The Woodjin

by Lbilover

Summary

An alternate universe Sean/Elijah series set in the beautiful and mysterious Pinelands of New Jersey. I am purposely not providing individual chapter summaries as this story is best read without any spoilers.

Notes

This story was inspired in part by the legend of the White Stag of Shamong and in part by the word 'woodjin' (a native guide), which I encountered for the first time in John McPhee's seminal work on the Pinelands, The Pine Barrens. Woodjin banner created by Frodosweetstuff. Originally written in 2007-2008. Please forgive the use of Trump Tower in the story. Believe me, I wouldn't do so today.
Chapter 1

Sean stared down helplessly at the engine of his car. *Shit.* He didn’t know one part from the other- he was no mechanic. All he knew was that the car wouldn’t start no matter how many times he turned the key and prayed. He couldn’t understand it. He’d had the car in for servicing only last week, and the mechanic had assured him that it was running great.

He’d pulled over on the shoulder fifteen minutes ago to watch the sunset over the pinelands, and turned off the engine simply to enjoy some peace and quiet along with the view. There was no reason at all that it should be dead now; it didn’t make sense.

Well, thank God for AAA, that was all he could say- assuming, that is, that he could even get a signal on his cell phone here in the middle of nowhere. Sean reached into the pocket of his black leather jacket, and felt for the familiar small rectangle of metal. It wasn’t there. *Oh fuck,* he thought, giving himself a mental head slap. He didn’t have his cell phone with him. He’d left it behind at the apartment- his pathetic way of rebelling against too much control in his life. And now he was royally screwed. He had no way to call AAA or even, if he could bring himself to deal with the shit that she’d give him for being so stupid, Chris.

Sean closed the hood of his silver BMW and got back in the car, huddling into the soft leather of the driver’s seat, welcoming the comfort of its familiar embrace. It was growing cold now that the sun had nearly dipped beneath the horizon, and the wind was starting to pick up. It had a bitter-sharp edge to it that cut right through his jacket and white dress shirt like a knife. The weather report he’d
listened to on the radio a little while ago had said it was going down to the teens tonight, with a chance of snow flurries. Definitely not the right night to be stranded in the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

Frowning, he considered his options. There weren’t many. He’d driven this route through the Pine Barrens many times, and he knew it was some miles yet before the first real signs of civilization appeared- one of the ubiquitous Wawa’s that sprouted up like mushrooms at every sandy intersection, and a Sunoco gas station. If it was summer, he probably wouldn’t have to wait too long before a carload of eager beachgoers came along, headed for the Jersey Shore and a day of sun, sand and sea. But at the end of January? He couldn’t recall passing or being passed by a single car since he left I-195 and began driving the quiet back roads through the heart of the Pine Barrens toward Long Beach Island.

*Why can’t you just stay on the highway, Sean?* He could hear Christine’s impatient voice in his mind from the last time they had driven down to the beach house. *These woods give me the creeps. If we ever broke down out here, we could be murdered, and no one would ever find out what happened to us. They’d probably throw our bodies in a cranberry bog, for God’s sake.*

Probably not the best line of thinking, under the circumstances, Sean decided with a touch of grim humor. Mysterious deaths seemed to be a New Jersey specialty- look at Jimmy Hoffa. As for that episode of the Sopranos… he decided not even to go there.

The light was fading fast. Sean opened the glove compartment and found the flashlight he kept there for emergencies. He pushed the switch and nothing happened. *Shit.* It was dead. He didn’t understand it; he’d checked the batteries last week, and it worked fine. He was anal about stuff like that. He tried it again. Nothing. Took the batteries out and put them back in, double and then triple checked that they were facing the correct way. Nothing.

He sat there at a loss for a few more minutes until it occurred to him that he could at least tie something white to the side view mirror as a distress signal. He leaned over into the backseat and pulled his overnight bag toward him. Unzipping it, he found a white undershirt. That ought to do.

He opened the car door and got out again. *Jesus, it was cold.* It felt as if the temperature had dropped several degrees just in the short time he’d been sitting in the car. He tied the shirt around the mirror with fingers made clumsy by the cold. There. It would be hard to miss that, if someone drove past. He blew on the bright pink tips of his fingers. *Shit,* he thought again. He didn’t have a pair of gloves with him, much less a hat or scarf. In the rush to get away, all he’d packed were a spare pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, underwear and socks. Now here he stood with only his leather bomber jacket, jeans and running shoes, plus a thin shirt and socks, as a barrier between him and the freezing cold. *Way to go, Astin.* He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and surveyed the woods around him.

He looked carefully for lights or a driveway, for any sign that might indicate a house or business. He’d never noticed either on this stretch of road, but then he was usually zooming by at 60 miles an hour. He’d read in a book once that people lived tucked away in isolated spots in these woods. Pineys, they were called, natives of the area who kept themselves to themselves and didn’t welcome outsiders into their world. He didn’t see anything, though, except for the endless reaches of pitch pine trees and scrub-oaks dwindling into the distance. Desolate. The forest appeared desolate, and barren of life. Chris hated it, but he’d always found the Pine Barrens starkly beautiful. Completely unlike any place he had ever been in his life, and he had traveled all over the Far East, Europe and the U.S. on business trips.

The sun had nearly disappeared behind the trees now; the sky was deep indigo, purple and red that silhouetted the contorted, fantastical shapes of the pines in an almost surreal manner, as if they were part of an Impressionist painting come to life. Stars were beginning to appear, astonishingly bright to
Sean’s city-trained eyes. You never saw the stars like that in the City, Sean thought. Way too much light pollution. He knew very little about astronomy, but he could pick out the constellations of Orion and Cassiopeia and the Pleiades from the myriad pinpricks of white, and the bright five pointed beauty of Venus rising over the trees.

If he was one of those intrepid explorers of old, he supposed he would be locating the pole star and steering by it. Steering to where, Sean, his mind asked sarcastically, the middle of a cedar swamp? God, he was completely unequipped to deal with a situation like this. He’d never so much as attended a single Boy Scout meeting when he was young, true child of the city that he was.

A sudden gust of wind caught the shirt, and it fluttered and flapped as if it was some trapped wild bird struggling for release. Sean shivered. He could see his breath, a dense white cloud that lingered on the frigid air. It was definitely time to get back into the shelter of the BMW.

But the interior of the car, though warmer than outside, was growing colder, too. The dark gray leather felt stiff and unyielding, slow to warm around him. God, he would give anything to be able to use the heater.

Sean began to feel the first faint stirring of panic, and tried desperately to squelch it. Stuff like this didn’t happen to people nowadays, he reasoned, not for long anyway. After all, it was 2006, not 1906, and there were cell phones, and GPS, and the Internet, and… How long he sat there, shivering and fighting panic, he couldn’t have said, when something on the opposite side of the two-lane road caught his attention.

Was that a light? He squinted hard. It was! There was a light in the woods, a faint but steady gleam of bright yellow that to Sean’s eyes was like a beacon of hope, blazing forth. Oh thank God, someone did live here, someone who would hopefully be willing to let Sean use their telephone to call for assistance, and maybe even let him take shelter from the cold while he waited for a tow truck. Relief swept over him in a wave. He was saved.

Sean quickly pocketed his wallet, and zipped his leather jacket as high as it would go, snug beneath his chin. He got out of the car and hesitated, wondering if it was safe to leave his car. What if someone did pass by, spot the abandoned vehicle and break into it? But the light appeared to be only a couple hundred yards away, if that. He was being ridiculously overcautious, just as Chris always accused him. Decided, Sean locked the BMW with a beep of the remote, pocketed the key and hurried across the road and into the woods.

The ground was almost pure sand here and littered with pine needles; it squeaked beneath the rubber soles of his running shoes as he walked. There was no sign of any path, and he had to force his way through the thickets of dwarf pine trees and scrub oaks standing shoulder to shoulder like a rank of soldiers guarding a fortress.

These weren’t soft yielding fronds, Sean discovered as he pushed at them, but stiff pointed branches that snagged his clothing and tore at his face and hands. He hadn’t gone fifty yards through the trees when he felt a warm trickle of blood on the back of his right hand from a deep scratch; it began dripping down over his fingers. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Sean pushed on, deeper into the forest, his native stubbornness not allowing him even to consider the idea of turning back. He wasn’t about to let some stupid trees get the better of him, god damn it.

The resinous odor of pinesap was everywhere. The sap was probably getting all over him- on his clothing and even in his hair. His jacket would be ruined at this rate, scratched and stained, and it had been ridiculously expensive, a Christmas present from Chris. Take care of it, Sean, she’d admonished him as if he were a child. He felt his blood pressure rise at the memory.
But Chris’s reaction to his ruined jacket soon became the least of Sean’s worries. Distances must be very deceptive in the forest at night, he realized, for he didn’t seem to be making any headway. In fact, if it wasn’t a completely crazy notion, he’d have said the light was retreating before him, drawing him ever deeper into the darkness of the pinewood.

Concerned, Sean finally halted. He turned and looked behind him. All he could see were the dim outlines of the trees; the road and his beemer were lost to view. He began to feel disoriented. Had he walked in a straight line? Or had he veered to the left or the right? He couldn’t tell. If he tried to go back to the car now, he might get hopelessly lost- if he wasn’t already. He bit his lip and considered the situation. But there appeared to be no choice: he had to follow the light. At least the constant movement was keeping him warm.

Other than his own panting breathes as he struggled on in pursuit of the elusive light, the forest was silent. The wind that had been soughing in the pines had died away. For the first time the word eerie crept into his mind. Living in the city, noise was a fact of life; it was incessant and ubiquitous- you couldn’t escape from it if you wanted to. The silence now was unsettling, creepy even, as if it presaged…

Stop it, Sean berated himself. Anyone would think you're a teenager in a bad slasher movie, and the theme from 'Nightmare on Elm Street' is going to start playing any moment.

Even as the thought entered his brain, an unearthly shriek, high and shrill, rent the night air, and sounds of something crashing through the undergrowth- something like a large bad-tempered animal, maybe- came from behind him. Sean was seized by a sudden, panicky feeling that he was a teenager in a bad slasher movie. He took an apprehensive look over his right shoulder, and saw twin points of red glowing like the fires of hell in the dark and the vague outline of horns and large leathery wings like a vast oversized bat. Holy shit! He didn’t wait to see any more. He turned and bolted, running for his life. The whatever-it-was gave another high-pitched, blood-curdling shriek and Sean didn’t have to look again to know it was chasing him, and he felt certain its intentions weren’t friendly.

OhJesusohjesusohjesusohjesus… Sean fought and struggled, cursing the trees and bushes that caught at his clothing and impeded his progress through the woods. He kept expecting any moment to feel fetid hot breath on the back of his neck or razor sharp claws slashing at his jacket. He had no clue what direction he was heading, or where the light was now, or if he was running toward it or away from it.

The red-eyed creature, whatever it was- and oh god, he was sure he knew what it was, and the knowledge scared the shit out of him- was still behind him, emitting that unearthly shriek at regular intervals, and the crashing noises were growing closer. Jesusjesusjesusjesus… Sean felt as if he was moving in slow motion, the way one did in a nightmare, only… this wasn’t a nightmare. Ohshitohshitohshitohshit…

Then, unexpectedly, the trees ended; sobbing for breath, Sean staggered into a small clearing. His momentum sent him pitching forward, and he went down hard on his knees in the sand, breaking his fall with the palms of his scratched and bleeding hands. Dazed, he remained on all fours for a moment, while pain from a stitch in his side lanced through him. But, tempting as it was, he couldn’t remain here. The thing would be on him any moment… He started to scramble to his feet- and then froze, gaping in disbelief. There in the center of the clearing, not ten feet in front of him, stood a stag.

A white stag.

The ivory velvet of its coat shone in the starlight with the luster of a pearl, and it bore on its proud head a magnificent rack of antlers that looked as if they were carved from highly polished ebony. Steam billowed in clouds from its flared nostrils as it tossed its head, snorted, and pawed at the sandy
Sean stared and stared, utterly mesmerized. He had never seen anything so beautiful or so magical in his entire life; the white stag was a creature straight out of a fairy tale. He must be hallucinating, Sean thought wildly—but nothing had ever seemed so real. Small beads of moisture clung to the whiskers of the stag’s muzzle, and fine tremors shivered along its flanks; its ribcage rose and fell with each breath. Surely if he was hallucinating, he would not be noticing such details?

The creature chasing Sean had apparently halted at the sight of the stag, for the sounds of pursuit had stopped, but he could hear it hissing and gibbering behind him as if in a towering rage. It sounded almost as if it was speaking words, but in some language Sean could not understand. He wanted to turn and look, to face his enemy, but his attention remained riveted on the stag.

Still snorting, it was lowering its head like a bull preparing to charge. He could see the ripple of sleek skin as the stag’s muscles bunched. It sank back onto its haunches, gathering itself. The sharp deadly points of its antlers were aiming straight at Sean. Oh dear god, he was caught between the hammer and the anvil with no means of escape. As the stag sprang forward with a powerful surge of its hindquarters, Sean cowered down and covered his head with his arms, praying as he’d never prayed before in his life…

…and felt a rush of cold air on the back of his neck as the stag vaulted over him, and the soft patter of sand kicked up by the stag’s hooves raining down on his jacket. It had jumped clear over Sean without so much as grazing a hair on his head. The stag squealed in rage, and the unearthly shriek of the whatever-it-was rent the air yet again. There was a scuffling noise, as of two bodies making contact, more squealing and shrieking, and then sounds of retreat that grew fainter and fainter, until at last they dwindled completely away, and the forest was quiet once more.

Sean lowered his arms and cautiously raised his head. The adrenaline rush of his mad flight through the woods was fading, and he felt sick and shaken as he climbed stiffly to his feet. The scratches on his face and hands stung with the cold. The white stag was still there, standing with its front legs splayed and gazing fixedly in the direction the strange creature had disappeared. Sean could see a hint of some dark liquid gleaming on the tip of one antler. Even as he looked, a droplet fell to the ground, beading in the cold sand. Then, with a toss of its head, and a snort, the stag wheeled to face Sean.

They stared at each other. And, odd as it was, Sean had the strangest feeling he wasn’t looking at a wild animal at all. The stag’s dark eyes appeared almost human as they met his, as if it understood everything that had happened. If the animal had opened its mouth at that moment and spoken, Sean wouldn’t have been shocked. But it did not speak. Instead, it did something even more surprising. It sank slowly to its knees in the sand, and lowered its proud head in mute invitation.

A ride, Sean realized in shock, it’s offering to give me a ride.

He didn’t even hesitate, but limped to its side. He was trembling, from the cold or shock, or both, and aching in every muscle. He wasn’t certain how much longer he could remain on his feet. Through chattering teeth, he forced out the words, “Th-th-thank y-y-y-you.” as he eased one leg across the stag’s broad back, winching a little at the pain the movement caused, and sank down. Then he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around its neck. Only then did the stag surge to its feet in one swift motion while Sean, who had never in his life been on the back of horse, much less a stag, held on for dear life.

Sean continued to cling to the stag with a near-stranglehold as it began to walk then gradually trot across the clearing, and onto a narrow path that led deeper into the woods. The stag’s body was warm, radiating heat that seeped comfortably through Sean’s jeans. He buried his cold face against
its neck; the smooth fur was as velvety soft as it looked, and smelled like pinesap, and dried grasses, and wood smoke. Its scent was not at all unpleasant, and he would have expected a wild animal’s scent to be so; but Sean was discovering this night that nothing was as he would have expected it.

How long they traveled, Sean could never afterward say. He lost all sense of time and direction, and fell into a sort of waking trance, exhaustion and shock overcoming him. He was only dimly aware when the stag finally came to a halt. With an effort of will, Sean forced open his bleary eyes, and he saw that it had stopped in the front yard of a house, a large log cabin with warm light streaming from its windows, and curls of smoke rising from a stone chimney.

The white stag had carried him to safety.

The stag lowered once more to its knees, using the utmost care, as if it was aware of Sean’s deteriorating physical condition. Sean slid off its back, so weary and sore now that he could barely manage that much exertion. “Th-thank y-you,” he forced out the words again. The stag turned its head and looked at him, and Sean gasped, for its eyes in the light from the windows… but the world was beginning to spin around him, telescoping in on itself, and becoming a black hole, drawing him down inexorably into darkness.

Its eyes…

As Sean lost consciousness, his last coherent thought was that the stag’s eyes were, impossibly, blue.
He was running blindly through the woods, running for his life. There was a monster with fiery eyes, leathery bat wings, long fangs and hooked claws close behind him. It was reaching for him... it was going to catch him any second... No, he cried out, no...

“No!” Sean abruptly awoke, gasping for breath, his heart beating frantically as he relived the terror of those endless minutes in the forest. It took a moment for him to realize that he was no longer in the woods but lying in a bed: an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. The room was in total darkness save for the flickering light from a fire, and quiet save for the hiss and crackle of burning wood. He became aware of a presence, sitting on the edge of the bed beside him.

“Hey,” said a soft, reassuring voice, and a hand stroked gently over his hair. “Hey, it’s okay; it was just a dream. You’re safe now. Go back to sleep.”

There was such kindness in that voice, such comfort in that touch. He knew instinctively that he
could trust the speaker, and that the nightmares would not return. Closing his eyes again, Sean slept.

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When Sean next awoke, it was gradually, and from a deep, dreamless sleep. He felt warm and comfortable and surprisingly well rested. Bright sunlight filled the bedroom, pouring through two large windows hung with butter-yellow curtains that had been tied back to let in the light. His wandering gaze fell on a calico cat, curled up on a multi-colored rag rug in front of the cheerily crackling fire. The cat regarded him thoughtfully with its huge amber eyes for a long moment then, apparently satisfied, rose, stretched languorously, and, tail carried high over its back, strolled across the room and out the door.

*As if it had been assigned to watch over me,* thought Sean, amused.

He lay there for a moment longer with lassitude weighting his limbs; it would be so easy to fall asleep again. But he really ought to get up. The alarm clock on the bedside table read 10:36, and besides…

“Oh hey, you’re finally awake. I was afraid you were going to pull a Rip Van Winkle on me. Last time I checked on you, you were out like a light.” It was the soft voice from last night.

*So that had not been simply a part of his dream, that soothing voice and gentle touch.* Sean turned his head on the pillow. A short, slender young man dressed in faded jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt over a white tee was walking barefoot toward him across the pale oak floor. The calico cat padded by his side almost as if… No way, Sean reasoned. The cat couldn’t have gone to tell him that Sean was awake- could it?

The young man sat down on the edge of the bed, as he must have done last night, and smiled at Sean. He had the most extraordinary blue eyes Sean had ever seen: unusually large and luminous, and very, very kind. A faint memory stirred but vanished before he could catch it. Something about blue eyes...

“How are you feeling?” the young man asked, studying him carefully with his head tilted to one side like a curious bird. His face was impassive, but he was probably thinking what a wreck Sean looked. He certainly felt it.

“Sore,” Sean admitted. His voice sounded hoarse, and his throat was raw. He must’ve been screaming like a banshee last night, though he had no memory of it. He made a tentative move to sit up, and winced as his aching muscles protested. Immediately a thin but strong arm was there to support him, guiding him into a sitting position, and efficiently propping the pillows up behind him. The distinctive scent of bayberry reached his nose, subtly underlain by other scents that caused memory to stir once again: pinesap, wood smoke and dried grasses. Smoke from the fire must have permeated the young man’s clothing, Sean thought; from the hissing and popping sounds it was making, the wood that was burning in the grate was most likely pine.

A beautiful double wedding ring quilt in shades of cream, blue and gold had been covering Sean to the throat. It fell away as he sat up, and he discovered that he was still wearing his white dress shirt and jeans. They were filthy and wrinkled, and he caught a whiff of himself, and began to color with embarrassment. God, he smelled ripe. He needed a shower and a change of clothes and, his full bladder reminded him, a pee. But the nagging worry that had been lying just beneath the surface of his consciousness came to life.

“My car,” he croaked. “I left it sitting on the side of the road.”
The young man gave him a reassuring smile as he removed his arm and sat back; Sean’s eyes were drawn to the small gap between his two front teeth—unexpected and charming, like the soft auburn hair that stuck up in tufts like a kitten’s fur. “Not to worry. I drove your car back here early this morning. I hope you don’t mind. The key was in the pocket of your jacket, and you were dead to the world after I got you inside and settled. I figured I’d better get it off the road and back here as soon as possible. It probably would have been safe, but you never know.”

“But but my car broke down,” Sean protested in bewilderment. “It was completely dead. I must have tried to start it a dozen times, believe me, and it didn’t make so much as a grinding sound.”

The young man shrugged, and lifted his hands: small hands with a curiously engraved silver ring on the ring finger of the right one. “Maybe, but it started right up when I turned the key in the ignition this morning. Whatever was wrong, it must have fixed itself. These things happen.” He sounded completely unconcerned.

“But I don’t understand…” Sean began, unwilling to let it drop. His analytical mind didn’t like mysteries, and now this, coming after everything that happened yesterday…

“Sometimes there is no understanding,” was the unexpected and very serious reply. “Not everything can be explained, you know. Sometimes events are outside our frame of reference, and we simply have to accept them.”

Sean stared at the young man. What an odd thing to say. But then again, after last night, could anything ever really seem odd again?

“Look, we can talk more about it later if you want,” said his host, standing up. “But I expect you’re probably dying for a shower. Let me show you where the bathroom is.”

“Thank you.” Sean smiled wryly as he swung his legs around and set his feet on the floor. “To be honest, I don’t know how you can stand to be near me. I’m a mess, and I’ve certainly smelled better.”

“Oh, I’ve encountered much worse, believe me.” As Sean got shakily to his feet, the young man took him gently by the elbow, and steadied him. “My name’s Elijah, by the way, Elijah Wood.”

“Sean Astin.” Sean felt absurdly weak, and was grateful for Elijah’s unobtrusive support as a slight dizziness assailed him, and the room tilted around him. God, he hoped he wasn’t going to disgrace himself and faint again, the way he had last night. The lightheadedness proved only momentary, however, and he was able to stand on his own when Elijah released his arm and stepped back; but the warmth of the young man’s touch lingered.

Sean noticed his overnight bag sitting on a cane back chair just inside the door. Well, at least he would have a clean change of clothes, he thought with relief, and he wouldn’t have to borrow from his host. Elijah Wood was shorter even than Sean and he was much thinner. It was doubtful he owned any clothes that Sean could have comfortably worn.

An impatient meow issued from the vicinity of the fireplace. “Oh, and this is Maggie,” Elijah said with an apologetic look at the calico cat, who was watching them from her post in front of the fireplace, her sphinx-like pose lending her an inscrutable air. “She doesn’t like to be ignored,” he explained, smiling.

“Oh, um, hello, Maggie. Nice to meet you,” Sean said, feeling a bit silly, but at the words, the cat rose and came to Sean, winding around his legs and purring loudly, as if in response to his greeting.
“The bathroom’s this way,” Elijah said, picking up Sean’s suitcase. Sean, his sore muscles protesting with every step, limped after him out of the bedroom and down a short hallway to an open door. “Here we are.” He set the suitcase down. “You should find everything you need, but holler if you don’t.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Elijah.” Sean felt humbled in the face of such kindness to someone who was, after all, a total stranger. Would he have been so trusting with Elijah if the circumstances were reversed? He didn’t think so, and he could just imagine Chris’s reaction if he allowed a chance met stranger to make himself at home in their New York apartment.

Elijah made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “You don’t have to thank me, Sean,” he said easily. “We take care of each other around here. Now go on and get cleaned up. When you’re done, come along to the kitchen; it’s at the end of the hall on your right. You must be starving—how about I make us some pancakes?”

“I hate to put you to so much trouble...” Sean began, but his impatient stomach growled its approval loudly.

Elijah grinned. “Pancakes it is. Oh, and don’t mind about Fred,” he added obscurely. “He likes to hang out in the bathroom.” And Elijah walked away, Maggie following closely at his heels.

Fred? Sean looked around the bathroom warily after closing the door behind him, but he couldn’t see anyone else in sight. Thank god. He’d had a sudden mental image of some eccentric old relative lurking behind the shower curtain and jumping out with a yell just as Sean was preparing to pee. After last night, he wasn’t sure his nerves were strong enough to take another shock.

The bathroom was spotlessly clean, Sean noticed as he began to strip off his filthy clothes, and modern, too: there was even one of those heated towel racks with a couple of fluffy blue towels draped over it. He wasn’t sure what he ought to have expected, but he’d heard that the people who lived in the Pine Barrens led a primitive existence. This was anything but primitive, even if the house was technically a log cabin. Not an outhouse or hand pump in sight so far.

God, Sean, could you sound any more pompous or condescending? he berated himself in disgust as he finished undressing. It was just as he’d feared: he was starting to turn into the very thing he had always most despised: one of those smug, over-privileged New Yorkers with their fancy apartments and their fancy beachfront houses who judged people by the size of their bank accounts.

That’s why you ran away, remember?

He had just flushed the toilet when an odd series of noises caught his attention. Scrape, scrape, thud. Scrape, scrape, thud. Sean looked around, startled, and there, crossing the powder blue tile floor with ponderous dignity, was a large box turtle. Scrape, scrape, thud. It paused and raised up on its clawed feet, long scrawny neck outstretched, head swiveling back and forth. Bright orange eyes met Sean’s for a moment, and then the turtle settled down, withdrew its head and neck into its shell, and went still.

“Mr. Rogers, I presume?” Sean inquired politely, but he was grinning. Elijah Wood had a sense of humor it appeared, for the turtle did, in fact, bear an uncanny resemblance to Fred Rogers. All it lacked was the sweater. As Sean climbed stiffly into the tub and pulled the shower curtain closed, he was smiling, truly smiling, for what seemed like the first time in months.

Sean stayed in the shower for a long time, feeling a little guilty at using so much hot water, but it seemed plentiful. And it felt wonderful as it pounded on his sore muscles. His scratched face and hands stung but he ignored the discomfort. He could take care of his injuries later. Right now, he
needed to scrub away the dried sweat and the dirt and pinesap that had gotten all over him. There was a chunky bar of obviously hand-milled soap in the holder, and it had a familiar fragrance: bayberry. It was a plant native to this area, Sean knew. The gift shops on Long Beach Island were filled with bayberry candles, soaps and similar items.

But it wasn’t of those that Sean was thinking now, but of Elijah, reaching behind his shoulders to help him sit up. There was something strangely intimate and a little unsettling about the idea of sharing the same scent with him. But Sean resolutely put the thought from his mind as he soaped up a washcloth and began to clean himself. It took several shampooings to wash all of the pinesap from his hair, and a scattering of small green pine needles littered the floor of the tub. Elijah must have thought I looked like some sort of bizarre Christmas tree, he thought ruefully.

He felt immeasurably better when he stepped out of the tub at last, and reached for one of those warm, soft towels. He quickly dried himself, pulled on clean boxers and then his spare jeans and an NYU sweatshirt. He sat down on the toilet to put on some socks- he would need to ask Elijah what had happened to his shoes- and noticed that Fred was watching him again from the shelter of his carapace. It was difficult- if not impossible- to read the expression on a turtle’s face, but it seemed approving of his newly clean state. Jesus, if the turtle had noticed…

Sean got up and removed his toiletry kit from his suitcase. While he brushed his teeth, he examined his face in the mirror, and reluctantly decided against shaving. He grew a beard quickly and already had a heavy 5 o’clock shadow. It went against the grain to go around looking scruffy, especially when he didn’t want to give Elijah any reason to be uneasy at having him in his home. Well, there was really nothing he could do about it. There were several scratches across his right cheek, one on his left cheek, a couple on his forehead and a long diagonal slash across his chin. Superficial injuries, fortunately, but he definitely wouldn’t want to drag a razor across them.

Of more concern to Sean were his hands, which were pretty beat up, especially the back of his right hand that he’d felt bleeding last night. But Elijah must have dressed the wounds with some kind of salve while Sean was asleep; he’d noticed a film of blue-green on them. Whatever the stuff was, it seemed pretty effective, for the cuts were barely oozing and there was no sign of inflammation.

Considering the events of the night, he had come through in surprisingly good shape. Thanks to Elijah… and the mysterious white stag.

As Sean rinsed his toothbrush under the tap, his eyes fell on a stack of magazines and books on a low wicker table next to the vanity. The book on top of the pile caught his attention. It was a large paperback with a bright green cover, and the words ‘Pine Barrens’ were easily legible. Curious, he set down his toothbrush and picked up the book: Pine Barrens Legends, Lore and Lies was the title.

Sean hesitated for a moment but then opened the book and flipped to the table of contents. His heart began to race as the words practically leapt off the page at him: The White Stag of Shamong 25. Sean turned with fumbling fingers to page 25, and began to read the author’s account of an incident that had occurred in 1772 on the Quaker Bridge road- the very road that Sean had been driving yesterday. But it had been a sandy trail back then, and it had been a stagecoach, not a silver BMW, traveling along it in a terrible thunderstorm.

As the stage and its frightened passengers approached Quaker Bridge, Sean read, a great white stag loomed in the center of the road… the driver jumped to the ground, rifle in hand. As he did so, the white stag vanished as suddenly as it had appeared!… To the astonishment of all, they discovered that the bridge across the river had been washed away by the storm. Had it not been for the great stag, the coach and all aboard would have plunged into the swollen stream!

Holy shit. Sean closed the book with hands that shook a little, and set it carefully back on top of the
pile. While he’d been in the shower, his logical businessman’s mind had begun to reason that the events of last night had not really occurred the way he remembered them. He’d gotten lost, yes, and panicked, but the unearthly scream had not belonged to the legendary Jersey Devil, as he’d thought, but to an owl or some other harmless, if noisy, wild creature. And the white stag had simply been a fantasy, a hallucination induced by his desperate need to find his way out of the woods.

But that book was proof positive that he had not been hallucinating, for he had never heard of the White Stag of Shamong until this moment, and surely it would be pushing coincidence to the point of absurdity to believe that he could have fantasized the very creature that appeared in local legends.

Even more than printed words on a page, however, Sean’s senses told him the encounter in the forest clearing had been real. Touch and smell and sight and hearing- they knew. If he closed his eyes, Sean could recall vividly each detail of the white stag: the softness of its velvety fur warming his cold cheek as he rested it against the stag’s neck; the ebon gleam of its antlers in the starlight as it tossed its majestic head; the white clouds of steam billowing from its distended nostrils; the almost-human expression in its great dark eyes as they met his own…

As Sean stowed his toiletry bag back in his suitcase and zipped it shut, a thought hit him: I will never see the white stag again. Surprisingly, he felt a deep sense of loss at the realization. Despite the terror the night had brought, it had also brought magic, the kind of magic that almost no one believed existed anymore. He wondered sadly if one day the memory of his encounter with the white stag would fade, and it would seem remote, as if it had happened to someone else.

He caught Fred watching him again. Maybe it was fanciful of him, but it almost seemed to Sean as if the turtle was looking at him with pity.
Elijah was standing at the stove pouring golden batter from a small ladle into a sizzling frying pan when Sean entered the kitchen. There was already an impressive stack of pancakes piled on a platter on the counter beside the young man, and a mouth-watering odor hung in the air. Sean’s stomach growled its impatience again.

“Hey.” Elijah waved the ladle by way of greeting. “I hope you don’t mind me saying,” he added with a smile as he took in Sean’s appearance, “but you look one hell of a lot better. Go have a seat at the table. Food’ll be ready in a couple of minutes.”

But Sean didn’t move or reply. He was too busy staring. There was a squirrel perched on Elijah’s left shoulder, its beady dark eyes regarding Sean with suspicion. Its gray bottlebrush tail began to quiver with alarm, and it started chattering loudly as if expressing disapproval of this new arrival. With a sudden bound, it leapt from Elijah’s shoulder to the top of the refrigerator, where it continued to scold Sean from the safety of its perch.

Elijah began to laugh. His laugh was high-pitched, almost a giggle really, and so infectious that Sean had to smile. “Oh shit,” he said as he expertly flipped a pancake. “I’m sorry, Sean. I forget what a madhouse this must seem like to outsiders. That’s Rocky- you know, as in Bullwinkle and Rocky. He’s not very friendly, I’m afraid- too much of a piney. He doesn’t like strangers much, but I
promise you he’s harmless. The most he does is scold or throw the occasional acorn top.”

He canted his hip forward and delved in one of the front pockets of his tattered jeans. Sean’s eyes were drawn to the movement, and how, as Elijah forced his hand deep into the pocket, the faded denim was pulled taut across the young man’s crotch. He caught a glimpse of light blue plaid through a small rip, and felt discomfited and thrown off balance by the sight.

Sean quickly averted his eyes, wondering what the hell was wrong with him. Elijah would think he was some kind of pervert if he caught Sean checking out his package, and Sean had always prided himself on being above that kind of behavior- not to mention that he’d never checked out another man that way before in his entire life.

Elijah’s hand emerged again holding a peanut, still in the shell, and he tossed it underhand to the chattering squirrel, who caught it deftly in his small paws, and turned his attention from insulting Sean to the task of opening his prize. Little bits of tan shell went flying through the air, but Elijah appeared unperturbed. Clearly this was not an unusual occurrence.

“So, are there any other unexpected- um- guests I should know about?” Sean asked cautiously. “I met Fred in the bathroom. Not very talkative, unlike your pal Rocky up there.”

“Fred is the strong, silent type,” Elijah joked. “But you’ve met all the indoor inhabitants… people included. I live here alone, in case you were wondering.”

Elijah’s words seemed almost overly casual to Sean, as if he was trying not to make too big a deal out of the fact, but Sean was intrigued by the revelation, for Elijah seemed very young to be living on his own this way. He made no comment, however, but went and sat down at the kitchen table, which was covered in a blue check tablecloth, and set for two people. At one end of the rectangular table stood a green-glazed ceramic vase, obviously hand-thrown and by a very good potter, filled with an artful arrangement of berry-studded dark green holly and other greenery he didn’t recognize.

Someone had certainly raised Elijah well, Sean decided, taking in the neatly folded paper napkins and precisely arranged silverware, and remembering his own housekeeping skills- or lack thereof- when he was Elijah’s age. Anna had not exactly been the motherly type.

The piercing whistle of a teakettle interrupted Sean’s musings. Elijah snatched the kettle off a back burner and poured hot water into a blue willow teapot he’d set ready on the counter.

“The animal population does tend to fluctuate, though,” Elijah went on as he carried the teapot to the table and set it down on a trivet. “I’m a licensed wildlife rehabilitator among other things, although Rocky and Fred have become permanent residents.” He looked rueful. “I tried to release them back into the wild, and they refused to go.”

“I can understand why,” Sean said at once, and was surprised when the younger man actually blushed at his words. He added softly, “I’m serious, you know. You’re a very kind man, Elijah, and that’s a rare quality these days.”

For a long moment their eyes met, and then Elijah said quietly, “Like I told you before, Sean, we take care of each other around here. Help yourself to some tea. But give it a few minutes to steep first, okay?” He turned away and went back to the stove.

Sean felt rebuffed, as if Elijah had suddenly held up a large ‘no trespassing’ sign. He’d meant the words as a simple sincere statement of fact, but of course Elijah had no way of knowing that. He didn’t know Sean from a hole in the ground, after all.
Afraid that he’d made Elijah uncomfortable, which was the last thing he wanted to do, Sean turned his attention away from the young man and looked around the room.

