

Special Needs

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"When will I get my Howling badge?" eight-year-old Hunter demanded as he came in through the back door, bringing a surge of crisp fall air with him. He was swinging the road-kill raccoon that Annemarie had tied on a string. "Paco already has his."

"Paco is almost a year older," Annemarie said from the table while she opened the packages of blue and gold plastic cups. "Daddy told you—howling comes to the Sharp-Toothed Folk when it's ready. It can't be rushed."

"I just don't want to be the last in my den." He held up the dead raccoon like a stringer of fish and grinned.

"What should I do with this?"

Annemarie had spent all week checking out road kill on local streets, trying to locate just the right carcass, one that smelled strongly enough to help the boys earn their Cub Scout Tracking badge. Her nose twitched. She'd found this one two days ago, and it was marvelously odorous, if she did say so herself. "Did you lay the scent trail around the backyard?"

"Yes." He jiggled the string so that the expired raccoon danced just above the kitchen's blue-flowered tiles. Its dead eyes stared and it looked almost alive again in a tantalizing sort of way. She felt half inclined to pounce on it herself.

"Then hide the carcass out in the trash can—and no rolling on it! I don't care how good it smells. Wash your hands when you come back in so you don't give the game away." She glanced at the clock. "They'll be here any minute."

The door creaked as her son ducked back outside. Patiently, she filled the little plastic cups with cherry Kool-Aid and arranged them on the snacks table, alternating blue with gold for the traditional Cub Scout colors. She thought they looked nice though the pattern wouldn't survive the den meeting's initial feeding onslaught. Still, the effort at stylishness cheered her. Martha Stewart would have approved—if she wasn't in stir.

Hunter had just finished washing his hands when the doorbell rang. He dashed to the front door. "Paco!" she heard him say as she set the brownies next to the platter of raw chicken legs, then, "Justin!" Feet pounded into the house, accompanied by giggling. Voices mumbled, then Hunter shouted, "Mom!"

Sighing, Annemarie brushed a brownie crumb off the table and headed to the door. To her surprise, a redhaired woman with the predatory smile of a lynx stood there. She wore an elegantly cut ivory business

suit, three inch matching spike heels, and had a restraining hand on the shoulder of a fidgety, doughy-cheeked boy in full Cub Scout uniform.

The woman thrust out a hand with manicured bloodred nails. She had a manic gleam in her eye. "I'm Sheila Wilson. We moved into the red-brick house down the street last week. I hope you don't mind us dropping in on you like this, but my son, Eric-Hayden, is in your boy's class at school and Hunter said you were having a den meeting today." She glanced over her shoulder at a gleaming ice-blue Chevy Tahoe idling at the curb. A silver-haired man rolled down the window and pointed at his massive gold wristwatch.

"Yes, but—" Annemarie said.

"Eric-Hayden was a Cub Scout back in Lansing before we moved," the Wilson woman went on in a rush, "and he's working on his Wolf badge, just like Hunter. He's dying to join a new den so that he doesn't get behind." Sheila urged the stocky boy into Annemarie's white tile vestibule which seemed to immediately shrink. "Say hello, darling."

Eric-Hayden only scowled and ducked his head. His hair was cut so close to the scalp, she couldn't tell its color. "This . . . is a . . . a special needs den," Annemarie said hastily as the boy spotted the snacks table and lurched past her, gathering speed with each step like a small locomotive. "We're invitation-only."

"Special needs?" the woman said. Her brow knitted in distress. "Oh, I'm so sorry, but you'll find that Eric Hayden is not the least bit prejudiced against, well, *slower* children."

"It's not that—" Annemarie said.

"It will be good for Eric-Hayden to deal with the less fortunate," Sheila said. "In fact, there's probably a badge for it." Her fixed smile broadened, which Annemarie would have bet was impossible, then the woman leaned around her. "Have a lovely time with your new friends, darling!"

Annemarie shook her head. "I'm sorry! You—you can't—"

"I'll pick him up at five." Sheila Wilson whirled and dashed back down the steps, her spike heels clicking on the pavement, just as the last two members of Sharp-Toothed Den 1410, Spense and Topher, arrived and gave Annemarie the special Den Snarl, complete with clawing fingers.

