

Turnskin



TURN SKIN



NICOLE KIMBERLING



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by Nicole Kimberling

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This book is dedicated to Dawn.
(Who else would it be dedicated to?)

1

TOM HIKED ALONG THE GRAVEL SHOULDER OF A TWO-LANE highway, hoping for a ride. Midnight came and went. The air grew cold and the crickets got tired of chirping. Near the county line, drawn by the sight of approaching headlights, he turned and stuck out his thumb. The driver slowed down, probably checking him out. Tom stood in the blinding glare of the headlights, wondering what part of him the driver noticed first. His red backpack? His torn jeans? Or maybe it was Tom's black skin with its thin layer of velvety hair? His yellow Shifter eyes?

Tom smiled and waved, hoping the driver would still stop and offer him a ride but internally despairing. He'd have had a better chance with a pickup than a private car.

The moment of uncertainty elongated as the car inched closer.

Massive irrigation sprinklers activated in the cornfields to Tom's right, and the summer air grew heavy and damp. Tom stepped up and saw, with a zing of fear, that the low sedan was actually a police cruiser.

Tom's skin prickled and his hair stood on end. Officer Mayle had told Tom straight out that if he found Tom hitchhiking one more time, he'd take him to jail. Tom's friend Shorty had been arrested by Officer Mayle once. He'd needed sixteen stitches. And Shorty was even a Skin. How many stitches would a Shifter need?

He'd have to run. But there was nothing but acres of knee-high corn. What if Mayle had a dog with him? Or a partner? He'd be worse off if they had to chase him down.

And even if Tom did elude Mayle, Mayle knew where Tom lived. Everyone knew where Tom lived. He was the only Shifter in town.

Tom stood his ground. There was still a chance that it was not Mayle. Tom peered into the car and almost fainted with relief at the sight of Officer Simpson. Simpson was slightly shorter than Tom and more thickly set. He had coarse blonde hair and a fair complexion that freckled more than tanned. Tom could see red stubble along the line of his square chin. He lounged in the car seat, the unlit stub of a cherry cigar pinched between his first two fingers.

Officer Simpson often picked up Tom hitchhiking around town. Sometimes, as they rode together, Tom would catch Simpson looking at him in an inappropriate way. Or at least that's what Tom hoped. Simpson's swift, insinuating glances defied Tom's interpretive skills.

Simpson pulled onto the shoulder ahead of Tom. As was customary, Tom opened the passenger door and got in. He lodged his backpack between his bare feet and curled his toes underneath it, self-consciously realizing that he should be wearing shoes. Civilized people wore shoes.

"Evening, Tom." Simpson pulled a disappointingly businesslike smile. As usual, he wore too much cologne.

"Hi." Tom stared at the cold, milky coffee congealing in Simpson's cup holder. Simpson reached over to pick the cup up, and Tom's heart raced as his knuckles brushed against Tom's knee. Simpson sniffed the coffee, then tossed it out the window.

"Walking down the side of road in the dark isn't safe. Other people don't got Shifter eyes like you. It'd be real easy to get run over." Simpson put the empty cup back in its holder and lit up

his cigar. Tom wrinkled his nose against the rank pungency of cheap tobacco and sneezed. Simpson cracked his window a polite quarter inch. "You're pretty far from home."

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you heading tonight?"

"The capital." Tom tried to sound completely casual, as if he had the perfect right to go there.

"Really? Have you got your transportation papers on you?"

"I applied, but the Shifter Office wouldn't give them to me. They say since I'm an agricultural worker, I've got no urban job skills."

Simpson eased the car into drive and flipped a wide U-turn across the empty road. "I'll take you home then."

"But I've got urban skills," Tom said. "I'm a playwright. I wrote *playwright* down on the form."

"You don't say?" Officer Simpson puffed his cigar thoughtfully. "And they denied you anyway?"

"And I'm an actor. In the capital there are plays with nothing but Shifter actors in them. My cousins own a theatre in the Shifter district. I've got a postcard of their theatre."

Tom rooted through his backpack searching for the old, faded card. The front showed an old-time theatre front with a massive painted sign reading *Snakegrass Theatre*. The back held a couple of old stamps dated more than a decade prior as well as a short note from his Uncle River to his mother.

"I've been to the Shifter District, you know. It's true that some streets you walk down there's nothing but fur as far as you can see. Black, brown. Even some of them Silents." Simpson's police radio suddenly spouted a noisy string of police jargon. Simpson frowned and turned it down. "But what I think you may not be considering is that the capital's full of rotten guys, furry and not, who are looking to latch onto a person such as yourself for purposes I don't believe you'd be amicable to."

“I still want to go.” Tom leaned his head against the car window. Speaking was pointless. Simpson couldn’t understand Tom’s curiosity about Shifters any more than he could understand the pain of being isolated. The only other Shifter Tom had ever met was his mother, and she had avoided teaching him any Shifter customs or their low, growling language. She wanted him to fit in better with the Skin children.

What little Tom knew of Shifter society had been gleaned from the library and made for TV movies. His favorite had been *Doctor of Hope: the Daniel Cox Story*. In the beginning Dr. Cox is among a band of Skin refugees escaping tyranny in their homelands. Dr. Cox tries to live harmoniously on the new continent with the resident Shifters, but the Shifters won’t allow the refugees access to the Blacksnake River Ford and war breaks out. Capable of terrifying transformations, the Shifters almost win, but at the last moment are brought low by Cox Fever. Their malleable bodies are riddled with tumors, and they die en masse until Dr. Cox finds a vaccine and an armistice is declared. When Tom was little, Dr. Cox, played by the gorgeous, young Fred Brandt, had been Tom’s TV boyfriend.

Tom’s mother had never liked *Doctor of Hope*.

Tom wondered what Simpson thought of Dr. Cox. He looked over and caught Simpson giving him another of those appraising, electrifying glances. Maybe, Tom thought, Simpson did understand what it was like to constantly seek one’s own kind after all. Maybe Simpson wasn’t a Shifter, but he was still an unusual kind of man. He looked at Tom with such open desire that Tom turned shy again.

“Why don’t you see what’s on the radio,” Simpson suggested.

“The police radio?” Tom asked.

Simpson smirked. “The FM radio.”

Tom spent the next hour twisting the radio dial, trying to find something good to listen to while Simpson green-lighted

or vetoed songs with no detectable pattern. A casual closeness developed between them.

Eventually, Officer Simpson turned onto a dirt road between two onion fields. At the terminus, a collection of decrepit mobile homes slouched against each other. Tom's trailer stood apart from the others, right at the edge of an onion field. Old and dusty, the trailer had once been pine green. Now rust bloomed intermittently across its surface.

The trailer closest to Tom's was Angela's place. When they drove up, the curtains in Angela's trailer pulled back and then snapped closed at the sight of the police cruiser. Tom saw that Simpson also noted the quick motion, but disregarded it, focusing on him instead.

"So you say you write plays?" Simpson toyed with his cigar, apparently fascinated by the burning ember on the end.

"Yes, I'm putting one on in a week." Tom felt awkward to be in familiar surroundings. Driving down the highway, they'd been in a special kind of limbo. In between towns. In between their two worlds. Here among the trailers, Tom felt guilty. Here the police were nothing but trouble, and he was consorting with the enemy.

"Will you be using your unique skills?"

"Acting?"

"Shifter skills."

"I will," Tom said, "since I can."

"Seems strange that you'd want to put yourself up on display like that," Officer Simpson said.

"Everyone already knows I'm a Shifter. Why not?"

"Sure they do, but town folks don't like to see it happening right in front of their eyes. They get unsettled."

"I'm not doing the play in town," Tom said.

"Where will it be, then?"

"At my friend Angela's trailer," Tom said.

"Well, that should be okay." Officer Simpson crushed out

his cherry cigar. “But you should be careful who you shift in front of. Some cops take too much latitude with the laws regarding changing one’s physical appearance.”

They both knew which cop Simpson was talking about.

“I will.” Tom got out of the car and then ducked back down to lean inside the passenger-side window. “You could come if you wanted to. It’s on Saturday night.”

“Sure you won’t run off to the capital before then?”

“I won’t,” Tom said. “I just... I just got worried that my play won’t look right. I wanted to see a real one. I mean, what if I forget my lines?”

“I suppose you’ll have to make some new ones up,” Simpson said. “You have a good night, now. Stay out of trouble.”

“Wait! Do you want to come in?” Tom asked in a rush. “I’ve got some beer.”

“I’m on duty now.” Simpson finally gave Tom the slow, sensual smile he’d been waiting for. Tom instinctively leaned forward, heart hammering in excitement. Simpson shook his head and glanced around the collection of trailers. Tom saw curtains pulled open, just a crack, in almost every dwelling. Everyone was watching them, afraid of what the law might want here. Tom knew he should be cautious too, but Simpson wasn’t like other cops. Not to him, anyway.

“Maybe I’ll have that beer next time.” Simpson’s smile broadened, as though he couldn’t suppress his pleasure at Tom’s invitation.

“Sure.”

Officer Simpson drove away. The air was thick with mosquitoes, which buzzed around the exposed skin of Tom’s inner ear. The curtains in the surrounding trailers closed again, and Tom went inside.

Though he didn’t need it to see, Tom turned on the overhead light. The faceted fixture cast yellow shadows throughout the room, which helped him feel less lonely. He tuned his

radio to the station he'd been listening to in Simpson's car, picked up his costume, a needle, and thread, and started sewing purple rickrack on the left cuff.

With *Opening Night* only one week away, Tom's confidence suffered intermittent, panicky fluctuations. He wished his mother was still here with him, but she'd passed away months ago, her presence reduced to a dusty stack of records that Tom disliked but couldn't discard and a closed bedroom door. Tom had locked all her belongings in there: the plastic flowers, the macramé owl, and the half-finished hook rug.

He had tried to make the trailer his own. He painted the warped living room paneling with stylish, green paint called *Brookside Moss*. It didn't look too bad with the avocado-colored carpet. He cleared away all his mother's tabloids as well as her reading glasses, pill organizer, and sunflower seeds.

He could no longer bear the sight of sunflower seeds; they made him want to cry.

Tom's coffee table sported a couple of men's fashion magazines and a neat stack of books—*An Actor Observes*, *Costumes of the Expansion Period*, and *100 Classic Scenes*—which Tom had gone through numerous times underlining his favorite monologues in fat, dull pencil. A single black and white film poster decorated the wall: Fredrick Brandt in *The Killers*.

As he sewed, Tom whispered those favorite lines to himself in a mantra of admiration, as if through repetition alone he could make himself the greatest playwright who ever lived—ever lived in an onion field, anyway.

Tom fell asleep on the brown and orange plaid couch, listening to the radio signal gradually diminishing to static and endlessly reliving the moment Simpson smiled at him. When he woke up, he discovered he'd lost his needle.



The next afternoon Tom was crouched between two rows of onions. Sunlight beat down on his back. He pulled prickly vines

from between tall, green stalks. Pungent onion vapors hung in the air around him. His best and oldest friend, Angela, worked the row next to his. She was a pretty woman with thick, light brown hair, which she alternately protected with a wide straw hat and nourished with a stinky, homemade botanical oil concoction that even now trickled fragrantly down the back of her neck.

Angela rubbed her lower back, mumbling, “Ah, what a fucking life.”

Tom scooted along his row. Bending didn’t hurt him like it hurt Angela. He just adjusted his back to fit his new posture. He shortened his legs and bent his knees backward like a cat in order to rest comfortably. His mother had showed him how to do this when he was little. Tom would creep along beside her, picking strawberries or cutting broccoli, emulating his mother’s motions and entertaining her with stories.

“I saw that cop Simpson brought you home again last night. He stayed talking awhile. What did he say to you?” Angela adjusted her hat.

“Nothing much.”

“I hate cops.” Angela sat back and lit a joint. Her fingernails were dirty and broken. “I was sure he was here for Shorty.”

“Don’t worry about Simpson.”

“He pays too much attention to you. I think he likes you. He’s going to ask you for a date. He’s going to say, ‘Let me take you away from the onion field and give you a new life...’ And then you’ll get to go live in his big cop house and watch his big cop TV all day.” Angela leaned in, making smooching noises. Tom hung his head until Angela relented. “Just kidding. I think he wants to kick your fuzzy ass.”

“Probably,” Tom agreed. Angela could never understand how Tom felt about Simpson. She hated the law too much. “He kind of said that it might be dangerous for me to put on my show.”

“What? He’s got no right to tell you what to do! You aren’t doing nothing wrong! Fucking asshole thinks he can judge us.” Angela looked worried. “You’re still doing it, right? It’s Cathy’s big moment. Her grandma is coming to see it. She’s bringing her camera. We handed out all those flyers!”

“I’m still putting the show on.”

Tom had spent the previous half-year working on this play. After writing and revising the text, he had started assembling his costume and training his face. In *Love Among the Cabbages*, Tom portrayed both the hero, an iconoclastic cattleman named Burt Butte, and the heroine, the feisty widow, Ermaline Trueheart. The only other actor in the play was little Cathy. She played Ermaline’s daughter, also called Cathy. Her job was to toddle out on stage and grab Burt affectionately during the denouement.

Tom had included Cathy mainly to make Angela happy.

Tom’s first plays had been for his mother, then for his mother and Angela. He had only begun to entertain the notion of staging a public performance after half of his own private audience had passed away the previous winter. His mother had always worn her nice skirt to watch his plays since polite people dressed up for the theatre.

Love Among the Cabbages was Tom’s seventh play. The first three were serious studies of the life of agricultural workers, which Tom thought were brilliant, but they received a lukewarm reception from his audience. After working in the fields all day, the last thing Angela and his mom had wanted to think about were their own hard lives.

So Tom had started writing romantic comedies. He thought *Love Among the Cabbages* was his best yet.

While they were stooped together weeding the rows, Angela would ask Tom questions about his new play or try and get him to incorporate her own crazy plot ideas.

“I can’t wait for Saturday!” Angela said. “Did I tell you Mama is bringing her camera?”

“You did.”

“Mama said she was going to take some pictures of you too. I think you should send them out to some people.”

“What people?” Tom asked.

“What about those cousins you have in the capital?” Angela said. “The Snakegrasses. If they saw you, they’d hire you to be in one of their plays. The Shifter Office would have to give you transportation papers because you already had a job. Then, when you get famous, you can get a great big house, and me and Cathy can come visit you.” Most of Angela’s fantasies wound up with both of them living happily in a great big house.

“What about Shorty?”

“He can stay home.” Angela waved the idea aside. “He’d just cause trouble with your wife.”

“My wife?”

“Yeah, your Shifter sugar-mama who takes care of you. Didn’t you say that in Shifter families the women are in charge?”

“Yeah, but—“

“That’s the way it should be anyway,” Angela pronounced. “Your mom told me that she believed everybody has a certain partner and you can fight against loving them but it doesn’t matter. It’s fate.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll get married,” Tom said. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get married.”

Angela looked straight into Tom’s eyes. Her expression verged for a moment on total comprehension of his meaning, which, with a shake of her head, she dispelled. “Everybody thinks that. Just like everybody thinks they won’t have babies, but everybody gets married and has babies someday. You will too; you’ll see.”

2

LOVE AMONG THE CABBAGES WAS SET TO START AT SUNSET. In late July the sun went down around 9:30, so Tom had two hours to finish his preparations.

The weather report predicted thundershowers in the late evening. Tom silently prayed for clear skies. He also prayed that Officer Simpson would come to see him, then felt stupid and retracted his prayer. This was not a quiet car on an empty road. Officer Simpson would be a fool to come here.

Angela's front porch became a makeshift stage. After Angela made Shorty take "all his shit" off her front porch, Tom and Angela strung a line of electric lights around the inside of the tin awning. Even with twenty light bulbs the stage was dim, but in this production the low light would work in Tom's favor, making his costume more believable.

Tom used Angela's bedroom to make up. A big, white four-poster bed took up most of Angela's room. Magazine pictures of beautiful women in beautiful houses were taped neatly on the walls. Tom spread a black plastic garbage bag on the worn red carpet, stripped, and started to rub his fur off. It didn't take much pressure. His fur fell in thick black clumps. He removed everything except the right half his scalp. Burt Butte had short, spiky black hair like Tom's own.

Once he'd gathered up the leavings, Tom put on his shorts and sat at the vanity. Angela had taped an encouraging note to the mirror that read *You're a Star, Tommy!* The note also

covered up the broken place where Shorty had thrown a shoe at Angela but only nailed her reflection.

Looking into a mirror wasn't necessary for transformation, but it helped speed the process. In this form, his nose was straight and flat, and his eyes, apart from being uniformly yellow, were not that much larger than an average Skin's. He had a wide forehead, high cheekbones and a heavy, square jaw. Without his fine black fur, Tom's skin gleamed deep blue-black.

Tom relaxed completely, breathing deeply, and allowed his face to settle back into his alpha form, the face he was born wearing. His complexion changed to a cinnamon color. His nose lengthened and grew pointier. His eyes remained yellow. His mother had taught him to hide this face—his father's face—almost before he could walk.

"The only thing Skins find more offensive than being a Black Lion Shifter," she'd said, "is being a half-breed. If they know you're part Skin, they'll take you away from me."

So Tom had hidden his alpha form in public, but sometimes, alone in the bathroom, he would look at his alpha form and wonder what his father had been like. Now he only saw his alpha form when he was getting ready for plays. Both Burt and Ermaline were Skins, so his alpha form made a good starting point.

He compressed his whole body eight inches, to bulk up his muscles.

Tom addressed the Burt half of his body first because it was easier. He lightened his skin and added red tones until he was bronze all over. Then he sculpted his flesh, fattening his chest and biceps. Last, he changed the color of Burt's eye to steely gray.

Ermaline's half of Tom's body took more work. Tom lightened his skin until it was almost transparent and grew long red hair, which he put in a braid. He reduced Ermaline's

jaw line and widened her eye. He turned her iris green. Tom pushed out one heavy breast, pulled in his waist, and rounded his hip and left buttock.

Tom's costume lay on Angela's bed. It was a one-piece with a zipper up the back. On the right side was Burt's outfit of blue jeans, red shirt, and vest; on the left, Ermaline's lavender-checked gingham dress with purple rickrack trim. The two were sewn together right down the center. Tom zipped himself up and adjusted his flesh to better fit the costume.

He donned one cowboy boot and one ladies shoe (borrowed from Shorty and Angela, respectively) and shortened Ermaline's leg appropriately to even up the difference in the heels. He grew Ermaline's nails out and used some of Angela's nail polish to paint them red. Then he flopped back on the bed, waiting for the polish to dry, and called Angela in to do his makeup. Tom knew how to do it himself, but it was so close to showtime that his hands shook. Besides, Angela liked putting mascara on him.

"You look so good!" Angela wore her best suit: a pink skirt and jacket with a ruffled white blouse and white shoes. Her hair was still wound around fat, hot rollers. "Turn around for me."

Tom did as directed, feeling Ermaline's skirt sway around his legs.

"Does everything fit all right?" he asked.

"It looks great. You're even more beautiful than when you did *Romance on Goat Hill*. More handsome too." Angela jabbed Tom's Burt half with her pointy elbow.

Angela applied his makeup expertly. Ermaline got ruby red lips, pink cheeks, and long, black eyelashes. Angela sat back, pondering, then said, "I think Burt needs a mustache. He's a manly guy, and I think he wouldn't want to shave a lot."

Tom turned back to the mirror and pushed out a thick black mustache on Burt's face. Angela clapped, then grabbed

her nail scissors and trimmed the hairs along his lip. She fussed with Tom's hair, applying shiny pomade to Burt's hair and fixing Ermaline's braid with a cloud of hairspray.

Shorty banged on the door.

"Ten minutes till curtain," Shorty hollered.

"I told him to say that!" Angela bubbled with glee. She rushed to the window and peeked between the curtains. "Oh my God, there's so many people here! There's people I don't even know. Okay, I'm going to announce you."

"You should take your hair down first," Tom remarked.

"Oh shit!" Angela's hand flew to her head. She rushed from the room, shedding curlers in her wake.

Tom paced the room, warming up his voice. He switched from Burt to Ermaline and back again. He drank a little water. Sweat prickled beneath Ermaline's breast and ran in a little trickle down her stomach.

The sound of the crowd increased. Their jumbled voices formed a solid mass of noise. Finally, Shorty came to get him. Shorty was five feet of solid muscle and black moustache. Tom had once seen him carry a refrigerator for a quarter of a mile without breaking a sweat.

"Tom, you are one weird-looking motherfucker." Shorty shook his head.

"Mom called it my own special gift," Tom replied. "How does the crowd look?"

"Drunk. Feeling good. I think the weather's going to hold up."

Tom followed Shorty down the narrow hallway leading to the living room. Once he stepped out the front door he would be on stage.

"Break a leg, man," Shorty said.

Tom nodded and listened for his cue. He felt sick and excited.

"Okay, everybody settle down now, the play's starting!" Angela flipped off the porch lights and stepped back inside. Tom walked out onto the darkened porch. His eyes dilated

wide to see the crowd sprawled on blankets and lawn chairs. Close to a hundred of his coworkers and their families had shown up. The turbulent night sky seethed behind them. Hot, twisting currents breezed across Tom's denuded skin. The air didn't smell like rain, just Shorty's menthol cigarettes. A wave of terrible nervousness rippled through Tom's guts. He clenched his hands tightly together in prayer.

He stood with Ermaline toward the audience. Angela cued the opening music. Twangy guitar noises blasted out from speakers in the living room window. The lights went up and Tom could no longer see the audience.

"Dear God," Ermaline's sweet, womanly voice rang out into the hot summer night. "I was just wanting to say thank you. Thank you for the food we eat. Thank you for the world so sweet. Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you, God, for everything!"

Ermaline's hand fell, and she seemed about to exit the stage when suddenly she lifted her hand again, high over her head, and peered high into the sky.

"Please God, I need a man!" Ermaline wailed into the unforgiving night. "I been a widow too long! I got no family, and my baby needs a daddy! A good-looking man would be nice, but Sweet Lord, I'll take anything! Just send me a man!"

Tom took a step forward and pivoted so Burt Butte came into the audience's view. A crash of applause washed over him, and Tom paused until the crowd had quieted.

"Would this one do?" Burt inquired raffishly.

Tom pivoted again, to show Ermaline.

"And who, sir, are you, to be standing in my cabbage patch so boldly?"

"I'm Burt Butte." Burt whipped a plastic rose from his sleeve. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

And the play began. Lines rolled out of Tom's mouth. His body knew the motions. For ninety minutes Tom became a

conduit for the story. Burt and Ermaline's love blossomed. Tragedy struck when authorities discovered Burt's migrant work permit had expired and deported him, but at the last moment a cyclone lifted Burt up and carried him straight back to Ermaline's cabbage patch, miraculously leaving the cabbages intact.

"Dear Burt!" Ermaline cried. "Is that you who God carried back to me on the wings of that twister?"

"That it is, Sweet Ermaline," Burt assured her.

Little Cathy toddled out and Burt swept her up in his arms.

"Daddy's home!" Burt proclaimed.

Thunder rippled across the sky, mingled with the rapid flashes of Cathy's grandma's camera. Then the lights went down. The audience burst into drunken hoots. The applause was louder than Tom had ever imagined. The lights came back up and he turned and faced his audience, who whistled and hooted. Tom bowed and the applause increased. A blast of onion-scent rushed over him. Tom straightened up and saw white pebbles shooting out of the sky. The hail slammed deafeningly against the tin roof over his head.

Lightning flashed, followed immediately by a clap of thunder that shook the air. Then the power went out.

The audience scrambled to get inside or back to their beat-up cars. Cathy began to cry. People shoved their way up Angela's stairs.

Tom loped the fifty yards to his own trailer, pelted by hail and huge raindrops the size of grapes. He burst into his kitchen, soaking wet and stinging. Apart from the hail, he thought the show went pretty well. People laughed when they were supposed to laugh, clapped when they were meant to. Maybe after the storm let up, he could go back and meet his public.

Tom hadn't even closed the door when he smelled a cherry cigar. All thoughts of *Love Among the Cabbages* exited Tom's mind.

"I was waiting for you outside, but it really started coming

down. Hope you don't mind." Officer Simpson sat on Tom's cracked dining room chair, smoking. The end of his cigar glowed bright red in the gray night. Tom's eyes dilated fully so that he could see Simpson clearly. He was out of uniform and sported khakis, a blue nylon jacket, and a baseball cap.

"Make yourself at home." Tom didn't shift back to his black-furred form. Simpson couldn't see him anyway. The living room was too dark for Skin eyes. Officer Simpson walked over to him, easily negotiating the dark room, never even coming close to hitting anything. Tom smelled the familiarity of Simpson's skin and tobacco.

Simpson looked straight at him and smiled in smug satisfaction. "Good job with your play. It was quite the entertainment."

Tom blinked. "You can see me."

"Everybody can see you, Tom. You're right there out in the open, big as life."

"But you can see me now, in the dark." Understanding came to Tom all at once. He blurted out his thoughts. "You're a Shifter, aren't you?"

"Now then, you didn't think you were the only actor in this town, did you?" Simpson ran his thumb along Tom's mouth. "As a performer, you certainly are flashy, but I think I've got you beat on consistency of character in the long term."

"Are you really Officer Simpson?" Tom searched the other man's face.

"Are you really Ermaline? Or are you Burt?" Simpson leaned uncomfortably close. Tom retreated nervously.

"I'm Tom." He backed into the bar that separated the kitchen from the living room area. Rain beat down on the roof, running in rivulets down the dirty windows.

"You can calm down." Simpson retreated to Tom's sofa. "I'm not going to hurt you. Let's just say I'm the same Simpson you've always known and leave it at that."

“What do you want?”

“Well, that’s pretty obvious, I think.” Simpson held out his hand. “Come on now, sit here with me.”

The invitation was everything he’d ever yearned for, and yet this new information made Tom’s picture of Simpson mad-deningly incomplete. Who was this man? He was so certain that Simpson was simply a homosexual that he had never even considered the possibility that he could be more like Tom than Tom had realized.

“No, I don’t want to sit down,” Tom said. “Show me first.”

“Show you what?”

“Your alpha form.”

Simpson shook his head. “The storm could stop at any minute; then your friends will be over here congratulating you. Can’t risk it.”

“If you show me,” Tom stepped closer, “I’ll do anything you want.”

Simpson’s mouth lifted up at the corner.

“Fair enough, but I’ll hold you to it.” He locked the front door to Tom’s trailer and started down the hall.

“This your bedroom?”

“How did you know?”

“Smells like you. May I?”

“Go ahead.”

Simpson walked into Tom’s room. Tom followed, suddenly embarrassed by his single bed and cowboy sheets. Simpson pulled off his jacket and polo shirt, folded them, and laid them on top of Tom’s dresser. He removed his watch, rings, slacks, and even his socks. Simpson’s body was heavily muscled. He had a navy tattoo on his upper left arm—a typical Anchor & Ribbon of fading green ink.

Tom had never seen another man shift before. Simpson’s eyes elongated and slanted, changing from blue to bright orange, the color of ripe pumpkins. His ears grew up into points

as his jaw shifted forward, thick and heavy and muzzle-like. His teeth lengthened. Simpson's spine decompressed until he was slightly taller than Tom. Simpson stood there, lithe and beautiful and Shifter, like him.

Tom expected Simpson's hair to change color, but it didn't. Golden fur sprouted across his shoulders and spread from there until his entire body was covered in very short, very fine blonde hair. Tom reached out and ran his fingers down Simpson's arm, amazed by the sameness of the other man, the softness of his fur. Just touching Simpson eased Tom's loneliness.

Outside, the hail turned to sheeting rain. The sharp, green smell of onions pervaded the room. When Simpson spoke, it was in Shifter tongue.

"I don't understand the Shifter language." Tom stroked Simpson's jaw, feeling the heavy muscles flex.

Simpson shook his head and shrugged helplessly. Tom realized that he was a Silent. The configuration of Simpson's jaw and throat didn't allow him to speak anything but Shifter in his alpha form. Simpson didn't need Skin words to convey his desire, though.

Tom felt electrified, yet ashamed. He had forced Simpson to reveal himself, yet he still wore a costume, his strangely bisected body. For a moment he thought of showing Simpson his cinammon-skinned alpha form, but he couldn't. His caution ran too deep. The rain thinned to a gentle hiss as Tom unwound into his black-furred shape. Tom's skin darkened as velvety fur erupted from beneath it. He pushed Ermaline's long braid off and it fell to the floor like a discarded wig.

Tom's narrow twin bed barely accommodated him; Simpson didn't fit. So he dragged the mattress onto the floor and motioned Tom down beside him. Because Simpson couldn't speak any language Tom could understand, Tom didn't ask any questions. He followed Simpson's lead, mimicking Simpson's

touch, his motions—even the rough Shifter words he didn't understand until ecstasy overcame him.

He sprawled, half on the mattress, half on the floor, chest heaving and sweat-damp. Simpson lay beside him, mouth curled smugly up at the corners. The rain outside had stopped, allowing Tom to hear revelers venturing out of Angela's trailer into the cool summer night. The sour chemical smell of menthol cigarettes drifted through the air, mingling with the smell of bruised onions.

Simpson sighed resolutely, stood, and shed his fur. Tom watched, fascinated, while Simpson compressed back into the shape of the police officer and dressed.

"Your friends will be over soon," he said the moment his jaw settled back into Skin shape. "I better head out."

"Will you come back?"

"Tonight?"

"Ever."

"Oh, I think I'd like to be back before too long," Simpson reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out an envelope, which he handed to Tom. "The question is, will you still be here?"

The envelope contained transportation papers, which would allow Tom to move freely within the state. Under occupation, the papers said *actor*. A melancholy sting undercut Tom's delight.

"Are you trying to tell me to go?" he asked Simpson.

"I just wanted you to know you're free." Simpson pulled Tom to his feet and rested his hand on Tom's hip. "But I do hope you'll stay on for a while. I stand by what I said before. The capital is a filthy, dangerous, rotten shithole. But if you want to go there, it's not my place to stop you."

Tom heard voices approaching and he hugged Simpson, who returned the embrace.

"Come see me next Saturday," Tom whispered into the side of Simpson's neck.

Turnskin

“I will do.”

Angela knocked loudly, causing Simpson to withdraw.

“Hey! Tommy! Come have a drink with us! I got sparkling pink wine!”

As Tom bent to pull on a pair of jeans, he could hear Simpson easing the trailer’s creaky back door closed.

Tom joined Angela, and her mom took his picture six times with the flash. Tom blinked during every photo. As the conversation died down to a slow, drunken murmur, all Tom thought about was his next play.

He thought maybe the hero should be blonde.

3

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, TOM PICKED UP HIS PAYCHECK and immediately went to town to purchase a new set of sheets. He ended up buying a cheap, black percale bed set with a pillowcase included. He chose black because his shed fur wouldn't be so obtrusive against it. After discarding his worn cowboy sheets, Tom stayed up late absently working on his next play while watching reruns of *Assassin!* on his snowy black and white television. His anticipation of Simpson's arrival was so enormous that he needed two distractions to cope with it.

Tom had always liked *Assassin!* It followed the life of Special Forces Agent Alex M., Shifter with a badge, played by Fred Brandt in the actor's breakout role. In every episode of *Assassin!* Alex M. used his Shifter skills to impersonate members of different underworld groups, from petty criminals to radicals bent on destroying the government.

Assassin! relied on prosthetic makeup to simulate the act of shifting even though Brandt himself was widely rumored to be a Shifter in disguise.

Between bursts of static and stilted dialogue, Tom heard his back door creak open, and although he'd been waiting for Simpson's arrival all night, he tried to convince himself that it was Angela who crept in to escape Shorty's all-night poker marathon. He refused to even rise to see who was walking down the hall, lest he be disappointed.

As his guest approached, Tom clenched the edges of his notebook so hard that the spiral wire binding dug into his palm.

Simpson stepped into the living room and stood, hands in his pockets, baseball cap shading his eyes.

“Hope you don’t mind me letting myself in.”

Tom, in spite of his resolution to be aloof, burst into a huge smile and launched himself from the couch. He threw himself into Simpson’s arms with enthusiasm he’d always found stupid when he saw it on TV. Simpson embraced Tom, nuzzling his face into Tom’s neck. Simpson’s hat fell off, and they let it lie. They stood this way for a few moments before Simpson asked, “Is your front door locked?”

“I left it open for you... I mean, in case you wanted to show up.” Tom felt his cheeks get hot. These were not the lines he should be saying now. In *The Killers*, Fred Brandt never blushed when a sultry dame invaded his office. He said something cool. Tom had been rehearsing cool things to say all night, but all lines had evaporated. He took a deep breath. “No, the door’s not locked.”

“Let’s lock it now that I’m here.” Simpson released Tom and took a seat on the couch. After locking, and double-checking the front door, and making sure all the drapes were pulled, Tom dropped down beside Simpson. He let his knee bump against the other man’s. Simpson glanced down at Tom’s leg and rested his hand on Tom’s thigh. Then Simpson scowled at the television.

“I still get surprised that they air this show out here, seeing as how networks won’t show it in the big cities anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Complaints from Shifter advocacy groups, mostly,” Simpson said. “The actor, Fred Brandt, isn’t even a Shifter—just a guy in a fur suit.”

“But he’s rumored to be a Shifter, isn’t he?”

Simpson laughed. “Everybody’s rumored to be a Shifter at some point. The best thing about this show is the subtitled

Shifter-tongue phrases,” Simpson said. “Whoever did the voiceover took a lot of liberties with the script. That’s another reason they don’t show it much anymore. I guess it doesn’t matter out here where no one understands it.”

“What does he say?”

“Well, first of all it’s a woman who does the voice, which is funny enough, but then rather than translating what the script says, she says things like ‘you’re ugly and have stinky fungus feet’ and things of that nature. In a couple of episodes some of her commentary could be described as not suitable for children.”

“I wish I could understand it.” The more Simpson talked about it, the more Tom felt left out of the joke. Childish resentment flared up inside Tom—at his mother for keeping the language from him, and at Simpson for making him think about his mother negatively, and again at Simpson for knowing so much more than Tom about the world. About television shows. About sex.

Simpson turned and studied Tom’s face, seeming to notice Tom’s tension for the first time. “Want to learn your first word?”

Residual petulance made Tom want to refuse, but curiosity and a deep desire to please Simpson overrode his initial defensive reflex.

Simpson made a throaty sound. Short and low.

“What does it mean?”

“Cloud,” Simpson said. “It’s probably the most important word you’ll ever learn in Shifter-tongue.”

“*Cloud...*” Tom mimicked the sound, feeling the word rumble in his throat.

“That’s good,” Simpson said.

“Why is it so important?”

“Well,” Simpson leaned in, kissing Tom’s jaw while his hand explored the muscular terrain of Tom’s thigh, “that would be because it’s my name.”

“I thought your name was Richard,” Tom whispered, breathless.

“The cop’s name is Richard.” Cloud found the fly of Tom’s jeans and pulled it open. “My name is *Cloud*.”

“What’s your last name?” Tom slid his hand under Simpson’s polo shirt.

“*Coldmoon*,” he replied. “My name is *Cloud Coldmoon*.”

“*Cloud Coldmoon*.” Tom repeated the words as best he could. “Does that mean I shouldn’t call you Simpson?”

“I think it would be easier if you just called me Simpson, so you won’t be tempted to use my real name in public. Good habits are key to sustaining impersonation in the long term, or at least that’s what I’ve been told.”

“But if you’re here, where is Richard Simpson?” Tom asked. “Isn’t impersonating him illegal? Won’t the Shifter Agency find out?”

“Don’t rightly know where Simpson is,” Cloud said. “Maybe gone for good. He paid me to take his place for a couple of weeks, then just up and disappeared on me. Since I met you, I don’t care too much if he ever comes back.”

“But don’t you have family someplace that wants you to come home?” Tom asked.

“Like I said, if Simpson never comes home, I’ll be happy.”



It took Angela three months to finally comment on Tom’s strange new distractedness. She diagnosed him with “Chronic Delayed Grief Syndrome,” a term she’d picked up out of a self-help book she’d been reading called *Why Can’t I Feel Good?*

“It’s because you and your mother were so close that you’re not able to mourn her death and move on. In this book there are six warning signs of deep depression. You have them all. I checked them off last night.”

It was Shorty’s poker night, so he and Angela sat in Tom’s kitchen assembling customer orders for her sideline home

cosmetics business while Cathy played with Angela's car keys on the linoleum floor.

"I don't think I have deep depression," Tom said.

"And also the doctor who wrote the book said that people who are depressed get themselves into destructive relationships." Angela slid a tube of blue mascara and a purse-sized perfume into a paper bag and stapled it shut.

"I'm not in a relationship."

"Is that so?" Angela's penciled eyebrows went up. "Cause Shorty said he seen a man come out of your place two Saturday nights in a row. Late."

Tom froze, a tube of frosted pink lipstick in his hand. Angela continued.

"I told Shorty he was wrong, so he woke me up last Saturday and I saw that guy coming out around 4:30 in the morning. I told Shorty that this guy was probably just your dealer, but I know he's not."

"Does anybody else know?" Tom could barely speak.

"No, and Shorty couldn't tell who the guy was. You should tell him not to come around anymore."

"But you saw him?"

"Sure I did," Angela said. "I know exactly who he is. That's why I said you've gotten into what this book calls a 'Destructive Love Spiral.' You probably only like him 'cause you didn't have a dad and he's an authority figure."

Tom woke himself from his fearful, cold paralysis and started sorting through eye shadow colors. In the neighboring trailer, a shout went up from the guys playing poker. Their cheers seemed sinister.

"I like him," Tom whispered.

"You're a good-looking man and you could do better, but I won't say nothing more about it." Angela took a breath and then went on to instantly contradict herself. "But you need to be more careful. Meet someplace else. Maybe, you know... in disguise."

Maybe you should meet in town once in a while. You need to learn to work with what you've got if you're going to see a man like that, Tommy."

Tom leaned close to Angela. He could smell her Salon Super-rich formula green apple shampoo.

"If you mean I should change my appearance, that's illegal," Tom said.

"Lots of things is illegal," Angela said.

"But he's a cop," Tom insisted.

"He's a cop who doesn't want to get caught." Angela sat back, regarding Tom with concern. "See, that's why I'm worried. You just don't want no man who's ashamed to be seen with you. Remember when I was seeing Louis? Your mom told me that I should never stay with a man who wanted to keep me a secret, and she was right. Look how that turned out."

"Simpson isn't married," Tom said.

"You're his secret, Tommy."

"I'm never going be anything except a secret to any guy in this town. Even if a man here had the guts to love another man, he'd never pick a Shifter. That would be like fucking an animal." The bitterness in Tom's voice surprised even him. "So why can't I have Simpson while he still wants me?"

Angela's expression convulsed in shocked sympathy. She mutely shook her head and opened her mouth as though she had tried and failed to formulate a meaningful refutation of Tom's logic. Eventually she just said, "What you're talking about, living that way, it's no kind of life. That's all."



"*So what's this?*" Cloud held golden onion up by its withered stalk. The onion fields lay fallow once summer's heat had passed. Roadside stands sold fat pumpkins, and corn mazes popped up everywhere. Field work had dried up, but Tom found a temporary job plucking turkeys at the poultry processing plant. The cold night air smelled of snow.

“Onion.” Shifter words came more easily to Tom’s tongue than they had before. He’d been learning sections of the Shifter Phrasebook Cloud had given him with the same zeal he’d previously applied to memorizing monologues from *100 Classic Scenes*. “*That is a yellow onion.*”

“*And this?*”

“*Paper. Cloud is holding a piece of paper.*”

“*God, I love it when you say my name,*” Cloud murmured.

Tom smiled and sidled up next to him. Practicing speaking Shifter tongue wasn’t easy. There were two strange and difficult conjugations: the Honorific, used for elders and women, and the Dreaming, reserved for hypothetical situations.

“*If, as if in a dream, I were to come upon Cloud in the shower, I wonder what I would do?*” Tom stumbled over the words but managed slowly to get them right. “*I wonder what Cloud’s revered mother would say if she found us.*”

Cloud’s sensual expression faded, as if two doors had closed over his face, whenever Tom asked about Cloud’s family in the capital.

“*You wouldn’t call my mother revered, not even to her face,*” Cloud said. “*You’d call her Boss.*”

“*Why?*”

“*She’s not exactly a holy elder,*” Cloud said. The strained way he spoke made Tom abandon the subject.

“*Does the Black Lion Clan speak the same kind of Shifter that the Coldmoon Clan speaks?*”

“*They have a weird accent over in Fort Shane City, but it’s the same language.*” Cloud relaxed again, leaning his shoulder against Tom’s. “*And the Coldmoons are just a family inside the River Clan, but hardly anyone but old women pay attention to what clan you’re in anymore.*”

“*But you all still know what clan you’re from, so it must mean something,*” Tom said. “*My mom only mentioned it one time. We were looking at the Locke and Harding mail-order*

catalog, and my mom pointed at a Black Lion knot rug and said that her family made them.”

“It’s so strange that your mother didn’t tell you anything about the Black Lion Clan,” Cloud said. *“She must have had a pretty big grudge. What do you think it could have been?”*

An opportunity opened up for Tom to tell Cloud about his father and Tom hesitated. What if Cloud thought less of him for being a half-blood? Tom couldn’t bear the idea of rejection—of Cloud’s face closing up and never opening again. He let the moment pass.

“I don’t know,” he said. *“She didn’t ever say.”*

“Typical mother,” Cloud said.

“She sure was.”



The night of the first snow, Cloud arrived later than usual. When he did appear, he wore running shoes and a hunted expression.

“Come here,” Cloud said. Tom complied and Cloud caught him in a fierce embrace that could be nothing but a precursor to bad news. Tom went limp inside in preparation for the blow.

“Can you understand me when I speak Shifter?”

“Yes, pretty well.” Tom switched to the words that had comprised their secret language.

“I can’t stay in town anymore,” Cloud said. *“I can’t even stay here too long.”*

“Why?”

“They found Richard Simpson’s body. They’re going to think I killed him.”

“Did you?” The words were out before Tom could consider whether or not he really wanted to know the answer.

Cloud looked at the floor. It was enough of an answer. *“They’ve called the Shifter Agency. They’re sending a blood identification team.”*

“How do you know this?”

“That dumbass Mayle was talking about it on the radio. He’s the shittiest cop I ever met. I made a better cop than him any—” Cloud stopped himself mid-rant. *“When the Shifter Agency arrives, I’m fucked. They’ll test everyone. Babies, quadruple amputees—everyone. It’s their policy to even continually check each other.”*

Tom felt like he’d been kicked in the stomach. *“Then you can’t stay.”*

Cloud shook his head. *“I wanted to come and tell you I loved you, but if I tell you now, you’ll think I’m just saying it because I’m leaving.”*

Tom swallowed. *“You probably shouldn’t tell me then.”*

“Probably not.” Cloud pulled Tom close again, and this time Tom’s embrace was just as fierce as Cloud’s, as if the vital strength in his arms could be stronger than the law pulling Cloud away from him.

Maybe if I held on tightly enough, Tom thought, maybe he’ll ask me to come with him. If he asks me, I’ll go.

Cloud didn’t ask Tom to come along; he just let go. He shrugged off Tom’s arms, an expression of benevolence verging on condescension on his face.

Tom thought, he thinks he’s being kind to me by not taking me with him. Standing on some moral high ground reserved for noble criminals. The bastard... He’s not even going to try. And so Tom didn’t let Cloud bid him a fond farewell. Filled with hurt and anger, Tom beat Cloud to the punch.

“Goodbye, Cloud.”

Cloud flinched at the sound of his real name spoken aloud, and Tom could see his composure crumbling as he turned away, mumbling a broken goodbye. He didn’t even close the door behind him.



Angela came to Tom later that night, after he'd stopped crying and fallen into a restless sleep. He heard her footsteps coming into his room and sat up, hoping that Cloud had returned. The sight of Angela confused Tom. She'd been filling in for her mother, who washed dishes nights at Scotty's All-Night, the truck stop on Route 10. Angela still wore her wet t-shirt. She smelled like grease.