The kitchen was rustic but homey, with bunches of dried herbs and shiny copper pots hanging from the ceiling beams, braided rugs scattered on the rust-red tile floor, and an oak hutch that matched the table and chairs dominating the wall on one side. The hutch shelves were filled with weathered glass bottles in soft hues of blue and green and ivory, a set of matching blue and white ceramic canisters, and a colorful jumble of antique teacups and plates neatly displayed.

A large picture window in the opposite wall gave a view of the back yard, and a sliding glass door at the far end of the room led out to a wooden deck. As a result of so much window space, the kitchen was filled with light and there was a variety of healthy-looking plants on stands or hanging from the ceiling, positioned where they could enjoy the sun’s benefits.

The room could not have appeared more attractive or appealing. And neither could the young man who was currently rummaging through a cupboard. Despite his resolve, Sean couldn’t keep from studying Elijah out of the corner of his eye as he moved around the kitchen with a lithe grace that Sean found captivating.

Elijah had opened one of the upper cabinets, and he was standing on tiptoe to reach the top shelf. Where his flannel shirt had fallen back, Sean could see a thin strip of bare skin in the gap between his tee shirt and the top of those light blue plaid boxers. His body was lean but clearly strong- Sean recalled how effortlessly his arm had propped him up in bed- but with that pure pale skin, those luminous blue eyes and delicately etched features, Elijah Wood was... well, beautiful. It was not a word Sean would normally have associated with another man, and there was nothing in the least feminine about Elijah. Yet he could not think of a more suitable word to describe his host than beautiful, and with a beauty not simply of face and body but of spirit. It shone from him like some inner light, that kind and gentle spirit.

Who was he? What on earth was such a young man doing living all alone save for a few four-footed friends in a place as isolated as the heart of the Pine Barrens? It’s none of your business, Sean, he cautioned himself. You’re a very temporary guest. In a few hours or less you’ll be gone, remember?

But reaching the solitude of his beach house, which had been all-consuming when Sean left the city yesterday, suddenly seemed far less urgent. Frowning, Sean picked up the teapot and filled the yellow ceramic mug Elijah had set by his plate.

“That’s an herbal tea, Sean,” commented Elijah as he shut the cupboard. He must have been keeping half an eye on him, too, Sean realized. “I’m sorry if you’d rather have had coffee, but you were in pretty bad shape when I found you last night, between the cold and those scratches, and the tea has a lot of healing properties. It’ll really help your sore throat and stiff muscles. The taste’s a little bitter, but there’s honey on the table you can use to sweeten it.”

Sean took a sip of the muddy-looking brew, and made a face. It was bitter all right. He reached for the honey pot, and added a couple of teaspoons. Sweetened, the tea didn’t taste too bad, and he had to admit that his raw throat started to feel better almost at once. “You’re right,” he said, sounding more like his normal self. “It does help.” He took another sip and felt the soothing warmth spread through his aching body.

Elijah came to the table juggling two plates piled high with pancakes and two bowls filled with fresh fruit salad. He slid a plate of pancakes and a bowl of fruit in front of Sean. “I’m glad. As for those scratches, I cleaned them as best I could last night and put salve on them but you’ll need to look after them, Sean,” Elijah cautioned as he sat down. Maggie jumped up onto the chair next to him and began industriously cleaning her whiskers with one dainty white paw. “You don’t want to risk
getting an infection.”

“I’ll look after them,” Sean promised while a little firefly of warmth sparked in the pit of his stomach at Elijah’s obviously genuine concern, and at the mental image conjured by his words: those small fingers carefully smoothing ointment on his face and hands. He wished he had been awake, but at least he had the memory of Elijah’s gentle voice soothing him when he woke from that nightmare, and of his hand stroking over Sean’s hair...

“Eat up,” Elijah said, and Sean started and turned his attention to his food.

There were butter and real maple syrup on the table. Sean threw his ongoing diet to the winds, added both to his pancakes, and cut into the stack with his fork and knife. He took a bite and nearly moaned aloud. Chris never bought or made them anything even remotely fattening, since they both found it all too easy to put on a few pounds if they weren’t careful, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d indulged in something this rich. “God, these are fantastic, Elijah. Did you make them with fresh blueberries?”

“Huckleberries are what we call them here in the pines,” Elijah corrected him, though he looked pleased by Sean’s enthusiastic reaction. “But nope, they’re frozen. From my own backyard, but they’d taste even better fresh.”

“It’s hard to imagine anything could taste better than this,” Sean said thickly as he savored the melt-in-your-mouth sweetness mixed with the tart tang of the huckleberries.

For some time, the two men concentrated on their food in silence, but it was an undemanding sort of silence, as if there was nothing that needed to be said that couldn’t wait until they were done. The contrast between this restful atmosphere and the hectic lifestyle dominated by cell phone calls and business meetings that had become Sean’s lot was stark indeed. I’m not going to think about it, Sean vowed. I’m just going to enjoy the peace and quiet while I can.

The kitchen table was positioned directly in front of the picture window, and through it Sean could see a small barn with a split rail paddock attached. In the paddock were a pair of blanketed horses, one brown and one chestnut, standing head to tail; a very fuzzy gray donkey nosing at a pile of hay; and a sheep curled up dozing in the pale winter sun. There were several birdfeeders located around the yard, all of them doing brisk business, and there was what Sean took to be a rabbit hutch although Peter Rabbit was not currently in evidence. Elijah was an animal lover, it seemed.

“You said you’re a licensed wildlife rehabilitator ‘among other things’, Elijah. What else do you do?” Sean finally broke the silence, hoping Elijah wouldn’t think he was being intrusive again. Chris was always warning him not to be so nosy with strangers. But then her interest in people normally didn’t extend beyond their potential as a client for the business- and she most definitely would not put Elijah in that category. Thank God. Sean was so sick and tired of talking to people with dollar signs in their eyes.

But Elijah didn’t seem to mind the question; in fact, a small smile tuck in the corners of his lips as he replied, “I’m a woodjin.”

“A what?” The word was totally unfamiliar to Sean.

“A woodjin.” Elijah spelled the strange word for him. “That’s what we call it in the pines. I suppose you’d call it a guide.”

“Do you mean nature trails and hiking? A sort of forest ranger?” Sean hazarded, with only the most vague concept of what that would entail. He was swimming out of his depth, and he knew it.
The smile had widened. Elijah looked almost as if he was enjoying a private joke. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Aren’t you awfully young to be a forest ranger?” Sean asked in surprise. “I mean, no offense, but I’d have guessed you were still in college.”

Elijah sighed as if he’d heard that comment before. “The curse of my baby face,” he complained. “I’m twenty-five- or as close as makes no difference.” He hesitated for a moment and then said, “Besides, I’ve lived here in the pines since I was born, Sean, and no one knows the area better than I do. I’ve been a woodjin for ten years now.”

Sean considered this statement while he mopped up a little pool of maple syrup with his remaining piece of pancake. Elijah had presented him with an opening… if he wanted to take it.

Elijah had been wonderful not to press Sean for any explanation for exactly how he’d ended up unconscious outside his house last night. But he simply wouldn’t be human if he wasn’t at least a little bit curious, would he? And besides, now that some time had passed and bright daylight had chased the shadows from the woods, Sean realized that he wanted to tell Elijah what had happened. He felt an almost compelling need to share the fantastical events with someone.

It was out of the question to tell Chris, of course. She would almost certainly consider it another manifestation of what she persisted in calling Sean’s ‘mid-life crisis’, and advise him, yet again, to see a shrink. He couldn’t imagine either Mackenzie or Anna believing him, and he’d lost touch with his few close high school and college friends in the years since graduation, since the business, and Chris, had taken over his life...

But Sean had a feeling that Elijah might actually believe him, or at the very least be receptive- as receptive as anyone possibly could be to such a wild story in this day and age.

“If that’s the case,” Sean said at last, hoping his intuition was on target and Elijah wouldn’t come to the conclusion that he was completely nuts, “then you’d be familiar with the wild animals that live around here as well as the, um, local legends, right?”

“Yeah, I’m familiar with them,” Elijah replied, and once more that tiny smile quirked his lips. “And local legends have always been sort of a special interest of mine.”

Sean set down his fork and knife on his now empty plate. He stared out the window at the sunlit yard with its bucolic scenery, and beyond it the forest of pines and scrub oaks that appeared so benign in the daylight. It seemed almost incredible that just last night he had been literally running for his life through those trees. He transferred his gaze to his abused hands: the network of vivid red scratches that crisscrossed them reminded him that it was anything but incredible.

“Elijah,” he began hesitantly, “I’m sure you’re curious about what happened to me last night, and I feel I owe you an explanation, especially after all your kindness to me. But it’s going to sound, well, crazy, to put it mildly.”

“Unless you tell me you met the Loch Ness Monster and the Yeti in the woods last night, Sean, trust me, nothing you tell me will seem crazy.”

Sean looked at Elijah sharply. The young man’s face was no longer smiling but serious, those intensely blue eyes steady on his own. Jesus, those eyes… he could lose himself in them, forget about everything… and be happy to do so… Sean brought himself up short, but for a moment it was a struggle to remember what they’d been talking about.
“I’m a good listener, Sean,” Elijah continued quietly. “And I promise, I won’t pass judgment on anything you tell me.”

Sean began to fiddle with the half-empty mug, turning it round and round on the tablecloth, staring into the murky brown depths while he steeled himself to begin.

“The truth is,” he said at last, abruptly, “I didn’t meet the Loch Ness Monster or the Yeti in the woods last night, but something equally as unlikely. It was... It was...” Shit, I can’t bring myself to say it aloud, it’s too ridiculous.

“The Jersey Devil?” Elijah supplied when Sean hesitated.

“But how...?” He hadn’t expected such immediate understanding, such calm acceptance.

Elijah smiled faintly. “I told you, I’ve lived here my entire life. I’ve even seen the Jersey Devil myself a time or two. Besides, what else could it have been to make you so hesitant to speak its name aloud? People nowadays are afraid to believe in anything that smacks of the otherworldly. But most legends are founded in some degree of truth, Sean. The Jersey Devil exists. You aren’t crazy or delusional.”

The matter of fact manner in which Elijah spoke was as reassuring as his actual words. Sean hadn’t realized just how tense he was until that moment, until he felt his shoulders imperceptibly relax as if a weight had been lifted from them.

“I know this is going to sound strange, Elijah, considering that it’s some kind of monster we’re talking about, but I’ve got to admit that it’s a relief to hear you say that it wasn’t a figment of my imagination,” Sean said. “But Jesus, you sound so calm. That thing I encountered last night was no laughing matter.”

“No, he wasn’t,” agreed Elijah soberly. “It must have been a pretty terrifying experience for you.”

“I’ve never been scared so shitless in my entire life, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. Of course I’ve heard of the Jersey Devil, who hasn’t? Hell, New Jersey even has a hockey team named after him. But I never for one moment imagined all that hype was based on something real.” Sean felt a chill, remembering those pitiless red eyes glowing in the darkness and the shadowy impressions of vast wings and razor-sharp claws.

“Oh, he’s real all right, although some of the stories you’ve probably heard or read are apocryphal.” Elijah leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on the table, hands lightly clasped. “You know, you really don’t owe me any explanations, Sean. If you don’t want to talk about what happened, if it’s too upsetting for you to relive it, it’s okay.”

But oddly, Sean sensed a hint of sadness behind the words. He didn’t understand why Elijah should be sad, but a sudden compulsion seized him to reach out across the table, to cradle that pale cheek with his hand, to offer comfort and to... undoubtedly scare or offend the shit out of Elijah and cause him to send Sean packing pronto.

Instead, he shook his head and gripped the mug hard enough to make the scratches on his hands pull and sting. “No, it’s not too upsetting; as a matter of fact, it’d be a relief to tell someone- someone who won’t think I’m crazy, that is.”

“Then please, go ahead,” Elijah invited, and settled a little in his seat, fixing his eyes on Sean’s face.

Elijah was looking at him in a way that was unlike anything Sean had ever experienced before. It was as if every atom of his being was completely focused on Sean to the exclusion of all else, as if
there was nothing more important at that moment than listening. It made Sean feel for the first time in
a very long time that someone honestly and truly cared what he had to say, that it wasn’t a polite
pretense.

“Thank you,” he said, as a surge of gratitude for Elijah’s kindness warmed him inside as effectively
as the tea he was drinking. “All right. Here we go then…”

To his relief, Sean was able to tell Elijah about the fantastic events of the previous evening
conherently, concisely and without emotion. Maybe it was because he was aware every second of
that intent blue gaze on him, steady and non-judgmental as Elijah had promised. Sean didn’t go into
his reasons for leaving the city in the dead of winter to drive to his summer beach house. He was
afraid that once he got started on that topic, he’d never shut up, and Elijah certainly didn’t deserve to
be subjected to the pathetic, irrelevent details of Sean’s personal life.

But when Sean finally reached the part of his story where he stumbled to his hands and knees in the
sand and looked up to see the white stag, he fell silent, for it was enormously difficult to put into
words the absolute wonder and magic of that moment. Elijah didn’t press him to go on, however,
only waited. But the very air suddenly seemed hushed and waiting with him. Even Rocky had
stopped his quiet conversation with himself atop the refrigerator, and Maggie’s huge amber eyes
were fixed unblinkingly on his face.

Sean took another sip of his now lukewarm tea, then said slowly, “If you’re interested in local
legends then I expect you’re familiar with the legend of the White Stag of Shamong?”

“I am.” Elijah dropped his eyes for the first time and began to fidget with his knife and fork, turning
them over and over, while the unusual silver ring he wore caught at the light. Sean wondered idly
what the engraving on it meant; the letters weren’t from any language he recognized. “The white stag
has been living in the pines for as long as the Jersey Devil has, Sean, since the 18th century…
though far fewer outsiders have seen or even heard of him. He doesn’t have so much as a pee wee
baseball team named after him,” Elijah joked lightly.

But Sean didn’t laugh. “What about you?” he wanted to know. ”Have you ever seen him?”

Elijah nodded without looking up. “From time to time.”

Sean would have asked him when and where he had seen the stag, but there was something in
Elijah’s voice that told Sean he didn’t want to be questioned about it. Sean could respect his
reticence- after all, wasn’t he having trouble talking about the white stag himself?

“Well, you must suspect what I’m leading up to here, Elijah. It wasn’t just the Jersey Devil I
encountered last night, but the white stag, too. In fact, he’s the only reason I’m still alive to tell you
about all this. He fought off the Devil and then carried me here.” Sean shook his head and huffed a
small laugh. “You know, it’s a damn good thing you have that book on Pine Barrens folklore in the
bathroom, or I’d be doubting my sanity for sure.”

The sudden upward sweep of long black lashes and the vivid blue revealed as Elijah finally raised
his eyes was so startling that Sean’s breath actually caught. Those eyes… Memory stirred and
vanished again, elusive as quicksilver. And in any case, Elijah’s next words drove everything else
away.

“That’s why I put the book there last night, Sean. I was hoping you’d be curious enough to pick it up
and read it, and it might relieve your mind a little if you were worrying or wondering.”

“You put the book there last night?” Sean repeated. “You mean… you knew that the white stag
“I guessed. But it wasn’t hard to guess, Sean. It’s not the first time the stag has brought a lost or injured traveler here,” Elijah explained.

“I see.”

Why that explanation should be so deflating, Sean couldn’t say. Yet he had felt something… some profound connection… with the white stag when their eyes met across that starlit clearing. But it was ridiculous to think that that connection was unique to him, or that bringing him here had been some extraordinary act. If the stag rescued others like Sean, where else would he bring them for aid but to this kind and compassionate young man?

“Were they also victims of the Jersey Devil?” Sean asked, suppressing his childish and unworthy feelings, ashamed of them.

Elijah shook his head. “Not necessarily. People become lost in the pines for a lot of different reasons, not just because the Devil tricks them with an ignis fatuus. The Pine Barrens cover over 3000 square miles, Sean, and even he can’t be everywhere at once.”

“What’s an ignis fatuus?”

“A will o’ the wisp,” Elijah said. “The yellow light that you saw, that he used to draw you into the woods. He’s a trickster, Sean, and very clever.”

“I guess you’re going to tell me that he disabled my car, too, huh?” Sean said, and understood completely now Elijah’s cryptic words of earlier that morning.

“I’m afraid so. You definitely stopped in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Well, all I can say is, he’s one hell of a mechanic,” Sean commented dryly, and unexpectedly Elijah burst into laughter, rocking back in his chair and startling Rocky, who began chattering indignantly again, and Maggie, who let out a plaintive meow.

“I’m sorry,” Elijah apologized when he finally regained control of himself, but Sean saw absolutely no reason for him to apologize. Elijah’s laughing face was lit by an inner glow that made the sun appear dim by comparison. “But I’d never expect someone who’s just been through what you have to start making jokes about it.”

“I can only joke about it because I survived more or less in one piece,” Sean replied. “Otherwise I’d be cowering under the table with my head over my arms.”

Elijah grinned. “Somehow I doubt that.”

Sean grinned back, but the grin faded and he grew thoughtful. “When I was a kid,” he said, “all my favorite books were fairy tales, especially the ones that had fantastical creatures in them like unicorns and dragons. I used to dream about them and wish I could meet one for real some day.” He gave a huff of disbelief. “And now I have, Elijah. Last night I was privileged to see a fairy tale creature step right out of the pages of a book and into my life, and he was more beautiful and more magical than in any dream I ever had. I guess when it comes right down to it I wouldn’t trade what happened last night for anything. I’m so damned lucky to have met the white stag.”

There was a silence.

“You really feel that way, don’t you,” Elijah said with evident amazement, and Sean sensed a
sudden difference in the younger man, as if something had shifted inside him, some invisible barrier relaxed. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“Yeah, I do. There’s so little magic left in the world anymore, Elijah.”

“You’ve got it backwards,” Elijah replied. “The magic is still there. It always has been and it always will be. What’s missing are the people like you, people who are willing to open their eyes and see the magic in front of them. That makes you pretty special, Sean.”

This time it was Sean’s turn to blush, and he felt his entire body grow warm. “No, I’m not,” he protested, squirming a little in his seat in his embarrassment. “Believe me, I’m probably the most boringly ordinary guy in the entire country.”

Elijah only smiled and said, “Well, we could argue about it, Sean, but if you’re done eating, I have a few animals I need to check on- how about instead we go outside and I'll introduce you to the rest of my menagerie?” Elijah hesitated then, as if hit by a sudden thought. “Unless you’re in a hurry to get on your way, that is,” he said, sounding awkward. “I don't want to hold you up.”

_I’d welcome any excuse to stay, Elijah._ For a moment, Sean was afraid he’d spoken the words aloud. “I’d love to meet your menagerie, and you won’t be holding me up,” was what he actually said. “And thank you, Elijah. For everything.”

This time Elijah didn’t reply. ‘You don’t have to thank me, Sean, we take care of each other around here.’ He said: "Thank you, Sean, for trusting me."
Sean rose from the table and began gathering up the dirty dishes.

“You don’t have to do that, Sean,” Elijah protested, leaning across the table and holding out his hands. “You’re my guest. I’ll take care of the cleaning up.”

“You’ve done enough for me already,” Sean replied firmly, picking up the plates and bowls he’d stacked in a pile. “It’s the least I can do.”

Elijah subsided, and studied Sean as he moved toward the sink. “How are you feeling?”

“A little stiff, but that’s all,” Sean assured him, carefully setting the dishes down in one half of the double stainless steel sink. “Your herbal tea certainly works wonders, Elijah. It’s a hell of a lot more effective than Advil or Tylenol.” He turned on the hot water tap and reached for a plastic pump bottle filled with green liquid soap.

“Uh-uh.”

The now-familiar scents of bayberry, of wood smoke, pinesap and dried grasses seemed to enfold Sean in their embrace as a flannel-covered arm reached around him and turned the faucet off again. There was a light touch of fingers on his back that sparked prickles of awareness on Sean’s skin right through the thick cotton of his sweatshirt. But as quickly as the touch was there, it was withdrawn, and Elijah stepped back.
“It won’t do your hands any good to be washing dishes, Sean,” Elijah scolded.

Sean turned to find Elijah standing with hands on his narrow hips, frowning at him. He supposed this was Elijah attempting to be stern, but the effect on Sean was something else altogether.

“But it’s Palmolive,” Sean spoke lightly, indicating the green soap, although Elijah was probably too young to get the joke, and would wonder what the hell he was talking about.

But apparently Elijah did get it, for a giggle escaped him. He looked a bit self-conscious, as if the infectious sound embarrassed him as much as it delighted Sean. “As a matter of fact, it’s not Palmolive, but a ridiculously overpriced brand from the Whole Foods Market. My sister Hannah teases me for always buying organic, but,” he shrugged, “the balance of nature here in the Pine Barrens is more delicate than most places. I figure anything I can do to help…”

“You have a sister?” Sean was taken by surprise, although his reaction was patently absurd. Obviously Elijah had parents and a family like everyone else, for god’s sake.

Elijah was grinning, amused by Sean’s surprise. “Yeah, I have a sister. She and her family live outside Philly. And I have a brother, too- Zachary. He lives with my mom in Iowa.”

“Your folks like Biblical names, huh?” Sean regretted the comment at once, for Elijah’s face went still, the grin vanishing in a heartbeat.

“Yeah.” Elijah pursed his lips and let out a low whistle. Rocky immediately leapt down from the refrigerator to crouch on Elijah’s shoulder, his tail folded neatly over his back and his tiny paws grasping the collar of the flannel shirt. “This way,” Elijah said, stepping back.

Sean had the distinct impression that the ‘no trespassing’ sign had been raised again.

“We’ll go out through the mudroom,” Elijah said. “I left your sneakers and jacket there last night when I brought you inside. The sneakers are okay, although I had to dump about a pound of sand out of each of them, but your jacket…” Elijah looked apologetic. “I’m afraid it’s pretty much history, Sean.”

“I figured that,” Sean sighed as he followed Elijah toward a side door he hadn’t noticed until then. “Shit. Chris is going to be so pissed off at me…” He stopped, simultaneously angry with himself for bringing her up, and swamped by the familiar feelings of guilt and soul-deep unhappiness that had sent him fleeing from the city, from Chris and their life there.

“Chris?” Elijah glanced curiously at Sean. “Who’s he?”

“She,” Sean corrected automatically. “Christine. She’s my…” Sean groped for the words to describe exactly what Chris was to him. Girlfriend? For a 35-year old man, that sounded ridiculous. Significant other? He’d always hated that expression. Partner? Maybe she was in the business, but in his personal life… He no longer thought of what they shared in private as a partnership: that implied a willingness to work as a team, and those days were now gone- if they’d ever really existed, that is. “We live together,” he settled on finally.

“Oh I see,” Elijah said. “God, I’m sorry, Sean, I didn’t mean to imply that you… That she…” Red blotches blossomed on the pale skin of his neck, and his ears were burning. He was clearly mortified by his mistaken assumption about Chris’s gender and what it implied.

“Elijah, it was a natural mistake,” he assured the young man gently. “‘Chris’ is usually thought of as a man’s name. It’s no big deal. Forget about it, okay?”
Elijah nodded and held open the door for Sean, but he looked subdued, and it felt to Sean as if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

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The mudroom was noticeably colder than the rest of the house. The floor was cement, although there was a runner of green indoor-outdoor carpet from the kitchen door to the door outside. The room was as scrupulously clean and organized as the others Sean had seen, and the various bottles and cans of cleaning products, the brooms and mops and pails, the gardening tools and bags of fertilizer and potting soil, were all tidily arranged.

There was a cat flap in the outside door, and Maggie suddenly streaked past and pushed through it. Rocky, chattering excitedly as if not wishing to be left behind, scrambled down from Elijah’s shoulder as if descending a tree, then, tail flicking, scampered after Maggie, and disappeared outside, too.

Sean found his jacket hanging where a row of hooks lined the wall on one side. He took it down and grimaced as he examined it. The butter-soft black leather was scored or torn in at least a dozen places, and covered with streaks of sap. Elijah was right: the jacket was history. Somehow the sight of it, even more than his scratched hands and face, brought home the reality of what had happened last night, and what he had so nearly escaped.

“Jesus, I know the distressed look is all the fashion these days, but this is ridiculous,” he said, holding up the jacket.

Elijah had pulled on a fleece lined canvas barn jacket, and was now sitting on an overturned metal bucket, tugging on thick white socks and tan work boots. “Do you always joke about the serious stuff?” he asked.

“I told you, it’s either that or cower under the table with my arms over my head,” Sean said. “But I suppose I get that from my dad. He always believed that there was nothing so bad you couldn’t get through it if you kept your sense of humor.” He no longer saw the jacket in his hands, but an image of the father he had loved and lost too young. “He kept his sense of humor right up until the very end, Elijah, even when his body was eaten up by cancer.”

“How old were you when he died?” Elijah asked softly.

“Sixteen.”

Sean started to put his right arm in the sleeve of his jacket, but stopped when Elijah said, “You don’t have to wear that, Sean. I have a coat you can borrow.”

Elijah finished tying the lace of his boot and got up. He took a blaze orange down jacket from another of the hooks. “Here, you can wear this,” he said quietly. “It belonged to my dad. He was a bigger guy than me, so it ought to fit you okay, and it’s nice and warm.”

“Thanks.” Sean took the coat, and one glance into Elijah’s eyes told him that here was a sorrow they shared. “How old were you when your dad died?”

“Fifteen.”

“It’s rough.”

“Yeah, it is.”
“Do you mind if I asked what happened to him?”

Elijah stared down at the floor, clearly lost in some memory of the past. “There was… an accident. I can’t really talk about it, Sean. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pried.” Way to go, Astin, you prick.

But Elijah set one small hand on Sean’s arm. “It’s not that. It’s just kind of… well, not possible to tell you. I would if I could. You’re too hard on yourself, you know.” He removed his hand and smiled and the shadow that had dimmed his expression finally passed. “Your sneakers are over there in the corner. I’ll see you outside in a few minutes, okay?”

Sean watched Elijah go out the door and head across the yard. He felt stunned. How many times had his dad said those very words to him? You’re too hard on yourself, son. You can’t take the world’s troubles on your shoulders. It was partly knowing what his dad would think of the road his life had taken that had convinced Sean to take the step that in his heart he had longed to for years: to get away. To try and figure out exactly who Sean Astin was and what he really wanted from life. Elijah’s words were like a dim echo from the past, and as he stooped to pick up his running shoes, Sean felt almost as if his dad had given him a message.

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Although it was still bitter out, the wind was quiet and the sun, unimpeded by clouds, managed to take the edge off the cold. He’d always loved the fresh salt air of the shore, but the scent of pine would forever now evoke memories of the white stag, and Sean drew a deep breath and for a moment the faint image of ebon antlers and great dark eyes rose before him.

Elijah was at the paddock, leaning against the fence with one foot propped on the lower railing, while the horses Sean had seen from the window ambled over to him. He waved to Sean, and said, “Come and meet Sonny and Cher.”

Up close and personal, the two horses were tall as towers with hooves the size of platters, though they seemed placid enough and their brown eyes looked kindly.

“Sonny and Cher?” Sean raised his eyebrows, and Elijah laughed.

“This one can’t be blamed on me, Sean. Hannah named them; they belong to her. I’m just the guy who feeds and grooms them and mucks out their stalls.” He rolled his eyes, but it was plain from the expectant way Sonny and Cher were nosing at his jacket that they were accustomed to being spoiled. “Sonny arrived first- he’s the chestnut- and when Hannah got her second horse and it was a mare, the Cher was unfortunately inevitable.”

Elijah gently pushed a questing muzzle away and searched in his pocket. “Here Sean,” he said after a moment. “The quickest way to make friends with a horse is through its stomach.” He held out several lumps of somewhat linty sugar.

“You want me to feed them?” Sean asked in dismay, visualizing the size of the teeth inside those large mouths.

“I take it you don’t have much to do with horses,” Elijah commented, amused.

“Afraid not. When I was a kid, I used to think it would be cool to be a mounted police officer, but it never got beyond the fantasy stage.” Still, Sean accepted the sugar, figuring Elijah wouldn’t have
gone to all the trouble of caring for his hands only to let them be chomped off at the wrists by the horses. Sonny and Cher immediately transferred their attention to Sean, both whickering with enthusiasm and stretching their long necks over the top of the fence.

“Put the sugar on the flat of your palm, Sean, and hold it out,” Elijah directed.

Sean did as instructed. One at a time, he held out his hands cautiously, palm upward, and the horses swept the sugar into their mouths with surprising delicacy and crunched on it contentedly; the tickle of their scratchy whiskers and the velvet softness of their muzzles reminded him of the white stag.

“Do you ride?” Sean asked, reaching up to pat Sonny gingerly on the neck; the chestnut’s thick winter coat was soft and warm, like the stag’s had been, only not, to Sean’s mind, quite as soft nor did it have the gleaming luster of a pearl.

“No, I never really wanted to learn. Riding was always Hannah’s thing. She was really good, too,” Elijah said proudly. “You should see all the ribbons and trophies she won.”

Elijah was scratching Cher at the top of her neck, and the mare’s eyelids were half-closed with pleasure. Her long black forelock nearly covered her deep brown eyes, and Sean decided that a Cher-like effect was definitely going on there.

Maggie suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and jumped on the top railing of the fence. She began walking along it with the precise grace of a tightrope artist, tail raised on high. Rocky was nowhere in sight, but Sean heard a distant chattering sound that he thought was probably the squirrel.

Sean was suddenly reminded of a Disney movie that he’d seen as a child, about an orange and white cat who’d been left for dead but was magically returned to life by a woman the locals called a witch. What was the cat’s name? Thomasina, that was it. There was a little girl, too, and the kid’s father, a bitter and cynical old bastard who’d fallen in love with the witch... *Don’t go there, Sean,* he told himself.

“Your sister doesn’t ride anymore?” he asked, leaning his elbows on the railing as Sonny moved away. The chestnut went over to lip at the pile of hay on the ground.

“Not as much as she used to,” Elijah replied. “Oh, when Hannah visits, she’ll throw a saddle on one of them and go out on the trails, but she gave up the serious competitions after she met Lawrence in college. They were married a couple of years ago, and they’ve got a son, Jordan. He’s a year old, and cute as a button.” Elijah gave Cher a final pat on the neck and stepped back. “So these two hang out here, mooch sugar and carrots and live the good life. Hannah couldn’t bear to sell either of them.”

“You’re a good brother, to take on that responsibility.”

Elijah shrugged. “She’s my sister, and besides...” He hesitated, and then seemed to think better of what he was going to say. Instead, he asked: “What about you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“One younger brother, Mackenzie,” Sean replied, wondering what Elijah had been going to say. “He lives in LA, and he’s an actor. Mack’s been in a few TV commercials, done some voiceover work.”

*But most of the time he expects me to support him.* Sean pushed the ungenerous thought away; it was his own fault, after all, if Mack had grown to expect Sean would send him money whenever he asked.

A harsh braying sound interrupted their conversation. It was the gray donkey, wandering over for his
"This is Paco," said Elijah, his voice softening so noticeably that Sean was surprised, for the donkey, unlike the horses, had anything but a kindly look about him. He butted his bony head roughly into Elijah’s middle through the fence, but instead of backing away, Elijah bent to duck between the bottom two rails of the paddock, and slipped inside. He put his arms around the donkey's scrawny neck and hugged him.

It struck Sean how physical Elijah was, how unafraid to show his emotions, how he hugged and touched as naturally as breathing. That sort of effortless affection had never existed in Sean’s family and he envied it. But even more, he wished that he could be the one on the receiving end of that loving hug.

The very thought caused a spark of flame to kindle in the pit of his stomach and even lower, but he fought against it. Elijah couldn’t possibly welcome that sort of attention from Sean, a near stranger. And yet at the same time, Sean felt a sense of relief at his body’s response. It had been so long since he’d felt anything even remotely like desire, and he’d sometimes wondered if he was even capable of it any more. He and Chris hadn’t had sex in weeks, and their lovemaking had never been more than lukewarm at the best of times. He’d come to regard that as yet another of his many failings, but he knew with unshakeable certainty that there would be nothing lukewarm about loving someone like Elijah…

Don’t go there, he warned himself yet again.

“What is Paco’s story?” he asked. “He seems kind of, um, cranky, for lack of a better word.”

Nothing could have appeared less like the magnificent white stag than this sway-backed creature with his comical ears and protruding lower lip, but Elijah clearly looked at him through different eyes.

“With good reason, Sean,” Elijah said as he dug a few more sugar cubes out of his pockets for Paco. “He and Dolly- that’s the sheep- came from a farm in Pennsylvania. The owners kept a small petting zoo there, but when they went bankrupt some years ago, they abandoned the animals to starve- not that Paco and Dolly had much of a life before then anyway. Hannah heard about it and contacted me and I offered to give them a home. They’ve both come a long way since then, no pun intended, but if anyone but me tries to get this close to Paco, he'll kick and bite at you; Dolly will run and hide. That’s why she hasn’t come over. If you could have seen them when they first arrived here… well, you’d understand why they don’t trust people.” Elijah’s face was somber, his eyes dark with remembered pain.

Sean looked at the little sheep curled up in the sunshine, its sandy white fleece speckled with bits of straw, and wondered on a surge of impotent anger how anyone could have abused her. “Jesus, the world is a fucked up place sometimes,” he said, shaking his head. “But I’ve met people in the city like you, Elijah, people who devote their lives to rescuing abandoned and abused animals. It takes a very special kind of person to take on such a responsibility.”

After feeding Paco one final piece of sugar, Elijah ducked back under the fence again. When he straightened, his cheeks were flushed, from cold or possibly embarrassment, and his eyes seemed to have absorbed the very blue from the sky. Sean felt dizzied by the sight. “How could anyone refuse to help an animal in need, Sean? And the truth is, I get back as much as I give, and more.”

“I’ve never had a pet,” Sean said regretfully. “I pestered my folks for a dog or cat when I was growing up, but unfortunately my mom’s allergic. And now Chris says I’m gone too much, and she doesn’t want to be stuck taking care of it when I’m away.” He sighed. “She’s right, of course. I do a lot of traveling for my business.”
Elijah began leading the way toward the barn, Maggie trotting along the fence railing beside him. “I really envy you that, Sean. I’ve never been farther from home than Philadelphia or New York. So where exactly have you traveled?” he asked with genuine interest, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet as he walked.

“Where haven’t I traveled is probably a better question,” Sean laughed. “The Middle East, Africa, South America, Australia, Russia, China, just about every country in Europe…”

“Wow. You must have had some brilliant experiences.”

“It’s nowhere near as glamorous as it sounds, Elijah, trust me. All the hotels start to look alike after a while, and there isn’t usually much time for sightseeing.”

“You sound jaded,” Elijah observed, looking disappointed. “Surely it can’t be that bad to see the world!”

“It’s different when you’re there on business, instead of because you simply want to be. It’s not that I haven’t seen some wonderful sights or met interesting people, it’s just…” Sean raised his hands, “not the same, you know?”

Elijah considered this, frowning a little, and nodded. “I guess I can understand that. But at least tell me the most beautiful place you’ve ever been.”

Where I am right this very minute, Sean was tempted to reply, and with perfect truth. “It’d be impossible to choose only one, Elijah. There’s something beautiful about every one of the places I’ve been.” He smiled. “But maybe one of these days you’ll get a chance to do some traveling, and you can see for yourself.”

A peculiar look passed over Elijah’s face then. Sean couldn’t figure it out. It wasn’t sadness or disappointment, exactly, but more like… acceptance? “I don’t know if that’ll ever happen, Sean,” he said quietly. “It’s hard to travel when you have animals to care for and responsibilities that you can’t turn over to simply anyone.”