Numbly, she returned the sign as the Tahoe drove off. In the dining room, she could hear shouting. "Hey, Butt-Face, we don't eat snacks until Mom says!" Hunter was telling Eric-Hayden, whose cheeks already bulged with brownie.

Annemarie took a deep calming breath and joined the fray. "We don't call each other Butt-Face here," she said firmly. "Cub Scouts are always courteous."

Hunter circled the intruder, head cocked to one side. A low growl rattled in his throat as he took in the new scent, then, to her relief, settled into his dad's recliner. Her mind whirled. Once the meeting was over, she would convince the boy's parents to find another, more conventional den. There had to be at least three out here in Windsor Heights Rancho Estates. For now, they would all just do their best to get through the next hour without betraying any hint of the "special" nature of Den 1410.

She maneuvered Eric-Hayden into an extra chair, then picked up her list. "Everyone, sit down," she said. "As you can see, we have a visitor today, Eric-Hayden Wilson from Lansing."

"Call me Smudge," the boy said. He had chocolate smeared on his nose. "Everyone back home did."

Paco and Spense laughed. Annemarie gave them her best shut-up-or-I'll-rip-your-throat-out look. "Now," she said, straightening her blue and gold Scout neckerchief,

"Is everyone ready for the Mom and Me Moonlight Run on Sunday night?"

The five heads nodded.

"Great," she said. "I'll be calling your mothers with the details." She ticked that item off her list. "Don't forget that the district Pack meeting will be on the fifteenth." They nodded again. "Did you all have a good week?"

Justin, pale, tow-headed, and the smallest member of the den, gave them all a joyful gap-toothed grin. "I howled last night!"

Hunter bolted to his feet, the hair on the back of his neck bristling. "Did not!"

"Yes, I did!" Justin said, rising. "You can ask my dad."

"Liar!" Hunter bellowed. His eyes flashed the fiery orange of impending *change* as he launched himself across the room, growling and snapping, and knocked Justin to the floor.

Not here and now, especially in front of an outsider! It was the nearness of the full moon, Annemarie told herself as she pulled her snarling son off Justin. That always brought out their wildness. She held onto Hunter's struggling body with both arms. "It doesn't matter!" she whispered. "It *will* come."

"No, it won't," Hunter said. He turned in her arms and his eyes faded from dangerous orange back to safely blue. "Everyone else will get their howl and I'll just be a voiceless nothing!"

She smoothed his black hair. "We'll talk about it later. Now, sit down and behave yourself!"

Head hanging, Hunter retrieved his Cub Scout cap and returned to his seat.

Eric-Hayden was watching the scene with startled gray eyes, but Annemarie saw that he hadn't been too alarmed to lose the opportunity to score another brownie. "Aren't we going to say the Cub Scout Promise?" he said, crumbs dribbling from his mouth to the freshly vacuumed beige carpet. "That's how my old den always started a meeting."

Paco and Topher obligingly bolted to their feet and raised their right hands in the traditional Cub Scout salute. "I promise—to do my best—not to bite anyone," they recited in singsong fashion, "claw the upholstery—mark my territory inside the house—or—"

"We're going to skip that this week," Annemarie said hastily. "Our Promise is a little different from the one that most dens do. We don't want to confuse Eric-Hayden."

"Smudge!" the boy said. "I hate being called Eric-Hayden!"

"So," she said, "any other achievements to report?" Topher waved his hand. He was a lanky boy with a thatch of unruly brown hair that always reminded her of a pelt, a perfect example of a child of the Sharp-Toothed Folk. "I chased an old lady across the street."

The other boys giggled.

"That's not exactly the way it's supposed to go," Annemarie said, reaching deep for patience. "You're supposed to *help* her."

"I was helping," Topher said. "She was so slow, she'd never have made it across before the light changed without me snapping at her heels."