"Get up, Tommy." She grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. "You've got to go."

Tom pulled his arm away from her, too tired of being jerked around today to tolerate it even from his best friend.

"What are you doing in here?"

Angela had grabbed Tom's red backpack and started shoving underwear into it.

"You've got to go right now," Angela repeated. "Do you still have your transportation papers?"

"Yes." Dread crept through his stomach. This could only have to do with Cloud. "Why?"

"The cops are coming for you."

"What? Who told you that?"

"Just get your stuff," Angela said. "I'll explain in the car."

Tom dressed and grabbed the things he thought he'd need. Extra pants. A couple of shirts. The notebook containing all his plays, including his work in progress. Toothbrush. The photo of his mother and him at his graduation. A photo of Angela and him taken by Cathy's grandma on the opening night of *Love Among the Cabbages*. The postcard of the Snakegrass Theatre.

He'd have taken something of Cloud's, but Cloud had never left anything. "No evidence to find," he'd joked.

Tom followed Angela out the back door.

"I'm parked across the field," she said, crouching low.

"I see it."

Angela started forward, then stumbled blindly into a low irrigation rut. Tom stepped in front of her and took her hand. He dilated his eyes wide and saw Angela's car parked on the side of the road. He picked his way through the dark, muddy field leading Angela, whispering instructions to her only as necessary.

When they reached the car Tom said, "Give me the keys."

"Why?"

"I can drive with the lights off till we get around the curve."

"Good idea." She handed him her keychain and they drove away. Once they were around the bend, they switched.

"Some cops were in the truck stop tonight. They were drinking coffee and eating pie like they always do. They always stiff Michelle too, those cheap fuckers. And do you know they don't even pay for anything at Scotty's?"

"No," Tom said.

"They were telling Michelle how the Shifter Agency is coming tomorrow to take the Shifter away, and I heard them, and I ... I came to get you. I told Michelle I had to go home to give Cathy some medicine I forgot to put out."

"It's not me," Tom said.

"You're the only Shifter in town!" Angela banged her hands on the steering wheel in frustration. "They said that their friend Richard Simpson had been murdered and a Shifter was responsible."

Angela glanced over at him, looking for a shocked reaction, which Tom didn't have.

"You already knew he was dead, didn't you? I knew it. Oh, Tommy! Why didn't you just break up with him?"

Tom stared out the window at the night stars. She thought he'd done it. Angela thought he murdered the real Simpson in a fit of passion.

"I didn't do it."

“Of course you didn’t.” Angela clutched the steering wheel. “But it’s time for you to move on anyway. Your star is rising. You’re going to be a big hit in the capital. You’re going to be famous.”

They pulled into Stovepipe Rock a few minutes later. The night sky was beginning to gray with the approaching morning. The Stovepipe Rock Bus Station was just a park bench and a sign in front of the filling station on Main Street. A mimeographed schedule was taped onto the filling station window. The next bus came through town at 5:45. It was 4:30.

“I have to finish the dishes at Scotty’s,” Angela said. “Michelle said she’d cover for me as long as I came back before the morning crew comes in at 6. Have you got any money?”

“I have twenty bucks.”

Angela dug into her pocket, pulled out a wad of bills, and counted them. “I’ve got sixty-three dollars. You take it.”

Tom did so without argument.

“Thanks for everything,” Tom said.

“Oh God.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “You take care. I’ll write you when it’s okay to come back.”

“Okay.” Tom’s throat felt raw.

“But you won’t want to anyway ‘cause you’re going to be a big star.” Angela’s voice broke on the last word. She sniffed and hugged him, then got into her car. Tom watched her taillights recede to nothing before he went to the bus stop to wait.

4

EVERY TIME THE BUS PASSED A POLICE CRUISER, TOM slumped low in his seat. He told himself he had to stop this suspicious behavior. But he could not suppress his reflex to hide any more than he could stop himself from searching for Cloud among his fellow passengers.

For the first three stops, no Shifters boarded; only Skins. Tom scrutinized each new arrival intently though without specific criteria, so the unfamiliarity of their expressions began to frustrate him. How could he recognize Cloud anyway if he were in disguise? Would there be some resonance that would alert him to Cloud? What about the squat motherly-type knitting in the third row? Could she be Cloud?

Anger at Cloud would well up and for a time relieve him of his fear, so that he could almost not cringe at the sight of a sheriff's car speeding past. He wished Angela were with him. She would have been able to keep up a constant stream of diverting conversation. But she was not here. More than that, he might not ever see Angela again.

At the fourth stop a whole Shifter crew came on, stomping and shivering at the cold. Three chocolates, two reds, and two blacks invaded the back six rows of seats. Most carried hard hats and toolboxes. The men flopped down into the seats like it was the first time they were sitting down in days, groaning and sighing and stretching out their legs. Tom stole a glance at the logo on the man across the aisle's hardhat and recognized the two interlocking C's of the Coal-Comstock railroad.

“Better get some rest while we can.” The redfox Shifter across from Tom noticed him staring. “Hi there, Blackie.”

“Hi.” Tom extended his hand, embarrassed at being caught looking for Cloud. “I’m Tom.”

“Virgil.” They shook hands.

“Where are you fellows headed?”

“Riverside,” Virgil said.

“Me too,” Tom said. “You fellows live there?”

“That’s right. Yourself?”

“I’m going there to visit my cousins.”

“Hope they’re not meeting you at the Harmony Gate Station,” Virgil said.

“Why not?”

“Municipal transit strike. All the trains are stopped. Lots of the other unions are on sympathetic strike with them, including ours. That’s why we’re riding this damn bus back into town. CCR Redline is stopped on the tracks for probably the whole weekend. Poor engineer has to stay with the train in East Sandflat. Not a lot of entertainment opportunities in East Sandflat.” Virgil opened up his lunchbox. Inside Tom spied three mysterious wraps, a crimson pear, and a tin full of hot pickled cabbage. The smell pervaded the bus, and the knitting woman turned around to glare. Virgil ignored her and offered a wrap to Tom.

“Want one? It’s red chicken.”

Tom didn’t know what red chicken was, but accepted anyway. The sauce turned out to be so hot his eyes watered and his nose ran uncontrollably. Virgil chuckled.

“Yeah, my wife makes it hot.”

This comment was greeted by appreciative hoots from Virgil’s coworkers until the bus driver shouted for them to settle down.

Virgil offered Tom a drink from a thermos full of milky tea. He asked, “You ever been to Riverside before?”

“No, I haven’t, sir. Stovepipe Rock is the biggest place I’ve ever been.”

Virgil let out a low whistle. “Stovepipe Rock? I didn’t even know any Shifters lived out that far. Well, I don’t want to tell you your business, but a fellow like you might want to be a little careful when you get to the city.”

“How do you mean?” Tom wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“He means watch out for guys like Knockout Henry,” the chocolate Shifter seated in front of Virgil offered without looking up from his paperback. “He’s got a special knack for attracting rubes.”

“Who’s Knockout Henry?”

“He’s an older guy who likes young fellows like yourself,” Virgil said. “He chloroforms them and, well, takes advantage of them.”

“He got my little cousin from Beaver Crossing last summer, the rat bastard,” the chocolate said. “His mother’s a council-woman, so the law can’t touch him. Used to be that you could trust a mother to be honest. Now they’re just in bed with the Skins like everyone else.”

Virgil patted Tom on the shoulder. “What I meant to say was I think you should keep a better eye on your backpack once you get into the city. Pickpockets will be after you.”

The thought of money made Tom uneasy. After paying for the bus ticket, he had forty-three dollars to his name. Following Virgil’s advice, he lodged the bills in his front pocket.

Tom and Virgil chatted intermittently for the next four hours, allowing long lapses between their exchanges where Virgil slept and Tom stared out at the passing landscape. This was the trip he’d dreamed of taking since he was a kid. Having Cloud with him had made the last few months back home bearable but hadn’t removed his desire to eventually leave. Now, finally he’d left his mother’s house in the fields behind. He’d fled in the dead of night as a fugitive. Still, he felt proud.

The terrain changed from farmland to hilly ranch spreads. Cattle dotted the rolling foothills, and jagged blue mountains lined the horizon. He'd never seen mountains in real life; the massiveness of them thrilled him. The bus ascended, engine groaning and sputtering up the mountains. Stops became more infrequent. The highway followed the river through the sheer cliff faces of Devil's Canyon. It became noticeably cooler and Tom's ears plugged up. He worked his jaw unconsciously.

And what about Angela? What was she doing right now? The image of masked Shifter Agency Operatives interrogating his friend filled him with guilty terror. He was so tired that his fear dulled to a nausea that dropped into his stomach to keep the red chicken company.

Virgil pulled a snore so loud that he managed to wake himself up. He opened his eyes long enough to cursorily assess the passing geography.

"Halfway there," he mumbled to Tom before settling back into a doze. They began their descent out of the mountains. Tom peered anxiously ahead at every curve, knowing that around one of these bends he would have his first glimpse of Riverside.

Riverside, the city where Cloud went. Tom was sure of it. He wondered if he'd even be able to find Cloud in the famous crowds, then felt a fool for even wanting to.

The highway started to look familiar, and Tom realized he'd seen this road before in *The Killers*. He could hear Fred Brandt's low voiceover clearly in his head.

"Riverside. The capital city. Center of culture. Height of fashion. Riverside—the Bitch-Goddess of a town that gives you everything she's got with one hand while she picks your pocket with the other. She's my town..."

Hours and hundreds of snores later, the bus emerged from the mountains onto a high plateau from which they could see the whole city sprawled out along the flat river-valley below.

Tom could see the glittery waves of Blacksnake River winding its way through the city and the small black bands of several of the 129 bridges that crossed it. The sun set lower, igniting the smog that hung over Riverside, turning the yellow-brown haze into an electric pink spectacle.

Even the haze excited Tom, because it was a famous haze endlessly ranted against and complained about by writers lucky enough to live within it. Soon he would live in and bitch about that haze. He would fight the rats and feral foxes. He would stomp cockroaches and wait for late trains at Horsemarket Commons Station, just like Fred Brandt had. He would not think of Cloud or look for him or cry because Cloud had left him.

He would disappear in the masses of Shifters, and the police would never find him. He would live a new life in a new town.

The bus descended the plateau in a series of switchbacks and entered the fringes of town. A sign, Riverside City Limits, stood on the right. The Shifter travel checkpoint loomed ahead of them. Tom would need an entry stamp to enter the city.

The bus stopped. The driver announced that he would now join his comrades in the Metropolitan Democratic Transit Workers Union picket line and, to a rousing cheer from the railroad workers, disembarked. Slightly dazed, Tom stood and followed Virgil off the bus. He asked if Harmony Gate Station was nearby and was rewarded with a sympathetic chuckle. Virgil led him to the map on the bus station wall. They were, according to the key, still thirty-five miles away from the Shifter District.

“Come on,” said Virgil, “you can ride up with us. My wife’s bringing her truck down.”

He and the rest of the Shifters lined up to get their entry stamps from the customs officer stationed there. But it became clear that the customs officer was also on strike. She sat in her

window resolutely reading a book. She'd left her stamp and a stamp pad out on the counter. Virgil walked up and tipped his hat to her. She glanced up.

"Hi there, Virgil. You'll have to stamp yourselves. I'm on a job action." She waved at the stamp pad. Across the counter he saw a yellow piece of paper taped to the wall. It said:

To be detained:

Addler, Sharon

Fletcher, Thomas

Redriver, Sparrow

Tom gripped his Transportation Book hard to keep his hands from shaking. Virgil stamped his own book and then Tom's before handing the stamp to Wallace and walking through the open gate past two other customs agents, who were stubbornly playing cribbage and did not look up.

He was inside the city.

Virgil's wife took twenty minutes to arrive. These were the longest minutes of Tom's life. Uniformed officers came within inches of him—even looked straight at him—then dismissed him. He kept close to Virgil asking quiet questions, unable to listen to or remember his answers. When he climbed into the back of her pickup and drove away, Tom was so relieved that he nearly passed out. Wallace's wife sped down a highway that followed an elevated rail line. Air roared around Tom, and he scooted closer to the other men in the back of the truck, hunching against the cold. The truck sped by a sea of tall, nondescript apartment complexes and large retail shopping centers. Then came older houses with garden walls on long, tree-lined boulevards. Yellow and red leaves clogged the gutters. Then the highway swung up right against the Cox Wall. It was shorter than he imagined—only a couple of yards high and topped with spiraling barbed wire.

Cox Wall separated the historical Shifter district from the rest of Riverside. It had been erected twenty years before, after

a series of savage race riots had ripped through the capital. It was supposed to provide protection for Shifters against Skin encroachment on the old city.

Tom had read that some of the city's best art could be seen on the Cox Wall, but this section seemed to have been recently whitewashed. The truck pulled up to a checkpoint. A Skin officer shined his flashlight in the back of the truck and waved them through. Tom craned his head around the side of the truck. There, before him, he saw the Harmony Gate looming across the road.

Freestanding and glorious, it looked like two enormous tusks planted into the earth, rising up for three stories then crossing delicately at the top. It was made of white marble by Shifter artisans to commemorate the peace treaty signed with General Shane at the cease of hostilities between the two peoples. Beyond the austere, almost primal beauty of the gate, Tom saw a flood of towering neon signs advertising every imaginable vice. The truck plunged down the main drag, into the fray. Tom stared, open-mouthed.

Casinos, with their flashing aces and rolling dice. Liquor bottles tipped into martini glasses. Brothels lined in pink neon flashed pointy-breasted silhouettes or simply the word GIRLS in giant letters. Other establishments sat alongside them, lined in lavender with names like Secret Sailor and Rumors. Hookahs decorated a building called Mystix.

The sidewalks were thick with people, Skins and Shifters alike, and cars jammed the streets. Thick-built Silents pedaled black pedicabs between the cars with little regard for traffic laws. Tom's heart leapt at the sight of the yellow fur, but sank when he saw the Shifter's breasts bouncing under her shirt. Somehow, Tom didn't think Cloud would hide as a woman, whether or not he was running from the law. Besides, the Silents and their pedicabs were everywhere. At least six whizzed by while they stopped at one traffic light.

A couple of minutes later, Virgil's wife stopped the truck in the middle of the street. Virgil leaned out the passenger side.

"You said you wanted to go to the theatre district, right, kid?" he asked Tom.

"Um... yes." Tom stood and reached into his front pocket. "You want any money for gas?"

Virgil waved the offer aside.

The man driving behind them got fed up with waiting and started honking. Startled, Tom hopped out of the back of the truck and watched the CCR guys drive away. It was eight o'clock on Sunday night, and the crisp autumn air was thick with the smell of alcohol, sweat, and weed. Groups of carousers clogged the sidewalk, forming a thick wall of revelry. Shifters of every description hawked their wares at passing pedestrians.

"Hey, country boy! You like fur?" a red-furred Shifter standing in a doorway shouted at him. "You like it red? All-natural red bitches at the Foxhole! Cheap! Come on, you scared of a little fox tail?"

Tom darted away and ran into a Skin woman in a yellow cocktail dress and long fur coat.

"Nice try, amateur." She pulled her pocketbook closer to her side and continued on her way.

He wandered, simply taking in Riverside and acclimating himself to the constant press of humanity with its unremitting competition for space. People, especially business people, seemed to guard their tiny properties with a ferocity Tom had not previously experienced. Sitting was not allowed, nor was lounging against a wall. Simply standing still seemed to offend other pedestrians in a way that mystified Tom. So he tried to fit in, only stopping if he was also pretending to read one of the dozens of handbills pasted to walls and power poles. Reading handbills and lighting cigarettes seemed to comprise a complete list of acceptable reasons to stop moving.

Tom decided to go back to the Gate, think things over, and look for a map that might help him find the Snakegrass Theatre, but once he got back to the Gate the fatigue and sadness of his day overwhelmed him. He could barely think. He needed some sleep. Near the Gate he saw a skinny chocolate girl standing, holding a tall handwritten sign. Her hair was dyed in green stripes. Her sign read “Hostel: Nine Bucks.”



The name “Nine Bucks” referred to both the nine stuffed antelope heads that decorated the wall in the hostel’s common room as well as the price per bed per day. The hostel itself was grimy, in a friendly way. Nine dollars bought Tom a warm bunk and tea & porridge breakfast.

In the morning, folded on Tom’s pillow was a flyer beckoning him to a high-paying, glamorous life of luxury at the Incognito Club.

After washing, Tom sat down at one of the two long dining tables next to the elderly owner and her husband and asked if they knew where to find the Snakegrass Theatre.

“Doesn’t exist,” she said. “At least not since the Cox Wall Riots. It’s a shame. They used to have the best musical revue in town.”

Tom stared down into his porridge bowl. He hadn’t realized until this moment how much of his hope was pinned on finding his cousins and convincing them to let him put on a show there. What kind of fool pinned all his hopes on people he’s never met before? Unconsciously his hand slipped down to his front pocket. He had thirty-four dollars left. Three more nights at Nine Bucks, and he’d be broke. And what could he do? He didn’t have any urban skills. He started reading his Incognito Club flyer. As soon as she saw it, the old woman demanded to know where he got it. When he told her, she summoned the green-haired girl, who turned out to be her granddaughter, and berated the kid for letting “those kind of people” into the hostel.

“I don’t get it; what’s it for?” Tom asked the old man next to him.

The old man poured a thick stream of clear syrup on his porridge. “It’s one of those joints where boys impersonate Shifter women to have sex with Skin men.”

“Don’t the Skins know they’re boys?” Tom felt naïve asking this question, but couldn’t stop himself.

“They know all right, but they’re happy to know they won’t be making babies. Nobody wants a passel of half-blood mongrels running around.”

“Right.” Tom’s porridge turned to paste in his mouth. The grandmother and granddaughter’s argument escalated and began to include the granddaughter’s choice of hairstyle.

“But about the Snakegrass Theatre... the daughter opened it up again, but it’s not the same. It’s gone... what do they call it? Experimental? My granddaughter went see a show there last month, came back, and gave herself that awful dye job.”

“Can you tell me where it is?” Tom’s hope rekindled.

“Same place as before, I think.” The old man stared off in the distance, his watery eyes wobbling slightly as he concentrated. “Over in Cherrygrove Circus. But it’s called the Turnskin now.”

Tom finished his porridge quickly, thanked them, and left the hostel directly after, his sense of urgency stoked by the contempt with which the old man had spoken of mongrels. Tom knew he couldn’t return to Nine Bucks, even if it was cheap. Either he had to find his cousins today, or he’d be looking for a new place to sleep.

He bought a map from the cigarette kiosk down the street. Cherrygrove Circus wasn’t far, and he could get there easily by following Silent Street toward the Cherrygrove Bridge.

His heart hammered as he traced his finger along the outline of Silent Street only one block away. Curiosity gnawed at him.

Golden Pedicab Company stood at the intersection of Harmony & Silent. Rows and rows of shiny pedicabs were lined up behind the chain link fence. Big, yellow Shifters lounged in and among them, smoking cigarettes, eating take-out porridge, and slurping tea while they waited to get their day's assignments. Their growling speech filled Tom's chest with pangs of longing. Cloud's secret language filled the air, and Tom realized now that Cloud hadn't felt the same intimacy that he had when speaking Shifter tongue.

Just past Golden Pedicab was the entrance to Silent Street. It, as far as he could tell, was like the rest of the Shifter Quarter. Cramped buildings and crooked streets. Shops selling porridge and noodles to breakfasting Silents. Many heads turned to look him over, but no one said hello.

But even if Cloud sat at one of those food stalls, would he even say hello to Tom? A miserable tightness settled in his throat and he swallowed it back down. He was so angry at Cloud for leaving him, and yet there was no one he'd rather see now. His stomach growled. Nine Bucks had been stingy with the porridge ration. He passed an open stall selling skewers. Tom mentally counted out his money, and after deciding that he could not afford to spend a single cent, sat down anyway. He squeezed onto an empty stool between two large golden Shifters. His biceps looked skinny compared to the bulging muscles of the man to his right. Being taller than most Skins, Tom wasn't used to feeling small.

The woman running the shop gave him a skewer on a plate along with a small onion pancake and a heap of carrot pickle. Tom tried to eat slowly so that he'd feel like he was eating more, but he devoured the carrot pickle ravenously. His mom had rarely cooked Shifter foods, preferring peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and TV dinners to cooking at all, but every year that Tom could remember, she had made an exception for Shifter pickles. She had put them up by the

caseload at the end of every summer. Most of the vegetables were ones she and Tom gleaned from the fields after harvest. Carrots, onions, turnips, and beets. His mom had sold almost everything she made during the New Year's holiday season, with the exception of the carrots. She always saved those especially for him.

Although he'd bought the skewer for the meat, he focused on the pickle, which brought him near tears. He felt so alone.

The woman running the skewer stand leaned on the counter across from him.

"You look lost, kid," she said.

"I'm not a kid." Tom gulped down his first two hunks of meat without chewing, as if avoiding mastication would somehow demonstrate his mature masculinity. *"I'm twenty-one."*

"That old, huh?" she said. *"You come to Riverside looking for work?"*

"No." Tom felt a twinge of embarrassment at being so easily identified as an out-of-towner. *"I'm looking for a man named Cloud Coldmoon."*

The shopkeeper blinked slowly at Tom. *"You're trying to find Cloud Coldmoon?"*

"Yes!" Tom leaned forward eagerly. This woman seemed to recognize Cloud's name. *"Do you know where he is?"*

"Can't say I do," she replied.

Disappointed, Tom ate his skewer slowly, taking a full ten minutes to consume every scrap of pancake and shred of carrot on his paper plate. Just as he was leaving he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You looking for Cloud Coldmoon?"

A big Silent stood behind him, his orange eyes slitted against the bright morning sun. He wore a very traditional vest with a crescent moon embroidered on each shoulder.

"Yes, I am," Tom said.

"Follow me."

Tom thanked the shopkeeper and followed the Silent around back of the food stand to a narrow, stinking alley full of crates of empty beer bottles. A small, feral fox rooting in some garbage scampered away at their approach. The Silent turned and grabbed Tom by the throat, slamming him hard against the back wall of the food stand. Tom dug his fingers into the Silent's wrist, trying to loosen the bigger man's grip.

"So, why do you want to see Cloud?"

"He's a friend of mine."

The Silent's upper lip curled into a sneer. *"You're a cop, aren't you, pig?"*

"I'm not a cop," Tom gasped. *"I think there's been a mistake. Maybe it's the wrong Cloud..."*

The Silent banged him against the wall again. Tom's head smacked against the wood.

"Tell me what you want from Cloud."

"I just want to see him. We're friends."

"You better start giving me some better answers, pig."

"I'm not lying," Tom whispered. His throat felt like it was going to collapse. *"Please, I can't breathe."*

The Silent released Tom, but only long enough to pull his arm back and punch Tom squarely in the gut. Tom retched. Fat hunks of unchewed meat and carrot pickle splattered onto the ground. The Silent seized his throat again.

"What a tragic waste of a good skewer," a man's voice rumbled.

The Shifter holding Tom's throat turned slightly toward the interloper, but didn't release his grip. The Skin stood there like a movie star. He was tall and slim with dark hair and a complexion the color of caramel. He wore a tan linen suit Tom remembered seeing in *Capital Man* magazine. His sunglasses were definitely from this year's Firetongue Collection. His haircut alone probably cost more than Tom's whole trailer. He wore a pinky ring set with an enormous, glinting

diamond. Behind the Skin, a shiny black pedicab gleamed in the morning sunlight.

The Silent regarded the interloper with what seemed to be puzzled disdain. He let go of Tom's neck and advanced menacingly on Tom's rescuer. Tom coughed and bent over, holding his aching stomach.

"Not that I'm questioning your disciplinary judgment, sir, but I was wondering if you wouldn't mind not beating the merchandise too badly. I was thinking of buying it." The man produced his wallet and removed a large bill. "I know this remuneration can't ever truly make amends for whatever insult he has dealt you, but I hope it can at least nudge you in the direction of forgiveness."

The Silent walked until he stood forehead to forehead with the Skin. The Skin neither flinched nor lost his smile. Tom's heart surged with delight and recognition. It was Cloud. It had to be. Who else would want to help him?

The Silent took the Skin's money and shouldered his way out of the alley. The pedicab driver didn't look at the Silent and hunched submissively as he passed by.

"Cloud?" Tom gasped.

The Skin lifted up his sunglasses to reveal pale blue eyes. Tom saw no glint of recognition within them. "Excuse me?"

"I thought you were someone else," Tom said. He stumbled forward out of the alley, unable to stand up straight.

"Come on," the Skin said, "we should go before he brings back family."

Tom climbed, breathless, into the pedicab. He coughed and spat on the street, wiping his mouth afterward with the back of his hand. The Skin climbed in beside him and offered him a monogrammed handkerchief. The initials were O.H.B.

"Please," the Skin said, "use mine."

"Thanks," Tom mumbled.

"Where would you like to go?" the Skin asked.

“Cherrygrove Circus.”

“Driver, go!” the Skin called to the driver, who started pedaling down the river embankment road.

“I really appreciate your help,” Tom said.

“Not to worry. I happened to see you being lured to the back of the building and couldn’t help but think you were being led there under false pretenses,” the Skin said. “I’m Oscar Highfield-Banks.”

“Tom Fl... Flyer.” Tom shook Oscar’s hand, hoping that his stammer went unnoticed. The pedicab turned up Tanner’s Hill.

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Oscar smiled gorgeously. “But then I find any occasion where I can rescue a handsome young man pleasing. How will you repay my timely kindness, I wonder?”

Tom gaped at Oscar, unable to believe what he seemed to be implying. What man in his right mind would hit on a man he’d just met five minutes before? Tom wondered if this rescue wasn’t just another bad situation.

“I think I’m all right now. I can walk from here.” Tom regarded Oscar with open suspicion.

“I’m just teasing, Tom. I can see that you’re not interested in participating in any of my lurid fantasies. You don’t need to run. I’ll keep my limbs to this side of the pedicab.” Oscar leaned casually back in the seat. Tom could smell his cologne, subtle and woody, like the samples in expensive magazines. Oscar’s scent was a whole world away from Simpson’s grocery store aftershave. “So Tom, are you an actor?”

“I’m a playwright,” Tom said. “Why?”

“I was wondering what business you had in Cherrygrove Circus. I thought actor or dancer of the non-exotic variety. Have I seen any of your plays?”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, you must certainly send me an announcement when you’re having your debut.” Oscar opened up a silver case and produced a card. “I’m always interested in seeing new works. Theatre is a fascination of mine.”

They turned onto a busy, traffic-clogged thoroughfare. Exhaust choked him. Oscar didn’t seem to notice. Nor did Oscar seem worried by their pedicab driver’s suicidal lunges into and out of the streams of cars. As they careened between delivery vehicles, sedans, and angry motorcycle couriers, Oscar chatted about the unseasonably hot weather. Tom gripped the edge of the pedicab, terrified that they’d be killed any second.

After about five minutes, they reached the Cherrygrove Circus.

“Be sure to send me your announcement,” Oscar said as Tom climbed down to the sidewalk. “I really do frequent the theatre.”

“I will,” Tom said.

Tom watched the pedicab pull away, running his fingers along the thick edge of Oscar’s card.

Riverside might be a bitch-goddess who would give you everything she had with one hand while picking your pocket with the other. Yet as Tom pocketed Oscar’s card, he thought it could also go the other way around. If you were willing to let her slap you around a little, the city might give you a chance at a whole new life.

5

CHERRYGROVE CIRCUS WAS A ROUNDABOUT INTERSECTION where Silent Street merged with four other thoroughfares. Theatres and taverns surrounded a tall, central fountain where two sculpted dogfish spit water down into a wide basin carved to look like a massive fish basket. Cars and pedicabs already jammed the narrow street even though none of the theatres or taverns seemed to be open yet.

Except for the newly painted sign, the façade of the Snakegrass Theatre was exactly the same as in the postcard. Tom approached, worrying the old postcard with his thumb. What if his cousins weren't there anymore? What would he do then? Trepidation made him hesitant even to pull the bell chain, but when he eventually worked up the courage, a bronze Shifter woman answered the door. Her gravity-defying curls stuck up all around her head like a halo. She still wore her nightgown, even though it was nearly 10 a.m. Through the thin fabric Tom could clearly see the generous curve of her breasts.

"Hello," Tom began. "I'm—"

"What does the sign on the front of this door say?" she asked.

"No soliciting?" Tom read aloud. "I'm not selling anything. I'm Tom Fletcher."

The woman squinted at him and said, "So what?"

"My aunt's family, the Snakegrasses, used to own this theatre. I was wondering if you knew where I could find them." Tom hefted his backpack. "I'm sorry if I woke you up."

“I’m Scarlett Snakegrass.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s your mother’s name again?”

“Rose Southwind from East Sandflat.” Tom dug the old postcard out of his pocket and presented it to Scarlett as if to prove his identity. Scarlett took the postcard and turned it over, reading the decade-old writing.

“So you’re Aunt Rose’s son, the little actor.”

“Yes,” Tom replied. How had Scarlett known that he was an actor? His mother must have written about his plays to Uncle River. Embarrassment knifed through him. What else did Scarlett already know? He hoped his mother hadn’t sent pictures.

Scarlett squinted at him again and then nodded to herself as though she was satisfied at the resemblance. “How is Aunt Rose doing these days?”

“She’s passed away.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. What was your name again?”

“Tom.”

“Well come in, Tom.” Scarlett stepped aside and let him enter the theatre’s low-ceilinged green foyer. She took an immediate left and opened a door directly behind the box office. “Righteous and Cyprus are still asleep, but you can come up.”

Tom followed her up a narrow flight of stairs that led to the second floor. Odd set pieces and racks of costumes filled the space directly over the auditorium. The space above the foyer turned out to be an apartment. Scarlett led him through the living room to the yellow kitchen and out onto a balcony that overlooked Cherrygrove Circus. She lit a cigarette and offered Tom one. He declined.

“So what brings you to Riverside?”



Tom could tell from the decayed ornamental plasterwork that the auditorium had once been magnificent. Now hunks

of the ceiling threatened to drop without warning onto the twenty rows of red velvet seats. Tom was glad to be up on the stage, even if only wearing his boxers and a thin t-shirt. His three cousins sat in the audience: Scarlett, her younger brother, Cyprus, and a tall person called Righteous to whom Tom could assign no gender. Righteous had either dyed or shifted his or her coat to be black with white spots, like a reverse Dalmatian. A crest of bristly orange hair shot up from the center of Righteous's cranium and flowed down its bare back, like a horse's mane. Most shocking were the firm, grapefruit-sized breasts in combination with an obvious trouser-bulge.

Cyprus resembled Scarlett in color: bronze fur and yellow-green eyes. Unlike Scarlett, Cyprus's scalp was cropped so short that there was no differentiation between it and his fur. And his body was flat and angular with wide shoulders and lanky limbs that reminded Tom of his own mom's lean build.

All three Shifters still wore their pajamas. Scarlett smoked a thin, brown cigarette. Cyprus leafed through the pile of manuscript pages Tom had just given him. Righteous merely looked at Tom severely and said, "You may begin."

"This is a scene from my newest work, *Love Among the Cabbages*." Tom took a deep breath and, in just ten seconds, made himself into Ermaline and Burt. To Tom's delight, Scarlett clapped. Cyprus leaned forward with interest while Righteous blinked in obvious surprise. Confidence flooded Tom. His mom had told him he shifted faster than anyone she'd ever seen, and now he knew he'd been right to believe her.

Then he started reciting the lines of his play.

Righteous stood up and left the theatre. Cyprus leaned back in his seat, leafing impatiently through the script. Only Scarlett still watched, a slightly amused smile on her face. Tom persevered. He played to Scarlett and ignored the others.

Scarlett laughed a couple of times. Up on stage, Tom was dying. He got to the end of the first scene before Righteous returned, holding a mug of tea. Righteous whispered something to Cyprus, who stood up.

“I think that’s enough,” Cyprus said.

“Damn right,” Scarlett said. “Your shifting is amazing! I’ve seen a lot of quick-shift artists, and you are a pro.”

“Really?” Tom tried to not to sound as out of breath as he was.

“I love it.” Scarlett turned to Cyprus. “What do you think?”

“I think your play is well-crafted,” Cyprus said. “But I’m afraid that, generally speaking, we don’t stage comedies at Turnskin.”

“Why can’t we do a comedy? I thought it was pretty funny,” Scarlett said.

“There are already enough works reducing Shifters to clownish buffoons.” Righteous’s deep voice carried across the theatre. “That paradigm doesn’t depend on our contribution for its continued existence.”

“You can be so pompous. I think this would sell some tickets.” Scarlett shook a crumpled cigarette out of her packet.

“Of course, you think of nothing but money,” Righteous said. “Like always.”

“And you’re happy enough to sponge off me while contributing nothing to—” Scarlett’s reply was cut short by Cyprus’s loud cough.

“So, we clearly need a little time to come to a decision, Tom.”

“If this represents your entire repertoire, I don’t think it will be necessary,” Righteous said.

Tom’s heart sank, but he steeled himself and started shifting back to his black-furred form.

“No, you stay up there, Tom.” Scarlett turned to Righteous. “Listen, I’ve just about had it with this attitude of yours.”

“It’s not an attitude,” Righteous said. “It’s my personality.”

“Righteous—” Cyprus began, but Scarlett cut him off.

“I think it’s that fucking cult talking,” Scarlett said. “I didn’t send you to university so you could join a fucking cult and come back and shit all over your origins.”

“The SLF is not a cult!” Righteous leapt up. “And I don’t take orders from anyone who whores themselves out to the Skin Male-Dominance Agenda for a few ticket sales.”

Scarlett took a drag of her cigarette and crushed it out on the seat next to her. Slowly, she stood. Cyprus looked back and forth between them. Scarlett leapt at Righteous, who turned and ran out of the auditorium with Scarlett in hot pursuit.

Tom wondered if he should really be hoping to stay with his cousins. They were much younger than he expected.

He looked at Cyprus, who also stood and gave Tom a bleak smile in return.

“Family...” Cyprus said by way of excuse. “As I said before, we don’t normally stage comedies for precisely this reason. The politics cause too much strain.”

“I can see that,” Tom said.

“I have to say that think you’re a really talented performer though. I’m sure we’ll find a place for you in the theatre,” Cyprus said.

“I write serious plays as well,” Tom said suddenly, heartened by Cyprus’s compliment.

“Sure.” Cyprus walked to the stage handed Tom’s script back to him.

“I have one of them with me. It’s about my mother.” Tom pressed on, “She’d just come to town from Fort Shane City. She was a former army nurse and eight months pregnant.”

“Your mother was in the army?” Cyprus looked horrified. “Father never told us that. No wonder Grandmother wouldn’t talk about her.”

Tom pulled on his shirt and pushed the pearlized button snaps together. “In the play this Shifter woman can only get

work in the fields, even though she's a trained medical professional."

"Yes, but why would any Shifter leave Fort Shane City to go to... Where are you from?"

"East Sandflat. Out near Stovepipe Rock," Tom said.

"I don't even know where that is," Cyprus said.

"It's okay, no one does." Tom threaded his belt through his belt loops. "To answer your question, I don't know why. I guess I never asked."

"It's a fascinating idea though," Cyprus said. "Grandmother must have disowned her for joining the army. What about your father?"

"All I know is he was an army captain."

"Doesn't your birth certificate list his name?"

"Ambrose Fletcher. He died before I was born."

"Fletcher's a strange name," Cyprus said. "Do you know what clan he was from?"

Tom thought of lying about his father—he needed his cousin's largesse, and the sting of the word mongrel came back to him. If the Snakegrasses would feel that way about him, he couldn't stay. He had no money and nowhere to go. But there had to be a chicken slaughter plant someplace in this city where he could find work, and if not, he always had Club Incognito to fall back on. So Tom said, "My father wasn't from any clan. My father was a Skin."

Cyprus stared at him for what seemed like hours, then said, "That would explain his being in the army."

"Yeah," Tom said. "That makes me a mongrel, I guess."

"Father never said anything about Aunt Rose being married to a Skin."

"She kept it secret."

"Why would Aunt Rose want to hide that?"

"My alpha form is Skin," Tom stammered, taken aback by Cyprus's lack of repudiation. "She thought the Child Protective

Services would take me away, so she taught me how to look more like her as soon as I was old enough.”

“I guess they might have taken you away twenty years ago, but not anymore,” Cyprus said. “So you’ve been shifting your whole body since you were little?”

Tom nodded. “Since I was three or four.”

“That’s amazing. No wonder you’re so good at it.”

Tom basked in the glow of Cyprus’s unexpected admiration for a long moment before he realized he was missing an opportunity. He yanked the manuscript out of his bag and pressed it into Cyprus’s hands.

“So would you like to read *Doves*? I think it’s more the kind of play that Turnskin is interested in.” Tom tried not to sound desperate but was disgusted to hear a pleading note creep into his voice. “Or there’s also one called *The Onion Boy*. It’s an autobiographical piece.”

“*Onion Boy* sounds interesting.” Cyprus took the stack of paper. Tom wondered what his newfound cousin thought of him now. That Tom was tainted? Or maybe just pathetic?

Scarlett returned to the auditorium, her fur slightly fluffy. Her curly bronze locks stood up like a mane around her face. She smoothed them down with one hand.

“Now that that’s taken care of, we can get back to our discussion. So, Tom, have you had breakfast yet?”

“I have ma’am,” Tom said. “I’ve been up since six.”

“Six?” Scarlett said.

“Mom and I used to work in the fields—that’s what *The Onion Boy* is about. Work starts early.” Tom hoped this would make his play seem more authentic. He turned to Cyprus. “I really appreciate you reading *The Onion Boy*.”

“Where are you staying?” Cyprus asked.

“I was at Nine Bucks Hostel, but I don’t think I’m going back there,” Tom replied.

“That flea trap? You’re lucky you don’t have ticks.” Scarlett paused to light a cigarette. “You don’t have ticks, do you?”

“I don’t believe so, ma’am,” Tom replied.

Cyprus, at the mention of ticks, started scratching the back of his neck.

“You don’t need to keep calling me ma’am. It makes me feel old.” Scarlett leaned forward and sniffed at Tom. “Not to be mean, Tom, but when was the last time you washed your towel?”

“I don’t know,” Tom stammered, horrified by Scarlett’s rude, and yet most likely accurate inference about his smell. “I used the hostel towels.”

“You can use our shower,” Scarlett said. “You need to stay here and have some breakfast and do your laundry. You can wear some of Cyprus’s shorts. Go on, Righteous is making porridge. Real Riverside porridge, not that Leadrock Pass crap they serve at Nine Bucks.”

“I’ll take a look at *Onion Boy* while you’re washing up,” Cyprus said.

Tom followed Cyprus back upstairs. The apartment filled with the smell of toasting nuts. Tom’s mouth watered. Cyprus led him through the living room and down the hall to the bathroom. He handed Tom a faded yellow towel.

“Thanks. This is a really big apartment,” Tom said.

“It’s got six bedrooms, but three of them are filled with theatre crap. I keep telling Scarlett if she cleans them out we could rent the rooms, but she’s got other priorities right now.” Cyprus slid open a frosted glass door to his right. “This one’s the shower. The toilet’s the next door down if you need to use it. Put your clothes in the basket there and put it outside the door. If you have extras to add, it’s all right.” Cyprus handed him a small woven basket decorated with a river fish motif and left. Tom stripped off everything and pulled his extra clothes out of his backpack. He kept his wallet and even took

it into the shower with him, keeping it perched on the semi-dry soap ledge. He shampooed and rinsed off, then stood in front of the tall electric fan, rubbing the velvety nap of his fur around to encourage the drying process.

A big pump bottle of Coat-Shyne stood next to the fan, and Tom helped himself to a little, working it into his damp-dry fur to keep it from getting too frizzy. He tried to smooth his locks flat, but they stuck straight up from his head no matter what he did. Cloud used to think his hair looked good like that.

He wondered what Oscar Highfield-Banks had thought of his spiky locks. Then he wondered what Oscar might have thought of his moldy, old-towel smell and shrank internally, humiliated in retrospect.

His dirty clothes had been replaced with a pair of red drawstring shorts, which fit him pretty well. He stuffed his wallet in his backpack and went down the narrow hallway toward the kitchen.

Scarlett sat at a small, round table drinking tea and reading the newspaper. Righteous stood at the stove, stirring a cast iron pot. Two doors opened out onto a small balcony where he saw Cyprus hanging his clothes out on the line to dry. Immediately, he offered his help.

“No worries,” Cyprus said. “I have a system. It will be done in no time. I’m about halfway through the first act of *The Onion Boy*. I like it.”

Tom returned to the kitchen table, glowing with the praise. Scarlett got him a mug of tea and set her paper aside.

“So, how’s Riverside been treating you, Tom?” She stirred a lot of milk into her tea and added two spoons of sugar. Tom thought of lying, then found himself accidentally telling the truth. He began to relate his day, beginning with the flyer from Incognito Club and ending with Oscar Highfield-Banks. Cyprus came in from the balcony. Even Righteous turned away from his-her sullen stirring to gaze sympathetically at

him. Tom ended his story by saying, "Could I have another cup of tea?"

Cyprus poured another cup for him.

"You met Oscar Highfield-Banks?" Scarlett whispered.

"Is he famous?" Tom asked. "He seemed sort of sleazy."

"He's a bored rich dilettante who enjoys pretending to be one of the creative people," Righteous said.

"And he gave you his card?" Cyprus said. "Can I see it?"

Tom produced the card, and Scarlett and Cyprus stared at it. Tom gulped his tea. He hadn't found Oscar's card that interesting. The two of them examined it as though they were government agents checking out a counterfeit note.

"That settles it," Cyprus said. "We're doing *The Onion Boy*."

"Really?" Reluctantly, Tom turned to Righteous.

"I have nothing against a play which is a socio-political portrait of agricultural workers. Their two hands feed the world." Righteous took the pot off the stove and put it in the center of the table. Then he-she dished up a heaping bowl for each of them.

"Are you all right to eat, Tom?" Scarlett asked. "Does your stomach hurt too much?"

"I feel all right," Tom said. His stomach hurt from the punch, and from Shifting through the bruises, but the hospitality of Snakegrasses made him reluctant to refuse their food.

"That's good. You wouldn't want to miss your first real taste of Riverside porridge. Ours is cornmeal only. And it has fresh toasted nuts and dried cherries and is served with fresh cheese and syrup. Not like that Leadrock crap just full of raisins. Who wants to eat a raisin? Starving people, maybe." Scarlett passed the soft white cheese to Tom, who copied her, applying a fat dollop to the top of his porridge. "What kind of porridge did your mom make?"

"Mom was more of a cold cereal person," Tom said. "She liked Chocky-Puffs best."

Even Righteous looked slightly scandalized by this revelation.

“She joined the army and repudiated porridge,” Cyrus said. “Now that’s rebellion.” He glanced to Righteous, who looked both annoyed and contrite.

“This is really good.” Tom shoveled the stuff in.

“Now, Riverside porridge is usually served with black pepper tea and smoked dogfish, but we don’t have any dogfish right now. I don’t usually keep it on hand. It’s too oily.” Scarlett doused her porridge in syrup. The three of them ate for a few minutes, the sound of their chewing broken only by the incessant honking on the street below. The Snakegrasses didn’t seem to notice the noise.

“I was just wondering, have you ever heard of anyone named Coldmoon?” Tom finally asked. The three of them looked at each other with deep alarm, as if trying to psychically agree who would answer him.

“Why is that?” Cyprus finally spoke.

“I met someone named Cloud Coldmoon on the bus here.” Tom lied, spooked by his cousins’ reaction. He heaped more creamy, white cheese on his porridge, playing at nonchalance. “He said he lived in Riverside and I should look him up. I was asking about him when that Shifter punched me.”

“Are you sure he said he was Cloud Coldmoon?” Scarlett helped herself to more porridge.