“You’re awfully young to be certain of that,” Sean pointed out. “Life can be so unexpected. After all, look at what happened to me yesterday. I’d never in a million years have believed it possible- but it was. Don’t assume your path is set in stone.”

“Maybe.” Elijah sounded noncommittal. “But it’ll be some years, at any rate, before I can go very far from home.” They’d reached the barn by then, and Elijah took hold of the handle and slid the rough-hewn wooden door open only wide enough for them to fit through. “I don’t want to let in the cold,” he said as he gestured to Sean to go inside. Maggie jumped down from the fence and darted ahead of him.

Sean was beginning to expect the unexpected from Elijah Wood, but even so, he was startled, for this end of the barn resembled nothing so much as a small animal hospital. There were wire mesh cages along one wall, several larger pens at the far end, a stainless steel examining table, scales, a refrigerator and on the opposite wall a row of cabinets, a sink and a long counter filled with medical supplies. There was a propane heater standing in one corner that was the source of the room’s warmth.

“This is impressive, Elijah,” said Sean as he gazed around him.

“My dad started it,” Elijah said as he flipped on a light switch. He ran a hand through his hair and looked a bit rueful. “But I take after him. I was always bringing home strays from the time I was a
kid. It drove my mom nuts sometimes, especially with folks calling or dropping animals off here all the time for us to take care of. Between me and my dad, it was a real menagerie most of the time.”

Sean could picture a young Elijah, all big blue eyes, trailing home with a stray puppy at his heels. It was an image that charmed and warmed him inside.

“How many animals are you caring for right now?” Sean asked as he followed Elijah over to the row of cages.

“Only three, fortunately: a pair of orphaned baby squirrels and an opossum that was hit by a car and has a broken leg.” Elijah stopped in front of one of the cages. Sean came to his side and peered into the straw that lined the bottom. The opossum with its hairless long tail and pink snout was an unlovely creature, but sorry looking, too; its left hind leg was in a splint wrapped round with bright green tape. It roused and blinked sleepily at them when Elijah unhooked the latch of its cage.

“Whew!” Sean exclaimed, catching a whiff of the opossum. “What a smell.”

“Opossums have a very strong odor, Sean.” He gave Sean a mischievous sidelong look. “I told you I’d encountered worse, remember?”

Sean resisted the urge to pinch his nostrils shut. If Elijah could take it, so could he.

Elijah reached into the cage and lifted the opossum out. “He’s been healing well. I can remove his splint today, and release him in a few more days.”

“Aren’t you worried about getting bitten?” Sean asked, amazed that Elijah could handle the wild creature without gloves or any other protective gear. Yet the opossum didn’t struggle or even try to play dead as Elijah carried him over to the table and set him down on a piece of thick white fleece that he’d draped over the top.

“No, I’m not worried. Animals have always trusted me, Sean. It’s a sort of… gift I have.”

“What is this strange power you have over horses?” The silly movie quote slipped out before he could stop it.

He grimaced, but to his astonishment, Elijah said, “Horsepower,” while that infectious giggle escaped him again. “Fred and Ginger in Top Hat, right? Are you a fan of old movies, too, Sean?” he asked eagerly as he began to unwind the green tape with deft and careful fingers.

“Guilty as charged. I really love old movies. My favorite is Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. What about you?”

“Harvey,” Elijah said at once.

“I might have guessed. So, do your friends all call you Elwood?”

“One or two have, over the years.” Elijah had reached the end of the tape. He wadded it up into a ball and set it aside. “I don’t have many.” He flushed a little as he removed the splint and set the two pieces next to the tape. “Friends I mean. Not those kinds of friends anyway. The people who live around here, Sean… they’re mostly older, my parents’ age or older, and they’d never be comfortable calling me by a nickname. Not too many people my age stay in the Pines. They leave for the cities, like Hannah did. There’s so much more opportunity for work. The old ways of life here are slowly dying.”

“You’ve stayed.” What about your mom and brother? he wanted to ask, but that was no doubt part
of the ‘no trespassing’ zone, and none of his business.

“I could never leave,” Elijah replied quietly. “This is my home, where I belong.”

Sean could hear the absolute conviction behind the simple words. What must it be like, to be certain of your right place in this world? Sean still didn’t know where his right place in the world was; he so often felt adrift, a lost traveler without any true roots.

And yet at the same time, Sean couldn’t help but wonder if Elijah was lonely. He seemed so grounded, so strong and self-sufficient, but it must be difficult to see the friends and acquaintances of your own age moving away, moving on to different lives. Sean knew better than anyone how appearances could be deceiving, how you could look like you had your act together even while your life was crumbling around you.

Elijah had taken the opossum’s injured leg in his hands and was gently manipulating it, his brow furrowed in concentration.

“How’s his leg?” Sean asked.

Elijah’s brow smoothed, and he smiled. “Fixed. He’s healed about as well as I could possibly have hoped for. Let’s see how he gets around, though. I’m going to move him to one of the larger pens now so he’ll have more space.”

“Not that I know much about it, but he sure looks sound to me,” Sean said a few minutes later as a seemingly healthy and happy opossum scurried around the pen, exploring his new, more spacious quarters. “You really know your stuff.”

“I can’t do a lot, not like a real vet, but the simple things like splinting and stitching I can usually handle. And now this guy needs some food.” Elijah went to the refrigerator and took out two plastic containers. “Earthworms and rotten fruit.”

Sean made a face. “Ugh.”

Elijah grinned as he filled a bowl with the unappetizing mixture. “You’re not thinking like an opossum, Sean. To him this is a banquet. But don’t watch if you’re squeamish.” He carried the bowl to the pen and set it inside.

But Sean did watch with a sort of morbid fascination as the opossum hurried over and began to chow down on his food. “Well, whatever turns you on, I guess.”

Elijah’s laughing glance met his and for a moment the world seemed to stutter and come to a halt. Then he looked away and moved across the room to what looked like a sort of homemade incubator with a heat lamp at one end. “Here are the babies. Take a look, Sean. They’re really cute.”

“God, they’re so small,” Sean said, staring at the gray-furred babies wrestling playfully together in a nest of white tissues, emitting tiny squeaks. “How old are they?”

“About six weeks old,” Elijah replied. “Their eyes have only been open for a few days. How would you like to help me feed them?”

“If you’re sure I won’t do anything stupid and harm them,” Sean said dubiously.

“I’m sure.” Elijah took a can of Esbilac out of one of the cabinets, opened it and poured some of the liquid into a saucepan. Then he warmed it on a hotplate, adding dry cereal to the formula and stirring until it thickened. “I use a syringe to feed them,” he explained as he handed one to Sean. “It’s safer,
keeps them from eating too much and choking. They’re greedy little guys.”

And so it was that a short time later Sean found himself, with some trepidation and a sense of unreality, cradling a tiny baby squirrel in one hand while with the other he fed it the lukewarm formula. It was a messy process, with as much formula getting on the squirrel’s face as in its mouth, but the squirrel was nothing if not an enthusiastic eater, and Sean couldn’t help but grin over at Elijah. “I’ve got to admit he’s pretty darned cute,” he said as he filled the syringe with more of the formula and dribbled a little into the squirrel’s avid mouth, being careful not to give him too much, as Elijah had cautioned.

Elijah grinned back as he fed the other baby. “They’re just starting to eat some solid food, but it’ll be a few more weeks before they’re completely weaned. Rocky was half this size when I found him, if you can believe it.”

“It’s a little hard to believe,” Sean said, and then, as a demanding squeak issued from the hungry squirrel he’d briefly neglected, he added, “Or maybe not. Sounds like I have a future Rocky in the works here.”

“Rocky prefers to think of himself as one of a kind, Sean. I’m not sure he even realizes he’s a squirrel, to be honest.”

“I obviously have a lot to learn about squirrels. I sort of assumed one squirrel was exactly like the next.”

“Oh no,” Elijah said, smiling a little at Sean’s ignorance. “They have very different personalities, the same as people do.” And he went on to regale Sean with a very funny story about Rocky and a stray squirrel that had had the temerity to wander into what he thought of as ‘his’ backyard.

The conversation drifted back to the subject of movies again, and they argued good-naturedly about the best and worst movies they’d ever seen, and the time seemed to fly by until the baby squirrels had finally eaten their fill.

“This must be such rewarding work, Elijah,” Sean said when they had placed the contented babies back in the incubator among a fresh pile of white tissues, after carefully wiping them clean. “I know, I once planned on becoming a doctor- a pediatrician. I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather do than help sick kids.”

“Why didn’t you?” asked Elijah softly. “I’m sure you’d have made a wonderful doctor, Sean. You have such a gentle way about you.” They were standing close together, looking down at the babies who were burrowing in among the tissues, and Elijah touched his forearm, as he’d done before, only the briefest of touches, but Sean felt it down to his very bones.

“Life,” he answered with a shrug. “My dad getting sick when I was twelve. I suppose it’s kind of ironic, in a way. It was spending so much time in the hospital with him that made me decide to become a doctor. When I saw how hard the doctors and nurses tried to help him and how compassionate and dedicated they were, I really thought I’d discovered my true calling.”

“But what happened?” Elijah was watching him again with that intensely focused gaze that even more than his words invited Sean to confide in him.

Sean fiddled with the zipper pull on his borrowed jacket. A jacket that had once been worn by Elijah’s father. I can tell him. He’ll understand. “My dad’s insurance only covered a portion of his medical bills, Elijah, and he was in and out of the hospital a dozen times. My parents had to use up all their savings to pay what the insurance wouldn’t. Things were really rough for my family
financially after he died.”

Maggie came over and started winding her way in and out of Sean’s legs, uttering a plaintive *meow.* He looked at Elijah. “Does she want me to pick her up?” he asked.

Elijah smiled. “Yes, she does. You know, for someone who’s never had a pet, you read them pretty well.”

Pleased by Elijah’s words, Sean scooped the cat up in his arms, and she rubbed her head against his chest and started purring like a racecar engine revving. *I could grow used to this,* he thought, resting his cheek against Maggie’s soft fur, as he’d done to the white stag. Funny how his every thought seemed to wend its way inevitably back to the stag…

“Go on with your story, Sean,” Elijah prompted, and reached out to tickle Maggie under the chin. “What happened then?”

“Well, when I was a junior in high school, I wrote a software program,” Sean said on a sigh. “I’ve always had an aptitude for programming and I liked messing around with computers, and I thought I could make a little extra money with my idea; mostly to help out my mom and brother, but also to put towards my college tuition. So I started a little business, literally out of our basement. Only, it turned out to be more than a little business. The software started selling like hotcakes.” He huffed a small laugh. “Next thing I knew, I was the CEO of my own company with a half a dozen employees, and by the time I was twenty I was a multi-millionaire.”

“And you changed your mind about becoming a doctor?”

*No, my mind was changed for me- by my mom, by Mack, by Christine.* “I realized that it was a pipedream, Elijah,” Sean said. The hopeful teenager he had once been, the one who had envisioned a life spent healing others, seemed like a stranger to him. “I went to business school instead, and got an MBA.”

The baby squirrels were already sound asleep, curled up together in a ball. They reminded Sean of his mother and brother in the months after his dad had died: helpless, clinging to each other, totally dependent on someone else for their survival. *I had no other choice. I had to take care of them.*

“I don’t mean to sound like an ungrateful bastard,” he said. “I have so much compared to most people, and I try to give back, I really do. I’m on the boards of so many foundations and charitable organizations I’ve almost lost track.”

“Sean…” Elijah began, but Sean hurried on, “But what you do here… this… it’s…” he fumbled for words, something that was unusual for him.

“Only one way of making a difference,” Elijah finished. “It’s your willingness to help others that really counts, Sean, not how you do it.”

“Anyone can pick up a pen and write a check, Elijah.” Sean couldn’t help the bitterness from creeping into his voice. “God, I’m sorry. I’ve been going through a bit of a rough patch lately but I shouldn’t be dumping on you.”

“I don’t mind,” Elijah replied. “I told you I’m a good listener. If it helps you to talk…”

"Don't encourage me. I'll only end up boring you to tears," Sean said self-deprecatingly. "Let's change the topic, okay? You haven’t told me how Maggie came to be here. Did you rescue her, too?” Maggie, hearing her name, began to purr with renewed energy.
For a moment Sean thought that Elijah was going to protest, but he obviously decided to respect Sean's wishes, and said, “In a way. Dr. Holm, he’s the doctor for most of the families around here, he found her by the side of the road. She was only a few weeks old, too young to be separated from her mother, and half-dead from cold and hunger.” Elijah reached up to pet Maggie and his fingers brushed against Sean’s, whether on purpose or by accident this time was unclear, but the effect was soothing, the way it had been when Sean woke from his nightmare. “He brought her to me. Of course, he could have saved her himself, but it was right after my dad died, and he thought I could use the distraction. We’ve been through a lot together, Maggie and I.”

The cat twisted agilely and stretched out both front paws. Elijah took her from Sean’s arms. Maggie arranged herself across Elijah’s shoulders like a living stole, her long orange tail draping down across his chest, her great amber eyes looking apologetic. “Well, we should go back to the house, and leave these guys to their sleep.”

No, not yet. Please, not yet. If we go back to the house, I'll have no excuse to stay.

“But I was wondering,” Elijah continued, almost as if he had read Sean’s thoughts, “if you’re still not in a hurry to leave, if you’d like to take a drive around the pinelands. It's still early yet; there's plenty of daylight left. Even in January, the pines are beautiful. Of course, I am pretty prejudiced,” he added with a smile as he reached out to flip off the light switch.

With the door still closed and the lights off, the room was in near total darkness, and Sean could barely make out Elijah’s face to judge the sincerity of his offer. He was afraid to overstay his welcome, though he desperately wanted to say yes. But all he could see was the liquid gleam of Elijah’s extraordinary eyes, and suddenly that elusive memory flickered and vanished once again. It was as if a thin but impenetrable veil had been drawn across the memory and the harder he tried to pierce it, the more opaque the veil grew. What was it that his mind refused to let him see?

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Sean,” Elijah hurried on, obviously reading the worst into Sean’s lack of response. “It was just an idea.”

He pulled open the door, and in the bright daylight that streamed inside Sean could see he was wearing the same awkward and embarrassed expression that he’d had earlier, when he’d voiced his mistaken assumption about Chris.

“No, no, I'd love to, Elijah,” Sean reassured him, trying not to sound too pathetically eager and pretty sure he’d failed miserably. But he didn't care.

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Sean’s BMW was parked in front of the house next to a somewhat battered-looking blue Toyota pickup truck with oversized wheels. It was a bit of a shock to realize that it had been less than twenty-four hours since he’d locked the Beamer’s doors and gone off with naive hopefulness into the woods in search of help. So much had happened between then and now, it almost felt as if he was looking at his familiar silver car through the eyes of a stranger.

“I'll bet you’re glad to see your car again, huh?” Elijah said at his side as they scrunched across the gravel driveway.

“Yeah,” Sean replied. “For a while there, I wasn’t sure I ever would.”

“I’m afraid my truck doesn’t ride nearly so well as a BMW, Sean, but we couldn’t take a car like yours where we’re going.”
“The extra large wheels are to drive in the sand?” Sean opened the passenger door of the pickup and climbed inside.

“That’s right. There are roads through the woods, but a lot of them are pretty primitive, and some of the places I want to show you aren’t accessible by road at all.”

“You mean, *Fasten your seatbelts, it’s going to be a bumpy ride*?” Sean quipped.

Elijah grinned and turned the key in the ignition. “Bette Davis in *All About Eve*. Although she said ‘bumpy night’, not ‘bumpy ride’, Sean.”

"Purist," Sean teased. "Nobody even remembers the true quote anymore."

"I do!" Elijah protested, pushing in the clutch and putting the truck in reverse.

"Well, you're the only one, then."

"Ha, I bet that's not true."

"I bet it is."

"Is not."

"Is so."

They looked at each other and burst into laughter, and were still laughing as the small blue pickup bounced off down the drive and into the woods.
The cab of the Toyota was small, and cluttered with Elijah’s possessions that he’d hastily shoved out of the way to make room for Sean to sit: a small Styrofoam cooler, a pair of Minolta binoculars, a well-used plastic travel mug with the Wawa logo, several paperback mysteries by authors Sean didn’t recognize, and a large rectangular black notebook filled with music CDs in plastic sleeves.

Sean would’ve loved to flip through the notebook, because he was curious about the sort of music Elijah liked. It would be one more piece in the puzzle that was Elijah Wood, and putting that puzzle together was becoming more and more important to him. Maybe later, Sean decided, when their impromptu tour of the pines was done. *Any excuse to linger, Sean?*

One thing that was clear, though, was that Elijah didn’t often carry passengers in his truck. He had instinctively reached to turn on the CD player after he started the engine, and then withdrawn his hand as he remembered he had company.

Sean was afraid to admit to himself how much that knowledge pleased him.

The drive from the house to the road was nearly two miles. As it wound through the woods, Sean stared around him, trying to recognize anything familiar from last night. But the journey on the back of the stag was a hazy memory at best, only the scent and feel of the stag itself remained vivid. He could recall looking up to see the lights from Elijah’s house and the smoke curling from the chimney,
“I’m just going to stop and get the mail,” Elijah said, jarring Sean from his thoughts. They’d reached the end of the bumpy, sandy drive, and he pulled up beside a black metal mailbox mounted on a wooden post. Elijah opened his window, pulled down the front of the mailbox and retrieved a small stack of letters and several magazines. He set them on the dashboard and quickly raised the window again; the truck’s cab hadn’t warmed up yet and the air coming in was frigid. Sean was glad of the warmth of the down jacket Elijah had loaned him, and touched by the gesture. It couldn’t have been easy, letting Sean wear something that had belonged to his father.

Elijah put the truck in gear again and turned left onto a two lane paved road. As he accelerated and shifted into second, the pile of mail slithered off the dashboard and cascaded onto the floor. Sean quickly unfastened his seat belt and bent down to retrieve it.

“Thanks,” Elijah said, glancing down apologetically.

“No problem.” As he gathered the scattered mail into a tidy pile, Sean couldn’t help but notice the titles of the various magazines Elijah received: *New Jersey Outdoors, Rolling Stone, NME, The Advocate*... Sean felt his cheeks heating and quickly placed the latter at the bottom of the pile. He hoped that if Elijah noticed his red face, he would think it was because Sean had been bending down.

It was useless to pretend that he hadn’t been wondering about Elijah’s sexual orientation, especially in light of his own undeniable attraction to the younger man. Sean wasn’t certain if he was more elated or unnerved by this likely confirmation that Elijah was in fact gay.

*It’s none of your business,* he repeated to himself as he tucked the mail into the side pocket of the door, but that mantra was growing more and more tired with every minute that passed, especially now that they were sitting in such close proximity, with Elijah’s jeans-clad thigh only inches from his own. Those snug, faded jeans with the intriguing rips in them seemed to beckon his fingers to touch... and the scents uniquely Elijah’s own, that heady mix of bayberry, pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses, made him wonder how Elijah’s pale skin would taste beneath his lips...

“I thought we’d drive down the old stagecoach road, Sean, so you can see the Quaker Bridge,” Elijah said, seeming unaware of either Sean’s discovery or his discomfiture, or else doing a fine job of hiding it. “Of course there’s a lot of other history associated with the road, not only the white stag legend.” He rolled his eyes. “There’s a lot of history associated with everything in the pines, and I’ll bore you to tears telling you about it if you let me.”

*The Quaker Bridge.* Sean refastened his seat belt, anticipation welling up inside him at the thought of seeing the place where the white stag legend had been born. “I’m a bit of a history buff myself, so I can guarantee you won’t bore me to tears,” he said. “I might drive you crazy asking questions, though. I’m ashamed to admit I know very little about this area even though I’ve driven through it on my way to the shore often enough. My parents once took my brother and me to Smithville when we were kids, but I don’t honestly remember much about it except this fantastic candy store in the historic village. It was one of those places that have all the old fashioned candies in big glass jars. Mack and I ate so many licorice pipes we were nearly sick.”

“I know that store, Sean. I’ve been there a bunch of times,” Elijah said, grinning. “Although Hannah and Zach and I always liked those candy dots the best- you know, the ones on the paper strips?”

“That wouldn’t quite peel off, so you ended up eating as much paper as candy,” Sean recalled.

“Yep, those are the ones.” Their eyes met briefly. Elijah’s were slightly narrowed with amusement,
the startling blue of them still a shock to Sean’s senses. “Wouldn’t it…” Elijah hesitated, staring straight ahead at the empty road in front of them.

“What?” Sean prompted, curious.

Elijah gave a tiny shrug. “I was just thinking how funny it would be if we’d met there as kids.”

“I’m ten years older than you, Elijah. If we had met, you’d have been too young to remember me.” But Sean smiled a little, imagining how cute Elijah would have been as a baby.

“I bet I would’ve remembered you anyway,” Elijah insisted, and Sean was touched. “When did you and your family start going down the shore?”

“When I was about two years old. My parents rented a house on the bay side of the island for a couple of weeks every summer. It was just a small place in Surf City. That was before my dad got sick, of course. We couldn’t afford it after that. I hadn’t been down there in ages, until a few years ago when Chris and I bought a house in Loveladies.”

Elijah’s eyebrows shot up, telling Sean he was fully aware that only the very wealthy could afford a house on that part of the island. It wasn’t really what I wanted, Sean was tempted to say, but he was determined not to make excuses. He’d gone along with Chris’s wishes, hadn’t he?

“So what made you decide to go back after all that time?” Elijah wanted to know.

“Nostalgia, I suppose. God, those weeks at the shore were the most carefree I can remember in my life, Elijah.” Sean could see himself and Mack, sun-browned and barefoot and so fucking happy. “Mack and I ran wild with a bunch of other kids in the neighborhood. Sometimes my dad would rent a small boat and take us fishing and crabbing in the bay, and even my mom…” He paused. “Anna liked it, too. We were out of her hair most of the day, and she could relax and read or sit on the deck and sunbathe…”

“I can see why you would’ve missed that,” Elijah said softly.

“Chris wanted us to get a place in the Hamptons but that just isn’t my scene.” One of the few times I actually fought her on something and won. “I like the peace and quiet. Nobody really knows us there.” Except when Chris fills the place with ‘guests’... which is most of the time. “What about you? Do you ever go down the shore? It’s not all that far from here.”

“Sure, though not since my mom moved back to Iowa five years ago,” Elijah admitted. “You know, that’s where my mom and dad met. At the Bay Village in Beach Haven.”

“No shit!”

“Yep. Mom was visiting a friend from college and Dad had a summer job as a waiter in one of the restaurants where they went for dinner. That was before.” Elijah stopped and bit his lip. “Here’s the stagecoach road, Sean,” he said, putting on the blinker and slowing at an intersection. “It was an Indian trade route originally, you know, that ran from Camden to the shore,” he added in an almost self-consciously ‘I’m your tour guide’ voice.

No trespassing. But Sean had bit back enough words of his own, hadn’t he? Besides, this was what they were here to see, the heart of the Pinelands, and Sean was being given the privilege of seeing it with someone who knew and loved it. That should be enough, more than enough.

Only it wasn’t really. Who did he think he was kidding? Sean had a million and one questions he wanted to ask Elijah, and not just questions about his family and childhood, but the kinds of
questions a guy interested in, well, another guy would ask. *Are you involved with anyone right now? was foremost among them.*

*And if he says no? Aren’t you forgetting that you are involved with someone right now? His conscience prodded him, and Sean knew he had no right to ask Elijah or anyone else that question, not yet.*

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There was a barely legible street sign at the turn that said ‘Quaker Bridge Road’ in small faded letters, and without it, Sean would have been hard pressed to guess that this wasn’t simply the driveway to the small Baptist church a short distance up on the left. But the lane continued on past the church, around a couple of dilapidated clapboard buildings standing in a sea of dead weeds, and then snaked its way into the darkness of the pinewoods and disappeared from view.

Bracing his hand on the gray velour seat as the truck hit a pothole, Sean said, “Jesus, you call this a road?”

“This is pretty much the way it would have been when the stagecoaches used it,” Elijah said, steering around another large pothole half-filled with ice-crusted water. “It’s virtually impassible after a lot of rain or snow, but we won’t have any trouble today. Although,” he added with a grin, “you’d be amazed at the number of cars I’ve discovered set in the sugar sand, usually in the summer.”

“Set in the sugar sand?” He had never heard the term before. “Do you mean stuck?”

“Yeah. There are spots where the sand turns soft and deep, and if you’re not careful, it’s easy to get set. It happens often enough that I keep a tow chain in the back of the truck so I can rescue people who’ve gotten stranded.”

“It sounds as if between you and the white stag, you have things pretty well covered.”

Elijah choked, and then burst out laughing. “I guess you could say that, although I’m not the only one who tows people out of the sugar sand. The tow companies around here make a nice living from rescuing tourists who didn’t do their homework before heading out to drive around the pines.”

The truck hit another water-filled pothole with a splash and a lurch. “Traveling this in a stagecoach must have been pretty brutal,” Sean said. It made his bones ache just to think about it, not to mention his muscles, which were sore enough and feeling every jar and bounce of the truck. He didn’t want to say anything to Elijah, because he knew the younger man would be concerned, but the truth was, **Sean hurt;** the effects of the herbal tea must be starting to wear off.

“Travel in the pines was rough,” Elijah admitted. “Living here was rough, too. But people came and stayed for different reasons, like the Hessians and Tories who didn’t want to go home after the Revolution.”

“I had no idea.” Sean dredged his memory banks from high school history days. “I thought they all ended up in Canada after the War.”

“But not all of them. Some of them stayed. They knew they could hide in the pines, Sean,” Elijah said in a contemplative voice, “and live quietly and in peace.”

“I envy them.” The words slipped out, surprising Sean as much as they did Elijah, who shot him an inquiring look. “Real peace and quiet are hard to come by, Elijah, especially these days. And this…”

He gazed out the window. “It’s like another world. You can almost believe that you’ve traveled back in time.”
The woods had closed in around them; if he put down the window, Sean could touch their
outstretched limbs easily. There was nothing else to be seen but the ranks upon ranks of pines and
oaks, and the occasional even narrower road that branched off from the stagecoach road in a different
direction. That is until Sean noticed a glimmer of silver sparkling among the trees. “Is that water over
there on the right?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s one of the cedar swamps,” Elijah replied. “There’s a trail up ahead a little ways that leads
to it. I thought we might stop there and hike down to the swamp. It’s not very far.”

About a half mile later, Elijah pulled off to the side of the road, into a spot obviously cleared for this
purpose, as the road was too narrow for two vehicles to pass side by side. He put the truck in neutral
and set the emergency brake. “Do you feel up to walking? Or would you rather keep driving and
stay out of the cold?”

“At first, I’ll do me good to get out and move around for a while.” Sean extended his legs in front
of him and winced as his cramped muscles protested. He pressed a thumb and forefinger into his
thigh, working at a spasm, but abruptly stopped what he was doing when he saw Elijah staring. Shit.
He’d been caught. Elijah would know he was stiffening up.

“I’m sorry.” Elijah’s cheeks had gone pink and his fingers fiddled nervously with the key in the
ignition before turning it and shutting off the engine. “I didn’t realize… You should have said
something, Sean. I wouldn’t have dragged you out here.”

“First of all, you didn’t drag me out here, and second of all, it’s worth a little discomfort to see this,”
Sean said calmly. “Don’t worry about me, please; I’m fine.”

“If you say so.” But Elijah managed to look both unsettled and guilty at the same time.

“I do.” Sean unfastened his seatbelt and opened the passenger door. He jumped down, gritting his
teeth against the ache of his calf muscles as the sandy soil broke away beneath his running shoes the
way it had last night in his mad flight through the forest.

The truck door slammed, and moments later, Elijah appeared around the front of the pick-up. He had
the binoculars around his neck, and he was tugging a nondescript-looking gray wool cap over his
spiky auburn hair. It was one of the least fashionable—okay, downright ugly—items of apparel Sean
had ever seen in his life. But it didn’t seem to matter what Elijah wore. He appeared luminous in the
dappled light that filtered through the pine trees. God, he’s beautiful.

“Here,” Elijah said, taking a pair of tan leather gloves from his jacket pocket. “Put these on. You
need to protect your hands. The path is a deer trail, barely wide enough for us to walk on, and I’d
hate for them to get any more scratched up than they already are.”

Sean would’ve argued, not wanting to take Elijah’s gloves from him when it was so cold out, but he
figured it would be a losing argument. And besides… the truth was, it felt kind of nice to be fussed
over. The gloves were a tight fit, Elijah’s hands being smaller than his own, but they were fleece-
lined and very warm.

“Aren’t you worried at all?” Sean couldn’t help asking as he began to follow Elijah down the path
into the woods.

“About what?” Elijah turned back to face Sean, tilting his head to one side in that way he had that
reminded Sean of a curious bird.

“Leaving the truck. The Devil…” It still felt odd to talk about the Jersey Devil as if he was real, even
though Sean knew beyond a doubt that he was totally, completely real. “Well, are you sure he isn’t lurking around here somewhere? That he won’t mess with the truck while we’re gone?”

Funny. Sean hadn’t noticed at first how the shadows cast by the trees looked like long skeletal fingers stretching out to touch him, or how the trees themselves loomed overhead, blocking out the sun… Sean shivered, and it wasn’t from the biting cold.

Elijah had shut his eyes for a few moments as if in consideration of Sean’s question, a faint line appearing on his smooth brow. Then he opened them again, and the shadows were only shadows and the trees only trees without a hint of menace or malice about them. “Not to worry, Sean, he’s… he doesn’t normally get up to mischief in the daylight. Nighttime is when he’s at his most dangerous. Come on.”

The wind had grown steadily stronger during the day, and now whistled among the pine branches, stirring the needles that whispered against each other as if speaking some unknown language. Other than the sibilant sound, it was completely silent; even their footsteps were unheard, muffled by the sand as the continued along the path.

It really was like being in another world, decided Sean. He looked up and high, high above him a single strand of cloud-white scored the flawless blue of the sky: the contrail of a jet flying into Philly or Newark. That remote evidence of the 21st century was the only sign that they weren’t walking in some past time. He returned his eyes to Elijah, and suddenly he seemed to see a different Elijah, one who was dressed in moccasins and a fringed buckskin jacket and pants that were worn and stained, and who carried a musket slung over his shoulder. So real was the vision that Sean actually stopped, blinked, and said somewhat urgently: “Elijah!”

Elijah whirled like a wildcat, balancing on the balls of his feet, alert and watchful. “Sean, what’s wrong?”

And it was the Elijah in the moth-eaten gray cap and the barn jacket and work boots who faced him. “Nothing, I- I just… Elijah, when did your family first settle here in the pines?”

“1710,” Elijah answered, raising his eyebrows at the unexpected question. “My great-great many times over grandfather was named Elijah Wood, too. He came here from England as a young man, traveled around for a few years and finally settled in the pines, on the same land my family still owns. The cabin’s been added onto over the years, but a little of the original structure still remains. He married a Native American, one of the Lenape Indians who used to live in the pines, and they had half a dozen children.” Elijah gazed into the woods, his expression somber and far away.

“There are no Lenape living here anymore?” Sean asked.

“No.” Elijah sighed. “I’m afraid it’s a familiar story, Sean. The European settlers were greedy to use the pines for their own purposes and drove the Lenape out of the places they had always lived. Eventually, the tribal elders appealed to the state, and they were granted three thousand acres for a reservation in 1758; it was called the Brotherton reservation. All this,” Elijah swept his arm in a circle, “was a part of it. They tried to make a go of it, but there were so few of them left, you see, after diseases like small pox nearly wiped them out. In the end, they finally decided to leave,” Elijah said sadly. “That was well over a hundred years ago. I’m not the only Piney of Lenape descent still living in the pines, but there aren’t many of us.”

“It must have been hard for them to leave.” He remembered Elijah’s words: This is my home, where I belong. For all the traveling he’d done, all the countries he’d visited, Sean had never met anyone who belonged in a place as clearly as Elijah belonged in the pines. Standing in the woods with him, listening to the whistle of the wind and smelling the clean tang of pine-scented air, Sean felt it so
strongly that once again that vision of a slender young man in buckskin seemed to hover over Elijah, a pale spirit from long-gone days. Maybe it was that great-great ancestor he’d mentioned.

“Oh, it was hard for them to leave, Sean. They loved this land and revered it for centuries, long before the Europeans came.” Elijah buried his hands in the pockets of jacket and looked down, digging the toe of his boot into the sand. “Just as those of us who live here now love and revere it. I know some people find the pines ugly, and say that Pineys are ignorant and backward. There are a lot of misconceptions about us, Sean; I’m sure you’ve run into them.”

“Yeah.” And he felt ashamed, remembering some of the things he’d heard said, the derision with which the word *Piney* had been spoken. “I really dislike labels, Elijah. I expect you do, too.”

“You have no idea.” It was almost a whisper. When Elijah looked up again, Sean could see profound pain etched on the other man’s face and clouding the depths of his eyes. This wasn’t only about people’s misconceptions of the pinelands culture, he realized. This was personal. Someone had hurt Elijah, had hurt him deeply.

The knowledge caused a surge of anger to well up inside Sean, for the very idea that anyone could deliberately hurt this kind-hearted and decent young man was intolerable to him. More than anything at that moment, Sean wished he had the right to draw Elijah into his arms, simply to comfort him as a friend, nothing more. If only…

Elijah straightened his shoulders and smiled with determination. “I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes searching Sean’s face and reading the anger there. “I didn’t mean to go all serious on you like that. Please… don’t let it upset you.” He reached out and touched Sean’s sleeve lightly, apologetically. “Not everyone thinks that way. *You* don’t. I could tell right away that you were different.” Then Elijah flushed, as if embarrassed at saying so much, and dropped his hand to his side. “We’d better keep moving, Sean. It’s too cold to stand in one place for long.”

But Sean didn’t feel the cold. All he felt was the warmth of Elijah’s words and his touch.

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“I wish it wasn’t January,” Elijah said regretfully at Sean’s side. “There’d be much more to show you- the bird population right now is a fraction of what is in summer or during the fall migration.”

They’d walked perhaps a quarter mile along the trail to where it ended at the cedar swamp. There was a bleak sort of beauty about the swamp, Sean thought, with its grassy hillocks and the bleached skeletons of long dead trees sticking up out of water the color of tea- from the tannin that leached into it from the white cedar trees, Elijah informed him.

Another narrow trail skirted the swamp; this one was man-made and marked at regular intervals by large blue dots painted on tree trunks. As Elijah led the way along the trail, Sean asked him question after question, about the Lenape and the reservation and about the industries that once flourished in the pines. It wasn’t only Sean’s inborn curiosity about people and places that fueled his questions, though of course, he was curious. It was the way Elijah’s expressive face lit up with enthusiasm as he answered Sean, the way he touched Sean’s arm and then gestured at something he wanted him to see, the way he smiled into Sean’s eyes, delighted by his interest in something that meant so much to him.

Eventually they halted where there was an especially good view of the scenery. With a loud ‘uh-uh’ and a flap of wings, a bird suddenly took off from one of the hillocks in front of them, and flew into the trees. Elijah stared after it.
“What kind of bird is it?” Sean asked.

“Fish crow.” Elijah shielded his eyes from the sun’s glare with one hand, and pointed. “And see there? That’s a Cooper’s hawk. Here, take a look.” He removed the binoculars from around his neck and handed them to Sean.