She folded her hands, striving for calm. "Good intentions do count, but, next time, *escort* the elderly person, no matter how long it takes. Chasing and snapping are considered very rude by ordinary people. You'll never get your Wolf badge that way."

"Told you!" Justin whispered under his breath and Topher bristled. The two stared defiantly into one another's eyes.

Annemarie sighed and stepped between them. Den meetings this close to a full moon were always a bit tetchy. "Now," she said with a determined smile, "we're going to work on our Tracking badges."

"What kind of tracks?" Eric-Hayden said. "Bear prints?"

"Not that kind of tracking, dodo," Hunter said, his head cocked scornfully. "Scent tracking, you know, with your nose."

"Oh." Eric-Hayden looked longingly at the table. "Can

I have another brownie?"

"Not yet," Annemarie said. "Let's go outside and see how well we do with the scent Hunter put down." With a whoop, the five Sharp-Toothed boys dashed out to the backyard.

Eric-Hayden just stared at her. "Outside?" he said, as though she'd proposed hiking down into the Grand Canyon.

"Come on," she said. "It will be fun."

He hung back, head low. "I'm not very good at games."

"You can just watch," she said, pulling on a thick blue sweater. "Hunter can't play either because he laid the trail." She reached for his hand. The child hesitated, then took hers.

Outside, the October light was fading and the wind was gloriously brisk. The boys were wrestling, play-snarling, and covering themselves in bits of dead grass and leaves. "That's enough," she said and they all, more or less, quit, save for a few final surreptitious punches.

"Now, who wants to go first?"

"Me!"

"Me!"

"No, me!" Spense and Justin got into a shoving match.

"Stop that!" she said, separating the boisterous pair. She had to admit, despite his size, Justin gave as good as he got. He probably *had* howled last night. "Topher can have the first run." She motioned him forward. "Try to pick up the scent."

Topher closed his eyes as he prowled the yard.

"Here!" he said triumphantly by the porch steps. "Raccoon! Really really dead raccoon!"

"Very good," she said. "Now—"

Eric-Hayden tugged at her hand. "Can I try?"

"Not today," she said, knowing his human senses would fail miserably. She turned to the rest and pulled the stopwatch out of her pocket. "Now, Topher, follow the trail through the yard and I'll time you. Everyone else turn around." Justin, Spense, and Paco obeyed without an argument. Scent games were only fun, of course, if you sniffed out the trail yourself. Otherwise it was like working a crossword in which someone had already written all the answers. "Go!" She clicked the stopwatch. Topher swung his head back and forth, then pounced on the scent. She could almost see his ears quiver. The full moon was coming on fast. Thank heavens the meeting hadn't fallen on the very day. They'd all probably be squabbling over the steaming remains of Eric-Hayden's carcass by now and then there would have been hell to pay with the local Boy Scout Council. Her own ears, in fact, felt a bit mobile at the moment and Eric-Hayden smelled far more like *warm hamburger* to her than *boy*.

Topher dashed around the yard, losing the scent at the swing set, then picking it back up by the hose reel. She clicked the stopwatch off as he ended at the north fence gate. "Two minutes, twenty seconds! Excellent! Now, Paco, it's your turn."

One by one, the remaining three ran the scent trail, with bonus points going to Justin, who even smelled out the dead raccoon in the trash can. She let them remove the lid so that everyone got a good long sniff. Eric-Hayden watched in silence.

"Paco had the best time, but all of you did very well," she said as they trooped, rosy-cheeked with the chill, back inside. They were happily punching one another as she handed out plates and cups, letting the boys serve themselves from the snacks. She sat down and bit into a brownie, listening to them chatter.

Five minutes later, the doorbell rang. Hunter ran to answer it, then reappeared with Sheila Wilson.

"Eric-Hayden, darling, did you have a good ti—" Mrs. Wilson stopped in midstride, one ivory pump suspended in the air. She gazed in shock at a half-eaten raw chicken leg on Justin's plate.

Great Devourer! Annemarie had forgotten about the platter of chicken *au naturel*. This close to the full moon, the den preferred their meat ultrafresh, but she should have put it back in the refrigerator after their unexpected guest arrived. "My goodness, we—must have had an oven malfunction!"