“Yes, ma—Scarlett,” Tom lied. The transition between telling the truth and lying was coming so easily to him recently. It was a little frightening.

“It couldn’t have been the real Cloud Coldmoon,” Righteous said. “I bet it was just someone trying to score with you, Tom.”

“By claiming to be a notorious gangster?” Cyprus asked.

“Why would the real Cloud Coldmoon tell some stranger on a bus his real name?” Righteous countered. “I bet it was Knockout Henry. What did he look like?”

“A golden Silent.” Tom wondered if this Knockout Henry was some kind of urban legend city dwellers told newcomers to scare them; there was just no way that someone could be so notorious and not be arrested. But then, apparently Cloud was a gangster and everybody knew it. Tom wanted to be surprised by this, but wasn’t. “He didn’t look like a gangster.”

“I can’t believe that a Shifter would actually make an image-based judgment statement,” Righteous said. “You sound just like a Skin.”

“That’s because he’s been living way out in the middle of Skinsville,” Cyprus said. “Give him a break.”

“So are all the Coldmoons gangsters?” Tom asked.

“Mama Coldmoon controls this whole section of town,” Scarlett said. “She’s harsh but fair. But if you keep asking about her baby son, you’ll be getting a visit from Seven. That’s her first son and lieutenant. She’s got no daughters.”

Scarlett continued, “Cloud is the little brother. Reputed to be the best impersonator in the entire country, but who knows. I don’t think that man on the bus is going to last very long in this town if he keeps walking around claiming he’s Mama Coldmoon’s baby boy.”

Tom’s porridge tasted suddenly less sweet. What if they were right, and Cloud, or Simpson, or whoever he was, had just given the Coldmoon name because he thought it made him sound sexy and dangerous?

“I think I’d just be careful for a little while. Don’t be so trusting.” Scarlett emptied the syrup container, got up, got a second, and continued pouring. “But you’re going to be staying here, right?”

“I am?” Tom asked.

“He is?” Cyprus looked up from the script.

“That’s right. Why shouldn’t Tom stay here? He’s family,” Scarlett said. “Go clear off the second bunk in your room, Righteous. Tom’s sleeping there from now on.”

“This is going too far,” Righteous said.

“I agree,” Cyprus said. “Nobody can be expected to share a room with Righteous.”

“I’ll be okay,” Tom said.

“No!” Scarlett slammed her fist into the table. “Tom’s mother’s not even in the ground a year now. He needs his family, and he needs some time to adapt his one-man act into a real play and send out his invitation to Highfield-Banks before the man forgets about him. Righteous, you only have to share a room until we clear out Grandma’s room. It’s about time we did that anyway.”

“We’re really going to clean out Grandma’s room?” Cyprus’s eyes shone with excitement. “What about the other two rooms?”

Scarlett set her mouth in a grim line. “We’ll see.”



Tom put his backpack on the lower bunk of a solid but ugly set of bunk beds. Righteous sat at a desk, savagely writing on a yellow legal pad.

“Um... I’m sorry about this,” Tom said.

Righteous ripped the sheet of paper off the pad.

“I understand that it’s not your fault. You are not my oppressor; rather we’re both under the thumb of my BITCH SISTER!” Righteous bellowed the last two words at the top of his-her lungs. “But since this is now our shared room, I have a set of requirements that I’d like you to observe. I’m going out tonight and I probably won’t be back, so just please write any standards you have on the bottom half of the paper. We’ll workshop the rules after breakfast tomorrow.”

“I imagine Scarlett will have the other room cleaned out by then,” Tom said.

“Grandma’s been dead for fourteen years and Scarlett hasn’t cleaned it out yet. She’s way too busy finding new fascist oppressors to blow.” Righteous swept out of the room.

First, the paper informed Tom, there is to be no use of gendered language in regard to Righteous. Righteous is free of the pernicious gender constructs crippling society today.

Second, there is to be no use of pejorative racial phrases of any kind including, but not limited to: furball, fuzznuts, mongrel, and baldy.

Righteous's room is a free love zone. Old ideas of jealousy and exclusionary labels of sexuality are unwelcome.

Righteous's room is a sanctuary against the dominant paradigm and the hierarchy that oppresses us. Not just the Skin on Shifter oppression but Shifter on Shifter, gender on gender, and the subtle fascism of old knowledge subverting new and emergent revolutionary ideas.

After pondering Righteous's rules, Tom dug in his backpack until he found a pen. He didn't really know what to write. The only time he'd ever shared a room with anyone in his life was at Nine Bucks.

Thinking of Nine Bucks, he came up with one request: *Please don't sit in the bunk above me and cut your toenails so that your old toenail clippings fall into my bed.*

He put the paper back on Righteous's desk and pulled out his script for *The Onion Boy*. He had to rework the entire thing for a cast of multiple members. He slid a carbon between two sheets of paper and cranked these into the typewriter Cyprus had loaned him. He felt a sense of sudden freedom at being able to write plays for more than one actor. Scenes could have more than two characters without being confusing. Tom slowly unwound his one-man show into individual character threads.

After a couple of hours, he got thirsty and headed into the kitchen. On the way there he had to maneuver around piles of dusty clothes and furniture in the hallway outside the room that would hopefully belong to him soon. Cyprus stepped out holding an armload of ancient crossword puzzle books.

“Hey,” Cyprus said, “how’s it going?”

“Pretty well,” Tom said. “I’m just—Well, I’m not used to sitting down for so long.”

“You could always give me a hand.” Cyprus dropped the books next to a similar stack of elderly scripts. “I figure if I can get this stuff into the trash before Scarlett gets back, she won’t try to dig it out.”

Tom followed Cyprus inside. Without question, this had been an old lady’s room. A tiny television stood in the corner on a folding TV tray. Big heavy drapes, which had clearly once been pink but faded to dusty beige, hung from ceiling to floor. A large, beautifully carved wooden bed was oriented primarily to facilitate television viewing.

“This headboard is really something.” Tom ran his hand over the bas-relief carvings of stylized cherry blossoms and the same fish motif that had been on the laundry basket.

Cyprus waved it aside.

“I’m sort of tired of cherry blossoms and dogfish to tell the truth. I always wished we were from one of the Fort Shane clans. They’ve got cool icons like hawks and leopards. I bet your house was full of lions.”

Tom shook his head. “Mom didn’t keep stuff like that. She said the clans created divisions between Shifters.”

“You know, Righteous had the same idea—that clans were an antiquated social construct used to pit Shifter against Shifter, and as such their icons are outmoded,” Cyprus said. “I hope my brother doesn’t scare you too much. Aw, shit!”

“What?”

“I’m not supposed to call him my brother.” Cyprus shook his head. “My sibling... I hope my sibling doesn’t scare you.”

“He... it... I don’t know what to say,” Tom fumbled.

“Just say Righteous. It’s easiest. In a pinch, you can call him ‘it.’” Cyprus dragged a stepladder to the window and started unhooking the drapes.

“Righteous seems to have a good heart,” Tom said.

“Yeah, Righteous does. I’m sorry about the fight earlier. Righteous is mad at Scarlett because Righteous thinks that the men she sees are scum. Not that I don’t agree, but yelling quotes from Shifter Liberation Front pamphlets at her won’t do any good.” Cyprus smiled at Tom. “We probably seem pretty messed up as a family.”

“I’m just happy to be with family,” Tom replied. “It was just me and my mom out there.”

Cyprus stopped pulling down the drapes. He said, “You know, you’ve got a little bit of an accent.”

“I do?” Tom said. “What does it sound like?”

“A Fort Shane Old Money accent. Definitely not a Cherry & Dogfish drawl,” Cyprus said. “Father used to get that accent sometimes when he was drunk. No wonder Oscar Highfield-Banks wanted you.”

Tom helped Cyprus disgorge the room and listened to Cyprus relate the saga of Righteous versus Scarlett. Their parents had been killed during the Cox Wall riots.

“Scarlett was put in charge of me and Righteous.” Cyprus removed hanger after hanger of women’s costumes. “She was in her first year of university, studying business in preparation for inheriting the Snakegrass Theatre, which is what Turnskin Collective used to be called.”

“Turnskin Collective sounds more modern,” Tom said.

“That’s what Righteous thought, too. Righteous wants to turn it into a real collective with mutual ownership by all the members. I think he wants to protest the idea of the firstborn female getting all the inheritance.” Cyprus paused to examine a gown more closely. “What do you think of this one?”

“I think it looks like a bumble bee wedding gown,” Tom said. “I kind of like it.”

“Me too.” Cyprus tossed it over into a pile of things to save. “Anyway, Scarlett left university and started running the theatre,

but no one wanted to come to the Shifter Quarter right then. The Cox Wall was being rebuilt. Clubs were closing right and left. I was sixteen and Righteous was thirteen. I pedaled a pedicab at night after school, but Righteous was too young to work. We couldn't pay our stage crew. Scarlett started seeing rich guys... You know, theatre patrons."

Tom thought he knew what that meant, but he wasn't sure. But no matter what, he wasn't going to ask Cyprus if his sister worked as a prostitute. What if she hadn't? He nodded knowingly, which satisfied Cyprus, who continued.

"Somehow Righteous never figured it out till half-way through university. So Righteous stormed in on Scarlett in her hotel room and accused our then patron, Mr. Wheeler, of being a fascist usurer. Righteous threw red paint on him and got arrested for fourth-degree assault. Mr. Wheeler dumped us, and we've been struggling ever since. Scarlett's still mad at Righteous for that."

"How long has that been?"

"Three years," Cyprus said. "They've got a really tight relationship and neither one of them is adjusting to Righteous being an adult very well. Of course, it's hard to take Righteous seriously when it's wearing boobs all the time and acting like one of those homeless drag ladyboys you see up by the Harmony Gate. I've seen him up there before. He goes up and gets Skins to proposition him just so he can chew them out."

"Maybe Righteous just likes wearing boobs," Tom said.

"Maybe... Hell, I don't give a damn. Righteous can wear four boobs if it wants. I just want get a show together that will sell some tickets without dissolving our family unit."

"*The Onion Boy* will sell tickets," Tom said. "If I could get a hundred people to come to see plays on my friend Angela's porch, I can get a hundred here."

Turnskin

“A hundred?” Cyprus stared at Tom. “We need to sell at least two hundred seats a night to make it worth opening the doors.”

Tom gulped.

“I’d better get back to the adaptation.”

6

TOM NEXT SAW OSCAR'S FACE IN THE "PEOPLE SEEN" SECTION of the newspaper. Oscar stood in the background of a photo in which Senator Scott Wellington accepted *Grandview Magazine's* Man of the Year award.

"Is this the guy who gave you the card?" Scarlett tapped the picture. The caption below identified Oscar as the owner and publisher of *Grandview Magazine*.

"Yeah," Tom said.

"Fantastic!" Scarlett leaned back in her chair. "We get him and his friends to come see your play, and we'll fill the seats for at least two weeks, maybe three. How's that play coming, by the way?"

"Good." Tom hunched over his porridge, leery of Scarlett's intense scrutiny.

"Will our little goldmine be ready by the end of the week?"

"End of the week." Tom's stomach clenched. That gave him four days.

"Good." Scarlett leafed through the classified ads. "Cyprus should be finished with Grandma's room by then. I think he's painting it today. After that there's just cleaning the carpet, and the room will be fit for habitation."

"I really appreciate all the trouble you're going to for me," Tom said, "but I think I should be helping Cyprus."

"Perish the thought, sweetie," Scarlett said. "Until you get your little gem written, Cyprus has nothing to do. He might as well tackle the housework."

Tom retreated to his shared room to work.

Righteous sat at the desk, painting watercolor sketches of some set-design and costuming concepts based on Tom's one-man script. Tom tried not to peer over Righteous's shoulder, but his curiosity made resistance impossible. Noticing Tom's interest, Righteous turned the tablet toward him. Cyprus paused in the doorway, carrying a paint bucket and a pink, synthetic sponge.

"I chose the beige and navy palate of that button-up you wear all the time." Righteous pointed at Tom's shirt. "Those colors exemplify the dowdy lack of sexual spirit that exists west of the mountains."

Tom stared awkwardly down at his shirt, suddenly filled with the desire to bury it in the dumpster behind the theatre. But he only had two shirts and no money to buy a replacement.

"Don't worry, Tom, Righteous is just jealous of your effortless repudiation of popular fashion." Cyprus left his bucket in the hallway and sat down on the end of Tom's bunk. Without asking, Cyprus started leafing through Tom's half-finished script pages.

"I am a little envious of your effortless bumpkin chic," Righteous admitted. "I wonder where I could find something like that in Riverside."

"I got mine at the Feed & Seed," Tom said.

"Is that some kind of boutique?" Righteous's face was dead serious.

Cyprus snorted with laughter. He said, "Tom, I must commend you on your fortitude in the face of my sibling's hypercriticism. You seem to be having no trouble functioning under the pressure of Scarlett's productivity tactics either. You're a strong man."

"Thanks." Tom's initial formality around his cousins had faded over the past week. Even Scarlett's strange generosity was beginning to make sense to him as he watched her with

her stage crew. She was endlessly mothering and indulgent, even to men old enough to be her father. “I don’t want Scarlett to think I’m a deadbeat and throw me out.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Righteous said. “Once she decides you’re in, you’re in for good. Of course, that means you’ll be nagged.” Righteous swished his paintbrush through a glass of water to clean it.

Cyprus continued his perusal of Tom’s handwritten draft of *The Onion Boy*. Tom watched his cousin’s face with dread, searching for any sign of dislike. Cyprus’s lips pursed into a thoughtful scowl, and Tom thought he might throw up.

“This play is fairly autobiographical, isn’t it?” Cyprus commented.

“Yes.”

“I’m wondering if you shouldn’t go ahead and make the main character a half Shifter. It would add another layer to the play.”

“The term is biracial,” Righteous corrected instantly, glaring at Cyprus. “I can’t even believe you just said that. Why not just call him a half-bred mongrel?”

“I’m sorry.” Cyprus’s embarrassment showed in the fluffiness of his fur. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” Tom said. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me a mongrel, though.”

“So your father is a Skin?” Righteous set his paintbrush aside and turned his full attention on Tom. “I guess that’s why Aunt Rose got disowned, wasn’t it? Grandmother’s class-one fascism?”

“My father was a Skin. He died in a diving accident when I was little. Originally, he came from the Coral Islands—Bailey’s Island, I think. I have a picture of him and my mother there. I think it was taken just before he died.” Tom found the photograph in his bag and offered it to his cousins.

Tom's mother stood on a beach dressed in military whites, her curly black mane pulled severely back from her angular face. She had her arm draped around the waist of another officer. He had the cinnamon skin and spiky, close-cropped hair that the sun had bleached completely white. He wore mirrored sunglasses, but Tom knew that behind those shades his eyes were green. His wide, toothy smile accentuated the squareness of his face.

"He looks friendly," Cyprus said.

"Your father had no Shifter blood at all?" Righteous asked.

"Not as far as I know," Tom replied.

"That goes a long way toward refuting the idea that only totally pure-blooded Shifters have intensive shape-changing capacity," Righteous said. "Do you think you could come to a Shifter Liberation Front meeting with me and speak?"

"Not everyone wants to make their lives a political forum," Cyprus said. "Tom doesn't even know how to hail a pedicab, and you want him to go shooting his mouth off at some SLF demonstration? You're going to get him killed."

"Going to an SLF meeting is not dangerous." Righteous rolled his eyes. "The Skin establishment just wants you to think it's dangerous to subvert our numbers. That's why there are always cops writing down people's names. It's blatant intimidation."

Fear zinged through Tom. He could not, under any circumstances, have cops writing down his name. The list of "Persons to be Detained" flashed vividly through his mind.

"Do you think most Shifters here will look down on me because of my father?" Tom broke in.

"The ones worth knowing won't," Cyprus said. "How did the people back home treat you?"

"They didn't know I was only half Shifter," Tom said. "None of them ever saw my alpha form."

“What’s your alpha form look like?” Righteous asked. “Not that it matters. I completely eschew the idea that the alpha form is somehow more valid than other forms, but it would just make this conversation make more sense if I knew what you were talking about.”

Cyprus nodded and said, “Could you show us?”

Tom agreed; it gave him a good excuse to get out of his shirt. He didn’t bother to go to the bathroom to shift. He was determined to not be shy in front of his cousins. He also didn’t bother to put his shirt back on, even though he felt suddenly chilly being bereft of fur. The cinnamon-colored skin of his chest was bare. His coarse, curling blonde hair hung around his face. Angular like his mother’s. Only his eyes and fingernails remained unchanged. Shifter yellow and jet black, respectively. Righteous gaped. Cyprus looked him over in a cursory way.

“So, basically you look the same, except with no fur and different-colored skin and hair,” Cyprus said.

“That’s right,” Tom said. He couldn’t tell if Cyprus found this good or bad.

“You’d easily pass for a Skin if it wasn’t for your eyes.” Righteous reached for his paintbrush. “Mind if I sketch you?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re gorgeous,” Righteous said.

Tom blushed and was horrified to realize that his cousins could actually see the flush spreading across his cheeks. His skin prickled as sweat trickled down from his armpits.

“You’re not comfortable like this, are you?” Cyprus observed.

“I feel pretty cold.” Tom crossed his arms over his chest.

“You can do the sketch another time,” Cyprus told Righteous, who shrugged his acquiescence. Turning back to Tom, Cyprus continued. “I’ve got to get back to work anyway.” As he spoke, Tom was already sprouting new black fur.

Tom sat back down and gathered his paper and pen, further indicating his urgent need to get back to work. Cyprus read this

signal and departed. Righteous was not so astute. After toying with his paintbrush for a few seconds he turned back to Tom, a reflective expression on his face.

“You know, before this I thought your obvious identification with Skin culture over Shifter culture was kind of tragic,” Righteous said. “I guess both cultures are yours to choose from equally or not at all.”

“I don’t identify with Skin culture over Shifter culture on purpose,” Tom said. “I just don’t know Shifter culture.”

“Do you even know Storydance?” Righteous asked. When Tom shook his head, Righteous continued. “Did you ever learn the Chicken Dance in school?”

“Sure,” Tom said. Every kindergartener learned the Chicken Dance. Parents loved to watch them fall over while performing it.

“That was originally part of an ancient Storydance comedy called *Wise Animals*. Storydance is amazingly informative to one’s acting craft. It’s a combination of expressive dance, drum, mime, electric guitars, and black light.” Righteous was visibly excited by the idea. “We should go tonight. I’ll find out what’s playing at Club Smoke.”

Tom managed a few pages of revision before Righteous returned, triumphant. A new Storydance would debut at Club Smoke that very night. Righteous took up his paintbrush, absently rambling about Club Smoke’s emcee, Lovey Celeste. After exhausting that subject, Righteous began to hum.

Tom stood, finding the humming, the room, even the building an unbearable impediment to his creativity. “I’m going to take a walk.”

“Sure,” Righteous said. “Be back by eight.”



Though the sun shone steadily in a clear blue sky, the shadowed pavement of Silent Street radiated relentless winter cold. Wind whipped through the narrow, canyon-like streets in

chilling blasts that penetrated Tom's fur and made him wonder how any Skin ever survived the winter. Tom kept to the sunny side of the street, where it was slightly warmer. Every alley he passed, Tom held his breath against the stomach-turning stench of urine and sweet, rotting garbage.

During his first week in Riverside, Tom had been thrilled by everything, including the smell of bar alleys. His enchantment with stink had waned considerably since then. Or maybe it was just the previous conversation. The Snakegrass family was so different from his own. He and his mother had never discussed—let alone loudly debated—the political meaning of his mixed race. Was he even capable of addressing the subject in *The Onion Boy*?

He headed up Silent Street toward the neon strip of Harmony Gate. He had fifty cents in his pocket, enough to buy a cup of tea at the Stoneway Teahouse. It was Tom's third trip to the famous theatre hangout. The first two times he'd been too intimidated by the cool sophistication of the other patrons to be seen working on *The Onion Boy*. This time he carried a sheaf of papers under his arm. The drama and bustle of the Stoneway couldn't be any more disruptive than the drama of Righteous Snakegrass's lower bunk bed. Maybe he'd get some work done.

He rounded the corner and ducked inside the steamy teahouse. A row of small round tables lined the front window. At one of these, accompanied by three other smartly dressed men, sat Oscar. Tom's heart raced a little. Should he say hello? What if Oscar didn't remember him?

He deliberately paused, brushing down his jacket unnecessarily and making a show of removing and securing his scarf so that Oscar would have time to notice him. Oscar glanced up, smiled at Tom, and looked him up and down. Tom smiled back. Oscar lifted a hand in a casual wave of recognition, then went back to talking with his friends. Tom got a cup of tea from the big teahouse matron and slid into a dark

little booth, where he could watch Oscar and his friends while pretending to write.

What had that wave meant? Obviously, Oscar recognized his face. Should he have gone over to Oscar's table, even though Oscar was sitting with friends Tom didn't know? If he got up and finished before Oscar left, should he go to Oscar's table and tell him about *The Onion Boy*? Oscar looked up and seemed to be scanning the interior of the teahouse. Searching for Tom, perhaps? Or just bored? Tom hunched over his paper, hoping that Oscar hadn't caught Tom staring. He picked up his stubby pencil and started scratching out meaningless revisions on act III. He focused entirely on the words, even mouthing them silently, in order to appear more authentically engaged in his work. After a couple of minutes, Tom forgot he was only mimicking industriousness and became genuinely absorbed in his play.

He reached the end of his script, sighed, and sat back against the booth, rolling his stiff shoulders. Then he turned his head and stared straight into Oscar's eyes. The other man sat at the table next to his. His teacup was empty.

"I was wondering when you'd notice me." Oscar checked his watch. "I don't think I've ever been ignored for eight solid minutes before."

"I didn't know you were there," Tom stammered. "You should have said something."

"I didn't want to intrude," Oscar said. "How's it going?"

"Really well." Now was the time to mention his engagement at the Turnskin. Tom felt suddenly shy, awkward, and self-aggrandizing about mentioning his play, but knew he had to tell Oscar. Scarlett wouldn't forgive him if he missed this chance at promotion. "I was going to send you a letter tomorrow. My play, *The Onion Boy*, is being produced at the Turnskin Collective."

"That's terrific!" Oscar's enthusiasm saturated his voice. "I'm so happy for you."

“Thank you.” Tom’s pride was undercut by a streak of bashfulness that made him seek out and then shrink back from Oscar’s full attention. He’d never had a man express blatant interest in him in a way that was obvious to everyone, and while Oscar’s careless sexuality made Tom feel liberated, it also made him feel exposed and vulnerable. And he’d already had his fill of vulnerability today.

“Do you have an opening date?” Oscar asked.

“A date?” Tom sat up, slightly panicked by the word.

“For your play.” Oscar seemed smug and amused.

“Not yet, they’re waiting for my script revisions.”

“And when will those be done?”

“I just finished.” Tom displayed the heavily marked pages of his script as evidence.

“Well, you must remember me when the time comes.”

“I will,” Tom said.

“Speaking of time, I think I may have to be going if I’m going to make my dinner engagement,” Oscar said.

“I don’t want to keep you,” Tom said.

“You could always come along,” Oscar said. His invitation hung enticingly between them for a long moment. Dinner with Oscar could be so many things. But accepting Oscar’s dinner invitation would be admitting that Cloud was out of his life for good now, and Tom wasn’t ready to let go yet.

“I’m expected back at the theatre. My cousins are taking me to Club Smoke tonight,” Tom said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Impromptu invitations rarely fit into one’s schedule.” Oscar smiled and Tom smiled back at him, relieved. “I only regret that I have to rush away. I’d hoped to get to know you better. Maybe next time.”

Tom nodded, unable to hide his eagerness.

“Next time.”

7

CLUB SMOKE WAS LOCATED IN THE BASEMENT OF A LARGE hardware store off Silent Street. Steep concrete stairs wound down to a low, narrow room with a bar at one end and a wall of speakers at the other. With fifty people occupying it, the room was about half-capacity. Pulsing music filled in the gaps between bodies.

“Scarlett’s getting drinks,” Cyprus said. Tom had to lean close to hear him. Righteous craned his head around assessing the crowd, occasionally waving to other patrons.

“Most nights Club Smoke is a hookah bar, but on Thursdays they do Storydance,” Cyprus said. Tom nodded. Righteous suddenly grabbed Cyprus’s arm and whispered something in his ear. Cyprus nodded.

“Don’t look right away, but the Silents standing to the left of the bar belong to the Coldmoons. The guy in the red t-shirt is Seven.”

A chill crept up Tom’s back. Slowly, with an expression he hoped was completely casual, he glanced across the room through the scattered clots of people to the bar. Seven Coldmoon leaned against the bar, holding a lowball glass. His resemblance to Cloud was obvious, not only in his face, but in his posture as well. Tom could tell that Seven worked out more than Cloud, though. His neck and shoulders had merged to form a pyramid of muscle. His forearms bulged. Even Seven’s fingers looked ready to burst from the confines of his chunky gold rings. Watching Seven, excitement twitched through

Tom's groin. Even from this distance, Tom could tell Seven was arrogant like Cloud. When Tom snapped his eyes away from Seven, he felt a familiar pang of loneliness for Cloud.

The other Silents around Seven wore more traditional, almost archaic clothes. Bodyguards, obviously. Tom recognized the man who'd punched him and hunched passively down when the man's eyes turned toward him.

"Here's an opportunity to learn some city manners." Scarlett sidled up to Tom and handed him a can of beer. "It's rude to ogle gangsters."

"Where's my drink?" Cyprus asked.

"At the bar. I've only got two hands."

"Why not get a tray?" Cyprus asked.

"Why not just go get your own damn drink?" Scarlett said to Cyprus, who shrugged and headed toward the bar. Scarlett turned her attention back to Tom. "So, if you ever see Seven Coldmoon or any of his guys, you start walking the other direction."

Righteous leaned close. "Did the guy you talked to on the bus look like that?"

"Nothing like him." Tom wondered if Seven knew where Cloud was now. Tom didn't seriously think Seven would tell him of Cloud's whereabouts, but maybe, if Cloud got word that Tom was in town, he'd come around. Or maybe Seven's bodyguard would just put his big fist into Tom's stomach like he had before.

Righteous shook his head and said, "I can't even imagine being so dumb as to claim to be Cloud Coldmoon. Impersonators are dangerous anyway."

"They are?" Tom had always considered impersonation to be a consensual crime, like prostitution. Inadvertently, Tom glanced to Scarlett, whose attention was focused on a well-dressed man near the door.

"Impersonators are heartless. The worst thing to have

happen would be to accidentally know about a Coldmoon impersonation taking place. Then you're a loose end that needs tying up," Righteous said.

"Why do you think Seven is here?" Tom asked.

"Probably recruiting broke Storydancers to work impersonation jobs for him." The lights suddenly flashed off and on, indicating the imminent start of the show. Righteous said, "We should get our seats."

"I'll meet up with you. I need to talk to someone." Scarlett waved across the room at a flashily dressed Skin.

"One of her clients," Righteous said, scowling. Tom followed his cousin through the room, weaving through a crowd of Shifters and Skins who made Righteous's weird physical statements look normal.

Righteous was in his element and knew nearly everyone there. Every conceivable color of hair, fur, and gender ambiguity assailed Tom's naïve sensibilities, leaving him staring openly at the people around him. One Skin usher, who Tom was certain was a woman, came up and offered them programs in an unmistakably male voice. Though Tom had impersonated a woman many times in plays, the idea of doing it in real life had never seriously occurred to him. Then Tom wondered if the woman was really a Skin at all or just a Shifter, and his confusion became profound.

Righteous greeted the mysterious Skin warmly and introduced Tom. Her name was Lovey Celeste. Righteous began to give Lovey a rapturous account of Tom's shifting stamina and weird transmogrifications—especially the Ermaline/Burt combo.

"You should have shifted into your half & half form for the show! I'd like to see it. Maybe next time." Lovey showed them to a couple of seats and handed out a mimeographed flyer containing a list of cast members and a synopsis of the performance, which was called *Broken River*. Cyprus scooted into the chair next to Tom.

“How’s Lovey?” he asked Righteous.

“Jealous as hell that Tom is our cousin, not hers.” Righteous’ eyes lit up gleefully.

Cyprus nodded. “I thought she would be.”

The lights flashed once more, and the stragglers found their seats. Scarlett squeezed in next to Tom, a strange look of resignation on her face. Noticing him watching her, she flashed him a toothpaste commercial-quality smile.

“You’re going to love this,” she said. The theatre went completely black. Tom dilated his pupils and still could see nothing. He felt uncomfortable. Darkness had never been complete for him before. He suddenly felt much more sympathetic toward Angela, who’d often stumbled around after him in the dark, completely blind. Then the music began. The black light came on and ghostly figures appeared on the stage. Skeletal animal shapes leaped over each other, stretching and changing. Tom thought the dancers must have been wearing suits covered in fluorescent paint.

The synopsis of *Broken River* said that it was a Storydance telling the modern history of the Shifter people, beginning with the cease of hostilities between Shifters and Skins two hundred years before. This hopeful period was represented by a dance performed to the turn of a popular song of the time called “Fine & Dandy.” The dancers grew their fur and shed it, changed color, changed fur, changed gender, even changed clothes on stage.

Cloud would have disapproved. But now Cloud’s disapproval of public transformation made a lot more sense, cast in the context of his criminal family. Shifting was not for joy or entertainment; it was a business, and one that had to stay secret.

The music segued and the dancers acted out the terrible Summer of Violence, which led to the riots that killed his aunt and uncle. Terrifying music crashed through the speakers, and searchlights and strobes flashed disorientingly around

not just the stage but the entire room. Dancers appeared out of the audience mimicking the rioters, covered in fake blood, their faces gruesomely contorted and painted with fluorescent makeup. The penetrating staccato of gunfire burst across the whole jerking, strobe-lit mass. Deafening sirens obliterated any other sound. Tom reflexively put his hands over his ears, then felt self-conscious because no one else did and took them back down again. The fierce searchlights stung his eyes painfully, and he felt under assault from the play.

Tom was caught between wanting to leave and wanting to be on stage. He wished he'd written something this wild while simultaneously feeling repulsed by the rawness of the emotion.

He imagined what Shorty and the guys would make of this performance. Even Angela would have been hard-pressed to tolerate it, although she probably would have if Tom was sitting with her. He suddenly missed Angela. He missed being the wiser, more knowledgeable, and avant-garde person.

The last segment of *Broken River* showed a tentative dance to a slower, more pensive cover of the song "Fine & Dandy" where Shifters and Skins tried to communicate with each other while holding white placards between them. Tom thought these must represent the Cox Wall.

As they applauded the actors at the end, Cyprus leaned close to Tom.

"I'm thinking of hiring the woman on the far right to play your mother."

"Really?" Tom felt suddenly embarrassed that he'd not been thinking of casting or anything else during the performance. He couldn't focus on anything except the sirens and searchlights. But Cyprus, being more inured to theatricality, had actually been casting the whole time.

"She's got an amazingly expressive body," Cyprus said. Righteous leaned around Tom to address his brother.

“Lovey is going to hate you for stealing her talent.”

Cyprus shrugged. “Lovey already hates me. Come on Tom, let’s go talk to that dancer.”



The next several weeks passed in a blur of activity. The moment Cyprus had a final script, he began to cast the characters in *The Onion Boy*. Tom got the lead, playing essentially himself as a teenager coming into awareness about the outside world and beginning to understand the inequities of class and race. Although Tom’s character, Roy, was in every scene, he had surprisingly few lines once Tom had disentangled Roy’s dialogue from the other characters. Roy was an observer and a commentator, often mimicking the other characters silently. Cyprus decided that rather than just impressions, Roy should actually shift to impersonate them during his satirical pantomimes, a decision that at first terrified, then fascinated Tom.

He loved the idea of a Shifter character openly shifting, even though he thought it grotesque. But that meant that he’d have to train harder than ever before. The play required Roy to shift and then return to his alpha form six times. Tom wondered how he’d ever have enough energy to do it, fueled by nothing but porridge and skimpy portions of garlic noodles. He thought he might need serious doses of pork ribs and pie to manage it without experiencing catastrophic weight loss.

But pork ribs cost money, and Scarlett hadn’t come across with any pay yet. She explained that she had enough money to fund the show, but wouldn’t have enough to pay Tom until they started selling tickets. Meanwhile, she was happy to feed and house him.

“You’ll see a fat check once we start selling seats,” Scarlett told him, “so you better open up a bank account.”

He couldn’t take her advice since to open a bank account, he’d need an initial deposit and a valid form of identification.

In the meantime, he moved his backpack from Righteous's lower bunk to Grandma Water's room and focused on the production.

Tom sat in on Cyprus's auditions and was amazed by the number of actors who showed up for the casting call. Cyprus auditioned and cast the Shifter woman from Club Smoke for the part of Tom's mother, as Cyrus had predicted they would. Her name was Wind Sweetrain, an actress whose alpha form was Silent, but who preferred to wear redfox fur. She said that men liked the redheads. Tom was excited to meet more with her and get points on the kind of rapid transformation he'd seen her perform at Club Smoke. He was astounded to find out that she was forty-nine years old.

Once the cast had been assembled, they started rehearsals. The weather remained bitterly cold. Tom would rise and stumble down to the frigid auditorium to read lines with a group of actors that surpassed him in every way. Every day was a new learning experience.

One afternoon, about a week into rehearsals, Tom saw Scarlett usher a very tall and bony Skin woman into the theatre. Her expensive overcoat brought to mind the elegant socialite persona Lovey Celeste liked to adopt. The Skin woman sat through about fifteen minutes of rehearsal and then left again with Scarlett. Tom thought nothing more of it until dinnertime.

The four of them sat around the table, eating garlic noodles and hot cabbage salad. Scarlett wiped her mouth, set down her napkin, and looked straight at Cyprus.

"So, guess who came around today?" she asked. Cyprus shrugged his ignorance and kept eating.

"Yeah," Righteous said, "who was that Skin woman you had so much fun toadying up to?"

"That was Ms. Anne Sharpe of the National Theatre. She's very interested in our new play."

Everyone stopped eating except Cyprus, who seemed more determined than ever to finish every molecule of his dinner.

“And?” he asked between bites.

“And she wants us to submit the manuscript of *The Onion Boy* for consideration for a new summer festival. It’s called *Diverse Voices*.” Scarlett poured herself an after-dinner tea and heaped sugar into it. “I said that I would ask the playwright.”

Tom felt like he might faint from joy. A woman from the National Theatre wanted to read his play—she had asked for it specially! He felt dizzy. Tom opened his mouth to answer Scarlett, but all that came out was a strangled groan. He wouldn’t be able to put his name on it. His name was on the list of people to be detained.

“Are you holding your breath?” Cyprus suddenly clapped Tom on the back. The sudden shock forced Tom to take a breath.

“I need a pen name,” Tom said. “Can I have a pen name?”

His cousins looked at him curiously. Cyprus said, “Because of your parents?”

Tom swallowed. It would be so easy to lie, and yet he could not do it. “Because I’m wanted.”

Righteous’s spoon clanked down onto his plate. The Snakegrasses all wore different expressions on their faces. Righteous’s shock complimented Cyprus’s chagrin. Resignation was Scarlett’s main emotional emanation. On the street below, a pair of drunks began to sing a garbled rendition of “Fine & Dandy.”

“When you say you’re wanted, do you mean that you’re wanted by the law?” Scarlett reached into her pocketbook and brought out a fresh pack of cigarettes.

“I’m wanted by the Shifter Agency.” Tom hung his head.

“What did you do?” Scarlett asked.

“I didn’t do anything!” Tom looked to his cousins for understanding, one by one. Scarlett seemed most composed,

having turned cold and business-like the moment she lit her cigarette. Cyprus rubbed his forehead as though massaging his brain. Righteous stared at Tom, mouth agape. Tom continued, "But I actually do know Cloud Coldmoon."

In a small voice, Tom explained about Cloud and about Simpson. He confessed everything.

"He was your boyfriend?" Scarlett asked. Tom nodded.

"But he's not anymore?" Cyprus's fingers moved in slow circles around his own temples.

"I haven't seen him since that night," Tom said.

Scarlett sighed and snubbed out her long-dead cigarette.

"And that's everything you have to tell us?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And here I was, worried about swearing around you because you're such a goody two-shoes," she said. "Well, Tom, I appreciate your honesty. But now I'm going to forget everything you said. We are never going to talk about this again, got it? No one. Ever." Scarlett stared pointedly at her youngest brother.

"Why are you looking at me?" Righteous demanded. "I'm not stupid enough to go blabbing that all over town. I kind of think Tom is, though."

"I'm not stupid!" Tom said angrily.

"No, you just trust us," Cyprus said. "And that's good. But seriously, never ever tell anyone that story again."

"I won't."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"So, is there a pen name that you'd prefer we submit the play under?" Scarlett asked.

Tom looked up in amazement. Scarlett wasn't going to turn him out or turn him in. Relief and gratitude verging on love flowed up into his chest. He thought he might cry.

"Flyer," he said. "Tom Flyer."

Scarlett nodded and said, "Tom Flyer, it is."

8

TOM SCRAPED THE LAST GLOB OF PORRIDGE OUT OF HIS bowl and wished for more. Breakfast had grown leaner and leaner as days without any ticket income went by. Tom had used the last of his cash to impulsively buy a copy of *Grandview Magazine*, Oscar Highfield-Banks's monthly periodical, after he saw that Oscar wrote an editorial column. Oscar's witty and suave style filled Tom with jealous admiration. There was also a small black and white photograph that Tom resisted the urge to cut out and pin to Grandma Water's bedroom wall.

He read the article at least a dozen times, trying to absorb the cadence of Oscar's speech. He felt pretty sure that it was the kind of speech that naturally occurred only in people whose breakfasts remained uncontaminated by porridge.

"As soon as we sell some tickets, I'm buying a slab of real Fort Shane pepper bacon," Scarlett said.

"Don't talk about food," Cyprus said. "It hurts me."

"I think bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches would be good," Righteous said. "We could buy some of that white sandwich bread from the Skin bakery near the bridge."

Tom's mouth began to water.

"We'd have to buy some mayonnaise to make real bacon sandwiches," Scarlett said.

"I don't like mayonnaise." Righteous wrinkled up his nose.

"I think it's pretty good," Tom said. "I like mayonnaise on curly fries."

Scarlett chuckled at this. "It'll be our secret shame."



Cyprus left to talk to the lighting guys, and Righteous had to go meet with the seamstress. That left Tom alone with Scarlett. She didn't seem busy, so Tom asked her to help him run his lines.

They'd been doing this for about half an hour when the fire marshal arrived—a big, stout Skin with a bristly brown mustache. In spite of the chill, he wore a blue, short-sleeved uniform shirt with wide circles of sweat marking the armpits.

"Hello there, Scarlett," he said.

Scarlett smiled benignly at him. "Hi Gary, what's up?"

"Looks like you've got some violations," Gary said. "You're going to have to get a new certificate of occupancy issued."

"Really?" Scarlett looked over the pink carbon copy that Gary handed her with an expression of surprised concern. "But I have a show opening."

"That is a problem," Gary remarked.

"What if I was to make the repairs by next week?"

"Well, the building inspector probably won't be able to come around until the end of the month." Gary scratched his neck and looked out the window.

Alarm zinged through Tom's stomach. He'd already sent a personal invitation to Oscar Highfield-Banks. Anne Sharpe from the National Theatre would be in attendance. They couldn't delay the opening night. They'd starve to death.

"Look Gary, we've known each other a long time." Scarlett clasped Gary's hand, holding it firmly. "Can't you come back in two weeks? I'll have the repairs made before then."

Gary pulled his hand away. Tom thought he caught sight of a folded bill in his palm.

"I suppose I could come back then." Gary stuck his hand in his pocket. "If you promise to make me some of that special porridge of yours."

"Done," Scarlett said. "Thanks Gary. I owe you one."

“You just be ready,” Gary said, “and I’ll forget about these violations.”

Scarlett smiled and waved until Gary was out of the apartment, then collapsed abruptly on the kitchen table.

“Fuck!” she mumbled into the turtle-print tablecloth.

“Did you just bribe him?” Tom whispered.

Scarlett looked at him as though he was a small child who’d asked her where babies came from.

“Of course,” Scarlett said. “That fat fuck always comes around for a payoff every time we have a new production. He’ll want more cash in two weeks. I only had a hundred, and he’ll expect five. Bastard.”

“Five hundred dollars?”

“I’ve got to make a phone call.”

“Okay,” Tom said.

“A private phone call.”

“Right.” Flustered, Tom withdrew to his room. He tried to keep running lines but couldn’t focus on the script at all. He could hear Scarlett’s voice, but couldn’t understand what she said. Suddenly guilty for eavesdropping on her, Tom decided to try and tune in the old television that sat in the corner of his room. He fiddled with the rabbit ears until he managed to tune in some daytime talk show.

Two Skin men sat opposite each other in bucket chairs, smoking cigarettes and talking politics. Tom twisted the knob, surprised at the number of channels that he got. Back home, he and his mom had only received three, and one of those had been the emergency public address channel.

“I didn’t think that still worked,” Scarlett said from the doorway.

“I just tried to turn it on now,” Tom said.

Scarlett sat down on the edge of the bed next to him.

“Want to help me solve our cash-flow problem?” she asked.

“Sure,” Tom said.

“A friend of mine has some friends who find themselves double-booked. They’re a little embarrassed about it. They need a couple of Shifters to go to a funeral for them.”

“Just for them?”

“As them. They’re willing to pay a thousand. Gary gets four hundred off the top, but I’m willing to split the remainder fifty-fifty with you,” Scarlett said. “Minus twenty percent to my friend for hooking up the deal. What do you say?”

“They just want us to go to a funeral?” Tom couldn’t believe it. Why would anybody hire an impersonator for that?

“That’s it,” Scarlett said. “We just have to make an appearance and come back with fat cash.”

“All right,” Tom said. He stood up. “I’ll just tell Cyprus—”

“No!” Scarlett said. “Don’t tell Cyprus anything! Or Righteous either... They’re not very practical when it comes to getting fast cash. This is between you and me. Now, let’s go; they’re waiting.”



Tom followed Scarlett to Dr. Black’s Infirmary, a bar down by the river. A strange funk floated up from the scummy water lapping at the embankments. The bar’s smoky interior was like a long, thin cave leading back to murkier depths. The walls were yellowed with years of accumulated smoke. Even at eleven in the morning, drunks lined the bar. Haggard old men stared up with watery eyes at Tom as he passed by. Scarlett sauntered up to the bar, leaned across, and air-kissed the bartender—a ghostly, yet beautiful Skin woman. Scarlett introduced her as Hot Sally.

“Named after the drink,” Hot Sally said.

Tom didn’t know the drink, but nodded anyway.

“Those two back there.” Hot Sally pointed at an incongruously attractive pair at the back of the bar near the popcorn machine. “They want to meet you.”

“Thanks, doll,” Scarlett said. “Come on.”

Scarlett started back toward the couple, pausing only to whisper a final message to Tom.

“From here on, don’t ever say my name. And don’t say yours either, got it?”

“Sure.”

Scarlett slid into the cracked vinyl booth the couple sat in. The man listlessly ate popcorn and nursed a beer. The woman drank water. They looked up when Scarlett and Tom joined them, but in a very nonchalant way, like this was something they did all the time. Tom didn’t know whether to feel reassured by their professional air or frightened by it.

“Hi there,” Scarlett said, “Sally said you might need a little babysitting job done for you tomorrow.”

“That’s right,” the woman said. “Take the kids to a funeral tomorrow at 10 a.m.”

“No wake?” Scarlett lit a cigarette.

“No wake.” The woman glanced disapprovingly at Scarlett’s cigarette. “Just the service.”

“Close relative?”

“Their grandfather,” the woman said, “but they didn’t know him well. They won’t be difficult.”

The man studied Tom skeptically.

“He’s a black,” the man said.

“That’s right,” Scarlett said. “So what?”