Obediently, Sean put them to his eyes and adjusted the focus a bit clumsily with his gloved hands. It took him a few seconds to find the hawk soaring high above them, brown-banded wings outstretched as it rode the wind. “It’s beautiful,” he exclaimed, following the bird’s lazy progress across the sky until it began to fade from view.

“Yes. Beautiful.” There was an odd note in Elijah’s voice that captured Sean’s attention; he lowered the binoculars and glanced at Elijah- and was trapped by vivid blue eyes that hadn’t been watching the hawk at all: they’d been watching him. And as quickly as Elijah averted his gaze, it wasn’t quickly enough. What Sean saw there in that split second of connection caused his pulse to race, and for the first time he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the attraction he felt was not one-sided.

A flush crept up the back of Sean’s neck. It was flattering and flustering and wonderful and confusing to think that someone like Elijah actually found him attractive. Sean had never put much stock in his own looks. He was too short, too stocky, too inclined to put on weight. He’d been told he had nice eyes and a nice smile, but the world he lived in now was filled with people who said whatever they thought you wanted to hear, whatever they thought would score them points with you. He’d long since stopped giving credence to their meaningless flattery.

But Elijah… clearly he hadn’t wanted Sean to know he was watching him. He couldn’t have been faking either look or words. Beautiful. Did Elijah really think that? No one had ever called Sean beautiful, not even Chris in the long gone days when he’d foolishly believed that their compatibility in the workplace meant they’d be compatible as a couple, and that the spark of passion that was lacking between them would grow in time.

Sean felt paralyzed by indecision. Should he say something? Force the issue? But in the back of his mind, a small voice was whispering, You haven’t even known Elijah for 24 hours. Whatever he’s feeling, whatever you’re feeling, it can’t be real. He didn’t want to listen to the warning, but his always lurking self-doubt plagued him; in the end he returned the binoculars to Elijah with only a quiet ‘thank you’. Elijah’s eyes were downcast as he took them back, the long black lashes fanning out on his pink-tinged cheeks, hiding his expression.

They didn’t linger long by the water, for the wind blowing off it cut like a knife. Nor did they speak on the way back to the truck. But as he studied the slim, straight back in front of him, Sean wondered almost desperately what Elijah was thinking and feeling right now.

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Sean felt an irrational niggle of dread as Elijah put the key in the ignition and turned it. But the engine leapt to life at once, and Elijah smiled and said, “I told you there was nothing to worry about.” He adjusted the blower so that a welcome blast of hot air poured out of the vents and then pulled back onto the road.

They had only traveled another mile or so when Sean saw a truck bumping and bouncing along the road in the opposite direction. As it drew near, the truck’s horn blared a greeting, and Elijah immediately responded in kind.

“A friend of yours?” Sean asked.
“A very old friend,” Elijah replied. “Bill Jenkins. I haven’t seen him for a few weeks, Sean, so I hope you don’t mind if I stop and talk to him. He’d be hurt if I didn’t.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Sean replied, trying his best to squelch the tiny wave of jealousy that rose up inside him at Elijah’s delight in meeting this ‘old friend’.

Elijah edged the Toyota onto the verge and parked it but left the engine running. He lowered the window as the other vehicle, an ancient Ford pickup so faded that the original color was hard to discern, pulled up just opposite them.

Sean’s jealousy dissolved in an instant when he saw the man behind the wheel. Bill Jenkins was an older man- in his late seventies, Sean judged, although he had the sort of weather beaten face that could have been ten years older or younger. He was wearing a hooded parka in camouflage green and brown, and had a black baseball cap with the red Snap-on tools logo resting on his thick, pure white hair.

Bill had wound down his window, too, and was smiling with shy pleasure at Elijah. “Woodjin,” he said in a slow deep voice, and to Sean’s astonishment he actually tipped the brim of his cap.

“Hello, Bill.” Elijah’s voice was soft and kind. “I’m so glad to see you. I’ve been wondering how you and Katie are managing during this cold spell. I hope her arthritis isn’t acting up too badly.”

Bill shook his head. “Not too bad. Doc Holm has her on a new medicine and it seems to be doing the trick.” He grinned. “Been baking up a storm lately, and after me to invite you for dinner.”

“Cranberry bread?” Elijah asked hopefully, sounding so like a child anticipating a treat that Sean had to smile.

“And huckleberry pie.” Bill looked a little sly and added, “I’ve got a batch of jack brewing that’ll be ready in a day or two for you to try when you come over, if you’re feeling brave enough, that is.”

“I’m not sure I’m that brave, Bill,” Elijah laughed, and it was clear that the two men were sharing a private joke.

Sean listened with interest as they talked, settling on a day for dinner and then exchanging news about friends and family members, most of whom seemed to live outside the pines. Except for Elijah’s sister Hannah and her husband and son, the names meant nothing to Sean, but the dynamic between the men was fascinating. Despite the fact that Bill was the older by several decades, he treated Elijah with striking deference, and he never called him by name, but always referred to him as ‘Woodjin’ as if it was some sort of title. Sean could see now why Elijah had told him that the people in the pines would never feel comfortable calling him by the nickname ‘Elwood’, not if they all treated him with that same quiet respect, almost reverence, as Bill.

If Sean had been curious about Elijah before, his curiosity now skyrocketed. He was so wrapped up in listening to their conversation that when Bill’s gaze slid past Elijah and focused on Sean, he was taken aback. There were suspicion and wariness in his face, and Sean had the distinct impression he was being put on trial, his fitness to be in Elijah’s company being judged. We take care of each other around here, Elijah had said, and obviously it was true, for there was no mistaking the protective air about the old man.

Elijah gave Sean a quick, reassuring glance. “Bill, I’d like to introduce you to a friend, Sean Astin. Sean, this is Bill Jenkins. His family and mine have known each other a very long time.”

“How do you do, Mr. Jenkins?” Sean said, absurdly happy that Elijah had chosen to introduce him
as a friend. He rested his right arm on the dashboard and leaned forward slightly so he could see the other man without craning his neck. Elijah sat back to make room for Sean, but even so, Sean’s shoulder was practically touching Elijah’s chest in the narrow space. He was acutely aware of how near they were to each other, how if he turned his head their mouths would be barely a hand’s breadth apart. *Don’t think about it,* he warned himself, and eased sideways, leaning harder on the dashboard. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Elijah wet his lips with his tongue as if they were suddenly dry. *Oh god.*

Bill tipped his ball cap again. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said with an old-fashioned formality that seemed strangely suited to their surroundings. Shrewd hazel eyes studied his face. “Well now, Mr. Astin, you look like you’ve had a run in with one of our Old Jersey Bull Pines and he came out the winner.”

Sean had forgotten about the impression he must create, scratched and unshaven. He felt mortified. No wonder Bill was staring at him with suspicion! What must he be thinking of him? Ruefully, Sean said, “I’m afraid so. You’ll have to pardon my appearance. I don’t usually go around looking so disreputable.” He ran a hand over his bristly chin, embarrassed.

But the old man only made a dismissive gesture and said, “It ain’t the first time I’ve seen someone who’s been cut up by the trees. The important thing is that you came out again with nothing worse than those scratches.”

It was on the tip of Sean’s tongue to mention the Jersey Devil and the white stag, but it had been hard enough to tell Elijah about his adventure, so he only said, “I feel very lucky to have got off so lightly, believe me.”

Bill then asked Sean where he came from, and expressed some surprise when Sean said he was from New York City. “You don’t act like one of those city boys we see around here from time to time.” This was apparently meant as a compliment, and so Sean took it as one. His next question was natural, but one Sean found awkward to answer. “Will you be staying with our Woodjin long?”

Sean glanced at Elijah, but he was looking down at his silver ring with the curious engraving, twisting the ring around and around his finger. “Not long,” he temporized. “I was passing through when my car broke down and I became lost in the woods. Elijah was kind enough to give me shelter and put me up for the night.”

Elijah spoke up then. “We’re on our way to the Quaker Bridge, Bill. Sean has an interest in seeing it.” A look passed between the two men, and Sean wondered how much Bill knew about the white stag. Enough to suspect what had really happened last night? Probably. Elijah had said Sean wasn’t the first lost traveler the stag had brought to him. There was no reason to think Bill wouldn’t have heard about those others, or even met them.

“I can’t thank Elijah for taking the time to show me around the pinelands while I’m here. You live in a very special place, Mr. Jenkins, although I expect you don’t need me to tell you that.”

“But it’s a treat to hear it from an outsider all the same,” Bill replied gruffly. “Me and Katie have traveled a bit, Mr. Astin, and I ain’t never seen anywhere I’ve liked better and neither has she. It’s a privilege to live here, and I know our Woodjin agrees with me.”

Elijah was looking down at his ring again, but he nodded at Bill’s words. “It’s true,” he said quietly. “Living here is a privilege.” But Sean sensed a weight of sorrow pressing on Elijah at that moment, and he wondered at it.

Bill seemed to sense it, too. “Well, the daylight’s burning fast, so I won’t keep you. But you be sure
and let me and Katie know if there’s anything you’re in need of, Woodjin, anything at all. You know you’ve only to ask.”

“I will. Give my best love to Katie.” Elijah hesitated, glanced at Sean and added quietly, “My blessing on you both.”

“I thank you.” And Bill bowed his head, as if in acceptance of the blessing. Then he said good-bye to Sean very politely and with only a lingering trace of wariness in his voice and eyes, and then with a wave slowly drove away.

As Elijah put the truck in gear again, the questions crowded thick and fast into Sean’s mouth. The first one to come out was probably the least important. “What’s ‘jack’?” he asked.

That brought a return of the lightness to Elijah’s expression, and Sean was glad he’d asked that rather than one of the more serious questions on his mind. “Jack is applejack, a hard cider that packs a one hell of a punch. It’s also called Jersey Lightning. Back in colonial times, it was used by the state to pay the road workers, but mostly it’s made privately in stills hidden in the woods. Bill has own still somewhere around here- he’s never revealed the location to me. But I’m sure that’s where he’s been, checking on the latest batch.”

“You mean he’s a moonshiner? Do people really brew moonshine in this day and age?” Sean was flabbergasted.

Elijah’s eyes danced with amusement. “Oh yes, not many, but there are still a few old-timers like Bill who won’t give it up.”

“But that can’t possibly be legal!”

Amusement spilled over into outright laughter. “Of course not, Sean. It never has been. But the police have always shrugged and looked the other way. There are a lot more important things for them to worry about, and it’s not as if Bill is selling the jack. He only makes enough for himself.”

“And you, I gather. What’s the story there?”

Elijah groaned theatrically. “On my twenty-first birthday, Bill presented me with a bottle of jack as a gift. All it took was one glass and I was giggling like a fool.” He grimaced. “Even worse than usual, I mean. And then I had a second glass and, well, the results weren’t pretty, Sean. I’ve never been so sick in my entire life, and Bill’s never let me live it down. I’ve watched him drink four glasses of that stuff and not turn a hair. Me, I stick to beer now.”

“Sounds like a wise decision.” Sean hesitated, and then added, “You shouldn’t be embarrassed by your giggle, you know. It’s charming.”

“No, you’re just being nice,” Elijah protested, flushing. “No one could possibly find my giggle charming. It’s downright embarrassing, that’s what is.”

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree, Elijah,” Sean said gently, and for the first time, he was the one to reach out. It was only the brush of fingertips over a faded canvas coat sleeve, but from the way his heart was pounding, it might have been the brush of lips on lips.

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Sean leaned on the parapet of the Quaker Bridge and stared down into the dark water of the Batsto River, eddying slowly beneath scattered patches of ice. Elijah leaned beside him, chin resting on his crossed arms. The bridge was smaller than Sean had expected, and made out of concrete and rusted
metal, with nary a sliver of wood in sight. Of course, in his mind’s eye, he’d been picturing the bridge as it would’ve appeared before it had been washed away in the violence of the thunderstorm the night that the white stag had appeared. But present and past became a bewildering jumble here in the pines, at least to Sean.

Now that he was standing at the site of the near-tragedy it was easy enough to imagine the fate of the passengers and driver of the stagecoach if the white stag had not saved them. The river wasn’t wide, but it was deep and the banks were sheer. It would be no easy matter to climb up out of them, especially encumbered by old-fashioned woolen cloaks, long skirts and layers of petticoats weighted down by cold water. Elijah told him the original bridge had been built because of the number of Quakers who had been drowned trying to ford the river on their way to the meetinghouse in Tuckerton. The currents in the water must be fierce.

Sean’s eyes drifted shut, the scene springing to life in his mind: the whinnying of the terrified horses as the driver frantically hauled them to a plunging stop; the screams of the stagecoach occupants flung about the interior, the sounds barely audible over the rush and roar of wind and rain and a river in full spate; and the wondering stare of the coachman from beneath the dripping brim of his hat at the mysterious white stag that had appeared out of nowhere to block the way. Most vivid of all was the image of the stag itself, standing in the middle of the road with its antlered head held proudly high, the ivory-velvet of its coat darkened by the driving rain…

“Sean?” From the sound of Elijah’s voice, it wasn’t the first time he’d said Sean’s name. “Hey, where are you?”

Sean came back to himself with a start. “Sorry.” He huffed a laugh. “I’ve never thought of myself as particularly fanciful, Elijah, but suddenly I could see everything so clearly. My god, if the stagecoach had gone into the river…”

“A lot of lives would have been lost,” Elijah murmured, and then he smiled. “But all’s well that ends well, Sean. Fortunately for them, the stag was there, and in the end they made it safely to the inn, wet and shaken, but alive.”

“The inn?”

“Tompson’s Tavern. It stood right over there on that rise.” With a sideways tilt of his head, Elijah indicated a sandy mound a couple of hundreds away on the far side of the river. “I know it’s hard to believe, but this was once a heavily traveled road and the inn did a booming business.”

“Is there anything left of it?” Sean asked, studying the spot curiously. From where they stood, he could see nothing but sparsely scattered pitch pines and white sand.

Elijah shook his head. “No, nothing’s left. The inn was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt, and eventually the pines reclaimed the land. There was talk at one time about a railroad station being put in here, but nothing ever came of it.” He straightened and stretched, arching his back like a cat with his arms extended over his head. Sean couldn’t help but stare. “We’d better head back now, Sean. Bill was right: daylight’s burning. It’ll be dusk soon, and even I don’t particularly like to drive around here in the dark.”

They began to walk back the way they’d come, their footsteps echoing hollowly on the open metal grid work of the roadbed.

“Elijah.” Sean stopped short in the middle of the bridge, the curiosity that had been burning inside him impossible to repress any longer. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”
“No, of course not,” Elijah answered, but there was a sudden wariness in the way he held himself, a tension in the set of his shoulders as he faced Sean with his hands shoved deep into his coat pockets.

“I couldn’t help but notice how Bill Jenkins addressed you. When you told me you were a woodjin, I guess I didn’t really understand what you meant. I had no idea it was a title, that you’re not a woodjin but the Woodjin.”

“It’s not a title… well, not exactly,” Elijah temporized. His shoulders relaxed. He’d obviously expected Sean to ask him something completely different. “That ancestor of mine I mentioned—the Elijah Wood who settled here in 1710? His son Jordan was the first Wood to be called the Woodjin. He was famous in the pinelands as a tracker and guide. It was said that he could look at a single grain of sand and tell you who had walked on it, and that there was no lost traveler he couldn’t find. In every generation of my family since then there’s been a woodjin and it’s become tradition for him to be called by that name rather than his given one.”

“But why are you the Woodjin and not your older brother?” Sean was puzzled.

Elijah shrugged and kept walking. “It’s not always the oldest child who inherits the gift, Sean. My dad, Warren, was a second son, too. Zach has never felt the… connection to this place that I have. That’s why he went with my mom when she left. He likes it here well enough, but it isn’t in his blood.”

“You mean it’s an innate ability? Something you were born with?”

Elijah smiled faintly. “You can’t learn to be a woodjin, Sean, any more than you can learn to have perfect pitch or perform complex math equations in your head.”

Sean fell silent, considering Elijah’s words as they got back in the truck. There were so many other questions he wanted to ask Elijah. About his mother and her reasons for leaving, about why Elijah had blessed Bill and his wife, about that moment when Elijah had seemed weighted by sorrow, about the unusual ring he wore and the inscription on it… But there was a lingering trace of wariness about his companion, and Sean felt he’d pressed his luck as far as he dared.

They drove across the bridge and shortly came to a crossroads. There was a signpost (that Elijah called a fingerboard) nailed to a tree indicating half a dozen different routes. But Elijah took none of them, choosing instead to turn into one of those unmarked narrow paths barely wide enough for the Toyota to navigate.

“We’ll go home through the woods,” Elijah said cheerfully. “Take the scenic route.”

Sean had always prided himself on having a good sense of direction, but he was disoriented within minutes by the maze of sand tracks that crisscrossed the pines, very much as he’d been last night after following the Devil’s ignis fatuus into the woods. But Elijah never hesitated as he steered first one way then another and the truck with its oversized tires made light work of the heavy going. Elijah did indeed know these woods like the back of his hand.

Twice they came to sandy clearings that reminded Sean vividly of the place where he’d encountered the white stag, and he studied the soft ground through the window as they crossed, hoping against hope to see the imprint of its cloven hooves. But to his disappointment, there was no sign of the stag. He would have done almost anything for one more glimpse of the magnificent animal.

Eventually they emerged from the pine trees, and there directly in front of them was the log cabin. The dormer windows on the second floor were glowing red in the light of the setting sun that was hovering just above the tree line and casting long shadows across the ground. With a start Sean
realized that it was now almost exactly 24 hours ago that he’d parked his BMW on the side of the road intending only a brief stop to enjoy the sunset. It simply didn’t seem possible that so much could have happened to him in such a short space of time.

After Elijah cut the engine, Sean sat on, silent. A strange inertia held him spellbound. He knew he should move, get out of the truck, but he wanted only to stay where he was, and put off the inevitable moment of leaving. Elijah didn’t move either; his hands rested lightly on the steering wheel, and he appeared deep in thought.

“Sean.”

“Elijah.”

They spoke simultaneously, looked at each other and laughed.

“You first,” Elijah said, making a small ‘go ahead’ gesture with his fingers.

There was a sudden obstruction in his throat. Sean swallowed hard. “I want to thank you for a truly magical day, Elijah, and also for your kindness to me, especially last night. I’ll never forget either as long as I live.” The words sounded sadly final to his ears.

The sky behind Elijah was shades of orange, red and gold. Against that backdrop, his eyes appeared an even deeper blue than usual and Sean was held captive by their beauty. “No thanks are necessary, Sean,” he replied. “I’ve enjoyed your company. In fact I was hoping…” He stopped, and as he seemed to do whenever he was tense or uncertain, fiddled with the silver ring.

“What? What were you hoping?” It was as if someone had sucked all the air out of the cab. Sean couldn’t breath. *Please don’t stop, Elijah. Finish what you were going to say.*

“I know it must seem like I’m coming up with excuses to make you stay here longer. And I guess in a way I am. I like you, Sean, and the truth is, I don’t often have visitors- *human* visitors that is.” He smiled ruefully. “All of which is my lame way of leading up to asking you if you might consider staying for dinner. You’re also welcome to spend the night if you want, so that you don’t have to drive to the shore in the dark.”

*I like you, Sean.* Four simple words, yet they outshone the most extravagant compliment he had ever received. “You don’t need to come up with excuses to make me stay, Elijah. I’d very much like to join you for dinner. And I confess that driving in the dark after what happened yesterday is not high on my list of things I’m anxious to do right now. But are you really sure it won’t be an imposition?”

“Of course not.” But Elijah didn’t have to answer in words. The happy glow in his eyes was answer enough. Sean’s heart gave a lurch even as he reminded himself that all Elijah had offered was dinner and a bed- alone- for the night.

Strange thing about his heart though. It didn’t seem to want to listen.

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“Why don’t you go ahead inside and get warm, Sean. I have to take care of the animals first. I’m about half an hour behind schedule in giving them their dinner and they know it. You can hear them hollering from here.” Elijah shook his head. “They keep more accurate track of time than an atomic clock.”

From the interior of the barn a cacophony of neighs and brays and baas was rising, and Sean said with half-laughing alarm, “We better get a move on, don’t you think? They sound pretty desperate.”
“Sean, you don’t have to come with me,” Elijah protested. “You must be ready to collapse.”

“Nah, I’m okay.” Truthfully he was pretty tired, but nevertheless Sean set off toward the barn at a brisk walk, without giving Elijah any time to protest again. There was no way in hell he was going to waste one single minute that could be spent in Elijah’s company.

With the efficiency of long practice, Elijah scooped sweet feed and oats from metal bins in the tack room, and quickly fed Sonny, Cher, Paco and Dolly, who were banging on their feed tubs in their stalls and loudly expressing their disapproval of the delay in their dinnertime.

A blissful quiet descended as the animals ate, pushing the grain around with their noses before grabbing up mouthfuls. Only their contented munching could be heard as Sean helped Elijah distribute their evening ration of hay and top off their heated water buckets. Then they closed the stall doors for the night against the cold and went to the other side of the barn, into what Sean privately thought of as the ‘hospital’, so Elijah could check on his patients.

They fed the hungry squirrel babies again and discovered the opossum hanging upside down by his tail from a large tree branch that Elijah had wedged inside the pen. Sean was baffled to discover that the odd-looking creature was sound asleep. Elijah explained that not only was this perfectly normal behavior for an opossum, but it was also a very good sign that he was nearly ready to be released into the wild again.

“Those chores went much faster with your help, Sean,” Elijah said gratefully as they hustled across the frosty grass to the house. It was nearly full dark now, and the stars were glittering brightly overhead and their breaths formed dense white clouds that lingered on the air. “You didn’t have to, but thank you.”

“I’m starting to understand why you find it difficult to get away,” Sean remarked as they entered the mudroom and hung up their coats. “Taking care of all those animals is a time-consuming responsibility.”

Elijah unlaced and kicked off his boots and stripped off his socks. He seemed to prefer to go barefoot as much as possible. Like a hobbit, Sean thought with amusement, recalling one of his favorite books.

“Yeah, it is pretty time-consuming,” agreed Elijah. He yanked off the gray wool cap and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket. “And I’m afraid the concept of ‘vacation’ is not one they’re familiar with.”

His burnished auburn hair was sticking up every which way, as if he’d just rolled out of bed. Without thinking, Sean reached out to smooth the wayward strands, as he’d used to do to Mackenzie. But Elijah’s reaction was startling: he shied away almost violently from Sean’s outstretched hand and stumbled back a few steps. For a long tense awful moment they stared at each other.

“Sean, I’m sorry,” Elijah whispered, eyes enormous in a face that had gone quite pale. “I didn’t mean to… But you- you startled me.”

“Don’t apologize, Elijah. I’m the one who should be sorry. That was a stupid, impulsive thing for me to do.” Inside Sean felt sick. He’d glimpsed honest to god panic in Elijah’s eyes, as if he was afraid… of what? That Sean might hurt him? And if so, why? The possible answers were too terrible to contemplate.

But as if determined to make up for his overreaction and prove he wasn’t afraid, Elijah moved close
again, took Sean’s hand between his own and gently squeezed it. “It wasn’t stupid or impulsive, Sean; it was sweet.” Then he released it, and said, “I wish you would forget what happened. 

*Please.*

“Okay.” Held captive by the imploring look in those extraordinary eyes and with the touch of those small hands lingering on his skin, Sean would’ve agreed to anything.

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Maggie was waiting for them on the other side of the kitchen door, meowing a welcome as she wound in and out of Elijah’s legs, tail held high. Rocky had been snoozing on one of the kitchen chairs, but at the sight of Sean he leapt up and in a few agile bounds was across the kitchen and perched atop the refrigerator once more.

At least he wasn’t scolding this time, Sean thought as he bent to pet the calico cat, who was now leaning against his legs. That was progress. If only he hadn’t screwed up so badly with Elijah… But Elijah wanted him to forget that unsettling moment, and if this was the one and only evening they would ever spend together, Sean was not going to ruin it with endless self-recrimination.

“So, what would you like for dinner, Sean?” Elijah asked with determined brightness, going to the refrigerator and opening it to examine the contents. “I have a confession to make first, though. I’m a vegetarian, so whatever we have is going to be meatless, I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine by me. I’m practically a vegetarian myself. Chris and I hardly ever eat meat any more.”

Sean straightened, wondering why the shape of Chris’s name on his lips felt so odd. “And really, I’ll be happy with anything you make. I’m not picky.”

“I do a mean vegetable-almond stir-fry,” Elijah said. “With or without tofu.” He glanced at Sean, one eyebrow raised in question.

“Without, please.”

“Without, please.”

Without, please.”

Elijah made an involuntary face. He still had trouble thinking of tofu as real food.

Elijah laughed with genuine amusement as he opened the crisper drawer and started gathering up vegetables in his hands. “I thought you said you weren’t picky,” he challenged.

“I’m not, but you *did* give me a choice.”

“True.” He pushed the crisper drawer shut with his foot, and then bumped the refrigerator door closed with his hip while he juggled peppers and onions and zucchini. “Sean,” he added hesitantly, setting the vegetables on the counter, “I meant to ask you this morning if you need to use the phone. In case there’s… anyone who’ll be worrying about you. If you do, please help yourself.”

“It’s kind of you to offer,” Sean replied easily, “but any phone calls can keep until I get to the shore.”

Only Sean knew that when he arrived at the beach house, the answering machine would be filled with increasingly annoyed messages from Chris, each of them along the lines of: *For god’s sake, Sean, stop being such a baby. This is no time for you to go off in a snit, not with our directors’ meeting coming up next week.*

“Well, if you change your mind, feel free, okay?” Rocky had jumped down onto Elijah’s shoulder and his tiny paws were pulling at the hair above Elijah’s right ear. “Ouch.” Elijah craned his neck and looked up at the squirrel. “I’m not another squirrel, remember? You don’t have to groom me. Easy does it, Rocky.” He reached up and very, very gently disentangled the strands from Rocky’s grasp. His eyes were intensely blue and alight with laughter as he turned them to Sean. “I can’t stop from him doing that, no matter what I try.”
The bolt of lust that rocketed through Sean then was like a sucker punch to the gut. His knees went weak. *I want him,* he thought helplessly, *I want him so fucking much.* The inevitable response of his body to this realization sent him into an instant panic; he could feel himself starting to get hard. *Oh shit.*

“I think I might go and get cleaned up a little before we eat,” Sean said, trying to sound casual. “Maybe put some more of that salve on these scratches. Where do you keep it?”

“It’s in the bathroom- in the medicine cabinet.” Elijah frowned, looking concerned. “Do you think you can manage yourself, or would you like me to help you?”

*Oh Jesus.* He imagined how Elijah’s small fingers would feel, smoothing the ointment on his skin, rasping across the day’s growth of stubble on his chin and cheeks… Big mistake. His jeans were starting to feel uncomfortably tight. “That won’t be necessary. I’m sure I can manage alone.” Sean began edging toward the doorway.

“Well, if you need help, just give a holler.”

“I will.” Sean made good his escape, bolting down the hallway and into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He went to the vanity and braced his arms on either side of the sink, staring down blindly at the shiny white porcelain while he struggled to bring his rebellious body under control. *I’m a fucking adult,* he thought desperately, *not some horny teenager.*

But the growing erection pressing against the fly of his jeans made a mockery of his words. He raised his head and gazed into the mirror, hoping the sight of his scruffy beard and scratched face would be enough to shock his arousal away. But it was the sight of his eyes dark with need and desire that shocked him: for it was like looking into the eyes of a stranger. He’d never understood those guys who let themselves be led around by their dicks. He’d always felt a little superior to them, to be honest. But the truth was, he wasn’t any stronger than anyone else. He simply hadn’t known until today what it was like to want someone so badly it *hurt.*

Scrape, scrape, thud. Scrape, scrape, thud. Sean turned around and discovered Fred staring at him with a philosophical expression on his craggy face.

“What the hell am I going to do, Fred?” Sean asked the box turtle with some desperation. “Take a cold shower? Jerk off here in the bathroom? I won’t do that, goddamn it.”

Fred blinked one small red eye very slowly. “That’s no answer,” Sean complained. And it was then that his sense of humor came to his rescue as it had so many times in his life. “I’ve totally lost it,” he said. “I’m asking advice from a fucking box turtle.” He began to laugh helplessly at the absurdity of it, sagging back against the vanity. The tension eased from his body, his erection finally subsided and he had himself under control again.

Beyond relieved, Sean decided that he really could use some cleaning up before returning to the kitchen. He washed his face and hands, and then opened the medicine chest and located the jar of blue-green salve next to some Tom’s of Maine toothpaste. There wasn’t a lot else on the glass shelves besides the usual deodorant, shaving supplies, nail clippers and Band-aids, and though Sean tried not to be nosy, he couldn’t help noticing that there wasn’t so much as a single bottle of aspirin or ibuprofen, no antihistamines or decongestants, much less any kind of prescription medication. Elijah must be very healthy, Sean thought. Or maybe he relied on natural products like that herbal tea. *No condoms or lubricant either.* The insidious thought slipped into his mind. But then Sean wasn’t really sure where Elijah would keep those items if he had them, and it was none of his business anyway.
Disgusted with himself, he unscrewed the lid of the glass jar and anointed his various cuts, most of which didn’t even really need it, and then returned the salve to the cabinet.

Fred meanwhile had retreated into his shell, leaving only the very tip of his hooked nose visible. But Sean thanked him for his advice anyway before leaving the bathroom. He figured it couldn’t hurt.

Elijah had been busy in Sean’s absence. Maggie was eating her dinner; her rasping purrs of enjoyment filled the room. Rocky, back atop the fridge, was too engrossed in stuffing seeds and nuts into his already bulging cheeks even to notice Sean’s return. Elijah meanwhile was at the stove as he had been that morning, but now there was a cutting board covered in vegetables—red and green peppers cut into strips, chopped carrots and zucchini, snow peas and mushrooms—at his elbow, and bottles of soy sauce and peanut oil and jars of spices and nuts beside them. From the smell of it, he was softening onions in the well-seasoned wok that he was gently shaking back and forth over the burner. There was a covered pot on the adjacent burner with steam gently escaping from under the glass lid. Rice to go with the stir-fry, probably.

“There’s beer in the fridge, Sean,” Elijah said, hefting his own bottle. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” Sean opened the refrigerator and located the beer on the second shelf. “Shiner Bock?” he asked, studying the label. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s fantastic,” Elijah enthused. “My sister got it for me. Hannah knows how much I like beer and she’s always bringing me some unusual brand to try when she comes to visit.” He tilted his head and regarded Sean. “Everything okay? You seemed a little anxious earlier. That scratch on your hand isn’t worse, is it?” His worried eyes settled on Sean’s right hand that was curved around the sweating brown beer bottle.

Anxious. Well, that was one way to put it. “It’s not worse, Elijah. I have a tendency to be a bit overcautious, that’s all. Drives my family crazy.” Sean untwisted the bottle cap and took a long swig of the cold beer. “Mmm, that is good.” He licked foam from his lips, caught Elijah staring at his mouth and quickly asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You can get out plates and silverware.” Elijah scooped up a handful of the vegetables and dropped them in the wok, which sizzled and spat. “I thought we’d eat in the family room, Sean. That’s where I usually eat my dinner. It still feels sort of weird to eat at the kitchen table without the rest of my family, you know?”

With Elijah directing him to the correct cupboards and drawers, Sean found the plates and silverware and napkins. Then he sat down at the table and sipped at his beer, enjoying the chance to relax and watch Elijah as he moved around the kitchen, even his simplest movement fluid and graceful. Perhaps both were consciously trying to avoid any repetition of the awkward moment in the mudroom, for they confined the conversation to their favorite beers and foods, and Sean told Elijah about some of the more exotic dishes he’d encountered while traveling in distant parts of the world. Maggie, her food bowl empty, trotted over and jumped up onto Sean’s lap. He thought again, as he had earlier in the day, I could grow used to this.

It seemed no time at all before the food was ready. Sean had to smile as he trailed out of the kitchen after Elijah, carrying his plate in one hand and a freshly opened Shiner Bock in the other. With Rocky perched on Elijah’s shoulder and Maggie and Sean following after him, they rather resembled an illustration for the tale of the Pied Piper.

The family room was clearly the heart of the house, and Sean felt its warmth and welcome from the moment he stepped through the door. Extending half the length of the house, it had two large windows that overlooked the front porch and drive. The floor was made of wide-planked golden
pine, and was largely covered by a carpet woven in abstract patterns of rust, black and cream.
Navajo, Sean guessed, and so beautifully made that he knew Chris would’ve coveted it at once.

At the far end of the room, there was a stone fireplace of similar design to that in Sean’s bedroom, but it had a woodstove attached to it. In the center a pair of comfortable-looking red leather couches with throw pillows in shades that matched the rug were angled to face an entertainment center with TV, DVD player and an impressively large stereo system. A plain wooden desk between the windows held an older model Mac computer, printer and various peripherals. The computer geek in Sean delighted to discover that Elijah was another Mac fan, but another part of him found the idea of a woodjin surfing the Internet or playing computer games hard to digest. Past and present, old and new… Elijah was a fascinating conundrum.

But what held Sean’s attention longest were the shelves of books that covered the walls on either side of the fireplace, and he positively itched to go and explore their contents.

“Have a seat, Sean,” Elijah invited, setting his food down on the end of the computer desk. “I’m going to feed the woodstove. I should’ve put more wood in it before we left. I try to keep it going 24/7 when it’s this cold outside.” He looked mock stern. “And don’t wait on me to eat, okay?”

Sean obediently sat down on one of the sofas and dug into his food while Elijah fussed with the woodstove, adding a few logs from a basket on the hearth and checking the water level in the steamer that was, to Sean’s amusement, shaped like a dragon so that steam would pour out its snout when the water was hot. When a bright blaze was flickering behind the glass door, Elijah dusted his hands on his jeans, and crossed to the entertainment center. “What about some music?”

“Sure,” Sean replied around a mouthful of stir-fry.

“I’m kind of a music geek, so I have pretty much everything. What do you like?” Elijah picked up a black notebook like the one Sean had seen in the truck, and began flipping through the plastic CD sleeves.

There were at least five more of the notebooks on a shelf, and Sean realized that Elijah must own literally thousands of CDs. Music geek, indeed. “My tastes are pretty eclectic,” Sean hedged, embarrassed to confess to his own lack of musical knowledge. “To be honest, even though I have an iPod, I don’t have much time to listen to music. So whatever you pick is fine with me.”

“God, I couldn’t survive without music, especially living alone,” Elijah said. “When I was eight, my mom gave me a cassette of The Monkees’ Greatest Hits. I swear I wore it out, playing it over and over. I’ve been kind of obsessed with music ever since.” He stopped flipping, pulled out a CD then closed the notebook and turned on the stereo. “Do you like The Stone Roses?”

“Um,” Sean began, clueless.

Elijah looked shocked. “Sean, you don’t know The Stone Roses? They’re totally brilliant.” He popped the CD in the tray and pushed the close button. The music started out softly, and then Sean jumped, nearly upsetting his plate, as it blasted from the speakers. “Sorry,” Elijah apologized, quickly turning the volume down. “I tend to keep the sound cranked so I can hear it no matter what room I’m in.”

He grabbed his plate and beer and joined Sean, but instead of sitting on the sofa, he sank onto the carpet to sit cross-legged with boneless elegance. Maggie and Rocky had settled in front of the woodstove, clearly craving its warmth. The small gray squirrel was curled between Maggie’s front legs, his bushy tail covering his head.
“This stir-fry is really excellent, Elijah,” Sean said, and he wasn’t just being polite, for the vegetables were crisp and the sauce spicy (but not too) and the brown rice perfectly cooked. “You know, I’m feeling a bit intimidated here. Is there anything you can’t do?”

