder who he worked for besides Mr. Bryn Nelson.

Without knocking, the duo entered Mr. Uchi's office, saying, "Here he is, boss."

The fennec fox, who already was looking at the door when we entered, snarled, "What have I told you two about knocking?"

The polar bears stopped. They turned to look at one another.

Before either one spoke, Mr. Uchi rolled his eyes and laid back his ears. "Never mind!" He pointed to the door. "Get out."

"Boss, uh, what about Mr. Snow? You want us to take him out too?"

"No, you cretins. Get out and close the door." The fennec rubbed his

face.

The two bears looked at each other and I couldn't help but ponder if they were bewildered about how to obey the fennec's orders when it clashed with his earlier order to not let me leave their sight. A sound from the fennec decided their course of action and they left together, colliding at the door. The two growled at each other and slapped each other before they squeezed their way through the doorway.

Once the door closed, the Fennec sighed and looked at me in disappointment. "I swear I'm going to trade them both in for a respectable badger."

Mr. Uchi's office was quite functional. A large ash wood desk dominated the space, with a high chair to accommodate his diminutive stature. Two pine chairs in different sizes for the comfort of his guests stood nearby. He had a functional Birch limb desk lamp on his right in addition to the overhead lighting. A small book rack stood to my left with photographs of the city at night and a large office window showed off the skyline behind him.

Out of the ordinary was the right wall. Plastered on it was a detailed map of the city with colored stick pins here and there. This caught my attention, though I didn't walk up to it, but rather I sauntered up to the chair made for my size and sat, uninvited.

Mr. Uchi eyed me but said nothing.

I began our conversation in an antagonistic tone, "Being animal-napped is a criminal act. Not to mention being accosted by those two." I jerked my thumb at the door as an unnecessary reminder of who I was talking about.

Mr. Uchi reached for a decanter of white wine, a Moscato blend if my nose wasn't mistaken, and poured himself a refill. "In polite company, it's considered good form to doff one's hat."

Translation, I showed you respect when I came calling, it's only good form to return the compliment. "I don't consider being dragged around town as being polite," I countered, crossing a leg over the other.

The fennec took a sip. “Perception is nine-tenths of the law. Point of fact, you weren’t dragged but escorted. I had a legal right to have you detained, as you failed to honor our earlier discussion, which could not have been mistaken.”

“You’ll have to clarify yourself.” I readjusted my position, as my tail hadn’t settled right.

“Mr. Snow, let us not play these games. Against Mr. Bryn Nelson’s wishes and our discussion earlier, you accepted a commission from Ms. Catharine Nelson to investigate her delinquent uncle’s absence. In light of this knowledge, I had you brought here to relinquish your fee, as it was illegally obtained. Now, if you please, you may drop the amount here on my desk and have our business concluded, or you may return tomorrow with the full amount if you’re lacking in funds tonight.”

The fact he’d learned I was back on the case miffed me. I had my suspicion who’d informed him. *Mitch Vetrov, no doubt.* But that was presently uncorroborated. I sought to hide my irritation and casually looked at my fingernails before I answered him. “I’m afraid you have your facts confused. Ms. Catharine Nelson never rehired me. After our meeting, my curiosity got the better of me and I donated my time poking around the museum, as I’ve no clients at present.”

The fennec took another sip and set his glass down. “Mr. Snow, let’s be professionals about this,” he tried to reason. “I’d hate to have my two employees explain the facts of life to you.”

“If you wish a lawsuit on your paws, you can try.” I’d be hard pressed to provide evidence of the alleyway attack while recuperating in the hospital. However, odds were good I could say what I wanted here, as he wouldn’t want his office messed up or witnesses.

The fennec sat back in his chair. “I’ll give you until tomorrow to return the funds.” He sat back up, taking up a pencil, and jotted down a note. “Five hundred bank notes.” He glanced at me. “That is your fee to begin, yes?”

I snorted, stood, and laying my ears back, I put my paws on his desk so I

could lean across to be better heard. “For your information, Ms. Kaia Sundell donated a sum of notes on behalf of Mr. Sullivan’s students for me to look in on the matter during my visit to the museum.”

It dawned on me I could’ve referred to the missing book, ergo mudding up the waters in case he tried to take me to court instead of using his two muscle animals. But then I realized why I hadn’t considered it. *Diverging too far from the truth can get an animal tongue tied. Lawyers love that. It gives them an opening to put words in your mouth.* I learned this early on in my career. After a moment batting that around, I straightened up and added, “Next time you send those two out to fetch me, I’ll take it as a personal threat and retaliate.” I turned on my pads and walked to his door.

Before I got there, he said, “I’ll of course check out your story. But once I confirm you’ve lied, I’ll have the police pick you up for petty theft.”

This last was said for the benefit of his secretary, as I never stopped my travels to the door and had pulled it open.

****

On the way home I dropped off at Millie Ann’s Moonlight Café to get a bite to eat and talk with Joann, if she had the time.

“Hello, sweetie…” Joann smiled at me as I doffed my flat cap, though I could tell she was having a rough day. “What can I get you?”

“How about a clam sandwich?” I whispered, using the street slang to let Joann know I wouldn’t mind tongue lashing her vagina while I gave her a sideways leer for the fun of it.

Joann leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Keep it up, big wolf, and you’ll get nothing tonight.” She stood back straight and said aloud, “Fresh cod it is.” She turned her tail on me to give the order, knowing I’d catch her meaning.

I looked down at that fluffy tail while I enjoyed the sight of her tight-fitting shorts. She has one of those tight butts I could look at all day. She turned

her head slightly and gave me a knowing look that I was staring then gave the cook my order.

I smiled and was simply going to sit there and watch her work when I remembered why I'd really dropped off. "Do you have a second, Joann?"

She turned and looked around the room full of patrons. "Not really, but what is it?"

"I'd like to have your help tomorrow concerning the job I'm on. Say about eleven hundred?"

"What's it pay?" she asked seriously.

"Room and board for another night," I retaliated.

She raised an eyebrow and mouthed, "I thought the clam sandwich covered that?"

I shook my head negative.

She wiggled her nose at me. "You're no fun. Okay, sure." With that she attended to her customers.

****

Ms. Giselle Deville's burrow was right off the college campus. The building was average-priced, expensive enough to keep out the riffraff, but low enough so students could manage a room if their parents helped out or they succeeded in obtaining a fair-paying job.

"This is sort of fun," Joann commented, holding my arm possessively as students passed us coming and going. "Tell me again, why am I here?"

I looked at the façade of the five-story complex and felt Joann's arm tighten around mine when a particularly fetching black wolf walked past. I gave the wolf a sideways glance to admire her upright, fluffed out tail and answered Joann, turning back to her. "A Mr. Neil Deville told me his sister lived here and on occasion has entertained Mr. Oscar Sullivan, who I am currently looking for."

"And?" Joann looked me in the eyes and dug her nails into my arm to

emphasize she didn't appreciate my looking at the wolf while she stood right there by my side.

I grimaced, showing her I understood, and explained. "Being that's she's a snowshoe hare, I think she's entertaining animals for the bank notes."

Already miffed at my indiscretion, Joann dropped my arm and glared at me with folded arms under her pink halter top. "For your information, not all hares are prostitutes."

"But on average, they are," I countered. "If not, they still entertain a lot of animals; take your sister, for example." I knew that was the wrong thing to say, but my mind wasn't as fast as my big mouth. *Oh shit, you idiot!*

Joann reacted as I imagined she might. Her ears laid back. Her eyes showed hurt and anger. She drew in a breath and slapped my muzzle. Her physical treatment of my face gained us unwanted attention from passersby.

"Is that how you see me? Was your proposal only to keep a hare in your bed?"

"No, no!" I corrected, taking up her shoulders with both my paws. "I didn't mean it that way."

She tried to draw away but I held her firm. "Look, Joann, I'm sorry. What I meant was there is a symbiosis between herbivores and carnivores with our intelligence."

She glared at me, half-heartedly trying to break free.

I hurried on. "Instincts play largely in all animal daily lives. Even with our intelligence the old needs of predator and prey are still there. However, for us it's been incorporated into our sexual adventures. When I have my jaws around your throat, a wave of euphoria washes over me sensing your life blood below the skin, hearing your breath flow so cleanly in and out of your lungs and testing your heightened arousal knowing your life is in my jaws. This is but one of the physical attractions between you and me. It's why meat eaters go to hare prostitutes. To feel that sense of ecstasy before concluding the experience in sexual release."

Joann snorted. I let her turn her back on me lest she take my words wrong and kick me between the legs.

“Joann, honey?” I put my muzzle against her blue hair and nuzzled the side of her head. “I love you.”

Her ears relaxed, which told me she was thinking. After a few seconds Joann turned her head slightly. “I will admit in sex education, all the female hares were singled out and told, in somewhat more detail, what you just said.” Her ears quivered. “I need to know, is it only that act which draws you to me, or do you feel more for me?”

I turned her around. “I’ll admit kissing you ranks second in my book.”

Joann’s eyes narrowed, not liking my humor at the present time.

“But your large gray eyes,” I hurried on as she shifted her darker-pink-shorts-covered hips so her weight was mostly on her left leg. This freed up her right leg if she wished to put it into action. “The way you look at me turns my heart into putty.”

Her body relaxed and her eyes softened. I pulled her close and we hugged.

“Okay, handsome. So what do I do?”

I sighed in relief and let her go. “Quite simply, you talk to her hare to hare.”

“About?”

“When was the last time she saw Mr. Oscar Sullivan? What kind of mood was he in when he arrived and when he left? Did he say where he might go? Does he see any other females?”

“Where will you be?”

“Down the hall. I want her to focus on your questions, not how much eyelash-batting or hints it’d take to get me in her bed.”

Joann huffed. “Braxton, you may be ruggedly good looking, and your scent attractive, but not all females want to drag you to bed like I do.”

I rolled my eyes. “Joann, you’re missing my point. She pays her rent by

sexing males. It doesn't matter if she's attracted to me or not. If I'm there, she'll wish to get some bank notes out of me."

She wiggled her cute nose, and I detected a hint of jealousy in her eyes. "Okay, fine. But you owe me."

"What would you like?"

She smiled, tiptoed and kissed my muzzle. "A carrot cake."

I laughed in my throat. "Done." I swatted her fluffy tail. "Let's get moving."

Joann jumped and turned her head. "Letch."

****

Ms. Giselle Deville's burrow was on the fifth floor. Coincidently, her apartment was next to the fire escape. I gathered this was how she got customers in and out of the building without the superintendent having to complain about the traffic. We'd stepped out from the open stairway and started down the hallway when Ms. Deville's door opened and a female arctic fox, dressed in a beige blouse, yellow sash and khaki pants, stepped out. The two were about to shake paws when I called out loud enough for them to hear.

"Ms. Pierpont?"

The arctic fox snapped her head around to us, and in an instant, she was at the window and throwing it open.

"Ms. Pierpont," I shouted. I took up Joann's arm as Ms. Pierpont ignored my call and dove out the window. "Stay with Ms. Deville and see what she wanted."

I left Joann at a run. I nodded and tipped my flat cap at a startled Ms. Deville. "Good day," I said and out the window I went. A quick look showed Ms. Pierpont had already hit the third landing. *Damn, she's fast.*

The arctic fox wasted no glance up but kept right on descending at a pace an Olympic runner would be envious of. Understanding I'd never catch her this

way, I first tried to reason with her. “Ms. Pierpont, I just want to talk!” I hit the fourth landing. She hit the second without any signs of slowing. This caused me to be reckless. I vaulted the railing and leaped for the fire escape across the alleyway. She hit the ground as I slammed into the second landing, almost missing. I scrambled and grabbed. She sprinted for the street. I dropped the three and a half meters to the stone alley. She disappeared around the corner, heading right. Gritting my teeth, I sprang in pursuit. I rounded the building corner to discover Ms. Pierpont with two police Dobermans. She sighted me, pointed and screamed before she charged off. The alerted police did as expected. They pulled their pistols.

One shouted, “Halt or we’ll shoot!”

Dammit! I cussed, not wishing to be apprehended and hauled into the police department, only then to be asked to explain myself. Fortunately for me, the street wasn’t bare of traffic, so I did the fastest U-turn I’d made in a long time and sprinted back into the alleyway. Once there I opened up my strides, hauling my tail double-time out the other side into a crowded street. Still hearing their pursuit by the slap of pads on the stones behind me, I shot across traffic, upsetting a rickshaw, and made it down another alleyway.

Most domestic animals by now would be breathing through their mouths. I, on the other paw, being originally from a county clan, kept pulling lungs full of air through my nose, for once an animal began to breathe out of his mouth, the race was over. My pursuers, however, were police-trained Dobermans, who by necessity had to pass a class in breathing. What was worse, they were ten or more years younger than I.

Out on the street, I spied the college park and took the chase out into green grasses, picnic tables, benches, barbeque pits, and startled animals enjoying the sunshine. I leaped over benches and vaulted over animals lying on blankets while I kept my strides even and unwavering. This was a test of endurance and training. Being older didn’t mean better trained, but in my account, my country training in navigating obstacles won out. After vaulting

over one more couple, I hit the street on the opposite side and reached another alleyway. Out the opposite side I slowed and ducked into a discount store. I walked unhurriedly to the back bathrooms where I went into the males' relief center. Grabbing the wash basin, I took in long deep breaths through my mouth.

Damn, I'm out of shape. I accused myself. *I've allowed this city living to soften me up. Hell, there was a time I could've run like that for over an hour before shifting to a stride I could run at for the rest of the day.* I looked in the mirror at my chest working, my mouth open and my tongue lolling out. *Shit!* I pulled my tongue in and licked my dry lips. I reached up and felt my bare scalp. *I lost my good flat cap.* I turned from the mirror and crossed my arms in annoyance. "I really liked that flat cap."

My ears swiveled to the approach of pads closing on the door. Not wishing to be seen yet, I entered a stall and dropped my pants. *Might as well, as I'm here.* I heard a door open and close. I heaved a sigh, as it wasn't the males' room door. I finished up and washed off my paws in the sink. Breathing normally, I walked out of the males' convenience room and browsed the garments until something struck my fancy. Deciding it would be best to change clothes, I entered a changing booth and donned brown cotton pants, a tan cotton short-sleeve shirt, dark brown vest, and applied a new light gray flat cap to my head. After a check in the mirror I laid down notes for the whole lot. Just outside the department store, I adjusted the snaps on the flat cap, settled it comfortably on my brow and began my walk back to Ms. Giselle Deville's burrow.

Joann was outside the apartments when I arrived. She eyed me and my newly-acquired clothes as I approached. "You could have asked if I wanted to do some clothes shopping too, you know."

"Unforeseen circumstances." I shrugged, glad of the walk to keep my legs from cramping after that run while I flexed arms and shoulders to work out the bruising after I hit the fire escape badly.

"Mm hmm. Did you at least catch who you were after?" Joann took note of my actions and sought to see if I'd cut myself, which I hadn't.

“No dice, ouch!” I reacted to her paws pressing upon my side. “That’s one quick fox.”

“That’s going to bruise something awful.” She looked into my eyes, worried-like. “You’re getting to old to run amok after animals. You could’ve broken a rib, by the look of things.”

“Yeah, I know. I wasn’t thinking.” I smiled to try to chase away her worries, and caressed her face. “Still it was exhilarating to open up and run flat out. I hadn’t done such in years.”

Joann tiptoed to reach my lips in a gentle kiss. When she settled back on her pads mischief filled her grays eyes. She tiled her head slightly, reached up and took my flat cap to settle it on her hair. “This is nice. What do you think?”

“Not your size or color…” I reached for the flat cap but she shied away, wiggling a finger negative at me.

“You owe me, Braxton.” She smiled. “So I’ll take this as a down payment.”

“Joann, come on, I’m not in the mood.” I half lied, for if truth be told, I’ve got a thing about having my hats messed with.

I tried for the cap. She giggled and turned her back on me. “Joann…” I complained, reaching around her, pulling her body up to mine to get at the cap.

“Basher…” She laughed, and deftly spun out of my grip.

I rolled my eyes; a smirk grew over my lips, as her humor was infectious. She backed up so she could waive the cap outside of my paw range. As her back was to the building, I stepped closer until she came in contact with the brick wall. I had her trapped. Joann shifted the cap behind her.

“I demand payment for the cap.” She cocked her head and her nose twitched.

I placed my paws to either side of her, leaning on the wall. “And what would that be…hmmm?”

Joann’s look of mischief changed to concern. Her ears perked up as her eyes focused on something other than me. Her obvious attention elsewhere

caused my instincts to activate. I sniffed the air, which let me know several animal species were nearby. Of course, that in itself was of no use. I swiveled my ears before my mind caught up to my thoughts to turn around. My hearing picked up the unmistakable sound of a CO2 cartridge being activated…no, make that two. I finished my turn to see a German shepherd college campus officer lowering my lost white flat cap from his nose. He took a whiff of the air and pointed at me with a confirming nod. Beside him with pistols already out and aimed were the two police Dobermans I'd outrun.

Joann caught their intent and screamed, "No!"

The Dobermans' eyes hardened and snarls marked their muzzles after getting confirmation my scent was on the cap. They sighted along their barrels.

It's normal procedure for both officers to have pistols ready. But only one was supposed to fire while the other waited as backup. However, since I'd humiliated the pair in losing them in a chase, I knew for a certainty by their body language that both were going to pull the trigger.

I'd an instant of time to decide whether to avoid the tranquilizer darts or not. However, Joann would certainly be hit, possibly by both darts. One dart wouldn't harm her, but two I was certain would kill her. This fact flooded my brain as my basic training in fluid contents of the darts over body mass ratio flashed before my eyes. Of course it didn't help matters much when it was followed by the knowledge the police carry a more potent dose of tranquilizer darts than those of us without badges.

In that second I knew I couldn't chance the darts would miss her. With little choice I threw my arms wide to make my chest a better target while keeping Joann shielded behind me.

As I predicted, they both fired. The sound of expelled air found my ears as two darts hit my chest. Joann cried out. The world spun. My eyes rolled back and I lost all equilibrium before darkness filled my mind.

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WANTED
Azzo Fulke

Chapter 7:

Time to Rethink My Life; Then Again?

I woke in a bed. My senses slowly churned on sounds and smells. Antiseptic, bleach, clean linen, metal, wood, paint, movement of pads on flooring, distinct odors of various animals. Lastly, my left paw held in two familiar paws. I deduced correctly I was in a hospital room. Joann was to my left. I could sense she'd been crying.

"Joann…" I whispered, my tongue and mouth dry.

"Braxton? Oh, Braxton…" Joann jumped from her chair and place a gentle paw on my face as she squeezed my paw with the other. "You're awake. Praise the Great Maker."

Her face came into focus as my eyes opened. She nuzzled my muzzle. Tears of happiness fell down her cheeks.

I tried to reach for her soft wet cheek with my right paw but found my wrist cuffed to the hospital bed railing.

Joann saw the move and before I could comment, she told me, "They said you attacked that arctic fox you were chasing. I told them that was bunk, but they won't listen to me."

"Typical…" I murmured. "How long have I been out?"

"Eight days." To my astonished eyes, she added, "You've been in a comma. The doctor told me had you not had a strong metabolism, you would not have survived both darts." She clasped my paw with both of hers, tightly. "It appears you're made of stronger stuff than most animals." She leaned over and kissed my lips before whispering in my ear, "I owe you my life, love." She pulled back and I looked in her eyes. "I know how fast you are, can be when you

wish. You could have dived out of the way. But because I was behind you, you stood fast and took the darts."

I tried to downplay her words. "Not necessarily. I didn't think I could avoid both darts. And as the fault was mine that they were after me, I didn't think you—"

Joann lightly slapped my muzzle to stop my lie. "Shut up, you, and take the praise you deserve."

The curtain shielding us from the activities beyond pushed aside to admit a spotted owl nurse. "Ah, Mr. Snow, you're awake." She walked in and took up my cuffed wrist then turned her own wrist to look at her watch to count my pulse.

I moved my tongue to try to wet my mouth. "What's the verdict?"

She raised her brown eyes briefly to my question while her beak counted on, before she looked back down at the watch. "Heart rate appears normal." She let go of my wrist, pulled out a small flashlight and after motioning Joann back, she looked in my left, then right eye and watched for a reaction from the pupils. "Response normal." She glanced at Joann before telling me, "By my guess, you're as healthy as a horse. But that's in my opinion only. I'll inform the doctor you're awake." She turned and closed the curtain before she walked off.

"Here." Joann offered me a glass of ice water.

"Thanks." I used my elbows to push up a little so Joann could tilt the glass and I could wet my mouth and throat.

Joann looked down, over to the curtain, then back on me and gave a half-hearted smile.

"Something on your mind?" I inquired.

She looked guilty. An ear drooped. She pressed her lips together and took up my paw within hers, squeezing tightly. "I want you to quit this job." She glanced up, huffed and drew in a breath, her ears laid back. "The whole thing. I never want to go through this again." Joann looked in my eyes expectantly.

I rolled her wish around in my mind. *We've already touched base on this.*

But I'm not ready. I want to know who that arctic fox is. Why was she in Mr. Sullivan's room uninvited? I'm also curious who she is to Lieutenant Fergus Barkly. How she's involved. Lastly, why Mr. Oscar Sullivan, a respected archeologist, would steal an ancient book from the Cat-A-Mite Museum and risk his reputation and possible jail time. I looked into her big gray eyes and saw the instant she knew my answer.

Joann let go of my paw. She looked hurt. Her ears laid back even further. "But why? Is getting yourself killed over this more important than us, than me?"

Before I could answer, the curtain was shoved aside, admitting the doctor. Joann looked up at the sand cat, folded her arms and walked away.

I wanted to call her back. Reach out and pull her to me. But the doctor forestalled this by speaking first.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Snow. I'm pleased you decided to return to the living." He flipped through some papers on a clipboard. "According to your chart, I don't doubt you'll be up and out of here in a day or two." The sand cat noted the cuffs and revised his statement. "Well, up and ready for the police to escort you over to their building, anyway." He set the chart down on a table and looked at my mouth, tongue, throat, eyes, and lastly pulled the blanket back to lay his ear on my chest to listen to my heart.

The sand cat stood when a bulldog police officer showed up at the curtain. "Beg pardon, Doctor, but is he ready for transfer?"

The sand cat rechecked my cart, used a pencil to write in something, gave me a glance, and then nodded. "Yes, Mr. Snow's good to travel."

****

It was nine a.m. the next morning when I walked out of the police station, alone and frustrated. Joann had left the hospital when the police bulldog had arrived to take me into custody. Once hauled inside the station, I was booked, photographed and held in a cell with four other animals of questionable

disposition while they sought Ms. Zoe Pierpont. But as she hadn't hung around that day she accused me of attacking her, or showed up while I was in the hospital to file a grievance, all they could do was hold me for unlawfully evading police detainment. Wishing to pin something on me, they grilled me for three hours to get a confession to a crime, any crime, but I denied them satisfaction by keeping my muzzle shut.

Freed at last, I stood outside the building eyeing the cool wet weather. *Do I go home and talk matters out with Joann, or do I head to the office and see if I have any paying jobs waiting?* This last thought was more financial, as I found in my pocket the bill for my hospital stay. *Four thousand, nine hundred and eighty four bank notes for my eight-day stay.* I rubbed my muzzle. *I haven't the notes, nor can I continue the search for Mr. Oscar Sullivan or satisfy my curiosity concerning Ms. Pierpont until I can pay this off.* I glanced at a police officer as he walked past. *Heaven knows, they won't pay the bill. According to the law, police can use what force deemed necessary to apprehend criminals. As I was stupid enough to outrun them in a fair match up, in their eyes that was admission I'm guilty of something, so the bill is mine to pay.*

I rolled up the collar of my shirt against the cool wet wind. I checked my shoulder holster, and for a second panicked that my pistol wasn't there. *Oh, right.* I sighed in irritation. *The criminal charge gave them cause to pull my pistol permit, confiscate the weapon and pull my P.I. license. If I wish to continue working as a private detective, I have to retake a three-month course in law enforcement and pass a test. After which I have to re-file for a P.I. license then buy a new pistol. That's another seven hundred and fifty bank notes total. Then there's the mandated pistol course on how to use one, plus a course on the use of tranquilizer darts, plus the firing range fees, plus...hmm, oh hell, I forget what else at the moment.* I squared my gray flat cap, put my paws in my pants pockets and started to walk, ignoring the drizzling rain. *I could be out as much as seven thousand bank notes.* I felt as dreary as the weather. *I'd have to work my tail off simply to break even.*

It was a long lonely walk to my office. Near dripping wet, I looked at my door and read my name and profession. I came to a decision. *A private detective is a young animal's game. I've the bruises to prove it plus my stupidity in running from the police to top it off.* I glanced down the hall where a chute led to the furnace. I opened my door and looked around at fifteen years of casework I'd collected. A sad smirk ran across my lips. *I can see Lieutenant Barkly's bright smile in learning I've quit the business.* I ran my paw over a file cabinet, shook my head and began the work of dumping my files down the furnace chute.

The whole project took four hours. *Not that I'm counting.* I'd have gotten done sooner had I not looked over a case file or two before letting them go. Lastly, I emptied my desk into a carry case. At the exit door, I glanced once more on what had amounted to my second home and headed to the elevator, more depressed then I've ever been as the thought crossed my mind, *So what do I do now?*

At the front security desk, Espen looked up as I approached. "Good evening, Mr. Snow. Anything I can do for you?"

"I'm closing up shop, Espen," I said matter-of-factly, and gave the startled black bear my keys. "Please have all my letters forwarded to my home address and inform management to send my last renter's bill there."

"Gee, Mr. Snow, I'm sorry to see you go." He took my keys and dropped them in a drawer. "The place won't be the same with you gone."

"Thanks for the sentiment. Good luck in college." I shook his paw in passing and stopped outside the front doors. The light rain had yet to let up. *Perfect*, I thought as it matched my mood. I pulled my pipe out and selected a can of leaves at random, filled the bowl and lit up. I took a couple of puffs while a rickshaw pulled up and stopped. Ms. Catharine Nelson stepped out, dressed in a green, foul weather overcoat.

"Oh, thank the Great Maker. Mr. Snow, I've been looking all over for you the past two days." She hurried up to me. "I've found something in my uncle's room that I thought might help you find him."

“Good evening, Ms. Nelson.” I nodded to her, using her title, as I felt it best to apply distance between us.

“Here.” She tried to give me an old tour guide.

I removed my pipe and waved her off. “I’m sorry to disappoint you. Due to circumstances, I’ve had to retire.”

Ms. Nelson blinked and kept shoving the book at me. “Yes, I know it’s late. But if you’ll take this with you, I’m sure in the morning, after looking it over, you’ll discover something that will help you in finding my uncle.”

“No, no, you misunderstand me. What I mean is that I’ve packed in my business. As of today, I’m simply another law-abiding private citizen.”

Ms. Nelson looked surprised and stuttered, “Wh-a-t? No!” She grabbed my pipe arm and pleaded. “Please, Mr. Snow, you can’t. Not now, not with this new discovery. You have to find my uncle!”

Her distress was so plain, she ignored that she’d dislodged my pipe from my paw. Unable to take a stab at a grab, I watched it hit the brick sidewalk and break off the bowl. *Well*, I thought to myself, laying back my ears as she continued to try to change my mind. *That settles it. I bought that pipe with my paycheck from my first successfully closed case.* I shifted my eyes from my pipe as she let go, opened her coat and sent a paw into her bra. She withdrew a bundle of notes.

“Here, Mr. Snow, please. Take this. It’s all I have at present, but I’ll get more.”

“Ms. Nelson, I’m sorry, but no. No amount of notes will change my mind.” I took her offered notes and placed them in an inside pocket of her coat, reclosed her coat and led her back to her waiting rickshaw. “In the past short days I’ve almost lost my life and may have lost my fiancée.”

She cried, “But you promised!”

“No, Ms. Nelson, I said I’d do some looking, and I have.” I pulled out of my case the folder I’d received from Lieutenant Barkly and my own notes I’d written up before leaving the office and gave them to her. “This is everything I

know.” I forced her up into the rickshaw and turned to the driver. “Please take Ms. Nelson home.”

She grabbed my paw with both of hers, tears pouring from her eyes. “Please, Mr. Snow. I’m desperate. I’ll do anything. I’ll—I’ll sleep with you if it’ll change your mind. Every night, if you wish, while you’re on the case! I want to find my uncle!”

I’d had that kind of offer before when a client couldn’t pay my fees, but that kind of payment doesn’t pay the bills. I shook my head no, and slapped the rump of the driver. “Get going.” The Clydesdale gave me a sour look, but started off. Ms. Nelson grabbed the side of the rickshaw and leaned out to watch me as she was pulled away.

In truth, I felt like a heel. *I’ve made my decision.* I swallowed a lump of regret.

Tanner pulled up, having watched from across the street. “Late night, Mr. Snow?”

“That and then some.” I eyed the distance, still seeing the drizzle.

“You need a lift, perhaps to Millie’s Moonlight Café?”

I looked at the bag in my paw. *I need to turn in the darts. You just don’t throw this stuff away.* But I didn’t wish to walk into a police station at this time. “Tell you what.” I tossed the bag into his rickshaw. “You take that to the police station for me, and I’ll give you my prepaid fare card, as I’ll not be needing it any longer.”