“Can he get as light as me?” the man asked.

Tom wanted to shift into Ermine right there, just to prove how pale he could get, but he knew the urge was sheer, stupid pride.

“My partner has rare skills. He can get so white he’s blue,” Scarlett said airily. “Don’t you worry about it.”

“We’ll need a demonstration, of course, once we get to our house,” the woman continued in a businesslike way. Tom picked at the bowl of popcorn in the middle of the

table. It tasted like salty, menthol-flavored foam.

“How do we get there?” Scarlett asked.

“I’m a licensed contractor,” the man said. “We’ll put you in the back of our truck like you’re day labor and bring you back here the same way.”

“Good.” Scarlett puffed on her cigarette. “Half now.”

The man pushed an envelope over to Scarlett, who counted the contents. She removed the cash from the envelope and tucked it in her bra.

“Let’s go, then.” The woman stood and shouldered her purse. “We’ve got lots of relatives to memorize.”

Tom trailed the couple out of the bar and jumped into the back of their beaten up truck. Fear and excitement mingled in equal portions within Tom’s chest.

Scarlett patted Tom’s shoulder.

“It’ll be all right,” Scarlett said. “I’ve done this before.”

They bumped along the main road. At the Cox Wall, they pulled off into the Business Permit Line, avoiding the long string of cars waiting at the checkpoint, and drove straight up to the gate. An agent approached the truck and asked the man driving a few short questions: How many workers? What was their business?

The man answered in a friendly, direct way. Roofers, he told the agent, on a two-day job. The agent nodded and waved them through. A few minutes later, the truck drove across the Shallowford Bridge. Tom could see the river winding beneath them. Barges chugged along the choppy surface. Gulls swooped around the bridge, squabbling noisily over stray pieces of garbage.

About fifteen minutes later, the truck pulled into the back driveway of a modest split-level, blue house with a trampoline in the back yard. Looking at it, Tom would never have guessed that the owners of this house would be hiring an impersonator.

Tom eyed the trampoline, which, like the rest of the house, had taken on a sinister air.

They followed their employers through the garage door into a dull, modern kitchen. It was neither spotlessly clean nor messy. Some children's paintings decorated the refrigerator. Tom scanned these for signs of parental cruelty and deceit, but found nothing. Mainly they seemed to be crude drawings of the family dog, apparently named Princess.

A small dinette set sat in the middle of the room.

"Have a seat," the woman said. "Coffee?"

"Please," Scarlett said.

The woman busied herself with making coffee while the man went into the basement. Tom stared at the basement door for the entire time he was gone, worried that he'd reemerge carrying an axe or shotgun. When he did come back up, he held an armload of photo albums.

He put the albums on the table and flipped open the first one. He addressed Tom.

"Your name is Paul Cooper. This is your father, Everret Cooper. He's the man whose funeral you're attending," Paul said.

"Everret Cooper," Tom repeated.

"Could I have some paper?" Scarlett asked. "It's easier to remember things once I've written them down."

"Oh, sure." Paul went to rummage around in the living room, finally returning with a spiral notebook and a couple of gummy ballpoint pens.

"What do I do for a living?" Tom asked.

"You're a contractor," Paul said. "You and your wife, Lisa, own a contracting business. I'm pretty sure none of my business associates will be at the funeral."

"And if they are, you can just start crying." Scarlett glanced up from where she was writing the word *Lisa*. "Your father's just died."

"Right," Paul said. "Some tears would be nice, if you can manage them."

"I'll try." Tom wondered if he'd been hired specifically to cry at the funeral. Paul didn't seem fazed by speaking of his father's death.

"And your children's names?" Scarlett accepted the coffee Lisa gave her with a smile, then immediately peered around the table for sugar. Finding none, she returned to her notebook, coffee untouched. Knowing that he could interpret her behavior made Tom feel closer to her and subsequently safer with these strangers.

"Edward Cole and James Ryan." Lisa set Tom's coffee cup down in front of him. "Eddy and Jimmy. Eddy is older."

"Do you have any sugar?" Tom asked.

"Yes, but you should remember not to use it at the funeral," Paul said. "I'm a diabetic."

"Right." Tom made a note of this. Lisa brought the sugar and Scarlett helped herself to it. They drank a cup of coffee as they flipped through pictures, taking notes on the names and relations of people in the Cooper family. Then Lisa looked at her watch.

"We should probably get started on your faces before the kids get back."

"Sure thing," Scarlett said, standing. "By the way, where will we be this evening?"

"There's a shop above the garage you'll stay in tonight. There's a couple of sleeping bags and a toilet. I'll bring sandwiches up later on," Lisa said.

"What about Princess?" Tom asked.

"Who?" Scarlett asked.

"The dog, I think." Tom pointed to the ambiguous refrigerator animal.

"Princess is at the vet's tonight. She's having an ingrown toenail removed. She won't be back until we pick her up tomorrow afternoon." Paul leaned back in the chair as if reassessing Tom's intelligence. "You're good."

“Of course he is,” Scarlett said. “Would you mind standing up, Lisa?”

Lisa did so, and Scarlett looked her over well.

“Do you mind if I just get a feel of you?” Scarlett asked.

“Go ahead.” Lisa held out her arms as though she was being frisked. Scarlett ran her hands lightly around Lisa’s body. Then she stepped back and took a deep breath. She stared at Lisa, then started to shift the proportions of her body around to match the other woman’s. Scarlett paused frequently to touch Lisa, feeling Lisa’s specific curves and planes. Lisa didn’t seem to mind this much. She had a slightly bored expression, like an actor getting fitted for a costume. Even when Scarlett cupped Lisa’s breasts, Lisa’s face remained placid.

Tom did not look forward to having this interaction with Paul.

Once Scarlett’s body was the same basic shape as Lisa’s, Scarlett decided it was time for her fur to come off. She asked for a couple of trash bags and some of Lisa’s clothes to wear. Lisa brought these and Scarlett retreated to the bathroom. A couple of minutes later, Scarlett returned, completely bald and wearing loose workout pants and a mint-colored tank top. Under Scarlett’s fur, her skin was deep bronze with a smattering of chocolate freckles across her shoulders.

She held a wadded up trash bag in one hand and her own clothes in the other. After disposing of her fur, Scarlett lightened her skin to match Lisa’s and spent close to an hour subtly shifting her facial features to match Lisa’s exactly.

Finally, she grew out her hair and eyebrows. Lisa and Scarlett spent a few minutes comparing. Tom could see Scarlett adopting Lisa’s body movements and voice all the while until the line between them blurred enough that their clothes were the only distinguishing trait. Lisa had straight, shoulder length hair, and she and Scarlett spent some time cutting their hair in exactly the same way.

Then it was Tom’s turn with Paul. He tried to do exactly

as Scarlett had done. Paul responded to having his body impersonally felt up with much more tension than Lisa had. He was visibly uncomfortable when Tom slid his hands down his backside to feel the shape of Paul's buttocks, which turned out to be flat and unappealing.

Tom wondered how Cloud had replicated Officer Simpson. The image of Cloud touching another man irritated him. The fact that Officer Simpson had most likely been dead when Cloud took his shape added a nauseating dimension to the image in Tom's head. He pushed it aside.

It didn't matter how Cloud had done anything. He was out of Tom's life for good now.

Matching another person exactly turned out to be much more difficult than he thought it would be. Tom's shifting was fast, but the minute differences between his face and Paul's were difficult for him to distinguish, let alone replicate. He was glad Scarlett was there to coach him.

Gradually, Tom became Paul, a pale, middle-aged Skin with lank, blonde hair and watery blue eyes. Tom stood before a mirror next to Paul, waiting for the other man's assessment.

"Perfect," Paul said after a few moments.

"Thank you." Tom used Paul's own rich, radio announcer-like voice to answer. Pride welled up inside him and also some emptiness at the ease of his transformation. Impersonating a real person should be harder, he thought. Then again, there was no reason it shouldn't be easy for Tom to fake his identity. He'd already been pretending to be someone he wasn't all his life—a full-blooded Shifter.

Lisa showed them up to the shop, a fourteen-by-fourteen-foot room full of menacing power tools. The table saw, in particular, worried him. What sort of things did Paul saw up in here? He peered at the jagged saw blade, looking for signs of blood. There was only sawdust. Three partially finished bird-houses sat on a table adjacent to the table saw.

Lisa hauled cots and musty sleeping bags up the stairs.

Scarlett and Tom spent the rest of the night memorizing the photo albums and listening to the radio. Scarlett practiced being Lisa, mimicking Lisa's poses in photographs, perfecting both her social and her genuine smile. Tom followed suit, trying to distract himself with practice and subvert his growing sense of apprehension. What would happen if they were found out? Scarlett didn't seem troubled by fear of discovery. But then, maybe she only acted calm for his benefit.

He finally broke down and voiced his fear, feeling a fool for stating the obvious and yet unable to say nothing. "I'm a little nervous about this."

"Don't be. Tomorrow won't be too hard," Scarlett said to him. "Most everybody there will be too upset to look at anybody else too hard."

"But what if someone challenges us?"

"Deny it," Scarlett said. "But no one will, not at a funeral. People are going to be way too distracted by their own grief to notice any of our mistakes. And even if they do notice, we'll have a very good excuse for not being ourselves."

Tom flipped through a few pages of the album, mentally tagging the pictures as he went by. There was Uncle Eddy, standing next to his truck, Betty. He turned the page and there was Paul's brother Jerry standing next to one of the many magnificent rock formations in Dead River Gorge. Jerry's wife stood next to him holding their oldest daughter, Samantha.

"Look at that," Scarlett tapped the picture. "Samantha's just a baby. Katie and Jerry Jr. mustn't have been born when the picture was taken."

Tom blinked, taken aback by Scarlett's deductive skills. He'd have never thought of the pictures as being a source of anything but facial recognition information. Scarlett had clearly been assembling them into a rough timeline.

“How many times have you done this, Scarlett?” he asked.

“Many, many times,” Scarlett said. “I think it’s safe to say that I do all my acting off-stage.”

“You’re really good at this,” Tom said.

“Yeah, well, I put Cyprus and Righteous through university this way,” Scarlett said. “One time I was stripping down to shift into this skinny guy who was a regular of mine and Righteous burst in and saw me naked, so now he thinks I’m a prostitute. That’s all right; the less he knows the better.”

“Why do you think Paul and Lisa want us to impersonate them?” Tom whispered.

“Who knows?” Scarlett shrugged.

“But I’ve been trying to figure it out. They don’t seem like criminals, do they? Why wouldn’t Paul want to go to his father’s funeral?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Scarlett stood and stretched. She pushed Lisa’s hair back from her face irritably. “This haircut is just annoying.”

“What if they’re doing something really bad?”

“Then it’s even more important that we don’t know.” Scarlett rifled idly through a coffee can full of screwdrivers.

“You can’t back out now anyway, so don’t torture yourself wondering what Paul and Lisa are up to.”

“I’m just scared they’re going to kill us or something,” Tom finally admitted. “What if we get to the funeral and it turns out that they’re in the mafia and there’s a hit out on Paul and they gun us down?”

Scarlett suspended her investigation of the screwdriver can and came to sit down on the bed next to Tom. She patted him on the back in a sisterly fashion.

“Honey, you watch too much television. The chances of us being killed at the funeral are almost nothing. We’re going to have Paul and Lisa’s kids along with us. There’s very little chance that they want to endanger their own offspring.”

“What other reason could a person have for not going to their own father’s funeral?” With Tom’s mother’s tiny, grave-side service still so fresh an ache, Tom couldn’t imagine any circumstance that would lead to him disrespect her memory by hiring a stranger to pretend to be him. “It’s not right.”

Scarlett laid her hand on Tom’s. Tom felt a strange disassociation watching Lisa’s hand take Paul’s hand, knowing that they were both impostors.

“People have their own reasons for what they do. There’s no way we can know what Paul is thinking. Our job is to do what he asks, which is to go to the church, cry for his father, and come back.” Scarlett stood up again, slightly agitated. “God, I’m dying for a smoke.”

“Why don’t you have one?”

“Lisa doesn’t,” Scarlett said. “I don’t want her clothes to smell.”

“So you don’t think that they’re criminals?” Tom pressed the subject, though it was clear that Scarlett didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“I don’t know,” Scarlett said. “That’s what I’m trying to get through your head. I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. You shouldn’t think about it too long. The last thing people who hire impersonators want is some kind of knowing glance from the Shifter that they’ve hired. If they think you know their secret, then that’s when it becomes dangerous. It’s like being a prostitute. Nobody cares about you until you start showing up at their golf club, threatening to expose them as spanking fetishists. You are their secret, get it? People get dangerous when their secrets are going to be revealed.”

“And the best way to keep the secret is to not know it in the first place,” Tom finished for her, then said in a much lowered voice, “I guess I shouldn’t have told you about Cloud and me. I’m sorry for making you keep a secret you didn’t want to know.”

“No,” Scarlett said kindly. “That’s different. You’re family. We want to be able to help you stay out of trouble—not accidentally work against you. With Paul and Lisa, though, it’s safer for everyone if we know nothing.”

At ten o’clock, after the children had gone to bed, Lisa brought their dinner up in a cardboard box marked “winter sweaters.” Scarlett thanked her and confirmed the time when they’d switch identities, at eight o’clock in the morning. They said goodnight.

Scarlett dove into the box immediately. It contained half a dozen tuna sandwiches on white bread, a couple of cherry sodas, and two wine-colored apples.

“This kind of looks like a school lunch my mom would have made,” Tom commented.

Scarlett peeled back the top of one of the tuna sandwiches and sniffed.

“Mayonnaise! I don’t know why but it always tastes best when I’m impersonating a Skin.”

“I like it anytime.” Tom crammed nearly half a sandwich in his mouth, starving.

“Like I said, it’s our secret shame.”

9

TOM STARED AT THE FLOOR AS PAUL UNDRESSED. THE OTHER man seemed tired. His eyes were puffy—maybe from crying. Tom’s own eyes, identical to Paul’s now, were also swollen, but from insomnia. The tuna sandwiches had combined with Tom’s anxiety to form an upset knot that kept him up half the night. Paul shed his robe and pajamas without a word. Tom slid his feet into Paul’s still-warm slippers, feeling vaguely disgusted at the sensation, and headed down the stairs into the kitchen. Scarlett was already there, in Lisa’s shape, pouring breakfast cereal for the boys. She wore a plain black dress and a demure, black headband.

Two boys sat at the table, dressed in small, black suit jackets and black pants. Neither looked happy, but then again, they didn’t look sad either. They ignored him completely, heads down in their bowls, shoveling pink and purple cereal into their mouths. Their slurping mingled with the noise of daytime television coming from the living room. One of the boys looked up at him. Tom tensed, wondering what the kid would say. Or should he say something? Give some advice? Should he comfort them? Tom really didn’t know.

He’d never had a father. Angela’s father, Poppy, had been the only adult male influence in his life. Poppy was nothing like Paul. For one thing, he was much older than Paul and prone to dispensing unsolicited advice.

“You should chew with your mouth closed,” Tom said to the kid.

“Okay.” The kid’s gaze sank back into his cereal bowl. Tom felt a tremendous sense of personal failure as a first-time father-figure, but felt like he hadn’t been too far off the mark as far as his impersonation of Paul was concerned.

“You better take a shower and get dressed, honey,” Scarlett said on her way to the living room, “or we’ll be late.”

“Okay,” Tom said.

“I put your clothes out in the bathroom for you.” Scarlett re-emerged from the living room fixing a diamond stud earring in her ear.

“I’m going,” Tom mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He showered, put on Paul’s mourning suit, and followed Scarlett’s lead.

They got the kids in the car. Tom sat in the passenger’s seat. He’d never been a good driver, even out in the sticks. The idea of negotiating Riverside’s cutthroat traffic terrified him.

“How come you’re driving, Mom?” one of the sons asked.

“Daddy’s tired,” Scarlett said without missing a beat. “Now, sit back; Mommy can’t see out the rearview mirror.”

At the funeral home, Tom fit in perfectly. Everyone seemed to be dazed, tired, and not sure about what they were supposed to be doing, just like him. Suddenly, surreally, Tom wondered if they weren’t all impersonators. He almost laughed, but was saved by the junior funeral director who came and ushered him and the rest of the mourners gently into the funeral home’s chapel. Tom hugged and was hugged by virtually every person he greeted. Briefly, he wondered if this was what Paul had hired him to endure for him. Paul didn’t seem like a hugging sort of guy.

Tom sat in a folding chair between Lisa and Paul’s mother—a plump, bereft woman who clutched desperately at his arm for the entire service. Then they drove in a procession to the family mausoleum, where Paul’s father’s ashes were shelved alongside the ashes of his immediate family. The collection of urns spanned decades and had no real continuity, other than

being basically urn-shaped. One squat, baroque urn on the far left looked very much like a ceramic beer mug, while Paul's father's urn was more like a golden chalice... or polo trophy. Tom wondered if Paul's father had chosen it himself.

Seeing the golden urn sitting alongside so many others, Tom felt strangely blank and cold, which was not good. He was the only person not weeping, and he knew he had to generate some tears quickly, before the prayers were over. He tried to make himself believe that this urn was his own father's urn—that his father, whoever he had been, was being laid to rest without ever having known Tom.

Tears came easily to him then, and though they were only self-pitying tears, they passed for genuine bereavement, which was all that mattered. Counterfeit tears would earn him the same paycheck that real tears would. Wasn't that what acting was all about? Being able to cry on command?

Tom let them have their two hundred dollars worth.



Lisa and Paul stopped their pickup truck on the cobbled curb in front of Hot Sally's Infirmary. Tom was never so relieved to climb out of the back of a pickup. The sleepless night and hours of weeping had exhausted him. He had a headache and wanted to shower off Paul's stinky, grandfather-ish after-shave, but at the same time felt heady with victory at pulling off his first professional impersonation job.

Scarlett was right. What did it matter if people didn't want to go to their father's funeral? Why shouldn't they be allowed to hire Shifters to do it for them, if the Shifters are willing?

Lisa and Paul pulled away from the curb without a word to them or a look back.

Scarlett wasted no time. She lit a cigarette and pulled hard on it three or four times before taking a normal breath. Then she flopped back against the brick wall of Hot Sally's Infirmary, groaning with pleasure.

“God, I love smoking,” she mumbled. “I think I’m going buy a pack of Crimson Queens Extra Long and smoke them all tonight.”

Tom giggled at her melodramatic decadence, delirious with sleep deprivation and the thrill of success. He leaned against the chilly brick wall beside her. Somehow the crying had made him sore. Or maybe it was the insomnia. Maybe it was just the tension generated by the fear of being caught and shoved in solitary confinement on Shifter Row.

“I’d like to try one of those Crimson Queens,” Tom said. He’d only ever smoked a couple of times in his life, but he’d always liked the way that actors looked smoking in films.

“You’ll love them. Crimson Queens are the best cigarette made anywhere, hands down,” Scarlett said. “And they have red, sugared filters. That makes them especially dear to my heart.” Scarlett dragged herself away from the brick wall. “We have to give Hot Sally her cut. Who knows? Maybe she’ll be generous and give us a couple of shots!” Scarlett’s hand rested on the door. She leaned close to Tom, speaking in a confidential whisper. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up though. She’s the stingiest broad I’ve ever met.”

Scarlett pulled open the door and sashayed into the darkened tavern. Tom followed, excited by the prospect of getting a free drink, or even buying one. He did have two hundred dollars in his pocket, after all. Once inside the dim tavern, Scarlett stopped so abruptly that Tom almost ran into her back.

The bar was completely quiet and, except for six big Silent Shifters, completely unpopulated. A Silent man with velvety golden fur sat at the bar, smoking a thin cigar. Seven Colmoon. Scarlett switched to Shifter tongue immediately, palpably afraid.

“*Excuse me,*” Scarlett said, holding up her hands in apology, “*I didn’t realize the bar was closed.*”

She backed into Tom. Following her lead, Tom turned to go but found the door blocked.

“Are you coming here to see Hot Sally?” Seven asked.

“We were just coming in to get a drink, Mr. Coldmoon.”

Seven showed no surprise at Scarlett knowing his name, even though Tom didn't think they were acquainted. He smoked the same cherry cigars that Cloud smoked, but he was not Cloud. Tom found nothing about Seven sensual, not even in a sexy, bad-boy way. He thought Seven's knuckles were wet with something dark and sticky, but the low light made it difficult to see clearly.

“You know, it's funny. You look just like a pair of scabs Sally said might be showing up to give her a little kick down from a job.” Seven reached over the bar and grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the well. He poured himself three fingers, then left the bottle open atop the bar. He put out two smudgy lowball glasses. *“But if you're just here to have a drink, have one on me. Hope you like whiskey.”*

“Thank you, I do.” Scarlett shuffled forward toward the bar.

“Don't be shy, Blackie,” Seven said. *“There's plenty of whiskey for you too.”*

When Tom didn't move quickly enough, the guy behind him shoved him forward. Tom stumbled, then stepped up to the bar next to Scarlett, who was already seated on a bar stool and pouring herself a whiskey.

“You like it neat or on the rocks?” she asked Tom. He didn't know what neat was, so he asked for it on the rocks. Scarlett leaned over the bar to grab some ice out of the bin and suddenly sucked in her breath in horror. Her hand clenched around the neck of the whiskey bottle. Alarmed, Tom looked over the counter and saw Hot Sally lying behind it. She did not look comfortable, or even natural. Her limbs lay twisted awkwardly around her. Blood spread out from her crumpled skull in a thin pool.

Still, it took Tom a few shocked seconds to realize that she was dead.

Scarlett scooped up a few ice cubes, which clinked against the side of Tom's glass as her hand shook. She poured him a drink and then poured one for herself.

"*Thank you, Mr. Coldmoon,*" she said. She held up her glass. "*Cheers.*"

Seven seemed to regard her for a long moment, then lifted his glass and touched it against Scarlett's.

"*Cheers,*" he said.

Tom's mouth was so dry that he couldn't bring himself to speak, but he touched his glass against Scarlett's and Seven's and forced himself to take a drink.

"*Now, I don't know what you may have heard about me,*" Seven said, "*but I like to think of myself as a fair man. That bitch down there thought she could get away with undercutting me. She'd take jobs for less money, you know what I mean?*"

"*Sure,*" Scarlett said.

"*Now you might think that promotes healthy competition in the market, but what it really does is devalue the product. Pretty soon Skins were telling me I charged too much and they'd take their business elsewhere. They didn't understand the quality product that our family provides is worth every penny. They just want it cheaper—no matter how amateur the service.*" Seven looked directly at Tom. "*That's not good for the industry. Trust me, I went to Business College. I know this shit.*"

"*I hear what you're saying.*" Scarlett nodded.

"*Good.*" Mr. Seven put down his whiskey, then smashed the back of his hand into Scarlett's face. She fell backward off her barstool onto the floor. Tom heard the twin sounds of her head thumping on the floor and her whiskey glass crashing into a hundred pieces. Tom lunged toward her but could only stumble forward as Seven kicked him square in the gut. Pain exploded through his abdomen. He curled over, unable to draw a breath. Scarlett lay disoriented on the floor.

Another man grabbed Tom from behind, wrenching his arms behind him.

"Scarlett!" he shouted.

Seven turned to look at him.

"Now see, that's what I mean about amateur. A professional never yells out their accomplice's name." Seven punctuated his advice by slamming his fist into Tom's stomach again. Tom coughed and retched on the floor. *"See, you're so untrained as to be a danger to yourself. Our business is an art, my friend, and you don't have any of the skills to make it."*

"Please," Scarlett mumbled, pushing herself up off the floor. *"I'll give you the money."* She reached into her vest.

Seven sighed heavily, then walked over and pounded a kick into her ribs. The folded cash fell onto the floor.

"You're not giving me anything. I'm taking the money." Seven scooped up the cash. He counted it and frowned. *"I can't believe you'd sell yourself to Skins so cheap. Don't you have any pride at all?"*

"I'm sorry," Scarlett whispered, holding her hands in front of her face in anticipation of another blow. Seven crouched down beside her.

"Don't cross me again, Scarlett." He hauled her up to her feet and shoved her toward the door. Scarlett stumbled forward, then wavered and looked back at Tom. *"Don't you worry, I'm sending Blackie right after you. Send him out nice, boys."*

Seven returned to his bar stool. The man holding Tom's arms wrenched them up in the air and shoved him out the door. Tom tripped and stumbled forward. Scarlett rushed forward and caught his arm, dragging Tom up and after her. He followed in a semi-crouch as she pulled him out of the bar and down the street.

"Come on, Tom," she said, pulling him down an icy, piss-filled alley. She didn't stop until they reached the river embankments, where she hunched on a bench. The sun was

setting over the river, igniting the yellow and orange clouds in an explosion of splendor. Scarlett held her head.

"I'm so dizzy," she murmured. "You know, no matter how many times you get your ass kicked, it never stops being special."

"We should go to a doctor," Tom said.

"And pay with what?"

"I've still got my two hundred dollars," Tom said.

"Keep it," Scarlett said. "Buy yourself a new shirt. I wish I wasn't so dizzy. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Tom said.

"You should keep your two hundred dollars," Scarlett said. "Maybe you can get a new shirt."

"You just said that." Tom looked up in alarm.

"Did I?" Scarlett asked. "Well, shit."



Cyprus stormed into Scarlett's bedroom only about a minute after Tom helped her to her bed. Tom was bent at the foot of the bed, helping Scarlett take off her sandals.

"Where the fuck have you two been?"

"I told you in the note," Scarlett said. "We went to a party."

Cyprus rounded on Tom. "What happened to my sister's face?"

"Too drunk. Fell down," Scarlett said, then added, "Get out of my room."

Cyprus ignored her.

"Spill it, Tom," he said.

"I—" Tom didn't want to betray Scarlett, but he was really worried about her. She'd hit her head hard enough to have trouble remembering what she'd said. He himself was having trouble thinking about anything but the dull throbbing pain in his stomach. "Do we have any aspirin?"

Cyprus narrowed his eyes at Tom, who recoiled from the intensity of Cyprus's angry suspicion.

"I'll go get one," he said. "You better have a good explanation by the time I come back."

"Thank God he's gone," Scarlett said, once Cyprus had left. "He's so nosy."

"What should I say?"

"Stick to the story," Scarlett said. "It'll only make him mad if he knows."

"But we don't have a story," Tom said. "What party was I at? Where?"

"Just make something up," Scarlett said. "Tell me later. I'm going to sleep."

"I don't think you should go to sleep yet." Tom gently shook her shoulder. She woke up angrily, shoving his hand away.

"What the fuck is it?"

"My mom always said you shouldn't let someone go to sleep if they've hit their head."

"Did Scarlett hit her head?" Turning, Tom saw Righteous standing in the doorway.

"I fell," Scarlett mumbled.

Probably seeking a better answer, Righteous looked to Tom, who cast his eyes downward in shame.

Righteous sat down on the bed and tidied the blankets around Scarlett. Cyprus returned with the aspirin. He then pulled Tom gently but firmly into the hall.

"I'm not going to blame you because I know that whatever happened, it's probably not your fault, but I need to know what's wrong with Scarlett."

"I told her I wouldn't..." Tom began. "She's going to kick me out."

"No, she won't," Cyprus said. "But I'll kick your ass if you don't spill it right now."

Tom gulped. He wanted to tell Cyprus, but felt childishly guilty for not keeping the secret.

“The fire marshal came yesterday,” Tom said, “and did his usual thing.”

“What usual thing?”

Tom blinked in surprise.

“He hit Scarlett up for a bribe, like he always does.”

“Like he always does,” Cyprus echoed with audible incomprehension.

“Scarlett said he threatened to close the theatre before every show,” Tom said.

“Does he?” Cyprus crossed his arms and leaned back against the fading hallway wallpaper. “That would explain why she’s always being so nice to him.”

“Scarlett gave him all the money she had but it wasn’t enough, so she made a couple of calls and asked me to come with her to help her get the money.”

Cyprus’s eyebrows shot up in the air.

“How did you do that?”

“We... went to a funeral for some people who didn’t want to go.”

Cyprus took in a deep breath, digesting the information.

“So you and Scarlett impersonated some people at a funeral,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And they didn’t want to pay you for it, so they beat you up and kept the money.”

“No! They were square. But when we went back to the bar to split the money, Seven Coldmoon was there.” Tom found his voice catching as he spoke. He’d been frightened and humiliated and thought Seven would kill them. Only an hour had passed, and Tom was still caught in a raw place between anger and tears. “He took the cash. He knocked Scarlett off a barstool and she fell and hit her head. I tried to help her. I’m sorry.”

“Seven Colmoon let you live?” Cyprus’s eyes went wide in astonishment.

“He...” Tom broke off, the image of Hot Sally’s body vivid in his memory. “He’d already killed the woman who set up the job. I don’t think he cared about us. He didn’t even ask me for any money; just Scarlett.”

“He probably figured she was in charge,” Cyprus said.

“But Scarlett had already given me my share.” Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out the two hundred dollars. He offered it to Cyprus, who declined.

“You should keep your money. You earned it.”

“But Scarlett only gave the fire marshal a hundred. She’s supposed to give him five,” Tom said.

“Five? Fucking bastard!” Cyprus sank down the wall, hands over his face. Tom thought he could hear his cousin counting quietly to himself. “Something else happened while you two were away.”

“What?” Dread sank through Tom’s gut. Was this what Cloud had been talking about when he said that Riverside was a shithole?

“Anne Sharpe from the National Theatre came by. They want us to present a scene from *The Onion Field* for their Diverse Voices Festival selection board tomorrow.”

Tom had been so prepared for bad news that he didn’t immediately comprehend what Cyprus was saying to him. Then, slowly, it dawned on him that this was good news.

“So we’re on the shortlist for the Festival? That’s great!” Tom blurted out in joy.

“Anne Sharpe is especially interested to see you shift on stage,” Cyprus said.

“Fantastic!”

“No, it’s not fantastic,” Cyprus gritted out, “because you can’t do it because you’re too beat up.”

“I’ll do it. I don’t care how much it hurts.”

“Really?” Cyprus jabbed Tom in the stomach with his index finger. Pain exploded through Tom’s whole abdomen. He actually saw stars. “You think you can shift through that?”

“It’ll be better tomorrow,” Tom whispered. Tears of sheer pain leaked out of the corner of his eyes.

“I don’t believe that our chance at the National is going to be blown because of this,” Cyprus mumbled.

“It won’t be blown!” Tom insisted. “No matter what. I just need some aspirin.”

Cyprus leafed through the two hundred dollars. He peeled off twenty and handed it to Tom.

“Here then, you’d better buy a big bottle.”

10

TOM TRIED NOT TO FIDGET. SURREPTITIOUSLY, HE LOOKED around to see if anyone was watching him. The other actors were too wrapped up in stretching, breathing exercises, and last-minute primping to notice him. Cyprus stood next to him, looking slightly bored. Occasionally he'd glance at his watch or shake his head slightly at another actor who was doing something he didn't approve of. He watched a Skin woman pull the hem of her very short skirt down.

"She has beautiful legs, but that short skirt just makes her self-conscious," Cyprus whispered. "It's a bad choice for an audition. I wouldn't cast her."

"You're not casting now," Tom whispered back.

"I'm always casting," Cyprus said. "And I wouldn't cast you if you kept holding onto your stomach the whole time."

"I can't help it," Tom said. "What if I move wrong and I yell or something?"

"Incorporate it. Add a line."

"What line?"

"Who cares? If this had happened on opening night, you'd have to figure something out."

"I should have looked at the script to find the best place to incorporate an injury to the character." Tom's heart raced.

"No, you're not the writer now. You're the actor. The actor works with what he's got."

"So I should explain how my stomach got hurt?"

"No!" Several other actors were openly staring at them now.

Cyprus leaned closer to him. “When you’re hurt, you don’t go explaining it to everyone you’ve ever met. You just say, ‘Phew, my stomach hurts.’ Be in the moment. Stay in character.”

“Just like when I was with Scarlett?”

“Exactly like when you were with Scarlett,” Cyprus said. “Except after this performance, Anne Sharpe isn’t going to take your wallet.”

Tom grinned. He felt his tension draining away. Whatever happened out there, it couldn’t possibly be as bad as what had happened to him yesterday.

“Phew,” he said, “my stomach sure hurts.”

Cyprus broke into a relieved smile of his own. “That’s right.”

“Turnskin Collective?” A woman wearing a shiny, low-cut shirt stood in the open doorway.

“Right here.” Cyprus held up his hand. “Come on, Tom.”

They followed the woman through the cavernous backstage area, past stacks of risers and ramps to the wings. The woman turned and beckoned them onto the stage. Her gold bangles flashed in the light. Cyprus turned to Tom and whispered, “Remember: you own this place. They just don’t know it yet.”

Tom straightened immediately and grinned. Walking out on this stage to essentially play the part of himself was nothing. Nowhere near as hard as walking into the funeral home and being Paul.

The auditorium seats were lit. Five Skins sat in the second row. Two women and three men. He recognized Anne Sharpe from before, but not the others. He smiled at her. She smiled back, then sent a sidelong glance at the man next to her—a strange glance, full of self-satisfaction that bordered on spite. The recipient of this glance, a thin man in stylish glasses and his early forties, appeared to be ignoring it.

Cyprus stepped up to the edge of the stage. “We represent the Turnskin Collective. We’ll be doing a scene from our festival entry, *The Onion Boy*.”

Cyprus began the scene, playing the part of an unkind farmer who objected to the main character's mother shifting to be more comfortable in the field. Tom's character shifted to mock him, growing shorter, rounder, and fatter as the scene progressed. Shifting on bruised muscles brought Tom to tears, but he played through it, comically grabbing his abdomen and rolling his eyes.

Cyprus played off Tom's energy. Their ten minutes sped by. Afterward, Tom shifted back to his normal shape, breathing hard and queasy from the pain, but happy with his performance. Both Anne Sharpe and the man on the end clapped loudly. The man with stylish glasses remained unmoved.

"Thank you," he said.

The woman in the shiny shirt escorted them back to the green room. An hour later, the woman returned.

"I'd like to ask Sunflower Troupe, Hammer Dance Company, and Turnskin Collective to stay. Everyone else, thank you for coming. We hope to see you again next year. Those of you who are staying, we're taking a short break. Please be back in thirty minutes."

Tom looked at the floor, overjoyed at being asked to stay but also unable to meet the disappointed eyes of the people who weren't chosen. Cyprus had no such reserve. He smiled and laughed and accepted the sad congratulations of the people that he knew with undimmed excitement.

"We're not in yet," Cyprus said to another Shifter.

"Closer than us, though," the woman said, laughing. She leaned close. "Here's a tip: I don't think they like bare breasts."

"Cretins." Cyprus shook his head.

Tom popped open the top of his aspirin and swallowed four. The chalky bitterness stuck to his tongue and he choked.

"Is there any water in here?" Tom spit the moist aspirins into an ashtray.

“There’s a drinking fountain down the hall to the left,” the woman talking to Cyprus said.

“Thanks.” Tom left the green room, brushing past other departing actors. The rose marble floor in the hallway had recently been waxed, and the yellow afternoon sun gleamed across it. Tom had never seen such a shiny floor before. The drinking fountain stood in the lobby near a tall, fancy ashtray and a payphone.

The man in stylish glasses stood talking on the phone.

“...So around nine would be good, then?” He glanced over at Tom and raised an eyebrow when Tom shook a few aspirin into his palm. “Will you be bringing anyone? No, I’m just asking.”

Tom slurped up a mouthful of water.

“Good. I’ll see you.” The man hung up. He leaned against the wall, fishing around inside his jacket pocket before finally producing a cigarette case.

“You put on a very... interesting show,” he said. “I hope you didn’t hurt yourself in the audition.”

“Not too much,” Tom said.

“Your name was Tom, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tom nodded, “Tom Fletcher.”

“I’m Michael David James.” He held out his hand. Tom shook it. “I’m on the board.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Tom Fletcher... I thought your application said Flyer,” Michael said.

“Stage name,” Tom said. A cold chill ran through him as he realized his mistake. He took a deep breath and arranged a pleasant smile on his face. He couldn’t let his nerves get to him.

“Isn’t Fletcher a unique sort of last name for a Shifter?”

“I guess... I never thought about it,” Tom said. “I should get back.”

“I’ll see you inside,” Michael said.

Tom forced himself to walk casually back across the polished floor. The slapping of his sandals against his feet seemed unbearably loud in the now empty lobby.

He knew his name was a strange one. Why did Michael David James have to point out the fact that he had a Skin name? Was he somehow suspicious? Probably he was just trying to point out that he knew something about Shifter culture.

Back in the safety of the green room, Cyprus was casually talking to one of the women in the Sunflower Troupe. They were Skin women who were all over the age of fifty. Cyprus seemed at home chatting to them about the business. All the Sunflower Troupe women were veterans of the stage. Three had played the National Theatre before in their younger days.

Hammer Dance Company was called first, then after ten minutes, Sunflower Troupe. Finally, Turnskin Collective was called back onto the stage.

“We have a few questions we’d like to ask,” Michael said. “The play you’ve presented requires the actors to shift onstage; is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Cyprus said, “because it describes the life of a Shifter boy whose life would naturally include changing his form.”

“Don’t you think that is exclusionary toward other actors?” Michael asked.

“No more than any other physical limitation is,” Cyprus answered.

“This is irrelevant,” Anne Sharpe cut in. “A play which describes the life of Shifters would naturally include shifting.”

“The Diverse Voices Festival is not about exclusion of any one group or the creation of special roles for one population.” Michael turned to face Anne, who clearly anticipated his resistance to the play. “It’s not a circus.”

Cyprus stood, stone-faced. Tom followed his lead.

Michael addressed them again, "I understand that you are the author of this play, Mr. Fletcher, or should I say, Mr. Flyer?"

"Flyer," Tom said. "Yes, I wrote it."

"I'd like to see a rewrite of this play which removes the necessity for on-stage shifting," Michael said.

Anne slammed her hands down on the table. "Michael, that is preposterous."

"I wouldn't call it preposterous," said the other woman on the jury. "We're going to be publishing these plays."

"Publishing?" Tom asked.

All eyes turned to him.

"Part of the Diverse Voices project is to produce a volume of each year's festival for the benefit of school theatre departments," Michael said. "For this reason we want to be as inclusive as possible while keeping the content suitable for teenaged students."

"And this is the only play so far featuring a Shifter protagonist in the correct age range," Anne said.

"Would a rewrite be possible?" Michael asked.

Disappointment and anger sank though Tom. The shifting made *The Onion Boy* unique; he could not imagine how he could convey the same feelings without it. Immediately, he started turning the play around in his mind, working the angles of the story. He might be able to make it work...

"No," Cyprus said. "*The Onion Boy* is about a particular part of Shifter existence, which if removed would render the play meaningless."

Tom stared at Cyprus, aghast. He'd just said no to the National Theatre People. Was that even legal?

"I'm sorry to hear that," Michael said. "We will take that into consideration when reviewing your play for inclusion in the Diverse Voices Festival. Thank you for coming. We should come to a decision in the next thirty days, and we'll inform you then."

“Thank you.” Cyprus gave a short half-bow and nodded to Anne Sharpe, who wore an expression of grim determination. Then he and Cyprus collected their bags and left. They were all the way down the front steps of the National Theatre before Cyprus said anything.

“That guy with the glasses hates us, but I think the others might be persuaded.”

“I can’t believe you told them no,” Tom said. “I could have come up with something...”

Cyprus shook his head. “You can’t start compromising during the audition. It makes you look weak. Besides, I didn’t want to. We’ve got a good play, and if they don’t want it, we’ll still sell tickets just because it was considered for the festival.”

“If we can get a certificate of occupancy,” Tom muttered.

“I’ll think of something.” Cyprus stopped walking and fished around in his pocket, eventually producing the train schedule.

The clock tolled eleven and the plaza began to fill with students coming out of the art and theatre academies. Tom wandered over to the massive fountain that occupied the center of the cul-de-sac green. Though empty in winter, the fountain still attracted the brown baggers, who sat munching bland-looking sandwiches in the weak sunlight. The National Theatre took up one third of the cul-de-sac. The art gallery and opera stood on either side of it. Looking south, Tom could see the Shane Monument, a massive arch built at the opening to the Horsemarket Commons. Between Tom and the arch stretched the boutiques and restaurants of Grandview Promenade. On the train trip over, Tom had been too nervous to really look at these historical monuments. Now he gaped at the famous street like an idiot.

When they were little, he and Angela would pretend that they lived on Grandview Promenade, in a great big house with a handsome butler and two palomino horses. Tom could see

now that there were no houses. There were, however, some very expensive looking apartments on the side streets. The only horses pulled carriages full of tourists.

One carriage stopped nearby and a bunch of tourists in identical orange parkas stopped at the fountain to take pictures.

“You see someone you know?” Cyprus asked, coming up alongside him.

“No,” Tom said, “it’s just Grandview Promenade, you know... I feel like I’m on TV.”

Cyprus frowned down the street. “I guess you’ve never been here before.”

Tom shook his head mutely. “I wish I’d brought my camera.”

“Listen, I have to get back to take care of the fire marshal, but why don’t you stay and see the sights? You remember what train to take back?”

“The green line,” Tom said. “But shouldn’t I come help?”

“Do what? Fight with Scarlett?” Cyprus handed him a couple ten-dollar bills. “It would be best if you weren’t there for this family quarrel.”

Tom hadn’t ever noticed that they cared or even noticed his presence when they fought. The thought occurred to him that maybe what he’d thought of as quarrels were mere disagreements and that maybe he should stay away after all. Plus, he stood within a stone’s throw of Grandview Promenade. Even though he’d been in Riverside for a few weeks, he’d only gone outside the Cox Wall to work for Paul and Lisa, and they lived in the duller part of the city.

Tom walked Cyprus to the rail station just behind the opera and felt a sudden thrill of excitement as he watched Cyprus’s train pull away. He walked back between the National Theatre and the opera, smiling at the mostly Skin students who rushed from building to building beneath the overcast sky. Tom wondered if it would snow. That would be something.

After weeks of clear, cold skies, it would decide to snow on the one day he wanted to go around town. The cul-de-sac ended and Grandview Promenade began. It was a wide street, lined with white-barked birch trees. Many famous photographs had been taken of autumn on Grandview Promenade, when the leaves of these trees turned golden. But now they were only bare branches.

Even in the winter, the promenade was full of people. Cafés abounded. Most had big windows, and Tom marveled at the beautiful interior décors as he passed by. One shop called Steam caught his eye, both for the weird, futuristic furniture and the clientele. Tom thought that everyone he saw might be wearing diamonds, or at least rhinestones. Blonde-haired Skin women sat in the windows chatting over massive bowls of milky coffee. Men in beautiful wool suits lounged against a shiny steel bar. Big, white orb lights hung low over the inside tables.

One man in particular caught his attention. His back was to Tom. He'd removed his jacket, which gave Tom an excellent view of his excellent backside. Tom slowed slightly to take in the view, then felt like a pervert and sped up just as the man turned around.

“Tom!”

Tom paused, puzzled. Then continued walking. It had to be a different Tom.

“Tom!”

This time he turned and saw Oscar Highfield-Banks, the man with the excellent backside, beckoning him into Steam.

Tom threaded his way through the crowd toward Oscar. The blonde women stopped their conversation entirely to watch him, smirking from behind their coffee bowls.

The air inside Steam smelled of roasting coffee beans, toasted cheese, and caramel. No other Shifter dined or even worked there, as far as he would tell. He wished he'd had time

to buy a new shirt, or at least tuck in the country-boy one that he wore, but he could think of no smooth way to accomplish this now.

He stepped up beside Oscar, hoping he didn't smell bad or look too shabby but fearing the worst on both counts.

"What a pleasant surprise to see you here," Oscar said, smiling warmly. "Can I get you something?"

"I couldn't—" Tom began to refuse, but Oscar cut him off.

"Don't be silly," Oscar said. "Milk tea?"