Smiling grimly, she circled the living room, retrieving the chicken legs, piling them on her own plate over the scouts' protests, coming last to Justin. When she reached for his chicken, the boy sank his teeth into the uncooked flesh and growled. His eyes glimmered orange. "Justin, let me have that," she said, wondering if she was going to get bitten.

He only growled louder.

"They're so territorial at this age," Annemarie said over her shoulder to Sheila Wilson as though all boys behaved like this. She turned and concealed the plate behind her back. Fortunately, Eric-Hayden's portion had been untouched. Justin worried at his chicken leg, still snarling. She eased in front of him to block Sheila's view.

"It was lovely to have Eric-Hayden as a visitor," Annemarie said, when the woman didn't respond. "But I'm sure that we can find him another, more appropriate den."

"My name is Smudge!" Eric-Hayden said. "And I like this den! They do really cool stuff. I want to stay!"

"Your stepfather is out in the car," Sheila said. Her face was wooden. "And you know how he hates

being kept waiting."

"What about the Mom and Me Moonlight Run?"

Hunter asked. "Is Smudge going on that?"

"No," Annemarie said. "He—"

"A run?" Sheila seized Eric-Hayden's hand and levered him onto his feet. "How lovely! I've been competing for years, especially 5K's."

"It's been—um—cancelled!" Annemarie knew she was babbling. "I just hadn't had the chance to tell the boys."

"Oh." Sheila's crimson lipstick smile was poisonous. She gazed at Hunter, her carefully made-up eyes narrowed. "So sad about the special needs," she said, then dragged her unwilling son to the door. "That one looks almost normal."

Later, after the rest of the boys had gone home, Annemarie and Monty, her husband and Hunter's father, had a little talk with Hunter over dessert.

"You know everyone in your den is from the Sharp-Toothed Folk." Annemarie passed Hunter a slice of blood-chocolate cake.

He took it, his eyes downcast. "Yes."

"So, if we are going to have the kind of activities we like, we can't invite ordinary people. They won't understand."

"I didn't invite him, Mom." Hunter only picked at his cake, even though Annemarie knew it was his favorite, the batter having been enriched with a full cup of chicken blood. His fork clinked on the plate. "He heard me on the playground talking to Topher."

"Then don't mention den meetings at school," Monty said. "We can't have this kind of slipup again."

"Sorry, Dad," Hunter said as the phone rang. Annemarie rose and went to the kitchen to answer.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Donohue, this is Sheila Wilson."

"Yes?" she said, heart racing. Had the boy eaten some of the raw chicken after all and fallen ill?

"Eric-Hayden still wants to join your den."

"But—"

"The special needs stuff doesn't matter to him," Sheila said. "In fact, just between you and me, there's been some talk from his teachers from time to time that he might be a trifle on the special needs side himself."

"I—"

"Not that I ever believed it for a second!" Sheila said.

"His biological father was a flake, but he wasn't a moron. The child is just an underachiever. He could

make A's if he wanted."

"We'll find him a regular den," Annemarie said, desperate to get in a word or two herself. "I'm sure there are some—"

"For whatever reason, he likes *this* one," Sheila said.

"If you won't accept him, I'll just have to file a complaint with the local Boy Scout Council. That little *faux pas* with the undercooked chicken would have to be mentioned under those circumstances. I'm sure you understand."

Annemarie's pulse was thundering. She felt distinctly furry behind the ears and could almost smell Sheila's hot prey scent through the phone line. "I—see."

"Nothing personal," said Sheila, "but I have to look out for my darling boy's interests. I expect you to provide a full schedule for the den's activities in the coming weeks via Hunter tomorrow at school, and of course I will be glad to take my turn providing *healthy* snacks at the meetings. You'll find that I make an exquisite fruitcup."

Annemarie felt her fingernails lengthening into claws, her hair standing on end. A growl rattled deep in her throat.

"Let me know when the Mom and Me Moonlight Run has been rescheduled." The connection clicked off. Annemarie hung up and prowled back to the dining room table.