“What’s this?” Tanner questioned and looked at the fare card I gave over, seeing about twenty notes still on it. “What gives, Mr. Snow?”

“I’m retiring, Tanner. I’m going to marry Joann and settle down to a normal life.”

Tanner’s eyebrow rose. “Seriously?”

“Afraid so.”

“Well, I hate to lose such a good customer, but I’m right pleased for you. If you have a fair-size wedding, I’d be honored if you’d consider inviting me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I shook his paw. “I wish you well.”

“You don’t wish me to take you to Millie’s?”

Tanner turned his palm up and felt the light raindrops, as a queue to remind me it was wet out. The gesture was a salesman ploy to elicit customers. I knew Tanner hadn’t meant it that way. He was genuinely concerned I’d take ill before making it back to my den. Being an arctic wolf brought up on the glacier, weather like this was only an irritant, diluting odors making tracking prey difficult. But as I wasn’t party to that kind of life anymore, the dilution of scents was a blessing.

“No, thanks anyway. I’d like to walk tonight.”

Tanner’s dark eyes showed concern, but as I’d refused help, he could do no more. “As you say then. Good luck, if I don’t see you again.”

“Thanks,” I called out as he picked up the poles and started off.

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I was soaked to the skin by the time my key hit the lock. I should have taken Tanner up on his offer, but at the time I needed the walk. It was 03:00. Joann should be home, unless she worked a few extra hours of overtime like she did now and again. I closed the door and allowed my eyes to adjust to the darkness. She wasn’t in bed. “Mmm…It would’ve been nice to crawl into a warm bed.” I shrugged and took a hot shower and milked it until my skin was red in reaction to the heat. As tired as I was, I still took the time to groom myself before lying down. *There’s nothing worse than waking up with matted fur or biting fleas.* A glance at the clock said it was 04:40. *Mmm, she normally doesn’t work more than two extra hours.* A deep yawn took over my face. I lay down on the mattress and in seconds was out for the night.

I awoke and stretched, and regretted it. “Ow! Shit!” Every muscle hurt. I wanted to curl up and whimper, but I kept right on stretching, no matter the pain. “Damn, those eight days of non-activity sure are telling on me.”

It wasn't until I'd worked out the worst of the kinks that I noticed Joann wasn't in bed with me. Puzzled, I sat up. I tilted my head this way and that, to work out stiffness in my neck. "Joann, are you in the bathroom?" No answer. I glanced at the clock. "Ten-thirty. Wow, I slept in over three hours." Not at all happy Joann wasn't home, I slowly stood, sore muscles complaining, and walked into the bathroom to take care of business.

Now that I was awake and had drained my bladder I caught sight of a blaringly clean shelf that should have had Joann's brush, toothbrush, hair dye and nail clippers.

"Oh no…Joann…" I stepped out and checked our closet, and found some of her clothes gone. "Oh, Joann…" I whispered, shaking my head in grief. I put my back to the wall and rubbed my muzzle. "I didn't mean to drive you away." I rubbed the back of my neck and looked up at the ceiling. *I've a choice,* I told myself. *I could go after Joann, or let her alone and see how it feels to be a true bachelor once more.* I closed my eyes and took a deep whiff. Joann's lingering scent played across my tongue. *If I leave her alone, she could find someone of her own species and have that litter she's been wanting without having to adopt someone else's cubs.*

I crossed my arms and walked over to the window. The grass lawn of the apartment complex was being trimmed by a herd of sheep. Two shepherd dogs kept track of the animals, using long staffs to make certain they didn't wander out into traffic or to guide them to a new patch needing eating. Some meters away, Mrs. Amelia Lamoree was out walking her goose. Mrs. Dorit Zachariah sat on a bench, doing needlepoint as her two kittens played around the trunk of a Hornbeam tree.

I put a shoulder to the window seal. *Just because my world's upside-down doesn't mean everyone else's has to be.* I glanced at our closet. *She'll be back for the rest.* After a moment more of postulating life without her, yet reminded by her lovely scent of what I'd be missing, I said, "Oh, hell. With her scent all over the place I can't clear my head for thinking straight."

Dressed in blue jeans and belt, white cotton vest and a black flat cap, I walked out, heading for the park to clear my sinuses. Paws held behind my back, I meandered the wet grounds without purpose, breathing deep of the clean air and heady scent of trees, grass and mud. With no ties to work or a female-friend, the day was mine to do with as I saw fit.

I found a bench that looked as lonely as I felt and sat to take my weight of my pads and absorb the sun's warming rays. I reached into an inner vest pocket for my pipe, which I sometimes brought with me on days like this, and found it empty. *Damn, I guess I'll have to buy a new one, or give up smoking.* As I had no job and owed a ton of bank notes to the hospital, going without seemed reasonable. I crossed my legs, and gave my paw something to do by ideally scratching my chin.

"Braxton, is that you?" My ears perked up to my name and I turned. Joann's younger sister Clair walked up. She had concern intertwined with anger written all over her face as she sat next to me. "I need to talk to you."

Though nearly identical in physique, Clair's coloring was a darker brown overall, making her white fur stand out that much more. Her long graceful ears matched Joann's to be nearly identical. However, sometime back she'd resented looking like a twin to her sister and had fallen prey to a tattooing artist who'd made it a fad to have the ears decorated with hieroglyphic symbols that meant she was all female. The results in my book only distracted the eyes from her beauty.

"About Joann, right?" I pressed her, trying to keep my voice even, taking note she'd added a silver ring in her left ear to advertise she was now married and unavailable.

"I want to know what you did to her," Clair said in some heat. "She's been crying her eyes out since yesterday. Why, she didn't even go into work yesterday. And this after being at your bedside at the hospital these past many days."

I sighed. Clair was very much concerned for her big sister. I dropped my

leg and leaned forward to put my forearms on my legs. I hung my head. “I hadn’t known she’d left me until about an hour ago.” I looked over at her. “I didn’t.” I sat back up and slouched. “Hell, I don’t know what’s best for the both of us anymore.”

Clair poked me in the arm. “You best decide that quickly. I’ll not have my sister pining for you. If you don’t see her today, I’m going to push a friend of mine on her. He’s a gentle male. He’s wanted to date her for some months, but because she was with you, he held off.” Clair stood. She folded her arms and glared at me. “By tonight, wolf, or you find some other animal.” She cast her ears back before walking off.

I turned my head, allowing my eyes to follow her, and watched how her hips shifted inside her pink knee shorts as she left. I admired the perkiness of her fluffy dark brown and white tail, and how her tattooed ears rose to normal and swiveled around, keeping track of sounds about her like all herbivores did out of instinct, not out of need anymore. Even in my state of agitation, I put my paws behind my head and enjoyed the show of femininity before me and for the first time really saw how similar in body Clair was to Joann. Once she was some meters away, Clair glanced behind her to see what I was doing. I realized then what she had been doing.

She’s purposely displaying her sex for me. Showing me exactly what I’d be missing if I let Joann go. The wolf in me wanted to bare my teeth at her for the reminder. Curiously enough, it also pushed the wolf in me to want to sex her up as well. I threw my head back to look up at the blue sky. *Joann and I were not a perfect fit. But we were comfortable with each other. If I sought out another mate, perhaps one of my own kind, there’s no guaranty she’d be any better.* That decided me.

After a quick trip back to my den for that awful tie Joann had bought me, I jogged over to Clair’s burrow. After a brief respite to settle my breathing to normal I climbed three levels of stairs in the apartment building. Once on the level with Clair’s burrow, I donned the white tie with the black silhouette of a

very shapely, long-legged rabbit bowing slightly, blowing a kiss. *If this doesn't get a smile out her…* I thought as I knocked. I tried to breathe normally, yet I felt like a school youngling asking his female-friend out on a first date.

Joann opened the door, and my heart did flip-flops. She was wearing a black cotton knit negligee with threads so fine I could see her whole body, except where it counted. Her ears drooped and she lowered her head. "Oh, hello Braxton, I wasn't expecting you."

"Expecting me?" Seeing her so-outfitted and to hear her say that, jealousy landed hot and heavy on my shoulders and I snarled, "You were expecting another animal?"

Joann's head came up quickly to my tone. Her red-rimmed eyes hardened and she set her paw on her hip and snapped, "And if I were, it's no affair of yours anymore. You made your choice quite clearly in the hospital."

Oh shit! I didn't seek her out to start an argument. On the other paw, the sight of her near nakedness had my mouth watering. My mind disjointed and instead of reason, madness took over. My ears laid back and I snapped, "If that's the way you want it." I yanked off the tie she'd given me and threw at her. "Fine!" I turned and ran from her. I hit the stairs and heard the door slam hard enough to vibrate.

Off the stairs and out of the apartment complex, I walked fast for about a block before I slowed and reason settled in. My face fell and my ears drooped, as did my tail. I stuffed my paws down my pants pockets and slowed to a walk.

Well, you did that right well didn't you? I accused myself. *If you'd only been sympathetic and apologetic, she'd be in your arms right now.* I stopped walking, and half turned, looking longingly at the entrance to her sister's apartment building. I grimaced and kept on walking. *She'd never open the door to me now.*

I had full intentions of dropping by a store and buying a twelve pack to sit down tonight and get hammered, but at the store I realized I hadn't any bank notes on me. This only darkened my mood. Outside my apartment complex, I

was intercepted by one of the smallest cats in the feline family, a rusty-spotted cat, decked out in a tailor-fitted blue business suit.

"Mr. Braxton Snow?"

I eyed the small but well-groomed cat, who stood all of one hundred thirty centimeters. As he drew close, I caught the scent of cologne and saw how white his teeth were. This marked him as upper crust, but not an aristocrat, as he still worked for a living. Regardless of his worldly status, I grumbled on my way past, "I'm retired."

He took a hold of my arm as I passed. "Mr. Snow, please, a word."

I stopped and looked down on his paw and growled with my teeth exposed, "If you want to keep that arm, you'd best remove it."

He did so. "I beg your pardon, but I really need to talk with you…"

I glared and started to walk away.

"It concerns Ms. Zoe Pierpont, Mr. Snow. She's missing."

I glanced back at him. "Why do you think I care? She's partly why I'm retired."

"Please, Mr. Snow. She spoke very highly of you in her notes on the case you both were on."

That caught me. "She worked for you?"

The rusty-spotted cat pulled out a business card and gave it over. "My name is Sahaja Palan. I head up a group of private investigators."

I read the card he gave me. *If the police can't help, I can. Sahaja Palan, Private Investigations.* I flipped the card and read the address. *Mmm…Up in the ritzy district.* I eyed him, calculating. *Probably works solely with the aristocrats. Even with all their bank notes, they sometimes need things looked into.* I thought of Ms. Pierpont. *Yeah, I can see her working for such animals. Her looks, size, speed and agility would make her a great asset to such clientele.* I sought to give the card back but he waved it off.

"So what do you want of me?"

He licked his lips. "If I read her notes right, you were also looking for

Mr. Oscar Sullivan."

I nodded. It wasn't a secret.

"I'd like to hire you to continue your search with the added note of finding Ms. Pierpont."

Disgust rolled over my face. "Sorry, can't help. Because of her I lost my P.I. license, my gun and permit, and I owe a considerable amount of bank notes to the hospital for running afoul of the police." *Well, mostly true.* I started to turn and walk away when he raised an arm.

"I can take care of all that."

My ears perked up and I looked back at him with raised eyebrow.

"I'll hire you as an employee. I know animals who'll rush the paperwork through."

I stopped him there. "Even prequalifying? That's a three-month course."

Mr. Palan nodded. "Even that," he assured me. "By tomorrow, all you'll need to do is show up at the practice range and qualify. Once done, come by the office with the certificate and you can start."

Tempting. I grimaced in remembrance. *Damn, I don't have the money to spare.* I shook my head and turned him down. "Sorry, I haven't the bank notes to pay for the dummy darts for the qualifying test, let alone the range fees."

"You needn't worry about that. I'll cover it. Just show the manager this card." Mr. Palan gave me another card. This one was red and had his name and an account number, a group of numbers the banks used to adjust business account credits and debits. I eyed the card a moment, considering. I looked him over again to verify in my mind he wasn't a con-animal. *Hmm…what would a con-animal get out of paying for all this to get me reinstated?* This thought path had me reasoning Mr. Palan was legit.

"Does this include a pistol as well?"

"Anything you need. Ms. Pierpont is my best agent, and my client will not accept anything but a satisfactory outcome in this case."

"Mmm…who's the client?"

"A concerned citizen. That's all you need know."

I didn't like not knowing the client; that was why I worked on my own. *Mmm…it's tempting.* I glanced in the direction of Clair's burrow and thought of Joann. *She's not about to see me now. In a day or so, maybe. Taking up his offer will solve my hospital bill. Still, I could always settle the case against me concerning the apartment building.* I looked at the cards he'd given me. *I could do this case to get back in the black without losing my den. Hmm, a couple of days of serious work might solve the case. If not I should have some path to follow. Then with hat in paw and flowers in the other, I could try to apologize to Joann. A win-win scenario—that is, if she'll see me.* I eyed Mr. Palan.

"You pay my hospital bill and three hundred a day plus expenses."

"My agents get three-fifty a day, and you pay expenses."

So we're in negotiations, good. "Make it four hundred, and I'll go to the qualifying range in the morning."

"Done." Mr. Palan put out his paw and I shook it. He nodded and gave over some of his cards. "You now work for me. Anyone requiring our services, you give them my card. I require up-to-date notes on any case. You report in at least once every day unless circumstances forbid it. Tomorrow I'll assign you a pistol and I'll turn over all Ms. Pierpont's notes."

"By the way, how long has she been missing?"

"Three days." He turned to leave.

I eyed the cut of his suit as he walked away and his tail riding high. To that I rubbed my muzzle. *I wonder if I could have asked for more?* I shrugged. *No point in being greedy. Clearing my debt to the hospital will be a great relief.* I turned to my apartment building and headed to my empty den with more spring in my step and hope in my heart.

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Clair South

Chapter 8:

Mr. Nelson Plays His Card

Five in the morning came far too early, if you asked me. I only got up that early because the firing range opened at seven. As our great city only allowed the one range, by eight, it was overflowing with cadets trying to prequalify, on-the-job officers re-qualifying every six months, private eyes and bodyguards trying to pass their yearly exams, and of course, the curious who showed up simply to learn how a pistol worked. As the city received half the proceeds from everyone at the range, it boggled my mind why the city officials would not allow a second or third range.

As I'd given Tanner my rickshaw pass-card, not believing I'd need one anymore, I stopped off at an office and obtained a new one. I reached Mr. Sahaja Palan's office building by nine in the morning. Certificate in paw, I allowed my eyes to wander up the expensively-carved stone facade of the ten-story building. Most buildings in Furlton had a basic street and block address. However, if the building resided in the richer quarter of the city, like this one did, it also carried a name. I looked over the business card given me and matched the name. "Wilmar Knapp. Yep, I appear to be in the right place."

The fabric canopy over the doorway covered a door bear. His outfit of black pants, belt, black shirt and black vest would have been totally lost on his black fur save the outfit was lined in white stripes where every seam came together. With white-gloved paws, he reached to open the door for me.

As I approached he said politely, "Welcome to the Wilmar Knapp, sir. Just inside the lobby to the right you'll find the business listings."

I nodded thanks on my way in. The lobby was larger than any I'd come

across and very richly decorated. Of course, none of my past clientele were ever made of bank notes for me to have visited such an establishment. However, I would say Ms. Catharine Nelson came close. She wasn't high-high class, but more likely middle-high class, if I had to guess. Regardless, here I was. A look at the business card and the directory showed Sahaja Palan's office was up on the ninth floor.

A ride up the elevator put me into another lobby, though smaller. Before me stood another directory. My pads took me down the left side then right about halfway down the hall to Mr. Palan's office. I opened the glass door and was met by a receptionist at a desk in a small waiting room. The pretty young Owlet took my name and announced me to my new boss via walky-talky. While she did so, I noted she had a pin board with thirteen names and corresponding pins indicating whether the named animal was in-house or out. At a glance I saw eight were already in-house.

"Mr. Palan will be with you shortly, Mr. Snow."

I nodded.

She put down the black box and moved a pin at the bottom of the list from "out" to "in."

So I'm already listed. I don't know whether to be insulted that I was a given, or impressed with the efficiency, given we agreed on a paw shake. Either way, I wasn't given time to pursue the thought as Mr. Palan came out and extended his paw.

"Good morning, Mr. Snow." Sahaja Palan gestured at the doorway through which he'd just appeared. "Please, this way."

Through the solid wooden door he indicated, I was met with fourteen cubicles, one office, his, with name and title, and one storeroom.

"As most of my employees are almost always out on jobs, save in the morning, like now, you'll meet them in time. For now, however," he led me to a cubicle near the storeroom, which already had my complete name on a name plate on the outside wall. "This will be yours. As you can see, it has all the

basics to start. Anything else, check the storeroom first. If it's not there, check with me. I'll either have the item added to our stock or tell you it's part of your expense." Mr. Palan stepped into the office space. "Here is Ms. Pierpont's case file, as promised." He bent and opened a locked box. "Inside, you'll find a pistol already signed out to you." He dropped the key in my paw. "All darts and CO2 cartridges are your expense." Lastly he pulled open a top drawer in the desk. "Here's your new business license as a private detective that shows I'm your employer. Your pistol license and four hundred bank notes as agreed to get you started." He looked me in the eyes. "I'll leave you to go over Ms. Pierpont's notes." He stepped out and pointed at a covered carry case. "By the way, all case notes are to be typed up on a typewriter." He considered something a moment before he said, "It would help if it's done daily, uh, for such an occasion as this." That's when he left.

I looked over my new office. Flipping open the typewriter case, I saw it to be a standard ribbon writer. I sat and opened the lock box and pulled out the pistol. *A Roaring, model 520.* I checked the grip. *Not bad.* I took a whiff and caught the scent of factory oils, grease, three kinds of metals, not to mention the paws that put it together. *Mmm, no other owner then. Neat.* The palm grip was made of red maple wood and well etched for a better grip. *Expensive.* I opened my black vest and slid it inside my holster. *Fits too. What more could I want?* I slid it back into the lock box. *I'll need a new cleaning kit for it, plus darts. I'll do that later.*

The small office had a good reading light above. I turned it on and opened Ms. Pierpont's case file. *She has neat paw writing,* I commented internally on seeing the few pages she had not typed up and started to read.

After two hours had passed, I lowered the file. *She knows her business. She hit all the points I had. She also checked on the stolen book. However, that makes me wonder. Did Mr. Sullivan's team mention the book? If so was it missing at that time? If it was, why wasn't it reported?* This made me shake my head. *Somehow I get the feeling that book is the pivot point in this case. How is*

another matter. I leaned back in the chair and put my paws behind my head to run through her tracks at the museum. *Hmmm, she makes no mention of the book, which could mean it was missing at that time, but then again if it had been there she'd have no reason to mention it, as she might not have known it held some bearing on the case. She did, however, catch the same smells I did at the Cat-A-Mite Museum's emergency doors and determined rightly Mr. Sullivan had his own keys.*

I scratched under my muzzle and sat up straight to reread some pages. *Tenacious too; she returned to Ms. Nelson's burrow that night but found nothing but the same mystery in dig sights. She also noted my appearance.* I used a fingernail to aid in my reading. *"Ran into a bodyguard or police detective. I'll have to check him out. Seems competent. A little daring, though. He should have known that rope wouldn't hold him. Good looking, too, for his age,"* I snorted at this. *"If I were into wolves and the circumstances were different, I'd have asked him out."* That raised my eyebrow.

I turned a couple of pages and started reading about her visit with Ms. Giselle Deville. *"Ms. Deville is a very active snowshoe hare. She keeps her burrow using notes left by college students and the occasional adventurous female or grown male. It appears Oscar Sullivan was one of these, which proved informative. His nephew, Bryn Nelson, has for the past year or so worked to have Oscar committed for psychiatric review. As far as I could discover, Oscar believes it's simply a ploy to obtain guardianship of his finances." Hmm, I hadn't confirmed that as yet, but it had crossed my mind. It's good to know I was right without any true facts.* I looked around the cubical to give my eyes something else to look at for a moment before re-immersing myself in her words. *"Here Ms. Deville laughed and said candidly, 'Sweet Oscar, he hasn't a bank note to his name anymore. Everything he does is for favors. I give him kickbacks on students he sends my way and he does odd jobs to collect notes for other things.' Ms. Deville did mention though, 'I think the sweet fox is a little touched, though. Last two times he was here, he talked of being shadowed. He had nothing rock*

solid, of course, just a glimpse of shadows here and there, or a blurry form turning into a doorway or alleyway.’”

I sat back in the chair and automatically reached for my pipe. When I stubbed my finger on a different drawer knob, I snarled and laid back my ears. *I see I’ll also need to get a decanter for water along with a proper drinking glass.* I shook out my paw. *As Ms. Deville gave no clues to any place Mr. Oscar Sullivan might have gone, I think I’ll replace my pipe. After which I’ll see Ms. Catharine Nelson. Perhaps I missed something Ms. Pierpont found in Mr. Oscar Sullivan’s room which led somewhere she doesn’t mention here. Also, Ms. Nelson did find something she wanted me to look at.*

I stood and shoved the pistol into my holster then turned and nearly ran into a leopardess passing my cubical.

“Watch it!” she snarled, and shoved me back inside.

Off balance, the back of my right pad kicked the chair wheel. This added to my stumble, which caught my tail at a bad angle on the countertop. I let out a howl and shifted at a jump to get my tail clear. Laughter rolled in over the cubicle wall. Not at all amused, my ears laid back and I had a will to rush out to get my paws on that leopardess. Instead, I held the counter, counted to ten, reset my vest and flat cap and with all my dignity in place, walked out.

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New pipe in paw, I strolled along the pathway in the local park and puffed, rolling over the facts in this case, which weren’t many. *I’m sure Mr. Sullivan’s disappearance is over that book. That’s if he took it. There’s the merest chance Ms. Pierpont purloined it. If so, why? Hmm…* I pulled my pipe out and rubbed my neck. *No, she had no reason to take it, and being a P.I. she had no reason to report it missing even if she knew it was missing. Hmm, I have to assume Mr. Sullivan has it. Regardless of who took it, Ms. Pierpont’s disappearance seems over the top. If she was animal-napped, it doesn’t*

necessarily involve Mr. Sullivan. It could very well be from another case she worked. Paws behind my back, I allowed my eyes to wander in the late afternoon cool weather. Thus you can imagine my annoyance when I spotted the leopardess from Mr. Palan's office, dressed in a simple blue blouse and black knee-length skirt, sitting on a bench. Once she spied me she stood, tossed her black hair behind her and strolled my way.

Her big yellow eyes targeted my ice blue ones, her approach casual, yet highly wound up. After our encounter in the office, I stopped my approach and palmed my pipe to make certain she didn't snatch it out of my mouth and toss it away. The extra steps she took to reach speaking distance set a tick off on her lip and her tail to twitch.

She let her right paw nails extend. Without pleasantries of any kind, once abreast of me she stabbed my chest. "I don't care who you are or what you mean to my boss, but you will return today and tell Mr. Palan you have no wish to pursue Zoe's case. That case is mine. Was mine before Mr. Palan assigned that airhead to it." She curled her nails into my vest, poking holes in the cotton fabric. "You feel me?"

"What I feel is you buying me a new vest."

I took her wrist in my paw and applied enough pressure to cause her to wince. Our eyes locked. Hers hardened. I applied a little more pressure. Her lips curled off her sharp teeth. She tried to pull her arm back. I kept my facial muscles as bland as could be, applying more pressure to emphasize that the amount of force she was using to extract her paw was causing me no amount of sweat to hold it in place, although the opposite was true. A glint in her maddening eyes showed she was about to do something to end our stalemate. Something painful to me, I was sure.

To keep that from happening, I said, "You try anything, and I plunge my nails into your wrist, causing you to lose functionality in your paw for quite some time."

Between clinched teeth, she growled. "You wouldn't…"

“Try me.”

Her arm relaxed after she thought it over, so I let her go. She pulled it back and rubbed her wrist. I let my eyes and ears reflect my next words.

“Let me be perfectly frank with you. The fact you’re a female gains no soft spot in my book. The next time you try to bully me away from a case, I’ll lay into you until one of us is still standing.” I inserted my pipe between my lips, took a hold of my vest and straightened it out. I palmed my pipe and said in passing her, “I’ll expect any notes you may have on the case to be on my desk by the end of day tomorrow. Also, I require a check or bank notes in the amount of thirty-two notes to accompany them for the replacement of my vest, or I will take the cost out of your hide.” This last was more bravado than any truth, but I had to make a point.

With the ugly matter hopefully over, I raised my tail high and strolled away more or less in the direction of the local pistol dealer, as they carried tranquilizer darts meant for public use. The stronger versions the police used were ordered by the police from the factory and sent straight to lock-up in the station. This was a precaution by the city to make certain no civilian obtained the doses that could kill an animal in as little as two darts.

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It was around eighteen hundred when I decided to call it a day. I’d gained new supplies, including a new pistol and pipe cleaning kit. I’d padded back out and visited city hall to make certain my paperwork was all in order. It was one thing to be told all the paperwork had been filed and another to see it for yourself. Satisfied all was in order, I’d caught a rickshaw and stepped out before my apartment building, unable to build up the nerve to visit Millie Ann’s Moonlight Café just yet. *If Joann is there…* I shook my head. *You chicken…* I told myself and answered, *Guilty as charged. Still, right now wouldn’t be a good time.*

My thoughts trailed off as I spied an old Sun Bear in worn-out blue jeans and vest making his way in my direction.

I raised an eyebrow. *It's been what, three years since I've run across a Sun Bear?* I let my mind question their rarity to take my thoughts off Joann. *Maybe longer…*

When he saw I was looking his way, the bear raised a paw. "Mr. Snow…" I barely heard him call out in a deep voice that had lost the strength to project very far. "Might I have a word with you?"

I stopped in my tracks, took a drag of my pipe and removed it. "How can I help you, sir?"

As the Sun Bear was the smallest of the bear family, when he drew close I found my eyes looking slightly down.

He ran his long tongue over his lips. He looked behind him a moment before he faced me. "I am speaking to Mr. Braxton Snow, oldest son of Mr. Elov Snow, correct?"

That caught me up short. Though most animals knew my name around the apartment building because of the lawsuits, nobody, and I mean nobody, knew of my family. Shock and confusion at hearing my father's name put me on the defensive. I snapped, "How did you…scratch that, who the hell are you?" I had a will to grab his vest and shake him vigorously, but I squashed that reaction to stand rigid and glare down at him.

My heated gaze fazed the Sun Bear not at all. He looked about him and told me, "My name is unimportant. However, the investigation you're digging into is. I must caution you, sir, you're padding down a dangerous path. For your own sake, please drop the matter and return to your fiancée. You'll live much longer for it."

The bear started to turn but I grabbed his shoulder. "Wait a minute! How'd you know who I am and that I'm engaged?" I leaned into him and repeated myself. "Who the hell are you?"

His black eyes looked up into my ice blue ones. "I'm merely a

messenger, Mr. Snow. If you want answers, it's best you get them from Mrs. Irina Yenin. You can find her in the history library near the college on most days." He looked around yet again, as if worried some-animal might see us together, and pulled off my paw. "No more questions, please. For our mutual safety, I must go."

I dropped my arm and allowed the sun bear to wander off. Although I had a multitude of questions for him, it was plain as the nose on my muzzle he was worried about being seen. This prompted me to look around as well. For good measure, I took in a few deep breaths. Out on the glacier, sampling the wind in such a manner could locate prey or give guidance about where I stood. Here, though, surrounded by countless animals and literally millions of smells, to mark something or some animal out of place was near on impossible. I did, however, have a small advantage. I'd been living in the apartments for twelve years. After some moments, I rubbed my muzzle and considered settling on a bench to keep an eye out for an animal who was out of place, but a yawn took over my mouth and I smacked my lips.

Best turn in and let my senses sort out any known smells. If I come across one at a later date, I'll have a clue as to where I sampled it. Another yawn. *In the morning I'll hit my new office and write up this incident before heading over to the history library in search of Mrs. Irina Yenin.*

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With Joann's scent permeating my bed, it had been sometime before I could fall asleep, and that only when I moved into the bathroom and made my bed in the tub. Heartsick to hold Joann, I dressed, and sleepy-eyed, left for the office. It felt so different to look up on the facade of the Wilmar Knapp building and call it my place of work. As with yesterday, the same black bear stood under the canopy and gave the same greeting as he opened the door for me.

A standard salutation said over and over. How some animals could do

this day after day… I nodded thanks and walked in, paying more attention to my surroundings. Although I unconsciously labeled the scents of the place yesterday, today I matched them up with their owners. Expensive Willow Wood paneling. A crystal chandelier high overhead to give the lobby a kind of dreamy effect. A painting by Katya Leitner, a renowned smooth-coated otter who used only paints gathered by her own paws. In the elevator, less expensive woods were used for the floor, walls and ceiling, since they would have animal contact every day.