Elijah looked extremely embarrassed by the compliment. “Oh, lots of things.”

“Name one.”

“You wouldn’t want to hear me sing,” Elijah said, grinning, “or play a musical instrument for that matter. I love music, but I have no musical talent at all. Ask my sister sometime about my guitar playing.”

“I’ll bet you’re a lot better than you think,” Sean said.

“I’d demonstrate, but I wouldn’t want to shatter your illusions or set Maggie to howling,” Elijah joked. “What about you, Sean? What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies?”

“When I have any spare time, which isn’t very often, I like to read. I’ll read pretty much anything—cereal boxes included—but mainly history, especially autobiographies. It’s enlightening to experience the world through someone else’s vision.”

“You’ll have to take a look through the books later.” Elijah pointed his fork toward the crammed shelves. “My dad was a huge collector of folklore and Pine Barrens history. My great-grandfather started the collection and I’ve added a few things, but most of them are Dad’s. He especially loved folk legends. Not just of the Pine Barrens, but cultures all over the world. He was fascinated by how legends traveled from place to place, how they grew and changed.” Elijah smiled reminiscently. “Dad used to give lectures on the Pine Barrens at schools and libraries and senior centers. How he loved to talk.”

“I’d love to have heard him.”

“He was a great woodjin, Sean, and taught me almost everything I know about the pines. We spent hours hiking and tracking and camping in the woods.”

“And… what about your mom?” Sean asked tentatively, not sure if he ought to bring up the topic. Elijah pushed the food around his plate as if his appetite had suddenly vanished. “She loved my dad, Sean, but she never loved the pines. I think she resented their hold over Dad, to be honest. After he died, she wanted to sell the house, wanted all of us to go away, but Hannah didn’t want to leave, and I…”

“He shook his head. “Anyway, she waited until I was 21 and then she signed the house and property over to me, and she and Zach moved to Cedar Rapids.”

“Have you seen her since?” Sean recalled what Elijah had said about never having traveled farther than New York or Philadelphia.

“Oh yeah. Mom comes to visit every summer for a few weeks. And we talk on the phone all the time. Things were rough between us for a while, but she loves me, and I know she was only trying to protect me.”

“Protect you from what? This seems like a pretty ideal place to grow up.”

“It’s complicated. You know how things are with families.” It was a non-answer, but Sean accepted it and didn’t press Elijah. He’d taken down the ‘no trespassing’ sign for far longer than Sean had expected.
“Turn about is fair play, Sean,” Elijah said then. “What about your dad and mom?” He set aside his half-empty plate and hugged his knees to his chest, watching Sean with that sideways tilt of his head that was so characteristic and charming.

“My dad owned a plumbing supply business in Queens. He started it from the ground up and worked his ass off so he could give me and Mack all the advantages he never had growing up,” Sean said. “He was largely self-educated and never graduated high school, but he believed in the value of a good education and always encouraged us to read. I inherited my love of reading from him, like I inherited my sense of humor. As for my mom…” Sean hesitated. It was still difficult sometimes to talk about her. “She has bipolar disorder, Elijah. It went undiagnosed for a long time, so she wasn’t able to be there for us a lot when Mack and I were kids, and she could never really hold down a job. My dad had to be mom and dad to both of us sometimes. When my dad got sick, Anna could barely cope with that and us and the money situation. But eventually she was diagnosed and I was able to help her get the treatment she needed.”

“I bet your dad would be really proud of you,” Elijah commented. “Helping your mom and brother, running a successful business…”

“I’ve asked myself that question more times than you can imagine, Elijah.”

“What do you mean?” Elijah leaned back against the sofa, studying Sean curiously.

Sean turned the beer bottle in his hands. The label was starting to peel off a little at one corner from the moisture, he noticed abstractedly. In the background, The Stone Roses played softly. It was good music, he thought, just as Elijah had said. He’d have to write down the title of the album before he left. He could buy it from the iTunes store. Hell, he could buy every fucking album in the iTunes store if he wanted.

“I wonder if he would be proud of me. Oh, he’d have been thrilled if I’d become a doctor the way I’d once hoped. But the CEO of a company that sells software for Internet advertising?” Sean huffed a laugh when he saw the surprised look on Elijah’s face. “Yeah. That’s my great programming invention, Elijah, and I make a hell of a lot of money from it. And sometimes I think that, far from being proud, my dad would believe I’d sold my soul to the devil.”

“Don’t say that!” Elijah spoke sharply. He rose to his knees, and shuffled across the carpet until he was directly in front of Sean. He sank back onto his heels, and rested his hands palm upward on his thighs in a gesture almost of supplication. “Anyone who has been in your company for even five minutes can see what a decent and honorable man you are, Sean. Of course your dad would be proud of you.”

Tears crowded thick and fast in Sean’s throat; it was a struggle to force them back. Elijah spoke with such absolute conviction, and he looked almost fierce, as if he was prepared to do battle on Sean’s behalf… as the white stag had done. “If only to hear you say that, Elijah, every single thing that has happened to me in the past 24 hours has been worth it.”

“Even being chased through the woods by the Jersey Devil?” Elijah asked, smiling, but his eyes were suspiciously bright.

“Even that,” he agreed, smiling back, although it was a wobbly smile. “I don’t want to startle you again, Elijah, so consider this fair warning: I’m going to give you a hug, okay?”

He leaned forward, the red leather creaking softly under his shifting weight, and held out his arms. Elijah rose to his knees and went willingly into Sean’s embrace, hugging him hard around the waist. Elijah’s body was lean but firmly muscled, and as Sean held him close, the intoxicating scents of
bayberry and pine sap, of woodsmoke and dried grasses filled his senses and made him almost dizzy with longing to turn this embrace into something more than a hug of gratitude for the light Elijah had shed in the darkness of Sean’s soul. But Elijah had called him a decent and honorable man. Sean held him for a heartbeat longer while he tried to imprint the memory of this moment in his mind forever. Then he whispered, “Thank you,” and let Elijah go.

Elijah sat back on his heels again, and Sean wondered if it was his imagination or if a trace of disappointment lingered in those brilliant blue eyes, as if he hadn’t wanted their embrace to end either.

But if that was the case, Elijah, like Sean, wasn’t going to say anything about it. “If you’re finished eating, Sean,” was what he did say, “I thought maybe we could watch a double feature of our favorite movies: Harvey and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. I own them both.”

“That would be wonderful, Elijah,” Sean said, and was rewarded by the pleased smile that lit the young man’s face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen either of them.”

“Great.” Elijah scrambled to his feet and held out his hand. “Here, give me your empty plate. I’m going to go get us some popcorn and ice cream.”

“Popcorn and ice cream?” Eyebrows lifted, Sean handed over his plate.

“Of course. You can’t watch a double feature without popcorn and ice cream,” Elijah stated firmly as he bent to pick up his own plate. “Be back in a few.”

Sean decided to take advantage of Elijah’s absence to explore the bookshelves. He was more intrigued than ever after what Elijah had told him about the collection.

Maggie and Rocky were still curled up together by the woodstove that was giving off steady warmth. Small clouds of steam billowed from the red lacquered nose of the dragon steamer. Sean stood for a moment looking down at the cat and squirrel, marveling at their trusting companionship. As if sensing Sean’s regard, Maggie opened one amber eye and regarded Sean curiously. “Do you have any idea how lucky you are?” he asked, and then laughed softly. “Of course you do, Maggie. Go back to sleep.” She closed her eye and went back to sleep, and Sean walked over to the shelves.

He scanned the titles with interest. In addition to a great many books on the Pine Barrens and its history, there was an extensive selection of books about world folklore and legends, as Elijah had said. But there were also books on botany and medicinal herbs, on natural history and ornithology, and even on veterinary medicine. There was material here for many hours of fascinating reading, Sean thought, and felt a pang at the knowledge that he would never have the chance.

At random, he pulled a large leather bound volume from the shelf. The binding was plain brown calf with no printing on it. Sean opened the book to the first page and stared in wonder at an amazingly lifelike watercolor and ink drawing of a flower. This was an artist’s sketchbook, he realized. Sean carefully turned the pages, and each page held yet another exquisite painting. Whoever this unknown artist was, he or she had uncommon talent. At the bottom of each drawing, the name of the plant was written in black ink in an old-fashioned script along with the initials ‘HBW’. The names of the flowers were strange to Sean, even when he thought he recognized the plant being depicted. Sparkle one was called, never-wet was the name of another. He wondered if HBW had named them.

“I’m back.” Startled, Sean turned to see Elijah juggling three bowls in his arms and smiling at him. “I see you’ve discovered one of my great-grandmother’s sketchbooks,” he said, observing the book in Sean’s hands.
“Your great-grandmother painted these?”

“Uh huh,” Elijah replied, setting the bowls down. “Her name was Hannah Byron Wood. She was entirely self-taught, never took a single art lesson, but she had a real eye for nature. She died before I was born, but my dad said she used to be gone for days at a time, alone in the woods with her sketchbook. Her goal was to paint every plant and animal that lives in the pines. It was almost as if she knew that many of the things she painted would someday become extinct or nearly so.”

“She was an amazing artist, Elijah. Her use of color is extraordinary. These flowers feel so real, I can almost smell them.”

Elijah went to Sean’s side and peered over his shoulder at the sketchbook.

“Whippoorwill shoe,” Sean read aloud, admiring a delicately colored drawing of a pink flower with pale green leaves on a long slender stalk. “I always thought this was called a lady’s slipper.”

“Not in the pines. We have our own names for many of the indigenous plants. Better ones if you ask me,” Elijah added with a touch of pride. “Now come on, the first half of our double feature is about to start and the ice cream’s starting to melt.”

Regretfully, for he could have lingered over the pages for hours, Sean closed the sketchbook, and slid it back into its place on the shelf with the greatest care.

No few hours ever flew by so fast. Popcorn and ice cream went surprisingly well together, Sean discovered, especially when the ice cream contained peanut butter Tastykakes, a food that Sean had seen for sale in gas station convenience stores or the end of aisles in the supermarket, but never once tasted until now. Elijah was nearly as shocked to discover this sad lack in Sean’s culinary experience, as he was to discover that Sean had never heard of The Stone Roses.

“You mean to tell me you’ve never eaten a Butterscotch Krimpet?” Elijah paused with a spoonful of ice cream halfway to his lips. “Oh Sean, you haven’t lived until you’ve eaten a Butterscotch Krimpet. They’re made in Philly, you know,” he said, as if that was the clincher.

All too soon, both ice cream and popcorn had been consumed amid much friendly arguing over which movie was better, and the credits for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* were rolling across the TV screen. Sean was half tempted to ask Elijah if they could watch another movie, but a glance at his wristwatch showed that it was already after 10 p.m. This magical day was coming to an end at last; there was no way to stop the clock, and his body was starting to clamor for sleep. Despite himself, Sean yawned hugely behind his hand.

Elijah tilted his head back. He was seated on the carpet, as he claimed to prefer, leaning against the couch next to Sean’s legs. “Sounds like you’re ready for bed, Sean.”

It was useless to deny it. “I am kind of beat.” Another yawn forced its way out, but he smiled around it. “But I’ve rarely enjoyed an evening more, Elijah.”

“Neither have I.” Their eyes locked and held.

From this angle, Sean could see the outline of Elijah’s full bottom lip and the curving ends of his long black lashes. Tired as he was, or perhaps because he was too tired to keep up his guard, Sean imagined what it would be like to slide off the couch and join Elijah on the floor, to push him down on his back on the carpet and taste that sensuous mouth, to undress him slowly and explore every inch of his body with hands and mouth. But Elijah believed him to be a decent and honorable man, and he knew he had no right to involve anyone else in the mess his own life had become.
So instead he stood up and said, “Well, I guess I’d better get to bed before I fall asleep on your couch.” *Hold out your hand, Elijah. Ask me to stay.*

But Elijah only said quietly, “Yes, you’d better. It’s been a long day.”

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*The white stag stood proudly in the middle of the starlit clearing, his great dark eyes holding Sean’s captive. Sean, his heart in his throat, moved slowly toward him, hand outstretched. Then suddenly, with a toss of his antlered head, the stag wheeled and began trotting away. Sean hurried after him, forcing his way into the trees, pushing at stiff pointed branches that snagged his clothes and tore at his hands. Gritting his teeth, he struggled on but the elusive figure drew further and further away.*

“Please wait,” he cried out in despair, but it was too late. The stag had vanished.

Sean woke up with tears on his cheeks. It was only a dream, he told himself, but the sense of loss felt so real.

The first cold pale light of dawn was showing through the windows. It was early, but Sean knew he wouldn’t fall back asleep, even though his eyes felt gritty and he didn’t feel at all rested. *I don’t want to leave,* Sean thought as he stared up at the ceiling. The words from a Robert Frost poem suddenly came into his mind:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

The sound of a door closing roused Sean from his bitter thoughts. Elijah was up then. Sean threw back the covers and got out of bed. He went to the window overlooking the yard, somehow certain of what he’d see. And there was Elijah in his faded barn coat and ugly gray hat heading toward the barn to take care of the animals.

Alone.

*Magical worlds aren’t for people like you, Sean. You had one glimpse of magic. Be grateful. That’s more than most people ever get.*

Sean rested his forehead against the icy chill of the windowpane and watched as Elijah slid open the barn door and disappeared inside, pulling it shut behind him. *Please wait,* he wanted to cry as he had in his dream, but like the white stag, Elijah had vanished from sight, and Sean couldn’t follow him.

***

Fred wasn’t in the bathroom. Sean felt absurdly disappointed. There was something about the turtle’s phlegmatic presence that he would have welcomed at that moment. Sean decided against showering— the scent of bayberry more than he could bear— but he did shave, even though it probably would have been wiser to wait another day or two. But it seemed a matter of pride, foolish or not, that Elijah should not remember him with two days’ growth of scruffy-looking beard covering his face.

When he was finished, Sean returned to his bedroom and packed his few belongings. He made the bed neatly, and as he was smoothing out the beautiful wedding ring quilt he realized with sudden and unquestioning intuition that it had been sewn by Elijah’s great-grandmother Hannah. “Thank you,” he whispered, not sure why, and with one final stroke of his palm across the soft fabric, left the room, taking his suitcase with him and leaving it by the front door.
He then made his way to the kitchen where he found Fred, long scrawny neck outstretched, eating a breakfast of shredded lettuce and berries from a small ceramic bowl. There was no sign of either Maggie or Rocky. Sean noticed at once that the kitchen table was set for two, and his heart was sore. *It still feels sort of weird to eat at the kitchen table without the rest of my family, you know?* Elijah had said last night. *I’m so sorry, Elijah,* Sean thought. *I can’t. If I do, I’ll end up begging you to let me stay.*

The flurry of bird wings outside the picture window caught Sean’s attention. Elijah was at one of the bird feeders, filling it with sunflower seeds from a plastic scoop. An involuntary smile curved Sean’s lips. The young man looked like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz.* There was a cardinal perched on his head, a bright splash of scarlet on gray, a pair of goldfinches in their drab winter clothing on one shoulder, and a tiny black-capped chickadee on the other. Other birds hovered, landing lightly on Elijah’s outstretched arms for a moment or two, or hopped around him on the ground, snatching up seeds that accidentally fell from the scoop. It was a sight Sean would never forget.

As Elijah replaced the top on the now-full feeder, he noticed Sean, and a bright smile lit his face. He waved, dislodging two sparrows and a titmouse from his coat sleeve, and mouthed, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Sean nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. His face must have been more revealing than he realized, for the bright smile faded from Elijah’s face, and he looked sober as he headed toward the mudroom door.

Within a few minutes, Elijah entered the kitchen with Maggie and Rocky. He had removed his hat and coat, but still wore his tan work boots. He was wearing an oversized sweater in a soft blue that made his eyes more luminous than ever, and he was carrying Sean’s ruined jacket in one hand.

“Good morning,” Sean said, drinking in the sight of Elijah, storing it in his mind and heart.

“Good morning.” Elijah’s voice was subdued. “I’ve got your jacket here,” he said, stating the obvious. “I didn’t want you to forget it, Sean. You never asked, but your wallet is still in the pocket.” He held it out.

“Thanks.” Sean took the jacket, and felt an unreasoning hatred of the butter-soft, expensive leather, wishing, absurdly, that it was a blaze orange down jacket instead. “I would’ve forgotten it, I’m sure.”

“Your car keys are on the dashboard,” Elijah hurried on. “In case you were wondering.”

Maggie was winding stiffly around Elijah’s legs. She let out a plaintive *meow,* and Elijah glanced down at her and said, “Maggie, stop.” From his spot atop the refrigerator, Rocky was chattering to himself, sounding agitated, and Fred had stopped eating and was regarding Sean dolefully; a piece of dark green lettuce drooped from the corner of his mouth.

“Can I get you anything before you leave? A cup of coffee or tea?” Elijah was determinedly not looking at the table he’d set with the obvious belief that Sean would be staying for breakfast.

Sean felt the worst sort of ingrate. “No, but thank you, Elijah. I can get something to eat on the way to the shore. I have to stop and pick up some groceries anyway.” He gripped the leather jacket hard between his fingers, steeling himself to say, as if he had some urgent business appointment: “In fact, I’d really better get going.”

“Of course,” Elijah agreed quietly at once. “I’ll walk you out to your car.”

They didn’t say a word as they walked through the quiet house with Maggie trotting at Elijah’s heels.
Sean picked up his overnight case by the door and followed Elijah outside and down the front steps of the porch. It was bitterly cold and the sky was leaden, but the thought of the heated leather seats of his Beemer did nothing to cheer Sean up. The small blue pickup truck parked beside the sleek silver sedan appeared so much more inviting.

Sean opened the back door of the BMW and as he set his suitcase on the dark gray leather, saw a rectangular cardboard box resting on the other half of the seat. “What’s this?” he asked curiously, glancing over his shoulder at Elijah.

“Just a small present for you, Sean. Something I’d like you to have.” Elijah smiled rather crookedly. “But please don’t open it until you get to your beach house, okay?”

“Okay,” Sean agreed, though he was burning with curiosity. “But you really didn’t have to…”

“I did.” The words were almost fierce.

Sean shut the car door. “Would you, um, say goodbye to Rocky and Fred and everyone else for me?”

Elijah nodded, biting his lip.

“Goodbye, Maggie,” Sean bent to pet the calico cat, and she butted her head against his hand though her amber eyes looked reproachful. Then he straightened and faced Elijah.

“You’ll need directions back to the highway,” Elijah said, and dug a piece of folded notebook paper out of the front pocket of his jeans. “It’s not complicated, but I wrote them down for you, just in case.”

“Thank you,” Sean said, taking the paper, feeling totally inadequate to the moment that was now staring him in the face. What could he say, what could he possibly say? “Elijah…” he began, and words failing him utterly, he held out his arms.

And in a rush, Elijah was pressed against him, his arms wound around Sean’s neck. They held each other wordlessly for a long time, rocking gently back and forth. Sean couldn’t bring himself to let Elijah go. In the end, it was Elijah who dropped his arms and stepped back first with a whispered, “Goodbye”. Sean let him go reluctantly, feeling almost bereft. “Goodbye, Elijah.” It was almost more than he could manage. Anything more would have choked him.

They walked in silence around the front of the car to the driver’s door, and Sean opened it. But as he was about to slide into the front seat, Elijah said quietly, “Sean.”

Heart leaping with foolish hope, Sean paused with his hand on the doorframe and looked at Elijah. His expression was unreadable.

“Do you remember me mentioning Dr. Holm? The man who gave me Maggie?”

“Yes, I remember.” Sean was thrown off-balance by the unexpected question.

Elijah held Sean’s eyes steadily with his own. “Dr. Holm grew up in the pines, Sean. His family owns a cranberry farm, has for generations. That was his entire life until he was in his late thirties. But he’d always dreamed of becoming a doctor, and one day he finally decided that he didn’t want to die saying, ‘If only I’d pursued my dream’. So he quit farming and went back to school. It took a lot of courage and a lot of hard work, but he did it.” Elijah paused. “It’s not too late for you to pursue your dream, Sean,” he said, and then he stepped back from the car. “Drive carefully.”
“I will.” Sean got in the car and closed the door. With fumbling fingers he found the key on the dashboard and fitted it in the ignition. The car purred to life at once, but Sean was too shaken by Elijah’s unexpected words to feel relief that the Beamer really was working perfectly again. He put the car in reverse and backed away from the house, aware every moment of Elijah following him with his eyes. He’d picked Maggie up and was holding her cradled against his chest. For comfort? When he’d cleared the Toyota, Sean shifted into drive, and with a final lift of his hand in farewell and an aching heart, pulled away. He watched Elijah in the rearview mirror until a turn in the driveway finally hid him from view.

As the BMW wound its way along the drive through the woods, Sean couldn’t escape the feeling that he was going in the wrong direction, that if he had any sense at all, he would turn around immediately and go back. But he kept driving.

A sudden glimmer of white shining in the pines on his left caught his attention. He slowed the BMW and searched almost desperately for the white stag, but it must have been his imagination.

Or perhaps it was the sudden flood of tears that were blurring his vision.
“Sir? Excuse me, sir?”

It took Sean a full minute to realize that the polite, if slightly impatient, voice was addressing him. While waiting on line to pay for his groceries at the Pathmark supermarket in Manahawkin, his eyes had passed over *The National Enquirer* and *The Globe* and landed on a display of snack cakes on the shelves that stood between his checkout line and the next one over. The words ‘Tastykake Butterscotch Krimpets’ had leapt out at him and riveted his attention in a way that would have been ludicrous if it wasn’t so painful.

In an instant, he’d been transported back to last night and Elijah’s laughing consternation when he’d discovered that Sean had never eaten a Tastykake before. *Elijah*... The colorful boxes of Butterscotch Krimpets and Kandy Kakes faded from view, overlaid by the image of a young man standing in his driveway, holding a calico cat in his arms and looking so very alone...

The young woman at the cash register was staring at him expectantly, waiting for him to start unloading his groceries. The four people in line behind him were also staring, clearly wondering what the hell his problem was and wishing he’d just get over it and get a move on.

“Sorry,” Sean muttered, reddening, and on impulse snatched up a box of Butterscotch Krimpets and set it on the conveyor belt. He quickly began to empty his shopping cart; the crowded, garishly lit
supermarket oppressed him after the peaceful silence of the pines, and all he wanted was to get out of there as fast as possible. Every item he picked up came as a surprise, for he’d walked in a fog up and down the aisles, grabbing things at random from the shelves and putting them in the cart without a second glance.

He was relieved to see that, except for the snack cakes, he’d chosen healthfully: salad greens, low fat balsamic dressing, boneless skinned chicken breasts, I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter, orange juice, bran flakes, 1% milk, pancake mix, maple syrup… Sean started, staring at the container of blueberries in his hand. Oh god…

“Got a club card?” the clerk asked as she picked up the Krimpets and scanned the barcode with a beep.

Sean shook his head and removed the remaining items. He rarely did his own grocery shopping, and had only the most vague clue what a ‘club card’ was. He and Chris used a service that did the shopping for them and delivered the groceries to their apartment on Central Park West every week. Anything they needed in the interim Chris usually picked up.

“That’s okay,” the woman said with a shrug. “I’ll scan this store one. There’s a dollar off the orange juice. You don’t want to miss out on a discount like that.”

“Um, no,” Sean agreed, trying to remember the last time he’d worried about a $1 discount, and feeling ashamed that he couldn’t. “Thanks.”

“No problem. That’ll be $42.78,” she said. “Cash, credit or debit card?”

“Credit.” Sean pulled out his wallet and removed his platinum American Express card. He started to hand it to the clerk, but she shook her head and pointed at a small black box mounted on a stand.

As Sean swiped the card through the machine, he could see her brown eyes widening at the sight of the card and the gold Rolex watch on his left wrist, putting two and two together and coming up with rich. He knew he didn’t have the kind of looks that caught most women’s attention, especially right now with his face and hands beat up, so there could be only one possible explanation for the sudden interest that lit her face.

Money, he thought dispiritedly, putting the credit card back in his wallet. *It has a scent more alluring than the most expensive cologne.*

Her eyes flicked to his bare left ring finger. “You from around here?” she asked with feigned casualness as she handed him a pen and the receipt to sign.

“No,” Sean said quietly, scribbling his name by the ‘x’, “I’m just a traveler passing through.” The words tasted bitter on his tongue. He handed her back the pen and receipt then gathered up the white plastic carrier bags and set them in the cart. He avoided her gaze as he said a quick ‘thank-you’ and pushed the cart away. She was far from unattractive… but her eyes weren’t the vivid blue of a cloudless summer sky.

***

There was little traffic on the causeway that connected Long Beach Island to the mainland, and none at all on the ice-coated waters of the bay that were normally a Mecca for sailors and sport fishermen. The population of the island might swell to 150,000 in the summer- a tight squeeze for a place that was 18 miles long and a mere half-mile wide at its widest point- but in the winter months, only a few thousand hardy souls remained in residence.
As he drove across the bridge, Sean lowered the car window despite the almost arctic cold and his lack of a coat. He was hoping that the first scent of salt air and the first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean, a glimmer of pewter gray on the far side of the island, would raise his spirits the way it usually did. Only for the first time that Sean could ever recall, the island’s particular brand of magic didn’t work.

A nagging sense of wrongness continued to dog him, as it had ever since he’d driven away from Elijah’s house a few hours earlier. He felt oddly disconnected from reality, as if everything he was experiencing was happening to someone else.

_You should have stayed._ The treacherous thought snuck up on him again, as it had several times during the drive.

Sean gripped the steering wheel with grim determination. No matter how he parsed it, no matter how often he recalled that moment when he looked away from the Cooper’s hawk sailing the winter sky to catch the admiring look in Elijah’s eyes, he couldn’t see that he’d had any other option than to leave.

_If Elijah had wanted me to stay, he’d have asked me. I’ve known him for less than two days. My life is in disarray and I’ve no right to involve anyone else in the mess._ The words echoed dully and dutifully in his brain, but sounded more like pitiful excuses than truths.

The creased sheet of notebook paper with the directions that Elijah had given him was lying on the center console, fluttering noisily in the breeze coming in at the window. Sean glanced down at it, taking comfort from the sight of Elijah’s sloping handwriting. The paper had assumed an almost talismanic aspect to Sean, for the directions it contained might, as in a fairy tale, become a symbolic trail of crumbs to lead him back to the pines and Elijah.

_If you even can go back._ A small shiver unrelated to the cold crawled over his skin. Maybe, as in a fairy tale, he would return to discover the house ringed round with a dense hedge of thorns or hidden by some sorcerous glamour that his mortal eyes could not penetrate. _Maybe once you’d left the realm of faërie, you could never return…_

A gust of wind snatched at the paper, lifting it from the console and setting it sailing around the interior of the car. Sean grabbed it, his heart pounding with dread at the thought of losing it, and he quickly raised the window. He reached behind him and set the paper down on top of the cardboard box that contained Elijah’s mysterious gift. And it seemed to him as he drew back his arm that the scents of pinesap and woodsmoke and dried grasses stirred the air, displacing the tang of ocean salt.

***

“Hey, easy does it.” Elijah eased the formula-filled eyedropper away from two tiny grasping paws. “You’ll choke yourself.” But a resentful, high-pitched squeaking told Elijah exactly what the squirrel thought of his concern, and he relented, smiling. “Okay, you can have a little more, only not so fast this time.” He set the dropper back at the squirrel’s frantically working mouth, and the squeaks immediately faded into contented chirps.

Against his will, Elijah’s mind conjured up a mental image of Sean, in his dad’s old jacket, cradling this same baby squirrel in one large hand as he fed it formula. He’d looked absolutely terrified at first that he might screw up somehow, but after a few minutes, when nothing dire happened, he’d really seemed to be enjoying himself. A smile had crinkled the corners of those gorgeous green-gold eyes and lightened the sadness that Elijah had sensed in Sean from the moment their eyes met across a starlit clearing deep in the woods.
It had felt so good and right to share this part of his life with Sean. Elijah ached with the knowledge that he would never again watch Sean’s careful and tender awkwardness and that Sean would never see these babies he’d helped to feed be released into the wild.

*You know you had no other choice.*

So easy to say… so much harder to believe.

***

The best thing about the beach house, in Sean’s opinion, was its view. The front of the two-story structure was entirely covered in floor-to-ceiling windows, and presented a virtually unobstructed and breathtaking view of the ocean, stretching to the far horizon where it met the sky. Sean could spend, and had, hours simply sitting and staring out at the sea: ever changing, ever the same, endlessly fascinating.

The worst thing about the house was that it wasn’t a home, at least not the kind of home Sean had wanted, something small and unpretentious in the quiet neighborhood near the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. Instead, he and Chris had bought this large and impressive showplace that had not only been featured in several nationally-known interior design magazines, but was included in the annual August house tours that gave summer tourists a chance to gape at the homes of the rich and famous.

The minimalist architecture and Danish modern furniture impressed the hell out of the clients Chris insisted they invite down to be wined and dined, courtesy of an excellent little catering business in Harvey Cedars. It sometimes seemed as if their entire lives revolved around the company, even their rare vacations dedicated to it. Chris’s commitment to Clicktwice was fierce, and had been since the day that Sean had hired the smart, ambitious, attractive young woman as his assistant.

Because of this, Sean always arrived at the beach house with mixed emotions, although never more so than this time. He honestly hadn’t known where else to go when it had been borne in on him at New Year’s, once and for all, that Clicktwice meant more to Chris than he personally ever would. Here at least there would be solitude and silence and the comforting aura of childhood nostalgia. Perhaps he would finally be able to figure out what the hell he was going to do about the company, about Chris and their future together… or apart.

Only he hadn’t factored meeting Elijah into the equation. By comparison with Elijah’s home in the woods, the ultra-modern glass-and-wood rectangle set among Japanese pines seemed even more stark and uninviting as Sean pulled up and pressed the garage door opener clipped to the sun visor.

After parking the BMW in the three-car garage that was home to an assortment of beach chairs, skim boards, umbrellas and mismatched flip-flops, Sean disarmed the security system and unpacked the car. The interior of the house was cool- the heat had been set to the minimum necessary to prevent pipes from freezing- but then it felt that way even in the summer. Chris didn’t like to have the windows open, worrying that the damp salt air would make things musty and mildewed, so the air conditioning and dehumidifier ran non-stop when they were there.

Tempted to throw open the windows just because he could, Sean instead adjusted the thermostat of the computerized climate control system to 68, and as he went into the kitchen to put the groceries away, he could hear the furnace kick on, a welcome sound in the otherwise silent house.

The answering machine lived at one end of the silver-flecked black granite countertop. As Sean had suspected, its red light was flashing insistently. Deciding it was probably best to get it over with, Sean punched the blue message button.
You have eight new messages, the machine intoned.

beep. ‘Sean, it’s Chris.’ Sean almost started at the sound of her voice. For a disconcerting moment, it sounded like that of a stranger. That sense of unreality swept over him again, as if he stood between two worlds, with one foot in each. ‘You left your cell phone here. I hope it was an accident, because if it wasn’t, don’t you think that’s a little immature, even for you? Anyway, give me a call when you get in. We need to discuss that deal with Northwest Airlines.’

beep. ‘Sean? pause. Sean, please pick up the phone. pause. Shit. Look, Tim Griffin is waiting to hear back from me. I don’t want us to lose this contract. Call me as soon as you get this message.’

beep. ‘Sean, I know you’re there. For Christ’s sake, would you please pick up the phone? This is getting ridiculous.’

While Sean put the perishables away in the nearly-empty stainless steel refrigerator—only a few lonely bottles of condiments were in residence—the messages continued to play, more or less in the same vein, until a frustrated Chris stated that she’d called Tim Griffin back and if Sean didn’t like what she’d told him, well then, tough luck.

Sean slammed the refrigerator door closed. Fine. I don’t give a flying fuck what you told him, Chris. You were the one who invited Griffin and his wife over on New Year’s Eve. The New Year’s Eve that we were supposed to spend alone, not with 100 of our ‘closest’ friends, remember?

He pinched the bridge of his nose against an incipient headache as he recalled that disastrous night when he’d finally reached the end of his tether. He was struck anew by the tone of her voice, the impatient one she used when she thought Sean was behaving childishly. How was it that two people could live together for so long but know each other so little? He’d tried, he really had, to explain to Chris the reasons why he had to get away for a while, but clearly he hadn’t gotten his point across.

But then in all fairness was that her fault? He’d allowed himself to drift along on the tide of her decisive personality for too long, and there had been a time in their early years together when he’d been as gung-ho about the business as she. Was it any wonder Chris now thought he was going through some sort of ‘mid-life crisis’ that would eventually pass? I’m such a total fuck-up, he thought dejectedly.

One more beep and the final message began to play. ‘Sean, look, I understand you’re upset about New Year’s,’ Chris said in a softer voice. ‘I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t realize it was so important to you. But we got the contract with Northwest, so you have to admit it turned out for the best. Why don’t you come home and we’ll talk about it. Maybe we can get away for a while after the directors’ meeting, just the two of us, someplace warm like Acapulco or Hawaii. Think about it, Sean, please.’

Sean stood there, paralyzed, still holding the handle of the refrigerator door. Chris’s rare softer moments always got to him, even if he later regretted it, even if he half-suspected that it was only an act to appease him until the next time. Immediately, the inevitable guilt began washing over him, guilt for his disloyal thoughts about the person who more than anyone else was responsible for the success and wealth he currently enjoyed.

He walked slowly over to the phone, while he debated whether or not to call Chris, to accept her apology and tell her he’d return home.

In another of those disconcerting, disorienting moments, it seemed that he was back in the pines, standing in front of the fingerboard at that sandy crossroads near the Quaker Bridge. Trails led away in every direction. One was the well-trodden, familiar path back to the city and his life with Chris. The others were little used, shadowy and frightening, and headed straight into the unknown depths
Sean’s hand hovered uncertainly over the phone.

And then he recalled Elijah’s parting words that morning: *It’s not too late for you to pursue your dream, Sean.* A renewed sense of purpose and determination filled him.

He pulled his hand away.

Instead of calling Chris, he picked up the cardboard box from the end of the kitchen counter and carried it upstairs to his study on the second floor.

***

The study was the one place in the house that was truly Sean’s, and it was as much a retreat as it was a place to work; in addition to a state-of-the-art computer system and office equipment, there was a comfortable brown leather sofa where Sean had spent more than a few nights sleeping, for one reason or another, and assorted oddments he’d picked up over the years, mostly on his walks along the shore line at low tide, when the ocean retreated and left behind gifts for those who cared to hunt for them.

As he entered the room with the box held securely in his arms, his eyes sought out those familiar, comforting treasures: driftwood twisted into fantastical shapes, a large clear bowl half-filled with pieces of glass weathered smoky-smooth by the tumble of sand and water, and a curio cabinet whose shelves were filled with seashells: whorled whelks and cat’s eyes, fragile angel’s wings and tiny colorful coquilles.

In pride of place over the sofa hung a hand-colored 19th century lithograph of the island that had belonged to his dad, and had once hung in the family room of their house in Queens. On either side of it were two large photographs Sean had bought at an art gallery in Barnegat Light: one of purple-gray storm clouds looming over the angry white capped ocean while jagged streaks of lightning shimmered from cloud to water, and the other of the Barnegat lighthouse, standing tall and proud against a sunset sky suffused with soft pinks and golds and lavenders.