"Wow, Mom, your eyes are way cool!" Hunter bounced in his seat.

"That must have been some conversation," her husband said, leaning back in his chair.

"You could say that." Unable to settle, Annemarie went to the refrigerator and rummaged for the leftover raw chicken legs, then microwaved one just long enough to simulate living body temperature. When the timer dinged, she snatched it out and tore off a bite. The uncooked flesh tasted simply delicious, a treat she rarely allowed herself during the darker nights of the month.

So. Chewing, she stared out the kitchen window into the inviting darkness. Light from the filling moon silvered the swing set and garbage cans. Every fiber of her being longed to rush into the night and chase down something small and terrified, then tear it to quivering bits.

Patience, she told herself, ripping off another mouthful of raw chicken. The full moon was only three days away and it seemed they were to have company.

Annemarie volunteered at the Boris Karloff Elementary School library on Fridays, so she took a den schedule by the boys' class and used the opportunity to observe Eric-Hayden. He was a plodder, it turned out, the kind who just put his head down and soldiered on, completing the assignment even though he obviously had no idea what the lesson was about.

She had to admire that kind of tenacity. Sharp-Toothed children were not always the best of students either, especially close to the full moon. They tended to be distractible and crotchety, not to mention extremely touch-and-scent-dominant, relying on their noses and hands for information rather than eyes and ears. Educators often didn't know how to handle them.

When their teacher, Mrs. Solly, brought the class to the library after lunch, Hunter was positively bristling. Annemarie left the check-out desk to take him aside.

"What's the matter?"

Hunter glared at Eric-Hayden who was sitting at a table, thumbing through a kindergarten level picture book about balloons titled *Poppie's Big Date*. "He's telling everyone!"

"About what?" she whispered.

"About the dead raccoon!" A growl rattled low in her son's throat. His eyes glimmered orange for a second, then subsided.

"I'll talk to him," she said, patting his shoulder. Hunter nodded, the hair on the back of his neck still standing on end, and returned to prowl the bookshelves. Annemarie sat down next to the boy.

"Eric-Hayden," she said.

"Smudge!" he said, clasping the book to his chest as though she would take it away.

"Smudge," she said, "I hear you're telling other students about yesterday's den meeting."

"So?" He opened the book and stared at the illustration of a prissy orange balloon decked out with a girlish hairdo. Annemarie thought it looked demented.

She pulled the book down to meet his gray eyes.

"Didn't you have a good time?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"Well, if you tell everyone about the *special* things we do, then we can't do them anymore," she said. "Den 1410 keeps those kinds of activities to ourselves."

"You mean they're a secret," he said, turning the page to study a leering purple balloon jazzed up with a bow tie and top hat. It had, it seemed, designs on the orange balloon.

"Yes," she said, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the Mrs. Giles, the librarian, wasn't overhearing this conversation. "Things like tracking the dead raccoon are a secret."

"Secrets are bad," he said doggedly. "Kids aren't supposed to keep secrets."

"Not from your parents, no," she said, "but Cub

Scouts keep each others' secrets."

"They do?" His eyes rose from the page to gaze up at her.

"If they want to belong to Den 1410, they sure do," she said. "Though, we can find you a different den where they don't have secrets, if that's what you want."

"No," he said in a small voice. His fingers tightened on the book. "We never had any fun in my old den. We just cut things out of stupid construction paper and ate carrot sticks."

Annemarie stood and realized there was a line of children waiting over at the check-out desk. She had to get back to work. "Do you want to take that book home?"

"No," Eric-Hayden said. "I've read it before. It's really scary. At the end, there's a girl with a pin."

On Sunday, the night of the full moon, Annemarie packed a cooler with raw hamburger and liver, her

contribution to the den picnic scheduled after the traditional Mom and Me Moonlight Run. Monty was going howling up on Bartlett Hill first with the other Cub Scout dads, then would meet them later at the picnic grounds.

Her ears had already gone distinctly pointed. It always felt so darned good to lose the cumbersome human form and revel in her pent-up energy.