On the ninth floor, the splendor of the downstairs lobby was replicated in everyday-ware items. Down the hallway and through the glass door, I nodded to the young owlet secretary behind the front desk, who with a smile for a greeting turned to move a peg by my name from "out" to "in." Through the door marked "employees only," I came to my desk in short order. There I found a small delight to help my low mood. A brand new white vest. However, the card with it left something to be desired: *Take this vest and shove it up your tail!* I smirked. *A small victory, but an important one, if I remain here after finding Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Pierpont.*

I looked around but found no accompanying file. *Either she doesn't know anything, or she's holding out. Bet I can guess which is more likely.* I shrugged the leopardess out of my thoughts and pulled out a ream of paper to type out my case notes. *At least I don't have to write it all out…* I mused to myself as my fingers flew over the typewriter keys. With my notebook beside me, I finished up my case file. Once done, I collected all the sheets and locked them in the 'Open Case File' drawer Mr. Palan had installed in each cubical so he could retrieve information any agent had gathered. Next came a thorough cleaning of my new gun. After a check of the darts and CO2 cartridges I was off to speak to this Mrs. Yenin at the history library.

Not bothering with pleasantries with the three animals present in the office, I left the Wilmar Knapp building and caught a rickshaw. A short hour later under a bright sun I disembarked the conveyance and looked at the five-

story Library of History. To the right and left of the twenty steps that led up from the street stood twenty evenly-spaced poles. Each meticulously rose ten meters, in height and bore a single animal family flag, the purpose of which was to inform the community all animals were welcome and all were represented within this building's walls.

Since the college campus was down the street, the prevalent animals about were students. After these were lawyer assistants gathering information for criminal cases and lawsuits. Beyond these were a sprinkling of everyday animals from the researcher of his or her kind to the simply curious. I adjusted my black flat cap to keep the breeze from stealing it and joined in the crowd. Above the double doors on a sign read *Knowledge is a force beyond Time to grasp* I stopped and eyed the words. *I guess you have to be a scholar to understand that.* With a shrug I walked up to the entrance window just inside the door and showed the golden jackal behind the glass my P.I. license.

"I'd like to speak with Mrs. Irina Yenin, if you please," I said politely.

The female jackal scrutinized my document then called a gray wolf over and pointed me out, though she never said a word to him. The security guard nodded and came around to the entrance. "If you'll follow me, sir." he said in a tone that boarded no other recourse.

As the jackal hadn't told him I was a P.I., I wondered if this was standard operating procedure for an animal who might be carrying a gun. I paid my five-bank-note fee to walk in and followed the wolf, who struck up a conversation as we walked.

"What brings you to the city?"

"How do you mean?" I responded with a glance at my closest relative, species-wise.

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Beg pardon, I thought you were from the Ice Packs."

"Ice Packs?" I inquired.

"You know, the Arctic Wolf Clans out on the glacier. I thought that's why

Silvia pointed you out. We've only ever see one of your kind visit when one comes around to speak with Mrs. Yenin, but I can tell you're too civilized to have come from them." He showed me the elevator. "As there are only a paw-full of arctic wolves within the city communities, you can understand her mistake. Since you're one of these civilized wolves, you may freely go up to the fifth floor to see Mrs. Yenin without an escort. Her office is to the right. Just look for her name printed on the seventh door you pass."

I walked in the elevator thinking as he turned away, *The clans come to see Mrs. Yenin? Hmm…* My mind was abuzz. *What does this all mean? Why does a sun bear warn me off this case? How does he know my father? And why do wolves come off the glacier to visit this scholar?* The doors opened before me and I stepped out. *This case gets more complicated by the hour.* I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to decide how to approach her. *Like a citizen with flat cap in paw or as one of the Ice Clan wolves? Hmmm…*

Seven doors down on the right, I read on the opaque window *Mrs. Irina Yenin. Scholar of glaciers and inhabitants.* Even though the door was opaque, I could see shadows moving about within. *The tribes out on the glacier are harsh animals,* I considered. *The barren ice makes them that way. Hmmm…perhaps as a meek wolf. If she's a researcher on the inhabitants of the glaciers, acting submissive might get more information out of her.* After a minute of thought I pulled off my flat cap and tried to look meek and abused, like a whipped puppy. *If I do this right, I may get more then she intends to give out.*

As I reached for the door knob, it occurred to me that by playacting as one of the glacier's clan wolves, I might glean some information on why the clans come to see her. After a second I banished the thought. *My current case is Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Pierpont, not my curiosity about how fares my family.*

Slowly I pushed down on the door knob and poked my nose into the growing opening. Smells similar to those surrounding me permeated the air from inside. I did, however, pick up the scent of seven animals behind the door. Still

acting the victim, I looked in with ears laid back, nose pointed down and my lower lip sucking on my upper lip.

At a glance, the room was a study hall. Chairs and tables stood on either side of a cleared path up to a counter. The side walls held paw-drawn maps of the seven glaciers on our continent. Each was clearly labeled as we knew them; however, below these were three or four lines, one under the other, of hairless apes' hieroglyphs. The intent was plain. Those must be the possible symbols the apes used to identify the glaciers.

At the tables sat five college-aged animals, each with black noses buried in two to three books before them, while off to the side, notebooks held testament to their adventures into the past. Behind the counter at the far end, a college-aged antelope jackrabbit sat also with nose buried in a book doing his own studies.

Ears swiveled to my entrance, yet no one looked to see who came in, save for the antelope jackrabbit, whose ears rose up high before he lowered the book he was reading. The jackrabbit stiffened as I approached. An aroma of uneasiness oozed from him as his ears lowered. It became quite apparent to me he'd had to deal with a few of the arctic wolves. Yet he remained behind the counter, folded his paws before him and tried to look nonchalant.

"How may I help you, sir?" he said when I was two steps away.

Still acting the part of a meek wolf, I asked, "Please sir, might I have a word with Mrs. Yenin?"

Though he tried to hide it, the jackrabbit's gaze strayed to the door behind me as if he expected someone else to come in, like the security guard. His throat worked as if he was afraid to speak, yet when no guard appeared, he asked, "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm sorry, but no. My visit is unexpected even to me. Yet I must beseech your forgiveness and ask to see her." I could see my act was slowly calming the jackrabbit; his ears rose a little, indicating a growing confidence.

He cleared his throat, "Yeah, sure, uh, let me see if she's busy." He stood

and left by the single door behind him.

Now that he wasn't my present goal I took note a map of Burrland was tacked up on the wall. Under each name of town and city were several paw-written hairless ape hieroglyphs, some of which had words below them like "Selfoss" under Furlton, "Helka" under Whiskeritch or "Reykholt" under Sable River. A third of the towns and cities had these other names, presumably the names hairless apes called these sites ten thousand years ago.

They seem to have deciphered some of the apes' hieroglyphs. I glanced behind me at the students and it occurred to me, *With so many studying the hieroglyphs, it's a wonder the language hasn't been completely translated. Then again, perhaps enough has been revealed. Perhaps Mr. Sullivan used this place to decipher enough of his favorite book to locate a dig site that would prove his theory correct.* I hid my nose in my flat cap to keep my questing mind's thoughts from belying my meek appearance. *I see the students here are paying me no attention. Yet the jackrabbit was clearly apprehensive. If I hadn't adopted this masquerade, I wonder what might have happened?*

The door opened in front of me, signaling I had to dump my thoughts to concentrate on the matter at paw. An old female horse came out, though she stood many centimeters shorter than most of her species and had enormous ears. After a sec, I understood why; she was a mule, the product of a female horse having unprotected sex with a male donkey. At one time such a combination was commonplace, as mules had qualities a growing society sought. These days, however, such offspring were rare. This mule wore a simple dress in muted colors of brown and black. Her brown hair and mane were cut short, a typical style for the elderly, and she wore a pair of large optical glasses resting on her long, rounded nose. She adjusted these with paws and looked me over with intelligent brown eyes.

"May I help you, young one?"

Young one, indeed… I thought. "Yes, Mrs. Yenin, I've some questions I'd like to ask in private, if that's agreeable with you?"

“If they’re important, could they not be better answered by your clan?”

Okay, that’s weird. Why would she ask that, when it’s clear the clan comes here to talk with her? I put the question aside and said, “I doubt as much.” I still held my flat cap before my muzzle and I knew we’d never met, yet I got a sense she knew me quite well.

“Very well. If you’ll come around the counter and follow me?”

I caught the sound of a huge sigh from the jackrabbit as I followed the mule into a room filled with shelves upon shelves of varied-sized books. Without a backward glance she led me to the back and into a small office to which she closed the door to give us some privacy. While I stood until she settled herself in a chair her demeanor changed.

“You may dispense with the charade, Braxton. You’re far too well known to me for playacting and I’m too old to keep it up.”

That got me. I raised an eyebrow as I lowered my flat cap. “You know me or merely know of me?”

“In truth, both.” Mrs. Yenin indicated with a paw a chair in front of her book-and-document-covered desk. “Please, sit. I’ve a crick in my neck already today.”

I looked at the one-size-fits-all chair. Tall animals would find it too short and short animals would find it too tall. I took up the chair and slid my tail into the V before I settled.

Mrs. Yenin preempted my questions. “I assume Javier gave you my message.”

“Javier?” I inquired, checking the back of the chair and adjusting, as my tail got pinched. “Oh, you mean the sun bear. Yes, he was quite vague, if that was your intent to get me here.”

“No, my message was quite clear. For your own safety, you need to drop the case you’re delving into.”

I looked across the desk. “Tell me, Mrs. Yenin, why do you care? Why the warning? What might I find if I continue investigating Mr. Sullivan’s

disappearance?”

Mrs. Yenin dropped her nose to look over her optical glass frame and directly into my eyes. “Your death.” She settled back in her chair, crossed her legs and adjusted her dress. “Which would be a tragic loss.”

“Beg pardon?”

Mrs. Yenin dismissed my confusion with a wave of her paw. “The point being, Braxton, I’ve delayed in my duties far too long. Your father’s clan is coming to an impasse and only you can set matter straight. Let me revise my warning. Drop what you’re doing and go back home.”

Duties? Father’s clan? What the hell?

“Oh and don’t take that white-tail jackrabbit with you, she’ll find another animal in time.”

If confusion was a commodity, I’d be the richest wolf in Furlton City. I sat up straighter and planted my paws on my knees. “Mrs. Yenin, where in the hell is this all coming from?”

If a mule could roll their eyes she would have. Instead, she sat up all proper, interlaced her fingers, and rested her paws on the desk. “Mr. Snow, my predecessor gave instructions to leave you alone. I see now that was a mistake. Your father’s clan is on the brink of collapse. You need to shrug off this civilized coat you’re hiding under and take your rightful place as clan leader. The sooner the better.”

Dwelling on my family was not why I came here. Nor was having a guilt trip dumped on my doorstep. My father’s clan can survive without me easily enough by electing another leader, and if that leader isn’t strong enough, another will take his place. I decided to reroute our odd conversation for more pressing matters at paw. “Mrs. Yenin, I came here to learn what you know about Mr. Sullivan’s disappearance, not to socialize about my past or my father’s clan. So please, what do you know and why would going forward with the case be any more dangerous than any other case?”

Mrs. Yenin readjusted her optical glasses. “Mr. Snow, the fact of the

matter is certain parties wish to keep the status quo. Rocking their world will get one killed, and Mr. Sullivan is doing just that. Whether he's still alive or not is no concern of mine. Whatever he has uncovered will eventually become public. As a scholar of the old world, I can assure you of this certainty. However, your investigation into that fox's disappearance may expose unsavory activities some wealthy animals are involved in. This does concern me. You're too valuable to our founding fathers' goals to pass beyond this life before you father a pair of cubs—"

"Hold it, hold it!" I interrupted with ears gone back. My head was spinning. "Why does my life concern you?"

Mrs. Yenin didn't flinch or hesitate. "Not merely your life, Mr. Byrghir Snow." She shocked me by saying my birth name. "But all arctic wolves are my concern. If you'd remained in your clan instead of running away, by now you'd know why. As you didn't, it fell on your sisters." Mrs. Yenin looked at her desk, selected a book out of the six present, and stood. "I gave you my warning. I've given you enough details to tweak your curiosity. The rest is up to you." She turned her back and raised her arm to set the book on an upper shelf. "It's time you went home, Mr. Snow. Take over your father's responsibilities and pass on your genes to the next generation." She glanced at me and whispered, "The future could use them."

I sat there with my jaw open. Mrs. Yenin slid the book in place before she turned my way, a smirk around her lips.

"Go home, wolf." Mrs. Yenin walked behind me and opened her door.

I stood. I looked at her with tail drooping and ears back. "Could you at least tell me how you knew my real name and who my true threat is?"

Mrs. Yenin folded her arms and said simply, "No."

"Why not?"

"I had not meant to lay any guilt on you, but I see it's necessary." Mrs. Yenin took my arm and led me out. "If you stay, what remains of your family will pass into history without another pad note." She stepped back into her office

and started to close her door. A thought crossed her face and she added, “Oh, and your fiancée, Joann South, will pay with her life if you continue to pad down this path.” She closed her door.

I stood staring at a piece of wood that separated me from answers that a moment ago hadn’t even existed in my mind. Flat cap still in my paws, I worked it in a circle as I fought down a strong erg to bust down the door and demand she tell me what ‘By the Great Maker’ was all that about? I knew it’d be fruitless. If she’d been a full horse or even a donkey it might have been possible to intimidate her into explaining herself. But a mule? Their rep for stubbornness was legendary.

I snorted. “That had better not be a threat!” I put on my flat cap and snugged it down so the brim sat just above my eyes. “If anything happens to her, I’m coming after you.”

My threat fell around me unanswered. My ears caught a sound and I turned to see the antelope jackrabbit staring at me from the other end of the book shelves. His ears were down and he was quaking on his pads. From out of nowhere I held a wish to make him lose his bladder. I clamped down on the urge like a steal trap and locked it back in its cage. *Such acts are no longer part of my life,* I told myself firmly. Even so, I couldn’t take the heat out of my eyes as I padded past him and left the building. Outside in the open air I breathed in the city smells and exhaled the air of the Library of History.

Our conversation had taken no time at all; I wanted to stay the day bouncing questions off of her. Regardless of my unanswered personal questions, some concerning Mr. Sullivan had been answered. Paws in pockets, I put pads to work walking me in no particular direction as I considered what was next.

When I stopped my pads and looked around, I found I’d unconsciously brought myself to Clair South’s apartment building. I looked up to the third level, where on the other side Clair had made her burrow. I glanced up at the sky. *Joann could possibly be home.* I took a deep whiff. *Of course you’re not going to smell her, you idiot,* I told myself then sighed. *The heart wants what it wants.*

Paws reapplied into pockets, ears lowered and tail drooping, I turned and headed for home.

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I'd reasoned out during the rickshaw ride home that I'd have to sit in Mr. Sullivan's workroom and go through his head by piecing his work together. In this way I might discover where he'd gone. *However, is it worth it?* I asked myself. *Is losing Joann over this worth it?* I stepped out of the rickshaw and thanked my driver. *I hate not finishing a job.*

I put my paws behind my back as I walked up to the apartment complex, then it occurred to me, *Mr. Sullivan left the museum under his own power. The fact he hasn't resurfaced doesn't mean unknown forces are at work. It simply means he's following his dreams.* These conclusions reintroduced a spring in my step. *I can quit looking with a clean conscience.*

I checked my mail in the row of boxes. *What of Ms. Pierpont?* This froze me until I recalled, *Mr. Palan hired me to find Mr. Sullivan, not Ms. Pierpont.* I looked back out onto the street and the small park beyond. Mrs. Boro, an African dog, and her daughter were returning. For a brief moment I pictured Joann paw in paw with my own cub. I lowered my muzzle and eyed my bills. *If I quit, Mr. Palan will demand restitution for all the bank notes he paid out on me.*

I scanned the row of mailboxes and caught, out of the corner of my eye, Hedrick or possibly Olsten padding my way at a jog. *Now what?* I rolled my eyes as he lumbered over.

"Mr. Snow," the polar bear began. He looked agitated. "My boss would like a word with you."

Not wishing to deal with the big oaf, I dipped into my vest pocket and pulled out Mr. Palan's business card and gave it over. "I work for this outfit now. If you need a private detective, this is the contact name and address here."

I turned to leave only to have a large white paw land heavily on my

shoulder, arresting my attempt to leave. “My boss said you, Mr. Snow.”

The polar bear’s eyes pleaded. I eyed him and he pulled his paw off.

“Please sir,” he added, more agitated.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ms. Nelson, sir.” He clasped his paws and fidgeted. “She’s missing.”

I’ll admit that admission took some seconds to hit, and when it did, my muzzle dropped. But I recovered quickly and asked. “When?”

He stood still a moment, trying to think. “I can’t say. Maybe this morning. My boss knows for certain. He and Mr. Nelson talked some long while before sending me and Hedrick out for you.”

The fact Olsten said “*This morning.”* Earned him a grimace. “Are you sure she’s missing and not just avoiding you?”

Olsten’s face took on puzzlement. “Why would she do that?” He shook his head. “It matters not. She’s missing and my boss said to get you.”

“All right, fine. Let me put my mail away first.” I started to turn but the heavy paw landed on my shoulder.

“Boss said now.” Olsten’s eyes hardened with determination. “Please, sir.”

I rolled my eyes. *Dealing with these polar bears is like dealing with cubs.*

Suffice to say, after giving my word I’d go with him, Olsten allowed me to dump off my mail before hailing a rickshaw to take us to Mr. Bryn Nelson’s home.

Once we arrived, Olsten took the lead to politely knock on the front door.

An older gray fox in a black and white cotton maid outfit opened the door. “May I help you?”

Olsten stammered. “Huh, Mama, yeah, huh, Mr. Snow—”

“Apparently I’m wanted by Mr. Nelson about his sister,” I supplied.

“Oh yes, quite. He’s expecting you, Mr. Snow. Please come in.”

I wiped my pads on the doormat before walking into the home. Oddly

enough, the maid closed the door on Olsten, leaving him outside. I didn't bother to inquire as to why.

"Please, remain here as I announce you."

I nodded compliance and watched her walk away with a swish of her upraised tail. Although you'd think the fox would show signs of agitation even if she was trained to act prim and proper to attend to her duties for her employer, she gave no outward signs. I eyed her, as she made it clear by the movements of her hips she was all female. Whether this unconscious or by orders, her nonchalant moves had me questioning her intent.

Either she's the very embodiment of a cold heart or something's off.

I scratched under my muzzle. *Best be on your pads, wolf.* I pretended to occupy myself by looking more closely over the entranceway, which was decorated in white with black accents. The white walls held pleasant motifs in black of open meadows, designed to give the animal present a feeling of openness. In front and to the right of the closet hallway stood a tall grandfather clock as wide as I was. Its polished gold and silver pendulum and weights reflected all surfaces in three dimensions while the clock face held bluish tones to make the twenty-four gold numbers easier to see. A second look at the weights showed I'd forgotten to doff my flat cap. Doing so to show politeness for the situation, if things were as I'd been told, I had it in my paws when the maid reappeared.

"If you will follow me, Mr. Snow?"

The maid still gave no show of distress. Because of this I took a casual deep whiff. *The other polar bear was here. By the freshness of a scent I pulled in, Mr. Uchi could still be here. Discounting the old scent of Ms. Nelson and the scent of the fox before me, one other animal is present. What's glaringly missing are the two to three other scents which should have been left by the police.* This had my tail twitching and my ears shifting front and back. Yet there was a logical explanation. Mr. Nelson could have gotten a ransom note stating harm would befall Ms. Nelson if the police were notified. Regardless of my sprinting

thoughts, I followed the maid into the living room. She turned left and headed for a mahogany door in the middle of the wall and knocked before she opened it.

"A Mr. Snow for you, sir."

"Show him in, please," a sour sounding male requested.

I nodded thanks to the maid as she stepped aside so I could walk into a lavishly-decorated office with an expensively-scrolled carved desk and chair set that would set me back a year's pay. A paw-woven round rug covered most of the hardwood floor. To my left stood shelves upon shelves of old and new books. On my right, a mini bar stood just before four padded armchairs and a coffee table, while further right, a door to the kitchen was my best guess.

Before me and left of a large cold fireplace built out of flat stones, the fennec fox, Mr. Uchi, stood, a bit antsy, facing me with his paws behind his back. He was dressed in his tweed three-piece suit. His tweed alpine hat lay on the coffee table. Some ninety centimeters to his left and before the fireplace but behind the expensive desk, with his back turned to me, stood the red fox, Mr. Bryn Nelson.

Everything he wore dripped of money, from his paw-tailored, all black business suit, right down to his custom-made leather sandals. The sandals, I knew, were a fashion that told those around the wearer that he or she was too good to have the earth touch his or her pads. Regardless of his statement he stood with paws clasped behind his back and looked at a painting above the fireplace mantel. It was a fine portrait of himself sitting before Ms. Catharine Nelson, who stood to his left with her left paw resting on his shoulder.

Mr. Nelson lowered and turned his face slightly so a single eye could see me.

"Mr. Snow," he huffed and then turned fully to me. His hard looks, I surmised, would be a way to deal with the situation, yet when I looked into his eyes I saw calculation without the slightest grief. This had been my final clue something was off kilter.

Mr. Nelson took two steps to my right, drawing my eyes with him, and

with that I missed the movement of the fennec fox until it was too late. A tranquilizer dart dug deep into my shoulder. I winced to the sudden pain. Once I verified the dart by a jerk of my head and slap of my paw, my ears flatted, my teeth bared in self-preservation. Sharp claws extended as Mr. Uchi took aim yet again.

The threat of being shot twice—again—brought up imbedded instincts which I'd locked in a cage long ago. Opening that locked door, my primeval animal took over. A snarl of rage hit my lips as I launched myself at the fennec fox. Mr. Uchi took on the look only a fully enraged arctic wolf could inspire as I landed on him.

Claws tore into flesh. Jaws closed on his exposed neck and without thought, I tore out his throat. His gurgling scream barely made it into the air as hot artery blood streamed out over the area. Rent fur and flesh hung jagged from my canines. The taste was coppery and delicious.

Memories of a younger time came to light. Animalistic euphoria of the kill cascaded over my body. I turned my sight on Mr. Nelson. My intent was so clear, his gaze locked on my eyes in disbelief. I extracted my claws from the body under me. Heart pumping a fast steady volume of blood throughout my limbs gave me strength to stand. Yet this was my undoing, as the tranquilizer flew through wide open arteries, saturating muscles, nerves and brain censers. Muscles relaxed. Eyesight darkened. I gave my body a violent shake. I reached out, extending my paws, and promptly collapsed.

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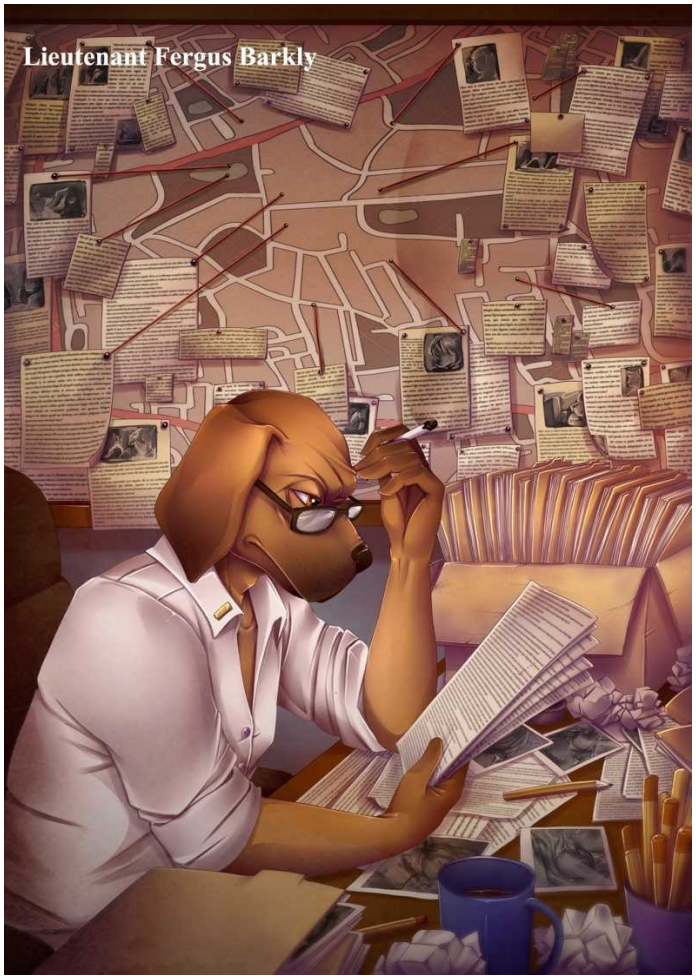
Lieutenant Fergus Barkly

Chapter 9:

A Caged Animal Can Turn Back The Clock

I awoke groggily in darkness. Senses were slow to return. Sounds, smells and other bodily senses told my waking mind I was alive and within a room of concrete and iron.

“Mr. Snow.” My ears distinguish a female voice some short meters away. “Mr. Snow, are you awake?”

My tongue was dry as the desert and tasted like the residual remains of the tranquilizer. Tongue lolling out of my mouth, I planted a paw flat on cold steal, rolled a mite and pushed up. My head encountered bars a little over a meter from the floor. “Ouch!”

“Please, Mr. Snow, I’m scared.”

I rubbed my head and tried to see the bars overhead with narrowed eyes as surrounding odors declared themselves. Residual scents of old bodily secretions declared others wound up where I was. Newer scents told me some animals had more recently been or were present. One of which my foggy mind set about putting a name to.

My pads pressed against more bars while I worked my tongue in an effort to answer Ms. Pierpont. “Give me time to wake up and I might join you in that sentiment.”

“Oh, bless the Great Maker, you’re alive. Are you hurt? I saw you brought in covered in blood.”

“That will take a moment to ascertain as well.” I ran my paw over my face, muzzle, neck and felt tackiness on my fur. Yet I felt no pain. No obvious discomforts that told of abuse. I let go a sigh that those thoughts could be

shelved presently while I felt out the rest of me in a semi-lying state, though my knees were centimeters from my chest. “I appear to be unhurt.” That was a shock to me.

“Then whose blood was it?”

Whose blood indeed? I rubbed my eyes. A memory of hot rage and the slight coppery tang on my tongue gave me my first clue. I dropped a paw, staring into the darkness. *Am I really capable of doing that?* Mr. Uchi’s scent on my paws and a vivid memory said I did. *Damn…* The fact I wasn’t in jail told me much about Mr. Nelson. *Whatever he’s into can’t involve the police. That I’m alive has meaning too, but what?*

“Mr. Snow?”

“Oh, ah, Mr. Uchi,” I answered her question. “I killed him.”

Ms. Pierpont’s side of the room became quiet. I ran my tongue over my canines to clean off the last of the coppery taste in my mouth. In some ways I was in shock as well in my understanding of what I did, but I guess the residuals of the tranquilizer was deadening a full out reaction. *At least I hope so, for I’d hoped I’d left that kind of lifestyle far behind me in my past.* I rolled my eyes and tried to think straight. The stench of the fennec fox was heavy in my nose. *I really wish I could take a shower.* With difficulty I removed my vest and shirt in hopes to lessen the smell of his death.

“So, uh, Ms. Pierpont. Any clues as to where we are?”

“Look, Mr. Snow,” she stammered. “I’m sorry I sicced the police on you that day.”

I wanted to say, “You damn well should be!” but instead I said, “Yeah well, save the heartfelt pleas for another time. This cage is cramping my style, but before I make an attempt to get us out of here, I need some information, like where are we and how often are we checked on, if at all?”

“You’re not holding my actions against me?”

I detected relief in those words. “Look, we both regret that day, and I for one would like to put it behind me.” I rubbed my face. “Now can you answer my

question?”

“Well, not precisely. I know we’re in the warehouse district. But that’s all.”

I was about to inquire of guards when she added, “It was getting late and thinning out of pedestrians. I had to duck into alleyways or pad quickly to another building to keep up with Ms. Deville.”

“Ms. Deville?” I questioned.

“Yeah, something about her didn’t seem right. Her burrow looked too well furnished with new furnishings. On a hunch she may have been paid off to distract Mr. Sullivan, I followed her for a few days. That was while you were in the hospital.”

I heard her swallow, a sign she was uneasy about that misfortune having befallen me. For the present I kept the fact my hospitalization wasn’t all her fault to myself. If by doing so she felt she owed me, so much the better. “I see…”

After a moment of thought she added, “Uh, this boxer comes by once a day to toss me a dead rat and fill a water container attached to the cage.”

“Dead rat, ugh.”

“Yeah, filthy thing. The boxer doesn’t even wash and cook the rat,” she said with loathing.

There was no point in asking if she ate the thing, given she’d been here a few days.

“What do you think they’re going to do with us?”

Though she’d asked that with curiosity, I detected fear intertwined in her question.

“Depends on the reason why we’re still alive. Anyway, what else did you learn about Ms. Deville?”

Ms. Pierpont huffed. “Ms. Deville is a very active rabbit. I counted twenty-three animals before she led me to this warehouse and was let in by that boxer. I found an open window and slipped in. I followed voices and came up under a small office. There I climbed up on some crates to get a view through a

window and saw her sexing him up. As she'd keep him occupied a while I nosed around. At a double door under the office, I heard a weak call for help. Instead of leaving to get the police to investigate, I used my tool kit to open the lock. When I did, the door burst open and knocked me down. I tried to scramble back but two four-legged Dobermans came out barking viciously and made it very clear if I tried to get away, they'd kill me." She was quiet for a few seconds. "Did you say, get us out? So you still have your tool kit?"

"Yeah, apparently no one thought to search me."