The house his parents had rented when he and Mack were kids had been decorated in a way that in retrospect definitely verged on the camp, with ceramic lamps shaped like lighthouses or sea captains, shell-decorated fishnet draped across the walls and painted clamshells for ashtrays. But Sean and Mack had adored every single over-the-top square inch of it, especially their twin beds shaped like boats, or pirate’s ships, as the two boys preferred to call them.

Other than Sean’s study, however, there wasn’t a trace of the sea to be found anywhere in the oh-so-fashionably decorated house. After they’d closed on the house, Sean in his naiveté had suggested a nautical-themed décor. After all, it was a beach house, as he’d pointed out to Chris. But he’d been quickly disabused of the notion by Chris and by the interior designer she’d hired at a ridiculous price to decorate the house. Apparently, having a place at the beach that actually looked like it belonged at the beach was considered tacky in the extreme.

It had been yet another instance, if he needed any more proof, of what he’d long ago suspected: he wasn’t really meant to walk in the world of the rich and powerful, a world Chris traversed so effortlessly in her Manolo Blahniks. It was only a fluke of timing that his little basement business had taken off the way it had, not some grand destiny.

Once upon a time, growing up, Sean had imagined that it would be very cool to be one of those guys in a fairy tale- a shepherd or goat boy- who ended up king of a great realm, living in a castle and
married to a beautiful princess. But not any more. All he felt was pity for the poor suckers, and a
suspicion that they secretly would much rather return to their quiet mountainsides, where their only
responsibility was to tend to their herds of goats and flocks of sheep. Simply because someone wore
robes of ermine and velvet, ate off plates made of solid gold and ruled a kingdom didn’t mean he
would ever truly fit in.

Maybe the best fairy tales, Sean thought now, were the ones without castles or princesses. Like the
one wherein a magical white stag came to the rescue of a lost and frightened traveler and brought
him for succor to a young man both kind-hearted and beautiful…

He sank cross-legged onto the carpet, and rested his back against the sofa, exactly as Elijah had done
last night during their impromptu movie double feature. Holding the image of Elijah’s flushed
laughing face and sparkling eyes in his mind, Sean let it chase away any lingering coldness left by
the unwelcoming house and Chris’s impatient messages. Only then did he feel in a proper frame of
mind to open his gift.

The box was three-quarters filled with pink foam peanuts, and involuntary amusement quirked
Sean’s mouth, for as he’d speculated about the contents of the box during the drive to the island,
among the thoughts that had flitted through his brain had been the completely absurd and illogical
one that Elijah had given him one of the baby squirrels. Well, the poor thing would have suffocated
for sure if that had been the case, and pink foam peanuts were no adequate substitute for the kind that
Elijah fed Rocky.

He could almost hear Elijah’s infectious high-pitched giggle as Sean told him what he’d imagined.
Sighing, he cupped his hands and scooped the foam peanuts to one end, uncovering a rectangular
package wrapped in several layers of white tissue paper. A piece of notebook paper, the same kind
of paper Elijah had used to write the directions, was taped to it.

Sean detached the note and quickly unfolded it, burning with curiosity to discover what Elijah had
written to him. The note consisted of one brief sentence, written in black ink, and the words leapt off
the page at him:

Because you can see the magic.

It was signed, simply, Elijah.

“How could Elijah have given this away?” was his first coherent thought, but he recalled Elijah’s
fiercely spoken words when Sean had voiced his objection by the car. He understood now why
Elijah had asked him not to open the box until he reached the shore. Elijah had suspected that Sean would never have accepted such a gift if he had tried to give it to him face to face. Oh Elijah...

Sean sat there with the drawing on his lap for a long time, while he relived the moment in the starlit clearing when he had looked up to see the white stag- and every moment that had come afterward. He had worried that some day the memory would fade and wither like fallen rose petals, leaving only the faintest trace of once vivid scent behind. But now, thanks to Elijah’s generosity, his remembrance of that magical meeting would never grow dim.

He lowered his forehead until it rested against the dull gold of the gilt frame. The ache in his heart was an almost physical pain. This was the most wondrous gift he had ever been given in his life, but he didn’t want it to be all he ever had of the white stag… or Elijah.

***

The phone was ringing when Elijah entered the house through the mudroom door, and he dashed across the kitchen, narrowly avoiding stepping on Maggie, and snatched up the receiver just before the answering machine clicked on.

“Hello?”

“Oh my god, Elijah, you’re there. Where have you been? Are you all right?” It was Hannah, sounding beside herself with worry.

“Of course I’m all right,” he replied, wondering what on earth she was talking about, and unable to suppress an unreasoning sense of disappointment. You didn’t give him your phone number. Why on earth would you expect him to be calling you?

“I was just out looking for a place to release the possum I’ve been taking care of.”

“Is he with you?” Hannah demanded.

“The opossum?” he asked, confused. He crouched down and held out his arm so Rocky could scamper up it to his usual perch on Elijah’s right shoulder. “No, he’s out in the-”

“Not the opossum!” Hannah nearly shrieked. “That man, the one you were with when Bill met you in the woods yesterday.”

Elijah straightened so abruptly that Rocky nearly fell off his shoulder and had to scrabble for a hold on the collar of his flannel shirt. “How on earth did you know about… Oh, you’ve been talking to Katie.” He sighed and ran a frustrated hand through his hair. His sister and Katie talked on the phone at least once a week, and Hannah was kept abreast of all the local gossip. Nothing could stay secret in the pines for long, especially if it involved the Woodjin. He should have realized Hannah would hear about Sean, and called her as a preemptive strike. His sister might be 5 foot nothing and weigh 90 pounds soaking wet, but you didn’t want to mess with her when she was mad.

“A good thing, too,” Hannah retorted, “or I’d never know what’s going on, would I? Like my crazy brother bringing home strange men. And you haven’t answered my question- is he there with you?”

“Hannah, that’s really none of your business.” Maggie, winding in and out of his legs, meowed disapprovingly. You stay out of it, Elijah mouthed at her.

“Oh my god, he’s still there, isn’t he?” exclaimed Hannah, leaping to the wrong conclusion. “Elijah, are you out of your mind letting some stranger into the house? Who is this guy? What do you know about him?”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Would you please calm down? He’s not still here. He left this morning.” It was difficult to keep his voice level and unemotional, but he must have done a credible job of it, for Hannah didn’t pick up on the sorrow and regret underlying those last four words.

“Well, thank god for that,” his sister said with relief. “But it doesn’t make what you did any less irresponsible. What if he’d been some kind of psycho? What if he’d attacked you or something?”

“I’m sure Fred would have rushed to my rescue,” Elijah said lightly. Rocky chattered indignantly in his ear. “And Rocky, too.”

“It’s not funny,” Hannah snapped. “You shouldn’t be taking risks like that, Lij.”

“I was called, Hannah. I’m sure Katie must have told you that.” They never spoke openly of who and what Elijah was; the habit of caution, drummed into them from childhood, was too deeply ingrained. “He was in danger, and he was scared and hurt. He needed my help.”

“You could have taken him to Dr. Ian,” Hannah insisted stubbornly, unwilling to let him off the hook.

“His injuries weren’t that serious, and it was closer to bring him here.”

Which was true, but it wasn’t the whole truth, and he had no intention of telling his sister the whole truth. If he admitted to the attraction he felt for Sean, she would only worry more.

Even though she was two years younger than him, Hannah had assumed a protective role in his life from the time they were little. She had been there for him through all the ups and downs in the years since their father died, and especially since their mom had left.

While Elijah sometimes wished she’d remember that he was an adult now and had been living on his own for nearly five years, without her support, the solitary road he had to travel would have been far, far harder. His voice softened as he said, “Sean is a good man, Hannah, a kind man. He would never have harmed me.”

Not deliberately. But it hurt like hell to watch him leave. It hurts right now to know that he might still be here if I wasn’t the Woodjin.

“Maggie liked him,” he went on, smiling down at the calico cat whose amber eyes were fixed unblinkingly on his face, “and she’s nearly as overprotective as you are.”

“Elijah…” Hannah said his name on a long exhale of breath. “Maybe everything turned out okay this time, but you took a terrible chance. Sweetie, I couldn’t bear to see you hurt again.”

Oh Hannah, it’s too late.

“The situation was completely different then,” Elijah replied. “And I can’t stop being what I am. Even if it means I’ll be hurt sometimes.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to hear you say that?” Hannah asked sadly. “But listen, Lij. I’ve been thinking. Maybe Jordan and I should move in with you, at least during the week. Lawrence is out of town on location half the time anyway. We could go home on weekends or he could come out to the cabin…”

“No.” Elijah was emphatic. “Absolutely no way. I’m not going to come between you and Lawrence. My god, Hannah, how can you possibly think that would be a good idea, knowing what almost happened to mom and dad?”
“Lawrence…” she began.

“…is your husband, and he’s already being asked to deal with a lot more than most husbands ever have to,” Elijah reminded her. “Please, don’t even mention to him that the idea crossed your mind, okay?”

Hannah sighed in defeat. “Okay. I won’t say anything.”

“Thanks. Lawrence is almost a foot taller than me and outweighs me by 100 pounds. I don’t want him mad at me.”

“Lawrence adores you just as much as Jordan and I do, and you know it. Look, I’m sorry for freaking out on you like that, it’s just that I worry about you so much.”

Elijah wished there was some promise he could make, some comfort he could offer to ease her worry, but he couldn’t, wouldn’t lie to her. Too much grief had been caused in the past by those kinds of lies. Instead he said, “Well, if you’re looking for a way to make it up to me, bring me some more Shiner Bock next time you visit. I’m almost out.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to mention Sean, to tell Hannah how he’d never heard of Shiner Bock, or ever eaten a Tastykake, and that he loved the pines, and that he thought the white stag the most beautiful and magical being he’d ever seen in his life, and that he’d gentled to Elijah’s touch in the midst of his nightmare, and that he’d looked last night as if he would have kissed Elijah if he’d only been given the slightest encouragement…

“You and your beer, Elijah,” Hannah was saying. “Okay, it’s a deal, and if the weather isn’t too bad, I’ll bring it over this weekend. We haven’t been out to see you since Christmas. That’s way too long.”

“Yeah, it is. I hope it doesn’t t-” Elijah began, but he was interrupted by a childish wail of ‘Momma!’ in the background. It was Jordan.

“Oh god, I’m gonna have to run. Jordan just woke up from his nap. Love you, Lij. See you this weekend.”

“Love you, too. Hug that little monkey for me.”

Elijah slowly hung up the phone. “Well,” he said in a determinedly cheerful voice to Maggie and Rocky, “let’s go put on some music. Something we can dance to.” But from the way the gray squirrel and the calico cat pressed up against him, offering him their wordless comfort, he knew that while he might have fooled Hannah, they weren’t fooled in the least.

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Sean did his best to pull himself together and start applying himself to the reason he’d come to the beach house, which wasn’t to wallow in self-pity and sadness and might-have-beens, but come to some firm decisions about his future.

He set aside the drawing, carefully, and went into the master bathroom. He took a quick shower, resolutely closing his mind off from any thought of Elijah, and changed into a favorite pair of faded navy sweats that Chris had unsuccessfully tried to convince him to throw out. Then he made a healthy salad for lunch, and ate it standing by the window, staring out at the turbulent ocean, gray under an equally leaden sky. When he was done eating, he returned to the study and booted up his Mac.
If he was seriously going to consider reviving his long-dead dream of becoming a doctor, he needed to find out what was involved: where he could go to school and what courses he would need to take. Sean spent some time googling post-baccalaureate programs, bookmarking sites, requesting catalogs and taking careful notes, all the while resisting the urge to set aside this research and look instead for information about Elijah.

The temptation to hunt down the younger man’s address and phone number was powerful. Even if the information was unlisted, Sean wasn’t a computer geek for nothing and he had access to resources that the average person didn’t. But to do this seemed the height of dishonesty when Elijah hadn’t offered it to him freely.

He’d set Hannah Wood’s drawing on the computer desk, propped up against the wall to the left of the computer, and his eyes frequently strayed from the flat panel monitor to stare at it. Elijah’s generosity still staggered him. It also humbled him, and yet at the same time renewed that sense of self-worth that he’d gotten from Elijah’s words the night before: Anyone who has been in your company for even five minutes can see what a decent and honorable man you are, Sean. Of course your dad would be proud of you.

No, he would not, could not betray Elijah’s belief in his decency.

When Sean had done as much preliminary investigation into post-bac programs as he could, and feeling flush with the exhilaration of taking his first concrete steps toward a new life, he rewarded himself by logging into the iTunes store and downloading The Stone Roses album that Elijah had played for him. It was excellent music, he reasoned dispassionately, and it would be silly not to have it on his computer. There didn’t have to be any ulterior motive for downloading it, such as feeling that it would bring him closer to Elijah again.

He turned up the volume on the computer speakers and settled down on the sofa, leaning his head back and closing his eyes while the opening notes of the first song with its insistent, hypnotic beat, washed over him.

Who had he been trying to fool? This had everything to do with bringing Elijah closer to him again.

I don’t have to sell my soul
He’s already in me

Since the moment he’d first set eyes on Elijah, hell, perhaps even before then, when Elijah had been no more than a gentle touch and a soothing voice in the midst of a nightmare, Sean had been attracted to him, an attraction that had grown by leaps and bounds during the hours they spent together.

I don’t need to sell my soul
He’s already in me

Now the desire he’d fought against laid claim to his senses as a series of images flashed through his brain, like a slideshow played on fast forward: Elijah reaching up on tiptoe, a thin strip of pale skin revealed in the gap between tee shirt and jeans; Elijah focusing his intent blue gaze on Sean to the exclusion of all else as he listened to the wildly improbable story of Sean’s meeting with the Jersey Devil; Elijah hugging a cranky old donkey and holding an injured opossum; Elijah in an ugly gray hat gazing at him with admiration in his eyes; Elijah laughing as he tried to free his hair from Rocky’s clutches; Elijah sitting at his feet, head tilted back to look up at him...

I wanna be adored
I wanna be adored
The consequence of this mental slideshow was inevitable and unstoppable. This time, there was no Fred with his doleful and phlegmatic presence to help Sean laugh his arousal away. He was helpless to resist his body’s response; not sure he even wanted to. He raised the hem of his sweatshirt… then slowly worked the fingers of his right hand beneath the waistband of his sweats and boxers to wrap firmly around his hardening cock.

*I don’t have to sell my soul*
He’s already in me
I don’t need to sell my soul
He’s already in me

His mind played out the way he’d have liked last night to end: with him sliding off the couch beside Elijah, pushing him down on his back on the carpet, undressing him and exploring every inch of that pale perfect skin with his hands and mouth…

*Adored*
I wanna be adored
I wanna be adored
You adore me
You adore me

His hand circled and pumped in rhythm to the music; it took only a half-dozen strokes before he was coming into his cupped palm with Elijah’s name a hoarse cry torn from his throat.

Sean slumped back, panting, while the sweetness of release tingled through him, and he fought desperately to hold onto his fantasy. But it vanished, leaving him alone with his bitter regret, and the final, fading chords of the song.

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Dial up sucked. Elijah listened to the succession of beeps and whining sounds as the modem on his Mac connected to the Internet, and thought that someone like Sean probably hadn’t used a dial up connection in years. He wished, for at least the millionth time, that he could get either cable or DSL out here in the woods.

His attempt to cheer himself up by playing a song from the latest album by Gorillaz had been a dismal failure. The techno beat dance music of *Dare* only made him wonder what it would be like to dance with Sean, whether he would approve of Elijah’s choice of music or prefer something slower, something they could sway to, arms wrapped around each other… Like the jazz music he was listening to right now, as a matter of fact, a sexy and seductive sax tune played by Pat LaBarbera. *Only Hope*, it was called.

*Shit.*

He hadn’t been able to get Maggie or Rocky interested in dancing either. Maggie had remained seated primly on the sofa, her long tail curled around her paws and her amber eyes fixed reproachfully on his face, while Rocky burrowed behind the sofa cushions so that only the tip of his bushy tail showed. Maggie hadn’t wanted Sean to leave, and Rocky was upset; he sensed Elijah’s sorrowful mood and it distressed him.

Maggie didn’t understand. To her feline mind, it was really quite straightforward: Elijah liked Sean, Maggie like Sean, and therefore Sean should stay. She had already asked him several times when Sean would be coming back, and refused to accept his answer: *Sean’s not coming back.*
After a few depressing minutes, Elijah had ejected the Gorillaz CD, and switched to the jazz. He decided to go on Amazon and order a couple of CDs that had been well reviewed in the NME. Maybe that would do the trick and cheer him up; it usually did. He hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d told Sean that he couldn’t get by without his music.

He ordered the CDs and fully intended to end his Internet session there. What happened next seemed almost to happen without his conscious volition. Even as he told himself it was a stupid, stupid, stupid idea, he was opening his bookmark list and clicking on Google.

“sean astin” he typed, and hit return.

The large number of matches that came up stunned him. The first hit was for the web site of a company called Clicktwice. That must be the Internet advertising company Sean owned. Elijah took a quick look at the site, but it wasn’t of much interest, being a corporate web site geared at current and potential clients. But the roster of existing clients read like a who’s who of major corporations: Microsoft, General Motors, Coca-Cola and a host of others.

Elijah knew that anyone who could afford a summer home in Loveladies was pretty well off, but a sinking sensation filled him as he clicked back and continued scanning the list of Google results. He was beginning to realize that Sean had grossly understated the truth when he’d told Elijah his basement business had ‘taken off’.

*Clicktwice posts record profits in fourth quarter of 2005…*

*Clicktwice turns down rumored $1 billion buy-out offer…*

*Clicktwice CEO Sean Astin and Company President Christine Harrell attend Met Opera Gala…*

Elijah paused, chewing at his lip. *I shouldn’t do this*, he thought, but he placed the mouse cursor over the link anyway and clicked. And slowly, pixel by pixel, a photo emerged on the screen: Sean, looking almost unbearably handsome in a tuxedo, walking up a flight of marble stairs hand-in-hand with a smiling, auburn-haired woman who could only, of course, be Chris.

Almost greedily, Elijah drank in the sight of Sean. God, he was so gorgeous. Sean was looking straight at the camera, and his slightly crooked smile deepened the lines at the corners of his eyes and for a moment it seemed to Elijah as if that smile was aimed directly at him. His heart actually flip-flopped. But he could no longer ignore the woman at Sean’s side, and he felt utterly deflated as he studied her.

Elijah didn’t know a Versace from a K-Mart special, but Chris’s deceptively simple strapless black dress and the spangled silver stole draped at her elbows screamed ‘designer’ even to one as unknowledgeable as he was. With her upswept hair affixed by a diamond-studded clip that matched the necklace she wore, spiky high heels on her feet and her face flawlessly made up, Chris looked stunning, sophisticated, glamorous… all the things Elijah was not nor ever would be. He didn’t even own a suit, for god’s sake, much less a tux, just a well-worn tan corduroy jacket and a few ties suitable for the rare dinner out at a restaurant with Hannah and Zach and Mom when they were visiting. It wasn’t that his family was poor or that there was anything here to be ashamed of, but he hadn’t realized just how rich Sean was. *It’s not as if you could ever be together anyway. Why does it matter?*

Elijah started as Maggie leapt up into his lap. He buried his nail-bitten, disgraceful fingers in the softness of her fur and whispered, “I’m okay. I guess I needed to see this, Maggie. Better to know the truth, don’t you think? That way I won’t have any more regrets over not asking him to stay. He’s completely out of my league, and besides, couples have arguments or misunderstandings all the time.
That doesn’t mean they’re separating for good. Sean was confused and hurting, but he and Chris have probably already talked it out and made up.”

*Mrrrrowr.* Maggie sounded indignant.

“That’s sweet of you, but you know you’re prejudiced. I’m short, skinny and I have really weird eyes. Look at her, Maggie. Just look at her.”

Maggie scrunched her eyes shut and refused to look.

“You’re not helping matters.” Resolutely, Elijah closed the web browser and logged off the Internet. But the image of Sean, wealthy, successful, handsome Sean, lingered. Such a contrast to the man Elijah had met in the woods, still handsome of course, but lost, sad and strangely alone.

Last night I was privileged to see a fairy tale creature step right out of the pages of a book and into my life, and he was more beautiful and more magical than in any dream I ever had. I guess when it comes right down to it I wouldn’t trade what happened last night for anything. I’m so damned lucky to have met the white stag.

Elijah fiddled with the silver ring on his right hand, the ring his father had given to him the day he died, the ring Elijah, too, would pass on some day. He wasn’t simply short, skinny Elijah with the strange eyes. He was also the White Stag, beautiful and magical, a creature right out of a fairy tale. Only… Sean didn’t know that Elijah was both. He would never know, and it was better that way.

It was tempting in that moment, when the hurt and loss were still raw, to give in to the lure of transforming into the stag, to take off into the pines and leave his other self and all his worries behind.

But that way led to danger: not only the danger of encountering his ancient enemy in the woods, but of never wanting to return to his human form. He had been cautioned over and over by his father never to transform as a means of escape, but only in fulfillment of his duties as the Woodjin. He could lose himself- his real self- forever if he wasn’t vigilant, for to be the white stag was to be free in a way no human could ever be free, to experience the world with senses almost painfully keen to every scent and sound. It was exhilarating beyond belief… but it was also a trap. For the most part Elijah had held fast to his father’s wise advice, although there had been a few times over the years when the temptation had proven too great to resist, and the temptation right now was stronger than it ever had been…

Maggie had opened her eyes again, and was watching him anxiously.

“I won’t do it,” Elijah promised her softly. “I promise you.”

Instead, he’d go out to the barn and give Sonny and Cher a good grooming, maybe even get out the horse vac, though he and the horses all hated the noisy machine. If Hannah was coming to visit, he wanted them to look their best. And Paco had kicked his stall door this morning, cutting himself on the fetlock. It wasn’t a serious cut, but he wanted to clean and treat it again. By the time he finished those chores, and a few other things that needed doing around the barn, it would nearly be time to feed the babies their evening meal. He’d have managed to get through the afternoon.

He set Maggie gently on the floor and stood up. The animals always kept him busy and reminded him of his responsibilities and of how blessed he was to lead the life he did, even if it was lonely at times.

But as Elijah went to turn off the stereo, his mind wasn’t on his animals. He was wondering if Sean
had opened his gift yet, and what he thought of it.

~*~

Sean took a walk on the beach late in the afternoon, but the falling darkness soon drove him back inside; it would be some time before he felt comfortable being alone out-of-doors after dark. It was a far shorter walk than he’d have liked to take. He’d hoped to tire himself out sufficiently that he could sleep through the night without dreaming, either about the white stag retreating from him into the forest or about the Devil chasing him through it.

After he returned to the house- trying not to look over his shoulder or jump at every unexpected sound as he hurried up from the beach- he turned on the gas fireplace in the living room. Sean stood for a time warming his cold hands and face while he watched the fire’s reflection in the tall windows. The dancing flames were a cheerful sight, but a gas fire was no substitute for the real thing. He missed the crackle and tangy smell of burning pine.

He cooked sautéed chicken breasts and brown rice for dinner- about the extent of his limited culinary skills- and opened a bottle of very expensive white wine that had been a gift from one of their client guests in August. He carried his plate and wine glass into the living room and ate in front of the huge flat panel HDTV, flipping aimlessly through the endless sports and news shows and sitcom reruns until he finally settled on the Weather Channel.

The forecast for the area was for more bitter cold weather tomorrow with light snow developing in the morning then becoming heavier, with a total accumulation of 3-4” predicted by the time the storm passed through. Sean frowned as the meteorologist pointed at a fast moving weather system in the southeast that was headed their way. Sean had been considering heading back to the city the following afternoon.

Like a good many New Yorkers, however, he wasn’t experienced at driving in the snow. Having a car in the city was a convenience, not a necessity, and the Beemer spent as many days as not parked in the garage around the corner from his apartment. If the weather was inclement, he used the company’s limo service, although he preferred to drive himself whenever possible.

Still, it wasn’t as if he was in a rush to get back, and any excuse to put off the inevitable confrontation with Chris was appealing, even a snowstorm. Now if only he could get out of returning her phone calls. Sean pushed the last bits of chicken and rice around on his plate, his appetite gone.

He returned to the kitchen and poured himself a second glass of wine for fortification. Then he grabbed the portable phone and punched in her cell number. He was being a fucking coward, and he hated it.

Nevertheless, relief swept through him when he got Chris’s voicemail instead of Chris herself. Cowardly maybe, but he’d only just taken the first tentative baby steps toward a new life and career, after all, and he didn’t want anything to screw with his newfound and shaky sense of self-confidence. And that was something at which Chris was an expert.

“Chris, it’s Sean,” he said when he was prompted to leave a message. “I’m sorry not to have called you back sooner, but I had some car trouble on the way here and only got in a little while ago.” It wasn’t technically a lie, and Chris wouldn’t believe the true story if Sean told her. “Everything’s fine with the car now, though, not to worry.”
“Listen, I expect to be back in a couple of days, and we can talk then. I’m totally fine with what you told Tim Griffin, by the way.” He hesitated, and then forced the words out: “I’m glad we nailed that contract. Good work.”

Sean said good-bye, and quickly disconnected. He stared down at the phone, uncertain what to do next. He had the rest of the evening to kill, and comparisons between where he was now and where he’d been at the same time yesterday were invidious and depressing. He had to pull himself together, that was all, and find something to take his mind off Elijah.

He gave up trying to become absorbed in a Dick Francis mystery after re-reading the same paragraph four times because his uncooperative brain was too occupied with wondering what Elijah was doing, and how Maggie and Rocky and Fred were and if the baby squirrels were thriving and if Elijah had decided when he would release the opossum back into the wild… He reshelved the book and turned on the TV again, but couldn’t find anything that held his interest; even Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert lacked their usual appeal.

Eventually Sean decided it was a lost cause, and he might just as well go to bed. But not in the bedroom he shared with Chris. Though he was trying not to think too much about what had happened earlier in his study, when he’d jerked off with Elijah’s name on his lips and Elijah’s image in his brain, the intensity of that orgasm had proved to him just how lacking his and Chris’s love life was and had been since the beginning. It would feel like a lie to sleep in that room.

So instead of the luxury of a king size heated waterbed in the master bedroom, he opted for one of the smaller pillow top mattresses in a guest bedroom. He gathered an armload of sheets, pillowcases, and blankets from the linen closet, and quickly made up the bed. He opened the bedroom window a few inches so that he could hear the rush and roar of the ocean, and set Hannah Wood’s drawing on the bedside table facing toward him.

After stripping to tee shirt and boxers, Sean slid between the soft Egyptian cotton sheets and settled back against the even softer down pillows with one arm behind his head. The misty outline of the white stag among the pine trees, and the gleam of his dark eyes from the shadows held Sean in thrall until, lulled by the soothing, repetitive sound of the waves crashing on the beach, he fell asleep.

_The white stag stood proudly in the middle of the starlit clearing, his great dark eyes holding Sean’s captive. Sean, his heart in his throat, moved slowly toward him, hand outstretched. Then suddenly, with a toss of his antlered head, the stag wheeled and began trotting away. Sean hurried after him, forcing his way into the trees, pushing at stiff pointed branches that snagged his clothes and tore at his hands. Gritting his teeth, he struggled on but the elusive figure drew further and further away._

“Please wait,” he cried out in despair, but it was too late. The stag had vanished.

He awoke drenched in sweat with his legs twisted in the covers as if he’d been fighting the sheets and blankets in his sleep. The sense of loss was if anything even greater than it had been the first time he’d had the dream. He untangled himself with some difficulty, and swung his legs around until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He rested his head in his hands. Was he going to revisit this dream every night from now on?

Sean raised his head and gazed blearily out the window. To his surprise, it was light out. He picked his Rolex up from the nightstand to check the time. 6:30. He might as well get up then, because he sure as fuck wasn’t going to be able to fall asleep again. But rather than sit around moping, he’d take that long walk on the beach that he’d wanted to take yesterday.

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If you walked far enough along the sweeping curve of the island’s northern shoreline, you eventually reached a massive stone jetty that demarcated the inlet where ocean and bay met in a swirl of wicked currents. Those currents had brought many a sailor to grief, and were the reason the majestic red and white lighthouse that guarded the inlet had been built, though it had been many years since it had been actively in use.

The beach was wider and wilder at this point, the houses no longer perched right above the sand, but set back behind a shimmering green sea of dune grass. Sean had once read in an article in the island’s local paper, *The Beachcomber*, that red foxes lived in this area, presumably brought to the island as hideaways in some fishing boat, though the writer had speculated that they might have braved the waters of the bay and swum from the mainland.

Although he’d scrutinized the dunes during his walks, Sean had never seen the slightest trace of a fox himself, but he wondered now whether Elijah’s presence might bring them out of hiding. He’d heard and read about people with an affinity for animals, like horse whisperers and those people on TV who claimed to be psychics and would cure your pet’s bad habits or health problems.

Such claims had seemed vaguely like snake oil salesmanship to him, for surely such people only existed in movies like *Thomasina*, but after meeting Elijah, he had to admit he was wrong, as he was wrong about so many things of late. He recalled that truly dreadful movie adaptation of *Doctor Doolittle* with Rex Harrison. Maybe it was fanciful of him, but it had almost seemed at times as if Elijah was really talking to his animals. Now if Elijah was cast as Doctor Doolittle, there would be a movie worth watching. He was certainly beautiful enough to be a movie star.

It was low tide and the hard-packed sand near the water’s edge made for easy walking. Sean had debated taking off his shoes and socks, as he normally would have so he could splash in the water, but decided against it. Even the usual fishermen, with whom Sean always made it a point to stop and chat, weren’t in evidence. The beach was completely deserted except for some gulls resting in shallow depressions in the sand and a few terns that hovered above him, staring down as if amazed that any human would be so stupid as to be out on such a day.

Sean stopped and crouched down to let a hissing wavelet run over his right hand. He let out a little yelp of surprise; the water was even colder than he’d expected. Barefoot was definitely not the way to go. Even a hobbit would want shoes on a day like today. Wiping his fingers dry on the leg of his jeans, he stood and continued walking, head lowered against the brisk northeast wind. He’d bundled up as best he could, layering two shirts, a sweatshirt and a sweater under a red Goretex jacket, and winding a black watch plaid wool scarf around his neck and over his chin. He probably looked ridiculous, but there was no one to see him except the gulls and terns.

There were shells scattered all along the beach where the tide had started to retreat, and Sean discovered an unusually large and perfect cat’s eye shell half-hidden in some seaweed. He picked the shell up and studied it as he brushed the sand away from its smooth convex surface. He wished he could give it to Elijah. It seemed the sort of gift the young man would like. Sighing, he put the shell in his pocket, and walked on.

By the time he reached his goal, the jetty near the lighthouse, Sean was actually perspiring beneath his layers of clothes. It was a challenging walk even on a balmy summer morning, and he was weary from too many nights without a decent amount of sleep. Nevertheless, he determinedly began to climb up the barnacle-encrusted black rocks to the top of the jetty. He went cautiously, for there were slippery patches of kelp and puddles of seawater lurking in wait. He made it to the top safely, however, and stood gazing around him, glad of the chance to rest and catch his breath.

To his left the lighthouse dominated the horizon, the deep brick red of its upper half warming the
drab winter landscape, while to his right the jetty extended several hundred yards out into the ocean. A bell buoy tossing on the water clanged dolefully just beyond it, and the waves crashed against the rocks, sending white foam spraying through the air.

Across the surging waters of the inlet was the southernmost tip of Island Beach State Park. There were a few off-road vehicles parked on the beach there, one of them a small blue pickup truck. Sean’s thoughts, never far from Elijah, turned to him yet again. He wondered if Elijah’s parents had ever taken him and his siblings up the inside of the lighthouse- 217 steps, the odd number had stuck in his brain- as Sean’s own parents had done when he and Mack were kids. He could picture a tiny Elijah, wide-eyed with wonder, clutching onto the iron railing as he climbed the winding staircase at his father’s side.

He imagined how a grown-up Elijah would look right now, standing beside Sean on the jetty. The wind would ruffle that bright auburn hair and turn his pale cheeks pink with color so that his eyes would look even bluer than usual…

You’re acting exactly like some sentimental love struck fool in a sappy chick flick, Sean.

Love struck. Struck by love. I’ve been struck by love, Sean realized. I’m in love, in love with Elijah. I love Elijah. I love Elijah. If the rocks beneath his feet had started to tremble, Sean wouldn’t have been surprised, so cataclysmic was the shock that went through him as the truth, like falling dominoes, cascaded through his mind.

I love Elijah.

But people didn’t fall in love in just two days. Love at first sight was a myth perpetuated in fairy tales, in movies and in songs. No one honestly believed that it really happened that way, that two strangers locked eyes across a crowded room and instantly fell in love. Or that the gentle touch of a hand in the midst of a nightmare filled your heart with certainty that here was the one you’d been waiting for all your life without even knowing it.

And no one honestly believes that the Jersey Devil really exists, do they, but he does. Why can’t you have fallen in love?

A giddy sense of euphoria rose up inside him. He wanted to sprint along the jetty to the lighthouse, fly up all 217 steps of it without stopping, and then dance at the top like Rocky Balboa, pumping his fists and shouting Elijah’s name. His weariness had vanished; he was filled with limitless energy.

I love Elijah.

The path to his future suddenly seemed crystal clear. Elijah had told him it wasn’t too late for him to pursue his dream. Why couldn’t that pursuit encompass more than his dream of becoming a doctor? Why couldn’t a life with Elijah be part of that dream?

With a recklessness that was totally foreign to his nature, Sean bounded down from the jetty, leaping from rock to rock with a total disregard for his safety. He set out across the sand like a race walker, arms pumping, while he imagined the look on Elijah’s face when he answered the front door and saw Sean standing before him, while he imagined the smile that would light Elijah’s face and how he’d fling himself into Sean’s arms.

God, he could be there in a couple of hours… Sean broke into a jog.

But he hadn’t even made it halfway back when reality started to rear its ugly head. Gradually the euphoria faded as Sean slowed to a walk and then halted, bent at the waist, his hands on his thighs,
his lungs seared by the cold air. It wasn’t a simple matter of rushing back to Elijah’s house and blurting out, ‘I love you’. He still had ties to Chris and to Clicktwice that he couldn’t walk away from even if he wanted to. He had no business saying anything to Elijah until he’d sorted out his own life first, and that could take weeks or possibly months. By then, would Elijah even remember his chance visitor? Would there be someone else in his life?

An unexpectedly vigorous wave rushed over his feet, soaking his shoes and socks in ice-cold water. He didn’t even notice.

“What do I do now?” Sean asked despairingly of the sky and the ocean and the birds, but they had no answer for him.

He was leg weary and sore at heart when he paused inside the back door to pull off his wet, sandy shoes and socks. *I need to talk to someone,* he admitted as he limped into the downstairs bathroom and found a towel to dry his numb feet. *I need advice.*

He rubbed his toes briskly with the towel, and they prickled painfully as the blood rushed back into them. It was sort of the way his heart felt right now after so many years lying dormant. A painful awakening, but he desperately didn’t want to lose what might be his only chance at love. He mentally sorted through the pitifully small list of people he could call. There was really only one choice.

Mackenzie.

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“‘lo?”

“Hey Mack.”

“Sean? Jesus, bro, do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Um, 8:30.”

“How about 5:30. I’m on the left coast, remember?”

“Oh god, Mack. I’m sorry.”

“‘Salright. Give me a sec to get my shit together, okay? I didn’t get in until 3 a.m.”