"I prefer coffee, if you don't mind," Tom said. If Righteous had been there, he would have remarked on Tom's lack of identification with Shifter culture; but the fact was, Tom didn't care for tea—especially not the spicy, buttered kind favored by the Riverside Shifter crowd. "But I can get it myself."

Tom dug into his pocket for the crumpled bills Cyprus had given him. Oscar held up a hand to stop him.

"It's all on my magazine's expense account anyway." Oscar winked. "So fresh-roast coffee, then?"

"Yes, please." Tom had never had fresh-roast coffee before, but he'd read about it. Tom pulled up a stool, relieved to get off his feet but unbearably nervous. He leaned on the bar and rubbed his stomach. It was one thing to talk to Oscar in the Shifter part of town, but to have coffee with him on Grandview Promenade? Tom feared complete social failure. He curled his arm around his stomach.

Oscar ordered a "full service" coffee from the barman, then turned his full attention back to Tom.

"Are you feeling well?" Oscar indicated Tom's defensive hunch with a light wave.

"I had a bike accident," Tom said. "My stomach is a little bruised. I'm fine. Listen, I wanted to say that I loved the editorial you wrote this month. It was hilarious, but it also made me think. I especially liked your take on the Horsemarket Pumpkin Queen bribery scandal."

For a split second, Oscar expression went completely blank. Tom wondered if he had gotten it wrong somehow, then Oscar regained his footing.

“Ah, you mean for the magazine?” Oscar laughed.

“Yes, did you not like that piece?”

“No, I just couldn’t remember it. I write a fair number of editorials, and sometimes they all get jumbled up,” Oscar said. “I’m glad you liked it. Look! Here comes your coffee.”

Tom’s coffee arrived in a rustic ceramic bowl. The service that came with the coffee was the most extravagant assembly of tools and condiments Tom had ever seen, a whole separate tray of them. There was a tiny pitcher of cream and another containing sugar syrup as well as a dish of small candies and crackers. A small round of lighted charcoal and a dish of what looked like little amber rocks sat on the tray opposite the cream.

Tom frowned at the charcoal. Then at the little rocks.

“Incense.” Using a set of minute tongs, Oscar picked up one of the little amber rocks and set it on the charcoal. A thin trail of smoke rose up and a musky fragrance filled the air around them.

Tom took a sip of his coffee. It did not taste like Sherman’s Instant Crystals. Some faint, mysterious spice lingered on the edge of Tom’s palate. It was delicious and disturbing. He’d secretly hoped that this coffee would be exactly what he expected it to be and not challenge or alienate him in any way. But it was not the comforting coffee that he’d hoped for.

He wondered what Angela would have made of this coffee. She’d have probably compared it unfavorably to Sherman’s.

“What brings you to my neck of the woods?” Oscar asked.

“Sightseeing,” Tom said. “I had an audition at the National Theatre this morning, but that’s over, so I thought I’d stay and look around.”

“An audition?” Oscar grabbed a candy and tossed it in his mouth. “That’s really great.”

“I don’t think anything’s going to come of it.” Tom related the story of what had happened and the jury’s objections to his play. When he was finished, Oscar nodded thoughtfully.

“Michael David James, eh?” he said. “I went to school with him.”

“Oh.” Tom blanched. “I didn’t mean to say anything against him. I’m sure he knows his business. I’m just disappointed, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry,” Oscar said, “I know exactly how particular Michael can be. But you shouldn’t be so downhearted. Getting to the audition is amazing enough, isn’t it?”

“Sure it is.” Tom picked at the crackers.

“It doesn’t feel like that now, though, does it?”

“No,” Tom admitted.

“Well, I hate to see such a brilliant young man looking so sad. I feel an obligation to cheer you up somehow.”

“You already bought me a coffee.” Tom smiled at Oscar.

Oscar laughed. “You’re easy to please, aren’t you?”

Tom shrugged. He ate a couple candies. They tasted like flowers.

“I happen to have the afternoon completely free. What if I gave you a personal tour of the promenade, ending with dinner at my favorite restaurant? It’s in the Horsemarket. Wonderful, wonderful bison steaks. You like bison, don’t you? If you don’t, they’ve got pork ribs as well, and they’re just as good.”

Tom’s mouth began to water at the mere idea of steak. He hadn’t eaten meat in weeks. Wouldn’t Oscar want something in return, though? Something like sex? Tom hesitated, thinking of Cloud. In his heart, he hadn’t given up on finding Cloud and didn’t want to consider taking a different lover.

His heart, Tom decided, was an idiot. Cloud had left him. Cloud was not a rich, handsome, well-connected man who wanted to buy him a nice fat steak. He was a murderer who'd abandoned him in the middle of nowhere.

The fact that the middle of nowhere was Tom's home failed to alter Tom's line of reasoning. He wanted a steak, and he wanted it now.

"I'd be happy to," he said, "if it's no trouble."



If Oscar should suddenly lose all his money, Tom thought, he could easily have made a living as a tour guide. All afternoon Oscar pointed out small statues and plaques all along the promenade, tailoring his information to Tom's taste. He showed Tom the café where Fred Brandt was discovered waiting tables and walked him around the grounds of the National Theatre School, which Oscar had attended as a youth.

"You see that bench," he said. "I was once violently sick on that bench after being rejected in love. Whiskey and ice cream is a deadly combination. I can't advise it."

They made their way up the promenade toward the arch at a casual pace, pausing to window shop and read posted menus. At one shop, Oscar purchased a very expensive scarf and gave it to Tom.

"I can't stand to watch you shivering like that," Oscar said. "Please, take it."

Tom let Oscar drape it around his neck, enjoying the attention and the feeling of being taken care of. He hadn't had this feeling since he was a child.

Oscar and he climbed the ten flights of stairs to the top of the arch and looked down the promenade they'd just traversed. Then, turning, Tom got his first view of Horsemarket Commons.

It was a long rectangle ten city blocks long and half a block wide. Cafés, clubs, and shops lined the Horsemarket,

now horseless except for the a few rental carriages and a lot of horse-themed signs and restaurant names. At the far end stood a towering obelisk, and behind that were the Houses of Senate. The sky above them turned grayer, bulging with snow that refused to fall. Oscar pointed a gloved hand out over the street.

“You see that red awning? That’s where we’re going for dinner. It’s called the Branding Iron.”

“It looks big,” Tom said.

“I could do with an early dinner after climbing these stairs,” Oscar said. “How about you?”

“I’m starving,” Tom said.

Oscar started down the metal stairs and resumed his tour-guide persona.

“The Branding Iron is quite famous for its clientele and widely acknowledged as the place to be seen on the Commons, especially for the homosexuals.” Oscar paused on the stairs. “That doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Why would it?” Tom asked.

“If we dine there together tonight, you might find your name scandalously linked with mine in tomorrow’s gossip rags.” Oscar smiled up at him. “I am well-known for my tastes. It may not be the publicity you’d like for your new play.”

Tom smiled back at him, charmed at the idea that Oscar would express concern about Tom’s reputation while simultaneously making his own intentions clear. All day Tom had floated along in a haze of self-imposed ignorance, failing to perceive that he’d likely be kissing Oscar before the night ended. Now Oscar gave him a chance to back out, making it Tom’s decision. Emboldened, Tom took two steps down so that he stood eye to eye with Oscar, leaned forward, and kissed him on the lips.

“Don’t they say that all publicity is good publicity?” Tom asked. Oscar’s smile widened. He started to lean forward for

a second kiss, but the sound of school children climbing the stairs below drew them apart.

“Then allow me to indulge you in the very best meat this city has to offer,” Oscar said.

They crossed Horsemarket Commons quickly, entered the Branding Iron, and were immediately seated at Oscar’s regular table. At dinner, Tom happily devoured everything Oscar encouraged him to try.

Only after dinner did Tom begin to feel slightly guilty. Like he was being disloyal to Cloud. Not so guilty that he didn’t go back to Oscar’s apartment, one of the nice residences he’d noticed that morning. Guilty enough, though, that he began to wonder if he could go through with sleeping with Oscar.

Oscar’s apartment took up the second floor of a six-story building one block off the promenade. By Tom’s reckoning, the front door was eight feet high and the ceilings inside stood higher—twelve feet at least. As he looked up at the ornamental plaster moldings, he wondered why rich people needed such high ceilings. Probably to accommodate their minimalist, ultra-modern chandeliers, he concluded.

Tall, narrow windows the size of doors punctuated the opposite wall. Tom thought he could see an iron balcony outside. To the left, a steel and glass display case housed dozens of tiny, white sculptures. Oscar took his coat and offered his rowboat-sized sofa for Tom’s reclining pleasure.

Tom leaned back into the encompassing, orange plushness of the sofa’s upholstery. Oscar smiled at him and said, “You like beer, right? Let me see what I’ve got in the refrigerator.”

Tom couldn’t remember having told Oscar that he preferred beer. Probably Oscar rightly inferred that he liked beer from his button-snap shirt and tooled leather belt. He seemed so considerate. What would be so bad about letting Oscar take care of him a little more?

Outside, the first few snowflakes started to fall.

Oscar returned, holding a long-necked bottle and a cistern-like glass of red wine. He handed Tom his beer already opened. Tom didn't recognize the label. Oscar switched on the stereo and sat down on the sofa next to him. Strange, atonal string music floated out of the best and biggest speakers Tom had ever seen or heard. Tom took a long drink of his beer, draining half the bottle, and then set the bottle on the floor beside the sofa. He couldn't see any coasters and didn't want to mark up Oscar's glass coffee table.

"I want to kiss you again," Tom said.

"Can I put my glass down first?" Oscar took a last sip and relinquished his stemware to Tom, who set it on the floor next to his beer bottle.

He pressed his mouth against Oscar's, not hard, but also not timidly. Oscar's mouth tasted like his wine. Tom unbuttoned Oscar's shirt. He did it as a challenge both to himself and to Oscar. He ran his hands almost roughly down Oscar's sides. He wasn't like Simpson, all thick muscle and coarse hair; Oscar had a lithe, smooth body. His hips were almost bony.

"So that's how it's going to be..." Oscar slid his hand into Tom's shirt and leaned forward, nuzzling his face against Tom's neck. He kissed Tom with a persistence that was also somehow yielding, coaxing Tom into taking the lead. Tom did, pushing Oscar back on the sofa. Tom kissed down Oscar's neck and across his chest, letting his mouth linger on each of Oscar's tight, salty nipples. Oscar arched up to meet him, holding tight to Tom's shoulders, murmuring encouragements.

Through the window Tom saw the snow turn heavy. Huge flakes poured out of the pink night sky.

He thought of another storm and of another man, and what he was doing became dirty and unbearable. He wanted Oscar. He wanted to fuck Oscar desperately, but he could not. He wasn't a steak dinner whore. He liked Oscar enough that he didn't want their sex to feel like an economic exchange.

He pulled back, breathing hard.

"I should probably get going," Tom said.

"You can't be serious," Oscar said. His face was flushed, and his normally dark skin looked even ruddier.

"Thank you for dinner. You'll have to let me take you out next time," Tom said. "I'll send you tickets for *The Onion Boy* to pay you back for the scarf."

Oscar sat up, staring in total incomprehension.

"You're going to leave now?"

"I really like you but I'm just getting over this other guy..."

"What better way to forget him?" Oscar took a long gulp of wine. "Come on, Tom, come back here."

"I can't," Tom said. "Thanks for everything."

"Don't make me chase you, Tom Fletcher," Oscar said.

Tom turned back, astounded. Oscar spoke Shifter.

"How do you know my name?"

"How do you think?" Oscar's demeanor changed abruptly. He leaned over Tom, one side of his mouth curled into a smug smile. *"I can't believe that you'd leave poor Oscar like this, you cocktease."*

"Cloud?" Tom searched Oscar's face, looking for a glimmer of recognition. Oscar's face was still Oscar's, but his expression sharpened to an almost sinister intensity.

"Who else?" Cloud grabbed the front of Tom's shirt and pulled him into a hard kiss. Tom responded instantly, opening his lips, kissing Cloud with sloppy desperation.

"I came to find you," he said.

"I know," Cloud said. "I don't know why."

"You don't know why?" Tom's quick, passionate relief at discovering Cloud was eclipsed by his brain catching up and finally remembering that he was still mad at Cloud, followed closely by a dread suspicion.

What was Cloud doing posing as Oscar Highfield-Banks?

"Did you kill him?" Tom whispered.

“What? Who?”

“Oscar.” Tom inched away from Cloud. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing,” Cloud said. “He hired me.”

“To impersonate him?”

“What else would he hire me for?”

“I don’t know.” Tom wanted to believe Cloud. He wanted to believe that a thorough search of the house wouldn’t reveal a decomposing body. “You said Simpson hired you too.”

Cloud drew himself up. He walked to the patio doors and pulled the curtains. Tom’s heart fluttered fearfully. He should run, he thought. He should run away from Cloud. What had Scarlett said about discovering a man’s secrets? But Tom didn’t run, because he wanted to believe Cloud more than he wanted safety. Cloud picked up his wine glass and passed Tom his half-empty beer bottle.

“Simpson was an accident. I was traveling between impersonation jobs and he pulled me over for speeding. He wanted to have a little fun with me since I was in my Silent form, and I couldn’t answer him right.” Cloud swirled the wine. “It got out of hand, and at the end of it he was dead.”

The record finished and the stereo turned off.

Cloud continued, “I heard on the radio that the other cops were coming, so I took his shape. I only meant to stay there for a few weeks, until I could get the body taken care of. But then I saw you walking down the side of the highway carrying that big plastic palm tree.” Though Cloud still wore Oscar’s body and spoke in Oscar’s voice, the expressions flitting across it were undeniably his own. “I stopped to give you ride... I guess the rest is history.”

“You stayed in town because of me?” Tom whispered.

“Why else would I stay in some Podunk shithole pretending to be a cop? Why else would I put up with Simpson’s bitch wife?”

“You didn’t. You divorced her,” Tom said.

“Best thing for her, really. Probably softened the blow of his murder.” Cloud drained the last of his wine. “I need another glass.”

Tom followed Cloud into Oscar’s kitchen. The white-tiled walls gleamed. Cloud got him another beer and poured himself another glass of wine.

“Was it you down on Silent Street?” Tom asked. “Were you Oscar then, too?”

“What were you thinking of, asking for me there?” Cloud leaned back against the refrigerator.

“I thought you’d be there,” Tom said, “and you were.”

“Yes, but... Tom, you have to promise me to never get tangled up with the Coldmoons. Never look for me.”

“I stopped looking for you!” Tom grew indignant. “You’re the one who called me over today!”

“I shouldn’t have done it. I just saw you rubbing your stomach and wanted to know what happened to you.” Cloud glowered at him. “Bike accident, my ass.”

“I got beat up,” Tom said simply.

“Who by?”

“None of your business.”

“Tell me.”

“What are you going to do about it, *Oscar*? Go take them on a really boring tour of the theatre college?”

Cloud stiffened.

“My tour was boring?”

“No,” Tom relented, “I had a really good time.”

“Good,” Cloud said. “If Oscar’s boring, I’m not doing him right.”

“You do him fine, as far as I know,” Tom said. “Except that you didn’t remember the editorial.”

“You got me,” Cloud said. “But I think I covered it well.”

“You did. I would never have guessed Oscar was you.”

Tom felt suddenly shy that Cloud knew that he'd been willing to kiss another man. "You kissed really differently as Oscar."

Cloud smiled and stepped closer.

"Who do you like better? Me or him?"

"Him," Tom said. "He didn't leave me."

"I'm sorry." Cloud slid his hands around Tom's waist. "I thought I was doing the right thing. And then once I got here, I should have kept away from you." Cloud's hands traveled down Tom's back. He shivered and leaned into Cloud. "But I just can't. I don't even want to."

He kissed Tom tenderly this time, coaxing him a little, pretending to be vulnerable, like Oscar might have done.

"Stay the night with me."

"I have to call my cousins," Tom said.

"Oscar's got a phone," Cloud said. "Stay."

11

“THIS WON’T WORK,” CLOUD MURMURED AGAINST TOM’S shoulder.

Tom pretended to still be asleep. Gray, early-morning light filled Oscar’s bedroom. It couldn’t be past six. Tom was used to rising early from doing fieldwork, but weeks at the Turnskin Collective had turned him into more of a night owl. His hands were barely calloused now.

Cloud hugged Tom closer, and Tom curled his back more tightly against Cloud’s chest.

“I know you’re not asleep.”

“No, you don’t.” Tom rolled to face Cloud, once again surprised by Oscar’s physical beauty and how different his face looked when Cloud allowed his own personality to surface. “What won’t work?”

“Seeing each other,” Cloud said. “Oscar’s promiscuous. It would be out of character to see anyone more than once or twice. And my cousin would notice.”

“Your family is watching you?”

“My cousin’s impersonating Oscar’s brother-in-law, so he’d notice if I kept seeing the same Shifter. It wouldn’t be good for them to notice you.”

Tom scowled. “Is there anyone important who’s not being impersonated right now?”

Cloud laughed. “Oscar and his brother-in-law are off on their winter getaway, so my cousin and I are doing this job together.

We've done this job every winter during the Senate break for the last twelve years—except when I was with you. Then I guess my aunt Hyacinth took the Oscar job, but she didn't like it. She hates drinking coffee. My cousin really likes being Oscar's brother-in-law though. I think he's more attached to Wellington's kids than Wellington is. He has all their school pictures. I think that's kind of unhealthy, but what do I know?"

"Where do they go?"

"Oscar and Wellington? Don't know," Cloud said. "If I had to guess, I'd say they probably go to the Coral Islands."

"Why?"

"The ivory collection." Cloud waved toward the living room. "In the glass case out front. It's crammed with antique ivory toggles from the islands. Wellington gets Oscar a new one every year for his birthday. They're worth a fortune. I don't even have the key to the case. You should have a look at them while you're here. They're museum quality. Oscar takes great pleasure in showing them off, so I had to learn about them all. He wrote me a booklet explaining the history of each one. It was 109 pages long."

"Are they gangsters?" Tom asked, suddenly.

"Who?"

"Oscar and his brother-in-law. Do you think they go to the Coral Islands to pick up shipments of heroin for their secret drug cartel?" Tom had just read a newspaper story about a Coral Island drug bust involving several famous and powerful businessmen.

"No," Cloud snorted with laughter, "I think they go there to fuck each other. The gangsters involved in this situation are us: the Coldmoons."

Tom stared at the ceiling, letting this information sink in. What kind of person slept with his sister's husband? It was something that would happen on that soap opera, *Grandview Gorgeous*. Oscar even lived right on the promenade.

“It seems like a lot of trouble to go through just to have sex with your brother-in-law,” Tom said.

“I guess they’re in love.” Cloud shrugged. “People go to a lot of trouble and great expense to be with the people they love.”

“I guess I could see why Wellington does it,” Tom said. “He’s a senator. He’s got a reputation to lose. But Oscar ... Why doesn’t he just give up and find another man?”

“Why don’t you?” Cloud asked.

“I did give up,” Tom insisted. “You’re the one who chased me down yesterday.”

“I know; it was so stupid.” Cloud ran his hand through hair. “I just can’t stay away from you. I thought I could seduce you as Oscar and be with you that way, but as it turned out you were in love with another man.”

“Don’t look so smug.” Tom squirmed away from Cloud. His cheeks burned with embarrassment. His fur puffed up.

“You wanted to be true to your hometown cop boyfriend.” Cloud snuggled up tight behind him. “Cause only he could do it to you like you like it.”

Tom elbowed Cloud hard in the ribs. Cloud coughed and fell backward.

“Okay,” he said. “I may have deserved that.”

Tom lurched out of bed, angry and feeling a fool. Now that Cloud was a tangible presence, Tom’s carefully cultivated romantic ideal was dissolving before his eyes. Cloud was not sad or sorry that they’d been separated. In fact, he was living the high life as Oscar Highfield-Banks. He’d slid back into his normal felonious life, while Tom had lost everything, even the ability to use his own name.

“Tom?”

“Don’t talk to me.” Tom pulled his pants on.

“I was just teasing you—”

Tom spun on him. “Do you even care what happened to me after you left? The Shifter Agency put out a warrant for me.”

Cloud bolted upright. His skin visibly paled. "What for?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "I imagine they thought I was your accomplice."

"That doesn't make any sense," Cloud said. "But they didn't arrest you?"

"I escaped," Tom said. "Angela heard the cops talking at the truck stop and came to warn me. Which is a hell of a lot more than you did."

"I didn't think they'd come after you," Cloud whispered. "That's the reason I didn't take you with me."

"It doesn't matter now." Tom pulled his shirt on. "You're right. It won't work between us." Tom headed for the door, holding his boots in his hand.

"Wait!" Cloud lunged after him, catching Tom by the elbow. "Don't go away mad."

"I'll go away however I damn well please," Tom said, but he didn't shake off Cloud's hand. He wanted Cloud to come after him, to call him back and say he was sorry and make this whole situation all right. But he doubted that Cloud had that power, let alone the inclination to use it.

"At least let me give you a cup of coffee," Cloud said. "Oscar has instant. You'll feel right at home."

"I thought Oscar would drink fancier coffee," Tom said. He wanted to find a way to stay without simply giving in to Cloud's charm.

"Oh, he does, but he has instant too. He's got everything." Cloud pulled him gently back toward the kitchen. He sat Tom down in a sleek, futuristic-looking dining chair. It looked like a white, plastic egg with three spindly, silver legs. Oscar's kitchen tabletop was made of red plastic and resembled a shiny amoeba. Tom wondered how his unsexy shirt was melding in with these surroundings. Cloud put on a kettle and found two mugs. He was still naked. Tom watched his round buttocks flex as he breezed around the kitchen. The sight filled Tom with miserable arousal.

“Are you sure you don’t want some pants?” Tom said.

“I’m afraid that if I go back into the bedroom you’ll run away.” Cloud put a coffee cup down in front of Tom. The familiar acrid smell of Sherman’s Instant Crystals floated up to him. Cloud seated himself in the adjacent chair. Tom stirred his coffee fretfully.

Finally he said, “I just can’t enjoy my coffee while talking to a naked man in an egg. I’m just not that metropolitan.”

Cloud smiled broadly. “Promise me you won’t go, and I’ll put on pants.”

“I won’t go,” Tom said.

Cloud bounced up. Tom heard him rustle briefly though Oscar’s drawers. He came back wearing a pair flannel pajama pants and an unbuttoned long-sleeved shirt. He reseated himself, looking relieved and contrite.

“I’m sorry,” he began. Tom thought it was a pretty good beginning. He nodded, waiting to see what else Cloud would say. “I was just so happy to see you... Tom, I’ve been thinking about you since the second I left. I missed you like hell. I want to be with you and I’m wracking my brains trying to figure out how.”

“You could just be with me,” Tom said. “Not keep me like your secret. That’s the beginning of a Destructive Love Spiral.”

“What?”

“According to Angela’s book.”

Cloud smiled and shook his head. “Dear old Angela. However, I don’t think her book applies to people in our situation. I’m not ashamed to be with you. I can’t be with you now because I’m not me. I took this job and I can’t stop right in the middle.”

“Impersonator’s Code of Honor?”

“That only exists in movies,” Cloud said. “No, I can’t stop because my mother would send Seven to kill you. She’s already suspicious about the time that I was gone. She didn’t even

believe it was me at first. She thought I was a Shifter Agency Double. Kept giving me blood tests every half an hour to confirm my identity.”

Tom blinked at Cloud. His own family experience was much, much different.

“That must have been rough.”

“I expected it.” Cloud dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. “The problem right now is that Oscar can’t be regularly seen with a Shifter. It would be out of his character and dangerous for me as the impersonator,” Cloud said. “I’ve got an idea, but I guess what I’d like to know first is whether or not you want to be with me.”

Tom gulped down the rest of his coffee, wincing at the burnt-bean flavor of it. He didn’t want to admit anything to Cloud. The man was unreliable. More than that, he was a felon and a murderer and an insufferable egotist. And yet Tom’s heart broke every time he thought of getting up and leaving. He loved all of Cloud, even the ugly parts.

“I want to be with you too,” Tom said. “But I also want to perform at the National Theatre. I don’t want to throw that chance away.”

“Who said anything about throwing away your chance at the National Theatre?” Cloud grabbed a banana out of the fruit bowl and started peeling it. “Oscar’s got tickets for the whole summer season. I was hoping you’d accompany me.”

“But Oscar can’t be seen with a Shifter,” Tom said.

“True, but Oscar can be seen with virtually any Skin.” Cloud took a bite of the banana. “Especially one who’s in the theatre scene.”

“Are you saying I should kill someone in the theatre scene and take their identity?”

Cloud almost choked on his banana. “God, no; there are better ways to solve problems than murder. Easier ways. Trust me on this; I know whereof I speak.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. He couldn't have imagined Simpson saying "whereof I speak." He wondered how much of Cloud's personality was influenced by the man he was impersonating. Certainly, his vocabulary was strongly affected.

"What do you want me to do, then?"

"If you could create a Skin persona, I could get you papers to support it," Cloud said. "Then you could come and go as you please. You'd be able to be with me—at least till the end of the winter when Oscar returns."

"And after that?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Cloud said. "Would you be willing to do that?"

There were so many reasons not to that Tom didn't even try to think of them. This was not a choice he'd be making rationally anyway, he realized, so why bother applying logic? All he knew was that in spite of the knowledge that it would be better to leave and be rid of Cloud forever, Tom wanted to stay. What would he do with forever anyway, but spend it wondering over Cloud and looking for signs of his personality submerged in the bodies of other men?

"I think my persona should be called Ambrose," Tom said.

Cloud smiled radiantly.

"Why is that?"

Tom shrugged. "It was my father's name."



Tom and Cloud spent the morning inventing Ambrose Sacks of Fort Shane City. Cloud suggested most of the details based on which documents would be easy to falsify. Ambrose was a graduate of Fort Shane University, the largest and least stringent university in the country.

"I think his degree should be in liberal arts," Cloud said. "You won't be expected to know any particular thing—just the mishmash of information that you already have. And FSU is known to be a party school."

“Did you go to college?” Tom asked as they leafed through fashion magazines, looking for the components of Ambrose’s face.

“I told you already,” Cloud smiled his best Oscar smile, “theatre school.”

“Not Oscar,” Tom said. “You.”

“I went to Riverside Tech. Business.”

Just like Seven, Tom thought.

“Was that what you wanted to do?” Tom asked.

“Of course not. Have you ever been to business school? It’s a dreary recitation of systems and strategies you just feel bad about ever imposing on actual people. That said, I was able to reduce costs at Oscar’s magazine by six percent last month... Sometimes a man can’t help himself. What do you think about this guy?” Cloud tapped a glossy photo of a blonde man with skin the color of cinnamon.

“I thought I was supposed to be unobtrusive.” Tom had paused on the photograph several times. The model’s coloring resembled Tom’s own alpha form. He wondered where the model was from.

“You’re just not supposed to be a furball,” Cloud said. “You don’t have to be dumpy. You’re not dumpy now.”

“You want me to be this guy so you can have sex with him.” Tom nudged Cloud with his toe. He hoped it was true.

“I wouldn’t at all mind having sex with that body, but I like black hair better, really,” Cloud said. “I like black fur best of all.”

“Maybe you should wear it then.” Tom leaned toward Cloud.

“Maybe when I’m done with Oscar, I will.” Cloud ran the tip of his tongue along Tom’s lower lip and then withdrew before Tom could catch him in a kiss. “You really like that Blaine’s Island beach look, don’t you? You’ve been going back to him over and over again.”

“I have?” Tom asked.

“You most certainly have.”

“I like him,” Tom admitted, “but not his chin. I don’t think I could wear a big cleft like that.”

“You should probably try him out and see how you feel.”

“I’d have to take my fur off.” Tom hesitated. “You’re just trying to get me to take my clothes off, aren’t you?”

“It’s a fringe benefit of the transformation process.” Cloud leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. “I’ll keep my dirty old hands to myself though.”

“I don’t think I can right now,” Tom said. “I’ve got to be back at Turnskin for rehearsal.”

“Too bad. Well, whatever shape you decide, you have an ID photo taken and send it to me at Oscar’s private address. I’ll have papers made up.” Cloud stared at the geometric plasterwork on Oscar’s ceiling. “I don’t know what I can do about the Shifter Agency looking for you. I guess if things get too hot, you can always become Ambrose permanently.”

“I’d have to be a Skin forever, though,” Tom said, though the idea gave him hope for the first time in several weeks that he would eventually be able to stop looking over his shoulder for officers ready to arrest him.

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Cloud smirked.

“I don’t know if I could do that,” Tom said. “I’m used to this shape. I really have to go.”

Cloud stood. “So its goodbye for now, is it?”

“For now.” Tom stood and rested his hand on Cloud’s hip.

“Take care of your stomach.” Cloud kissed Tom’s cheek. “Come back, okay?”

Tom leaned his forehead against Cloud’s shoulder. That is, Cloud’s shoulder in the shape of Oscar, which was bonier than Cloud’s shoulder in the shape of Simpson.

Simpson, his trailer, and his old life seemed impossibly far away now, standing in Oscar’s apartment next to a collection of antique ivory toggles. But then again, when he was

with Cloud reality tended to recede. The world narrowed down to become just the two of them inside a circle of impenetrable present. The heat of Cloud's skin soaking up through Oscar's designer sleepwear was the only connection to the world that Tom needed. He forgot the past and didn't think of the future. He lived fully inside these short moments. Cloud rested his hand on the back of Tom's neck.

"Everything will be all right," Cloud said. "I'll wait for you to send the photo, and we'll be in Oscar's box seat at the National Theatre before the end of the month."

Tom straightened up and looked Cloud in the eye.

"Don't let me down," he said.

"I won't," Cloud said. "I promise."

12

TOM WRAPPED HIS COLD HANDS AROUND HIS MUG OF MILKY tea. Though the sun blazed high in the sky, the walk from the train station had been bitterly cold. The Snakegrass kitchen was steamy and warm. He'd come in just as Cyprus and Righteous were finishing their breakfast. The radio crackled in the background, playing a commercial for cheap Coral Island vacation packages.

"So, Tom." Cyprus stood to get a second cup of tea for himself. "Have a good night out?"

"I ran into Oscar." Tom sat down in the empty seat. "He took me out to dinner."

"And then to breakfast, too, huh?" Cyprus cut a thin pat of butter, then poured hot tea over it. Tom shuddered at the sight.

"I bought a couple of crullers on the way to the train station," Tom said.

"Slut," Righteous mumbled into his porridge. Then meeting Tom's narrowed eyes, amended, "Not you. Him. But I hope you realize that we don't expect you to rent yourself out to bourgeois artistic pretenders. You are an artist, not a prostitute."

"I didn't—" Tom felt his cheeks flush. He actually had, but not that way.

"Shut up, Righteous," Cyprus said simply. "The polo scores are almost on."

“Fascist,” Righteous muttered.

“How is Scarlett?” Tom belatedly asked.

“She’ll be all right in a couple of days. No permanent damage.” Cyprus helped himself to another serving of porridge. “Just a knock on the head. She’ll be happy to hear that you ran into Oscar. What about you?”

“I’m feeling all right,” Tom said.

“That’s good.” Cyprus twisted in his seat to fiddle with the radio antenna. “I need you in full working order tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Cyprus got us jobs,” Righteous said.

“I have a friend who owns a pedicab company that does historical tours of the Shifter district. If we all work nights over the next week, we should have enough to pay off the fire marshal and some left over to print handbills.”

“The whole cast is working?” Tom wondered how that was possible. Most of them had other jobs.

“No, just us. It would be unfair to ask them. It’s a family problem,” Cyprus said.

Tom felt a warm rush at being included in Cyprus’s definition of family, but also wondered why the definition of family included him only when there was work to be done.

“We start tonight,” Cyprus continued. “I’ve got a map of the route and a copy of the script. It’s only twenty pages. Should be a snap.”



“See that corner?” Tom paused to catch his breath as well as increase the dramatic tension for his forthcoming gem of faux historical revelation. “Flaming Sam Silent, the big, mute gunfighter was shot dead on that corner, ending his reign of terror over the red-light district. Most people don’t know it, but Flaming Sam was struck by lightning on six separate occasions over the years. People around here would say he was so mean

that even God couldn't kill him. They say when he died, all the ladies in the red-light district were so grateful to the marshals that they worked all weekend for free!" Tom waited for the customary scandalized chuckle from his customers, a pair of middle-aged Skins from Marley's Ridge, a suburb of Fort Shane City. His customers did not disappoint.

"I bet everybody was happy then," the man said.

"Oh, Jim," the woman said.

Tom wondered how anyone could believe this ridiculous script he'd been given. After working for a red-light district pedicab for only three days, Tom had developed serious skepticism about any hooker ever working for free. It wasn't that they weren't nice, exactly, but they sure didn't give anything away.

Up on his left, two hustlers were duking it out over who owned this particular street corner while a bored woman watched from the stoop. Tom pedaled faster, trying to get by them fast. Unpleasant scenes like these could ruin his tip.

"Someone should tell those boys that there are prettier women in the world," Jim said. His wife giggled.

Tom realized with sudden amazement that they thought the two men were clients fighting it out over the woman.

"Oh, those two," he said, with sudden inspiration. "They're legendary. For ten years they've been rivals for the love of the same woman. She washed her hands of both of them a long time ago, but they can't forget her, and now they fight like this every Friday night, hoping one of them will finally win her back."

"You Shifters live such passionate lives," the woman said as Tom pedaled away.

Tom rolled his eyes and continued his spiel, "Coming up here on the left you'll see the famous arch indicating the entrance to the Shifter Nation Lands, bounded on three sides by the Cox Wall and on the other by the river. I'm sure you've already noticed our laws here are a little different."

“Yeah, you’re not so uptight about everything,” the woman said. “You understand how to get happy!”

Tom glanced over his shoulder and saw her unscrewing the top of a flask. Doing this job was like penance crossed with research. He was getting a lot of material about how people like his suburban Skin alter ego Ambrose Sacks might talk: full of well-intentioned social clumsiness. Tom whispered the woman’s words over again, trying to emulate her accent. Ambrose would have that accent, and he would use it when he was sitting at the National Theatre with Oscar tomorrow night.

Tom had already sent an ID photo to Oscar’s office and received a note back telling him that an envelope would be delivered to the Turnskin Collective tonight. He hadn’t told his cousins about Oscar being Cloud. He didn’t want to withhold information from them, but it wasn’t his secret to tell.

“You know, we have a Shifter couple living right next door,” Jim said.

“Oh, yes?” Tom’s attention snapped back to his fare. “What’s their name?” Tom had been collecting Fort Shane Shifter names from these conversations.

“Crowquill,” the woman supplied. “You know the Crowquills?”

“Not personally,” Tom said.

“That’s right, Crowquill. Nicest people you’d ever want to meet,” Jim said. Tom mentally settled in for some sort of story that would demonstrate Jim’s racial sensitivity. Jim did not disappoint. “The guy across the way—Hascome—didn’t like them moving in one bit. He was always complaining about their cat and trapping it and taking it to the pound. One day I said to him, I said, ‘Hascome, just you leave that cat alone.’”

“Blackie Bell’s her name,” the wife chimed in.

“And Hascome told me he didn’t like the look of black fur on his block. Can you believe it? I told him he just better keep his words to himself, or we might not be so neighborly anymore.”

“After that he never said anything.” Jim’s wife took another swig from the flask.

“That was nice of you,” Tom said. He couldn’t bring himself to like Jim for telling him this story of marginal defense of his people. But at least Jim’s heart was in the right place. He understood that Jim wanted gratitude, and so Tom gave it. He was working for tips, after all. But Tom wished Jim and all his kind would refrain from telling him about their great acts of courage while he was straining to pedal them around. Dispensing approval was difficult for Tom to accomplish while actively engaging in servitude.

But guys like Jim were ultimately better than the fares who just criticized Tom for being less Shifter than he could be or for having an eastern accent. He let Jim and his wife out in front of the Lucky Lady Casino, then pedaled to the corner and put up his flag to indicate that he was free. It only took a couple of minutes to find another fare.

This one was a middle-aged man on his own. He had a pronounced limp and walked with a cane. Tom wondered which brothel he was headed to but didn’t ask. He’d learned early on that people dislike having their vices anticipated, so he just said, “Where to?”

“Let’s go along the river,” the man said. Tom was surprised. Usually only couples wanted to go along the river. Tom looked at him more closely. A Skin in a faded, old army jacket and trousers. His gray hair was short and neat, and his shoes, though old, were polished. Tom thought he looked a little sad.

“You want to do the loop?” Tom asked. “I can give you the full tour.”

“I don’t need that Flaming Sam Silent stuff,” the man said. “I’d just like to go for a ride.”

“Fair enough.” Tom started down the hill away from the casinos toward the water.

“So, what’s your name?” the man asked.

“Tom. What’s yours?”

“Henry.”

“Got any plans this evening?” If Henry was depressed, it might have been possible to take him around the Tickled Slipper Brothel and Saloon. The doorman there gave a kickback for every customer they could deliver.

“Taking a ride down by the river, then maybe having a drink,” Henry said.

“Got a place to get that drink?” Tom craned his head around to catch a glimpse of Henry. The older man had his fingers laced in back of his neck and was staring up at the cold winter moon thoughtfully. Suddenly an explosion of honking erupted from Tom’s left, and he swerved to avoid a pine green sedan. “I’m so sorry! You okay, Henry?”

“I’m fine,” Henry said. “Old guys like me need a scare every once in a while to keep the blood pumping.”

Tom pedaled on in mute embarrassment. They reached the river and Tom slowed down, negotiating the wide curves and other pedicab drivers with ease.

“So, Tom,” Henry said. “I couldn’t help but notice you had an accent. Where are you from?”

“Stovepipe Rock,” Tom said. “It’s out east of here.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve been through there, back in my early service days,” Henry said. “Never saw a Shifter though. Didn’t know any lived out there. Your mother still out that way?”

“She’s passed away,” Tom said. He tried to make it sound casual, but he could still hardly mention his mother’s death without his voice catching in his throat. Ashamed of his own obvious sorrow, Tom changed the subject. “Are you from around here?”

“I am.” Henry took the abrupt subject change well. “But I’ve been stationed in Fort Shane City for so many years that I hardly remember what it’s like here in the capital.”

"I've never been to Fort Shane City, but my mother came from there," Tom said. "She was in the army too."

"She must have been quite a unique lady to sign up," Henry remarked.

"She sure was." Tom shifted gears and pedaled hard, focusing on the bridge up ahead. He wondered if his identification papers had been delivered yet.

"Have you been here in Riverside long?" Henry asked.

"Just a few weeks."

"It sure is hard to be in a new town all alone," Henry remarked.

"It's not so bad," Tom said. "And the nightlife beats Stovepipe Rock hands down."

Henry laughed and Tom kept pedaling. He reached the Cherrygrove Bridge and turned east up an easy incline through Basketmaker Square, one of the great tourist traps of the Shifter district. During the day various traditional basket-weaving families plied their trade, doing demonstrations, wearing anachronistic, beaded vests, and selling their very fine wares for hundreds of dollars along with t-shirts and postcards for a reasonable sum. At night the basement clubs opened up. Club Smoke had a line out the door. Tom looked wistfully at the patrons. They were having a great time while he was stuck at work.

Henry wasn't a bad fare though. Tom found his occasional, polite conversation soothing. Almost fatherly, or at least what Tom thought of as fatherly. And that old feeling came back to Tom, the same compulsive urge he always felt, to please all Skin army men Henry's age.

Tom turned north, heading back down the main drag toward the casino where he'd picked Henry up. He waved as he passed by Righteous, going in the opposite direction.

"Anywhere you'd like me to drop you off, Henry?" he asked.

“I’m staying at the Fat Fish Hotel,” Henry said. “It’s right on this block.”

Tom followed Henry’s instructions. The Fat Fish was a skinny building crammed between two larger, nicer hotels. A thick clot of unsavory looking men and women lounged against the outside of the building, obviously converging on the Fat Fish because they’d been run off the adjacent properties. They eyed Tom coolly when he arrived. Henry paid Tom’s fare and handed him a nice, large bill as a tip.

“I was wondering if you might have the time to give me a hand up the stairs,” Henry said. “I’ll pay you for your trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Tom said. “Just let me lock up my bike.”

The first floor was taken up entirely by a dirty bar called the Fishin’ Hole and a tiny, closet-like reception area. The stairs were steep. Tom helped Henry steady himself as they went up the four flights to Henry’s cramped but clean room. The television was already on. A fifth of whiskey sat between two coffee cups on the faux-wood nightstand. Big, yellow and black dogfish motifs decorated the closed drapes.

“Can I at least give you a little whiskey for your trouble? It’ll keep you warm out there,” Henry said.

“I’m at work,” Tom protested, but only half-heartedly. He was cold and bored. And besides, he only had an hour left before he was off.

“One won’t do you any harm.” Henry poured a small glass and handed it to Tom, who knocked it back immediately. Henry chuckled. “You sure don’t need too much convincing, do you?”

Tom shrugged sheepishly. “I do like whiskey every now and then.”

“Would you like another?”

“Oh no. Really, I’ve got to go.” Tom took a step for the door and felt suddenly lightheaded. The room spun sickeningly.

“Are you all right?” Henry stood by his side, guiding him to the bed. Tom sat down heavily.

How could he be drunk so fast? And on only one watery shot? Was he that dehydrated? He fell back against the bed. Henry said something, but Tom couldn’t hear it over the ringing in his ears. His hands felt like two enormous paddles at the ends of his arms.

He had to get out of this room.

“I think I need some fresh air.” Tom lurched toward the door, but was only able to take two steps before he tripped. He started to fall. Henry caught him easily—too easily for an old man with a limp. He carried Tom back to the bed. His twisted leg and limp were gone.

Tom realized with deepening sickness that Henry was a Shifter. He’d been reeling Tom in the whole pedicab ride.

Knockout Henry. How many people had warned him?

Mom had always said bad things would happen to him if he came to the big city, and now she was right.

The world receded and Tom closed his eyes. The red darkness behind his eyelids suddenly horrified him, and he opened his eyes again. Yellow light swam into his head, and for a moment he couldn’t see anything. Then his vision resolved.

Henry stood over him, unsmiling and desperate. He reached down and jerked Tom’s belt off, then roughly pulled open the fly of Tom’s pants. Tom lay horrified, unable to believe it. Henry thrust his hand into Tom’s underwear, kneading his cock in a way that Tom was sure would be painful if he could feel anything. Rage rushed through him, but he could not move.

“You... fucker...” he croaked through dry, uncooperative lips.

Henry's gaze snapped to Tom's. He smiled—a grotesque parody of friendship. “You sure can't hold your liquor.”

“How can you do this?” Tom whispered.

“It won't be so bad,” Henry said. He rolled Tom over onto his stomach. “Lots of boys like it.”

Someone was banging on the door.

“Help me,” Tom whispered, but he couldn't even hear himself. Henry got up to answer the door. Tom felt a surge of hope before he realized that whoever was out there wouldn't be able to tell him from any average drunk. He couldn't speak or move, and yet he could see and hear. He wanted to panic, but his body would not comply. His fingers twitched spasmodically, but that was all he could manage.

Henry opened the door. Outside, Tom glimpsed gold fur.

“Hi there,” Henry said, “are we being too loud for you?”

“*Hi there, Knockout,*” the Shifter outside said. Tom's heart thrilled! It was Cloud. He tried to shout out to him, but his paralysis was nearly complete.

Henry chuckled. “*You need to buy a dose, Coldmoon? I'm a little bit busy right now.*”

“*I'm looking for my friend, Tom. He left his bike outside, and some of the whores downstairs seem to think he's up here with you.*”

“*Don't know him. I'm just on my way to bed right now.*”

Henry started to shut the door. With a snarl of rage, Cloud slammed his shoulder against the door, sending Henry flying across the room. The cheap hotel door hung on one hinge. Cloud wore his alpha form, thick and muscular and golden. No wonder he'd been speaking Shifter. Cloud's eyes met Tom's, and Tom felt ashamed of his helpless nakedness.