"Do be careful. This room houses those Dobermans."

"That's good to know." I felt around my cage until finding the latch and padlock. "So the animal calling for help, who was it?"

"Don't know. The boxer hit me with a tranquilizer dart once he found me."

"Damn, that's not good. Sounds as if he takes no chances." Because of the lock's position and the narrow gap between the bars, I'd have to lie on my back to get at it. "Any guess to how long we got until he checks on us?"

"I'd say ten, maybe fifteen hours. It's hard to tell time in the dark."

"Hopefully we'll be long gone in that amount of time." I worked to get on my back.

"Mr. Snow…"

"Braxton, please." I pulled my tools from the seam of my vest.

"Zoe."

I nodded out of habit.

"If I may ask, why did you kill Mr. Uchi?"

"He hit me unawares with a dart. As I wasn't fond of him in the first place, I reacted with understandable anger. When it registered he was set to hit me with another, I lost it. I can tell you it scares me to know I can do that, but I've no guilty conscience about killing him."

"He worked for Mr. Nelson, right?"

"Right." I heard the faintest shift of metal then toenails on concrete. I

tried to see past the bars but it was impossible. A wet nose touched my finger. Hastily I pulled my fingers back but in doing so I lost one of my picks. “Damn-it!” Hot breath snorted on my face. I heard a shift of nails outside my cage and then was subjected to ear-splitting barking.

“You okay? What is it?” Zoe yelled.

“I lost my pick,” I yelled back, “But I think I’ve unlocked the padlock. I need to get this stupid dog to walk away to check.”

“I’ll see if I can’t draw him off.” Zoe started shaking the bars of her cage. Toenails scratched on concrete to the sound of two Dobermans barking.

Light suddenly flooded in from a doorway and a flashlight was shined in on Zoe and then me. I covered my eyes against the bright light but peeked between my fingers to see a silhouette in a doorway. After the light had stabbed both our night vision to hell, the silhouette yelled.

“Zak, Jack, shut-up! I’ve company and you’re barking is annoying.”

By squinting I saw the Dobermans turn their heads to the silhouette in the doorway. One gave off a throated whine.

“I don’t want to hear it, hear me!” The two lowered heads, abandoned Zoe’s cage and trotted up to him, where they sat while he shook a finger at them. “Those two are safely locked in their cages and there are no intruders. If I come down here again for no reason, they’ll be no breakfast for the pair of you!” The two Dobermans looked at each other. The silhouette took a hold of the door knob and slammed the door closed. Once more in total darkness, toenails approached. Noses sniffed all around my cage before the two left us alone.

It was obvious to me those two four-legged Dobermans were not simple watchdogs with toddler intelligence. The way they looked at one another after being scolded told me they were the product of special breeding. A system developed to install ten-year-old intelligence in normal four-legged animals by a mating between a four-legged female dog and a two-legged male dog of the same species. Such favorable outcomes were rare. Most were stillborn or horribly disfigured. The disfigured ones were of course mercifully put to sleep.

But one in every two hundred mating might produce such an animal. This made the four-legged animals very expensive. Only corporations or the very wealthy could obtain them. Which put to reason a corporation or one of the elite owned this warehouse.

"You caught that, didn't you?" Zoe inquired, understanding most or all of what we'd said could well be understood by the two dogs.

"Yeah, and I'm not happy about it." I lay on my back for a short time, allowing my vision to reorient with the darkness. Problem was the black Dobermans had the advantage over us, with me being an arctic wolf and Ms. Pierpont an arctic fox with white fur. This meant the slightest amount of light would make us stick out like a black wool lamb in a heard of white wool sheep. However, without light, sound and smell would be all each of us had. So now it was a test as to who had the better training.

"Zoe, could you make some noise for a short time?" In answer she rattled her cage door. Still on my back I reached fingers through the bars and pulled down on the lock. As I'd hoped, the mechanism separated. A push, a grab and I lowered the padlock to the floor. Now came the trickier part. I rotated the bar to slide it out of the way. Before I started, toe nails warned a Doberman was approaching. His nose active, he found the lock on the floor and growled loud, but held back any bark.

Ms. Pierpont stopped. "How's it going?"

"Wonderful, until Skippy here came over."

"Oh hell…" I heard a sob in her words. "I wish you hadn't gotten my hopes up."

I wanted to say, "Don't count me out yet." But I didn't want the Dobermans to get a whiff of desperation in my words. *What to do?* I asked myself. *I could take on one Doberman, but two?* I scratched my head and ran a paw over the back of my neck. For the next hour I conjured up several options and discarded them all in moments. The trouble was every plan I worked up always got torn apart by sharp white teeth. Specifically the Dobermans' on my

body. Before the second hour passed, I hit on a plausible plan. It was chancy. I could be torn apart, but in the canine mind, it might work.

"Zoe, you awake?"

"Mmm, huh, now I am. Sort of."

"You're going to hear some noises. Bad ones. But do me a favor, don't yell out or try to get my attention. My attention will be needed elsewhere."

"Uh, okay."

She sounded unsure. Pretty much mirroring my own thoughts. However, I felt it our best chance. I shrugged out of my shirt and pants, so no clothing could aid the Dobermans, and rolled until I was on paws and knees. I dug deep into my ancestral knowledge and childhood upbringing to let out a long wolf howl, low in volume to keep from waking the boxer, yet filled with ancient meaning. Twin growls met my call. In answer I flattened my ears, narrowed my eyes and growled right back. I worked from the depth of my soul to bring out the canine language long buried in my past. I snapped my muzzle at the two, jerking my head from one to the other by the sounds they made. Finally, the old canine ways came to me. Had the two animals been merely what they appeared, this might not have worked. But as they held intelligence for better reasoning, it might.

In a guttural sound coming up from deep in my throat, I growled, "Challenge!"

Their growls went deeper in volume. Menacing.

Again I snapped. "Challenge!"

If I had it right, these two considered themselves a clan. The clan leader was the boxer. This meant I'd fight one of them to qualify as worthy enough to take on the clan leader, or better yet be brought to their clan leader for the challenge. After a moment I tracked their placement and chanced it. I pushed my fingers through the bars and shifted aside the steel pin holding the door in place. Still warning them to stay back, I crawled out. Nervous as hell, yet doing my best not to give any hint of it, I stood. Claws extended, teeth bared, ears flat and

my tail whipping about, I waited for the attack. Instead, the sound of nails slowly gave ground in the direction of the door. Apprehensive yet left with no choice, I followed.

The two separated to either side of me. I stretched out a paw and after a step found the wall. I gave the area a long whiff and caught the boxer's scent to my left. I shifted slowly. Doorknob came to paw and I gave it a turn. Compared to the room void of any light, brilliant light spilled in around the door. To better adjust my eyes, I stayed out of the light until reasonably able to see.

A thought came to mind. *Open the door quickly and I'll ruin the Dobermans' sight.* The move held merits. It would give me a shot at putting one down. *But the other would recover before I turned on him. Hmmm. Best stay with my current plan.*

When I was able to see into the warehouse proper, crates of all descriptions and sizes met my roving eyes. Above the doorframe was the office Zoe told me about.

"Braxton!" Zoe called out. "What about me?"

I turned my head slightly. "Be still. I'll be back."

"You swear to the Great Maker?"

"If I'm still alive in few minutes, yes."

The Dobermans growled louder, indicating they would bear no more words. Stiff legged, I walked out and easily found the stairs up. Quietly, I padded up the wooden stairs until my head cleared the window. A pause. I looked in to ascertain the whereabouts of the boxer. I beheld no sight of him, but I did hear movement. A whiff of a familiar scent had my ears perk up. I also caught a scent I couldn't place as yet but the two were so strong, all three had to be behind the partway open door beyond a desk I could see through the window.

Though a growing need to move built within every fiber of my sinew, I proceeded slowly up the steps to the open door in. Twin growls told me the Dobermans were on my heels. A quick move and I could pad in and shut the door on them. However, the window was well in their reach. As trained

watchdogs, the two would be through the plain glass in seconds.

A scream echoed around the walls. *Joann!* Riddled with a need to charge into the room beyond the open door in aid of her, I turned my face slightly to eye my escort.

“Be still, bitch!” the boxer’s voice fell out of the far room and filtered underneath the door frame to reach my ears.

Joann screamed unknown words, as if muffled in some way.

Hair standing on end, I forced my pads to slowly approach the closed entrance door and knock.

“What the?” an indignant but surprised male hollered.

“I’ll get it, honey.” This was a female voice. “You enjoy my present.”

Paws curling into balls of barely-repressed energy beat against my thighs to give myself something to do until I could go into action.

The sound of a heavy blow followed by a cry of pain flowed passed the opening door. The snowshoe hare, Giselle Deville, pulled the door open only thirty centimeters, and placed her paws on the doorframe using her up right ears and barely-covered body in skimpy pink halter top and pink mini skirt to block any sight of the happenings in the far room behind her.

“Now’s not a good time, honey,” she said without looking at my face, as her eyes took note of my unclothed, furry white chest. Those same eyes traveled down instead of up. If she had witnessed the dried blood on my matted fur, the next moments would’ve been different. But as she did not, her long ears perked up even more so upon seeing I wore no pants. Her lips parted, showing her long white incisors as her yellow eyes filled with lust.

I wanted to shove her aside. I wanted to deck her and charge in. Yet I did neither, for before I could think of what to say or do, Giselle shot a quick look behind her and stepped out of the work room in front of me to close the door. She threw her arms around me, burying her face in my chest. “Damn, you look gorgeous. I could eat you alive.”

“Ms. Deville…” I started stiffly.

Giselle surprised me by grabbing my crotch with her long finger paw and started massaging. “We’ve got a couple of minutes before he misses me.” She sighed deeply, enjoying how my furry chest felt on her face. Her ear twitched in front of mine when she heard growling. Giselle shifted to look at the stairs on my right. “Zak, Jack, what the hell are you two doing out here?” Giselle let go reluctantly. “Shoo, go back to your duties.” She released her hold on me and walked toward the dogs, motioning with her paws for them to turn around and head back to the room I’d come out of. The two Dobermans whined in their throats but held their ground. “Go on, I said. Both of you, or I won’t give you your special treat.”

I chanced a look. The two looked at each other. Giselle grabbed a paw full of furry skin behind their necks and pulled them toward the stairs to get them going. “Let’s go, boys. I’ve an animal to keep company.” Giselle gave me a wicked look in saying that.

Several paths lay open to me. Each with its own merits and downfalls. However, a muffled scream beyond the door ahead of me nixed them all save the worst choice. As soon as Giselle had the dogs descending the stairs, I quickly threw open the door before me and sprinted across the workroom to the next and sent its door crashing against the wall, startling the naked boxer who leapt up off Joann.

“What the hell? You!” he spat in surprise.

Though Joann lay on a couch, beaten and crying, she saw me and reacted in desperation. Face contorted in anger, she doubled up her powerful jackrabbit legs and kicked out with all her strength. Her pads nailed the boxer so hard that even I winced to the thud of his body hitting hard against the wall behind him.

From behind me, Giselle had come back in. She cried out, “Shit!”

I whipped around to see her standing inside the open entrance to the office a second before she yell at the Dobermans, pointing. “Get him!”

“Braxton!” Joann cried, bouncing up off the couch, arms reaching out.

“Stay back!” I yelled. I enforced my words with a raised paw, startling

Joann. Briefly Joann's large gray eyes showed hurt at my denial of receiving her embrace. However, that was quickly squashed as I snapped my paws to either side of me, stepping back into the main room to gain freedom to move. Claws extending, I prepared for the worst.

On Giselle's orders, the pair of Dobermans charged in unison, deadly sharp teeth bared. I braced for the impact, digging in toenails. Savagery swallowed my face. Gut-churning knowledge of what was to happen had me change my odds. I charged. Adrenalin dumped into my system. Time slowed. Reflexes instigated instead of reacted. The dogs leapt. Joann cried out. Giselle stood by the open exit with a slightly upward curve smile on her lips. A combined weight of one hundred and twenty-four kilograms, hit my chest. My paws arrowed in on their throats that same instant. Claws dug into their throats as Doberman toenails raked my chest in our combined impact. A misstep. A leg out of place. Momentum changed and I toppled left. Doberman teeth snapped. I came down. Jaws wide, I bit down on legs.

Time caught up. We hit hard. Blood and bone severed in my jaws upon impact with the floor. Howls of pain left two throats, the second being my own as teeth dug into my right shoulder. I rolled right from the injured Doberman, taking the one on my shoulder to the floor. In response he dug his teeth in deeper. I howled my pain as my right paw, still on his neck, was joined by the left. Paws combined, I pushed. He raked my chest and legs with all four toenails. He saw my muzzle go wide and he let go to spring away.

Giselle commanded. "Get him, Zak!"

I gained a knee quick-like, paws out front to catch the oncoming Doberman. Unfortunately, my thoughts were only on Zak. I'd forgotten about Jack, having nearly bitten off his front two legs. Even so, his jaws clamped down on my left calf. The searing pain caused my body to dump more adrenalin into my bloodstream. Time slowed. With the seconds of extra speed, I grabbed Zak by the throat and slammed him down on top of Jack. I grimaced to Jacks teeth as they sunk in deeper. He let go a long moment later, evoking a howl. Time

resumed. Zak rolled up on his paws. I came down on mine, straddling Jack, and sought to end this with a growled promise. “I kill him if you attack!”

Jack whimpered.

Zak readied to renew his attack.

Jack whimpered louder.

Their eyes met, Jack’s pleading. Zak’s eyes sought mine. He gave a whine and closed his jaws. By his posture, I knew he was backing down. An agreement between us given and accepted.

Giselle, not understanding our communication, screamed, “Get him!”

Carefully I stood. My shoulder and calf were inflamed and bleeding. My chest reddened from rent flesh. Yet I managed to say, “Give it up, Giselle, they are mine now.”

Giselle shrieked and bolted out the open door.

Zak growled and snapped his jaws. The sound warned me, and I whipped my head to see him sag to the floor with a dart in his shoulder. I looked behind me and saw Joann, her back pressed against the doorframe, a pistol aimed. It spat out a second dart to deliver its payload into Jack’s prone body. She looked at me. The pistol lowered. Her eyes asked questions. Her ears drooped, displaying relief.

My adrenalin rush subsided. My need for bravado over with, I limped to an office chair and sat heavily. “The Boxer?” I asked needlessly. She raised the pistol and displayed it sideways to me with a shake indicating he too dozed.

She laid the pistol on the desk. Her posture easily read she wished to hold me. Instead, she said, “I’ll flag down a rickshaw to get you to the hospital.”

“Before you do.” I laid a paw on hers and squeezed it. “A Ms. Pierpont is locked in a cage below this office, in a store room. Could you please see to her release as soon as you get some clothes on?”

Joann looked down at herself. Though she still wore her purple and green halter top, it was pulled up over her breasts. Her matching shorts were on the floor in the other room. A burst of hysterical laughter escaped her lips. She

clamped her mouth shut and covered it with her free paw.

Though tired and hurt, I still managed a slight smile. “Not that I haven’t longed to see you this way these past days.”

To my quip, as I sought to lighten the mood, Joann was able to swallow her hysteria and regained a semblance of balance. She leaned over and our lips met. She lingered for more than a quick kiss yet shorter then we both wanted. She took a deep whiff of my scent and rubbed her nose on mine. “I love you too.”

She stood and pushed the pistol my way, but before she left me I caught her paw, having considered a problem might ensue that puts me in jail.

“Joann. A hospital may have to wait. Please, release Ms. Pierpont and bring her up here.”

“But you’re hurt and bleeding?”

“I’ll not deny this, but the circumstances that brought me here may have consequences.”

Joann knelt. She put her paws and head on my good thigh. “Oh, Braxton, what did you do to find me?”

I grimaced for more reasons than one. I rubbed my neck, acknowledging it hurt as well as wishing for better circumstances to tell her. I used my paw to raise her head so she could see the truth in my eyes. “First of all, I want you to have no doubts I love you. But the truth is I didn’t know you were here until I caught your scent in climbing the stairs.”

An ear rose halfway, “But…then…” She moved her head away from my outstretched paw.

“The circumstance that brought me here I’ll explain later. In the meantime, you need to understand my fight with the Dobermans was because I heard you scream beyond that door.” I pointed to the room where within the boxer lay sleeping.

Joann stood quickly and backed some steps. She folded her arms around herself. Her ears layback behind her head and she snapped, “You’re still looking

for that archeologist. That's why that snowshoe hare lured me here…"

"Joann, please…"

"I…oh shit." Joann's eyes went wide then narrowed just as quickly. "I was abducted and nearly raped because of your case!" Her heated words fell heavily on my shoulders. Joann's paws curled into fists, her arms fell stiffly to her sides and she stomped into the next room to get her shorts.

"Joann, please hear me out." I stood, though presently doing so was not a good idea.

"Can it, Braxton. I don't want to hear it." Tears erupted on her cheeks and she slammed the door to have a barrier between us while she got dressed.

"Joann!" I pounded on the door she'd locked. "I'd tear into a pack of wolverines to save you. You've got to believe me, I'd never have willingly taken a case which I knew could ever endanger you!"

"And yet you have. Did! Even after I begged you to quit!" her muffled words of hurt fell into my ears from beyond the door.

"But I did quit!" A half-truth. But it would've been the whole truth had not Ms. Pierpont gone missing.

"Bullshit!" The door rattled and I stepped back. She opened it, having pulled up and buttoned her shorts. "That hare brought me here to be abducted by this boxer." She pointed at the comatose animal behind the wall before she pulled down her halter top. "As a warning for you to back off!"

"A warning perhaps, but not on my account."

"What do you know about it?"

"For one thing, I've been locked in a cage for the past day or so in that storeroom I mentioned."

Her right ear twitched. That told me she was at least running that over in her mind.

Carefully I reached up to hold her arms with my paws. "Circumstances forced me to pack up my business, but before I could get my pads wet in unemployment, another P.I. agency tracked me down to aid them in finding Mr.

Sullivan as their lead P.I. Ms. Pierpont had gone missing. The owner's thoughts were that since I'd been already looking in on the matter, I'd find Ms. Pierpont first. I believe she would then have taken over as lead investigator, with me as back-up. I then received a threat against your life, at which time I resolved to quit. Right as I decided on that, I got a message Ms. Catharine Nelson had supposedly been animal-napped and Mr. Nelson wished for my help. I found out too late that her being missing had been a ruse to get me out of the public eye so he could safely tranquilize and cage me here."

Joann digested this. Her ears rose. "If…this is so, we need to go to the police and report it."

I shook my head in denial. "I can't, at least not yet. You see, I killed an animal in self-defense"—Joann's eyes grew wide—"But Catharine's brother, Mr. Nelson, I'm sure has spun a different tale to the police in order to explain the death in his house. One that involved my actions as unprovoked. A story that holds more plausibility, given he's a respected red fox in his business. Compounded, of course, by my disappearance. A fact the police will weigh heavily as admission of guilt."

"Then we can explain it to them," she snapped, regaining her anger.

I shook my head sadly. "You don't understand police mentality concerning Private Investigators. We're nothing but bottom feeders. A blight in any city. Always under pads and mucking up their investigations no matter how many cases we solve. They would rather believe a criminal's story over the truth. Any story really, if it'd get us off the streets."

"Then why do it? Why put up with it?"

"Because I'm good at it."

"If that's true, why haven't you ever tried to join the force? Surely from there you could do just as well."

"True, I'll grant you that. But then I'd be working cases they want solved, not cases I'd like to solve."

Joann looked confused and pulled out of my paws. "You're making no

sense. What's the difference?"

"The difference is in who they benefit."

Her face contorted in bewilderment.

"Look, Joann, the police are paid by the city. However, it's the wealthy who truly control the city. So only cases that affect the wealthy are really looked into. Simple animals like you and I would never get any justice if it weren't for private detectives like me."

While Joann considered, I carefully approached and engulfed her in my arms, really needing the contact, regardless of the pain. After a short moment she returned the hug.

In my ear I heard her reason, "You're done now, right? You're dropping this case?"

I hugged her as tightly as I could bear before pushing her out to arm's length. "Joann," I whispered sadly and watched her eyes and ears drop. "I'm so very sorry about having involved you in this. But we'll never be safe until the reasons behind all this is exposed." I gently laid a paw on her cheek. "However, we're not in the dark anymore. Mr. Bryn Nelson showed his complicity in this case by animal-napping me. Also, the owner of this warehouse has to be complicit as well. This gives us two avenues to investigate. Besides, we have Ms. Deville by the ears in her involvement and Ms. Pierpont's help. Since we both work for the same agency we can bring to bear all its resources."

Joann looked into my eyes and saw how much it was costing me to stand there and talk to her. She took my paw and kissed the palm. "Okay, love, I trust you." She led me back to the chair. "You sit here and I'll get Ms. Pierpont. Between the two of us we'll get you medical treatment and take this fight to whoever started this." Joann first gathered up a blanket from the other room to cover my lap before she left to find the arctic fox.

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Mrs. Irina Yenin

Chapter 10:

Obscurity Could Work

It turned out Mr. Sahaja Palan was efficient. By day's end, I was resting comfortably in a private hospital known to be discreet for its special clientele. Joann laid next me, possessively. With her curled up sleeping beside me, I understood our separation had made her more cherished in my heart then I ever expected another animal could ever be.

Out in the city, the newsstands were going to be the recipient of quite a story by morning. Though Mr. Palan had unbelievable pull in the city, I'd written a letter to Lieutenant Fergus Barkly and had Ms. Pierpont take it to him. This pretty much guaranteed a raid on the warehouse before the criminal organization got wind of it. As for that red fox, Mr. Nelson, I'd imagine once he got word, he'd be inconsolable for days, unknowing if an arrest warrant would be posted for him. *In truth,* I considered*, he should tuck tail and run. But I don't really believe he'll do that. His personality is more likely to hunker down and dig in. I'm in hope he does, cause he and I have unfinished business to attend to.*

A short time into my thoughts, a white-nosed coati nurse pushed the curtain aside, eyed Joann and I, shrugged and pricked my skin with a needle. "This will let you sleep through the night." She then left us to ourselves.

My injures were severe enough to warrant I remain in the hospital for three days. On the day of my release, Ms. Pierpont showed up, causing Joann to hug me tighter to her side.

"I got word you were being discharged today," she said.

"Yeah, though the place has done wonders with my injuries, it's time I got some exercise to bulk up so I can face Mr. Nelson."

“Yeah, about that…” Zoe began. “Mr. Palan wants you to forget about your revenge and help me find Mr. Sullivan. The fox is still missing and our client is getting pissed about our lack of results.”

Joann stepped in front of me. “That fox’s disappearance is no longer his priority. Clearing his good name is.” Joann shooed Ms. Pierpont out of the room with a wave of her paw. “So you can just go away.”

“I mean no disrespect, but Mr. Snow owes—”

“He owes nothing!” Joann cut in. “Braxton told me all about that deal. Because of it, he was nearly killed. So that slate is clean.”

Zoe’s face took on stubborn lines. Her tail twitched and her ears shifted to indicate she was getting irritated. “Look, Ms. Uh—”

“South,” I supplied. “Ms. Joann South.” I put my good paw on her left shoulder and added. “That is, until we get married.”

“That’s right.” Joann placed her paw on mine. “That’s why his priority is to clear his name, so we can have a public wedding. A wedding I can invite my family and friends to.”

“Look, Ms. South,” Zoe sought to reason. “I’m sorry. Though he was hired in a roundabout way to find and help me, his being in the same predicament by other sources doesn’t, as you say, clear his debt.”

“You’re free aren’t you? And he was the one that made it happen. So that’s that!”

It looked as if Joann and Zoe would go on arguing the matter unless I butted in. So I did. “Look, Joann, Zoe.” I squeezed Joann’s shoulder. “You’re both right and wrong.” This earned me some odd looks from both. Zoe stayed where she was and Joann twisted to look at me. “I confess I haven’t pieced it all together, but I feel it in my tail. Mr. Nelson is connected to the whole mess somehow.” My wounds might have been stitched up and I’d had a little time to rest, but that didn’t mean I was up to strength to argue a matter standing up. I looked behind me and sat back down on the hospital bed.

“Explain, please.” Zoe leaned back on the wall and gestured for me to

begin before she crossed her arms.

“First off, Zoe, you mentioned you heard an animal call for help in that warehouse before you got caught.”

Zoe nodded.

“Well, my nose tells me that someone was Mr. Sullivan.”

Zoe looked skeptical. “When were you ever close enough to Mr. Sullivan to catch his scent?”

“Never, of course. However, his workroom reeked of his scent.”

“Granted, but other animals have been in that room as well, police, family members and other investigators, including myself. Who’s to say that scent isn’t one of them?”

“I do,” I said with certainty.

Zoe’s tail twitched. “Don’t be conceited, Braxton. Just because our ancestors were predators, relying heavily on scents, doesn’t mean you can pick out one among many unless you got it off the animal himself.”

“You don’t know my arctic wolf,” Joann slipped in.

Zoe’s eyes slid to Joann in annoyance.

“You can believe me or not, Zoe. I know I smelled Mr. Sullivan’s scent.”

Joann ran her fingers over my head to get an unruly strand out of my eyes. I smiled at her and she wiggled her nose in her endearing way.

“At any rate, this leads me to believe Mr. Nelson is now involved in his uncle’s disappearance.”

“How can that be? Weren’t you working for him when you caught me in Mr. Sullivan’s study?”

“No. I was working for his sister, Ms. Catharine Nelson. Mr. Nelson, as it would seem, has been trying to discourage or otherwise halt any investigation into his uncle’s disappearance.”

Zoe’s tail continued to twitch. “You’d have me believe he would do that to the red fox who took him and his sister in, raised and cared for them all these years? Even up to giving over his wealth to make certain they wouldn’t fall on

hard times? You'd sit there and spin a tale Mr. Nelson would forget all that and abandon his uncle?"

"You got it in one."

Zoe looked incredulously at me. "You're nuts."

"Whether you believe me or not is irrelevant. The fact remains Mr. Nelson had me drugged and sent to the same warehouse where Mr. Sullivan had been. This means he's either involved or knows the people involved."

"Even if Mr. Sullivan was there, and I'm not saying he was, it could've been a coincidence," Zoe reasoned.

"My bank notes are on Mr. Nelson being in on this. So you can follow what leads you have and I'll investigate Mr. Nelson."

Zoe had a trump card to play and chose to lay it down. "You're forgetting, Braxton. Your investigating license is under Mr. Palan's name. You're his employee. You do as he says or he'll yank your work cardinals."

"Let him." I shrugged then regretted the move as my shoulder and chest wounds reminded me of their condition. "As long as that trumped-up murder rap is on my head, I'm fairly useless to him. So whether Mr. Nelson is involved or not, he is my number one priority."

Joann and I watched Ms. Pierpont walk away, her gait, ears and tail belying her agitation.

"What's our first move?" Joann asked.

"As much as I'd like to send you home or to your sister's it's unfortunately out of the question. I was already caged up and destined for wherever they were going to send me when Ms. Deville brought you to the warehouse."

"As I asked, what's our next move?" Joann inquired, telling me in no uncertain terms she was not leaving my side.

I rubbed my muzzle, wishing I had an office to puzzle this out in, and my pipe to help quiet my mind. "I feel its time I called in some favors."

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Joann and I sat in Tanner's covered rickshaw as he pulled into his stable. "Make yourselves at home." He waved his malformed left arm. "There's carrots and lettuce in the icebox. Some dried fruit in the cupboard. Cornmeal in a feed bag. Water in the tall jug above the icebox." Tanner gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry, Mr. Snow, I've no meat around."

"Tanner, please, I think it's high time you called me by my first name."

Tanner backed up the rickshaw once Joann and I crawled out.

"Thank you, Mr. Snow. But until your reputation is restored, it might be best this way. I'd hate to be questioned and refer to you by your first name instead of your last." Tanner waved then checked his pocket for the note Joann was sending her sister and the letter I wrote to my lawyer to settle on the apartments, as I needed some fast bank notes.

Joann puzzled aloud as I closed the door, "That's the weirdest thing. The Clydesdale gives us free rein of his stable but yet won't use your first name."

I'd puzzled over the same thoughts, but as I secured the bar across the door, which was his lock, it came to me. "Actually, Tanner's smarter then I gave him credit for." I put my arm around Joann to pull her close as well as to let her aid me over to two barrels that had been made into a chair. "If Tanner's questioned about me by police or some unsavory animals, using my last name wouldn't tip them off he knows me save as a paying passenger."

Careful of my tail, Joann let me settle. "Ahh, I get it." She put her paws on the arms of the chair and leaned into my face. "By the way, you, my wolf, are going to take a few days off to let yourself heal."

"I already had that in mind."

"Good, cause back at the hospital it sounded as if you were going to jump right back in the action." She kissed my nose. "Besides." She licked her lips. "Your nose is warm, so you may have a cold or fever. Most likely a fever, due to your injuries."

“So you’re going to nursemaid me?”

“You got it, buster. No horsing around. You get well first then we’ll see where things take us.”

“Not even a little?” I licked her nose, eyes shifted to indicate a place behind her, my breath heavy on thoughts of her and I entwined.

She glanced at the pile of hay I was referring to. “Braxton, that’s downright rude. That’s your friend’s bed.”