Hunter's eyes were a glimmering orange and the backs of his hands furred. He bounced in his seat in the car.

"This is going to be so great!" he said. "I can't wait!" Last year, the moms and Scouts had flushed a coyote, any number of rabbits, and three deer. The deer had led them through the greenbelt skirting the suburbs for an hour, their hot scent like ambrosia in the night. Hunter's legs had been even shorter then, but he'd done a great job of keeping up. "Maybe we'll actually run something down this year!" he said, his voice low and growly.

She smiled and felt how sharp her teeth had become in the last few minutes. "Maybe!"

They parked their Toyota SUV in the park's lot which adjoined the suburb's main greenbelt. Hunter shucked his clothes in the back seat, *changed* into his adorably furred shape, and then she opened the door for him. The other boys had already transformed and were scuffling in the grass in their wolf forms, play-mauling one another. Snarling happily, he leaped into the fray.

Overhead, the moon was rising, gloriously full. Stars glittered and the whole night world was limned with silver. The other four moms, already *changed*, waited at the trees' edge, ears eager. Annemarie locked her purse in the trunk, hung the car key around her neck on a chain, then headed for the park Ladies Room to *change*. Her human shape felt stodgy and stiff-legged. She so looked forward to this moment each full moon.

An ice-blue Tahoe pulled up. Annemarie stopped, alarmed as the front doors swung open. Sheila and Eric-Hayden Wilson climbed out. Sheila was wearing a velvet dark-blue jogging suit. Eric-Hayden was shivering in a hoodie and sweat pants.

"Hi!" Sheila waved at her, then bent at the waist to touch her toes. "Where's the starting point?" Annemarie glanced at the five scuffling wolf cubs.

"How—?"

"Not with your help, that's for sure!" Sheila snapped.

"There was certainly nothing about tonight on the information sheet you gave Eric-Hayden. Topher Cooney had to tell us."

One by one, the cubs stopped playing and oriented on the newcomers. Their eyes gleamed orange and at least one of them was growling. Their mothers sensibly faded into the trees.

"I'm afraid everyone else has already started," Annemarie said, trying to make her startled brain think. "Hunter went ahead with them. I'm—staying behind to watch the cars."

"Where did all those puppies come from?" Eric-Hayden said, his eyes wide. "Can I play with them?"

"They're—strays," Annemarie said. "Shoo, puppies!" She waved them toward the hidden moms, but they didn't take the hint. "Go home!"

"Stay away from the nasty things, darling," Sheila said.

"They probably have fleas and all kinds of diseases." Several of the Sharp-Toothed cubs yipped at the insult.

"Well, we'd better get started," Sheila said, pulling a leg up behind her thigh to stretch her quadriceps. "I'm pretty fast, though, so I bet we can catch up. Where's the path?"

"Over there." Annemarie pointed at the easement which had been long ago cleared for the high tension lines. "It's a mile run to the end and then back again." And by the time the two of them returned, the den could be safely gone, she thought.

"Come on, Eric-Hayden!" Sheila said, then jogged toward the open corridor through the trees. Giving the cubs one last longing look, the boy lowered his head and plodded after her.

Annemarie sat on the bumper of her Toyota as they disappeared into the greenbelt. That had been entirely too close! Another five minutes and Sheila would have caught her trotting out of the Ladies Room in full wolf form.

Darla Cooney, Topher's mother, loped up and then transformed back so that she was crouched at Annemarie's feet in her naked skin. "What was that all about?"

"Evidently Topher told Eric-Hayden about the run tonight," Annemarie said. "We have to call it off."

The Sharp-Toothed cubs turned to Topher, who was a bit taller at the shoulder than the rest, then all four leaped on him, biting in earnest this time.

"No, no, stop that!" Annemarie and Darla waded in, pulling them off by the scruff of their necks. "It doesn't matter whose fault it is now. We just have to fix it." Darla stalked off to the Ladies Room to retrieve her clothes, obviously smoldering from the stiff set of her shoulders. Annemarie wouldn't have wanted to be in Topher's furry hide at that moment. "*Change* back, all of you," she told the den.