“*Tom!*” Cloud started for the bed, but Henry smashed a table lamp into the side of his head. Cloud staggered. Blood poured out of a cut.

Henry bolted for the hallway. Cloud hauled Henry back by the hair and kicked the door shut. Trapped, Henry lashed out for Cloud's already injured head. Cloud seized Henry by the shirt and pounded his face. Henry brought up his shaky, bloody hands to try and defend himself.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered. *"Just take him and go! I'm sorry."*

"You better not have laid a hand on him, you sick fuck!"

Cloud punctuated his words with another punch. Tom knew he should be repulsed by the violence, but he wasn't. All he could think about was getting his pants pulled up, but he couldn't make the slightest motion.

"If you kill me, my mother will hunt you down," Henry said.

Cloud laughed out loud at this.

"Yeah, I'm real scared." Cloud slapped Henry hard and Henry began to cry. Cloud recoiled in disgust and let him go. He fell to the floor, curled up in a ball, moaning. "Stay down or I'll fucking kill you."

Cloud kicked Henry for emphasis. He walked to Tom and leaned over him. *"Are you all right?"*

Tom tried to say yes, but all that came out was a short grunt. Cloud rounded on Henry again.

"Tell me what you gave him," Cloud demanded. He seemed to notice, for the first time, that he was bleeding. He rolled the fresh blood from his scalp between his fingertips.

"Just the usual," Henry said. *"He'll be awake in about an hour—I swear!"*

Cloud regarded Henry for a moment and then said, *"Give me your wallet. You're going to owe me for the stitches."*

Henry complied, and Cloud took out a fat wad of bills before throwing the wallet back at him. He pocketed the cash and, as gently as he could, worked Tom's pants back up.

Finally, he hauled Tom over his shoulder fireman-style and walked downstairs, pausing only briefly at the front desk to peel off some of Henry's money and slide it to the unblinking desk

clerk. Then he laid him in back of his own pedicab, carefully tucking his arms and legs inside and covering him up with the lap blanket.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Cloud said. *“I finally found your cousin. He said he saw you coming down here. How the fuck did you hook up with that psycho, Henry? Didn’t anyone warn you about him?”*

Tom wanted to retort angrily that he hadn’t “hooked up” with Knockout Henry on purpose, but being drugged to a stupor made any kind of retort impossible. As the pedicab began to move, the street-scene melded into one neon blur. He didn’t notice himself passing out.

Tom woke again in his bedroom at the theatre. Cyprus was there, talking to Cloud. He seemed angry. Tom could barely understand what they were saying. He could no longer see.

“I think you should tell me who you are,” Cyprus said.

“Just a passerby,” Cloud said. *“He said you were his cousin.”*

Tom let go and slept.



Tom woke early, desperately thirsty and slightly nauseated. When he sat up, pain knifed through the right side of his skull. Clutching his face, Tom staggered out of bed and into the kitchen. Cyprus was there, reading the paper and drinking milky tea. He looked tired. The clock read six, and the quiet street below indicated it was morning.

“Hi,” Tom said.

“I took your pedicab back,” Cyprus said.

“Thanks.” Tom gulped water.

“A passerby brought you home.” Cyprus didn’t look at him. “A Silent. He had a bad cut on the head.”

“He was in the hotel,” Tom said. “I guess he decided to help me.”

Cyprus nodded. "You know, Tom, I think I need some advice. I know this guy who's a little bit of a rube, but basically a nice guy. This guy is infatuated with a dangerous man."

Fear trickled through Tom's stomach. "A rube, you say?"

"A country mouse in the big city, if you know what I mean," Cyprus said. "So, a mysterious Silent brings my friend home after he's been attacked by a local pervert. The Silent's hands were all covered with blood. And get this: one of my friend's pockets was stuffed with a bloody wad of money and the other one had all these ID cards for a guy called Ambrose Sacks, who just happens to strongly resemble my friend's secret alpha form. Do you think I should be worried about my friend?"

"Is it enough money to pay off the fire marshal?"

"And then some," Cyprus said.

"Then I think you should probably just try to forget you ever reached into your friend's pocket. You hardly ever find anything good in someone else's pants anyway," Tom said.

Cyprus stared hard at Tom. He stared like he was considering whether or not to let Tom keep living in his grandmother's room.

Tom felt too miserable to lie and too honor-bound to tell the truth, so he said, "You can probably guess who it was. I ran into him on Grandview Avenue last week. I asked him to help me get some papers. He thought Skin papers would be safer."

"What for?"

Tom shrugged. "Being wanted isn't a good enough reason?"

"I suppose so," Cyprus said. "Look, don't tell the others about it yet. We're just recovering from a run-in with one Coldmoon. But you be careful. Bad luck comes in threes, you know."

13

AS SOON AS TOM SLIPPED INTO THE STALL AT THE COXWALL train station public toilet, he began unbuckling his belt. He kicked off his boots and pulled his jeans off, careful not to let them fall onto the sticky floor. His legs were bare even of fur, as was his torso, upper arms, and every other part of him that could be hidden under clothes. Only the soft fur on his face and hands remained.

The station toilet was busy. Men rushed in, pissed, farted, crapped, and sometimes washed their hands before hurrying away. They didn't look at each other or pay any attention to what he did, which was why he'd chosen Coxwall Station in the first place.

He rolled up his jeans and pulled out a pair of navy slacks, a white, long-sleeved shirt, a sports jacket, and Tom's first tie. Ambrose's costume, courtesy of Oscar's bank account. He also had brown casual shoes, woolen argyle socks, and a watch with a brown leather strap. Tom put on the pants, socks, and shoes, then leaned over the stool and carefully rubbed his remaining hair into the stained bowl. The hair on the backs of his hands and his face was so fine that it settled atop the murky water in drifts. The hair from his scalp was heavier and coarser and fell in fat clumps. Since Tom had removed his other fur at home, it only took one flush to remove the evidence of his transformation.

He finished dressing and let himself relax, and his alpha form appeared with almost no effort. His hair grew

out in loose blonde waves that Tom stopped after a couple of inches. He looked a little untidy, but all right. His skin lightened and reddened into a dark shade of cinnamon. His eyes turned yellow. He noticed that his fingernails stayed dark. He couldn't remember, but figured that this must just be how they were—a little reminder that he was still a Shifter. Personally, he found it comforting to know, but black nails, like yellow eyes, weren't something Ambrose could wear. After greening up his eyes, Tom lightened his fingernails, turning them from black to transparent. As he did this, he noticed his nails were dirty.

He packed up the rest of his things and stopped at the sink to scrub his nails. Rather than using the grubby toweling roll, Tom ran his hands through his hair to dry them and get the hair into some kind of style. He smiled at himself, caught sight of his crooked eyetooth, and surreptitiously straightened it out. Ambrose looked fantastic. A middle-class man with exotic good looks. He'd have had orthodontics. After stashing the bag in an overnight locker, Tom headed for his train, the 6:40 uptown. All seven car doors were open with seven conductors checking papers of passengers heading out. Tom swallowed. Now he'd find out how good Cloud's forger really was. He handed the big woman his identification. She glanced at it casually and waved him inside.

Tom shouldered his way onto the train and slid into an empty seat near the door, only to vacate it ninety seconds later to an old Shifter woman carrying a big basket. The old woman looked at him strangely and then took the seat with a polite nod. Alarm prickled over Tom's skin. Had he done the wrong thing? Given himself away by deferring to the old woman? Did Skins really not give up their seats to even elderly Shifters? As the train lurched forward, he wondered if he could really go through with being Ambrose. If he had to be an ass, then no.

Would Oscar have given up his seat? Tom decided that he probably would have, but the point was moot because Oscar would never have been on a public train in the first place. He could be gracious because he had so much more than everyone else. Giving up something small didn't hurt people like Oscar. But what about Ambrose? Tom ran through Ambrose's biography to plant the seeds of respect and tolerance that would sound convincing to his own kind. Some transformative experience perhaps? A Shifter who saved him from drowning in an irrigation ditch? No, Fort Shane City was not a maze of ditches like the countryside.

Maybe Ambrose could simply have been taught that acceptance was the right thing to do. Maybe it could be as simple as that. Tom didn't want Ambrose to be like one of his pedicab fares, constantly citing their epiphanies in hope of acknowledgement for what Tom considered basic decency. If he was going to manufacture Ambrose from nothing, he would make Ambrose a man he could respect.

The train stopped just outside of the Cox Wall, and another throng of people pushed into the already crowded train. A thousand fragrant deodorants partially masked the stink of a thousand armpits that filled Tom's nostrils. There really was no stink like the stink of a Riverside train. Tom would have jotted that line to use in a play, but he couldn't easily get his hand into his pocket standing chest-to-back with the rest of the passengers. He hoped he wouldn't get too wrinkled.

The train ride to Grandview Promenade took twenty minutes. Tom pushed his way out of the train car and spent some time smoothing his suit before exiting the station. He hadn't seen Cloud since the incident with Henry three days before, and while he was excited, he was also still embarrassed and slightly paranoid. He wanted to linger self-consciously in front of the newsstand, getting acclimated to Ambrose's body, but the curtain rose at eight o'clock. He headed for the front

of the station. Cloud, in Oscar's form, waited out front, leaning against a bike rack. He glanced at his watch and scanned the crowd, looking past Tom twice before their eyes met and Tom saw that spark of recognition. Cloud smiled slowly, looking Tom up and down as he approached.

"You like it?" Tom asked.

"Your passport photo failed to convey the majesty that is your fine self," Cloud said. "The question is, do you like it?"

"I'm a little chilly," Tom said. Cloud laughed and threw his arm over Tom's shoulders, pulling him close.

"Wait till tonight," he whispered. "Skin on Skin is really hot."

Tom felt a hot flush on his face.

"I can see you blushing," Cloud said. "Do you blush often? I never saw it before."

"What is the play about?" Tom asked pointedly.

Cloud straightened up and stuck his hands in his pockets. "It's called *Sweet Pomegranate Wine*. It's the last of the *Women Write!* series. It's something to do with three society women searching for their erotic identities. Not as populist as you'd like, I imagine. The playwright has a one-act in the Diverse Voices Festival though, so I thought you'd be interested."

"I just want to see a play in the National Theatre. I don't care what it is," Tom said.

"You're so charmingly easy to please," Cloud said. "Let's go, then."

They walked a few minutes down the promenade, making small talk and window-shopping. Tom would have never guessed that this same man had beaten Knockout Henry unconscious three days before. It was an eerie, uncomfortable thought. When they reached the theatre, Cloud didn't even have to produce tickets. He was simply greeted and allowed in. Oscar was known. Several people standing by gazed at Tom curiously or admiringly as they made their way to the theatre.

An usher led them around the right side to a small door, which he opened. Tom followed Cloud into a small theatre box containing four chairs. The usher handed them a program each.

“Champagne at intermission, sir?” he asked Cloud.

“Please.”

“You didn’t tell me Oscar had a box,” Tom whispered.

“It’s the family box,” Cloud said.

“Will they be coming?”

“No, they’re all at the National Horse Show in Fort Shane watching my niece. She’s set to win the junior jumping championship. We’re all alone.” Cloud slid his hand around Tom’s waist. Tom glanced down into the theatre below. No one looked up, but an older lady in the box opposite stared straight at them. Tom caught Cloud’s hand.

“That woman is watching us.”

Cloud drew close, his lips almost brushing Tom’s ear.

“*That woman is watching Oscar seduce Ambrose.*” The sound of Cloud’s speaking Shifter sent a delicious shiver through Tom’s body—a shiver that was immediately quashed by the frigid look the old lady shot him.

“Ambrose isn’t that much of a slut.” Tom peeled Cloud’s hand off his stomach.

“That’s such a shame.” Cloud flopped down in a chair and opened up his program. “And an unusual choice for me.”

Tom shrugged and sat beside him.

“I didn’t get to thank you for the other night.” Tom kept his voice low.

“Don’t mention it.” Cloud waved Tom’s thanks casually aside. “Your cousins should have taken better care of you.”

“How did you find me?”

“I’d been looking for you about an hour when I passed your cousin. He told me where he’d last seen you and that you were in cab 16, which I found locked up in front of the Fat Fish.”

“How did you know Righteous was my cousin?”

“You described him pretty well and he’s not exactly easy to miss,” Cloud commented. “One of the ladies at the Fat Fish told me you were up there with Knockout.” Cloud’s smile dimmed somewhat, and Tom thought he could almost see a ghost of Cloud’s face beneath Oscar’s visage.

“Do you think he’ll come after me?”

“You?” Cloud turned to fully face him, keeping his voice very low. “No, not at all. He was so high, I doubt he remembers anything other than your color. If he came after anyone it would be me, but he won’t. His mother’s a councilwoman. She needs Coldmoon support in the winter election.”

“So that’s the end of it?”

“That’s the end.” Cloud returned to Oscar’s normal tone and demeanor. “Except that you shouldn’t even consider pulling a pedicab anymore. It’s too dangerous. If you need money, come to me.”

“I can make my own money,” Tom said.

“But why bother when you can just have mine?” Cloud winked and Tom wondered to whom he really spoke. Cloud? Cloud’s impression of Oscar? Well, he thought, two can play at this game.

“I don’t know what folks are like in the capital, but in Fort Shane City a real man doesn’t live off of charity.”

Oscar raised his eyebrows. A playful twinkle glinted in his eye.

“Well put, Mr. Sacks.”

The theatre filled rapidly now, and the murmur of quiet conversations had risen to a rumble of noise as the last few ticket holders settled in. A bell chimed. Five minutes to curtain. Across the way, two more people entered the scornful old lady’s box. They were a middle-aged blonde woman wearing a shawl dyed with elaborate, Shifter net-patterned batik and a thin man in a stylish suit. Anne Sharpe and Michael David James. Before

Tom could even mention them, Michael David James waved. Cloud waved back.

“Old college roommate,” Cloud explained.

“He hates Turnskin Collective,” Tom said.

“Yes, he probably would. Too militant.”

“But why is he with Anne Sharpe?” Tom tried not to stare too openly at the other box. The old lady gestured toward him and Oscar in a mildly aggressive manner.

“They’re cousins,” Cloud said. “That sour old bat is their grandmother, Lucinda. They’re distantly related to my brother-in-law somehow. Michael will probably be over during intermission. I’m sorry, there’s nothing to be done about it.”

“That’s all right,” Tom said. “I’m just happy to be here with you. It’s hard to believe.”

“You were already here.”

“That was different. This is reserved box seating.” Tom reached over and squeezed Cloud’s hand.

The lights went down. *Sweet Pomegranate Wine* began with the plaintive notes of three violins rising and falling, weaving around each other as the blue velvet curtains drew back. The story focused on the three generations of the Wheelock family, each embroiled in her own quiet struggle for dignity and self-actualization. The struggle turned out to be too quiet for Cloud, who was dozing by the end of scene 1, but Tom was too enraptured with the whole experience to be critical.

The theatre itself, in action, amazed him. When he’d auditioned he’d been on the stage, incapable of truly appreciating the acoustics of the place, the lighting, the grandeur of the theatregoers. The smooth professionalism of everyone and everything about this show astounded him. It was as far away from Angela’s front porch as a person could get, and yet still, at its base, exactly the same: people on stage performing for other people. The actresses wrung every bit of emotion out

of their dry and understated script. Tom felt their pain, their quiet struggle. He understood, for a few seconds, the battle to be a woman in a man's world while still retaining an elusive and vulnerable erotic femininity. Then the curtains closed for intermission and he nudged Cloud awake.

Cloud blinked and straightened up. "Has the champagne arrived?"

"Not yet."

"I see Michael is on his way." Cloud stretched. "Get ready."

Michael David James entered the box with a smug and knowing expression on his face. A theatre server followed behind him carrying a bottle of champagne on ice and a tray with three glasses.

"Oscar, I have such interesting news." Then, turning to Tom, he said, "I'm Michael James, by the way."

"Ambrose Sacks." Tom shook Michael's hand.

"Ambrose is a playwright from Fort Shane," Cloud explained. "This is his first visit to the National."

"Disappointed?" Michael asked ingenuously.

"Not at all," Tom said. "It's fantastic."

Michael nodded, as though it was his doing. "Thank you so much. We, of the board, hope to please."

"So what is this news?" Cloud asked.

"There has been a Shifter among us," he announced. "Who do you think it is?"

Alarm prickled over Tom's skin. Could Michael David James possibly know who he was? They'd met only briefly. Had he given himself away? Tom looked to Cloud, who regarded Michael with mild disinterest.

"You?" Cloud lazily took a glass of champagne from a server.

"Hardly," Michael said.

"Your lovely cousin?" Cloud raised his glass to Anne Sharpe across the way. She didn't notice.

“She only wishes she was,” Michael said. “No, this person was at your birthday party only two months ago chatting with your sister.”

“Dear God! Not my brother-in-law! I always thought he was too handsome,” Cloud said.

“Now you’re just being an ass,” Michael said.

“Who is it?” Tom felt lightheaded. He realized he was holding his breath and forced himself to stop.

“None other than the inimitable Fredrick Brandt,” Michael said.

“Really?” Tom could not hide his enthusiasm for this news. Fred Brandt! His auteur hero a Shifter! He’d suspected and wished for it to be true so many times that he’d convinced himself that it could be nothing but his own impossible fantasy.

“How do you know?” Cloud asked.

“My brother Miles is his publisher. Miles spilled it over dinner tonight. Apparently, Brandt confesses in his tell-all biography due to hit shelves next week. Miles has kept it under wraps this whole time but got drunk and blabbed to Anne. Now Anne wants to have Brandt open the Diverse Voices Festival.” Michael looked thoroughly disgusted, causing Tom to hate him with a fan’s irrational loyalty. “But that’s not all. Miles said that Fred Brandt’s birth name is, in fact, Lily Redcorn.”

Lily? Tom’s thoughts went blank for a moment, and then comprehension washed over him. Fred Brandt was a woman. Or had been a woman at one time.

Cloud crowed with laughter. “This is fantastic! I must talk to Brandt’s agent about an exclusive interview.”

“It’s not fantastic,” Michael said sourly. “What do I even call this person now? Him? Her? Is there some appropriate Shifter pronoun I’m going to be expected to master?”

“Even if there were, you probably couldn’t pronounce it,” Cloud soothed. “And as for Brandt, I suppose you use the word *him*.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Michael said.

“I take it you’re not a Brandt fan?” Cloud said.

“I’m not a fan of Anne’s choices in general.” Michael sniffed. “But this one is completely awful.”

“I know,” Cloud said. “You have to hire crowd control. And that’s such an effort.”

“Not that. I’d be happy to have that many people at Diverse Voices, but Fred Brandt is not a good role model to anyone, especially Shifters.”

“Why would you say that?” Tom asked. “He’s a self-made man.”

“I don’t think we can call a woman a self-made man.” Michael helped himself to another glass of champagne. “Brandt’s been dishonest with the public right from the beginning, hasn’t she or he? What could this person teach young Shifters? Deceive the public? Diverse Voices is not about subterfuge.”

“But there’s no way that Fred Brandt could have gotten even one of the roles he made famous if he were known to be a Shifter.” Tom used the word *he* deliberately, even defiantly.

“It does seem slightly unfair to call him a liar, Michael,” Cloud said. “Shifters weren’t even allowed into the National Theatre School until the year that you and I graduated. Brandt was already a star by then. I’d call it a necessary deception.”

“That’s true, but that deception is no longer necessary. Miles was saying that he refused to even return to his alpha form long enough to be photographed for the book jacket. He claimed that the face we knew as Fred Brandt had become his alpha form, which is just avoiding the issue, isn’t it?”

“But—” Tom began, but Cloud cut him off.

“And how is Diverse Voices coming along otherwise?” he asked Michael.

“Except for Anne giving me hell, everything’s going fine. We have all our plays chosen except one. Anne wants to include a troupe of militant Shifter contortion artists on the program. I keep telling her that the festival is not meant to be a freak

show, but she doesn't listen. I guess it's good this Brandt thing came up. Now I might not have to greenlight Turnskin—that's the theatre. I'm thinking of telling her that she can have them or Brandt, not both."

"I've been to Turnskin Collective shows," Cloud said. "I've always found them stimulating."

"I know, but then you enjoy being shocked. We at the National would rather push the envelope than transform the envelope into a big-breasted Dalmatian hermaphrodite. Fred Brandt's gender swap will be adequate." Michael laughed. "Honestly, I don't know where Anne finds these people. She seems to think that using the National Theatre is an appropriate venue for leftist activism. There will be children attending this festival. It's not appropriate."

"It sounds like it would be easy enough to cut Turnskin," Cloud said. "Big Dalmatian breasts are rarely suitable for children. Not that I'd know much about breasts."

Cloud and Michael shared a laugh at this. Tom found it impossible to do more than push out a weak smile. Rage and hatred rolled around in his stomach. Acting in real life was harder than acting on stage, he realized, to an extreme degree. Cloud couldn't be happy with what Michael was saying, and yet there he was, being Oscar and laughing like he and Michael were old friends. Cloud had been right that first night in his trailer when he claimed to be a better actor than Tom. Michael casually pressured Cloud about getting a nice spread for *Diverse Voices* in Oscar's magazine. Cloud replied with good humor. Tom simmered in hatred.

"I'm sorry, Ambrose," Michael said, noticing Tom's wan expression. "It's rude and dull of me to babble on and on about my own problems. Is this your first trip to the capital?"

"Yes, it is."

"You know, Michael, Ambrose is very well acquainted with Shifter culture, coming from Fort Shane and all," Cloud said.

“He was just telling me that he wrote a play with a Shifter as the main character.”

“Did you?” Michael’s expression cooled slightly into a mask of professional courteousness. “What’s it about?”

“Well, I—” Tom stalled. What was Cloud thinking? “It’s called... Mirrorchild. The story centers on a young boy who’s half Shifter and half Skin. His alpha form looks Skin, so a group of ladies from the town want to take him away from his mother. They say it’s because she’s too poor to take care of him, but it’s really because they want to try and make him pass as a Skin. They think it would be better for him in the long run to be a Skin, even if it costs him his mother. So he’s trying to find his identity between these two worlds.”

“So the boy is a metaphor for the intersection of our two cultures? He can be sympathetic to both, yet belongs to neither. That sounds like a fascinating way to explore our relationship to the Shifter culture,” Michael said. Tom forced himself to keep smiling. He suddenly perceived why Cyprus had told him that talking about an autobiographical play would be hard as he listened to another person reduce his own life to nothing but a mechanism—some kind of lens through which two races looked at each other. At a loss, Tom mumbled out a yes.

Cloud regarded him thoughtfully.

“See, now that’s the kind of play I wanted to see in the festival. I wanted a play that showed a young person trying to make sense of the world. Something with pathos,” Michael said. “It’s too bad that you didn’t send it in.”

“It could have been held up in the mail,” Cloud said.

Michael shook his head. “Anne would never buy that.”

“She might if you gave her Fred Brandt,” Cloud said.

The five-minute bell chimed.

“If you could have it to me by Monday, I might be able to make it fly,” Michael said. “Assuming the script is usable. No offense.”

“None taken,” Tom said.

Michael downed the last of his champagne and departed, leaving Tom staring at Cloud.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Getting you into the festival,” Cloud said.

“I was already in the festival.”

“Not for very long. I know Michael.”

“Oscar knows Michael,” Tom hissed.

“I’ve been doing Oscar for years now. When I say I know Michael, I do. Although I must say I didn’t realize he had so much trouble with gender switching until today.” Cloud leaned back in his chair. “Michael likes to be in the position of benevolently bestowing favors on the poor and unfortunate and prefers his plays to reinforce those ideas. He dislikes very much the idea of anything being taken from him by ungrateful revolutionaries.”

“Then I won’t write that play,” Tom said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to give him the pleasure of winning,” Tom said.

“So you’ll let yourself lose an opportunity to spite a man who doesn’t even register your existence?” Cloud said. “Where does that leave Fred Brandt?”

“Where does it leave my cousins? And it’s not my opportunity. It’s Ambrose’s opportunity,” Tom said.

“Don’t give away your self-determination to a man you just made up last week. You are Ambrose. Ambrose is you.” Cloud resettled himself comfortably as the lights dimmed in the theatre and the third act of *Sweet Pomegranate Wine* began.

Tom could no longer pay attention to the play. The magic had fled. He could see the actresses’ makeup too clearly, and the lines sounded pointless and insipid. His attention kept drifting over to the far box, where Michael David James sat looking

smug. Tom stared at Anne Sharpe, the woman who'd gone out on a limb for Turnskin, who he'd just been party to undermining. In the back of his mind, he knew that he would write the play and that it would inevitably be accepted. Already he was reconfiguring the scenes from *The Onion Boy* to fit the pitch he'd given Michael.

He spent all of act III jotting down notes. When they returned to Oscar's apartment, Tom spent an hour finishing the outline before allowing Cloud to draw him into bed. Without insulating fur, Cloud's skin felt intensely hot against his own bare flesh. Sweat ran between them in tiny rivulets.

"You feel good." With Oscar's full mouth, Cloud kissed what Tom still thought of as Ambrose's chest. Tom felt distant from himself and from Cloud, like they were two strangers performing in a pornographic film.

"*Please don't use his voice right now,*" Tom whispered. Cloud's head came up immediately.

"*Whose voice?*" He seemed alarmed.

"*Oscar's,*" Tom said. "*Speak Shifter.*"

Oscar smiled. "*Do you want me to change my body?*"

"*No,*" Tom reached out to push Cloud's hair back from his face, "*I just want to know that Cloud is still in there.*"

Cloud pulled Ambrose's body close and kissed him deeply, hungrily. He kissed like Cloud would, abandoning the playfulness of Oscar, proving his essential identity still lay beneath Oscar's dark skin while forcing Tom to admit that Ambrose's body was his own. They made love until morning.

14

TOM STEPPED OUT OF THE BATHROOM STALL AT COXWALL Station and paused to check his face in the mirror. Black fur. Slanting eyes. Lanky limbs. Everything checked out. He looked very much like himself, or at least he looked like the self that he remembered. He yawned. Shifting before nine in the morning made him sleepy. Maybe he could take a nap? No, he could not afford to sleep today. He needed to work on the new play.

When he returned home, the porridge had already been eaten. Tom scraped dejectedly at the empty pot on the stove. He should have eaten at Oscar's, or at the train station. There was some tea left in the pot, so Tom consoled himself by slurping up the rest of that. Just as he finished downing the lukewarm mug, Righteous ambled into the kitchen. He stopped when he saw Tom.

"Morning," Tom said.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I went for a walk," Tom shrugged, "trying to calm my nerves, and I ran into a guy I liked." Tom hoped this excuse would be adequate.

"Cyprus is just about ready to crap himself. He keeps talking about how you're probably out getting attacked or something." Righteous opened the breadbox, pulled out a bowl, and thrust it at Tom. It was full of cold, solidified porridge. "Here, I saved you some breakfast. Eat it."

“It’s cold.” Tom poked at it. The hard cool surface resisted him.

“Eat it anyway. You want to have something in your stomach while Cyprus is chewing you out. Why didn’t you call?”

“I left a note.” With a butter knife, Tom sliced off sections of porridge and ate them like medicine, taking big gulps of lukewarm tap water in between. Nights spent dining with Oscar had made porridge-eating banal. Eating cold porridge had reached level of such difficulty that it had become a matter of sheer discipline.

Righteous slammed the kettle back down on the burner and struck a match to light the flame beneath it.

“I told Cyprus that you’d probably just met a guy you liked and spent the night with him,” Righteous said. “Since what happened with you and Scarlett, I think he thinks you’re kind of hapless.”

Tom was grateful to Cyprus for worrying about him and also for apparently not telling Righteous about his run-in with Knockout Henry. But his cousin’s concern would also make his life as Ambrose more complicated. It was a tradeoff, he supposed. Now that he had people who would miss him and look for him if he disappeared, those same people would be wondering where he went all the time in his secret other life.

Tom sawed off some more porridge. He’d have to spend so much time as Ambrose; how would he explain his absences to his cousins?

Cyprus rushed into the kitchen just as Tom was finishing his breakfast. He looked Tom up and down. Now that he could see Cyprus’s face, Tom wasn’t sure whether Cyprus mistrusted him or simply worried about his safety.

“Please tell me that you haven’t been impersonating,” Cyprus said.

“I’m not impersonating,” Tom replied.

“Bullshit!” Cyprus jabbed his finger at Tom. “I followed you to the train station yesterday. Black furball walks in to

the bathroom and cinnamon Skin walks out and gets on the train. What have you been doing?”

“It’s personal,” Tom said.

“Did you actually say you followed him?” Righteous demanded. “I can’t believe you would do something so monitoring and fascist. You have no right.”

“I’m sorry—” Tom began, but was cut off by Scarlett.

“What the hell is all this yelling?” Her eye was still swollen, but she could open it. She gave him an appraising look. “I see you came back all right. Calm down, Cyprus. Give Tom a chance to catch his breath. Then he can tell us what he’s been doing.”

“Neither of you has any right to make Tom tell you anything.” Righteous turned to Tom. “It’s your private business.”

“That’s a change of tune,” Scarlett remarked dryly. “A couple of days ago you were demanding to know all of my business.”

“When you support me financially, then how you get your money is my business,” Righteous said. “And I’m sorry, all right? I just assumed that you were a prostitute when you were actually working as an impersonator, which is not to say that I approve of impersonation, but it’s different than being a prostitute, and I said a lot of really mean things to you over the last couple of years, and I was wrong. Now Cyprus is doing the same thing to Tom, assuming that he’s an impersonator when he doesn’t really know anything except that Tom used his alpha form.”

Cyprus glared at Righteous, but said nothing.

“Actually, I’m more like a prostitute, I guess,” Tom said. Righteous’s defense was as touching as it was undeserved. Guilt rolled over him like a steamroller, crushing a confession out of him. “I was with Oscar last night. We went to the National Theatre together. He said it would be awkward to be seen with a Shifter, so I went in my alpha form.”

For a moment no one said anything. Tom sawed off another slab of porridge. His appetite had gone, but it gave him something to do. Finally, Scarlett said, “You aren’t eating that porridge cold, are you?”

“How else would I eat it?” Tom asked.

“Give it here.” Scarlett took the bowl from him and turned the solid lump out onto a plate. “How was the play?”

“A little boring,” Tom replied, “but really well-written. Michael David James was there.”

“And?” Scarlett lit a burner on the stove. She got out a skillet and started frying the porridge into crisp, golden slices. While she did this, Tom told his story—omitting the fact that Oscar was actually Cloud. He saw their faces fall as they realized *The Onion Boy* would be rejected from the festival and then perk back up again when they realized that Tom and all of them had another chance. When he told them about Fred Brandt, he saw Righteous was just as excited by the revelation as he had been.

Scarlett put the fried porridge on a plate and sprinkled it with a deep brown spice she pinched out of a small tin. She put the plate down in front of him, sat down opposite, and lit a cigarette.

“So, do you think you can get the play done in time to submit it?” she asked.

“It’s just a modification of *The Onion Boy*,” Tom said. “It’s simple.”

“What I don’t understand is why would Oscar care that much about your play,” Cyprus said. Though he left his suspicion unvoiced, Tom knew that Cyprus must have made the connection now between Tom’s mysterious, Silent, impersonator boyfriend and the very wealthy, notoriously eccentric Oscar Highfield-Banks.

“I think he was enjoying putting one over on Michael. I get the impression he’s a little bit of an instigator.” Tom took a bite

of the fried porridge. Delicious. Exactly the kind of thing that he'd have eaten in a restaurant with Oscar. In fact, Tom was pretty sure that an elaborate variation of this had been served with his *après theatre* roast beef the previous evening. Somehow Scarlett's porridge, made just for him, tasted better.

"I know that everyone is expecting me to say this, but a guy asking you to change the appearance of your race to make him look better is completely racist. I don't care how much money or influence he has, you don't have to do it," Righteous said.

Scarlett toyed with her cigarette, rolling the ash slowly off the burning tip before finally saying, "I agree. I don't think it's possible to deny your real identity without hurting yourself deep down."

"Except that the Ambrose is my alpha form," Tom said. "And this shape is the one that I originally put on to fool people."

"That doesn't make Highfield-Banks less of a racist," Righteous said. "It just makes you look like a sad, isolated orphan who hates himself."

"I don't hate myself," Tom said. "And I don't think that Oscar is a racist. I think that he's picking his battles. He didn't ask me to change my appearance; I offered to—"

Righteous finished Tom's sentence for him.

"—because you hate yourself, and it's so deep that you don't even know it. It's all right. You're still my cousin. I'll respect your twisted decision."

"You didn't think altering one's appearance was a twisted decision when Lily Redcorn was the person making it," Tom said.

"That's different. Lily Redcorn subverted the dominant paradigm with her actions. You're just trying to date." Righteous set himself to washing the dirty skillet Scarlett had left behind.

He supposed that if he were Righteous looking at himself, he'd think exactly the same thing.

“Are you saying that you want to keep this deception up?” Cyprus asked.

“Since I’m wanted, I think it might be safer for me to be Ambrose anyway, don’t you? And I want my play in *Diverse Voices*.” Tom finished the last of his fried porridge, wishing there was more.

“If you did get your play in, they’ll still have to hire a troupe to perform it,” Scarlett said. “I don’t know if you’ll have any say in that, as the playwright, but Anne might be able to work it for us.”

“I just wish that you’d tell us about these things before you do them,” Cyprus said. “You act like we’re going to try and stop you from doing what you want. When have we ever done anything to give you that impression?”

“You did follow him to the train station like some kind of cheap television detective yesterday morning,” Righteous pointed out.

“I followed him because he was sneaking out, and every time he sneaks out he gets beaten up. If he’d just said he was going to meet Oscar, I wouldn’t have bothered. And I didn’t try to stop him; I let him go.” Cyprus turned his attention back to Tom. “You know, even if you were impersonating, I couldn’t stop you. It’s not safe, but that’s your decision to make.” Cyprus glanced quickly to Scarlett and then looked away, as if embarrassed of his unconscious action. Righteous dried the skillet fastidiously, as if to remove water on the sub-atomic level.

“Then why were you so angry?” Tom asked.

“Because you were lying to me,” Cyprus said. “We are your family. At least tell us where you’re going when you leave, all right? So we don’t have to wonder if the Shifter Agency got you.”

Tom felt suddenly ashamed for leaving them and assuming that they were people he’d have to hide from. And he felt ashamed for making them worry about him. That he withheld Cloud’s identity prickled a little at him, but he couldn’t feel

truly guilty about it. Revealing his own secrets was his right. Revealing Cloud's was not.

"I'm sorry about that," Tom said. "I really am."

"Don't be sorry." Cyprus stood and stretched and patted him on the shoulder. "Just try and trust us a little, okay?"



Tom ran from the train station to Oscar's apartment, the winter cold stinging his bare cheeks and ears. How did Skins stand winter? As he hurried down Grandview Avenue, he passed by a bookstore. Fred Brandt's smiling face filled every shelf of every display in the front window. Already people lined up, waiting for the store to open so that they could buy their copies. There had to be a hundred or more chatting to each other and stamping their feet in the cold.

After spending the last forty-eight hours rewriting his play, Tom had reached a state of elevated delirium, nearly bereft of emotions, looking at the world with weird clarity punctuated by episodes of quasi-collapse.

He wondered how many of them would disdain Brandt as Michael had, once they knew his secret.

He had to be at the Turnskin at three o'clock to accompany his cousins to the National Theatre. Anne Sharpe's office had called them back to read again.

All his thought was directed toward his new script. He'd completed the script and wanted to read through it with Oscar before sending it on to Michael. Early morning light slanted across the storefronts. Only the coffee shop was open. A burly man stood out front, salting the sidewalk.

Tom ran past the doorman and up the two flights of stairs to Oscar's apartment and pounded on the door. No answer. Impatiently, Tom banged again. Cloud opened the door. He stared stupidly at Tom, as though he was a mysterious stranger whose appearance was a frightening portent of disaster. For a moment, Tom wondered if the real Oscar had come back.

“Can I come in?” Tom asked.

Cloud simply moved aside, letting Tom enter, then listlessly nudged the door closed with his foot.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing, I just wanted to read through this play with you since you haven’t read it yet. When I called last night I said I’d be here first thing in the morning.”

“It’s 5:30,” Cloud said.

“That’s first thing in the morning,” Tom said. He laid his jacket down on the sofa.

“It’s inhuman.” Cloud flopped down beside Tom’s jacket and leafed through the pages. “Which part should I take?”

“The main character; I’ll do the rest,” Tom said.

“The boy who is not just a metaphor for the racial tensions of our times?” Oscar’s voice asked the question, but his demeanor, his vocabulary, his expressions were all Cloud. His presence struck Tom as slightly incongruous, like the costumed players from the Blue Turtle Theatre who Tom would see standing outside the stage door in the alley that separated the Blue Turtle from Turnskin, smoking cigarettes and gossiping between shows. Their uniforms and dresses said they were proper ladies and gentlemen while their relaxed bodies and loud laughter revealed their true identities.

Doubtless when he was more awake, Cloud would remember who he was supposed to be, but now it was nice to watch the details of his lover rise up to the surface. Cloud was not self-consciously masculine like Officer Simpson; neither did he cultivate Oscar’s subtle effeminacy. Relaxed arrogance radiated gently from him, so that even while doing nothing, he gave the impression of being able to do nothing at a higher level than any average loafer could ever hope to reach.

“I think that if I was this boy, I might have some complex feelings about my relationship to my mother. A deep and inexpressible anger and sorrow, maybe,” Cloud said.

“Inexpressible anger and sorrow?” Tom paused to make a correction in the manuscript. “Do you think you could play it that way?”

“If I’m going to express the inexpressible, I need a coffee. Want one?”

“Sure.”

Cloud and Tom read the play through, sounding out the lines. Tom made notes as they went along. He tried to focus solely on the words, but over and over again he found himself becoming mesmerized by Cloud’s portrayal of his Shifter character. Each passing minute Cloud seemed to slide deeper in the character. Occasionally he’d pause, asking Tom to clarify a point. Listening to Cloud read, Tom could like this new bastardization of his original idea. When they finished, Cloud collapsed back on the couch. He still wore only his bathrobe.

“What do you think?” Tom asked.

“I think it’s good.” Cloud rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. “I think Michael will love it. Speaking of Michael, he sent over the official festival entry form for you to fill out. It’s on top of the tobacco safe.”

Tom scrutinized the furniture in the room. He had no idea what a tobacco safe looked like.

“The thing by the toggle case.” Cloud flopped his hand in the direction of the kitchen. “With the spindly legs.”

Tom hadn’t realized that the application would be so long. The festival committee wanted to know all sorts of details about his life.

“Do you need a pen?”

Tom shook his head and sank into the couch next to Cloud.

“This is going to take me forever,” Tom said. “Look at all these questions. How am I ever going to remember the answers?”

“I suggest writing them down a few times. That’s how I memorized all the stuff about the toggles,” Cloud said. “It’s the best way to remember your back story.”

“But I haven’t even made some of this stuff up yet,” Tom said.

“No time like the present.” Cloud leaned over to read the form. “Let’s see... Education?”

“Liberal arts, Fort Shane University,” Tom said, “but what if they check?”

“Michael is not going to check the background of anyone he’s sponsoring. He’s just not that fair,” Cloud said.

“What if Anne checks it to get back at him?”

“Anne Sharpe? She doesn’t believe in background checks at all. You’ll be fine. I promise.”

As they began to fill in the gaps in his biography, Tom became more impressed by Cloud’s prodigious memory for dates, places, and numbers.

Cloud grinned at this.

“It’s all part of the service when you’re a professional impersonator,” he said.

“You really would make a really good actor,” Tom said.

“I am a good actor,” Cloud said.

“I mean stage acting.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that would make Mom happy. My life as an actor...” Cloud leafed through the pages of Tom’s play, lost in a sudden reverie. “I wonder what she would think if I decided to go legit, after all.”

“Does she want you to succeed her?”

“No, my older brother Seven’s doing that. He’s going to be a pioneer. First male head of the Coldmoon family.” Cloud dropped the script back on the coffee table. “Have I ever told you about the first time I ran away from home?”

“No,” Tom said. Cloud had never told him much of anything about his real life.

“I was going to join the Wolf Moon Repertory in Fort Shane. Seven found me right at the train station. He was just an underling then, running messages between Mom and her

lieutenants. When he brought me home, Mom was so angry that I'd gone out of the Shifter district, but Seven told her that he'd taken me out. He got such a beating for it."

"He sounds like a good brother—protecting you like that." Though Tom's kept his voice light, he couldn't suppress a shudder of fear as the image of Hot Sally's corpse flashed through his mind. "But most people around here seem pretty scared of him."

"It's not like he didn't turn around and knock me in the head for getting him in trouble." Cloud laughed. "But, yes, I think he's a good brother otherwise. At least he lets me come and go as I please, unlike Mom, who thinks I'm not safe alone."

Tom gave a derisive snort. "I think you can take care of yourself."

"Not so much as you might think," Cloud said. "There are whole sections of the city where I dare not tread. My mother's enemies are just as vicious as she is. It's one of the reasons that I almost never go anywhere in my alpha form."

"Oh." How stupid of him to not realize this, Tom thought. Tom looked at the floor. He didn't want to think about his lover's family entanglements. Especially not when separation seemed the inevitable result.

Cloud leaned across the couch and squeezed Tom's knee. "You think too much about the future."

Tom smiled. He leaned over and pressed his lips against the stubble on Cloud's cheek. Cloud made a sleepy grab for him, but was too slow. Tom stood and left the play on the coffee table.

"Are you sure your secretary can type up these changes fast?" he asked.

"She's a marvel of efficiency," Cloud said. "Don't worry."

"I'll see you Thursday," he said, shrugging into his coat.

"Make sure to get the play to Michael today," Tom said.

"I will."

Nicole Kimberling

“And one more thing,” Tom said sheepishly. “Can I borrow ten dollars?”

15

THREE HOURS LATER TOM WAS FOLLOWING CYPRUS UP THE steps to the National Theatre, his nose jammed firmly in his new book, *Behind the Scenes: the Lives of Fred Brandt*. The stone steps were slightly worn in the center from a hundred and fifty years of use. Tom found himself focusing on the slight indentation, wondering how many thousands of feet had to step in the same place before they managed to wear down the marble. Even Brandt's feet had done their part to carve this path during his years as a student. Then, Brandt had lived a double life. During the day he was a male, Skin, acting undergraduate and at night a Silent, Shifter, Storydance performer.

"Cyprus, listen to what Brandt says here." Tom had been periodically reading aloud from his new book throughout their entire rail journey. *"I knew from a young age that I wanted to work in film, but I did not want to be the fainting heroine or the wise and faithful Shifter nanny. I wanted to own the screen! I wanted to save the day, get the gold, get the girl, and ride off into the sunset. I wanted to fight the bad guy and win. That's why I created Fred Brandt initially, though not why I've stayed in this shape. After so many years, this body seemed to fit me more and more. I grew into it and it came to represent me—the real me—and my alpha form became a costume that I didn't want to wear anymore."*

"Excuse me," a voice said, "are you Tom Fletcher?"

Distracted and fatigued, Tom responded instinctively. Even as he looked up he knew that he should not have. No one

should be asking for him by that name in this town. Still, he did look up, and there, standing before him, was Officer Arthur Mayle.

“It’s him!” Mayle pointed. Two men Tom hadn’t noticed suddenly reached out and grabbed him. They twisted his arms back behind him and kicked his knees out, forcing him to fall to the hard stairs. Tom’s book crashed down in front of him. One of the agents stepped on its spine, cracking it in two.

“Who are you?” he heard Cyprus yelling. “What are you doing to my cousin?”

“Shifter Agency,” a voice answered, “please step aside.”

“He didn’t do anything,” Cyprus said.

“We have reason to believe that this person is an impersonator posing as your cousin.”

“A what?”

Tom wanted to look up and see who was talking, but he couldn’t raise his head. An agent knelt on the back of his neck.