“He gave us free rein—”

“No, lover,” Joann cut me off. “Sexual release leaves very strong odors and even if his nose isn’t as keen as yours, my cheeks would burn red should he smell us.” She stood. “I’m for making up a salad with those carrots, lettuce and dried fruit he offered. How’s a glass of water and dried fruit for you sound?”

“Quite the letdown compared to what I want to eat.” I looked at her purple and green shorts, which she’d had no chance to change out of.

She saw this and lightly slapped the back of my head. “Down, wolf. First you heal. Then we’ll play.”

I gave her my best leer as she walked off. After which I sat back, allowing myself to acknowledge my aching muscles and rent skin. *Now the main question is what to do with the predicament Mr. Nelson has me in,* I told myself.

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Tanner was the best host. Since he worked nights, this gave Joann and I privacy to lie together at night. Sadly, sleeping was all we did. When Tanner returned for his turn in the hay, Joann and I would sit in the kitchen and quietly discussed options, which were few. First off, Tanner confirmed I was an animal wanted for murder. Second, I had no weapons for defense. Lastly, we both needed new clothes.

On the fourth morning of our hiding out, Joann sat cross-legged on the floor with her back to my bandage chest, and pointed out another problem. “You,

lover, are far to conspicuous. Arctic wolves around here are far too few. So the way I figure it, we'll have to dye your skin and fur."

"Say what?"

"You know, like I do my hair. Save you'll have to bathe in the color."

"Oy vey." I rolled my eyes at the thought of masquerading as another kind of wolf.

Joann turned her head and kissed my lips. "Don't worry, lover, it's not permanent." She patted my muzzle and resumed her thoughts. "For your size, you could pass as an overlarge black wolf."

"Great." I moaned. "Nothing like hiding out as a lower life form."

"Braxton." She slapped my paw, which rested on her knee. "Black wolves are as intelligent as you. Besides they're plentiful in this city and the best choice to hide you in a crowd."

"Fine…" I huffed. "But if I have to change colors so do you."

Joann considered this. "My hair color, yes, but I think that's all."

"If I have to bathe in the stuff, I think you should too," I argued.

"Braxton, that won't be necessary, there are plenty of jackrabbits around with my coloring." Joann leaned back into me and took up my paws to wrap around herself. "Besides, coloring around my white fur and skin would be hell to do. A slip up here or there would make me more conspicuous then simply dyeing my hair red, orange or light blue."

"So if you get to choose your hair color, why can't I?"

She wiggled to gain more connection between us. "Because I said no."

"You never said no."

"So now I am. No." She giggled.

When Tanner stirred from his well-earned rest, he listened in on our thoughts. "That's good thinking on your part, Ms. South. There's an old wooden washtub I use out back. I'll go shopping and gather the supplies, plus more fruits and vegetables." Tanner looked at me like he did every trip out. "Sorry, Mr. Snow, it's still too unnatural for me to pick up any meat."

“Thanks anyway.” I grimaced like usual.

At dusk, while Tanner worked at his job, I stripped out of bandages and clothes. Joann did a once over on my healing skin with eyes and paws and nodded. “As long as you don’t over stretch, these wounds should not open.”

As I was reluctant to become a black wolf I did my own inspection. “Umm…Shouldn’t I wait a few more days?”

Joann had started to work the handle on the well pump to fill the tub. She turned her head with a thoughtful look. “In truth yes, but Tanner is taking a big risk in housing us. So it’s best for all of us that you change color as soon as possible.”

“But what if I open a wound or two?” I lamely argued.

Joann stopped pumping the handle and stood straight. She put a paw to her hip and said crossly. “Braxton, stop you’re bellyaching. You and I both know why you’re arguing about this.” She took up the handle once more. “Just take it slow and you’ll be fine.”

Joann was right of course on all points, yet it rankled my self-worth to hide like this.

Once the tub had enough water, Joann abandoned the pump and headed back to the house. “I’ll be just inside the stable so I won’t get splashed by accident.”

I watched her fluffy tail step inside. *She’s probably smart in that.*

For about a minute I stared at the black ink in the container next to the wash tub. *I hate this.* Regardless, as black wolves were known to be all black while all other wolves tended to have multiple colorings, a black wolf I’d have to become. I sighed. I dumped the ink in and after stirring the mixture with a broomstick; I sat my butt on the edge, closed my nose and fell in. After soaking for five minutes I used my old clothes to sop up the inky water before using Tanner’s old hay. After that, towels finished the job of drying off. Joann came out and pointed to the tub.

“Best see to dumping the water before anyone else gets the ink on them.

Also, you'll need to stay out here until you're completely dry or you'll smear ink on everything you touch."

"Oh, thanks, now you tell me," I griped.

Joann blew me a kiss. "Now you know what we females go through to make ourselves adorable for you males." Before I could respond that I never required her to do so, she closed the door.

The next morning, Tanner arrived home with a bank check from my lawyer. The sum was more than I thought, while still far below market value. This whole issue set in and I sat, despondent.

"Braxton?" Joann inquired. "What's wrong?"

I gave her the check, as it was in her name per my request. After all, I couldn't cash it if it were in my name. "Everything I built these past twenty-five years was all for nothing." I gestured to the check she looked at. "This is the sum accumulation of everything I have left because of this case. And a twentieth of that will be used to get clothes, food, supplies, a new pistol, a license and walking-around bank notes."

Joann gave me a comforting hug. "In all fairness, my thoughts have traveled down paths that say we animals are too beholden to material things. Our ancestors didn't need all this stuff. Even the Amish have proved we're over-dependent on creature comforts. Why, take a look around Tanner's stable. Hay for a bed. Icebox. Wooden boxes for cabinets and chairs made out of barrels. All simple possessions he could leave on a whim and rebuild elsewhere. This is how we animals should live. Closer to nature and our true strengths."

I eyed her. Joann had unknowingly dredged up old memories. Unwanted memories. I tried to push the thoughts aside, but they flooded the corners of my mind like an irritating cricket who'd made its home under the icebox, just out of reach. For a brief moment I was back in the clan, struggling day by day to fit in.

The wilderness was a harsh place, especially out on the glacier living with animals I felt alienated by. It mattered not how I tried to fit in, or that my skills were improving. What mattered was that I balked when it came to hunting

on the glacier. Hunting normal un-evolved animals had never been a problem for me. My problem was with the pledge the clan stubbornly held onto. A demand the clan hunt the glacier to keep it bare of all sentient life. Though that in itself hadn't driven me out. It was what the clan did in the lean years. What they did with the sentient animals they caught.

Backing up to her words, I reevaluated them and said, "If I don't clear my name you'll get your wish."

Joann's ears drooped. "Braxton, I've been thinking. Why don't we give it a try?"

"Give what a try?"

"Join an Amish community. We could travel north until we run out of land. Then look around for a group. We could trade in our skills for a place to live. I know a lot about food preparation and you, well you know the law. You could be a justice of the peace. I'm sure even the Amish need officers."

I turned Joann enough to look at her. "Where is this coming from? I thought you wanted to clear my name?"

She lowered her head and her ears dropped as she picked at the hem of her shorts. "I do," she said slowly but quickly looked in my eyes, raising her ears, and touched my face. "But not at the cost of losing you." She turned and threw her arms around me. "I love you too much to take that chance."

"What about adopting? You stated you wish to have a family. Parents are investigated before they can adopt."

Joann drew back. She bit her lip and lowered her eyes, her ears laid back behind her as she considered this. "Umm…you could father a cub by a surrogate wolf. Or I could look up a strong jackrabbit to impregnate me…" She raised her eyes to look into mine. "That is, if you could accept another jackrabbit's litter as your own?"

"As we were going to adopt, that point is moot."

She brightened and her ears came back up. "So you'll do it? I mean, we can do this?"

I took a deep breath. “May I have some time to think on it?”

Joann turned away and stood. “Braxton, I hope you’re not saying that to lead me on. I understand male egos well enough. If my carrying another jackrabbit’s litter bothers you, say so.”

I sighed. “I will admit the notion of another animal touching you bothers me.” I shrugged. “As a wolf, I’m territorial, I guess. It grinds my nerves. But I understand the reasons.” I got up as well.

“Enough for us to do this?” Her eyes searched mine.

“If I agree. It might be best if I didn’t know this jackrabbit.”

“Would you agree faster if you had a cub first?”

“Joann, please let me think on this.”

Joann huffed. She laid her ears back and walked away. “Fine.” She picked up the bank check and without a glance at me headed for the door. “I got some shopping to do. You do what you want.”

I followed. “Joann, don’t be like this…”

She wheeled around. “Like what?” She stabbed me in the chest with her finger. “For the past days I’ve tried to help you understand any plan we come up with will have a fair degree of danger. Well now I need to clear my head and think on our relationship, as you plainly are not. I’m going to my sister’s. I’ll be there a day or so while you”—Joann waved her arm and paws in the air—“figure this out.”

“Joann!”

She slammed the door.

Tanner walked in, stretching his arms. “Ms. South has a point.”

I turned and raised an eyebrow. “You overheard us?”

“In point of fact, most days I do.” He blink his eyes, looking guilty. “Sorry, I’m naturally a light sleeper.” He went to the water jug and poured himself a cup. “If I may give advice here?” He looked a question at me. I gestured to go ahead. “We Amish folks keep tabs on one another. Our communities are small, so to prevent inbreeding we do this. I know of three good

Amish communities northeast of here who would gladly take you in. That is, if you're serious in living the life."

As he drank his water, I scratched the back of my neck. "I possibly could with little difficulty. Joann, however?"

Tanner poured more water in his cup then bit the handle so he could open his cupboard and pull out a bundle of carrots. He put the bundle under an arm and took up the cup with his good paw, motioning for me to follow. "I'm not one for overstepping my bounds, Mr. Snow, but even if she can't deal with the hardships, you'd both be well out of Furlton City." Tanner sat in his barrel chair and settled his cup on a tall wooden box acting as an end table. He looked around his stable and unbound his carrots. "Truth is, I'm ready to move on. The animals around here are too prejudicial on looks." He showed me his left arm then dropped it in his lap. "You were a real bright spot in my life here." He bit down on half a carrot and chewed. He looked at me still standing and shrugged.

I leaned on the wall and tried to reason with myself. *I've done far too much thinking. It's time I put some action in motion. But what?*

"You're welcome to stay as long as you wish," Tanner interrupted my stymied thoughts. "If you decide on leaving, let me know and we'll take my rickshaw. You two could sit and enjoy the trip while I get a good stretch of my legs on uncluttered roads."

I nodded understanding and walked out the front door to stretch my legs. At eight in the morning, the April sun had already fully risen. Temperature wise, it was a good 55 degrees. *If we did go, the rickshaw would be a great comfort to me, as the temperature will be rising several degrees each month until August. Of course for Joann and Tanner, with less fur then I have, it will be ideal traveling weather.* Wearing only black pants and a belt, I put my paws behind my back and let my pads wander where they would.

Inside an hour I looked up and took note my pads had taken me to a local park. There I found a bench and sat. Out in the park grounds, animals of all description took pleasure in daily life given these moments to relax, play, lie out

on blankets or gather in groups for gossip and good food. *A wolf worth his salt is not domesticated.* My father's words came back to me. For some moments I considered the clan, but vetoed the thoughts. *My family could never understand my wish to marry outside of my species. Besides, Joann wouldn't survive long in the clan. They'd make sure of that.* I put up an arm on the backrest and crossed my ankles. After a couple of hours I said, "Uh, hell with it." Internally I continued my thoughts, as I'd startled a passerby with my cuss words. *I've already packed it in.* I rubbed my chin. *As for a litter, it'd be best if Joann had hers first. I could always father a cub or two later.* I looked around and took my bearing before I set out for Clair's warren. While I walked along I put mind to work on whom to breed with Joann. *I really don't like the idea of a stranger impregnating Joann. Mmm…perhaps we could keep it in the family. Clair just got married. Maybe she wouldn't mind her husband doing the honors.* Still unhappy with any other animal touching Joann, I sought to set my mind on this course. *Joann was going to stay with her sister for a couple of days anyway. So while she gets pregnant, I'll get with Tanner and see what supplies we'll need to start our trip.*

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Mr. Bryn Nelson

Chapter 11:

An Unwelcome Home Visit

Without any bank notes, my walk to Clair's apartment building took me some four hours. By then my wounded leg, chest and shoulder were a little upset with me. Yet I paid them no mind. You learn early in life out on the glacier to ignore discomforts. Though this wasn't the glacier, I found out early in my chosen career, a P.I.'s life is fraught with mishaps. Thus with a look up the stairs I set pads to work to climb up the levels and then along the hallway. Walking along the pathway my nose caught three familiar scents. None of which should be here. "What the hell are Mitch Vetrov and the dumb brothers doing around here?"

I slowed my pace and took deeper breaths. The closer I came to Clair's warren, the stronger their scents came to my nose. I swallowed. *Joann and Clair's scents are just as strong.*

I came up on the door and put an ear to the edge of the door, my thoughts filled with anxiety.

"…ell me where he is." Mitch Vetrov ordered. "My two compadres are not as patient as I am."

"Eat me!" Joann screamed at the lynx.

The sound of a heavy slap came to my ears. "That, rabbit, is a poor choice of words." I strained to catch the sound of his pads as he crossed the floor a few steps. A moment of no words was followed by him threatening, "If you don't tell me in the next few seconds where Braxton is, I'll give your sister to Hedrick and Olsten to do just that." Another pause. "You best tell your sister to give me what I want, or you're going to be dinner."

“Joann, please!” Clair screeched. Tears of sorrow flooded her words. “For the Great Maker’s sake, tell him!” Sorrowful crying followed this, as if something horrible had already happened.

I swallowed. *Clair’s husband*. I put my paw over my muzzle. I couldn’t know for sure, but I’d held my fair share of females crying over the years, and her tears sounded devastated.

“Go to the devil!” Joann spat.

I put my back to the wall. *Oh, Joann…I’m not worth the life of your sister. Or yours for that matter.* I let my head fall back onto the wall. *Without a bargaining chip of any kind, Joann and Clair could be killed. But if I leave, if I take the time to figure out what I could use or even to flag down a street officer, one or both could suffer at my delay.* I closed my eyes to try to think. *What can I do? The dumb brothers will be hateful toward me for killing their boss. So manipulation is out.* I wanted to pound my head on the wall. *There’s got to be a way!* I rubbed my forehead and opened my eyes to see a black paw. The sight was still unnerving. I dropped my arm and sought any idea.

That’s when it hit me. *Of course! No one outside Tanner and Joann knows of my color change. It might be enough to get me past the polar bears. Once close enough to Mitch Vetrov….mmm, damn-it, I’d still have to contend with the polar bears.* I heeled my forehead. *Think, wolf, think! You’ve talked your way out of many a situation over the years…*

A yell and scream found my ears and I cringed. *I’m wasting time! Let’s go, wolf, you’re sharper than this.* What held me back was Joann. If I miscalculated. If I screwed up, she could be hurt or killed. *Oh, Great Maker, have mercy on this poor wolf and show me the way,* I begged.

I was reaching for straws when an idea came. I looked at my arms. My chest, pants and legs. *It can’t work!* I told myself. *The dumb brothers can’t be that stupid.* I took a big whiff of myself. Hay, wood, dye, Tanner, Joann and myself. Not to mention pollen from spring flowers. I licked my paws and sought to flatten my head of hair. I pulled up my pants. Shook out my arms and legs.

Rolled my head and squared my shoulders before I let my pads put me before Clair's door. I took a deep breath and knocked. Light cuss words came from inside and pads shuffling. The door opened.

"Are you Hedrick or Olsten?" I inquired in a high voice.

"Name's Olsten. Hedrick's here too."

"Hi there," Hedrick said beside the door, though out of sight.

"Good, I was told Mr. Vetrov would be with you. Is he?"

"He's behind us watching the jackrabbits."

A white paw smacked Olsten's shoulder and Hedrick scolded. "Don't tell him that!"

Olsten hit Hedrick back. "Well, what should I tell him?"

Before the two could get into it, Mitch Vetrov came up and shoved at Olsten. "Get out of the way, you oaf." The lynx shouldered his way in to see me. "Now what's all this and who are you?"

I tried to look meek. "The name's Brin, sir. I've a message from Mr. Nelson…" I was taking a risk here, but I had no choice.

"Well, out with it, I haven't all day," Mitch Vetrov snapped.

"Yes sir. Sorry, sir. Uh…Mr. Nelson told me he's in need of Hedrick and Olsten. And uh, that I'm to take their place as your aid, uh muscle, sir."

Mitch Vetrov, whose hundred and sixty-four centimeters, took him to my jaw line, look me over and sneered, "You have got to be kidding me."

I tried to look hurt, but after a few seconds I looked around waiting for his compliance.

"Fine, fine," The lynx snapped, stepping back. "With luck you're smarter than these two oafs."

I stepped past Hedrick and Olsten and scoured the room with only my eyes. Joann and Clair sat tied and currently gagged in chairs facing each other in the middle of the room. Clair's newlywed husband lay crumpled on the floor near their bedroom. His head set at an angle no neck could withstand without snapping. Inwardly I groaned. *His death is on my paws,* I condemned myself.

Joann's sorrowful face turned slightly enough to catch a look at me. An ear twitched and rose a little. Her face brightened a hair. I made a motion with my paw in front of me for silence. She caught this and turned her head away. Clair simply sat, her head down and tears silently falling down her cheeks.

"Well!" Mitch Vetrov snapped at the polar bears. "You heard the wolf. Get out and help Mr. Nelson." Mitch swatted at one and kicked at the other. "And good riddance!" He slammed the door then let out a breath of irritation. "Damn idiots. The only good they've been was in killing that rabbit."

Clair opened up again in horrific tears at his boasting.

"Aaa, pipe down," Mitch snapped. "You'll be seeing that rabbit shortly, I promise you."

With the polar bears out of the warren, I stood struggling with myself to hold off killing the bastard until I was certain they were well out of ear range.

Mitch Vetrov slapped my arm and pointed at Clair. "Make yourself useful and take a hold of that one's throat and squeeze it until I tell you to stop."

Had I still been on the case, I would've set myself to knock the lynx out so I could tie him up and interrogate him. I could still do that then give him to the police for the murder of Clair's husband. But something whispered in my ear justice would not find him if whoever was pulling the strings needed him for more dirty work. This left me free to do option three. One more agreeable to my current mindset.

After his slap, I dug deep into my mind and opened a cage door that let my animal out without boundaries. My irises opened wide and my tail fuzzed up. Claws sprouted from my paws and pads. A snarl filled my throat. My paw shot out and grabbed Mitch by the throat. I took him off his pads, twisted my torso and came down on my knee and slammed his head onto the hard wood floor. As I'd hoped, the lynx never saw it coming. His eyes had gone wide to the contact. His paws grabbed my arm out of reflex, if nothing else. He sought to cry out as his skull cracked open like a coconut.

After verifying he was beyond this world, I let go and filled my lungs in

a deep breath to calm myself and rein in my animal. Knowledge of the city brought back intelligence. I turned to gauge Joann and Clair's reactions. Clair still had her head turned away. Joann's eyes marked my deed as she sought to breathe through the rag around her mouth. Her eyes held anger, sorrow and pain. She looked into my eyes then closed hers and nodded understanding.

What happened next I had never even considered. The door to Clair's warren opened and one of the two polar bears walked in.

"Beg pardon, Brin, but I've a bet with Olsten. Are you related to Mr. Snow? Because…uh, you sure…uh, smell like him…"

Hedrick stumbled on his last words as I jerked my head quickly about to see him in the doorway. My position over Mitch Vetrov found a glimmer of intelligences in the bear and his calm face filled with rage. His jaw opened. He emitted a loud roar. His arms shot out in front and he charged.

At my prime I might have downed a single polar bear, given room and time. But two, once Olsten joined in? It was asking too much. The best outcome would be to survive. A very highly unlikely condition if a wolf like me was dumb enough to fight back. A lot of scenarios flashed through my mind in that instant. The only outcomes to them were all the same. *Oh shit, I'm dead!*

In the end I did a remarkable back flip between Joann and Clair. This rendered a second or two of time as Hedrick halted his charge while his low I.Q. considered pathways to me beyond the white-tail jackrabbits. Ultimately he decided to negotiate around Joann instead of bowling over her and Clair. Olsten, having heard the loud roar, followed in on fast pads, mirroring Hedrick's path. On my pads, I saw the polar bears veer around the rabbits. This unexpected event left the doorway clear.

New scenarios opened before me. Stay and get pounded on or torn apart, or jump over my family and high tail it out. If luck held, the bears would follow me. This would leave Joann and Clair out of danger while I lost the polar bears and doubled back. Optimism in my abilities as a free working wolf won out. I bolted over my lover and her sister and charged the door. In the outer hallway, I

headed for the stairs down. A look behind showed Hedrick and Olsten were indeed following as they collided in the doorway and fell out onto the floor. With a good lead, I hit the stairs, yet had to revise my path as trunk-carrying Great Danes, Boxers and a certain red fox were coming up the stairs. My shock in passing Mr. Bryn Nelson almost set my pads to stumble.

What the hell is he doing here? ran wild in my mind as I hit the next level and darted along the hallway. I realized the pursuit stalled somewhere, which allowed my pads to stumble to a halt at the second set of stairs I headed for. I filled my lungs with air after that all-out sprint while flashes of three large trunks came to focus. My ears and tail dropped. A resident walked past with an odd look for my antics.

I slowly turned my head to see down the way I came. *By the Great Maker, no!* It was obvious who those three trunks were for. Yet I held no chance against so many. I sucked in my tongue and closed my muzzle. *The practical thing would be to leave. Track them at a distance. Once they go to ground I could enlist the help of Mr. Palan. Yet there is no guaranty either one would be alive when dumped in those trunks.* The air and life drained out me. I leaned on the wall and slid to the floor. My paws covered my head. I felt like howling at the moon, though there wasn't any in the blue sky. *I can't win! There are just too many of them!*

"Hey, wolfy?" a young voice and light touch on my shoulder called me up. "You okay?"

I looked between fingers and saw concerned large eyes of a young cottontail. Her ears were high and sweeping the airway in anxiety. A brief image of Joann smiling brightly came to mind, kneeling behind this rabbit as if she were our own daughter. That image burned red hot in my consciousness.

An upsurge of who I truly was came to light and stomped to ash this pathetic pampered city self I'd become. Like an old friend, I took hold of the reins and lowered my paw to pat the little waif on the head reassuringly. "I am now." I stood. "Thanks to you." I smiled down on her. The little cottontail

brightened. I took to the stairs and once on the level with Clair's apartment I called myself to war. "I am an Alpha Male and Joann is my chosen Alpha Female. Any animal dares touch her and my clan will suffer my wrath!"

Hedrick and Olsten stood guard at Clair's warren. "These two will be the first to know it!" I snarled. Claws in pads and paws sprouted. My face took on the ugly snarl of a maddened animal. I bared my fangs in true ferocity for the first time since I left my true self years back with my clan, and charged. Adrenalin hit my bloodstream and excited muscles to expand beyond normal boundaries. In fewer seconds then one could estimate, I was on them.

Claws raked fur, skin, and finally dug deep into meat and bone. Impossibly fast I'd ripped out the throat of the closest polar bear and passed the second before either knew I was there. The second polar bear blinked, heard the gurgling to his left and turned. Like a taut spring I sprinted back along the hallway and sprang onto his exposed back, sinking pad nails into his back while paw nails found skin and flesh on his shoulder. As my instincts predicted, he arched backward, head raised in a yell of pain. Jaws wide, I fell on his throat and pressed my powerful jaws to close. Sharp canines passed fur and hit skin, slicing in. Liquid delight ran hot and pure into my mouth and over my muzzle. Intelligence foretold my quarry's next move. Before his paws could gain a grip on my head, I used his back like a springboard and leapt away. Teeth vacated the wound in a tearing motion to maximize the damage.

On the ground, instincts told me to capitalize on the wounded animal with another attack. Intelligence overruled this. Without a moment wasted I ducked under his arms as his paws latched onto his throat and sprinted. I came up past him, shoulder and arms aimed at the closed door.

The door swung open to expose a pistol held by a Great Dane. The animal in me took total delight in his surprised expression. I changed tactics. My left arm bashed the door out of his paw. My right paw balled up into a tight fist and I slammed this into his windpipe with the power of my shoulder and arm. The collapse of his throat followed. Body taken off its pads, the Great Dane flew

back into the room.

My senses heightened. Eyes shifted, and marked a diagram of the room in the back of my mind. Nose and ears filled the diagram with placements of each member of Mr. Nelson's hench-animals. Immediate danger labeled, pad nails tore into the wooden floor and I launched myself into a bloodbath.

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A world of aches and pains throughout muscles and body was what I awoke to. I tried to unwrap my curled body to find myself imprisoned in a small wooden trunk. The wonder I was still alive came next. By all rights, I should be long dead and my body feeding the crows. *So why am I alive?* I questioned, though that was a lot to consider when my world held little energy to think past the beating I took. Knees pressed upon my chest. Head and pads pressed on the walls of my confinement. I sought to work free my tied-up wrists behind my back. Unable to growl or snarl due to the muzzle around my mouth meant someone was taking no chances.

My trunk bounced. A moment of consideration of vibrations suggested my box was on a cart on the move. Complete darkness meant no way to ascertain my location until I could either scratch through wooden walls or the trunk lid was raised. Still, I had my ears and nose.

I closed my eyes and rested. When I next awoke, my full bladder and empty stomach said as much as a day or two had passed. A lack of freedom a few hours later meant bodily functions were not to be denied, however embarrassing. The pungent smell of my own urine did not distract my nose from finding other smells. Joann was near. Possibly her sister as well, though I wasn't certain. I only knew a pregnant herbivore was nearby.

More days passed. Though unfed, my body sought to heal itself.

A day emerged where my trunk was upended. A paw drill put a hole near my pads next to the corner then another hole in the top corner. After which a

hollowed-out bamboo stick was inserted and cold water rushed in to rain down my body only to exit out the hole at bottom. A good two minutes of this treatment allowed me to adjust my muzzle and sip down some of the liquid. The taste told me it was river water. Crisp air made it past the bamboo. Smells told me the city was far away. Wherever we were, it was around rivers and undeveloped land. Finally, unblocked voices made it to my ears. The accents told me our captors originated easterly from Furlton City.

The bamboo was removed and a cork was beaten into the holes. The sounds around me said the other trunks, possibly five others, were given the same treatment. This made it a good bet six of us were being taken somewhere for disposal. Why, of course, was the question. Murders within city limits were not uncommon. Perhaps our journey was simple self-preservation. No body. No murder investigation.

Within crowded confines without light, counting the days was difficult. After the sixth day, at an estimate, I must admit, I'd given up. The only bright spot in my predicament, or should I say ours, was that we weren't tossed into one of the many rivers or lakes we passed. This gave me small hope we were worth something to someone.

On the umpteenth day, a wolf warning-howl called my ears to attention. This howl was answered with more howls that grew closer. Our cart came to a halt. Someone patted the trunk above mine and orders were given to proceed. After a short time the cart stopped and our trunks were subjected to pounding by wooden objects, possibly to stir up the contents in each trunk. Possibly simply out of malice. More time passed in inactivity. Finally ropes were removed and the sound of trunks being unloaded came to my ears until it was my turn. Rocked around, I gathered my trunk was being carried some short distance until of a sudden, I was dropped. Locks were undone and the lid was thrown open.

Bright clear daylight stabbed me blind. Cool air swirled inside to chill my flesh. The trunk was pushed over and I tumbled out on to snow-covered ground. Unused muscles screamed as I sought to gain control of them. Thirsty

and famished, if I could have seen, I'd have given an account for myself. However, rough paws grabbed hold and steel shackles were locked onto my wrists and ankles. I was able to make out only blurry images. A pole slid under the chains and I was hauled up off the ground like a suckling pig being readied for the fire pit. White images raised the pole over shoulders and after a few steps, the ends were settled in yokes on hundred eighty-four centimeter, poles.

Poked and prodded with paw-held poles, my vision adapted. To my surprise, I was surrounded by arctic wolves. Males and females. Their attire was simple animal skins around hips for all and around breasts for females. Bracelets and necklaces of teeth hung in varying numbers around wrists and necks. Ankle chains adorned some of the females on left legs, signifying they were married or spoken for. This sight sparked an old memory and I squinted to better see their left shoulders. *Damn me,* my mind said in surprise in seeing the tribal mark of an elongated triangle piercing three circles. *They're my father's clan!* I corrected myself after a thought, *Or use to be. I'm certain my father's too old to hold that position.* A shift of my head brought to view a Dalmatian. In fact, one I'd come across before…*but where?* After a moment of rolling the scent over with new drawn-in breaths I had it. *The booth attendant at the Cat-A-Mite Museum.* This was confirmed when I saw he still wore his Museum attire. As I'd run the air over my sensory centers to identify the Dalmatian, I knew Clair hung on a pole next to him. Beyond her I smelled an owl, and if my nose wasn't playing me falsely, she was the very owl I'd worked for before this fiasco concerning Mr. Sullivan started. Mrs. Wibert. Lastly in the line of stacked-up animals, I determined by the strength of her smell, was Joann.

Even across the distance, our eyes met. She looked as bad as I felt. Her ears perked slightly upon spotting me, but fell back to a jab at her side by a female arctic wolf.

"You want a lot for such scrawny fare," a female told a city-dressed weasel.

The weasel, dressed in casual clothes, shrugged as if used to negotiations.