A guilty Sean heard his brother crack a giant yawn, and then came a rustle of bedcovers and a muttered ‘Fuck’.

“I’m going to stagger into the kitchen to make some coffee,” Mack said, yawning again. “Now start talking; it must be important if Mr. Anal Retentive forgot the time difference.”

“Mack…” Sean hesitated, not sure where to start now that he had the opening. “I need some advice,” he said, gazing out the window at the massing gray storm clouds. It looked like it was going to start snowing any minute.

“Hang on. This is my brother Sean calling, isn’t it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sean asked defensively.

“Just that you’ve never asked for my advice before. You’ve always been too busy dispensing it.” There was a series of clinks and then the sound of running water as Mack presumably filled the
coffee maker. “To what do I owe this unusual honor?”


“What? Sean, you’re starting to freak me out. Tell me what’s going on.”

Sean drew a deep breath and blurted out, “I met someone.”

“You mean as in you met someone? Mack sounded incredulous and wide-awake now.

“Yeah.”

“I think I need to sit down. Jesus. Who is she?”

“Not she, he.”

“Now I really do need to sit down.” There was a scraping sound as Mack pulled out a chair. “Sean, are you telling me you’re gay?”

Perhaps it was the logical question to have expected, but it still caught Sean unprepared. Truthfully, the issue of his sexuality didn’t seem all that important compared to the other complications he had to deal with. “I guess I am. But I’m not looking for advice about coming out, Mack.” Sean huffed a laugh. “Falling in love with another man was the easy part. It’s everything else: Chris, the business…”

“Falling in love? You mean you’re that serious?”

“Yes. Yes, I am. I’ve never been so serious.” Or so scared.

“So when did you meet this guy? And where?”

“Four days ago. My car broke down in the Pine Barrens on the way to the shore and he rescued me.”

“Four days ago? Sean…”

“I know it’s crazy, all right? You don’t have to tell me. If you want to know just how crazy, the truth is, I’m not even sure how he feels about me. We haven’t slept together, Mack. Fuck, we haven’t even kissed. When I left yesterday morning, I didn’t think I’d ever see him again, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t think he’ll ever see me again either.”

“But now you’ve realized you want to see him again?” Mack asked softly, and he didn’t sound as if he thought Sean was crazy at all.

“So much it scares me,” Sean confessed.

“He must be a pretty damn special guy.”

“Elijah. His name is Elijah.” God, it felt so wonderful to say that name aloud to his brother. “And yeah, he’s special.” He huffed. “Way, way too good for me.”

“Hey, I seriously doubt that. You’re pretty special yourself, you know.

Sean was taken aback by his brother’s words. He’d felt increasingly estranged from Mack over the years, and sometimes wondered if his brother resented his success, if he’d moved to California just to
get away from him. He hadn’t realized how deep his grief over the growing distance between them went until that moment.

“I mean it,” Mack went on quietly. “Give yourself some credit, Sean. Did it seem like Elijah was attracted to you?”

A reminiscent smile grew on Sean’s face as he recalled that moment by the cedar swamp. “Yeah, amazingly enough, it did.”

“There, you see? So what’s the problem?”

The smile vanished. “I can’t simply walk out on Chris and the business, Mack. It’s not fair to her and it’s not fair to Elijah.”

“A lot of people would walk, Sean. I see it happen all the time out here.”

“Is that what you think I should do?” Sean asked, torn between wanting to be told to do what he longed to do, and knowing that it would be utterly wrong.

“As a matter of fact, no, I don’t.” Mack replied decisively. “You’re right; it wouldn’t be fair to either of them. And it wouldn’t be you. I know you. You couldn’t live with yourself if you did that. No, if Elijah and a future with him are truly important to you, you have to do things right, get all your ducks in a row first.”

“But that could take so long, Mack. What if it’s too late by the time I’m free to go to him? What if—”

“What if a giant meteor hits the earth tomorrow and we’re all history? Sean, you didn’t use to be a ‘what if’ kind of guy. You used to see a problem and go right for the fix. What’s happened to you?” Mack sighed. “No, you don’t have to answer that. I know the answer. Chris happened to you, Chris and that goddamned company.”

“Mack—”

“No, don’t interrupt. You called me at this ungodly hour to ask for advice, and I’m gonna have my say. I’ve kept my mouth shut for the past twelve years while I’ve watched the life being sucked out of you, and I can’t keep quiet about it anymore. Chris is one hell of a woman, Sean. She’s smart and she’s attractive, but the two of you are totally wrong for each other. Jesus Christ, Sean, do you know that in all the times I’ve visited you and Chris I’ve never seen you kiss each other? Hold hands even, for fuck’s sake?”

Sean was silent. What could he say? It was true. Everything Mack was saying was true.

“But it’s not only Chris,” Mack went on. “I don’t mean to dump all the blame on her. Anna and I are as much to blame, and don’t think I don’t know it. You gave up all your dreams to take care of us after Dad died, and we stood by and let you because it was easier that way.”

“That’s not true, Mack,” Sean argued. “It was my choice. No one twisted my arm. And you were just a kid. You can’t blame yourself.”

“Maybe, but I remember you used to talk all the time about becoming a pediatrician. It’s what you should have done, Sean, instead of getting so wrapped up in Clicktwice. I’ve always thought you’d make a great doctor.”

“I didn’t think you remembered that.” Sean was deeply touched. “But if it makes you feel any better, Mack, that’s almost exactly what Elijah said.” You’d probably make a wonderful doctor, Sean. You
have such a gentle way about you. “In fact, the last thing he said to me before I left was that I shouldn’t give up on the idea. And I’ve decided he’s right. I’ve already started looking into what courses I need to take so I can apply to medical school.”

“And you walked away from this guy? Are you fucking nuts? God, I can’t wait to meet him so I can shake his hand. Hell, forget the handshake, he’s gonna get a hug- a strictly platonic one, by the way,” Mack joked, but his voice sounded thick.

“Then you really don’t think I’m crazy.”

“I think my big brother’s finally come to his senses, and it’s the best news I’ve heard in years. Well,” he amended unexpectedly, “the second best news.”

“What do you mean, the second best?”

“You know that TV pilot I was in? The sitcom? I found out yesterday that it’s been picked up by NBC. Your baby bro is going to be a regular on prime time television. That’s why I was out so late- celebrating the good news. I was gonna call you later today to tell you.”

“Oh my god, Mack, that is such fantastic news. I’m so proud of you.” Tears were burning Sean’s eyes.

“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t for a certain older brother being willing to support me during the lean times, I’d never have stuck it out. And the best thing about getting this job is that I can finally start paying you back the money I owe you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Sean protested. But the tears had started to overflow. For so long he’d feared that Mack would never stand on his own two feet or find a sense of self-worth, for so long he’d feared that his inability to say no when Mack needed a helping hand was the very thing holding his brother back.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Mack said quietly. “Now that you’re going to become a doctor, you’ll need every dime you can get. Those medical schools cost a bloody fortune.”

Sean wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “I love you, Mack.”

“I love you, too.” And Sean had a feeling his brother was also wiping his eyes. “Jesus, just listen to the two of us. My brother calls and tells me he’s gay, and suddenly we both go all emo.”

Sean laughed. “Sorry. But maybe being a little emo isn’t such a bad thing, huh?”

“Maybe. Now get your ass in gear, Astin. What are you doing wasting time yakking on the phone when you’ve got so much work to do? Elijah’s waiting for you.”

Elijah’s waiting for you. He’d never heard four more beautiful words.

But as he disconnected the phone after saying goodbye, Sean saw the first flakes of snow slowly spiraling down out of the sky. It was okay, though, he thought as he set the phone back in the charger. He didn’t want to go rushing off. He wanted to sit and watch the snow fall and savor his conversation with his brother, the brother whom he feared he’d lost, but now felt closer to than ever.

Then he’d go make a cup of coffee and open that box of Tastykakes. It was about time he tried a Butterscotch Krimpet.

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“Aren’t you hungry, Elijah?” Katie asked, sounding worried. “You haven’t finished your pie. You aren’t sickening for anything, are you?”

“Katie, stop fussing over the Woodjin,” scolded Bill. “He’s left two bites on his plate, that’s all.”

“That’s two more than he usually does,” retorted Katie.

Elijah listened to the familiar, comfortable bickering on either side of him, like volleys in a tennis match, and hid a smile. Some things never changed, he thought with fond exasperation.

“I’m not sickening for anything, Katie,” he protested mildly. “I was only waiting until there was more room in my stomach.” Considering the amount of food Katie had prepared for dinner that was certainly no lie. She always chided Elijah for being too thin and seemed to believe that it was possible to fatten him up with one gigantic meal.

But despite the corn and cheddar pudding, the cranberry bread, the scalloped potatoes, Brussels sprouts, green beans almondine and honeyed carrots he’d already eaten, not to mention the huckleberry pie smothered in heavy cream, Elijah picked up his fork and forced himself to finish the last two bites under Katie’s approving gaze. It wasn’t that the pie wasn’t delicious. Katie was justly famous in the pines for her baking. Truth was, he hadn’t felt much like eating since Sean left.

Getting out of the house to visit Bill and Katie had been the right thing to do, though, and the drive through the snow-covered woods under a starlit sky with a silver quarter moon rising had been peaceful and calming.

The snow that had started in the late morning had ended by sunset, the fast moving nor’easter tracking up into New England, and Elijah had had time to shovel the front steps and walk, and clean off his truck before it grew dark. He’d worried a little about the opossum that he’d set free early that morning, and wondered whether he shouldn’t have waited to release it, but it had wanted to go. Possums liked their freedom, like most wild creatures, and the burrow he’d found for it was deep and snug. If only Sean could have been with him to see it…

“Elijah? You’re sure you’re all right?”

Bill and Katie were both staring at him now, identical expressions of concern on their faces. This wouldn’t do. He was the Woodjin, after all, and he owed it to them to pull himself together and stop moping. Elijah pinned a bright smile on his face.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m fine, really. I was, um, thinking about Hannah and Jordan. I hope we won’t get any more snow in the next few days. They’re coming out for a visit this weekend if the weather cooperates.”

Bill rocked back in his chair and hooked his thumbs through his red and white striped suspenders. “That’s fine news,” he said, diverted as Elijah hoped he would be. “But what about Lawrence?”

“He’s out of town shooting a film.”

“Doing stunt work?” he asked eagerly.

Elijah nodded, suppressing a grin. Bill found Lawrence’s job as a stunt double totally fascinating, owned every movie he’d appeared in, and never tired of watching his scenes over and over.

But Katie looked suddenly troubled, turning a delicate rose-patterned china teacup around and around in her age-spotted hands. Whenever Elijah visited, she got out her best china and silver and linen and they ate in the dining room, as was befitting when entertaining the Woodjin. Nothing Elijah
said could convince her that such a production was totally unnecessary, and he’d be just as happy to eat in the kitchen with them. But then, it had literally taken years to persuade her to call him Elijah. Bill still refused to do it, as did almost everyone else in the pines, save for Dr. Ian and a couple others.

“Hannah didn’t say anything about a visit when I spoke to her yesterday.” She hesitated and glanced apologetically at Elijah, her brown eyes filled with worry. “I’m afraid she was a little upset when I mentioned your young man, Elijah.”

Elijah couldn’t help it. He choked and felt his face burn with color. “He’s not my young man, Katie. Where did you get that idea?” He glanced at Bill, who was rather red in the face himself. What had Bill said to put such a notion in her head? What had that shrewd old piney read in Elijah’s face when he met him and Sean in the woods? No wonder Hannah had freaked, if that’s what Katie had implied to her.

“He’s not coming back, then?” Katie sounded exactly like Maggie, disbelieving and disappointed. It was possible that she was even more anxious for Elijah to have a ‘young man’ than Maggie was, and that was saying something.

Elijah let her down as gently as he could, but the words were achingly difficult to speak. “No, I’m afraid not. Sean has a- a girlfriend and his own life in the city.”

Katie’s face fell, and Elijah’s heart went out to her. A few years ago, she’d started trying to set Elijah up, inviting over every ‘eligible’ young woman in the area- up to and including the daughters of friend’s friends’ friends- until he finally worked up the nerve to tell her that he wasn’t interested in dating girls and it was a lost cause. She’d taken the news well, but since she hadn’t, thank goodness, tried setting him up with any friend’s friends’ friends sons, she clearly despaired of him ever finding someone on his own. She must have considered Sean his last best hope.

Like he’d told Sean, the pineys were often referred to as ignorant or backward by outsiders, but no group of people could have been more accepting when Elijah finally came out. They’d been just as accepting of Lawrence, a man of color, a Maori from New Zealand, when Hannah married him. Tolerance for those who were different was bred in the bone of a piney after hundreds of years of persecution and prejudice. Elijah often thought, when he read or listened to the news, filled with stories of mindless violence based on religion or race or sexual orientation, that the rest of the world could learn a thing or two from the folks in the pines.

“I’m sorry to hear he won’t be back, Woodjin,” said Bill, letting his chair legs down with a thump. “He was different from most of those city types who pass through in their fancy cars. I liked him.”

Mercifully, they let the subject drop, and Elijah left a short time later. He thought Katie’s hug and Bill’s handshake were even tighter than usual as they said goodbye. These two wonderful friends had been almost like second parents to him, and he could never repay them for all their kindness. His blessing on them was as deep and sincere as he could make it, both as Woodjin and as Elijah.

With a final wave to the couple standing arm in arm on the front porch, silhouetted against the light from the open doorway, Elijah drove away, several Tupperware containers filled with leftovers resting on the front seat beside him. Katie never failed to make extra food for the Woodjin to take home.

He didn’t head straight home, however, but decided to make a brief detour through the woods first. The snow wasn’t deep enough to present any difficulties that the Toyota’s four-wheel drive couldn’t
He left the truck idling while he got out and walked a short distance through the trees to a clearing. It looked like any one of a dozen such places scattered through the pines, but to Elijah it wasn’t like any other, for it was here that he’d met Sean.

Elijah stood for some time staring at the pristine silver-white blanket of snow that covered the exact spot where Sean, crouching on hands and knees, dazed and terrified, had raised his head and seen the white stag for the first time. He would never forget how the fear in Sean’s eyes had turned to wonder at the sight, even with the Devil only a few yards behind him.

When the cold grew too much to bear, Elijah returned to the truck and drove home through the silent woods, holding the memory close to his heart.

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Sean went to bed that night feeling the way he used to as a kid: eager for the next day to arrive and filled with anticipation for what it might bring. He had a goal now, and a renewed sense of purpose, and he was ready for that long overdue talk with Chris about their relationship and his future with Clicktwice.

The thought of driving back to the city in the morning didn’t fill him with dread, as it would have only yesterday. Oh, it wouldn’t be an easy conversation- there was an understatement- and hurting Chris was the last thing he wanted to do, but he hoped that in the long run she would understand that it was better for her as well as Sean not to be locked in a loveless relationship. And maybe eventually she’d discover an Elijah of her own. Sean chuckled quietly as the impossibility of that ever happening occurred to him. There was after all only one Elijah, and Sean wasn’t about to share him with anyone.

Elijah… Sean stared dreamily at the ceiling while he pictured Elijah at home. What was he doing now? Where was he? In the barn feeding the squirrels? Curled up on the rug in the family room listening to music? Getting ready for bed? Sean transferred his gaze to the drawing of the white stag, and wondered if Elijah had kept it in his bedroom. Sean hadn’t gotten so much as a glimpse of that room while he was there, but he expected that would change when he returned. He certainly intended it to.

He smiled, and reached out to turn off the lamp on the nightstand. He truly trusted now that one day, not too far distant, he would return to Elijah, and that there would be a welcome for him when he did. “Thank you, Mack,” he whispered into the dark, thinking how much he owed his brother.

When Sean fell asleep, he was still smiling.

***

When the call came, Elijah was already awake, lying on his back in bed, staring up at the ceiling. He was thinking about a man whose changeable eyes held the colors of the pines that he loved so dearly: the soft green of fern fronds, the tea-brown of quiet streams, the deep gold of asphodel.

At his side Maggie was stretched out, and Elijah was absenthly stroking her orange and black fur, her rasping purr vibrating beneath his fingers. Rocky was sound asleep in the nesting box Elijah had made for him above the headboard, where he could hoard his store of nuts and seeds, collected against the harsh winters he would never experience.

The call was, as always, abrupt and insistent, and arrived in a swift succession of mental images that
told him without words that there was someone in great danger.

Elijah sat up and threw back the bedcovers. Maggie raised her head and gave an inquiring *meow*.
“Yes, I’ve been called,” he said. “I’ve got to go.”

Maggie padded silently beside him as he made his way quickly through the still house to the kitchen. At the door to the mudroom, she meowed again, and Elijah stopped and sighed. “No, it’s not him,” he said sadly. “He’s not coming back. You’ve got to stop asking me that, Maggie.”

*Mrowr.* Maggie sounded anxious.

“I’ll be careful,” Elijah promised, and a faint smile touched his lips. “You’re such a mother hen, Maggie.” He turned the doorknob. “Don’t wait up for me,” he added, knowing that she would anyway.

The mudroom was cold, and Elijah shivered a little as he pulled off his boxers and tee shirt and hung them on a hook. Then he opened the back door and, barefoot and naked, walked out into the snow-covered moonlit yard.

***

Sean awoke with a start, as excruciating pain lanced through his shoulder and ran down his arm to his fingertips. *Oh my god,* he thought in a panic, *I’m having a heart attack.* He sat up, gasping, and hoped he could make it to the phone to call 911. God, where was the nearest hospital? He had no idea. Off the island somewhere… how long would it take an ambulance to arrive?

But then gradually, as panic subsided, he realized that he couldn’t possibly be having a heart attack. The pain was in his right shoulder and arm, not in the left, as it surely would be if he were having a heart attack, wouldn’t it? But more than that, Sean was realizing that the pain wasn’t really pain at all. It was different, more like the *ghost* of remembered pain, or… as if he was experiencing someone else’s pain?

Tentatively, he moved his right arm; both it and his shoulder felt perfectly normal. The phantom pain, whatever it was, had vanished, but in its place, a deep sense of foreboding had arisen.

*What on earth was going on?*

The answer arrived in the form of an image that flashed into his mind: an image of Elijah, his face pale and contorted with pain. And at that moment Sean knew with absolute, unshakeable conviction that the pain he’d experienced was Elijah’s pain, and that Elijah was hurt and in trouble.

Sean was on his feet and turning on the bedside lamp even as the knowledge came to him. Squinting against the sudden glare, he snatched up his watch. 1:13 a.m.

Sean ran into the master bedroom and began yanking open dresser drawers, grabbing the first clothes that came to hand and pulling them on. The feeling of urgency, of foreboding, continued to grow, and he didn’t stop to question what he was doing or why. He tugged on socks and shoved his feet into his still slightly damp running shoes, and bolted for the kitchen without bothering to lace them.

*Hurry, hurry,* a small voice inside his brain suddenly spoke up. *Hurry, hurry.*

He grabbed his car keys and wallet off the kitchen counter and the precious directions from the front of the refrigerator where he’d secured them with a lighthouse magnet from his study. His jacket and scarf were still draped over the back of a chair in the living room. He put them on, and then he was bounding down the back stairs and into the garage and almost diving into the front seat of the
Beemer. He hit the garage door opener and cursed as he tried unsuccessfully to fit the key in the ignition. His fingers were shaking so badly, it took three attempts before he succeeded.

He started the engine, put the car in reverse and hit the gas. The tires squealed as he roared out of the garage like Mario Andretti, and then the car fishtailed as it slid on the snow. Oh shit. Gritting his teeth, Sean shifted into drive and headed as fast as he dared down the lane, plowing through several inches of powdery snow that sprayed out from under the tires as if he was driving through water.

He didn’t even realize that he’d left without closing the back door or the garage, much less setting the security system.

When he reached the boulevard and turned south, heading toward the causeway to the mainland, Sean was relieved to see that the road had been plowed, although there were icy patches in evidence. Nevertheless, he exceeded the speed limit by a good 25 mph as he flew through the innumerable traffic lights that were thankfully turned to blinking yellow in the off-season. Please god, he sent up a silent prayer, please don’t let me get stopped by a cop.

His luck held, however, even when he ran two red lights on the street leading to the causeway. But once off the island and heading west on Route 72, he didn’t dare to run lights or speed, for there were other cars around even at this hour; it was a heavily populated area. As Sean waited anxiously at a red light, he worried at his lip so hard he tasted blood, and his legs jiggled and his fingers beat a nervous tattoo on the steering wheel. And all the while, the insistent little voice in his head was saying, hurry, hurry and sounding more and more urgent. The light turned green and he stomped on the gas pedal. The BMW shot away like a jackrabbit, burning rubber.

Once he was clear of traffic lights and heading into the pines, Sean cast caution to the wind and floored the accelerator pedal. He didn’t give a shit if fifty cop cars started chasing him. But fast as he was going, and it was way, way faster than he’d ever driven before in his life, the miles seemed to crawl by. When he slowed for the first turn off the highway, however, and glanced at the dashboard clock, he realized that he’d probably cut a good 20 minutes from the trip by driving like a total lunatic. It was worth every petrifying, nerve-wracking moment.

He’d read through Elijah’s directions several times that afternoon, blissfully looking forward to the day when he’d be free to use them again. Now he blessed the coincidence- or was it coincidence?-that had led him to do so, for the route was plain in his mind, and he didn’t have to pull out the paper crammed in his coat pocket and try to read it and steer at the same time. In fact, he was in such a hyper-aware state that he could almost visualize the route, not as a trail of bread crumbs, but as if it was displayed on the windshield in glowing neon colors.

But the closer he got to Elijah’s house, the worse the driving conditions became, and he was forced, reluctantly, to slow down. The snowplows hadn’t passed through here yet- if they ever did- and the snow had been compacted by traffic until it held an icy gleam in the Beemer’s headlights. Sean’s fear of losing control of the car and running off the road fought with the urgent little voice saying, hurry, hurry. Several times the car skidded, and Sean’s heart leapt into his throat as he wrestled with the steering wheel and straightened it out. Why in god’s name hadn’t he done like everyone else he knew and bought one of those fucking giant Hummers with four-wheel drive?

When he finally arrived at the driveway to Elijah’s house, Sean was sweating profusely, and his hands were shaking and leaving damp patches on the leather-covered steering wheel. He hadn’t expected the long, twisting drive to be plowed, not if the roads weren’t, but the high beams illuminated a set of tire tracks in the snow. Thank god Elijah, or someone at least, had driven along it, clearing a path. He steered the car carefully so that he was following in the tracks, and crept up the drive.
On either side, the pitch pines loomed, dark and menacing, and Sean flashed back to the night he’d encountered the Jersey Devil. He tried to banish the memory of what the Devil had done to the Beemer from his mind. Just keep going, he thought, clutching the steering wheel so tightly that his hands ached, whatever you do, don’t stop. Don’t think about what might be in the woods. Or what it might have done to Elijah…

Oh god. What about these tire tracks, he suddenly thought. What if they didn’t belong to Elijah’s truck, but the car of some crazed serial killer… Stop it, stop it. But Sean’s brain, as if determined to torment him, kept right on. What if Elijah wasn’t home? What if the tire tracks belonged to the Toyota and he’d had an accident, and was lying in a hospital somewhere dying and… Stop it, stop it. He drove around the final curve in the driveway holding his breath, and then exhaled with relief. There parked in front of the cabin was Elijah’s blue pickup truck. There was no other car in sight. Sean pulled up next to the truck, parked, and got out on legs that felt rubbery. The cold was wicked, and he shivered as the sweat on his exposed skin cooled abruptly.

The brief moment of relief vanished and foreboding crept over him again as he navigated the narrow shoveled path to the front porch and climbed the steps. He didn’t knock or ring the doorbell. Instead, he reached for the doorknob; the brass burned with cold beneath his fingers, but it turned easily. Sean pushed open the front door and stepped inside, wondering what sight might greet him.

But the house was silent and dark, exactly the way one would expect a house to be at such an hour. Yet… there was something unnatural about the stillness. Sean flashed back again to the night of his encounter with the Devil, and the ominous quiet of the pines moments before he heard that bloodcurdling shriek. Could the Devil get inside someone’s house, he wondered, and wished that he’d never in his life watched a single slasher movie, for the mental images conjured up made bile rise to his throat. He forced it back down.

He stood in the hallway, uncertain what to do, and then called out softly, “Elijah?” There was no reply. The only sounds were the faint ticking of a clock, and the thrumming of Sean’s heart. He walked forward a few steps, then stopped again to listen and once again called, “Elijah?”

He caught a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye, and whirled in its direction, raising his hands like a boxer ready to deflect a punch. A piercing yowl rent the quietness like a jagged knife, and Sean almost had a heart attack for real. Then he recognized the source of the godawful noise. “Maggie. Jesus. You scared the shit out of me.” Sean set a hand over his racing heart and took several deep breathes while he struggled to regain his shaky composure.

Maggie padded up to him, but she didn’t wind through his legs or attempt to greet him. Her black and rust fur was standing on end as if she’d been shocked, and her long expressive tail was flicking back and forth. She let out another ear-splitting yowl, the sound completely unlike any he’d heard her make, and his fear escalated even higher. There was only one thing that could affect her so strongly, he thought, and that was if something had happened to Elijah.

Slowly, dread weighting every step, Sean ventured down the hallway and into the family room. There was no sign of Elijah there. He left the family room, and proceeded through the rest of the house, turning on lights as he went. He left no room, no closet, unopened. He called Elijah’s name over and over. He discovered Fred in the bathroom, shut up tightly inside his shell, as if he’d seen something so awful he was afraid to peer out. Could it have been Elijah, wounded and bleeding from cuts inflicted by razor-sharp claws? The idea didn’t even seem over-the-top. He’d seen the Jersey Devil with his own eyes.

Sean continued his methodical search, fearing at every turn what he might discover. Maggie remained riveted to his side, keeping up an almost continuous stream of mews and yowls. If she was
trying to tell Sean something, he didn’t know what it was. Unlike Elijah, he couldn’t talk to animals, and he could only do his pathetic best to find the young man he loved.

When he reached Elijah’s bedroom, he was struck by the terrible irony of how, only a few hours ago, he’d been looking forward so much to this moment. But he’d never imagined for a second that he would enter the room with dread in his heart. Yet even in his current state of anxiety, he couldn’t help but notice that in this room, at least, Elijah’s tidiness was not in evidence. There were piles of discarded clothes, and stacks of books, magazines and CDs on the floor, and the drawers of his dresser were half open and spilling out socks and tee shirts.

Elijah’s oak four-poster bed was unmade, the sheets and comforter carelessly thrown back as if he’d got up in a hurry. Above the headboard a curious looking wooden box was hanging; it resembled a birdhouse, but with a larger opening cut in the front. Even as Sean looked at it with puzzlement, a familiar beady-eyed gray face appeared, chattered something indecipherable and highly agitated, and withdrew again. It was Rocky. All Elijah’s beloved house animals were present and accounted for now, but Elijah himself was nowhere in sight.

He headed to the kitchen last of all, and Maggie sprinted ahead of him to stand at the mudroom door. She batted at it repeatedly with one paw, yowling piteously, and Sean went to her. “Is Elijah out in the barn?” he asked as he opened the door. But Maggie streaked through the opening, across the runner and out through the cat flap, leaving Sean alone. He missed her small presence ridiculously. The oppressive silence and sense of foreboding hung over him like a pall.

He flipped on the light switch beside the door, and entered the mudroom, fully intending to go straight out into the yard and to the barn, certain now that that must be where Elijah was. But he stopped in confusion at the sight of Elijah’s tan work boots on the floor, and his barn jacket hanging on its accustomed hook, the gray hat sticking up out of a pocket. Had Elijah been in such a rush he’d forgotten to put on his jacket and boots? And then Sean noticed something even odder: blue plaid boxers and a white tee shirt hanging on the hook closest to the back door.

What the fuck? If he didn’t know better, he’d believe that Elijah had actually undressed before going outside. But that was ridiculous. It must be barely 20 degrees out. Even more confused, Sean looked around him for any further clues to this apparent riddle, but found none. He did notice a large mag flashlight standing on end on a utility shelf. Praying that it would work better than the one in his car had when he needed it, he picked it up and tried it. A bright flood of light poured out, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t even want to cross the yard to the barn without a light.

Hefting the heavy flashlight, thinking that it could also be a weapon if necessary, he moved toward the door, but then stopped, turned, and took down the blaze orange jacket that had belonged to Elijah’s father. He shrugged into it, feeling braver somehow with it on, and went outside.

In the glow of the flashlight, he noticed the footprints immediately. Bare footprints, that traveled in a straight line- not toward the barn, but diagonally toward the woods. An image of Elijah, terrified and helpless with a gun held to his head, being forcibly marched into the woods to be tortured or murdered rose up before him… But he immediately realized that such a scenario simply couldn’t be, not unless Elijah’s captor was invisible or walked on air. There was only one set of footprints heading in that direction.

No, it appeared that Elijah had gone alone, barefoot and possibly naked, into the pines on a bitter cold January night… Why?

Sean swept the flashlight over the snow-covered yard. There was a confusion of booted footprints crisscrossing the space between the barn and the house, most likely from Elijah making his trips back and forth to the barn to take care of the animals, and then there was that lone set of bare footprints
leading toward the woods.

He raised the flashlight and it caught twin points of green glowing about twenty yards away. It was Maggie, her amber eyes reflecting eerily in the light, and she was watching Sean intently: watching him, and also waiting for him. Maggie knew something; that much was clear. He should trust her instincts and quit fumbling along on his own. He went to join her, walking alongside Elijah’s small footprints, unable somehow to bear the idea of stepping on them.

*God, his feet must be freezing; he’ll end up with frostbite,* Sean thought worriedly, and wondered what in God’s name could have driven Elijah to do something so reckless.

Suddenly he stopped dead, dumbfounded. As he’d walked, he’d let the flashlight play over every footprint, perfectly and delicately outlined in the snow, right down to the shape of each individual toe. But now it was illuminating a completely different shape of print, one that was smaller, rounder… and cloven. Not human.

Somehow, between one step and the next, the footprints had turned into hoof prints.

Sean stared down in disbelief. The prints looked exactly like the spoor of a deer or… a stag? *Oh my god,* he thought. *Did Elijah come out here to meet the white stag?*

And then the truth hit him with stunning force: *there was only one set of hoof prints in the snow, the set leading into the pines.* There could be only one possible answer.

Elijah hadn’t met the white stag, he was the white stag.

The veil that had been clouding his memory of that night was ripped away. Sean remembered at last what it was that had lurked on the edges of his mind, elusive as quicksilver. As he’d spiraled down into darkness, losing consciousness, the stag had turned his majestic head to look at him, and his eyes in the light from the cabin windows had been blue…

Sean fell to his knees in the snow, heedless of the cold wet soaking his jeans, the flashlight almost falling from his nerveless fingers, light swinging crazily around him. “Oh my god. Oh my god,” he said aloud. He covered his face with his trembling hands as the puzzle pieces fell neatly into place, and he wondered how he could possibly have failed to see the truth. Elijah was the white stag, and the white stag was Elijah, the Woodjin, the guide and guardian of the pines.

*How could I have been so blind?*

An imperative *meow* roused Sean from his stupor and he looked up. Maggie was staring at him, irritably shaking the snow from one dainty orange paw. The sense of urgency returned in a rush, and with it the reason he had been here: it wasn’t to discover the truth of Elijah’s identity, but to rescue him from whatever danger he was in- if he could. Sean swallowed hard as he realized exactly what he was going to have to do: walk willingly back into the forest, even knowing what might lie in wait. His heart almost failed him as recalled the Devil’s pitiless red eyes and terrible scream of rage as it chased him through the woods.

But Elijah, the White Stag, needed him. Sean rose steadily to his feet, his face set and the flashlight held in a firm grip. “I’m coming,” he said quietly, and with unflinching steps followed Maggie into the shadows that awaited them.
He liked to bring his dates to the Pine Barrens, especially late at night and after a nice dinner and a couple of drinks. He’d discovered that the spooky atmosphere of the woods made them more inclined to put out. There was nothing like a little dose of horror-movie creepiness to turn a lady all soft and clingy, and once they got into that state, it was a hell of a lot easier to get into their pants. A little cuddle and kiss, and then it was wham-bam, thank you, ma’am.

He glanced over at the young woman occupying the passenger seat of his four-wheel drive Ford Ranger truck. He’d met her at a friend’s party in downtown Philly a few days earlier, and she’d caught his eye immediately. Crystal had great tits, shown now to full advantage in a low-cut aqua tank top, an even better ass encased in skin-tight designer jeans with a wide leather belt that emphasized her tiny waist, and legs that went on forever, the kind a guy liked to imagine wrapped...
around his waist or hooked over his shoulders while they had sex.

She claimed to be twenty years old, but beneath the artfully applied makeup was a face he’d be willing to bet was no more than eighteen. He mentally shrugged; her age made no difference to him, as long as she was willing, and she’d seemed more than willing when he’d asked her for a date at the party. In fact, she’d seemed downright flattered by his attention. She was sweet and kind of naïve—exactly the way he liked his women.

“It’s awfully dark,” Crystal said in her breathy, childish-sounding voice, glancing nervously out the window at the snow-shrouded trees that lined the road. She sidled a fraction closer to him. “Are you sure it’s safe? I’ve heard that strange things live in these woods.”

He gave a low chuckle. “You mean like the Jersey Devil?”

Crystal tossed a strand of long platinum blonde hair back over her shoulder. “Yeah. You know, they—they say it really exists.” Her voice was hushed, as if she thought the monster might overhear her and leap out at them from the bushes any second.

“I’ve driven through the Pine Barrens plenty of times, but it’s never bothered me,” he said, and then added smoothly, “Although I’ve heard some stories. I even met a guy at a bar a few years ago who swore he’d seen it with his own eyes.” He shrugged. “He might’ve been telling the truth. Hard to say.”

He suppressed a grin as she edged even closer. She’d started out sitting right by the window; now she was practically sitting on the console. Yeah, the horror-movie creepiness was paying dividends again.

Crystal shivered and hugged herself; gooseflesh stood out on her bare arms, despite the warm air blowing from the vents. She reached behind her to grab a pink mohair sweater she’d draped over the back of her seat and shrugged into it; the half dozen silver bangle bracelets she wore jangled a discordant accompaniment to the soft rock music that was playing on the car stereo.

“Maybe we should go back. What if your truck breaks down?” She looked uneasily around her again as the Ranger bounded along the deserted back road. The headlights revealed an untouched blanket of white from the snow earlier in the day, and to either side, densely clustered pitch pines and scrub oaks that felt uncomfortably close. “We could disappear and no one would ever know. You know, just like in Supernatural. It’s, like, totally creepy out here.”

He’d never heard of the show before this evening, when she’d told him over dinner that it was her favorite, and that his looks reminded her of one of the stars, some dude whose name began with ‘J’. He already knew a lot of things Crystal liked and didn’t like. She was a talker. Unfortunately. He preferred the ones who didn’t talk much, just moaned and panted while he was fucking them.

“The truck isn’t gonna break down, babe, and we aren’t gonna disappear. Stuff like that doesn’t happen in real life—only on TV,” he said dismissively. “And even if something was to happen, you think I don’t know how to protect a lady?”

He reached down under the front seat, the truck swerving slightly from side to side as he steered it one handed, and came up holding a gun, black metal glinting dully in the red-orange light from the dashboard. He straightened and set the 9mm Beretta on the console between them. “Who needs those ghost hunter dudes? That Devil comes anywhere near us and I’ll blow his fucking head off.”