“Make this easy for yourself now.” The agent jerked hard on Tom’s wrists, cuffing them to his ankles. Without thinking, Tom shifted his wrists, not trying to escape but to make the restraints more bearable. As he did so, the cuff tightened. His hands went numb.

“I’m not resisting.” Deep, consuming fear surged through Tom’s chest. He shook with adrenaline.

Tom felt himself being lifted up. Cyprus stood, arguing with a uniformed agent. At the top of the steps, near the entrance to the theatre, stood Michael David James. A ghost of a smile played over his lips and then vanished.

Cyprus rushed toward Tom as he was being carried down the steps, but the officer stopped him. Cyprus shouted, “Don’t say anything! I’m getting you a lawyer!”

Tom could barely hear what he said. Blood roared in his ears.

He rode to the Grandview Precinct Station face down on a cracked vinyl seat that smelled like an old chlidog. Thoughts crashed through his head in a panicked jumble. Angela had said Officer Mayle wanted to kill him, and there he was, riding in the front seat, staring back at him with hateful satisfaction.

“You’re going down,” Officer Mayle said.

“I didn’t do anything.” Tom twisted until he could make eye contact with the Shifter Agency officer riding next to him.

“Please remain calm,” the SA officer said. He took a syringe from a small case. “I’m just going to draw some blood for an identity check. This will sting.”

Tom held still while the SA officer tied a rubber tourniquet around his upper arm. Tom’s veins rose instantly, his heart beating fast. The SA agent filled two vials of blood, then removed the tourniquet.

“Why are you arresting me?”

“You are not under arrest,” the SA officer said.

“Not yet,” Officer Mayle added.

“Your identity is being verified. After that, we have some questions we’d like you to answer.” The SA officer seemed to regard Officer Mayle with vague disgust. “It shouldn’t take long. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

They carried Tom into the station and handed him over to a pair of guards in full facemasks. They laid him on a bunk in a holding cell in a long line of cells with solid gray doors. Shifter Row. No windows, no way to view the other prisoners or guards.

They locked two big, plastic cuffs around his ankles and then took off his restraints. They left without saying a word. Tom hunched on the edge of the bunk, on the verge of tears. Somehow the worst thing about this was the fear that he would betray Cloud.

The wait was agonizing, but not lengthy. The guards returned and brought him to a questioning room. Two other SA officers sat opposite him—one a blonde Skin named Wright and the other a redfox Shifter named Swiftriver. Mayle was nowhere in sight. The redfox officer offered Tom a paper cup full of water, which Tom greedily accepted. His hands shook. He told them his name and his mother's name and his address back home on Country Road 27. They asked him why he'd come to Riverside. He said he wanted to be an actor.

"Do you know a man named Richard Simpson?" Officer Swiftriver asked.

"Yes, of course." What did they know? Probably Angela had told them that he and Simpson were seeing each other. She'd have called Simpson a no-good man. He could clearly picture Angela waving a hand at Officer Swiftriver and explaining Tom's inability to extricate himself from the Destructive Love Spiral.

"How did you know him?" Officer Wright asked.

"We were seeing each other," Tom said. A flush of heat spread up across his face. Neither SA man seemed fazed by this admission.

"And when was the last time you saw Simpson?"

"The night I left town." Tom toyed with the edge of his paper cup. "He came over to say he didn't want to see me anymore."

"And so you left town in the middle of the night?"

"I didn't have any reason to stay. I'd always planned to come to Riverside... I guess I just took getting dumped as a reason to finally come," Tom said.

"Have you had any communication with Officer Simpson since you came to Riverside?" Officer Swiftriver asked.

"No," Tom said. "I don't think he wanted people to know he liked men. He said people would start to notice him coming around if we saw each other anymore."

"People like your friend Angela?"

“Yes.” So they had talked to Angela. What else might she have said? What had she told them about that last night? He was almost certain that she’d deny seeing him on that night. She thought she’d been aiding a fugitive. She’d never admit to driving him to Stovepipe Rock.

Officer Wright leaned on the edge of the table. “How long had you been seeing Officer Simpson?”

“About three months,” Tom said.

“What did the two of you talk about?”

“Plays,” Tom said. It was easy to answer them because it was true. Cloud, as Officer Simpson, had told him nothing about his life beyond the basic revelation of his identity. “I write plays.”

“Yes, we know.” Officer Wright crossed his arms. “Did Officer Simpson ever talk about his life?”

“Not really. We mostly...” Tom trailed off shyly. “Most nights we didn’t really talk much. Why are you asking about Officer Simpson? Is he in trouble?”

“Why would you think he’s in trouble?”

“Because you’re asking me a lot of questions about him.” Tom looked pleadingly at Officer Swiftriver.

“Officer Simpson’s body was found in a state of high decomposition on the night that you left town,” Officer Swiftriver said. “Officer Mayle thinks you had something to do with his death.”

“He’s dead?” The tears that were already brimming in Tom’s eyes spilled over. “How did he die?”

“He was murdered. Strangled and buried in the bank of an irrigation ditch.”

Tom did not have to fake his horror. Somehow Tom had imagined there had been a struggle with a gun that went off accidentally, or that one unlucky punch brought him down and that Cloud hadn’t meant to kill him. But he’d seen Cloud relent with Knockout Henry. If he strangled Simpson, he’d known what he was doing, and meant it.

“He’s dead?” He scrubbed the tears from his cheek.

“He was killed some time before you last saw him,” Officer Swiftriver said. “Do you understand what that means?”

Tom shook his head dumbly, numb with shock and slightly sickened with himself because he knew that he’d love Cloud no matter what he had done or however he’d committed the murder. Already, Tom manufactured justifications; Cloud was provoked, and Simpson was just a small-town bastard.

“Officer Simpson was murdered by a person who then went on to impersonate him for two years. Only a Shifter could accomplish this. Most likely an experienced impersonator with strong sociopathic tendencies. Then on the night Simpson’s body was discovered, Tom Fletcher also vanished,” Officer Swiftriver said. “Officer Mayle discovered that the person posing as Simpson had recently acquired transportation papers for this same Tom Fletcher, a Shifter agricultural laborer whose absence no one would notice.”

“You can see how Officer Mayle would be suspicious about a thing like that.” Officer Wright leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest. “One Shifter evaporates at exactly the same moment that another leaves town.”

It took Tom a moment to figure out what they were saying. When he did, a weird relief came over him.

“Officer Mayle thinks I’m the impersonator?” Tom asked, just to make sure.

“Officer Mayle requested that we help him track down Tom Fletcher and perform a blood identification,” Agent Swiftriver said.

“So I’m really not under arrest?”

“Not yet,” Agent Wright said.

“It depends on who you turn out to be.” Agent Swiftriver’s tone was measured and reasonable. “We have no reason to detain Tom Fletcher.”

“But I would like to know about that last night,” Agent Wright said. “You said that Officer Simpson came to your house to break up with you?”

“Yes, sir,” Tom said.

“And then you left. According to the bus driver, you boarded the bus in Stovepipe Rock. That’s miles away from the nearest bus stop. Why did you go there?” Agent Wright was reading out of a little notebook.

“I hitched a ride with a trucker. That’s where he was going, so it’s where I went too,” Tom said.

“What was the trucker’s name?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “I rode on the flatbed in the back.”

Agent Wright nodded and closed his little book.

“Officer Mayle has some questions to ask you.”

Tom wanted to ask for his lawyer, but was scared that it would make him look guilty. When Officer Mayle entered the room, Tom began to feel serious dread. He was well-known for driving suspects out into the fields for a little unofficial interrogation. He’d broken Shorty’s nose and done worse to boys he thought were fags.

He did not want to be left alone with Officer Mayle.

“Has my lawyer arrived yet?” Tom asked.

“What do you want a lawyer for?” Officer Mayle leaned heavily on the table. Tom could smell his sour breath. “Think you might be in a little trouble?”

“I’m entitled to a lawyer,” Tom whispered, unable to put any force behind his voice and unable to look Officer Mayle in the eye for fear of provoking a beating.

“You don’t deserve to be called human after what you did to Simpson,” Officer Mayle said, “and to Tom Fletcher. What did you do with that poor faggot’s body anyway? Did you eat it, you sick fucker?”

“I am Tom Fletcher.” Tom tried to make eye contact with Agent Swiftriver, but he was writing something down in his own little book. “My blood test will prove it.”

“Your blood test already came back,” Officer Mayle said. “No match. Why don’t you tell us your real name?”

Tom’s jaw dropped in horror.

“That’s impossible,” he whispered. “There must be a mistake.”

“No mistake,” Office Mayle said. He waved a piece of paper at Tom, and then handed it to Agent Swiftriver. “The blood techs don’t lie. Why don’t you show me your alpha form?”

“Is that what the report says?” Tom looked pleadingly to Agent Swiftriver. “It’s wrong!”

“The initial test is inconclusive. Your original identity sample suffered some damage due to improper long-term storage.” Agent Swiftriver cast a mildly irritated glance at Officer Mayle. “We’ll re-run the test.”

“I’d like to see my lawyer,” Tom said again.

“Nothing she says is going to help you here,” Officer Mayle said.

Tom said nothing. What would he do if his identity couldn’t be proven? They would think he was Cloud. They’d think he’d done those things? Could he really face execution for a man who couldn’t even commit to him past six months? How stupid that would be?

“Getting a little worried?” Officer Mayle asked. “I would be. Even if they don’t kill you, Shifter Row’s the end of the line. They say you go crazy in there, never seeing a single face.”

Tom closed his eyes. He pictured the guard’s mask, and in the moment of panic and dread, he almost said Cloud’s name, but then he finally looked up at Officer Mayle. He saw the malicious eagerness in the cop’s face. He thought he’d already won. He thought he’d captured Officer Simpson’s murderer and solved the big case. He didn’t have anything but a theory.

“I won’t be on Shifter Row,” Tom said, “because you’re wrong. I am Tom Fletcher, and this test will prove it.”

For a moment, Tom thought Officer Mayle would strike him. His shoulder tensed and he even lifted his arm.

“I think that’s all we need for right now,” said Agent Swiftriver.

Tom was escorted back to the holding cell by another masked guard. He sat on the bunk and pressed his palms into his eyes to keep himself from crying.

Several hours passed. Tom lay on his side on his bunk, imagining the life of Ambrose Sacks. He perfected his mental image of Ambrose’s family home: a modest, four-bedroom place in typical Fort Shane-style, with rough-hewn logs and smooth, almost featureless plasterwork walls. He imagined his childhood, riding spotted horses through the scrubby desert mountains. He invented an incident with a rattlesnake and replayed it in his mind until it became as real as Tom’s childhood in the trailer.

He remembered Ambrose’s first boyfriend: a kid named Lyndon from his school. They first kissed in the boy’s locker room. Terror of discovery by their peers burned that kiss into his memory with more power than even their first clumsy fuck in Lyndon’s bedroom.

Ambrose wasn’t a slut, but he was more experienced than Tom. He’d even seduced one of his college professors. They’d done it in his professor’s office on his big wooden desk while, outside, the cactus bloomed and the desert turned ephemerally green. Their romance had lasted about as long as the spring rains and had been equally beautiful.

Tom didn’t remember falling asleep, only being woken up by a masked guard to be escorted into the back of a car. Agent Swiftriver rode in the front seat while Officer Wright drove. Officer Mayle wasn’t there. The sky was dark and the streets, deserted. They drove past a bank and Tom saw the big clock read 3:45.

“Where are you taking me?” Tom wished the fear wasn’t so obvious in his tone.

“To Coxwall Station. Your identity has been confirmed.” Agent Wright handed Tom his scuffed and broken copy of *Behind the Scenes*. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

The agents drove him to the checkpoint and released him just on the other side of the Cox Wall. Tom walked three miles back to the Turnskin Collective in the dark, alone, clutching the book to his chest.

16

THE MOMENT CYPRUS SAW TOM WALKING IN THE DOOR, he bounded down and wrapped his arms around Tom so strongly that Tom could barely breathe. Righteous and Scarlett were both slumped across the kitchen table. Two empty cigarette packs lay on the table. Cyprus's fur smelled like sweat and bitter tea. Tom hugged his cousin back, suddenly so grateful and overwhelmed at the idea that they'd all been waiting up for him that he sniffed back a few tears. It seemed like he'd been crying all night. He had to pull himself together.

"Did they hurt you?" Scarlett rose and gingerly laid a hand on his shoulder.

"No," Tom said. "They just took blood. Most of the time I was in the cell."

Righteous was looking at him with a weird admiration. Finally he said, "I've never met anybody who got arrested by the SA. Do the guards really wear masks?"

"Yeah, they really do. Gray ones. You can't even see their eyes." Tom shuddered involuntarily. Now that he was out, he could admit to himself that the masks had terrified him. The thought of seeing no faces ever again made him sick with delayed fear. As his defensive numbness wore off, he began to shake.

Scarlett made him go to his bed and lie down while she made another in an endless string of cups of strong tea. Righteous sat on the corner of his bed.

“So, what happened?” Cyprus asked. “I couldn’t get anything out of the officer.

Tom explained the murder and Officer Mayle’s theory about his involvement.

“That is such bullshit!” Righteous leapt with rage. “I bet a hundred Skins left town that day, and they didn’t chase *them* down! It’s clear oppression!”

Cyprus simply stared down at his teacup. When he looked at Tom, it was with such an uncomfortable look of comprehension and empathy that Tom flinched and had to look away. He couldn’t have pieced it together... could he?

He didn’t distrust Cyprus, but the idea that his cousin had enough information to implicate Cloud still prompted new waves of sick worry. If Tom got arrested again, would Cyprus finger Cloud to get Tom released?

Righteous ranted on, unaware of either of them.

“I’m going to the arch tomorrow with a bullhorn and the biggest fucking sign I can find,” Righteous said. “They won’t get away with arresting you for nothing.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You have rehearsal tomorrow.” Cyprus rubbed his eyes. “And so do you, Tom. We’ve got to make back some money.”

Scarlett came into the room and pressed a warm mug of tea into his hand. Spicy vapors floated up at Tom’s nose. He still didn’t like tea at all, but this smell made tangible his cousin’s genuine worry for him.

“Anne came down here after she heard what happened. She thinks that Michael David James tipped off the SA. His office was doing background checks on all the performers. So it’s no coincidence that you were arrested coming to the theatre today.”

“He’s a fascist prick,” Righteous seethed. “People like him make me want to stop messing around and build a bomb.”

“People like him make us all want to build bombs.” Scarlett lit a cigarette. “But then we get over it.”

“You get over it—” Righteous began.

“Please,” Tom said, “please don’t fight right now. I’m not feeling up to it.”

“Sorry.” Righteous crouched down beside him. “It just makes me so mad.”

“I know,” Tom said. “Did Anne have anything else to say?”

“She said she’d still try and get us into the festival somehow,” Cyprus said. “They’re hiring some circus acts to busk around the festival grounds. We might get in there.”

“Turnskin is not a circus act!” Anger finally flared through Tom’s chest. “You’re a legitimate theatre!”

“I know,” Scarlett said. “I think I managed to plant the seed of her hiring us to perform someone else’s play if the opportunity comes along. Oh, speaking of that, Oscar Highfield-Banks’s secretary came by. She left a note for you.” Scarlett fished around in her pocket until she produced a slightly crumpled envelope.

“Did you tell her I’d been arrested?” Tom asked.

“Are you kidding?” Scarlett scoffed. “I’m not that stupid.”

Tom broke the seal and barely opened the note, desperately worried at what it might say. He couldn’t be seen with Oscar now. What if the SA, or even Officer Mayle, was still following him? Cyprus had followed him so easily; he’d be no match for real agents. He’d lead them straight to Cloud.

“I wish you wouldn’t cover your note up so much.” Righteous leaned over, trying to see the paper. “I can’t read it.”

The note was simple: *Meet M. at Café Steam 7:00 p.m. Thursday. Congratulations.*

And there was a crisp fifty spot. Ever thoughtful, Cloud had included the cash for train fare.



Tom sat at a tiny table at Café Steam, cold despite the humid heat of the café. He supposed that in the summertime he'd be happy to be furless. Just past sunset, the promenade cafés filled with diners. Tourists walked up and down, looking at the posted menus. Regulars, mostly from the Arts Complex or nearby government offices, trickled in for after-work drinks.

Michael was already ten minutes late. A good-looking waiter refilled Tom's coffee and replenished his rock-sugar bowl, and Tom couldn't help but wonder if he was from the Shifter Agency.

Had they really believed him, or were they tailing him? Did they know about Ambrose? While he was shifting in the Coxwall bathroom, every single sound made him jump. Every person seemed sinister. What did an undercover agent look like?

Tom fidgeted with his napkin. He'd mangled a solid a quarter of it by the time Michael arrived. To Tom's surprise, he was accompanied by his cousin Anne.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting long. Traffic is hell tonight." Michael held out his hand. Tom smiled and shook it.

"It's good to see you again," Tom said. The last time he'd seen Michael, Tom had been on his face with a cop kneeling on his neck. He still managed to smile.

"This is my cousin Anne Sharpe. She co-chairs the festival committee."

The waiter arrived, and Michael and Anne ordered coffee and a small tray of assorted sweets that Tom was too nervous to try and eat. A group of well-dressed women drifted in, stomping the thin snow off their fancy shoes. Condensation beaded the windows, giving the night outside a watery look.

Michael and Anne engaged in a brief comparison/contrast discussion about the merits of the cookies before Michael finally came to the point.

“Anne and I have both had a chance to read your play.” Michael folded his hands, beaming. “Ambrose, I love it. It’s just what we need for Diverse Voices.”

“That’s wonderful,” Tom said.

“What I really love about it is that the characters are humanized in such a thorough emotional vivacity that there is no depressing aftertaste to what is essentially a story of inequity,” Michael said.

“Audiences don’t like to go away sad at events like this,” Anne said. Tom couldn’t decide if he was hearing sarcasm or resignation in her tone.

“Absolutely,” Michael said. Anne turned to Tom with an air of polite interest.

“So Ambrose, your biography says that you’re from Fort Shane City, is that right?” Anne dropped three sugars and substantial cream into her coffee. Tom wondered if she and Scarlett had originally met at the condiment bar at some Shifter teahouse.

“That’s right,” Tom said.

“Did you ever attend any performances by the Wolf Moon Repertory?” Anne asked.

“Wolf Moon?” Tom searched through his peripheral Fort Shane information. The image of a howling wolf logo flashed through his mind. Hadn’t Cloud run away to join Wolf Moon? “The repertory theatre on Seventh Avenue?”

“Isn’t that another of those performance art troupes?” Michael asked.

“Not exactly,” Tom said. “They’re a fully Shifter troupe, so they’re able to perform really amazing pieces with on-stage transformation. I suppose they’ve got a couple of theatres like that here too.”

“There are a few.” Anne gave Michael a tight smile. Tom saw his opportunity.

“Do you think it would be possible to use a troupe like that for the cast of my play? I think they’re amazing.” Tom tried to inject his tone with innocent enthusiasm. Anne looked at him in pleasant surprise.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Anne said. “I think I may have just the people. Have you heard of the Turnskin Collective?”

“Now, wait a minute.” Michael snapped his cookie in half. “We’ve already gone through this. We don’t want any gratuitous transmogrification in the theatre. Outside among the buskers, maybe, but on the stage it is tasteless.”

“There’s no transmogrification at all in Ambrose’s play,” Anne said. “And I think that a Shifter play written by a non-Shifter and played by non-Shifters doesn’t particularly push the envelope.”

“Of course the players would have to be Shifters,” Tom said. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Michael smiled at Anne. Tom thought he could actually see the waves of animosity between them.

“We don’t generally like to discriminate in our hiring processes at the National Theatre,” Michael said. “That includes reverse discrimination as well.”

“However we would very much like to use Turnskin Collective in the festival somehow,” Anne said.

“As buskers,” Michael broke in.

“But they could be more. How about taking a look at them?” Anne addressed Ambrose, ignoring her own cousin. Tom couldn’t believe his luck. Anne was doing his work for him.

“Of course, I’d love to,” Tom said.

“If you don’t like them, there’s no pressure to hire them,” Michael said. “You have a great degree of control over that.”

“The collective is performing a play this weekend. Would you like to come take a look at them with me?” Anne asked.

“Are you sure the play is still going on? Wasn’t the principle actor arrested yesterday?” Michael off-handedly popped a honey candy into his mouth.

“He was released early this morning. I spoke with his cousin,” Anne said with a dismissive wave.

“But isn’t he a murder suspect? I’m not sure that’s the sort of person we want in the theatre,” Michael said. “Not to mention that the owner of Turnskin Collective is a known prostitute.”

“Oh God, Michael, the principle actor was only a witness. As for the owner, if you exclude every actor who may have dabbled in sex work, there’d be no one left to hire,” Anne said, laughing. “So what do you say, Ambrose?”

“I’d love to go,” he said. This was just what he needed to repair his conscience and do right by his cousins.

“Fantastic.” Anne pulled an *Onion Boy* handbill out of her crocodile pocketbook. “I’ll meet you there, Friday night. I must, I’m afraid, excuse myself. I’ve got a previous appointment. See you later, Michael. You’ll take care of the check, won’t you?”

“Of course, all the best.” Michael waved at Anne’s retreating back, then turned to Tom. “You know, sometimes I wish I was a woman.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, you can manipulate any situation however you want and still leave the men to pay for you. It’s brilliance.” Michael took another cookie. “You really don’t have to hire her troupe, you know.”

“I know, but Oscar really likes them too,” Tom said.

“Oscar does?” Michael’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t know that.”

“He was planning to go to opening night, I think,” Tom said.

“Was he?” Michael’s eyebrows returned to their normal position. “Were you planning on going with him?”

“No.” Tom shook his head.

“How did you meet Oscar, if I might ask?” Michael leaned his chin on his hand.

“I—” Tom choked, stammering in indecision. Where had he met Oscar? On the promenade? In Fort Shane?

Michael laughed.

“Never mind. You don’t have to answer any question that might incriminate you.” Michael winked. “God knows we all have our embarrassing little secrets.”

Tom laughed nervously.

“I suppose we do,” he said.

They finished their coffee, chatting amiably about the coffee services in Fort Shane City, then Michael excused himself and Tom headed for the train station to catch the 8:47.

So elated was Tom by both his acceptance into the festival and also wrangling a spot for Turnskin that he did not notice the flaw inherent in the plan that he’d just made until his train had nearly reached Coxwall Station. But when he did notice, it hit him like a freight train. How was he going to be simultaneously in the audience as Ambrose and on the stage performing as Tom?

17

TOM ARRIVED AT THE TURNKIN JUST PAST TEN O'CLOCK. He couldn't think. At this time last night he'd been on Shifter Row, escaping from his horrible reality in Ambrose's past. Now he was losing track of what both incarnations of himself were supposed to be doing.

Righteous lounged in the living room watching late night comedians take shots at Fred Brandt's revelation of gender transformation and scowling. He looked intensely relieved when he saw Tom open the door.

"You know, I can almost understand why Cyprus followed you to the train station," he commented. "All night I've just been worried that agents are tailing you."

"If anyone followed me, I couldn't tell." Tom flopped down into a chair and rubbed his face. It felt good to feel warm fur on his skin again, but also slightly strange, like he was wearing someone else's skin. "Is everyone downstairs?"

"They're looking at the books," Righteous said. "I can't believe how these people are slamming Fred Brandt. Now everyone's second-guessing everything they ever said about him. They just had his second ex-wife on. She swears she couldn't tell the difference in bed. Of course she couldn't tell the difference! There is no difference. Gender is just a construct."

"For us it might be." Tom sat down on the couch next to his cousin. "For Skins maybe it isn't, who knows? I got another copy of Brandt's book. The shop only had three left when I got it." Tom handed Righteous the paper-wrapped hardcover.

“Fantastic!” Righteous ripped the bag open and flipped to the center of the book, which contained eighteen pages of black and white photos. None of them were photos of Lily Redcorn.

“Listen to this: *Many people will be disappointed that I haven’t included any photographs of my previous physical self. Frankly, I didn’t bother to keep any. I barely remember what Lily Redcorn looked like, and I’m not sure I could actually accomplish the task of shifting back to that form, if indeed I wanted to, which I don’t. When I became Fred Brandt it was like I’d finally transformed into my true self after years of being forced to wear a disguise. We Shifters have that choice available to us—the decision of how we would like to physically appear—and I feel no shame or regret at having decided to be the man you see on the cover of this book.*” Righteous stopped reading and closed the book, then said, “That is so true.”

“I read a lot of it on the train,” Tom said. “I thought you’d like it.”

“How did your meeting with Michael go?” Righteous asked, as though he’d been deliberately avoiding the subject.

“It’s a mess,” Tom said. “I think we have to have a family meeting.”

“I’ll go get them,” Righteous said.

Tom moved to the kitchen while he was gone and cracked the kitchen window. He suspected that Scarlett would smoke at least a pack of cigarettes tonight. A stab of guilt twisted in his stomach. Why did he always have to be coming to them with problems? At least he had good news this time.

Righteous returned with Scarlett and Cyprus. Scarlett fell into the chair opposite Tom and lit a cigarette. Cyprus stood behind her, leaning against the kitchen counter. Righteous took up his position by the window.

“What did they say?” Cyprus asked.

“The play’s in,” Tom said. “They accepted it.”

Scarlett broke into such a wide smile at the good news that Tom rebelled against telling her the bad news. The rebellion didn't last long, though.

"But there's a problem: Anne wants me to come see *The Onion Boy* with her this weekend. She's bringing the whole festival committee with her."

"Wait," Scarlett leaned forward. "She wants you, Tom Fletcher, to come with her?"

"She wants me, Ambrose Sacks, to come with her to see it," Tom said.

Scarlett sighed heavily. "So one of us is going to have to... what? Double your alias?"

"Or double me in the play." Tom knew, as he said this, that it would be impossible. They couldn't even find an understudy who could shift as quickly as Tom could.

"No way, the shifting is too strenuous for any of us," Cyprus said. "But who's going to do it? Who's going to cover for us if we're covering for Tom?"

"I don't know." Cyprus unlatched the cupboard, rifling through it. He picked up a tin of tea, shook it, then frowned. "Maybe Righteous could make the shifts necessary for the play in a pinch."

"Who'd manage the backstage?" Righteous asked. "Couldn't Scarlett do Ambrose instead?"

"*Maybe I could do Ambrose.*" Tom instantly recognized the voice that came from the living room. "*I have some experience in that area.*"

Cloud stepped into the doorframe. Scarlett dropped her cigarette.

"*You should lock your door,*" Cloud said.

"It was locked," Scarlett said, partially regaining her composure.

"*You should lock it better.*" Cloud glanced around the kitchen, his gaze finally falling on Tom. "*Hi there, baby.*"

Before he realized what he was doing, Tom had launched himself off his chair and was burying his face in Cloud's soft shoulder.

"You shouldn't come here." Tom could barely hear his own voice, muffled against Cloud's body. *"The SA might be watching me."*

"I shouldn't do a lot of things, and yet here I am." Cloud wrapped his arms around Tom. *"I felt like I'd been punched in the gut when Michael told me you'd been taken in by the SA. He said it with such a happy little fucking smirk too, the bastard. Did you think I could just send Oscar's secretary down to see if you were all right?"*

Tom felt suddenly ashamed to be displaying his weakness in front of his cousins. He pulled away, and Cloud released him. The Snakegrasses, excluding Cyprus, seemed to be stuck somewhere between anger and astonishment at Cloud's intrusion. Tom's emotions moved between pride, delight, and deep fear. What if the SA was following him after all? And yet it was hard for Tom to feel fear at all in Cloud's presence. More than anyone, Cloud made Tom feel safe, which was stupid. Most of the bad things that had ever happened to Tom happened because of Cloud. That was hard to remember, though, when Tom was close enough to smell his cologne.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" asked Scarlett.

"This is my boyfriend," Tom said. He was about to make up a fake name for Cloud when Cloud stepped forward and introduced himself.

"I'm Cloud Coldmoon." He extended his hand. *"You must be Scarlett. It's an honor to finally meet you, ma'am. I'm sorry for the intrusion. I wasn't sure if Tom was among friends."*

"What were you planning to do if he wasn't?" Scarlett asked.

Cloud shrugged. *"Improvise."*

Scarlett smirked and took Cloud's hand, reciprocating the formal Shifter greeting. Cloud bowed slightly, in deference to

both her age and gender. Perfect. He was a perfect gentleman. Tom felt suddenly proud of him for it, but Scarlett didn't seem to be put at ease by Cloud's effort. But why would she? Seven had been polite, too.

Scarlett introduced Cyprus and Righteous somewhat stiffly and invited them both to sit down. Cyprus went back to making tea, as if Cloud had not just broken into the house. Only Righteous seemed willing to acknowledge that Cloud was a trespasser in their kitchen, but confined his protest to a suspicious glower.

"So, *why are you having to impersonate Tom?*" Cloud laid his hand on Tom's shoulder in a manner that was half-reassuring, half-proprietary.

Tom explained everything again. About Michael David James and about Turnskin's unexpected chance at being in Diverse Voices after all. Cyprus poured three cups of fragrant tea. He didn't sit down with them or pour any tea for himself or his brother. Tom gulped at the formality of Cyprus's demeanor. After Tom finished, Cloud took a thoughtful whiff of his tea, complimented the aroma, then added, "*I could play Tom's part in The Onion Boy.*"

"*What happened to doing Ambrose?*" Tom asked.

"*Michael and Anne have spent and will continue to spend a lot of time with Ambrose. Tom, they'll hardly see at all. It would be less strain and less information to report back. That, and I like the play,*" Cloud said. "*Anyway, didn't you say I'd be a great actor? What better time to find out than now?*"

Tom bristled as Cloud's confidence crossed the line into arrogance. Again.

"*Almost any other time would be a better time to find out how good an actor you are,*" Tom said sourly.

"*No, I think he's got a point. You have to be able to talk to the festival people,*" Scarlett said. "*We'll see how you read. Cyprus, can you go get Mr. Coldmoon a copy of the script?*"

For a few seconds everyone in the kitchen, Cloud included, gaped at her.

"You can't be serious," Cyprus murmured.

"Why not?" Scarlett fished in her cigarette packet and, finding it empty, pulled a couple bills from her pocket. *"Righteous, could you go down to the corner and buy me another pack? Get a crock of honeywine too. Fireweed if they have it."*

It wasn't really a request. Righteous wordlessly took her money and left the kitchen, Cyprus right on his heels.

"So, Mr. Coldmoon..." Scarlett fixed Cloud with an aloof stare. *"Before we start any of this, there's something I need to know."*

"Yes, ma'am?" Cloud straightened up a little in his chair.

"You know that Tom's mother has passed away, so it falls to me to ask you, just what are your intentions for my young cousin, Tom?"

"Scarlett!" Tom wished he could evaporate. But at the same time he was in awe of Scarlett. Cloud Coldmoon was the brother of the man who had beaten her bloody, and she had the audacity to ask him his intentions? His admiration for her soared beyond all reasonable levels.

"Well, ma'am, my intention is to be beside Tom for as long as I'm allowed," Cloud said.

"That's not exactly the kind of commitment Mrs. Fletcher would have wanted to hear," Scarlett said.

"It's the best I can do, ma'am, without being a liar," Cloud said.

"Then it will have to do for now. Ah, here comes Cyprus. Let's see how you do with the script. Go ahead and get into character first."

"What? Shift?"

"That's right," Scarlett said. *"The quality of the Coldmoon impersonators is legendary. Wow me."*

Tom vividly remembered Seven calling Scarlett an amateur back at Dr. Black's Infirmary. He wondered how much she was

enjoying her chance to dominate Seven's younger brother. Cloud didn't seem to notice the slightly vengeful tone in her voice.

"Yes, *ma'am*." Cloud stood up. "*Right here?*"

"*Suit yourself.*"

As soon as Cloud stripped down to nothing, Tom began to flip distractedly through the phone book. Cloud was shameless. But Tom's embarrassment only lasted a few seconds before his curiosity got the better of him. Back home it had only been him and Cloud, and he'd thought that all Shifters were capable of speed in transformation when necessary. Now he knew that just wasn't true. But every other time he'd seen Cloud shift, Cloud had taken a leisurely attitude. Now he wanted to impress Scarlett.

Even as Cloud brushed off his golden fur, new black hair rose up from behind his hand so quickly that he didn't appear to be shedding and re-growing hair so much as changing color before their eyes. He was like one of the Club Smoke body magicians. He stared fixedly at Tom, saying nothing but constantly making the subtle shifts necessary until Cloud had vanished and a second Tom stood in the Turnskin dining room. The whole process had taken less than a minute.

Scarlett grinned and clapped, causing long column of ash to fall from her forgotten cigarette onto the linoleum.

"*You're not just as fast as our boy, you're faster,*" she said.

"I should go put on some pants." Cloud cupped his hands self-consciously over his groin. His voice, his manner, everything was perfect. Tom felt almost angry at Cloud's ability to mimic him so well and a tiny sadness at Cloud's ability to submerge himself so completely.

Righteous returned, holding the jug of honeywine under his arm, and stopped cold at the sight of two Toms.

"This is sort of creepy, even to me," Righteous said. "I'm going to assume my cousin is the person wearing clothes."

"No," Cloud said in Tom's voice, "Scarlett made me give him my clothes so she could see how he looked in them."

“Quit that,” Tom said.

“Maybe you should shift to the Ambrose form just to keep things straight.” Scarlett took the jar of honeywine and cracked the wax seal with her pocketknife. “Then we’ll sit down and read through the script.”

“Are you sure I should shift to Ambrose here? What if someone sees me?” Tom asked.

“I think the chances of more than one person picking the front door locks today is minimal,” Cyprus said.

Tom retreated to his bedroom to become Ambrose. Changing his skin, changing his jacket. He put on Ambrose’s heavy gold chain bracelet, a gift from Cloud-wielding-Oscar’s-bank-account, and returned to find Cloud-as-Tom in full costume.

“You must be Mr. Ambrose Sacks, the playwright.” Tom extended his hand. “You know, from the way you write about Shifters, I expected you to have fur.”

“I would never be that obvious.” Tom took Cloud’s hand and found himself yanked off his feet into Cloud’s embrace.

“Wouldn’t you?” Cloud slid his hand down Tom’s back.

“And I would never do that in public either.” Tom caught Cloud’s hand just before it reached his bottom.

“Maybe Tom’s feeling feisty,” Cyprus said dryly.

“Maybe Tom’s just so moved by the sight of Ambrose that he can’t help it,” Cloud said. Tom saw that familiar sly smile of Cloud’s, so foreign to see on his own face. No, not his own face. His own face was on his own body, which was currently in the shape of Ambrose Sacks. Cloud wearing the shape of Tom’s didn’t change their identities, no matter how strange it might seem.

Scarlett expertly poured five skinny glasses of honeywine from the wide-mouthed jar without spilling a drop.

“Let’s seal the deal.” She raised her glass. “To Turnskin.”

“To Turnskin,” they repeated. Tom downed his glass in one gulp, shuddering at the whiskey-like burn. He glanced

sideways. Cloud let out a low appreciative whistle.

“That’s fine honeywine,” he said.

“Thank you very much, little cousin.” Scarlett winked at Cloud. “Now let’s get down to work.”



Cloud was a quick learner, and that was good, because he had a lot to learn. They went downstairs, and Cloud had a little crash course in stagecraft and stage terminology. Tom and Righteous read against Cloud and helped him understand Cyprus’s directions about blocking. For the first fifteen minutes the amount of information seemed insurmountable, and Tom worried that the plan would fail. But Cloud was both talented and tenacious, learning how to turn, how to project his voice, how not to upstage other actors.

Over the next three hours they carefully read through the script. Tom watched the delight in Scarlett’s eyes when Cloud made the first shift, and the worry in Cyprus’s expression lifted when he completed the seventh without difficulty. Tom felt enormous pride mixed with a little jealousy. Cloud surpassed him without even trying. He lived the character, right in the moment and without artifice.

Tom’s admiration for him grew in direct proportion to an undermining sadness. Cloud should be acting up on the stage where everyone could admire his excellence. He belonged in the theatre, and yet he remained submerged in the impersonator’s existence, living Oscar Highfield-Banks’s life for him while Oscar went on his annual honeymoon.

“Are you sure you can have the script memorized in time?” Cyprus asked.

“I’ll have most of it done by tonight,” Cloud replied. “I once memorized a 109-page book in three days. This script is nothing compared to that.”

“Be at rehearsal tomorrow at noon.” Cyprus had lost his formality with this Cloud some time ago.

“Unless you have another appointment,” Tom said quickly. “You don’t, do you?”

“Nothing I couldn’t get out of.” Cloud stretched and cracked his knuckles. “I should be going back, though. I have a drinks date.”

“With who?” Tom tried not to sound possessive.

“Now if I told you that, I’d have to kill you,” Cloud said, chuckling. Everyone in the auditorium froze, as though a blast of arctic wind had swept through. Cloud seemed to realize that he’d hit too close to the mark. “Just kidding.”

“I’m sure we wouldn’t know them anyway.” Scarlett slouched deliberately in the theatre seat. “You’d best be on your way.”

“Come on,” Tom caught Cloud by the hand, “let’s get changed.”

“Sure.” Cloud started along with Tom up the aisle, but Tom felt his hand pull away as Cloud turned back to the Snakegrasses. “Thanks for letting me help. I won’t let you down.”

Cyprus and Scarlett looked startled for a moment, then Cyprus said, “Thank you for stepping up.”

Cloud followed Tom out of the theatre and up the stairs. Once safely ensconced in his room, Tom spun on Cloud.

“This is so dangerous! What were you thinking, coming here?” Tom whispered.

“And here I thought I was helping.” Cloud leaned against the door, arms akimbo. “Saving the show, etc.”

“You are, but...” Tom flopped down on his bed, covering his face with his hands. “The Shifter Agency could still be watching me. What if they figure it out?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Cloud sat down on the bed next to Tom. “In Riverside the Shifter Agency can’t touch me. Mom makes sure of that. But you... I had to come make sure you

were all right. Otherwise I'd never be able to face your mom when I meet her in heaven."

Tom peeked through his fingers at Cloud, both touched and bewildered by this statement.

"Are you serious?"

"Partially." Cloud flashed a crooked grin.

"I don't know if my mom believed in heaven," Tom said.

"Sure she did. Otherwise, why would she have all those owls?" Cloud laid back next to Tom. "We're carried to heaven on the wings of owls, you know. She must have believed in it a little."

"I think they were just easy to macramé," Tom said. "I haven't thought about that trailer in a long time. I wonder what happened to her things."

"You could always try and find out," Cloud suggested. "Now that you've been cleared by the SA, there's nothing stopping you."

"I guess there isn't," Tom said, feeling the restrictions slide away as he realized there was no longer any reason to cut himself off from his old life. Freed from the immobilization of fear, he allowed himself to miss his old house and his old friends. "I could write to Angela."

"Why not call?"

"She doesn't have a phone," Tom said.

"I bet she'd like to hear from you." Cloud kissed him on the cheek, stood, and stripped. Tom felt a twitch of longing that turned to fascination as he watched his own features slide into the shape of Cloud's. After a minute all that remained of the impersonation was a heap of black fur on the floor. Tom rose to hug Cloud goodbye. He nuzzled his face into Cloud's golden shoulder, something he loved doing when he wore fur. It felt so soft.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"It was my pleasure," Cloud's voice rumbled through his chest.

After Cloud left, Tom reverted to his Shifter form, and with a long, black-furred hand, picked up a pen and started to write:

Dear Angela,

Bet you didn't expect to hear from me so soon. How are you? How is Cathy? Me, I'm doing great. Riverside is an amazing town...

18

THEY REHEARSED ALL WEEK, EVERY DAY. CLOUD FEIGNED illness. He canceled all Oscar's appointment and made sure that Oscar was strategically seen sniffing around Café Steam on at least one occasion per day. The rest of the time, he worked with Tom at Turnskin.

Though they'd never spent a whole week together, Tom found he didn't tire of Cloud's presence in his life. Not that it was just them, either. One or more of his cousins accompanied them most of the time, and sometimes Tom wondered if they'd devised a chaperoning plan together. Innately aware of his audience, Cloud behaved like a perfect gentleman. Tom didn't always relish the air of polite superficiality of his demeanor, but appreciated that Cloud would try to impress Scarlett for him.

Once a day, at least, the two of them took a break and walked up the street for lunch, where Cloud and he could talk alone. Cloud would relax and allow himself to be personal. Tom always lingered at the end, not wanting to rejoin the others, and tended to drag his feet as they walked back down the sidewalk.

"We should get something hot before we go back," Tom said as they neared the Stoneway Teahouse. Tom, as Ambrose, walked alongside Cloud, who was still shaped as Tom. Tom had acclimated to the strangeness of looking at his own body on another person, though he still felt awkward kissing Cloud when Cloud wore the black fur. Cloud, on the other hand, claimed the black fur made him feel sexier. But then, Cloud claimed everything made him feel sexy.

“Don’t you want to come inside?” Tom stopped at the door to the Stoneway Teahouse. Cloud flopped down at one of the outside tables. Winter had relinquished its stranglehold on the city, and though spring had yet to truly arrive, the teahouse owner had been optimistically setting out tables.

“I’d rather just lie out here.” Cloud stretched his legs out, enjoying the bright afternoon sun. “That theatre is so dark. You forget it’s daytime.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Tom said. “What do you want?”

“Hot ginger, no sugar.” Cloud’s eyes were closed.

“I’ll be back,” Tom said.

“I’ll be here.”

Tom plunged into the dark and noisy teahouse, squeezing his way through patrons. The teahouse was always busy at three o’clock, full of workmen just getting off their early morning shifts and old people taking a leisurely break. Most tables sported big, bubbling hookahs. A haze of fragrant smoke hung in the air. Tom took a deep breath. Someday, he thought, I should try one of those. A table of Silents looked up at him as he passed by. Tom became aware of being one of two Skins in the teahouse, but having long been the only Shifter in any given room, he wasn’t too uncomfortable. He’d acquired a certain familiarity with discomfort.

He ordered two teas and waited, glancing casually out at Cloud, who lay splayed out like a big cat in the sun. An old, redfox Shifter man sitting at the counter followed his gaze outside.

“Those blackies sure like the sun, don’t they?” he said to Tom. “You’d think he’d get cold out there, but nope.”

“My friend’s been inside all day.” Tom spied an opportunity to promote his play. “We’re doing a show at the Turnskin. It’s called *The Onion Boy*. It opens this weekend.”

“You don’t say?” The redfox scratched his faded orange shoulder. “Hope he’s not too important to it.”

“Why?”

“Cause Johnny Law seems to have got hold of him.” The redfox waved to the window.

Officer Mayle stood on the sidewalk outside, arms crossed over his chest, a smug look on his face. Tom forgot his tea and pushed his way back through the teahouse patrons, some of who watched the confrontation taking place outside with interest.

“*Fucking cop,*” one of the Silents muttered, smoke puffing from his mouth as he spoke.

Cloud was standing up now, his hands in his pockets, his head bowed. The sight of Cloud so seemingly cowed by Officer Mayle sickened Tom. The injustice of it stabbed at him, filling him with fury, while at the same time the accuracy of Cloud’s portrayal of Tom filled him with self-loathing. He would hang his head like that. That was what he’d always done.

Tom burst out of the teahouse, squinting at the bright sun. Officer Mayle didn’t even bother to turn around.

“You think you’re smart, don’t you?” Officer Mayle jabbed Cloud in the chest. Cloud recoiled. “Don’t you?”

Officer Mayle jabbed Cloud a second time and rather than recoiling, he straightened a little. He raised his eyes, and Tom could see Cloud’s hatred smoldering in them. Cloud was the best actor he’d ever seen, but there was a limit to the humiliation he would endure for the sake of staying in character. Not when he wasn’t being paid. Tom drew in a sharp breath, full of understanding and premonition. This was how Officer Mayle’s partner, the original Simpson, had died.

“Don’t touch me again,” Cloud said.