“Even so, that’s the price.” He gestured my way. “Besides, you’ll get a right good festival out of that last one. I’m told that black wolf bested two polar bears and two other animals before he was overcome by numbers.”

The female looked up and started my way. The weasel was a half-step behind, as was tradition for an animal of lower rank in the tribes. Behind him followed a red fox in work jeans and black-dyed cotton shirt. I squinted. *Could it be?* A long drawn whiff of the air caught his scent. *Mr. Oscar Sullivan. After all this time, here you are safe and sound?*

Beside him walked a tall arctic wolf with leather straps crisscrossing his muscular chest, signifying he was a guardian of the clan chief or wife. This had me looking at the female with more scrutiny. After a second I asked myself, *Can it be?* I narrowed my eyes to better see the female wolf over the glare off the surrounding snow and took in another long whiff as she approached. I realized who she had to be. *Sassa? And she’s wearing the head crown of Clan Mother.*

My sister Sassa came over and eyed my muscle tone with a critical eye.

“Sassa!” I tried to push the words past my tightly-bound muzzle. “It’s me!”

Sassa, of course, only heard “Mmm! Mm mm!” She briefly made eye contact before she felt the power in my leg muscles with a paw.

I shifted as best as I could to make better eye contact and kept calling her name. *Had I not dyed my skin and fur black, she’d have recognized me. Hell, Sassa, you still should by my scent!* I wanted to scream.

“He does seem to hold significant mass to give the hunters a good hunt.” Sassa stepped away and placed her paws in each other behind her back. She ignored my attempt to make myself plain and looked along the row of captives. “Something your people never deliver.” She rubbed her muzzle. “These others are worth the norm. Five seal skins each, though the jackrabbits are scrawny. The black wolf, however. Hmm…Tell you what. To encourage more such deliveries, I’ll authorize ten skins alone for the black wolf.”

“That is most kind.” The weasel bowed low. “Indeed such may entice

more animals such as he to be delivered."

Sassa opened a leather bag at her waist and counted out thirty silver tokens and gave them over to the awaiting paws of the weasel. "See the quarter master. He'll pass over the skins for these."

The weasel bowed again without words as Sassa waved him off. Two strong males and four females standing together near Joann were signaled over. "Make ready a feast tonight, for we dine on owl and dog." She clapped her paws and walked off followed by Mr. Sullivan, setting in motion the de-feathering of Mrs. Wibert, after which would come the gutting of both animals before they'd be skewered and roasted over a pit.

Flashbacks of such events came vividly back into my mind. This had been my real reason for leaving the clan—the wanton cannibalism of other sentient animals. Although plainly a normal act of nature thousands of years ago, relived in sexual play between carnivores and herbivores these days, predation was now an abomination to most of the animal kingdom. Wide-eyed, I struggled with my shackles. I bounced my body around in hopes of breaking the pole above. A jab at my side and sharp words spoken by a male wolf to cease my activities were of no use, as I knew the animals about to be killed. As I grew ever more violent in my bid for freedom, the jabs shifted to a snap of his staff on my forehead.

"I said," he growled loudly, "stop it!"

Though nowhere near full strength due to lack of food for days, I nonetheless snapped a challenging glare at the wolf.

The wolf snorted, understanding the look. "You've sprit, I'll grant you that. But your time to prove your skill and prowess is not now. If you want any chance at all, I'd suggest you quiet down."

The muffled squawk from Mrs. Wibert reached my ears. I turned my head and saw the bearers lift her off the yokes and carry her after the four females whose job it would be to strip her of every feather. Anger renewed its flame within the depths of my soul. Intelligence heightened. A look at the pole

above me told of my futility in trying to break it by bouncing up and down. With a shift of my head I eyed the wolf still watching me. *More bouncing would gain nothing.* I told my instincts to still themselves. A way out to save Mrs. Wibert and the Dalmatian had to present itself.

The vast expanse of my mind ran a wayward path throughout my experience. A hard look at shackles, pole and yoke over and over finally revealed the error in my captivity. A look at my captor showed he still watched me, but his attention was not solely on me. Precious seconds were fast eluding me. Mrs. Wibert would soon be suffering the worst fate any bird could be subjected to. I had no time for delay.

I turned my head to watch my watcher. When he looked away, I shifted my shoulders then pulled and pushed my arms. My right paw came down. The chain between right and left wrist forced my left paw up, whereby I grabbed the pole I hung from. Quick-like, I pulled myself up and took hold of the pole with my right paw. Like shimmying backward along a rope, my paws went over each other until my pads connected with the support pole and my knees bent. My guard chose that moment to look back. I locked my paws tightly to the pole I was holding and sprang into action.

His eyes grew in size as he watched my knees unbend at speed to catapult myself toward the other support pole, which freed the pole above right out of the yoke. A shift. Pads landed on the snow covered ground. Another shift in bearing and I swung the pole in righting myself. Though free of hanging suspended off the ground, I was still shackled by sixty-one centimeters, of chain links. This restricted my avenue of attack but not my velocity. The pole came down and so did my guard, though he was not out of the fight. With the upper paw and seconds to use, I tore at the muzzle and shouted with all the volume I could push through my throat.

“By right of birth, I call for a hearing!”

Unfortunately, my demand availed me nothing. I’d forgotten one very important fact. My dyed skin and fur still made me look like a black wolf, and

that made my request null and void in the eyes of an arctic clan. If they looked closely, they'd see seven millimeters, of white fur sprouting underneath the black fur. Still it made no difference, as no one was looking.

After my outburst, two wolves tackled me from behind. The one in front, once I'd steadied up my footing, took up his spear and landed a solid blow on top of my forehead.

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Chapter 12:

An Alpha's Right Scorned By Family

It was the wee hours of the morning before I stirred. That's not quite the right word. "Came to" is more to the truth. Bound from head to pads by rope to the pole about one meter off the snow-covered ground instead of hanging by chains, I rotated my head the little I could to ascertain if any guards were close at paw. Borne on the light breeze, scents aplenty made themselves known to me. Worst of these was charred wood mingled with flesh. The memory of yesterday's events told me of the unholy demise of Mrs. Wibert and the booth attendant from the Cat-A-Mite Museum. Although I'd had nothing to eat for days, bile came up into my throat, causing me to gag.

Only after I'd gained some control of my sensibilities did I remember Joann. Unable to turn my head and fearing the worst, yet hopeful, I expanded my lungs as far as the ropes would allow in a deep whiff. After three of these I caught Joann's scent mingle with her sister's. I gave thanks to the Great Maker and relaxed.

For some hours I hung, all the while expecting the cook to walk over and select Joann or Clair for breakfast or the afternoon meal, but to my relief, the winds shifted and I caught the scent of cooked fish mixed with seal. By experience from my youth I knew such a catch would last out today and possibly tomorrow.

Before noon, my ears perked up and swiveled around after I smelled Mr. Sullivan. Off to my left where Joann and Clair hung, I caught snippets of talk that mentioned rabbits. The talk grew closer until I could overhear them.

"…owe us much. The price of your release, for one thing."

“Yes, yes, I quite understand. Yet your father gave me special permission to acquire items as needed—”

“My father,” Sassa cut in, “retired three years ago.”

“As it would appear,” Mr. Sullivan admitted.

“It’s only my father’s friendship with you that has saved your fur…this time.”

“And mere words to that effect can never bestow unto you my gratitude. Yet I still dare in asking this boon from you.”

“You’re a likeable fox, Oscar. Even so, where are you going to come up with ten seal skins or the equivalent in trade to pay for them? It’s obvious by how you arrived you’re not welcome in your own home town.”

“Pshaw. Idiots. They’ve no idea the value of the discovery yet uncovered out there. Grant me two of your best trackers, along with supplies and these two jackrabbits, and I’ll share the wealth of my discovery with your clan. I guaranty the gratuity will far surpass ten seal skins.”

“If I do this, what need do you have of the jackrabbits? They’re scrawny and lack of long fur are bound to slow you down.”

“Yes, well, to that. I’d want, of course, to remain a few days to allow them time to regain proper strength. As for why I’d want them…since you availed yourself of the Dalmatian I asked for and you won’t hear me out in granting me the black wolf—or any of your clan for that matter—these two will have to do in helping me with my discovery.”

“I see.” Some moments passed, then Sassa said, “Even if I grant this boon, it’d be for naught. No one’s allowed out on the glacier. It’s forbidden. Our ancestors made a pack to hunt the glacier for any trespassers.”

“I see. I take it there’s no exception?”

“None.” Silence between the two lasted some minutes. “So, do you still wish to become indebted to us by freeing these jackrabbits?”

Oh come on, Oscar, indebt yourself, I found myself saying. I knew Joann would inform him who I was once freed. Even if he couldn’t care less about me,

at least she and her sister would escape the cooking pot. What was said next was lost to me when clan business interfered and the two walked off.

Stomach growling, thirst unabated, I found I could fall asleep once preparations for dinner came and no one took away Joann and Clair. Still, my dreams were not pleasant. I was immensely grateful when later that night Joann's paws touched my shoulder.

"Be still and quiet, love," she whispered, "I'll have these ropes off you soon." she told me later she managed to escape her own pole in the same manner I had, save she took it slowly and quietly. With the aid of her long incisors, Joann had the ropes around my head and legs off in no time. Those ropes around my torso she worked slower so I wouldn't inadvertently drop to the ground and possibly give warning of our escape.

On the ground, immensely grateful to be free of my bonds, Joann held the chains to her wrists and knelt, nuzzling my neck as she sought to meld into my body. Free of any restraints, I reciprocated her physical display of love by wrapping my arms around her and squeezing her tight. After a moment of this I relinquished my hold and pushed her away. She looked up into my eyes and quietly detached the muzzle around my head. Once that was gone, I stretched my jaw muscles a second before our lips once more met in expressive passion. Emotionally distraught, we took comfort in each other in that long kiss. Even so, I forced her to let go of my lips when I couldn't risk our dalliance any longer.

With freedom at paw, my mind ran down a maze of possibilities of what we should do. Countless of these were denied us because of our weakened physical state. The only plan that made any sense seemed idiotic. The worst of course was convincing Joann it was our best course.

"Braxton, no!" she whispered, her ears laid back behind her, voice filled with confusion and hurt.

"I know, I know." I laid a paw along her jaw and rested my forehead on hers. She was crying as I explained, "Don't you see? Once our escape is discovered, trackers will be out on our trail in no time. Even in top form, our

chances would've been fifty-fifty they'd find us before we found a populated town or city. It's best this way. If I fail, with you still bound up next to Clair, you may still leave as Mr. Sullivan's helpers."

She fell into me, her tears wet on my shoulder. "What if you're wrong… what if that fox doesn't take us? What if they won't give us to him? I'd rather risk a flight by night on the glacier and get lost with you than waiting it out here to be made into rabbit soup."

I hated doing it, but I pushed her away so I could look into her beautiful gray eyes. "Joann, you need to be with your sister. The loss of her husband is devastating her soul yet you must be with her to lend strength, for she's carrying his litter." She searched my eyes at this revelation. Sadly, I smiled and used a thumb to wipe away a tear. "I smelled her condition in her urine while we were locked away in the crates."

An ear rose. "Oh, Braxton."

"I know love, I know. Your sister has suffered much and shouldn't endure anymore trauma or she could lose the cub."

"But should your plan fail—"

"Shhh…we're in no mental or physical shape to gain our freedom in blindly taking our chances out on the ice. The only option I see which has a snowball's chance in hell to work is this." I laid my cheek on her soft hair. "Please, Joann. This way is best."

After a time, she shifted and kissed my lips. "You best be right, my darling wolf, or I swear my spirit will haunt you to your dying day."

We kissed for the last time. After that, with her help, I threaded the pole back through her restraints and hefted the pole back in place. Lastly, I retied the cloth around her mouth. I allowed my paw to linger on her face as tears ran out of both our eyes before I wiped away the wetness, set my shoulders back and put my mind on to the task at paw.

For whatever reason, no guard was posted nearby. In my father's day, such laxity would never be allowed. As Sassa had won out in being clan mother

and was in charge of the prisoners, I couldn't believe she felt guards were irrelevant. That her husband went along with this, made no sense. Regardless of the reason, I wasn't about to argue the absence of guards, as I could use all the luck I could get.

My nose up in the air, I took great lungs full of breaths and closed my eyes. I separated out hundreds of scents with the best inheritance my parents could have bestowed unto me, my sense of smell. Thus I stood facing the night breeze and sought out Sassa, as it was her husband I had to confront. Seconds passed and I caught no fresh scent. I turned perpendicular to the breeze and padded slowly up to a fence by the first canvas tent. Here I caught the even breathing of the tent's occupant. A look around still showed the night peaceful. Nose in the air, I repeated the use of my talent. Though my sensory input said she wasn't along this path, I did pick up Mr. Sullivan's scent. As a guest, by tradition, he should be settled near the center of the encampment. This was for his protection as well as a deterrent to go wondering off. Discovering his scent was significant, in that the chieftain's tent would also be near the center for some of the same reasons. Thus narrowing in on him would by default bring me closer to my sister, as she would be sharing her tent with her husband, the clan's chieftain.

I glanced up on the half-moon glowing brightly in the heavens overhead, and for the first time gave thanks for my dye job. As a black wolf, if I kept to the shadows, I could in theory make my way undetected through the camp. My only downfall would be my scent. Unfamiliar as it would be to those born after I left, it alone would not raise a hue and cry. Joann's scent around my clothes and fur, however, might bring about an investigation by a curious wolf or a night sentry. Regardless of my inability to restrain myself from holding her moments ago, I'd still have taken the risk had I considered this very problem. With regrets firmly subdued, I eyed places of cover or darkness and inched step by step into the den of wolves. Halfway into the sleeping clan of animals, imagine my surprise when Mr. Sullivan's scent grew stronger on the breeze. Puzzled why that would be in

such a short span of breaths, I stopped behind two stacked crates by a tent and sought to reason it out when Oscar rounded the crate and stepped on my left pad.

His total surprise would have awakened the entire camp had I not taken that second of startlement to lock his muzzle with my paw while the other arm pulled his body into mine. Briefly he sought to struggle. This ceased when I whispered in his ear.

“Make a noise and I break your neck.” This I emphasize when my arm came up under his chin and I squeezed. Oscar froze, if you can call shaking in fear frozen. “In only whisper tones, tell me why you’re sneaking around in the middle of the night?” Without revealing who I am, I slowly released my fingers around his muzzle though I didn’t take my paw away.

His throat worked. “You’re not going to call the guards?”

“Who says I’m not one. Now tell me.”

He swallowed. “Truthfully?”

I pressed my forearm up on his throat.

“Okay, okay. Um, I thought to avail myself of the two jackrabbits and head on out onto the glacier.”

“You jest?” I asked in astonishment. Such a reckless venture would find them all captured or at the very least Joann and Clair frozen to death within the span of a week, if they somehow avoided the trackers that long.

“Sorry, but it’s the truth.”

“Why would you risk the wrath of the clan?”

“Have you never had a dream so close at paw you could taste it, yet it was denied you?”

“Only recently,” I admitted, for I was risking everything in the belief I could persuade my sister’s husband to spare Joann and Clair’s lives.

“Then you can understand my meaning. Out there on the ice is the answer to all my questions. To all our questions, for that matter.” He swallowed. “Have you ever questioned why only certain animals evolved in intelligence? Or why the apes all died out around the time you and I got off our paws and stood

up on our pads?”

For a moment I stood considering. Although such questions were never taught in schools or passed down from parents to cubs, I sometimes wondered the same things, well, at least on Joann’s account. Why did her ancestors break off onto different paths where one line evolved into my beautiful Joann and others remained as small simple animals without advanced intelligence?

“Such questions have plagued animal kind for centuries.” Oscar interrupted my thought process. “That’s why I was bargaining with your clan mother for those two jackrabbits. Although I’d rather have a team of archeologists at my side, I’m afraid desperation is driving me to get help where I can and take my chances.” He swallowed. “I’d not have considered this course of action were it not for your clan mother denying me access to the glacier.”

“There are other reasons you were denied, fox,” I decided to remind him. “Your fur is not meant to keep out the cold as ours is. As for the rabbits, with their short fur, without proper clothes they’ll most likely freeze to death inside a week.”

“You obviously haven’t experienced the drive of an earth-shattering discovery when a lifelong quest is within reach.”

“I thought your quest was to unearth proof apes could fly?” I let slip.

“In truth it is,” he answered without question. “But what if I were to tell you I’ve translated enough apes’ hieroglyphs to believe my life-long quest and the discovery of our evolution can both be found out there? I had documented poof of such until it was taken away from me by my nephew. Yet even with that setback and his blocking my rightful assets to hire a team of daring archeologists, I’m here, only days away from the biggest discovery animal kind has ever found, only to be blocked once more by your clan mother and chieftain.”

As he took a breath, it dawned on me I was wasting time.

He continued. “You know…if you’d consider helping me, I could promise you’d be rich beyond your wildest dreams inside a month’s time.” Oscar

quivered, almost as if he had an orgasm just thinking about it. He licked his lip. “If you’d help me, I’ve no problem in sharing. That is, if you’ll escort the three of us out onto the ice?”

I considered his words but shook them off as too chancy. *Nothing has changed since I denied Joann our escape in heading out on the glacier. In fact, the presence of the fox would be more detrimental in our chances to stay free as they know better his scent over ours.*

He coughed, waiting out my decision. A moment more and an old custom came to light in my mind. One that would mean, if I decided to go this route, I had the clan by the balls.

“See me to the chieftain’s tent and I’ll see a pair of trackers are made available to you.”

“Why would you need me to see you to…” He got a better look at my arm and I can only reason he connected that the darkness was not all caused by the night. “You’re that black wolf that was tied up with the jackrabbits!”

“In point of fact, I’m an arctic wolf. More specifically, the son of Elov Snow,” I corrected him.

Oscar considered this and brightened. “B..By…Byrghir? You’re Byrghir Snow? But, but you died years ago.”

“That may be the story given out. Truth is I ran away. Now, however, I’m back. Although I’ve no wish to confront my family, present circumstances make it a priority of mine.”

“Circumstances?” Oscar apparently was a bright red fox. “The, uh, Jackrabbits?”

“My fiancée and her sister,” I admitted, though I didn’t know why I was telling him.

Oscar nodded. “Hence your reluctance to chance their trek out on the ice.” He swallowed easier as I let up some. “Forgive me, Byrghir—”

“Braxton,” I corrected.

“Um?”

“I changed my first name to Braxton.”

“Ah, um, sorry. But if I may ask, how are you going to give me a pair of trackers? I thought such could only be on orders from the chieftain—Oh, honestly,” His tone turned unbelieving. “You’re not going to challenge your own sister?”

“My sister, no. Her husband. If matters go that far I’ve no choice, if I’m to save Joann and Clair.”

“But Sassa’s husband is not…Uh oh, you don’t know, do you?” Oscar sounded astonished.

“Know what?” I allowed Oscar to step out of my grasp and turn to face me.

Oscar looked around us before he told me, “Sassa’s husband isn’t chieftain.”

“Excuse me? What are you on about? Sassa’s husband has to be chieftain. Sassa’s clearly performing the clan mother’s roll, dealing with finances and daily meals.” It dawned on me after I said this that there were exceptions. If the chieftain chose a wife who was incapable of performing such duties another could be chosen.

“Oh, Sassa is clan mother, you’re right about that.” Oscar bobbed his head with a hint of anticipation coloring his tone of voice. “But it’s your other sister, Lovisa, who claimed the title of clan chieftain.”

Briefly I stared at him. “Say what?”

“Lovisa Snow is clan chieftain.”

My ears fell back. “That’s not possible.”

“Be that as it may, she is.” Although I couldn’t see his visual antics to give over clues to his thoughts, his voice did relay some details of his mind’s travels. “So do you still wish to face her, or take your chances out on the ice with me?”

What circumstances prevailed to allow my sister, Lovisa to claim clan leader were beyond my mind to grasp. Unless…*No, the clan would never allow*

it. Though Lovisa had always fought to prove she was as good as any male, she couldn't have bested all the males and married Sassa to pick up the title. No, wait… I backed up my thoughts. *Oscar said Sassa's husband wasn't chieftain.* I rubbed my muzzle and looked off in the direction he came from. *This is all too much to grasp. Tradition would never allow Lovisa to take up the role no matter how many wolves she managed to defeat. I'll have to face the situation to reason it out.* To Oscar, I said, "I've no choice, no matter who's chieftain." I looked Oscar in the eyes and told him, "Now take me to the clan leader's tent."

Oscar considered his choices. Choices even I could work out in my bewildered mind. If I beat whoever was chief, he'd get his trackers. If I lost, he could still barter for Joann and Clair, if he somehow gained access to the glacier. Either way, his wish to follow his dream could possibly be solved. "As you wish." He shrugged.

I nodded and he gestured.

"It's this way, if you please."

Of course Oscar could make a run for it, calling out for help. But archeology wasn't solely digging up the past. It meant the study of nature. This was important for putting artifacts in perspective. Thus observing what happened to me in my dilemma would be a windfall in his collective memory of what happened to an alpha male returning to his clan.

Oscar led me past ten more tents before we came to an open circle, about forty meters distance across, at a guess. Under the glow of the half-moon above, I saw in the center two large tents where only one should stand.

Oscar gestured. "Sassa's tent is on the right. Lovisa's tent is on the left."

Oscar was so frank in who resided in which tent, I looked at him. "You're not playing me for a fool, are you?"

"No." Oscar elaborated, "After besting all the females in order to claim clan mother, Lovisa rejected the title and demanded to fight the males for dominance of the clan. When she proved she could overpower two of the weaker males without showing any sign of sweat, your father allowed it. Fascinating

case here. Females are inherently the weaker sex, yet your sister found ways to best all the top males in your clan. With much deliberation and a conference with the elders, your father put aside tradition and gave her the leadership—but only until an Alpha Male could best her. So like any Alpha Male, she over see's all the male affairs." Oscar looked up at me. "With the Alpha Female slot still open, your sister Sassa took on the females and trounced them good. Thus she's undisputed Alpha Female and takes care of all the administrative work, like your mother did." Oscar rubbed his chin. "Of course with you here, things should go back to normal. That is, when you best your sister Lovisa and take on a proper wife."

My ears laid back and my tail dropped. I knew having seen my sister Sassa that even in my weaker state I could best her. But Lovisa I hadn't yet seen.

So occupied was I that I didn't catch sight of the wolf who'd stepped out of his tent some paces away, until…

"What the hell? Alarm, Alarm!" the wolf cried out and ducked back inside his tent only to reemerged with a spear in paw. He ran up before us, menacing.

With my presence advertised throughout the camp, I took one step away from Oscar and called out, "Lovisa. Sassa. Your older brother has come home!"

Spears aplenty surround us both. Only when we were encircled did my sisters emerge. What a contrast the pair of them made. Sassa was as before, dressed in leather skins around waist and breasts. Around her neck and wrists she wore teeth necklace and bracelets. Each tooth signified a verifiable kill since she started hunting. Above her brow, resting on her green-tinted, shoulder-length hair, a silver circlet signified her status as Alpha female. On her left ankle, as I remembered seeing it, was a length of chain that told all she'd taken a husband. He stepped out and stood behind her.

My eyes glided over to Lovisa, who came to a stop a step out from her sister. Although obviously my sister, she was more male in stature. Her physique was muscular, rivaling countless male animals I'd seen in the city and most that I

could see around me and Oscar. Around her neck and wrists she wore an impressive array of teeth, all told tripling the count of her sister's. She wore no ankle bracelet of marriage and no hide on her upper body to cover her athletic-sized breasts. As for hair, hers was cut as a hunter's, short and dyed red under her Chieftain's circlet of silver. In her right paw she held a spear while a long ivory knife adorned her left hip.

Lovisa planted her spear. Her voice when she spoke held strength. "Our brother is dead, stranger." She pointed the spear tip and gestured at Oscar and me. "As the pair of you will be."

My ears laid back and I tucked my tail between my legs. "Not without a fight," I snapped. "As Alpha male and son of Elov Snow, I challenge you for ownership of the clan!"

"Our brother might have given challenge if he didn't tuck tail and run away from his responsibilities many years ago. But now, however, wherever he is, he's long dead to this clan. Regardless of these facts, you're no arctic wolf and therefore have no rights save to die as I choose!"

I gestured down the length of my chest. "Don't let this black dye fool you, sister. I am an arctic wolf, and most certainly your brother!" I stood with shoulders back and tail raised in arrogance. "My name," I proclaimed loud and clear so the latecomers could plainly hear, "Is Byrghir Snow, son of Elov Snow, and by law, as an Alpha Male, I have the right to challenge."

"Byrghir?" a recognizable voice asked in question. "Byrghir?" My mother pushed her way through the crowd of confused bystanders and spear holders. "Is that really you?"

Though aged, she held the posture of a female half her age and padded right up to me to take a big whiff. Lovisa and Sassa stood where they were. Silent, giving all due respect to our mother.

I looked down into the black eyes of my mother and saw the instant she knew the truth.

Instead of giving over a greeting to a long lost son, she snarled, showing

her canines, and slapped my muzzle with all the force she could muster. “How dare you show up now!” She spat, causing me to blanch under her hate. “My husband is dead these three long years because of you! Had you taken your rightful place as ordained by birthright, he’d be by my side in comfortable retirement. But no, you deserted your responsibilities, which left him no choice but to remain Alpha Wolf ten years longer than he should have.” She spat on the ground. “By the Great Maker, I curse the day I pushed you out of my body.” She waved at my sisters, but indicated Lovisa with her next words. “There is my true son.” She lowered her head, and said in a lower tone, “Should have been my true son.” She turned away, but halfway around she looked up at me one last time and said, “You should have been stillborn.”

Her sentiment hurt. In truth she was right that Lovisa should have been male; from the very first sup of my mother’s breast milk, she had fought me like any male. Regardless of my feeling toward my family, Joann and Clair’s lives depended on my ability to stand up to them and take my rightful place. With this in mind, I squared my shoulders and shouted out, “I am Byrghir Snow, an—”

“Enough!” Lovisa raised her voice over mine. “Though your scent is of my dead brother, your fur says plainly you’re but a common black wolf.” She stepped further into the circle and raised her spear. “As Alpha Male, I make this declaration. We’ll let the barren glacier reveal who you truly are. If you really are our brother, then you’ll return as a true arctic wolf after being out in its grasp for the twenty-day run. If not?” She let the obvious answer lay thick in the air.

The twenty-day run surprised me. All wolves who wished to prove their adulthood subjected themselves to such a risky run in winter, out on the glacier. I knew, for I’d done it. What bothered me was that she knows this. Something else was going on. “What of my family?” I called out before she could turn her back on me.

“You’ve no family here,” Lovisa said plainly.

“Maybe not among this clan, but my fiancée and her sister are present and languish as your captives.”

Before Lovisa waved that aside, having not seen the prisoners, Sassa, though astonished by what I'd said, called her name and stepped up to whisper in her ear.

"Jackrabbits?" I heard Lovisa question in disbelief. Lovisa looked off in the direction of the captives. Her ears perked up and she started laughing. Her change in temperament startled me while easing away the tension of the gathered clan. "By the Great Maker, it's a fitting retribution." She laughed. Her eyes fell on me and her tone turned harsh. "Untie the jackrabbits and house them in the guest tent with the fox." She looked daggers at me. "If you're not back by the twentieth morning, by noon we'll be feasting on their bones."

"Hold, sister!" I called out, knowing I was in no shape to face the glacier at present. "Before I take my run, I'll need some days to bulk up."

"Silence!" Lovisa shouted. "You claim to be an Alpha. Any Alpha worth their mettle can do such a run even in your shape three seasons out of the year and have hours to spare. You go at dawn. They'll be plenty of game to satisfy your hunger in the path of your run." I saw a thought cross her eyes and she smiled evilly. "But then again I'm being too hasty. If you feel yourself too famished to start the trail tomorrow morning, then by all means stay and dine on jackrabbit, come the noon meal." Lovisa laughed, and turned for her tent.

As hungry as I was, I bit my tongue to keep from arguing. Lovisa was not to be trifled with. Not until I could confront her as an Alpha male, and for the moment she was having no part of that. At least not until I proved myself. I had no wish to confront her; however, circumstances prohibited any recourse if I were to save Joann and Clair. My problem was my weakened state. The run was laid out to push the endurance of a young cub who sought to become an adult. A young adult could conceivably push him or herself and make it back in eighteen days. I, on the other paw, was near on forty, and had spent the last twenty-five years becoming city-soft.

Oscar tentatively raised a paw before Lovisa made her tent. "Beg pardon, Ms. Snow?"

Sassa had turned and put her arm around her husband. To Oscar's voice, she and Lovisa both turned as one, though clearly he wished to speak with Lovisa.

Oscar glanced at me as I watched him. He experimented in easing past me and on up to the line of spear holders. The one he stopped before looked at Lovisa. Sassa took Lovisa's moment of pause and whispered in her ear. Lovisa rolled her eyes but nodded and waved him closer. Oscar watched the spear lower before he eased past.

"Beg pardon, Ms. Snow." He looked at Sassa. "Mrs. Snow." Oscar was no dummy; after giving both their due, he directed his words to Lovisa. "It occurs to me that while your brother—"

"Alleged brother," Lovisa snapped.