Four of them did so that Topher, Spense, Justin, and Paco knelt by the picnic table, but her own son, Hunter, remained stubbornly wolf. "You, too, mister," she said,

"on the double!"

Hunter snarled, ears pinned, then dashed toward the greenbelt, disappearing into the cleared corridor where the Wilsons were jogging to catch up with people who weren't there.

Darla returned, pulling on a sweat shirt. "Where's

Hunter?"

"The little wretch followed the Wilsons," she said, thoroughly vexed. "I guess I'll have to go after him." The other three mom wolves walked out of the trees, bristling. Darla shook her head. "Go ahead. We'll alert the dads not to show up in their fur."

Annemarie left her clothes in the Ladies Room, *changed*, and dashed after Hunter. It did feel good to stretch out and run on all fours. The scent was laid down, hot and fresh. She would give that boy such a thrashing when she caught up!

Fifteen minutes later, she found her cub prowling through the trees along the greenbelt. Sheila Wilson was still jogging, but Eric-Hayden had slowed to a walk and was rapidly falling behind. She poked Hunter

with her nose. "Get back to the park!"

His orange eyes turned to her. "Something's weird, Mom."

She bared her teeth, resisting the urge to seize him by the scruff of his neck. "No excuses!"

"Smell him," he said, glancing back at Eric-Hayden. Hackles raised, she snarled.

Hunter dropped to the ground, eyes turned away, submitting wolf-fashion. "Mom, I mean it! Smell him!"

She inhaled and let the scent molecules dance through her head. An instant later, recognition clicked into place. Her tail drooped. *That*—couldn't be right.

"You smell it, too, don't you?" Hunter said.

"He's not—" He couldn't be. She would have known right away, the moment Eric-Hayden walked through the door.

"He's Sharp-Toothed Folk," Hunter said, "though the scent is not very strong."

"He must not be pureblood," Annemarie said as they watched the boy fall more and more behind. "Not even halfblood, I think, maybe only a quarter or an eighth." Diluted blood meant he could have gone through his entire life never knowing the potential locked up in his genes if he hadn't come in contact with the den's intense Sharp-Toothed pheromones under the full moon.

Sheila disappeared around the bend and Eric-Hayden stopped, thoroughly winded, staring after his mother resentfully.

"I'll get him," Hunter said and loped out of the trees before she could stop him.

Sighing, she padded after him. The proverbial fat was really in the fire now.

"Puppy!" Eric-Hayden said to Hunter and sagged to his knees, arms open. "You followed me!" His eyebrows had gone distinctly shaggy and his teeth and ears were a bit pointy.

Good thing his mom was far ahead, Annemarie thought. She would have been hysterical if she'd gotten a good look at this. Eric-Hayden must have inherited the connection to the Sharp-Toothed Folk from his absent father's line.

"Puppy, you smell good!" Eric-Hayden was *changing* faster now, fur springing up on his face and hands. Obviously the Sharp-Toothed pheromones were doing their job.

Annemarie felt a sudden rush of tenderness towards this lost cub. What would it be like to grow up experiencing even a hint of what she felt each full moon without understanding what it meant or what to do about it?

"Eric-Hayden," she said, "I know it feels good to *change*, but we can't let your mom see this."

"Yeah," Hunter said. "She would totally freak out!"

"My name is Smudge," the boy said automatically, then stared at the two wolves. "You can talk!"

"Big deal," Hunter said. "So can you."

"But—" The boy's mouth gaped and he gazed around the moon-silvered trees and undergrowth, seeming

to realize suddenly he was alone with two wild animals. He stumbled back. "Mom!"

Annemarie nosed him gently. "Look at your hands."

His gaze dropped to his fur-covered hands. "Whoa!"

"Dude, you're part of the Sharp-Toothed Folk,"

Hunter said. "Didn't you ever *change* like this before?"

"In—in my dreams sometimes I dream that I'm a wolf," Eric-Hayden whispered, his eyes glimmering a faint orange. "Mom even took me to a doctor about it. He said it's not real."