Officer Mayle smiled malevolently.

“I thought you liked men touching you.” Officer Mayle leaned forward until their faces were inches apart. “You sure let that piece of shit cop-killer touch you down deep, you little bitch.”

Cloud's lip curled in fury. Tom suddenly found his voice.

"What the hell are you doing to my actor?" Tom rushed forward and shoved the two of them apart just as Cloud's hand curled into a fist. He turned, putting himself between Cloud and Officer Mayle. "Who are you?"

Both men seemed equally stunned by the interruption. Officer Mayle recovered himself quickly. He pulled out a black notebook.

"And what is your name?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" Tom demanded, crushing down his complete terror at defying Officer Mayle.

"I'm Officer Mayle of the Carson County sheriff's office. I have a few questions for Mr. Fletcher."

"Carson County? I've never even heard of it! I demand to see your badge." Tom lifted his chin high.

"Sir, you should know you're obstructing justice right now." Officer Mayle seemed to notice, for the first time, the audience of Shifters watching from inside the teahouse. A shadow of nervousness passed over his face as he produced his badge for Tom's inspection. "Now, what is your name, sir?"

"Officer Mayle? Aren't you the one who had my actor detained last week?" Tom turned to Cloud, hoping that he'd catch on.

"Yes, he's the one." Cloud thrust his hands back in his pockets, a passive country boy once more.

"And now you're harassing him again?" Tom pulled himself up. "I'm sure my friends at the Grandview Post would love to ask you some questions about that, Officer. I'll just call them right now; they can be here momentarily. Are you even allowed to talk to Mr. Fletcher? Maybe I should go get a Riverside PD officer and ask just to make sure. You wouldn't mind that, would you?"

Officer Mayle flipped his book closed.

“I know you’re hiding something, Fletcher,” he said to Cloud. “It’s just a matter of time before I get you.” He spun on his heel and stalked back up the street.

“You don’t want to wait to talk to the reporters?” Tom called after Officer Mayle’s retreating back.

“Easy, tiger.” Cloud sidled up behind Tom and wrapped his arms around Tom’s waist. He rested his chin on Tom’s shoulder and rubbed his fuzzy black cheek against Tom’s cinnamon-colored one. “You already won. Let him go.”

“I couldn’t stand to watch him do that to you.” Tom leaned back into Cloud’s chest, feeling slightly self-conscious of the physical relationship that their pose so obviously communicated to everyone watching from inside the teahouse, but also feeling equally defiant toward those same people. Let them stare. Let them know. What did he care?

Officer Mayle turned the corner, disappearing from view.

“I know you’re seeing some rich guy right now,” Cloud whispered. “But I’d be happy to express my gratitude to you in real and physical way. Does this teahouse have a bathroom?”

“I’m not that kind of playwright.” Tom tried to push himself out of Tom’s embrace, but Cloud held him close. No matter whose body he inhabited, Cloud could go from zero to lecher in .5 seconds. “Come on, the hookah smokers are staring.”

“If I see Mayle again, I’ll fucking kill him,” Cloud growled.

Tom sighed and patted Cloud’s hand dismissively. He unwound himself from Cloud’s arms.

“I’m touched, but no, I don’t think you will.” Tom leaned very close and whispered, “If you’re going to be my boyfriend, Cloud Coldmoon, you’re going to have to investigate avenues of conflict resolution that don’t include murder.”

Cloud blinked in surprise, then a slow smile curled out from the corners of his lips. A smile infinitely familiar to

Tom, a smile that revealed the man beneath the Shifter skin. Cloud's smile.

"My, my Mr. Sacks. Is that the kind of fancy talk they teach you down in Fort Shane University?"

Tom opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again as the teahouse door opened and the old redfox man walked out, carrying Tom's two forgotten cups of hot ginger.

"Did you fellows still want these? They're starting to get cold."



At 6:45 Tom began to fret. He scanned the street once more. Behind Harmony Gate the sky erupted into the fiery pink and orange sunset depicted so commonly in Riverside photographic calendars. Crowded sidewalk cafés spilled patrons out onto the street. The pre-theatre crowd, mostly Skins, generally university types. Tom caught the word "onion," and his skin prickled with excitement. He turned to catch a glimpse of the person talking, but it turned out to be someone ordering dinner from a noodle cart a few feet away. His heart sank, and then he heard a group of women at a café table talking about going to the Turnskin, exclaiming that it was only thirty minutes till curtain, and his heart soared.

He returned to Turnskin and met Anne Sharpe at the front door. Two other Skin women who Tom recognized from his audition at the National Theatre accompanied her. "How are you this evening?"

"Fine, thanks." Ambrose held out his hand and Anne clasped it warmly. She adjusted her shawl, a voluminous silk rectangle decorated with a fish trap motif. "These are my friends, Rose Morton and Lynn Miller. We went all went to college in Fort Shane City back in prehistoric times."

"At State?"

"Oh, no!" Anne chuckled. "At Blacklion. Go Fighting She-Cats!"

Rose and Lynn laughed.

“I see,” Tom said. Of course they’d be private college alumni. What else could Anne Sharpe be? “And Mr. James? Is he coming along tonight?”

“Don’t worry, Michael’s tardiness is legendary,” Anne said. “You know, he doesn’t like the idea of including Turnskin, but I thought you might be slightly more liberal in your views.”

“I do enjoy Storydance more than he does, I think,” Tom said.

“So, have you had a chance to read *Behind the Scenes* yet?” Anne’s business-like exterior vanished while speaking of Fred Brandt; she became one fan talking to another. “Can you believe it?”

“I can, but it’s so strange to think of,” Tom said. “Some-what shocking.”

“Are you talking about Brandt’s alpha form being female?” Lynn chimed in. “It must be, because you can’t have been shocked to discover he was a Shifter. Who didn’t suspect that?”

“I can’t believe that I never thought Fred had been female,” Rose said. “We dated briefly, you know, back in the day. It’s a little embarrassing being fooled like that.”

“I don’t think Fred was trying to fool you, exactly. It’s not as though his gender is some kind of cheap theatrical disguise. It’s real flesh and blood,” Anne said.

“Yes, I know. I know it a little too well; that’s why it’s embarrassing!” A blush spread across Rose’s face. “I’m not at all interested in women.”

“Honestly, I don’t think being attracted to Fred brings you even a hair closer to lesbianism.” Lynn seemed fundamentally irritated by Rose’s admission and not bothering to hide it.

“But Fred Brandt is a woman!” Rose said.

“Not anymore,” Lynn countered.

“Ah, here’s Michael!” Anne waved at her cousin. “And he’s brought his wife, how nice. She’s a She-Cat, too.”

Tom listened hard for a note of irony in Anne's voice, but didn't hear one—only relief at having the tension broken.

Michael stepped forward and shook Tom's hand warmly while his wife exchanged air kisses with Anne.

"So glad to have another fellow for this outing," Michael said. "I'm positively outnumbered."

"It is a little female-intensive, isn't it?" Tom stuck his hands in his pockets like he'd seen Fred Brandt do on a television awards show once. At the time he'd thought it was a hugely masculine gesture and deliberately cultivated it. Now that he knew Brandt's alpha form was female, he felt strange doing it, then felt ashamed for feeling strange. He continued the gesture.

"Go fighting She-Cats," Michael deadpanned. "Shall we find our seats?"

Michael gave their tickets to an usher, who led them down the aisle. The theatre, which Tom had only ever seen empty, was transformed by the presence of an excited audience. The quiet rumble of conversation rippled over them. Tom beamed with enthusiasm and painful anticipation. What would they think of his play? For the first time, he realized that he'd be sitting out here among them, able to see their reactions in a way that a performer couldn't. The idea of it thrilled and terrified him. What if they didn't like it? Could he sit here among them and bear their scorn? And what if they did like it? Could he keep his cool, taking no credit for his own script? He was Ambrose now, and Tom Fletcher was a colleague at best; at worst, a competitor.

The usher led them to the best seats in the house—the same seats that his cousins had been sitting in when he'd first performed the first scene of *Love Among the Cabbages* for them. It seemed so long ago.

"Do you see that man down there?" Michael whispered to him. "Blonde hair, tortoise-shell glasses?"

“Big nose, no chin, looks like a grilled fish?” Ambrose asked. Michael suppressed a grin.

“My, you are bad, Mr. Sacks.” Michael leaned over and repeated Tom’s comment to Anne, who stifled a bark of laughter behind her hand, then wagged an admonishing finger at him before turning repeating it to her friends.

“What about him?” Tom prompted.

“That’s Andrew Porter, theatre critic for the *Sun*. I’m a little surprised he’s here. It’s a marginal theatre. There must not be much happening today,” Michael said.

“I think Oscar’s been talking the show up at his supper club,” Tom said. “I told him that there was a chance I’d be using the troupe.”

“That must be it,” Michael said. “In fact, that would explain a lot of the faces I’m seeing here.”

Michael spent the last few minutes before the show pointing people out to Tom and explaining their relevance in the theatrical world. Tom tried his best to remember the faces and names. It was hard, though; to a great extent they all looked the same. All middle-aged Skins with nearly identical haircuts.

The crowd grew louder as people filled the theatre to capacity. Only a few seats in the balcony were empty by the time the five-minute chime sounded. Tom felt suddenly very glad to not be the man stepping out on that stage into this anticipation-charged atmosphere. And also glad to not be backstage with his cousins, rushing around improvising last-minute solutions to unexpected problems, wrangling actors. His part, writing the play, was done.

The theatre dimmed, the curtain opened, and Cloud, in the shape of Tom Fletcher, walked out on the stage.

“This is the suspected felon of the troupe,” Michael whispered.

Tom refused to acknowledge that he’d heard Michael. He focused solely on watching Cloud perform, rapt from the first minute. Cloud played the same scenes that Tom had played,

but made them more real, more subtle, and more wrenching. Tom realized, watching Cloud, that he'd always played these scenes reservedly. Because he'd written the whole thing, he never gave himself to his character as Cloud did. Tom had remained concerned with the other actors and their portrayals, never deeply immersed in his own character.

Tom wondered how he would ever manage to match Cloud's performance that night. He glanced down and saw Andrew Porter jotting down notes in a small, black book and forced himself to look away. He couldn't think about Porter and not feel sick. Instead he looked at the other faces in the crowd. Most watched intently, laughing when they were supposed to laugh, flinching when they were supposed to flinch. Even Michael succumbed to a chuckle at Cloud's antics.

Intermission came and drinks were delivered. Tom tried to catch snippets of conversation. Most people seemed to be enjoying it. Few Skins had seen onstage transformation in the context of a play. Most had only seen it in the circus or performed by streetcorner buskers. Anne beamed proudly. The Turnskin was her discovery, and she talked it up to everyone.

Again the chimes rang, and act III sped by. Tom's heart jumped to his throat when Cloud dropped two lines but continued without foundering. The curtain closed to tremendous applause.

"Well, what do you think?" Anne shouted over the hubbub.

"They're fantastic!" Tom grinned.

"I have to admit, you can't take your eyes off Fletcher. And not just because you're worried he'll take your wallet." Michael stood and brushed himself off. "Let's go out into the lobby. I'm dying for a smoke."

Tom followed them into the lobby. Lynn and Rose chatted with Michael's wife while Anne and Michael lit cigarettes and engaged in deliberations too quiet for Tom to hear. He scanned the crowded lobby, scrutinizing faces. Were they satisfied?

Happy? They seemed to be. What small pieces of conversation he heard above the din seemed positive.

Across the lobby Tom suddenly caught sight of a familiar face: a Silent Shifter in evening clothes. For one incongruous moment he thought that somehow Cloud managed to get out into the lobby, but it wasn't Cloud. Seven Coldmoon stared right at Tom, through him even, as though he could see into his chromosomes. Could he be recognizing him from their encounter at Hot Sally's bar? No, impossible. He wore Ambrose's body now.

"Ambrose, is this all right with you? Do you want this troupe to perform your play?" The sound of Michael's voice made Tom jump. Michael sighed out a huge plume of smoke. Anne regarded him pensively.

"I would. I think they were great." Tom glanced back, but Seven had disappeared. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe he'd just imagined it...

Michael said, "We might as well go see if they're available to perform in the festival."

Anne turned to her cousin, one hand raised to her mouth in a girlish gesture of surprise. "Really?"

"Porter left with a very favorable expression on his fishy face. The positive review could generate some additional excitement for the festival if our announcement followed closely on its heels." Michael folded his hands.

"Thank you very much, Michael." Anne leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Shall we go congratulate them?" Anne asked. Michael nodded. "Would you like to come along, Ambrose?"

"I would," Tom said.

The three of them threaded their way toward the stage door where Scarlett stood, magnificent in a gold velvet cocktail dress and a Blackriver pearl choker that Tom never knew she owned. She recognized Anne right away and beckoned her

over and into the cramped dressing room area. More air kisses were exchanged, and Anne introduced Ambrose to Scarlett.

“I have someone to introduce to you as well.” Scarlett opened a door. Cloud sat inside with Wind Sweetrain, drinking a glass of champagne and grinning with genuine exhilaration Tom hadn’t known Cloud capable of expressing.

“You’ve met Mr. James and Miss Sharpe already,” Scarlett said.

“Always a pleasure.” Cloud bowed slightly to them. “And you are?”

“This is Ambrose Sacks. He’s a playwright, too,” Scarlett said.

Cloud took Tom’s hand and gave him a look made up of a hundred percent sex. Tom flushed. Wind giggled.

“I’m Tom Fletcher,” Cloud said. “And I’m very happy to make your acquaintance.”

19

TOM HEARD THE KEY TURNING IN OSCAR'S FRONT DOOR lock and automatically caught his breath. He knew it would be Cloud, in Oscar's form, rather than the real Oscar, returning unannounced. Cloud said he'd be back at half past eleven, and it was 11:34. Still, Tom held his breath until Cloud came in and flashed him a smile of recognition.

"Hello, Ambrose," he said. "Have you been waiting up for me?"

"Always." Tom shuffled the pages of his manuscript together, glad to put them to bed for the night.

"I think I'm going to drop dead." Cloud flopped down onto the expensive couch beside Tom, who sat reviewing the editorial changes Michael had suggested for his play. Michael, for all Tom's dislike, had a knack for doctoring an awkward turn of phrase.

"You're the one who insisted on playing the entire run of *The Onion Boy*. I would have been happy to take up the role again," Tom said, though he was relieved that he didn't have to.

"I know, but... It's just so exhilarating." Cloud pulled off his jacket and scarf. A warm, early spring had broken over Riverside. Daffodils had sprung up out of the round, cement planters in Horsemarket Commons, but the night air still held the chill of winter, and patches of dirty ice lingered in shaded alleys. "And I'm learning a lot. Wind is an amazing actress. There's so much energy when we play a scene together."

“Energy?” Tom couldn’t keep the jealous note out of his voice.

“Not Oscar and Ambrose kind of energy. And not even close to Tom and Ambrose energy.” Cloud sidled up to Tom, his fatigue vanquished by sexual arousal, as always. “Tom and Ambrose are better than a string of firecrackers. Who would have thought it?”

Tom closed his eyes, feeling the blood rising in his cheeks.

“You really liked that, didn’t you?” Tom had found making love to Tom—to his own body—too disconcerting at first to keep the lights on. But in the same way that being Oscar freed Cloud’s inner snob, being Tom freed Cloud’s inner artist. And that artist thrived on experimentation.

Tom blushed just thinking about it.

“How could I not like it?” Cloud said. “How could I have imagined that there were so many sides to you?” He stroked Tom’s flat stomach.

“I’m working.” Tom pushed Cloud’s hand aside. A quiet bell sounded from Oscar’s kitchen. “And your phone is ringing.”

“God, I think that’s Oscar’s father.” Cloud forced himself to his feet. “I shudder to think that I’m going to spend my night listening to his pedestrian financial advice.”

“Well, he’s rich; he must be doing something right,” Tom said. Cloud rolled his eyes.

“It’s hard not to stay rich when you start off with that much money. He’s the least adventurous man I’ve ever met. He always criticizes my decisions—especially in advertising.” Cloud padded into the kitchen. Tom heard the change in Cloud’s tone the moment he answered. His voice became tense with a strange note of angry subservience Tom had never heard in his lover’s voice before.

“So, what’s up?” Cloud leaned against the kitchen doorframe, looking out at Tom, stretching the spiral phone cord to the limit.

Tom wrote *who?* on the back of his manuscript and held it up to Cloud. Cloud drew a number seven in the air. Alarm prickled through Tom.

“On Thursday?” Cloud’s expression darkened as he listened. He wrapped his free arm around his stomach. “Yes, of course I’ll take care of that... See you then.”

Cloud retreated into the kitchen to hang up the phone. Tom followed.

“What did he say?”

“Oscar’s coming back on Thursday.” Cloud leaned back against his stylish refrigerator. “Seven was calling to tell me to break up with you before he gets back. It’s poor form to saddle a client with an existing relationship.”

Tom felt like he’d been punched in the stomach.

“I thought Oscar would still be away for two more weeks.” Tom sank down into an egg-shaped chair. Would this really be the end of them?

“The senator got called back, and Oscar doesn’t want to stay on the islands on his own.” Cloud shook his head.

“Are you going to break up with me?”

“My family will notice if I’m still with Ambrose Sacks on my new job. They’ll know I compromised my identity and Oscar’s impersonation.”

“I’ll become someone else.” Tom heard the note of desperation in his voice and despised it.

“You can’t keep changing your identity just for me. It’s not right,” Cloud said.

“Can’t you just tell your family about me?” Tom asked. “Can’t you just explain that we’re together?”

“Only if you want to become a Coldmoon.” Cloud smiled wanly at him.

“I would,” Tom went on, anguished. “I would do it. I don’t want to be left behind this time.”

Cloud flinched. He said nothing, then knelt down in front of Tom and laid his head in Tom's lap. Tom stroked the fine, dark skin at the nape of Cloud's neck.

"I don't want to leave you," Cloud finally spoke. "And I don't want you to be a Coldmoon. You'll never be free."

Tom's chest heaved. He felt his throat tighten.

"We could go," he said. "We could go to Fort Shane City, or somewhere. Take some of Oscar's money. What's he going to do, call the police?"

Cloud shook his head.

"If anything would make Seven hunt us down, it would be embezzling from a client," Cloud said. "And you'd never get your play produced."

"Fuck the play," Tom spoke savagely. Cloud's head came up immediately.

"Don't say that! It's everything you've ever wanted. I don't want to be the reason that you lose your dream."

"My dream includes you," Tom said. "Without you, there is no dream."

"For now, but you'll get over it," Cloud said. "You'll find someone else and love him more."

Tom shoved Cloud away. He fell back onto the floor, looking up at Tom in hurt surprise.

"Don't you tell me how I'll feel, you arrogant prick!" Tom stood, his body too full of rage to remain seated, but also too full of chaos to move. He grabbed one of Oscar's modernist vases off the counter and hurled it against the wall behind Cloud. It shattered in a prismatic explosion. Needle-like red and orange and purple glass shards flew everywhere. Cloud flung his arms over his head.

"What the fuck?" he yelled. "That's a collectors piece! I'm going to have to pay for that."

Tom grabbed the second in line and hefted it in his hand.

"Are you going to leave me?" he asked.

“Are you actually doing this?” Cloud climbed to his feet.

“Well?” Tom gripped the fragile vase. It was aquamarine blue and turquoise with an impossibly narrow neck and bulbous base.

“I don’t have any choice.”

“You coward! You won’t even try!” Tom hurled the vase at the wall with all his strength. Cloud caught it mid-flight and set it down on the table. Enraged, Tom went for the next one. Cloud grabbed him by the wrist and twisted his arm up behind his back. He pried the vase out of Tom’s fingers. Tom squirmed against him, bucking as Cloud shoved him across the counter. He felt Cloud’s weight on his back.

“Do you think I want to leave you?” Cloud growled in his ear. “You’re the best thing I’ve ever had. But I don’t want to keep you if I just end up ruining you.”

“Stop being so fucking melodramatic!” Tom twisted against him trying to break Cloud’s grip. “You’re not going to be rewarded in heaven, you martyr!”

“I am not being melodramatic,” Cloud hissed, “I am a murderer and a mobster, and that’s all I’m ever going to be. If you stay with me, that’s what you’ll become. It’s like you don’t even remember being pulled in by the Shifter Agency. Do you want to spend the rest of your life looking at masks?”

Tom collapsed against the counter, all the fight drained out of him. The marble countertop felt cool against his cheek. His heart was breaking, worse than when Cloud left him before. He felt like he’d felt when he’d realized his mother was going to die, adrift and staring into a dark and lonely future. And he reacted the same way that he had then, grasping onto the mundane details of life to keep from drowning in apathy. He’d grasped onto each successive appointment and tiny responsibility like they were buoys along a lifeline leading from deep water until he could feel the shore beneath his feet and stand on his own again.

If Cloud was going to leave for good, there were things to settle. No matter how much his throat hurt. No matter how much disappointment knifed through him.

They'd both known this was only temporary. They'd both just chosen to ignore the knowledge until now.

"Do you think you'll be able to finish the run of *The Onion Boy*?"

"What?" Cloud relaxed his grip on Tom's wrist and got off him. Tom pushed himself up.

"Will I have to take over your part in *The Onion Boy*?" His voice sounded foreign. Even though Tom felt numb and leaden inside, his voice sounded like a sob, as though all his emotion had been carried out of his body on the sound of his voice, leaving him empty. Cloud flinched and looked away. "Or will you be able to finish it?"

"I'll be able to finish. I'll just ask for three weeks off." Cloud ran his hand through Tom's hair. Tom wanted to angrily push Cloud's hand in defiance, or at least show some kind of pride, but he wanted the comfort of Cloud's hands as well. He grabbed Cloud and pulled him close, kissing his neck and mouth with a violent desperation that Cloud fully returned, practically dragging him out of the kitchen and onto Oscar's expensive sheets. They didn't speak another word that night. With his body alone, Tom begged Cloud not to go, and by morning it was clear to Tom that Cloud did not want Tom to let him go but couldn't find a way to hang on. Cloud's acceptance of defeat was not chivalry; rather, the despair of a man who'd run out of options.

In the quiet of the night, Tom considered what Cloud had told him. It was true that Cloud was a murderer and that he would never be free of the Coldmoons. It was true that Tom was poised on the verge of a career that would be easier for him to accomplish without Cloud. And he could live without Cloud. He could even be happy without Cloud. Separating

seemed the best decision, the smartest option, and Tom would have been amicable to accepting the inevitable, except that he didn't want to be amicable and smart. He wanted Cloud, but he would have to earn Cloud. He would have to prove himself to be a person upon whom Cloud could rely.

Tom left Oscar's apartment at daybreak, knowing that if he and Cloud were going to be together, he would have to find the way himself.



"We need to find some way to retain Tom Fletcher as the principal actor in Turnskin." Tom heaped sugar into his instant coffee. "It's critical."

"When you say Tom, who do you mean?" Scarlett said.

"I mean the actor who's getting us the rave reviews." Tom sipped the coffee. Too sweet. He dumped it out, rinsed his coffee cup, and started over. New hot water. New instant coffee crystals. "I mean Cloud, I guess."

"How many times are you going to remake that coffee?" Scarlett asked.

"Until it tastes right," Tom said.

"That's the fourth cup, and you didn't drink any of them."

"So?"

"It's a waste of coffee." Scarlett lit a cigarette and put her pack back atop the pile of bills and receipts heaped on the kitchen table. Her long, red hair was wound up into a knot and secured with a wide yellow ribbon. "Just because you're living as a Skin now doesn't mean you have to be snotty about the coffee."

"I'll pay you back for it, okay?" Tom threw his teaspoon down into the white enamel sink and fished around in his pocket for cash. "Here!"

"I don't want your money, Ambrose. Why don't you sit down." Scarlett patted the seat next to her. Tom obediently complied.

“Did you just call me Ambrose?”

“When you’re Ambrose-shaped, I call you Ambrose, especially since we’ll be working together in *Diverse Voices*.” Scarlett shrugged. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What?”

“I’m wondering when you’re planning to go back to being Tom again.”

“I don’t know. Not until after *Diverse Voices* at least.” Tom felt a deep resistance inside himself. Somehow, he didn’t want to go back to his Shifter form. “Why?”

“I think it would work out better for all of us if you stayed Ambrose,” Scarlett said. “The only problem is, who’s going to be Tom?”

“Cloud will be Tom until *The Onion Boy* is over, but after that he’s gone.”

“Is that why you’re so upset today?” Scarlett asked.

“Yes.”

“I think you might have to just let Cloud go.”

“No!” Tom’s voice was a savage whisper. “I don’t want to. I’ll become a Coldmoon.”

“If he wanted you to become a Coldmoon, he would have asked you to join his family. Over the last few weeks I’ve talked to him a lot, and it seems pretty clear that he doesn’t want to be a Coldmoon himself. Why else would he hide out in some crap town on the plains for years, pretending to be a cop?”

“It wasn’t that crap,” Tom said.

“It was, and you know it. Otherwise you’d go back there,” Scarlett said. “Anyway, I asked Righteous to be Tom when Cloud leaves, but he got pissy. He wants to be himself.”

“Maybe Tom could just disappear,” Tom said. “We could say he went back home or something.”

“No, we need him for the show.”

“Then I’ll go back to being him.”

“I don’t think that would work out best for us. Ambrose has access that Tom may never get,” Scarlett said. “No, we need someone to be Ambrose, and we need someone to be Tom.”

Tom sipped his coffee. It tasted sweet and also acrid, as only instant coffee crystals could.

“I don’t want to let Cloud go.” Anxiety revolved like a turbine in Tom’s stomach, forcing the same words out of his mouth over and over again as if he could have his way by just saying it enough times. “Maybe we could just go somewhere far away.”

“Think about your future.” Scarlett leaned close to him. “Hell, think about our future! Where will we be if you decide to just run off?”

Tom turned away. He could throw away his own life and his own chance, but he couldn’t throw away Scarlett’s future too. This was the limit of his selfishness.

He rubbed his bristly chin. He needed a shave. Of all the differences about being a Skin, learning to shave turned out to be the hardest. He didn’t need to. He could have just shed his whiskers every morning, but stubble had an authenticity that helped establish Ambrose as a Skin, and he was going to be Ambrose for a long time—for as long as his theatre career lasted. He said, “Don’t worry. I’ll stay Ambrose.”

“Good. Now all we need is a Tom.”

“We have a Tom if he could just stay,” Tom said.

“But Seven knows who he is, so he can’t.” Scarlett shook her head. “It’s a shame.”

“Seven doesn’t know Cloud is impersonating me,” Tom said.

“He doesn’t?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Tom said.

“Then why can’t Cloud just keep impersonating you indefinitely?” Scarlett asked.

“Because...” Tom stopped. “I don’t know why not.”

“It’s not like you’re going to turn him in for wrongfully impersonating Tom Fletcher.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Tom felt as if a weight had lifted from his chest. He had to tell Cloud. “I have to go back uptown.”

20

“IT JUST WON’T WORK.” CLOUD SAT DOWN ON THE EDGE OF Oscar’s bed. Muffled sounds of business floated up from the busy street below. A piercing whistle cut the air, followed by mixed laughter. The warm spring afternoon brought out hoards of Riverside dwellers shaking off the claustrophobia of being holed up all winter.

“You keep saying that,” Tom said.

“If I run, Seven will find me.”

Tom pulled the window closed, yanking the sash down. “He didn’t find you before, when you were Simpson.”

“That’s because I lived in the middle of nowhere. If I stayed with you at the Turnskin, I’d be two blocks away from Silent Street. And what about money?”

“What about it?”

“We don’t have any,” Cloud said.

“We’ve got enough,” Tom soothed. “You’re just used to living the high life right now.”

“I’ll miss this apartment,” Cloud admitted. “Except the toggles. I won’t miss the toggles.”

“We’ll have an apartment like this someday, when we make it big,” Tom said. “I’ll get you back on Grandview Avenue. You’ll have your own egg chairs.”

“Now you’re just dreaming.” Cloud pulled Tom close. “Egg chairs will be completely out of style by then.”

“So you’ll do it? You’ll try?” Tom spoke into Oscar’s shoulder.

Cloud groaned and fell back on the bed, hands covering his face. “I just... What if after a couple of years you hate me?”

“Then you can go.” Tom leaned over Cloud and stroked his chest. “I won’t take Tom’s body back. You can be free.”

“You can’t give me your identity forever.” Cloud shoved himself up on his elbows, alarmed.

Tom shrugged. “Why not? I’ve got one to spare.”

“But it’s your alpha form,” Cloud said.

“Righteous would say that the notion of alpha form is itself a Skin-centric construct,” Tom said.

“And in that case, Righteous would be really annoying,” Cloud said.

“Besides, the black Shifter isn’t my alpha form,” Tom said. “My alpha form is Skin. When I was little, I learned to shift so that I’d match my mother. She was afraid that if people knew I was biracial, they’d take me away from her.”

Cloud sat up and laid a hand on Tom’s knee, as if to comfort the child that he had been. Tom found it touching, in a slightly annoying way.

“So what does your alpha form look like?”

“What do you see?” Tom opened arms, displaying himself. “Except I’ve got black nails and yellow eyes.”

“You said you got that look out of a magazine.” Cloud studied his face intently, as if some deeper meaning had been suddenly revealed to him.

“I wasn’t being entirely truthful.” Tom shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“Not to me.”

“So will you stay with me?”

“I told you I’d stay until *The Onion Boy* closes. After that... we’ll see.”

A soft edge of disappointment moved through Tom. He’d wanted Cloud to agree without reservation, which he hadn’t,

but he also hadn't refused. Tom kissed Cloud's throat, felt Cloud's muscles tense as he drew in breath, felt how much Cloud wanted him.

Tom whispered, "I'll just have to do my best to convince you to stay before then."

21

TOM SWIRLED HIS COLD COFFEE THOUGHTFULLY, WONDERING whether it was time to get up and make a fresh cup. He'd been writing all day and still couldn't complete the scene he was working on. He'd been writing the same seven words, erasing, then rewriting them all week. He was too distracted by the suitcases sitting on the dresser by the door to think at all.

Tonight *The Onion Boy* would close. Cloud would get his flowers and his standing ovation. He'd give a speech at the cast party, he'd come back to this room, and then... what? Would he pack those bags and go? Would he stay one last night and be gone in the morning?

Yes, it would be like Cloud to leave a sad note and sneak out in the dead of night. Tom made a vow to stay awake, all night if necessary.

He'd just sat back down at his desk when he smelled cigarette smoke outside his bedroom door. A knock followed.

Scarlett stood outside his door, puffing from the climb up his stairs. A stumpy cigarette dangled from her lower lip. She already wore her indigo evening dress and sapphire earrings. Tom frowned. He hadn't thought it was that late.

"This came for you," she said. "From somebody named Angela."

"Really?" Tom took the package, fingers tingling with excitement.

"A friend of yours?"

“From back home.” Tom tore into Angela’s package, pulling and yanking at the layers of clear packing tape that entombed the little box. As he pried the cardboard apart, he saw a jumble of knotted jute and two polished bead eyes. It was his mom’s macramé owl. Directly underneath was a small envelope decorated with yellow rosebuds and inscribed with the words *To Tommy*.

Inside was a short note from Angela, written in her big, bubbly cursive. It said she’d moved to Stovepipe Rock with Shorty and that she’d saved this owl for him in case he came back. She’d also enclosed a small photograph of Cathy. Tom folded the note away, struck by the bittersweet letter addressed to “Tommy.” He’d already grown so far away from that name. No one called him “Tommy” or even “Tom” anymore. No one except Cloud.

Scarlett picked up the lucky owl, examining it, squinting at the knots. At last she nodded.

“Your mom did pretty knotwork,” she said.

“I didn’t really know that until I came here and saw so much bad stuff at the flea market.” Tom chuckled. “It’s time to go downstairs, isn’t it?”

“The doors will open in twenty minutes,” Scarlett said. “All the congratulatory flowers and liquor are in my office downstairs. It’s going to be some party.”

Tom nodded, feeling numb. He dressed, ate a bowl of cold noodles while standing over the kitchen sink, and combed his hair. He realized he was stalling. Trying not to go downstairs. Trying to make time move more slowly. Just before he headed down, he took Cloud’s suitcases and hid them in Righteous’s room. A childish maneuver? Yes. But if Cloud was going to leave him, he wanted to make it inconvenient. Tom went downstairs feeling almost confident before the sound of a familiar voice shook his composure.

“Of course boldness is much more frequently rewarded in theatre than in film; the bankroll is more within reach to the creators.”

Turning, Tom saw Michael David James coming toward him, followed by Oscar. The real Oscar. Seeing him caused a clash of emotions inside Tom. First, desire for a body he knew intimately well, followed by icy terror. He stepped backward, preparing to slip away. At that moment, Michael spied Tom and beckoned him over.

That he should run into the real Oscar sometime seemed inevitable, but in front of Michael? He knew Cloud had given Oscar the complete rundown of a version of their relationship. It would all depend on how good an actor the real Oscar Highfield-Banks could be—how much of his Theatre School education had stuck.

Even worse, what if Oscar did not recognize him at all? Michael was perceptive enough to notice something like that. He tried to catch Oscar’s eye, and to his relief found a glimmer of faint recognition there. Oscar looked subtly puzzled. Was he trying to recall where he’d seen Tom before? Trying to remember his name?

“I wondered if you’d be here.” Michael shook Tom’s hand. Tom tried to figure out a way to drop his own name casually into a sentence to help Oscar out, but couldn’t.

“I’ve been spending a lot of time at the Turnskin,” Tom said.

“So I’ve heard.” Michael gave Oscar a sidelong glance. “From all reports the actors at the collective have been quite... welcoming to you.”

“Come now, Michael, don’t be catty.” Oscar turned to regard Tom. “How have you been, darling?”

Darling? Relief swept through Tom. Of course Oscar would have a whole bag of tricks for dealing with people whose names he could not remember. He’d been practicing for years.

“I’m doing very well.” Tom knew it wasn’t Cloud in there. Still, he blushed. Cloud’s portrayal had been dead-on, right down to the way Oscar held his champagne glass.

“So you two are getting along amicably, I see.” Michael sounded a little disappointed by this fact.

“Why would we not?” Oscar asked. “I heard a little rumor that you’ve taken up with Tom Fletcher?”

“That’s right,” Tom said.

“Good for you.” Oscar swigged his champagne. “He’s a dish well worth tasting. I hear he also writes.”

“He does.” Tom relaxed a little. He wondered if Oscar would be so gracious if they’d actually been lovers. But then, did Oscar really take other lovers, or was his lothario reputation built solely on the wild, brief affairs of his winter impersonators?

“Then you’ll have plenty to keep you occupied outside the bedroom.” Oscar turned to Michael. “I am a hopeless bore out of the boudoir, alas. Dull as dishwater. Ambrose is well rid of me. Ah, there’s the bell. We must be off.”

Overhead the five-minute bells chimed. Tom smiled broadly at Oscar, overwhelmed by gratitude and sympathy for him. Tom darted forward kissed Oscar’s cheek.

“Thanks for everything,” Tom whispered.

Oscar smiled a warm, slightly hollow smile.

“It was my pleasure, I’m sure.”

They joined the stream of patrons flowing into the theatre. Tom hung back, watching them go. Even after the curtain went up, he found himself unable to stay seated during the performance. He stood first at the back wall, then ended up pacing the lobby and watching the clock.

Intermission came and went. Tom remained in the lobby, alone, pacing aimlessly, counting jade-marble tiles.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Tom looked abruptly up into the broad, tuxedoed chest of a blonde Skin.

"I'm sorry?" Tom stood up straight. He'd nearly run into the bigger man.

"Don't," the man stepped closer, "don't you even try to run away from me."

"I'm sorry." Tom backed away. "I think you may have mistaken me for someone else. I'm Ambrose Sacks."

"How can you expect me to look the other way when you use my organization to get the papers for you to disappear again? I can't tell if you think I'm stupid or if you thought I'd just go along with it." The man shook his head in disgust. "Damn it, Cloud, how can you put me in this position?"

"Who are you?" Tom glanced around the lobby. Two ushers lounged near the bathrooms, smoking cigarettes. They paid him no attention.

"Don't pretend you don't recognize me. And I hope you shoved this poor fucker Ambrose Sacks' body in a deeper hole than you buried the cop. I can't clean up for you like that again. Someone will notice." The man's expression turned almost tender, in a frustrated way. "It's time you came home."

Tom felt the blood drain out of his face.

"Seven." The word was out of Tom's mouth before he could stop it. All he could do now was run. He felt the tension build in his legs. He forced himself to be calm. Stay put. If he ran, Seven would catch him and not be kind when he did. Could he bluff? Could he actually pretend to be Cloud? What would Cloud say? How would he be with his brother?

In his indecision, Tom waited too long. Seven's eyes narrowed.

"You're not Cloud at all, are you?" He gripped Tom by the elbow, firmly but not obtrusively.

"I—"

Seven leaned close, smiling. "I bet you know where he is though, don't you? You've got ten seconds to tell me, or I'll gut you right here. Don't think I'm afraid of a couple of pussy ushers." Seven nodded to the other men.

"I'll scream bloody murder," Tom said. "There's three hundred people in that auditorium who'll hear me."

"And when they come out and find you with your guts lying on the floor, they'll take you to the hospital, and it will become obvious that you are not the Skin you pretend to be." Seven sighed. "That's not exactly the resume-builder you want. So don't make it hard on yourself."

Tom remained silent. Seven's expression of brotherly exasperation evaporated, revealing the deadly calm beneath. There was a flicker of silver in Seven's hand. A small, curved blade lay in his palm. He pressed it against Tom's side. He felt the wet of his blood trickling out before he felt the pain of the small point sticking into his side, just barely breaking the skin.

From inside the auditorium, Tom heard the clash of thunder. Act III was nearly over. He looked into Seven's eyes, which now held no flicker of humanity.

"I'm going to ask you one last time," Seven said. "Where is Cloud?"

"I'll take you to him," Tom said. "Come on."

Seven withdrew his blade, but kept hold of Tom as he walked up the pine-carpeted steps through the auditorium doors. He brushed through the curtains and they stood in back of the auditorium. Cloud stood on stage, alone, his arms raised in the air, performing the last transformation of the play, from his grotesque mockery of the Sheriff into his black-furred alpha form. The audience sat in rapt silence. Tom saw tears glistening on the cheeks of the woman nearest him. The sound of a lone violin soared through the air, and pride replaced Tom's fear.

Seven's eyes darted around, peering at the box seats.

"Which row is he in?" he whispered into Ambrose's ear.

"He's where he belongs," Tom whispered back, pointing toward the stage. Seven stared as Cloud spoke the play's final lines: "Every day the sun rises, and every day something new starts up growing."

Then the lights went down and the curtain fell. In the short silence between the curtain fall and the audience reaction, Tom leaned close to Seven.

"Cloud deserves to be allowed to be something more than just a shadow living other people's lives. He's got a real chance to be great." Tom's throat ached with emotion as he spoke. "Please give him that. Please let him go."

Thunderous applause erupted from the audience. The lights came up again and the cast ran out, one by one, until Cloud at last took the stage again and the applause redoubled. A few people in the audience stood, and a few more followed until the whole audience was standing. Cloud's smile radiated pure triumphant joy as he bowed again.

"I want to go backstage now, to congratulate him." Tom pulled his elbow out of Seven's grip. Seven made no motion to pursue him. "It's been good to finally meet you. He talks about you all the time."

Seven stood, his expression utterly blank, watching Cloud on stage. He turned to Tom and said, "Take me backstage with you."

"He wants to stay with me." Tom met Seven's eyes.

"I said, take me."

Tom led Seven backstage, bursting through the stage door and into the wings just as Cloud and the rest of the cast were leaving the stage. When Cloud saw Seven, he stopped cold, staring warily at his brother while the other actors jostled by them. Then he stepped closer to Tom and draped an arm across Tom's shoulders. Seven's frown twisted up into a smirk.

Turnskin

He said, "Great show," then turned and walked away.

Cloud immediately pulled Tom into his arms, hugging him hard. Other actors pushed past them, sometimes pausing to pat Cloud on the shoulder.

"You were fantastic!" Tom nearly had to yell to be heard above the noise.

"Wait till the National Theatre!" Cloud said. "I'll slay them."

Epilogue

“GO ON,” CLOUD URGED, NUDGING TOM FORWARD. “HE’S right there, and he’s alone. It’s your chance.”

“I can’t,” Tom said. “What if he thinks I’m an idiot?”

“So what if he does?” Cloud smoothed the black fur on his face and pushed his curly mane of hair back. Even in the cool of the night, Tom could tell Cloud was feeling the summer heat. “You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“If he thinks I’m stupid, I’ll curl up and die.” Tom’s fingers twisted around the brittle stem of his cheap, plastic champagne glass. Fred Brandt stood just a few yards away across a green expanse of lawn. He picked up a cube of cheese from the refreshment table, sniffed it, and popped it in his mouth. He glanced around. Tom kept his eyes on the ground.

The Diverse Voices artist reception was just getting started. Only a few people ambled around the sculpture-strewn grounds of Michael David James’s country house. Most, Tom’s cousins included, stood clustered around the drinks table making small talk and guzzling the free liquor.

“I don’t believe this,” Cloud whispered. “How can you have the balls to stand up to Seven and still act like a fan girl?”

“Seven is just a gangster. Fred is...”

“A transsexual?” Cloud supplied. Tom shot him a dirty look.

“He’s my idol!”

“He’s coming this way,” Cloud said. Tom looked up to see Fred Brandt coming directly at them. He walked right up to Cloud and said, “You’re Tom Fletcher, aren’t you? I watched

you in dress rehearsal today. Great shifting.” Though Brandt was in his fifties, his voice had lost none of its strength.

“Thank you,” Cloud said. “That means a lot, coming from you, sir.”

“Please, call me Fred,” Brandt replied. “I believe I saw you in *The Onion Boy* a few months ago at the Turnskin. Didn’t you write that play as well?”

“I had some help in the writing department.” Cloud slipped his arm around Tom’s waist. “Have you met my partner, Ambrose Sacks?”

Brandt turned his full attention on Tom, and Tom thought that he would melt. Brandt exuded the same masculine charm that had made him Tom’s first crush. Knowing that Brandt had at one time been a woman didn’t dim Tom’s abject worship and awe.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Ambrose.” Brandt offered his hand. “You’re the writer of *Mirrorchild*, aren’t you?”

“I am, sir—I mean Fred.” Tom clasped Brandt’s hand, feeling his warm, papery skin. Above their heads, distant thunder crackled across the turbulent summer sky.

“I’m sure it will be a hit with the festival crowd.” Brandt’s benevolent pronouncement filled Tom with confidence that verged on invincibility. “You two seem to be a winning team. Got anything else in the works?”

“I’ve been thinking of a play about impersonators—shifter impersonators, I mean,” Tom said, ignoring Cloud’s sharply raised eyebrow. “I think I want the main character’s alpha form to be female but to just go wild from there—you know, to try and create a character free of the pernicious gender constructs crippling society today.”

Brandt smiled at this and looked even more handsome than before.

“You know, I would very much like to be involved in such a production. Do let me know when you have a script.”

With these words, Brandt produced his card and pressed it into Tom's hand. "Keep in touch." Brandt winked and walked on to mingle with the other guests, leaving Tom alone with Cloud once more.

Cloud asked, "Did you just make all that up on the spot?"

Tom shrugged, feeling alive and free and full of hope. He said, "Isn't that what improvisation is?"

Even as Cloud pressed a kiss onto his check, Tom imagined how he would pitch the new play.

When young woman's parents are tragically killed, she must embrace a life of crime to support her young brothers.

He wondered which role Cloud would play.

Acknowledgments



So many people have helped me it's hard to name them, but I'm going to try anyway.

In alphabetical order:

Grace Dugan

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Melanie Madden

Melissa Miller

And the sole boy, my first fan,

Alex Vouri

Thank you all. You were there when I needed you.

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