Oscar's posture showed contriteness. "Beg pardon, alleged brother." Oscar squirmed under her heated stare but continued with his request. "As I would like to examine the second marker the wolf is to reach in eleven days, might I accompany the wolf you send to the stone face so I could look it over while waiting out the wolf's arrival? I promise, I'll do nothing but take pictures of the edifice."

Lovisa raised an eyebrow and glanced at Sassa. *At least my sister is no tyrant.* I hoped. She crooked a finger to Sassa to come near without her spouse and they both whispered quietly for a few heartbeats. Her gaze drifted to me. Her eyes narrowed and more words were spoken. Briefly Sassa's features looked torn about something; her ears dropped and her tail lowered. Lovisa's next words hit the mark and Sassa's ears flattened. Her lips curled back and she glanced my way before she faced her sister and nodded.

This, I conceived, didn't bode well for me.

Lovisa looked at Oscar. "Clan laws forbid strangers to be allowed out on the ice. With that said, you are not wholly a stranger. Father made you an honorary guest of our clan. For this reason alone, I will grant you this boon."

Oscar's whole body went taut a second before he trembled with

excitement.

"However, my wolves are not pack animals and I wish not to grant that wolf an easy mark once he makes that checkpoint. So you my go, but you will use the jackrabbits to carry your supplies." Lovisa eyed me a second, daring me to say otherwise before she turned for her tent.

Momentarily, as her angry eyes looked at me, I thought to argue her decision. Joann and Clair were not dressed for the weather out here, nor would their light layer of fur stand them any chance to survive very long, and I doubted they'd be supplied with proper skins to ward off the cold. I then considered the proximity of the stone edifice. *It's possible,* I considered, my mind counting the kilometers. *I could best the wolf awaiting my arrival and have at least a six-day head start to get us off the glacier before the clan knows we've fled. That is, if I'm strong enough.*

Sassa motioned Oscar to follow her to the stockade while my mind sped on.

The decision will be mine to make at the time. It'll be chancy at best. But should I fight him and win, I should be able to keep them alive long enough to walk off the ice somewhere other than near this clan. All I'd need do is keep track of the sun.

I felt a pinprick on my arm.

"All right, all right, I'm going," I grumbled, and started off for the tent where a wolf would await the dawn to begin the long run.

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As it had been the middle of the night before I'd faced my sisters, dawn came far too quickly. For most cubs, the night was the first test. The hours spent alone gave the cub a chance to reflect on his or her resolve. Without comfort of blanket, fur-skin pillow, pottery jug of water or bucket for night waste, the cub would understand a small part of what they were about to do. For me, the few

hours unable to sleep left me reasoning with my empty stomach that something would find its way down there by day's end.

The guard who stood at the tent flap awoke from a light doze when I cinched up my black pants one more notch and stepped out to look tall and arrogant in the morning mist. He looked me over. He cast his eyes around to find that no one as yet had acknowledged the lightening of the sky in the distance.

He licked his lips. "If you're truly Byrghir Snow, I wish you all the luck in the world." From the pocket of his brown pants, he covertly slid out two sticks of jerky and passed them to me. "Regardless of who you are, come back and best that bitch. This clan has been humiliated long enough."

I eyed him a moment to see if this were some kind of test Lovisa might have thought up. He looked sincere enough, as I reasoned it out, but nothing came to mind. I gave him a curt nod.

Jerky in paw, I wanted to cram them both down my gullet. However, I mustn't have the smell on my breath before I left the clan. Lovisa would smell it and possibly add another condition to my test. The fact I had no intention of finishing the test didn't matter whatsoever. However, a new condition added to the test might put a wrinkle in my plans that I'd spent some time thinking out during my hours in the tent.

My guard customarily gave me a ladle of cold water before he escorted me out to the edge of camp. There I waited upon the sun to clear the far horizon, all the while I sought to think of anything other than the jerky in my pocket.

Not long into my wait, Lovisa and Sassa arrived. Tall and proud in stature they both barely took notice of me. Sassa, as clan mother, planted her staff beside her a few meters in front of me. This was significant, for when the sun's rays touched the top of the staff, it signaled the beginning of the run. It also, in twenty days, signaled the end of the run in the same manner when the last light of day no longer touched it.

Wolves of both sexes now appeared out of the morning mist to form a semi-circle around me. Looking around, in a few eyes I caught a glint of hope

hiding within. A hope a male would reclaim the chieftain's spot. *A bad sign.* It meant the clan was not in harmony, and such a condition meant a civil war could erupt. It also meant my sisters could be killed or at the very worst cast out of the clan if things didn't change. *Ergo, the guard's wish for me to succeed is really a cry for help.* This brought to mind Mrs. Yenin's warning. *Your father's clan is coming to an impasse. Drop what you're doing and go back home.*

Lovisa pulled her hunting knife out of her hip strap. She raised her arm up high and angled the blade. In seconds the glint of the morning rays shone around those gathered. She lowered the blade. "Twenty days, wolf," she said clearly. Against custom, she walked up and whispered in my ear, "I will see you dead should you attempt to return, brother." She emphasized *brother* with distaste. "If you want to live, I suggest you forget about the jackrabbits once clear of my clan, and head east for two days then south to clear the glacier." Lovisa tapped me on the chest with her hunting knife, her intent made very clear when the sharp tip separated a couple of layers of skin. After this she backed up, replaced her blade, took up her position next to Sassa, and folded her arms.

Sassa made no attempt at eye contact. She looked up at her sister, then back upon her staff, and awaited the light to touch its top.

For myself, Lovisa's ultimatum had my lips curl back in a snarl. The Alpha in me wanted ever so much to stand over her body and hear her plead for her life. My intelligence, however, knew the point was moot. I did plan to leave, but not without my fiancée and her sister.

Lovisa's lips curled back as well. We locked eyes. The animal in me wanted to be let out of his cage again. As starved as I was, once out on the ice, I just might do that, but not yet. *No, not yet.*

I swung my eyes around for a glimpse of Joann, knowing she wouldn't be permitted out of Mr. Sullivan's tent until I was well out of sight. Still, I could hope. One last look at Lovisa, whose upturned lip and cold blue eyes held a touch of a smile, gave me my only warning that somewhere along my run something untoward would befall me. If I hadn't been so famished, if my animal

had been silent, if Joann and Clair's welfare wasn't still on my mind, I might have been a little more wary along the run. Suffice to say, they were on my mind, so I took no notice of that blaringly obvious second of warning.

Being that my mother wasn't present, my eyes looked lastly on my sister, Sassa, who gave no apparent recognition to suggest we were remotely related.

Fair enough… a voice growled in the back of my mind. *Joann and I will start our own dynasty.* I licked my lips. The sun's light touched Sassa's staff and I was off, leaving behind forever a life I never wanted any part of now or ever again.

My starting pace was not a fast one. Though time would be a factor, conserving energy was paramount. Five long agonizing minutes into my run I dared tear into the jerky, which in retrospect I should have left alone, for the only good it did was set afire my hunger. Gnashing at its cage in the primal corner of my soul, my animal went wild.

The realm of the ice pack required skill and intelligence to survive. My animal held neither. Yet to call it useless would be a grave mistake. Instincts along with sensory receptors, in some cases, could triple. Yet weak as I was, if I let go, there was no telling when I might regain control. So I struggled on all that day and into the night battling myself, my animal and my hunger. In the long run, overtaxed, I let slip my hold and my animal escaped. Instincts and the will to live took control. Seconds or days could've passed without my intelligence knowing. Only sating my hunger after digging out a hare's warren allowed its return.

I lay in a heap on churned-up ice frozen earth, my breath hot and heavy in the cold air. I was exhausted. Dangerously so, as the temperature dropped. Though breathing through my mouth to rush air back into my body, my nose told me of the carnage my animal dealt out to quash my hunger. Nauseated with myself, I was very glad of the dark, for it hid the spray of blood I knew would be all around myself and the ground. Still, sensibilities aside, it would be foolish to drag myself away from the hole I'd made in digging the rabbits out.

Pragmatically, I crawled into its farthest point and curled up into a ball to conserve warmth and fell asleep.

It took the sun a couple of hours before its warming rays could best the edges of the earth mound around the hole I slept in. Minutes more fell into the past before the rays filtered through my fluffed out tail and found my eyelids.

A great yawn took my mouth and jaws, which spread as wide as they could go. Razor sharp teeth glistened briefly before I was able to close my muzzle and blink my eyes. A need to stretch the whole of my limbs was followed by a record-setting cramp in both legs. I howled and scrambled to crawl out of the hole so I could stretch out my legs to fight off the cramping. In so doing the nerve ending in my fingernails complained fiercely. Water ran from my eyes to sounds of distress leaving my throat. At last able to open them to the vanishing cramp, I discovered I'd ripped out several nails in my animal's lust to gorge on the red meat that had quivered in fright deep within the burrow I emerged from.

Hunger's not a stranger to me, so why the slip? I stood and surveyed my surroundings. *I should have been able to keep my animal caged.* Out on the ice, the scenery changed with the turn of the seasons. Unless I found a familiar landmark, I could wander the glacier for kilometers out of my way. Although not detrimental to me, the delay in making my second appointed landmark could result in Joann and Clair's death. That thought alone had me abandoned the first landmark, where I was supposed to break off a limb from a lone birch tree that had made its home in that desolate spot long ago. My only problem in doing so was the five-day run to the hairless ape wall. The thing only rose out of the ice pack four meters at the highest temperatures in the year. This left very little for the eyes to see at a great distance.

Part of the purpose of the run was to learn the glacier and how to mark the sun from where you were. Landmarks were the key to this, of course. The first part of the run had a wolf angling out from the clan at about thirty degrees from the morning sun. Once at the tree, the wolf would wait until morning and

angle away from the tree at a hundred and thirty degrees from the rising sun. This was by the winter sun. Other seasons required a wolf to readjust for the tilting of the world. Having not made the birch tree, I could only guess on the path I took.

A glance up at the sun told what direction I needed to run in winter, had I made the tree. *How do I proceed?* I asked myself. *Did I pass the tree or am I short?* I laid back my ears in anger at myself. *Come on, wolf, think!* I cast my arms around myself and turned in a circle studying the land. *My animal would not have held to my course. Food was its only goal. So where am I?* I put my nose into the air and took deep breaths. Airborne particles descended my nasal cavity and hit my olfactory. As the wind was coming from the east, I sought to glean any scent of the birch tree or even the clan encampment, but found none.

"Damn…this is impossible. Had I time to spare…" But of course I had none. Roaming to smell or find a landmark was out of the question. "Best guess then." Intelligence went to work. "The clan would not have wiped out the snowshoe hares I fell on last night, so food would be present to aid a young cub on the run. This could mean I'm in between the clan and the birch tree." I eyed the sun. "A wolf is to angle one hundred and thirty degrees from the sun at the birch tree. Given I haven't made the tree, my course would be steeper, say one hundred ten degrees."

After a brief wash down with ice from a snow bank, I set out at a kilometer-eating jog. My path was chancy. *Six days to the hairless ape wall from the clan encampment. Five days from the birch tree. Giving myself two days for my animal being in control, I still may make it in five days, which would put me there before the clan arrives.*

Survival on the glacier meant knowing where you were, thus every quarter shift of the sun, I stopped and put my nose to good use. Not until my third morning out after my intelligence held rein did I catch a whiff of the birch tree.

"Finally…" I huffed in some relief. "Now if I only choose my path

correctly.” I stuck my nose in the air. “Let’s see, the tree would still hold the scent of growth.” I took another deep whiff. The wind still came out of the east and held strength today. Within the currents I smelled the air was heavy with water. “A storm’s coming. Oh, by the Great Maker no. Not now.” I cast my eyes east as the sun began to make its appearance and saw the red coloring among dark clouds. “Red sky in morning, old wolf take warning,” I mumbled, remembering the wise knowledge of our ancestors. “It’ll be on me soon.” Though the temperatures held in the high seventies and low fifties this time of year, the glacier always lowered the temperature. “I’ll possibly be facing freezing rain. Not good.” I looked around. “Best dig into a snow drift for cover.” I set my course and kept an eye out. “Damn, more time wasted.”

The clouds overtook me. Soon small droplets fell from the dark sky. *Not yet freezing. Still getting my fur soaked will take away its ability to keep me warm.* During the warmer months, snow drifts able to give shelter were few. Thus I was near soaked by the time I found one. The wind picked up and howled like a lone wolf over the drift. Down inside the snow bank, as the day passed, I heard the rainfall increase in intensity. With nothing I could do but wait it out, I closed my eyes and suffered under bad dreams. Joann skewered over a fire pit. Joann spread eagle between two poles and skinned alive. The scenarios were many and her screams loud in my ears.

The screams took on a sudden change in pitch. Deeper, as if from a larger throat. Something heavy caved in my hole. A familiar bellow worked past the layers of snow and my dream-filled mind. I startled awake. My mind screamed, *Polar bear!*

The bear’s jaws found my right leg and ripped me out of the snow drift. I yelled, frightened and airborne. I landed in a heap and scrambled until I could get my pads under me. Toenails dug deep in solid water left behind by the storm, and without direction I ran for my life.

Moments passed. My ears picked up the unmistakable crunch of frozen ice as it gave out under six hundred kg of maddened bear. As the sudden fright

passed, my leg began screaming obscenities. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I forced my legs to keep my mad dash going. At last able to slow, I rubbed at tears flowing from my eyes, yet I couldn't stop. The hungry polar bear may have stopped the chase, but should I cease in my travels he would gain expectations of having crippled his meal and retake up the hunt. Thus I had to keep walking but it was time to reorient my travels.

Long did I limp before I felt significantly safe enough to halt my progress and see to my legs. Kneeling carefully, I found my right calf received several puncture wounds from the bear's teeth. The flesh was all tender and weeping blood. The left leg, fortunately, only sustained minor scratches and some loss of fur from his claws when he collapsed the drift on top of me. Relatively whole, I stripped out of my pants. Using teeth and claws, I ripped runners down the legs to make up wrapping for the wounds. Once these were tied around the worst of the wounds, I donned what remained of my pants and set off jogging at a slow limp.

By my dead reckoning it was eleven in the morning. Which meant I'd lost a whole day to the storm. *How many does that make it now?* I shook my head trying to rattle the numbers into place. *Too many…* I told myself, knowing my wounded leg reduced my chances of success.

Because of the time of year I had plenty of light to guide my limping steps, for the sun only allowed the dark of night to touch our land for a mere hour of time. In a few more days the sun wouldn't even allow that for the span of two months.

I just wish I knew how long my animal held control. With that knowledge I could determine how long of a rest I could take once I spot the stone landmark before I set upon the wolves guarding Joann and Clair.

Those thoughts barely finished swimming up in my consciousness when my toes collided with an immoveable object below the ice-capped hill, which gave out to my weight. First there was pain as toes and leg bone collided. Next came the ice pack, which I hit face first. I broke through into a hole beneath the

ice. A fast tumble, a howl from my throat, and I landed in ice water. Startled and shocked into full presence of mind, I sought to escape the water in the dark.

Soaked to the skin yet again, I stood up in the light chilly wind and wrapped my arms around myself as I glared down in the hole. *Damn, I'll need to dry out or freeze.* Slowly I made out part of the wall landmark the hairless apes made long ago buried in the snow. "Uh oh…" was all I got out before a white blur of figures took me off my pads. Surprise, combined with pain, fatigue and a bad case of the shivers, made any attempt on my part to combat the well-fed and rested wolves futile.

Trussed-up like a birthday pig for the fire pit, I was knocked unconscious for easer transport. When I came to, it was by prodding to my side by a slat of wood broken off a crate.

"Wakey-wakey," a condescending voice requested.

"Hmmm…" I sought to open my eyes.

The same slat of wood slapped my muzzle. "Wake up!"

"Ow!" My complaint, though loud in my ears, had a hard time leaving my throat. My muzzle had been tied shut.

"There, that's better." The wolf who stood before me cleared his throat. "Now that I have your attention, let me introduce myself. I'm Pyrois Dwyre, husband to Sassa Snow, presumably your sister." My brother in-law did a formal bow. "I'm sure you're confused and disorientated, which is fine by me. However, my lovely Sassa asked that I inform you of a few things."

Fully awake, I found Joann and Clair chained up on the hairless apes' ancient wall on either side of me. Worse yet, we were all chained up on the section the clan used to punish those who disobeyed clan laws. Punishment by a death sentence.

Pyrois eyed the sun, which hung in the sky at a level that said I'd been out for an hour or more. "Because Lovisa bested those opposing her, your father declared her clan leader by the law. Because of this, Sassa easily stepped in as mother of the clan. However, should you win out in your bid to reclaim the clan,

she would have to step down as clan mother once you take a wife. She and I are opposed to that."

But I don't want to be clan leader! I tried to tell him, save the rope around my muzzle made my words come out as if I were mumbling. "Mm m mm mo me mmummemmmr!"

"Save your breath, Byrghir. Trying to appeal to my conscience will avail you nothing."

"Mmf mum mot my maa!" *Uh, shit, he'll never understand me.* In desperation I turned my head and tried to dislodge the rope by rubbing it on my arm. The act, though useless, did cause him to hit me yet again with the slat of wood.

"Pay attention, Byrghir…" Slap. "I'm trying to be respectful. The least you can do is hear me out." Pyrois cleared his throat and resettled his shoulder belt. "As Elov Snow's son, regardless of your abandonment of the clan, you deserve a proper burial. However, no reasonable way could be contrived that didn't involve Lovisa having to kill you in battle. Although she is certain she could do so, there was that minute possibility you'd do her harm, for which she'd have to step down as leader." Pyrois poked me with the slat of wood. "I thought to honor you by spiking your water with loco weed the morning of your run. I figured after some kilometers out on the glacier the drug would take over your mind and you'd disappear out on the ice where you'd run afoul of a polar bear, or at the very least another clan, in time. This would have guaranteed you a proper death."

My ears perked up. *So that's why my animal escaped so easily. Had I not been starving, I could very well have done as he planned.*

Pyrois noted my raised ears but mistook the reason. "I appreciate that you understand me. Sadly, I must have put too little in the water, that or Lovisa was right in her thoughts an Alpha could fight off the effects. Regardless, she set me a task to await you at the second marker and make certain you failed to continue." Pyrois began to pace. "Of course, her orders were to kill you on sight.

But I will admit it rankles my fiber to do so." He turned back to me. "You're my wife's brother, and regardless of your reasons for abandoning the clan, you're now family. Still I can't let you live, so this is my only alternative."

Pyrois turned to the other wolf with him. "Lykaon, pull that crate of meat over and cast it out under their pads."

"Right, cousin."

While Lykaon did as asked, Pyrois told me. "As you know, polar bears are known to have a good sense of smell. Though frozen, the meat below your pads should be enough to attract the bears." When the crate was emptied, Pyrois looked me in the eyes. "I'd free your muzzle to give you a chance to get a bite out of the bears if I was certain you'd keep quiet until they arrive." Pyrois shrugged, signaled Lykaon, and the pair of them set out at a leisurely jog.

Once the two were well on their way, I looked more closely at Joann and Clair. Though both looked well fed, both held a look of fatigue. This afforded me a clue they'd been hanging on the cold wall for more than a day, perhaps two. Joann's sad eyes and my own met. While my muzzle could easily be tied shut with rope, a white-tail jackrabbit's could not, so instead a cloth had been shoved in her mouth and another tied around her head to keep it in place. I lowered my ears and whimpered; it was all I could do to say how very sorry I was. She lowered her head and nodded understanding. She looked down at the meat below her pads. Her head raised so her eyes could see the crate some centimeters away. After which she looked out onto the ice pack. I followed her eyes in looking at each item her gaze passed over. If a polar bear did come before she succumbed to the cold weather, he or she would tear into us without question. It'd be a horrible way to die and torture to my soul to see Joann torn asunder. But it was the law of the ice pack. Eat or be eaten. Meat was protein and to live on the ice you needed a lot of it.

With the knowledge I'd outlast Joann and Clair should no bear show up, I sagged within my thoughts, despondent. Surly a polar bear would come along and finish the torture started a day or so back. Still I couldn't help but turn my

head and look at Clair with guilty eyes, only to have my guilt deepen upon seeing she'd already given up hope. A movement beyond Clair caught my watering eyes.

Oscar? Of all animals to see chained up here, I'd never had thought of him. From what I'd gathered he was a guest of the clan, and that meant the clan was honor bound to protect him. *This goes beyond simple dishonor. This means the clan holds no traditions as sacred.* Which in my mind meant the clan was going rogue. I looked at his face and saw he looked mad as hell. *Hell, if he still held the vocal cords of his ancestors, I do believe he would've barked at the receding backs of the wolves in the distance.*

After a little struggle, Oscar managed to loosen the ropes around his shorter muzzle and once they were off, he huffed, "Well, wolf, don't just hang there like a normal animal might. You're an Alpha Male. Prove it!"

I rolled my eyes. With the rope still holding my muzzle shut, I couldn't respond.

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Lovisa & Sassa Snow

Chapter 13:

The Archeologist Dream:

Our Only Chance?

Movement to my right caught my attention. Joann raised her ears and set her jaw. She pulled up one leg then the other in what appeared to be an exercise. After a moment of deep breathing and being far more limber than I, she used her stomach muscles to pull both her legs up at once. Even though it was near on impossible, she bent her pads to place the tips of her toes below her upraised jaw to scratch at the cloth around her muzzle. I took more notice and saw the strain in her whole body this act was causing her. Ears lowered, jaw tense, paws flat against the wall and pads shaking in effort she worked at the cloth over her mouth.

Oscar also took notice. “That’s it. Don’t give up.”

Her toenails caught the fabric just right and the cloth came off so she could spit out the rag, whereby she straightened out in great relief.

“Now talk some sense into your fiancé,” Oscar complained.

Joann looked out in front of her but her scathing glare and words wore solely meant for Oscar. “Shut it, fox.”

Oscar looked at Joann with questionable insult.

Joann leaned her head out away from the wall and called past me, “Clair.” When she gained no response she shouted, “Clair!”

This afforded her a sorrowful look.

“I need your help. Braxton can’t double up as we can. I need your help to work off those ropes around his muzzle.”

Clair glanced up at my face. She worked her jaw and found her gag was loose. With this discovery and a little work to spit out the rag in her mouth she was able to work words past the remaining cloth and snapped. “At what end…? So we can hear his apologies for getting us killed like this? For getting my husband killed?”

Ouch! That hurts. Worse yet, totally true.

“Clair, I understand the pain you’re in. I grieve wholeheartedly alongside you. But you must put away your sorrow briefly and aid me in this if we’re to have a chance to survive.”

“A chance?” Clair’s voice held just-checked tears. “Do you think his teeth are strong enough to bite through steal?”

“Never mind what I think. Just help me!”

“I’ve no idea what your sister plans, but prudence suggests you aid her,” Oscar advised.

Clair became lively and snapped at Oscar. “Shut it, fox. You’re already on my shit list for forcing us to pack out here your crates of—of whatever they are.”

“Would you rather have been dinner for those wolves?” Oscar inquired with anger in his words.

I looked at Clair then at Oscar. He saw me and glared. “Don’t you go and judge me, wolf. It was either that—”

“We know, we know,” Joann cut in. “We owe you our lives.”

“Damn straight you do.”

“Yeah sure, from the frying pan into the ice box to freeze to death. I think I would’ve preferred a warmer and quicker death.”

“Clair, don’t!” Joann snapped.

“Believe me, rabbit, dying out here is far kinder than being a meal for wild ice wolves. I can testify from experience they can be barbaric in cooking their food.”

I closed my eyes in remembered nausea concerning some of the clan’s

cooking habits. Roasting live animals over a fire pit for starters, or worse, locking an animal in a covered steel pot of water before setting the wood afire. The screams alone within the pot had given me nightmares.

"Clair, it doesn't matter how we got here. What matters is that we're alive. And until I've drawn my last breath I intend to do whatever it takes to keep us that way."

"Oh yeah? Is that so, Joann? Whatever it takes? I guess that never included Halsten—"

"Clair!"

"—All you need have done was give up Braxton and he'd still be alive."

"Not true and you know it!"

"Rabbits! Now is not a time to air out—"

"Shut up, fox!" Both Joann and Clair cried out together.

For some moments after this outburst, only the ruffle of my fur showed any kind of life existed out on the glacier.

Joann sighed. "Clair, Halsten was killed before that lynx even told us why he was there. You know this as well as I do."

I counted out four breaths before Joann re-aired her demand that her sister aid her in removing the ropes around my muzzle. As for her reasons in doing this, I couldn't even guess. *Clair's right, removing the rope will only allow me to apologize, for what else can I do?* Internally I despaired that I was powerless to save either white-tail jackrabbit. Still, a remote part of me sought out a way to prove myself wrong.

"Braxton?" Joann cut in on my search for an answer. "Love, look at me."

I did as bidden.

"I love you dearly. Always remember that." Her face had softened in saying this. Then she looked over at her sister. "Now, Clair, do as I say!"

"Fine, if it'll make you happy," Clair said without enthusiasm.

The pair of them doubled up and strained against muscles not meant to work that way, and got a pad apiece under my chin for support. They each

worked around my neck until their sharp toenails hooked into the ropes. With the leverage of one pad in my throat, they used their toenails to slice slowly through the ropes, only cutting into my muzzle a few times. Once this goal was achieved, they both sighed and fell back in place. I took in several deep breaths, as I couldn't breathe while they attempted this small luxury. I also exercised my jaw once the rope fell away, as it was stiff as hell.

"Love…" Joann spoke the endearment as if she were pleading with me. I turned to look at her. "I know in my heart Clair and I will not survive this climate long."

"Joann?"

"Love, please shut up and listen to me. Really listen. Clair and I will not last more than three days in this cold weather before we succumb to hypothermia."

I blanched.

"By tonight or by morning we'll be half frozen."

"Oh, Joann…" Tears flowed from my eyes with the pain of knowing I caused her death to be this way.

"Braxton, stop it. You're not solely responsible for our predicament. You are, however, the only one who might have the strength to save my sister."

"Joann, I—"

"Braxton, shut it! This is hard for me to propose as it is. I don't need—" Joann bit her lip. For a second or so she wrestled with whatever demons were eating her. "Braxton, I want you to put aside your sensitivities. The only way you can save my sister is to regain your strength. The only way I know to do that is for you to…to eat me."

"Joann, no!" I looked at her in horror.

Clair also stared wide-eyed at her sister.

"It's the only chance we have, Braxton!" Joann pleaded. "We're already dead, love. Can't you see that! I'm dead no matter what else befalls us. But if you regain your—"

“No…by the Great Maker, no. I won’t. I can’t do such a thing!”

“Then you condemn us all to die!” Joann shouted. “Clair and I don’t have the strength to budge these chains or break out of these wrist shackles. You might.”

For each objection I gave, Joann offered up another reason why I should.

“Will you listen to reason! You’re a carnivore. Your ancestors ate any animal they could bring down. Hell, those wolves that brought us out here still do! If they can, so can you!”

During a spell when Joann was tired of shouting at me, Oscar offered up his unwanted opinion.

“Beg pardon, but as gruesome as it sounds, your fiancée has a point. None of us has the strength. However, from what I’ve—”

“Back off, Oscar.” I growled. “If you don’t, I’ll leave you, should I get us out of this.”

“Shutting up,” Oscar said. “But it had to be said. Even this pretty young thing next to me would agree if—”

“That’s it!” Clair screamed. “I’m going to pound you into mush!” Clair doubled up and twisted her body so she could rain blow after blow of her pads on his body and face.

Oscar sought to protect himself as Joann and I screamed and yelled at Clair to stop. Only after she’d landed the fourth blow did Clair tire enough to settle down and simply hang in place, to catch her breath.

“Damn, Clair, I know what he said was unwanted. But it’s not worth wearing yourself out over. You’ll need every ounce of strength you have to survive this.”

Clair’s ears relaxed for a second then they laid back as she glared at me. “I have every right to pound him. He could have taken us back to civilization but no, he had to drag us out here to look at this piece of rock!” She indicated with her head the wall we were chained to.

“Clair, stop it,” Joann said across me.

“Why not? It’s not as if we really have a chance to live out here!” Clair spat.

“Clair, you need to conserve your energy!” Joann reminded her.

“Would you two both stop this!” I growled at them, turning my head to look at each. “You’re wasting energy you can’t spare.” I gave Oscar a glance and saw he tried to hold himself out of her reach. Minor scratches wept blood where Clair’s toenails dug in. If he had no clothes to fend off her nails. Had she continued, he’d be a dead, bloody heap in no time.

I let my exasperation show as I laid my head back on the wall. “Clair, besides wasting energy you haven’t to spare, by cutting Oscar you’ve set out on the breeze the smell of live meat. If a roving polar bear hasn’t already caught our scent and decided to investigate, he or she is certain to change his or her mind once the smell of blood on the wind enters his or hers nostrils.”

To my declaration of the consequences to her actions, Clair only huffed. Joann, on the other paw, gave me a long and meaningful look. A look that said I needed to take her earlier words seriously. Yet I could say with a certainty that nothing or no one could ever make me eat her. *I’ll never do it, no matter what.* My mind firmly plastered those words in place above my eyelids.