"It's totally real," Hunter said. "This is so cool!" He frisked around the boy, play-bowing, then nipping his ear.

"Eric-Hayden!" Sheila's voice came through the night.

"*Change* back now!" Annemarie said. She could hear the woman's running feet.

"I—don't know how!" The boy's eyes filled with tears.

"Show him," she told Hunter.

Hunter's furry outline shimmered, then he was a boy again, albeit a completely naked one.

"Hey, what happened to your clothes?" Eric-Hayden said.

"Eric-Hayden!" Sheila called, her panicked voice closer now.

"Close your eyes and think *human!*" Annemarie said.

"Come on, Smudge, you can do it!" Hunter said.

She *changed* back herself and then put her hands on his shoulders. "Breathe slowly," she said.

"Concentrate on being ordinary, perfectly perfectly ordinary."

His orange-tinted eyes closed obediently. She felt his breath slow. The fur . . . retracted. His teeth and ears rounded back into normal configurations.

"Great!" she hugged him, then slipped again into wolf form. "Bring your mom to the park when she gets here." Hunter *changed* back too and then mother and son raced away through the night, nipping at one another in their exuberance at being out in their true skins under a glorious full moon.

Monty and the other dads were already there sitting at a concrete picnic table, when the two of them got back, all the men in human form again and decidedly miffed. It wasn't often they were able to get together for a fun night of howling. Annemarie loped on to the Ladies Room where she *changed* and dressed.

The boys were playing a half-hearted game of catch when Eric-Hayden and Sheila walked out of the greenbelt. "Oh, there you are," Sheila said with a tight forced smile. "You said the course was just down and back. Why didn't we pass anyone?"

"The others decided to return through the trees," Annemarie said. "They didn't know you were trying to catch up."

"Well, it certainly wasn't much of a run," Sheila said,

"and I have some phone calls to return, so we should just go home."

"Mom, no!" Eric-Hayden turned to Annemarie, hands fisted.

"We could take him home in our car after the picnic and games," Annemarie said, "if you like."

"I don't know," Sheila said. "He seemed a little peaked out there. He couldn't keep up with me at all."

"I'm fine!" Eric-Hayden said, hopping on one foot in demonstration. "Let me stay, please!"

Sheila's cellphone rang and she pulled it out of her pocket. "It's your stepfather," she said, checking the number. "All right, but don't be late. Tomorrow is a school day." She flipped the phone open and talked all the way back to the Tahoe.

Hunter watched until the blue SUV drove away, then turned to her. "Now, Mom?"

When the tail lights rounded the corner, she smiled.

"Yes, go ahead and *change* back." The five boys dashed into the trees to discard their clothes. Eric-Hayden watched them.

"First you have to undress," she said softly. "You won't need clothes—after."

He bit his lip, then lumbered toward the trees.

The five Sharp-Toothed cubs emerged, running and leaping, growling, bowling each other over in the moonsilvered grass. Eric-Hayden pulled off his hoodie and entered the woods. Annemarie held her breath. He'd had a dose of pheromones as well as exposure to the full moon, but would he be able to *change* all the way with his diluted blood? Maybe Monty should coach him through his first time. She turned to her husband.

"Could—"

A wolf cub edged out of the forest, big-shouldered and a bit paunchy in the middle, awkward and shy. He lifted his feet one at a time as though unsure what to do with them. The other five Scouts halted their play-brawl and stared, eyes bright, ears pricked. Paco raised his head and howled in welcome, joined after a second by tiny Justin. Spense and Topher hung their heads, mute. Like Hunter, their howls hadn't come yet.

Hunter, though, circled the newcomer, tail high, eyes a brilliant full-moon orange, then threw back his muzzle and let loose with a marvelous deep-throated howl that sent tingles down Annemarie's spine. All the parents erupted in applause.

She dropped to her knees and held out her arms. Hunter leaped, knocking her down. Laughing, she buried her face in his silken fur as her clever boy nipped her ear in Sharp-Toothed joy.