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With the coming of evening the sun rode close to the horizon. This in effect allowed the wind to retain the cold air it gathered up lying low on the glacier. Worst yet, the wind picked up force, pelting our bodies with below freezing air. As an arctic wolf, my fur protected me. Joann and Clair’s short-haired bodies, however, were shivering with force as their core temperatures lowered and their bodies sought to warm up by eating up what energy was still left within them. Some short span into the weather, one of several gusts of wind dislodged the crate left by the wolves and sent it into the wall by Joann. Though she paid it little heed, I considered it.

If I could somehow get the wood lit, the little heat would help once the wind died down. I looked at Joann and bit my lip. Her eyes were closed and face turned to avoid the worst of the wind. *She was right about surviving less than three days.* I grieved inside. *If she survives this night at all. If this wind keeps up, she and Clair will be gone before sunset tomorrow.* My eyes locked on the crate, willing it to go ablaze to grant her some warmth. *Any amount to grant us more time.* Ten minutes passed before a tickle of an idea granted me a spark of hope. *The crate had nails!* "I'm such a fool," I said aloud. "Joann." When she failed to answer I yelled, "Joann!"

She raised her head slightly.

"The crate. Do you have the strength to move it over to me?"

She looked at the crate only centimeters from her pads. She glanced at me and nodded.

"Good. I need the nails from the hinges. If I break it up, you could use your pads to lift up a board to my muzzle. I can chew off what I don't need. Afterward I can use the nails to pick the locks of my wrist shackles."

The light in Joann's eyes, which had grown dull, sparked to life as she heard my plan. Though hungry and cold, Joann mustered her strength and worked the crate under me. Although Joann's legs held the most power, I wished to save her energy. Thus I started in on the crate. I adjusted to hold my wrist chains in my paws and stomped down with my left pad. After several failed attempts, the crate cracked. When at last I'd busted the lid and side, I worked the crate over to her. Joann mustered herself and separated a piece small enough for me to work with.

With her nimble toes and renewed hope, Joann shifted her body my way and doubling up, held the piece in front of my muzzle. As quickly as I could I gnawed at the wood and metal until I had two nails. When I nodded I had what I needed, Joann virtually collapsed from the strain of holding up her lower body.

"Hold on, Joann," I begged. A little manipulation of my tongue and I strained in using only my wrists to haul my dead weight up to take a look at the

keyhole. With an idea how to pick the lock, I lowered enough so my right paw fingers could take up one of the nails. The other I left in my mouth. After this was accomplished, I relaxed to give my wrists and biceps a rest while I took several deep breaths. I prepared my mind. I closed my eyes. I flexed my left paw to work out any cold and stiffness. Satisfied, I took up the chain using only my left arm and pulled my body up. Once my elbow was fully bent, I pulled it into my chest. I lowered my muzzle to look at my paw. Shaking with the strain of supporting my body, still pelted by the wind, I carefully inserted the first nail. My eyes went wide when my shaking almost shook out the nail. In haste I nabbed it back with my lips. I realized my stupidity and relaxed to where I hung once more. *I can't allow my weakness to rake my body so. I need to steady up.*

I laid my head back on the wall and sought my inner animal. The true strength that made me an Alpha Male. I'd touched it so often of late it was there under the surface, installed in the cage I'd made for its home all those years ago. Tail wagging like a dog and ears laid back, it waited. Ready to act on my bidding. But it had to be controlled. The animal was wild with wants and desires. I could see it in its glistening eyes. It wanted total control. Like it had when it got out after I'd unknowingly drunk the loco-weed-laced water. Firmly I held the door to that cage and only slowly opened it so it wouldn't lunge out but seep out, that my intelligence could lay reins on its desires. Breathing deeply, I made the animal mine ever so slowly. I let it fill my soul and heat up my blood.

When at last I opened my eyes, completely entwined, the night had come and gone and the wind had died to a mere breeze. Though panic sought to raise up that I'd let Joann and Clair freeze to death during those hours, the animal stomped on it. Snarling, it, I, forced my panic back and took up the chain so I could pull myself up without the merest shake. Elbow bent and pulled into my chest, I worked the nail in place. My fingers took up the last nail from my teeth and I manipulated them together. Short seconds passed before the telltale sound of a click filled my ears. Eyes aflame, I lowered myself and shook out my left arm and paw.

Out of a moment of weakness, I reached across and caressed Joann's face. "Joann. Joann, it won't be long now."

She didn't answer. She didn't even look up. Panic reinserted itself into my chest, but again my animal forced the emotion down, reasoning rightly, *Nothing can be done until I'm free.* With a will I closed my eyes to clear my mind. Once I reopened them I worked at the other shackle. Freed at last, the animal wanted to howl at the moon, even though it wasn't presently out as yet. Giddy in freedom at last, the animal was hard to control. Yet I was an Alpha. That knowledge made all the difference.

In short order I freed Joann, Clair and Oscar, and carried them to the other side of the wall to get them out of the breeze. Next came the crate and the hunt for any others. Disregarding the pain in my right leg, I soon smashed the two crates into kindling and scraped the metal parts on the stone wall, raining sparks on the wood. After an interminable time, the wood caught. Soon a blessed blaze was lit. *This pile will not last out the day. Perhaps only three hours or more if we're lucky. It'll have to do.* I rubbed arms and legs on all animals. Oscar was first to stir, having more protection from the cold. After I gained his help, I pulled Joann into me and rubbed her from head to toe. Oscar did likewise with Clair. Both Jackrabbits soon responded by latching onto whoever held them for warmth.

"Oh, love…" Joann murmured softly. "I shouldn't have doubted you."

I kissed her forehead. "You had every right." I sighed within and held her close. Clair's reaction to who'd revived her was another matter.

"No! Let go! I'd rather freeze to death…"

I turned to the ruckus and saw Clair weakly slapping and kicking Oscar.

"What the hell? Clair, stop it. You need the warmth," I called over.

"Clair, please…" Oscar pleaded. "Can you not forgive me and accept my aid?"

Clair kneed him in the groin to get free.

Oscar let go and she scrambled, fell, rolled until she hit my side and

latched on.

“Clair, what’s eating you?” I questioned, grimacing as she hit my bad leg. “He said he was sorry.”

She looked up into my eyes then buried her face in my fur, mumbling obscenities.

I looked at Oscar. “Did something else happen to her while I was out on my run?”

Oscar gained his feet and straightened out his clothes.

“Hardly.” He busied his tail between his paws. “She maybe still upset over my suggestion the two of them lay with me as a token of appreciation in saving their lives, but as I didn’t force the issue, I don’t know why she’s acting so.” By the firelight, Oscar’s features looked composed. There was no guilt written in face, tone or body.

“Oscar,” Joann spoke up, shifting her head to look at him. “You need not tell him. That was between you and us.”

Clair’s antics rolled over in my mind until I realized he’d posed the question to both Jackrabbits. That meant he propositioned Joann as well. When I stiffened, Joann felt it and grabbed my muzzle.

“Braxton, don’t! We need your warmth more than your chivalry.”

A snarl escaped my lips. The Alpha male was enraged. Had our circumstances been anything other, I might have gotten up and beaten the shit out of him for seeking to have sex with my fiancée.

Joann slapped my face. “Braxton! You’ve nothing to avenge your pride on. Nothing happened. The fox accepted our refusals and left us alone.”

“Speak for yourself, sister…” Clair spoke up. “I want my pound of flesh.”

Joann slapped her sister. “Don’t you go encouraging him. We don’t need this.”

The two argued as I watched Oscar with eyes that saw everything. He knew he’d overstepped his boundaries. Yet how could I really blame him? Joann

was a lovely white-tail jackrabbit and Clair was no eyesore either.

The fire was dying. By the sun's position I guessed the time to be oh-six hundred hours. To keep himself apart as I calmed down and acknowledged nothing happened to warrant physical harm, Oscar involved himself in the stone wall, examining every exposed inch.

For myself, I held Joann and Clair while I worked out how far we might be out on the ice. Though I'd done the twenty-day run in its entirety as a youth, I only knew the approximate location of the hairless apes' wall from the birch tree and not as a straight shot out from the clan. *An average animal unencumbered on the ice could walk three to five kilometers an hour. The clan wolves, twice that. A bit further, if on level ground. However, the glacier is anything but level.* I nuzzled Joann as I continued to work it out. *Encumbered as they were with slowing to Joann and Clair's pace as they lugged out the two crates, I estimate the wolves walked twelve hours a day for six days. Best guess, we're fifty-eight kilometers on the ice.* Clair had fallen asleep at my side. Joann looked to be awake, but remained still with her head on my chest. I looked at the fire. *Perhaps another hour left.* I eyed the distance. *We're halfway into May. Another day or so and the sun will sit on the horizon, giving off some light all twenty-four hours in the day.* I closed my eyes to bring up a picture of the glacier. *If I'm right, the ice should have receded some, south of us. Still, we've five or six days to walk on freezing ice during the heat of the day while the evening finds us without the sun's heat to chase away the cold.* I sighed.

Joann stirred. "Braxton, what are we to do? We're days from civilization."

"I'm working that out, love."

"You two best work that out soon. This fire can't last much longer," Clair added.

"By the Great Maker!" Oscar said out loud on the other side of the wall. "I never thought!"

My ears swiveled and I raised my eyes up and right to hear Oscar's antics

on the other side. Joann did the same, though I had to push one or her ears out of my eye.

Oscar came around the wall at a fast walk. “You’ll never believe this. It’s not far. Perhaps four to five days, at a guess.” Oscar was like a little kid, bouncing around as if his pads were on fire. “Braxton, it’s the discovery of a lifetime. We have to go!”

“What are you on about?” I asked.

“Paradise, Braxton. Paradise. According to the old language, northeast of us is a stretch of land the old book referred to as Cleo Baker Two.” He looked around the wall as if he could see that far. “It’s referred to as the last best hope. A place to gather and commence a life-changing event.”

“You’re talking of that book you stole from the Cat-A-Mite Museum.”

Oscar’s ears dropped and he look hurt. “Stole is such an ugly word. Besides, I didn’t steal it. I liberated it to keep certain parties from getting their paws on it.”

The conversation wasn’t advancing the cause to save ourselves, but it gave us a distraction from our plight. I decided it might help Clair’s morale to argue with him. Besides, my primitive self wanted ever so much to pound on him for propositioning Joann. An outcome that felt ever so right for his wish to violate my chosen Alpha Female. “Tomato, Tomatto, same difference.”

“Not so. Those animals wanted to destroy the book with all its hidden knowledge.” Oscar’s ears fell back and his tail twitched.

“So where is it?”

Oscar’s lips curled back as shame covered his face. “Burnt to ashes in my very own home by my accursed nephew, right before my eyes.” Oscar’s eyes filled with feverish fire. “But not before I’d already committed it to memory.” Oscar slapped the wall. “This marvelous structure was featured in the book as ‘Guide post one.’ A marker in the ice to point the way.” He pointed northeast along the length of the wall. “We need to go that way.”

“That direction leads deeper onto the glacier. It’s not possible. As it is,

Joann and Clair will have a bad time of it heading south, where I think we'll come out some kilometers from Whisker Falls." I took a deep breath, as that made up my mind. "With luck, before then we'll find some kind of game we both can eat to fortify our bodies in further aiding them." I stopped there. I didn't want to fill the air with the likely possibility my leg was infected and I'd be in no shape to hunt by then. *Hell, I hate to think it. But we may be dependent on Oscar to scare up game.* As for the frozen meat on the other side of the wall, it would do us no good. With no way to light a fire to thaw the surface enough for or teeth to penetrate, it would only be a burden on our trek out.

Oscar let his head fall back on his neck and said some curse words. He found new words to throw at me and said, "You're not looking at the big picture." He raised his paw. "A few days and we'll uncover the last hold-out for the hairless apes. After hundreds of years of speculation, the facts will be there for us to discover. We'll finally know what happened to them and possibly what turn of events caused animals such as us to stand up on our hind legs and take their place."

"No, Oscar."

The fox clinched his paws. "Damn it, wolf! I'll never get this chance again. Your clan, along with eleven or twelve others, guard this glacier. Don't you want to know why? Aren't you just the least bit curious? Your own father was a part of this mystery. Now your sisters are involved. Would it not be self-serving to join me and seek these answers so you can reclaim your rightful place in the clan and know why you're guarding this glacier?"

Regretfully I stirred both Joann and Clair. "We needs be moving. The fire has given all it's going to."

"I'm not following him, if that's your intention," Clair clarified in a huff.

"Padding deeper onto the ice is far from my thoughts," I assured her.

Oscar stood rigid and took a stand. "You're not going anywhere but with me."

I put my arms around Joann and Clair to offer up some heat from my

body. However, Joann noticed my face belied my pain and I favored the leg the polar bear mauled. She looked down and really took notice of my leg.

“Love, you’re hurt!” Joann touched the area and I winced.

“Yeah, that tends to happen when a polar bear gets the jump on you.”

“Polar bear?” Oscar inquired, his ears going active.

“How long ago?” Joann asked.

“Can’t say, I’ve lost track of time.”

Joann slapped my arm, hard. “You idiot, I see it’s hurting you. If it’s not properly treated, you could lose the leg or worse yet, your life. Then what’s to become of me…” The intent was clear in her eyes but with a sideways glance on her sister, she added,”…and Clair?”

“Believe me, you two are all I think about,” I confessed.

Joann’s ears stiffened behind her, showing she was mad, agitated and worried. “You need to sit and let me look at it.”

“We need to get moving.”

Joann pointed to the ground. “Sit.”

I looked in her beautiful but stern eyes. Even shivering as she was, she looked adamant.

As arguing would squander more energy than she had to spare, with her help and that of the wall, I sat, for in truth I knew her to be right.

“Clair, I’m going to need your help.” Joann looked up at Oscar. “You too, fox.”

“Are you sure?” Oscar asked.

“He’s not going to hurt you but I will if you don’t help,” Joann threatened.

Oscar held up his paws in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

The fox made it a point to be on the other side of Clair while Joann unwound my makeshift bandage. I grimaced to even her light touch, showing off my teeth in an involuntary snarl.

“It’s infected, alright.” Joann’s worried words found my ears. Clair was

holding my right arm while Oscar held my left shoulder and arm. Joann rotated my right leg, examining the calf. “I’ll have to reopen the wounds and bleed them.”

“Is that really necessary?” Oscar asked nervously. “Could we not just help him along until we find shelter to properly attend to his leg?”

Joann ignored Oscar. “Love, this is really going to hurt.” She rolled up my ripped-up pant leg and gave it to me. “Here, bite down on this.”

“Thanks…” I did as bidden.

Clair and Oscar hunkered down and held onto me. Joann swallowed, extended her claws, and gave me one more worried look before I nodded. Ears laid back, she tore my leg apart. It took all I had not harm her, Oscar and Clair. My animal screamed and fought to tear out of their hold to stop her ill treatment of my calf. Yet despite the snarls and growls that escaped my clinched teeth, Joann was thorough. Each puncture the bear left in my calf she reopened, and using her claws she widened and deepened each to make certain blood flowed to aid in cleaning out the infection and bad blood trapped inside. When at last I thought she was through, Joann snapped her fingers at Clair and asked her to get any remaining brand still left in our near-dead fire. My eyes went wide—she was going to cauterize the wounds. I watched the brand being given over and I learned, though only minutely, how an animal felt being burned alive.

Some moments passed. I think I passed out. I blinked to see Joann wrapping my leg with strips cut from her own pants. Still hurting, I scolded. “You should have used my pants for that.”

Her worried but big sympathetic gray eyes looked into mine. “Don’t be silly. Your pants are too filthy. Though I’ve cauterized the wounds, there’s still a chance they could get infected. Mine were the cleanest between Clair and I.”

I rolled my head. Oscar stood some centimeters away, examining his arm.

“You broke free of his hold and grabbed his arm,” Joann enlightened me.

“Oh…” I looked at my paw and saw the eggshell-colored nails held

drops of blood. “Sorry,” I said lamely.

Oscar glanced my way, moving his arm and flexing his fingers. Pragmatically he said, “No harm done.”

Clair stood and remarked, “Too bad.”

We all looked at her.

“With your leg fixed, I think we should leave him and try to get off this ice, “Clair said loud enough for Oscar to hear.

“Clair, that’s uncharitable of you,” Joann argued.

“I’m not in a chartable mood. Because of him we could die out here, and because of him”—she pointed at me—“my husband’s dead and we nearly ended up as fried rabbit for a pack of wolves.” Clair hugged herself and turned away as the sniffles took over. Joann stood and gathered her little sister into her arms.

Emotions flying at all levels, I used the wall to ease up off the ground. “Best we get moving.”

Joann turned Clair, still hugging her close and said, “You need to stay off that leg at least one day.”

“Can’t be helped. That fire we had helped to revive the pair of you, but within no time the cold will re-seat itself in your bones.”

Practical as always, Joann pulled and pushed Clair to my left side. “Take up his left side, sis. I’ll hold him up on the right.”

Oscar looked around and nodded. “Right, then. Northeast it is.”

“That’s out of the question, Oscar. We all need to get off this ice pack. Joann and Clair are not suited to withstand even the summer nights out here. And I’ll be of little help if we come across any trouble.”

“You misunderstand me. Without me, you’ll never get off this ice pack,” Oscar said, meaning it.

“How do you mean?” I inquired.

“I told you this glacier is patrolled by other clans,” Oscar reminded us. “Like your sister’s clan, they do so to keep animals off the ice.”

“Which is what we’re doing. That is, getting off this glacier.”

Oscar shook his head. “You still don’t get it. Let me put it this way. No animal is ever allowed on or off this glacier. That’s why I worked so hard at ingratiating myself with them.”

I looked hard at Oscar. His eyes bore into mine and I understood. The moment I did, he saw and nodded.

“Is he saying what I think he’s saying?” Joann asked while she sought eye contact with me.

“That the only way out of here is through a clan of wolves, yes,” I confirmed.

“The hell you say…” Clair said. “You’re not seriously believing his cockamamie story?”

“Clair…” I began.

“You are!” She let go of me and backed a step. Her ears dropped like rocks. “You’re really going to trust anything that fox says?”

“Clair,” Both Joann and I said.

“After what he did to us?”

“What he did,” Joann spoke up in some heat, “is save our lives. Food and warmth for two days before we carried his crates out here.”

Clair set her paws on her hips and glared. “What else, Joann? What else did he promise?”

“If you’re referring to having us released, at what time did he have the chance to do that? You saw that wolf seize him once we were chained up to ‘Keep us from causing problems,’ and chain him up beside us.”

I looked at Oscar.

He shrugged and pointed at the wall. “Sorry to involve them, but I was desperate. Everything I’d uncovered said my answers were here, and the books were right.”

This brought to mind a major problem. I rubbed my muzzle. “Oscar, as I understand it, you’re a guest of the clan. If that’s so, why would they betray their honor in harming you?”

“I know that look,” Joann whispered in my ear as Oscar sought an answer. “What’s the problem?”

“The clan’s in trouble. I could feel the tension on my skin and the scent on the air,” I whispered.

Oscar finally said, “In truth, that has me puzzled. Nothing like this would ever have happened in your father’s time.”

I folded my arms, showing him I suspected he was holding back. “Uh-ha, you’re hiding something. Out with it, fox…”

“Well, if you must know.” He sighed. “Lovisa has never liked me. I fear she believes my knowledge of all the clans could threaten her position. That I’d involve myself in clan laws and get her exiled, as if I’d do such a thing to change events.”

“So you lied,” I accused.

He raised an eyebrow. “In what way?”

“You said you could get us off the glacier, when in fact you can’t.”

Oscar swiveled his ears as if listing for something. “I may not be able to persuade the clans right now, but I think something northeast of us could be used to gain us passage past them.”

“So what do we do?” Joann asked.

“I’m in no shape to fight off a lone wolf, let alone a clan,” I reasoned. “Nor will I get anywhere with my sister’s clan, as I still look like a black wolf. On top of that, I’ve failed the twenty-day run.”

“You’re joking, right?” Clair sputtered. “You’re not seriously believing the shit that bastard’s spouting?”

I looked at Oscar, whose eyes sparkled, and took notice his ears and tail twitched in victory.

“Not all of it, but enough to know you and Joann need a place to get out of this weather while I seek out game to regain my strength and allow my leg to heal fully.”

“So what’s wrong with this place?” Clair waved at the stone wall.

“Besides the obvious?” I crooked an eyebrow.

“Clair,” Joann cut in. “We’ve no choice, so quit your bellyaching and join me to help Braxton.”

“No way, I’m not going! I’ll set out on my own before I follow him.” She pointed at Oscar.

Joann let go and stormed up to her. She slapped her sister hard and they had a heated argument for a time. In the aftermath, Clair broke down and fell into Joann’s arms, crying. If I had to guess, Clair was on the verge of losing her wits. I ducked my head and swallowed. Guilt lay heavy on my shoulders.

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Chapter 14

Two Fables Equals One Answer

“Okay, I guess we’re in agreement. What say I lead the way?” Oscar announced.

I glared at Oscar. My Alpha said, for his ears only, “Keep yourself in line, but understand me—if you’ve played us falsely, I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

Oscar swallowed, ducked his head and looked around. “Uh, yeah, okay, uh it’s this way.”

He started walking.

Even though I hated to interrupt Clair’s soul cleansing, I hugged both jackrabbits, and with Clair on my left, we followed an obsessed fox deeper onto the ice.

****

Our struggle against the elements took its toll. Even Oscar seemed regretful of his choice. But the die had been cast three days ago. We either found this place Oscar had dreamt of finding all his life or Joann and Clair would perish from hypothermia, while I followed shortly after either at the jaws of a clan member or a roaming polar bear. What Oscar might die from mattered little to me.

Upon a snow drift with a crest that rose over our heads, I stumbled. My leg was fully aflame yet again from infection. My bulk more than Joann and Clair could hold, we hit the powder and tumbled to the base of the drift. Hungry,

sleep deprived and hurting, I lay where I'd come to a stop. Face down in the drift, battling delirium that had set in last night. Joann and Clair shook violently; neither one sought to regain her pads. Instead they huddled up to me for the last bit of warmth I might radiate before we all succumbed to the elements and my injuries.

It had been more than the five days Oscar had promised. Perhaps eight. But I couldn't lay the blame on him. Because of my leg, Joann and Clair struggled to keep up a good pace while helping me along. Day after day the cold evenings stole more and more warmth from their bodies. The fact Joann and Clair had lasted this long told of their inner strength. Regardless, this was all we could manage. Oscar knelt and rolled me over after dislodging Joann.

"I'm sorry, wolf. I thought it would be closer." He looked around us. "It can't be far now. I'll go on ahead. You three rest. Perhaps I'll find some kind of aid and come back for you."

I nodded and snaked my arms around both white-tail jackrabbits to hold them tight.

"I still love you, my beautiful arctic wolf," Joann whispered in my ear with chattering teeth.

Tears frozen on my eyelids, I kissed her forehead. Had I the courage, I would've taken up Joann on her offer and chowed down on her to rebuild my energy. I could at least save myself and Clair. But I couldn't see a life without her, no matter how much my animal sought to dislodge my intelligence so he could do exactly that.

Another long cold evening settled in, yet in the distance I could still see the sun peek over the horizon as if unsure he should brighten the world or not. This left a rising layer of freezing air flowing over the three of us. Frozen ice below and a cold breeze pelting us, the two seeking to steal every last taste of warmth from our bodies.

Delirious from the infection, I looked up to a sound I somehow discerned was nearby and saw a blue moon appear out of the rising sun. The moon blinked,

which was a strange sight to see. The moon shifted, changing my assumption. That blue moon was not a moon at all, but an eye, an eye matched by a second one on the head of a horse. Yet no horse would willingly be out on the ice this deep on the glacier, *Unless…*

All in white, with vibrant blue eyes that could look beyond my soul and a long spiral horn projecting from her forehead, the glacier unicorn looked me over. She snorted and shook her horse-like head. “Bless my soul, if it’s not Byrghir Snow.”

“Hello,” I said simply, as it was hard to say much more.

She snorted. “You look in a bad way, wolf, even with food readily at your side in order to rebuild your strength.”

“Food?” I questioned and managed to glance around. “I see nothing here.”

The white unicorn indicated Joann and Clair with the paw she’d turned me over with. “These two white-tail jackrabbits.”

“I beg to differ, that’s my fiancée and her sister.” I tried to put some heat into my words to indicate I was offended, but I doubt it made it. As for facial expressions, simply talking so she could understand me took far too much energy.

“Fiancée?” The unicorn looked closer and eyed Joann and Clair. “Remarkable.”

After a moment more, two sheepdogs came around the unicorn. “Pascal,” she said to one, “it would appear we’re in time to save the wolf. My brother will be so pleased. As for the white-tail jackrabbits, put them in the cart and wrap them in warm blankets. Perhaps we’ll be lucky and save them all.”

“Bless you…” I managed.

The unicorn snorted. “You may say such now, but time will truly tell if you hold to that sentiment.”

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This marks the end of Book 1 of, The Snow Adventures:

Braxton Snow P.I..

Be sure to look for Book 2 of The Snow Adventures:

The Infinite Wisdom.

####

Thank you for taking the time to read, Braxton Snow P.I..
If you enjoyed this novel, please consider telling your friends or posting a short review. Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated.
Thank you, Danny C. Estes.

About the author:

Danny graduated high school in 1978.
In the 1990's, Danny won an
Editor's Choice Award
And
Accomplishment of Merit award for his poems.
Only Feeling
And
Loneliness by War
From
The National Library of Poetry.

Presently, Danny resides in North Carolina, works
3rd shift, and during off moments, he thinks up ideals to flush out
on the weekends, when Danny spends several hours continuing his writing

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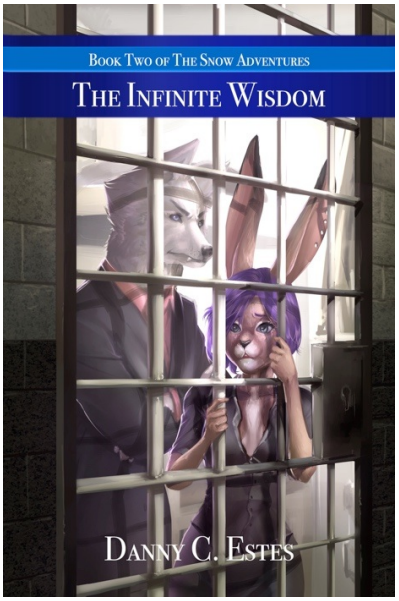
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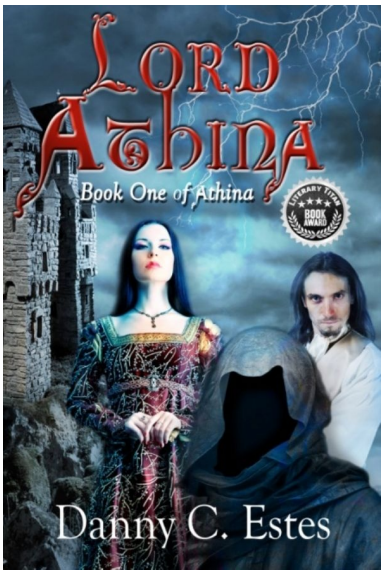
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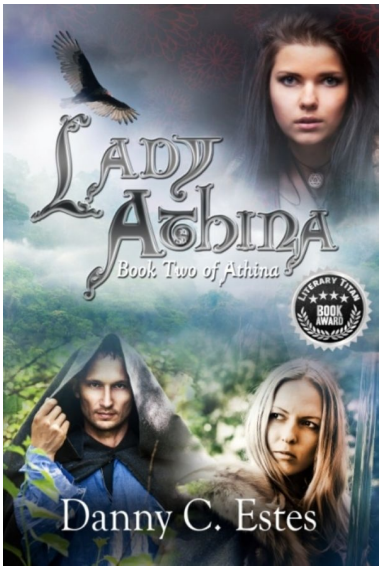
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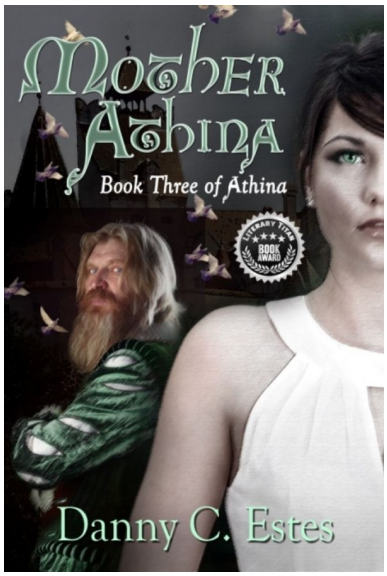

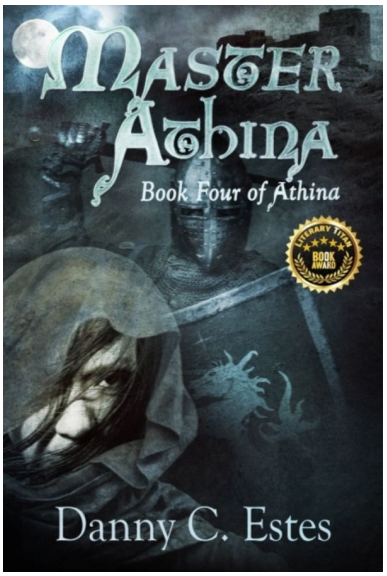

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Has won Silver and Gold awards from:
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Lord Athina Lady Athina Mother Athina Master Athina

The Snow Adventures

Book One

Braxton Snow P.I.

Has won a Gold award from:
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The Paranoid Thief

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