The expression on Crystal’s face did make him grin then: her heavily made-up brown eyes were open wide, and she looked both afraid and reluctantly impressed as she stared at the gun. The Beretta
was always a nice touch. Made him seem like a total bad ass, although he’d never actually had occasion to fire it. Women liked badass men, even if they pretended not to. That was another thing he’d discovered.

He looped an arm around Crystal’s shoulders and pulled her closer, so that the gun was pressing cold and hard into his hip. “Now relax and enjoy the ride, baby. I’ve got everything under control.”

But Crystal felt anything but relaxed; her back and shoulders were tense beneath his encircling arm. “I don’t know. I still think maybe we-- we should go back.”

Jesus, he thought. What the fuck was her problem? He stroked the palm of his hand down her right arm then shifted to take her firm, full breast in a light grasp and squeeze it.

“Don’t,” she said sharply, and pushed his hand away. Hers felt cold and a little clammy.

“Sorry,” he apologized, trying to sound nonchalant, while his patience started to fray. Crystal was beginning to seem like more trouble than she was worth. The best tits and ass in the greater Philly area weren’t much good if their owner wouldn’t let you handle them. “I thought you could use a little distraction.”

“I don’t want to be distracted. I want to go home. It’s dark and scary in these woods, and I don’t like it.” She sounded stubborn and petulant, and if she was twenty years old then he was Bruce Springsteen.

“Look, it’s only a couple more miles to where we’re stopping,” he said, keeping tight hold of the reins of his temper. “It’s a real pretty spot, baby, right by the river. You’ll like it, I promise.”

“Well, all right,” Crystal agreed reluctantly. “If we’re almost there.”

He felt her body starting to relax against his shoulder, and decided that maybe she wouldn’t turn out to be a dead loss after all. He steered the Ranger around a bend in the road and accelerated, anxious to reach their stopping point before she could start whining again about going home. Once they were parked, he didn’t doubt for a second his ability to take her mind off that Jersey Devil shit. He had weed in the glove compartment, beer in a foam cooler in the back, and condoms in his wallet. He intended to make use of all three.

Up ahead about a mile, beyond the reach of the high beams, was a small bridge that spanned the Batsto River, and it was just on the other side of the bridge that he liked to park. There was a rise there that overlooked the water, and girls always oohed and aahed over how romantic the view was. Tonight, with the snow and the moonlight, it should be spectacular.

“We’re nearly there, babe,” he commented a couple of minutes later, and then let out a curse and abruptly hit the brakes. He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands as the four-wheel drive struggled valiantly to slow the skidding vehicle. Crystal let out a small cry of alarm, and held onto his arm as the truck slid to a stop. “Jesus.” His heart was pounding, a surge of adrenaline racing through his body. They’d almost hit a fucking deer.

It had appeared as if out of nowhere, right smack in the middle of the snow-covered road, a few yards from the near end of the bridge. There were plenty of deer in the Pine Barrens, and it wasn’t the first time he’d had a close encounter with one. But they usually got the hell out of the way and bolted for the safety of the trees. This one hadn’t moved a muscle, however; it just stood there with its antlered head held high and its dark eyes fixed on the truck, about twenty-five feet away. It didn’t act like a typical deer, and it sure as hell didn’t look like one either. It was larger than any deer he’d ever seen, and its coat was pure white, whiter than the snow even. It almost seemed to shine.
“Oh,” Crystal breathed, releasing his arm and leaning forward to peer through the windshield. “He’s beautiful. I’ve never seen a white deer before.”

He felt irrationally irritated by Crystal’s breathless reaction to the deer after all her bitching about how scared she was. The deer wasn’t beautiful; it was some kind of mutant freak. Its mother probably drank water polluted by toxic waste that someone had illegally dumped, or some crazy shit like that.

“For fuck’s sake, Crystal, it’s only a stupid deer,” he said. “They’re nothing more than oversized vermin. The woods are crawling with them.” Impatiently, he laid on the horn, and then lowered his window halfway. “Get out of the fucking road!” he shouted through the opening, and hit the horn again, but this time held it down for a good fifteen seconds. Crystal visibly cringed as the strident noise went on and on, and put her hands over her ears, but the deer didn’t so much as flinch. If it wasn’t for the thin wisps of white vapor trailing from its nostrils as it breathed, it might have been a statue, not a living being.

“Stop doing that! You’ll scare him!” Crystal’s voice could barely be heard over the sound of the horn.

“Fuckin’ A, I’ll scare him. He’s blocking the goddamn road.” Abandoning the horn, he shifted the truck into gear, his motions jerky with the anger that was starting to spill over, the inevitable result of an evening that wasn’t going according to plan.

“Are you crazy?” Crystal exclaimed as the truck began to creep forward, crunching over the snow. “You’ll hit him!” She grabbed at his coat sleeve, pink-lacquered nails digging into dark brown suede like the claws of a kitten, and with about as much effect.

He shook her hand off, and gave her an impatient look. “I’m not gonna hit him. You think I want to put a dent in my truck? But I’m gonna make the bastard move if it’s the last thing I do.”

But the deer didn’t move, even when the truck rolled to within ten feet of it. It tossed its head once or twice, but all four hooves remained firmly planted in the snow, as if it was determined not to let them pass.

“Shit.” He stopped the truck and put it in neutral, setting the emergency brake. He stared at the deer, and the deer stared back, and there was something uncannily human about its steady, impassive gaze. It seemed aware in a way no animal should be aware, and he was unnerved, even frightened, by its behavior. But he wasn’t about to let some fucking animal frighten him. “All right, that’s it. I’ve had enough.” He picked up the Beretta and undid the safety lock. Then he opened the door and got out of the truck.

“No!” Crystal cried. She scrambled after him on hands and knees, and half fell out of the truck. “Please,” she begged, clinging to the doorframe for support, “don’t shoot him. Please.”

He ignored her pleas, and quickly raised the gun, his forefinger resting lightly on the hairpin trigger. His intention was to fire over the deer’s head and scare it off, not really wanting to kill it if it could be avoided, but before he could take aim, Crystal let go of the car door and lunged for the Beretta. Her desperate fingers closed around his wrist like a vice; involuntarily, he squeezed the trigger.

The gun went off with a deafening report that echoed like thunder through the still night air, causing some roosting bird to flap away in panic, and his ears to ring as if he’d been clocked in the final round by Mike Tyson. There was a dull wet thud and a loud grunt. Crystal screamed, and released his wrist.
Time seemed to go into slow motion.

The white deer staggered, forelegs splaying and nearly buckling. A dark stain began to spread across its right shoulder at the base of its neck, blossoming like some obscene flower on the pristine whiteness of its fur. There was a look of almost human surprise in its eyes as they met his own, as if it couldn’t believe what had happened, and he could see now that those eyes weren’t brown like a typical deer’s, but a deep, fathomless blue. For a long moment they held him captive, and he couldn’t look away. A sense of shame filled him such as he’d never known in his life…

“No!” Crystal screamed, and time sped up again.

She began to run toward the deer, long legs flashing, but it moved finally, lurching into an awkward canter before she could reach it. In a few stumbling strides it had gained the shelter of the pines, and then it was gone, vanished, leaving behind in the snow a trail of hoof prints-- and spatters of blood. Crystal ran after it, sobbing, but halted when she reached the edge of the woods, her hands clenched at her sides while she tried to nerve herself to venture alone into the woods. She couldn’t do it, not with every story she’d ever heard or read about the Jersey Devil mocking her from the shadows.

Defeated, she turned back, and black tears of mascara were running down her face. “You’ve killed him,” she choked out between sobs, “killed him.”

But he didn’t even hear her. Now that the deer was out of the way, the truck’s headlights illumined the bridge over the river-- or rather, what remained of that bridge. For less than half the span was still intact; the rest had collapsed into the river, whether from the snow or cold or a combination of both, or perhaps from something else entirely, he had no idea. All he knew was that, by the time he’d have noticed, it would’ve been too late. As fast as he was driving, he could never have braked in time, and they would have plunged straight over the edge and into the icy embrace of the river. He didn’t have a particularly vivid imagination, but he didn’t need one to picture what would have happened next.

“Oh my god.” It was Crystal, arriving at his side and staring in horror at the gaping black hole between what was left of the bridge and the far side of the river. “Oh my god. We--” she hiccupped, “we w-would have fallen in the river and drowned. He s-saved our lives, and now he’s going to d-die alone in the w-woods and it’s all your f-fault…” She fumbled at the front of her jeans and unclipped a pink Razr cell phone, flipping it open with shaking fingers.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, snapping out of his near-trance and whirling to face her.

“I’m calling 911. Maybe-- maybe someone can find him… save him…” There was a shrill beep as she hit the first number.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? You can’t call the police.” His gun was unregistered, and it was illegal to shoot deer out of season. And then there was that weed in the glove compartment... He felt a frisson of fear that the near miss with the collapsed bridge hadn’t given him. Jesus, he’d be screwed ten ways to Sunday if the cops searched his truck, and Crystal-- shit, with her makeup smeared and her eyes swollen with tears, she looked about fifteen. Jailbait. They’d arrest him for consort ing with a minor. Fuck that. He was sorry about the deer, but it was a freak anyway, probably better off dead. He shoved the gun in the waistband of his jeans, and said, “Gimme that phone, Crystal.”

“No!” she quickly stepped back, hand outstretched to fend him off, but her high-heeled boots slipped on the slick snow, and he easily overpowered her, despite her frantic struggles. He pried the phone out of her cold fingers, and heaved it overhand toward the river. It sailed through the air, glowing eerily, and disappeared from sight. There was a soft splash as it hit the water.

“I hate you!” she sobbed, hitting at him with her fists. “Hate you!”
“I don’t give a flying fuck what you think about me. Get in the truck,” he ordered.

“I’d rather crawl home on my hands and knees than get in that truck with you,” she spat, twisting in his grip like a wildcat.

“I should let you crawl, but you might get picked up by the police and start yakking.” He gave her a rough shove toward the Ranger then pulled out the Beretta. He pointed it straight at her. “Now be a good girl, and Get. In. The. Fucking. Truck.”

Before the implacable look in his eyes, her defiance wilted. Without another word she climbed in, and collapsed in a heap on the passenger seat, weeping helplessly.

He slammed the door behind her, and then climbed in himself. He hit the automatic door locks, stowed the gun back under the seat, and put the truck in gear. The ruined remains of the bridge showed starkly in the headlights, and the trampled snow where the deer had stood: the deer that had saved their lives. He clamped down on the memory of those almost-human blue eyes and the feeling of shame that had swept over him. It was coincidence, that’s all. The deer hadn’t been there on purpose. Leave it to a woman to come up with some fanciful shit like that. There was absolutely nothing for him to feel guilty about. Besides, it was Crystal’s fault anyway, stupid bitch, grabbing for the gun just as he was about to fire it.

He looked at Crystal, huddled defenselessly against the seat, her head bowed so that her bright hair fell in a curtain about her face, hiding it from view. Her body was wracked by convulsive shudders, but the sight roused no pity in him. “You say one word about this to anyone, one word, and I swear to god I’ll make you sorry you were ever born. Understand?”

She nodded slowly without looking up.

“Good. Now let’s get the fuck out of here.” And he didn’t plan on coming back again. Ever.

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Pain. The stag had never experienced such pain in his entire life. His right shoulder was on fire, nerve endings screaming in protest with every labored step he took. There was a grinding sensation as he swung his right leg forward, as if bone was grating against metal; he thought the bullet must be lodged there. With every beat of his heart, pumping blood through his veins, he could feel a tiny pulse at the bullet hole as another trickle of blood emerged, running warm down his shoulder and leg. His sensitive nostrils, accustomed to the familiar, loved scents of the pines, were filled with the sharp coppery tang of his own blood. The wild animal’s panicked reaction to the scent— a near overwhelming impulse to bolt mindlessly— was difficult to tame. He had to remind himself over and over of whom he really was. Elijah. I’m Elijah.

And if he was Elijah, then he was the Woodjin, too, and he still had work to do this night. He had answered the call, and thankfully been in time to save those two people from the river that had claimed so many lives in the past. But the collapse of the bridge had to be reported as soon as possible, in case anyone else might be put at risk. If he was called a second time… The very idea that his injuries might prevent him from answering a call was intolerable, an agony nearly as great as the pain of his wounded shoulder.

His right front leg felt increasingly numb, as if it didn’t even belong to him; it buckled when he tried to put his full weight on it, and he could barely lift it clear of the ground. When the dragging tip of his hoof struck a rock concealed beneath the snow, he tripped and fell hard to his knees. The jolt sent shockwaves of white-hot pain searing through his body, and he nearly blacked out. He gathered his haunches under him, and struggled to his feet. He stood there, trembling and weak, and fought the
temptation to sink back to the ground and rest. But he was afraid to stop, afraid to rest, because somewhere in the pines his ancient enemy was prowling, and he would be hungrier and angrier than ever after his defeat in the clearing four nights ago.

Elijah tried to concentrate, to focus that subliminal awareness he possessed of the Devil to pinpoint his current location, but his mind was too clouded with pain to sense him clearly. He couldn’t tell if his enemy was near enough to sense **him**—or the scent of his blood. He had never yet lost a battle with the Devil, though he bore his share of scars from their encounters over the years, but if he came after Elijah now, there was little doubt what would happen.

It wasn’t that he was afraid for himself, though he had no wish to die, but who would safeguard the pines if he were killed? There was a superstitious belief among pineys that without their Woodjin, they would lose the homes and livelihoods their ancestors had carved from a wilderness of sand and scrub pines and fought so hard to preserve. So many people depended on him; he could not let them down. Elijah thought of his father, and of the other Woodjins who had guarded the pines. What would they think of Elijah, if he were the one who failed in his trust? He had the oddest sensation then of eyes on him, as if every Woodjin who came before him was gathered in the shadows in stag form, just beyond the edges of Elijah’s vision, watching and waiting.

He was becoming light-headed and confused, and he wondered how much blood he’d lost. The warm trickle from the bullet hole hadn’t stopped, though he thought it had slowed— but perhaps that was only wishful thinking.

The light-headedness grew as he limped painfully along the paths that he usually traversed with effortless grace. As if his brain were a kaleidoscope, a series of images flashed through his mind: the faces of those he’d met as the stag— the lost and weary and frightened— ending with the face of the man he’d just rescued, the man who had shot him. How he’d looked at Elijah, with such fear and mistrust… It wasn’t the first time Elijah had seen such a look in someone’s eyes, and a pang from a different sort of pain hurt his heart then, but the pain was mixed with pity, pity for those who feared what they did not understand. And then one last image rose before him: green-gold eyes staring at him in the starlight with wonder and awe. The eyes belonged to Sean: Sean, who had seen the magic. Holding tight to that memory, Elijah found renewed strength and will to go on.

But his awareness of the world around him, almost preternaturally keen when he assumed his stag form, gradually dwindled and dissolved, even Sean’s image at last fading away until nothing existed except a red haze of pain through which he moved, slower and slower. All unknowing he wandered from the path he had been following, and into the trees. Confused, he floundered blindly forward until he emerged at last into a small clearing. He stopped, swaying, and then crumpled slowly to the ground. And this time he did not get up again.

***

“Maggie, wait,” Sean called after the cat’s retreating form. Only the trailing tip of her fluffy orange and black tail could be seen as she rounded a bend in front of him. Her smaller form allowed her to navigate the narrow deer paths they were following much more easily than he could, and Sean was desperately afraid of losing her in the maze of trails crisscrossing the woods.

If this were a cartoon, Sean thought, a tiny red devil with horns and a pitchfork would be perched on his shoulder, whispering in his ear that he was insane to put his faith in a cat. It was hard not to question his sanity, especially when Elijah’s footprints—no, hoof prints—veered away to the left, and Maggie, ignoring them, kept trotting straight ahead. His heart had nearly failed him then, but he had to trust that her bond with Elijah was strong enough to lead her, lead them both, to him.

Sean wasn’t finding it any easier to judge distances in the woods this time, even with Maggie’s
unhesitating guidance and the blessedly bright flood of light from the mag to show the way. He had no more idea of what direction they were headed or how far they’d traveled than he had when the Devil was chasing him in the dark and he’d been running in a blind panic. The Pine Barrens weren’t anything like the city, with its streets and avenues neatly laid out at right angles to each other.

*If you started setting pine trees side by side, how many would it take to equal a city block?* Sean wondered. He concentrated on the ridiculous mental calculation, because it was better than dwelling on the nightmarish memory of his frantic flight through these same woods four nights earlier with the Devil chasing him. Still, he found himself bracing for the moment when that unearthly scream would shatter the quiet and the nightmare would begin again. Only this time, he vowed to himself, he would not run.

As for Elijah, and what might have happened to him… *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,* Sean, his Grandma Astin, who liked to quote scripture, used to scold him, when he would fret about matters out of his control. Speculation was a fruitless waste of time and energy. He had to focus on finding Elijah first, and deal with whatever came after at the appropriate time. But his imagination wasn’t a faucet that he could simply turn off at will, especially when the stabbing pain that had woken him from sleep continued to manifest itself in prickling waves that radiated down his right arm to the very tips of his fingers. Sean switched the heavy flashlight to his left hand, afraid that he might drop it. He’d tugged the cuffs of the down jacket over his hands to protect them from the cold, but nothing could protect them from phantom pain.

Maggie did in fact slacken her pace, as if she’d understood his words, and waited until Sean caught her up. She glanced back at him, her amber eyes glowing green in the light from the mag, and voiced her displeasure before setting off again at a trot. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, Sean might actually have laughed, for he’d just been told off in no uncertain terms, and by a cat.

“You’re right,” he said, ducking to avoid a low-hanging tree branch, “I’ve got to push harder.”

He did, and they hurried on, single-file, through the quiet woods. Minutes passed, and nothing happened. The night remained still and hushed; the only noticeable sound was Sean’s ragged breathing. He recalled a dream he’d once had, in which he’d wandered down long dim corridors without any doors, and every time he thought he’d finally found a way out, he’d turn a corner and be right back where he’d started. He began to worry that they were going in circles, and the tiny cartoon devil had been right after all.

He was on the verge of panicking in earnest when Maggie suddenly let out a loud yowl, startling Sean so badly he nearly dropped the flashlight. The cat veered off the path and into the trees on their right, bounding stiff-legged through the underbrush like a meerkat crossing the Kalahari. His heart pounding with a mixture of hope and apprehension, Sean followed her, raising his right arm to shield his face as he shouldered his way through the trees.

He aimed the flashlight’s beam straight ahead of him, rather than at the forest floor, and a gleam of white beyond the copse of scrub oaks into which Maggie had led him caught his eye. Sean recognized that gleam, like the luster of a pearl, for he’d seen it once before: four nights ago in a starlit clearing in these very woods. His heart gave a joyous leap. She’d found him. Maggie—blessed, brilliant, wonderful Maggie—had found Elijah. Maggie, Sean promised silently, *you’re going to eat filet mignon and bathe in catnip every day for the rest of your life.*

He broke into a run, vaulting a fallen tree like an Olympic hurdler, but the remaining yards seemed the longest of his entire life, so desperate was he to reach Elijah. Then Sean burst out of the trees and into a small clearing very much like the one where he’d first met the white stag, and nearly sobbed aloud with relief at the sight that met his eyes: the white stag, with Maggie standing protectively by
his side. Strangely, at that moment, even though he now knew the stag’s true identity, Sean could only think of him that way.

But the euphoria of discovery vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

The white stag, whom Sean had been picturing in his mind’s eye as he’d first seen him, standing proudly in the starlight with his antlered head held high, was down, curled up on his left side with his legs bent beneath him. His head was bowed as though the weight of his own antlers was too much to bear; his soft muzzle rested wearily on his left foreleg, and his eyes were closed.

And then Sean’s gaze fell on a dark stain covering the stag’s right shoulder and chest and running down the leg. It took a few seconds for his brain to process what he was seeing. “Oh my god, no,” he breathed.

He’d expected any injuries to the stag to mirror the phantom pain he’d been experiencing, but the reality was far, far worse than anything he’d imagined. Horror at the sight held him frozen in place for the space of several heartbeats, and then he stumbled forward and fell to his knees by the stag’s head. Maggie, who had begun pacing in tiny circles, uttering short mewling cries of distress, now stared imploringly at Sean, her expression saying more clearly than words: “You’ve got to help him.”

“Maggie, I promise you—” Sean choked out, but he couldn’t finish the sentence, for fear had clamped his throat shut. The stag, roused by the sound of his voice, slowly lifted his head. His blue eyes—Elijah’s eyes, and oh, it was Elijah looking at him—were dull and clouded with pain, but Sean thought he saw a glimmer of recognition and gladness in their depths.

“Elijah, I’m here,” he said, and reaching out, gently cradled the stag’s bony head in his arms. He bent and kissed the soft fur between his eyes, and with a sort of shuddering sigh the stag relaxed in Sean’s hold.
It was only then that Sean became aware of the tears freezing on his face. He rested his icy-wet cheek against the warmth of the spot he had just kissed, and breathed in the scents of woodsmoke and pinesap and dried grasses, as he had the night the stag carried him to safety-- the safety of his own home, though Sean had been too blind to see that the compassionate young man and the magical white stag were one and the same. How he could have failed to make that connection? God, he had been such a fool. "Elijah," he whispered again. "Oh Elijah."

Sean might have stayed that way far longer than was wise, forgetting everything but the joy of finding Elijah; but the ever-practical Maggie, with one well aimed smack of paw on arm, called him
back to the urgency of the situation.

“Sorry,” he apologized in a hoarse voice. He sat back on his heels, very, very carefully releasing his
hold on Elijah, who had closed his eyes again as though utterly exhausted. “God, I’m so sorry,” he
said again, and this time the words were meant for the stag, whose head was once more bowed upon
his left foreleg.

The knees of Sean’s jeans were soaked through, as were the toes of his running shoes-- he had lost
the feeling in his own toes some time ago. His exposed skin was numb, his nose was running and his
eyes were burning with fatigue and cold. But he felt none of it, for his attention was entirely focused
on Elijah.

He turned his mind to practical matters. He had to assess Elijah’s injuries first, before he could make
any further decisions. But it was a daunting prospect; he couldn’t ever remember feeling so totally
inadequate to a task. Feeding baby squirrels was child’s play compared to this.

*Screw the negativity, Astin,* he chided himself. *You say you want to be a doctor? Then prove it.*

Drawing a deep breath, Sean shifted carefully around on his knees until he was close enough to
examine the bloody mess that was the stag’s right shoulder. He aimed the flashlight directly at it, and
that’s when he received his second greatest shock in a night that had been full of them.

He’d assumed, naturally enough, that Elijah was wounded in a confrontation with the Jersey Devil;
the intensity of their battle in the clearing four nights ago was not something easily forgotten, nor was
the image of that droplet of blood falling from the white stag’s ebon antler to bead in the cold sand.
But unless the Devil had taken to carrying firearms, his assumption couldn’t have been more wrong.
Here were no gouges or skin tears made by razor sharp claws or bite wounds from equally sharp
teeth-- only a small hole. What Sean knew about bullet wounds from personal experience was nil,
but he’d watched plenty enough cop and doctor shows on television to recognize that small hole with
its jagged edges for what it was.

Elijah had been shot.

~*~

Don’t let yourself get distracted, Sean cautioned himself while anger unlike any he had ever felt in
his life bubbled up inside him, and threatened to destroy his shaky self-control. *Finding the
sonuvabitch who did this can wait. Right now, Elijah needs you.*

The bullet hole was oozing; scarlet fluid dripped slowly into the snow. How much blood had Elijah
lost? Sean wondered. Jesus, it looked like so much. With difficulty, he put that worry aside, and
searched for an exit wound. Using the sides of his fingers for lack of anything better, he gently wiped
away the trickles of blood, but saw no sign of one. Presumably then, he thought as he cleaned his
fingers in the snow, the bullet was still inside Elijah’s shoulder. Was that good news or bad? He had
no idea, only a vague memory of him and Mack watching an old western where a bullet had to be
dug out of some gunslinger’s shoulder without anything to dull the pain except a hefty dose of rotgut
whiskey poured down his throat. The poor guy had screamed in agony anyway, and then passed out
cold. The thought of Elijah being put through an ordeal like that made him distinctly queasy.

But that sort of butchery didn’t go on in this day and age, he reminded himself as he searched for any
other signs of injury. Elijah would go to a nice modern hospital, and Sean would make sure he had
the most skilled surgeons and nurses that money could buy and all the painkillers he needed to keep
him comfortable while he recovered.
And that’s when it hit him: his mental imagining and planning involved Elijah the man, not Elijah the stag, who was a very, very different proposition and who was the Elijah lying in front of him right now.

Finished with his assessment of Elijah’s injuries, shakily confident that he had only the bullet wound to deal with, Sean switched off the flashlight to conserve its batteries and considered this rather monumental dilemma.

He could do some quick and dirty triage, put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding-- even he knew that much rudimentary first aid-- but how on earth was he ever going to get Elijah home? As a man, Elijah was slight; he probably weighed in at 145 pounds or less. But as the stag? Sean guessed that he must weigh at least twice that much, possibly more. There was no conceivable way Sean could carry or even support such a weight for any distance, and Elijah was clearly incapable of making it back under his own power.

Aware that every passing second was desperately important, Sean debated his options. As far as he could tell, there were only two. The first option was to get the bleeding under control, leave Elijah here in the clearing, and go for help. Bill Jenkins, Sean felt certain, knew exactly who and what Elijah was, and it would be safe to confide in him. He recalled the significant look Elijah had shared with Bill when they met him out by the Quaker Bridge. Through the prism of hindsight, that exchange of glances took on new dimensions of meaning-- as did almost every conversation Sean had had with Elijah since meeting him.

But going for help meant walking away from Elijah, leaving him alone again in the cold and dark, vulnerable to dangers both known and unknown. **Fuck that,** Sean thought fiercely. **I’m not leaving him, and that’s all there is to it.**

Which left the second option, if Elijah was strong enough for it. Well, there was only one way to find out.

“Elijah.” Sean spoke with quiet urgency. “Elijah, I need you to listen to me. Please. It’s important.”

The stag’s head lifted again, and his blue eyes slowly blinked open. They were still hazy with pain, but aware and attentive.

“I can’t help you the way you are now-- as the stag, I mean. You’re going to have to…” He hesitated, unsure what was the correct word to use, or if there even was one, “transform, change back into yourself-- your human self. Can you do that?”

He had forgotten the communication barrier between them, and felt like an idiot when he realized he was waiting for Elijah to answer him in words. He was about to add, ‘Blink once for yes, twice for no’-- the only solution that presented itself, ridiculous as it sounded-- but it proved unnecessary, for the stag’s antlered head raised and lowered in what was unquestionably a nod of ‘yes’.

“Thank god,” Sean almost sagged with relief. “Elijah, is there anything I can do to help you?” And this time, the stag’s head moved from side to side in a decisive gesture of ‘no’.

Maggie, who had taken up a station close against the stag’s left shoulder, the steady rumble of her rasping purr making her sound like a tiny engine, now rose and padded to Sean’s side. He buried his blood-flecked fingers in her thick rust and black fur, not only for warmth but reassurance. He felt helpless, frustrated and very afraid. Maybe this was asking too much of Elijah, injured and exhausted as he was. He was sorry now he’d ever read those damned Harry Potter books, with their too vivid descriptions of spells gone awry, like those poor wizards who were splinched and left parts of their bodies behind... **But this isn’t fiction, Sean.** Which when you came right down to it wasn’t much
consolation, considering what was about to take place in front of him any second now: something even stranger than fiction.

It occurred to Sean that Maggie must have witnessed these transformations before, and he glanced down at her. She didn’t appear worried, only watchful and alert. That was something, at least. Sean turned his attention back to Elijah.

His eyes were closed again. Sean sensed that it wasn’t from weariness or pain this time, however, but from concentration: Elijah was gathering himself, digging down deep for every scrap of strength and will he possessed. Sean held his breath, and then…

…the air moved. Sean blinked in surprise. It wasn’t the wind. The air was actually moving, melting and shifting above and around the white stag, and distorting Sean’s view, as if he was looking at the stag’s body in a funhouse mirror. The air crackled and hummed, not with sound, but with energy. A light sprang up, dazzlingly bright, as if a million fireflies had suddenly congregated in the clearing. Sean shielded his eyes with his hand, but the light continued to grow in intensity, burning brighter and brighter until he was forced to close his eyelids. Seconds ticked passed-- how many Sean couldn’t say-- and gradually the brilliant glow behind his eyelids dimmed, and the hum of energy faded. Cautiously, he opened his eyes.

Where the white stag had been curled in the snow, there now lay the slender naked body of a young man, his right shoulder, chest and arm covered in blood. At any other time, what had just occurred would have left Sean frozen in awestruck wonder, but he was already moving, stripping off his layers of clothing: scarf, down jacket, Gore-tex windbreaker, flannel shirt, sweatshirt and lastly tee shirt, until he was kneeling bare-chested in the frigid air. Sweet Jesus, it was cold. But how much worse was it for Elijah?

He quickly spread out the down jacket to serve as a blanket, and then, with the utmost care, gathered Elijah’s trembling body into his arms, heedless of the blood being smeared on him. He’d imagined holding Elijah, naked skin on naked skin, but not like this, never like this. Elijah’s skin was pale and cold as marble, and his teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Sean eased Elijah into a sitting position on the jacket, supporting him under his left shoulder.

“I’ve got you,” he said gently. “Everything’s going to be all right now.” He put as much conviction into his voice as he possibly could, and knew he was trying to convince himself as much as Elijah.

“Y-you c-came b-back,” Elijah finally spoke, and his eyes were swimming with tears. “S-Sean, y-you c-came b-back.”

“I had to, Elijah,” he said simply. “But there’s no time to explain everything right now. I have to get that bleeding under control. We’ll talk later, okay?”

Elijah nodded; his eyes were fixed on Sean’s face with a wondering expression that brought Sean perilously close to tears again.

Blinking them back, he folded the white tee shirt into a thick pad with quick, efficient movements, and placed it over the wound. He used the scarf to secure the makeshift bandage in place, winding it around Elijah’s shoulder. Elijah let out an involuntary gasp as Sean pulled the scarf as tight as he dared. He knotted the ends with some difficulty, as his fingertips were practically numb, and the wool was awkward to handle.

“God, I’m sorry,” he breathed, as his hands slipped and Elijah choked back a whimper of pain. “But look, I’m all done.”
“‘Sokay,’” Elijah replied. His lips were bloodless, and he was trembling violently. “B-better al-
ready.”

“Liar,” Sean said, and was relieved to see the tiniest of smiles appear on Elijah’s face. He was able to
fashion the sweatshirt into a rough and ready sling to support Elijah’s arm by tying the sleeves
around his neck. Then he draped the flannel shirt over Elijah’s shoulders, and eased the young man’s
left arm into the sleeve. The shirt was oversized: the hem reached halfway down the front of Elijah’s
thighs, and completely covered his buttocks. A fleeting sense of regret for the beauties that were
being concealed passed through Sean’s mind as he buttoned the shirt up as far as it would go, and he
felt ashamed of himself. He picked up the windbreaker, intending to put that on Elijah, too, but Elijah
protested.

“N-no… y-you,” he insisted through his chattering teeth. “C-catch c-cold.”

“Elijah--” But there was a stubborn set to Elijah’s chin, and Sean wasn’t about to waste precious time
arguing. It wasn’t easy to put the windbreaker on under the circumstances-- he was still supporting
Elijah against his side-- but he managed it, and zipped it up to his chin. “All covered up. Are you
happy now?” His voice was gently teasing, though privately he had to admit that Elijah had been
right to insist on it.

Elijah gave a jerky nod. “Sh-shame, th-though.” He sounded genuinely regretful, and Sean realized
he wasn’t the only one noticing things he probably shouldn’t be under the circumstances. He was
surprised into genuine laughter, the sound dancing on the frosty air, and the laughter, even more than
the windbreaker, warmed him. Maybe everything was going to be okay after all.

But they weren’t out of the woods yet, literally or figuratively, and Elijah’s feet were a major concern
to Sean. The young man had drawn his knees up toward his chest, and curled his bare toes into the
down jacket in a vain attempt to warm them.

“Let’s get those feet covered up now,” Sean said. “You can wear my socks. They’re damp, but they
should help a little at least.” It was a measure of his discomfort that Elijah made no protest at the
suggestion. After easing Elijah down onto his side, Sean quickly removed his shoes and socks. He
knelt to pull the thick white cotton over Elijah’s feet; it was like handling twin blocks of ice. The
brief spurt of light-heartedness vanished, and worry returned, bringing with it self-disgust.

“I am the world’s greatest asshole,” Sean said bitterly, as he shoved his feet back into his running
shoes, trying not to shudder at the unpleasant sensation of the clammy cold leather on his bare skin.
“I ran out of your house without taking anything useful besides the flashlight. I should have brought
a first-aid kit, extra clothes, boots, a thermos of coffee…”

From her spot warming the backs of Elijah’s knees, Maggie spoke up, and Sean had no doubt that it
was in response to what he’d just said. She was an opinionated cat, and obviously not hesitant to
share her opinions.

“You see? Maggie agrees with me.”

“H-hero,” Elijah stuttered unexpectedly.

Sean, fumbling at his shoelaces, glanced at Elijah. “What?”

“M-Maggie. S-says you’re a h-hero.” Elijah managed a shaky smile. “Sh-she’s r-right.”

It took an awful lot to render Sean speechless, but that did it. A hero? Him? He avoided looking at
either of them while he hastily finished tying his shoelaces in sloppy, uneven bows. He was certainly
no hero, far from it. He could think of a thousand things he should have done differently, starting with ever having left Elijah in the first place.

“You’re both crazy,” he muttered, cheeks burning with more than cold, and changed the topic. “All right. I think we’re ready to head back now.” He crouched by Elijah’s side. “How’re you doing?”

“G-great,” Elijah lied again, and managed to struggle up onto his elbow.

“Easy,” Sean cautioned. “You don’t have to prove anything.” And the only heroes around here are you and Maggie, he almost added, but he had a pretty strong notion that that might result in another argument.

Elijah looked anything but great when he was finally on his feet. If Sean hadn’t been holding him, he felt certain Elijah would have sunk straight back to the ground. He hung limply in Sean’s arms, even that small bit of exertion having knocked the stuffing out of him.

“S-sorry,” he whispered, lips shockingly cold against Sean’s throat. “G-give me a m-minute.”

“Take all the time you need,” Sean soothed, rubbing a hand in gentle circles between Elijah’s shoulderblades, but inside he was a bundle of jittering nerves. Doubt about his half-assed attempt at playing an EMT was eating at him. He had little confidence in his makeshift bandage, and the sooner they got started, the better he’d feel.

When Elijah seemed more or less steady on his feet, Sean shuffled them to the side so he could rescue the down jacket that had belonged to Elijah’s dad. It would never be the same after tonight, Sean thought sadly, having been trampled underfoot and spattered with blood. Of course, every piece of clothing he and Elijah had on was beyond ruined, but the only thing that mattered was the blaze orange jacket, because it had sentimental value to Elijah. But it had served its purpose, and now would provide extra, desperately needed warmth-- and perhaps even lend Elijah some of his father’s strength. He helped Elijah into the jacket, and then last of all picked up the flashlight.

“Now it’s my turn to give you a ride,” Sean said lightly, bending on one knee like some courtier of old. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

With a weary sigh, Elijah rested his chest against Sean’s back, and wound his left arm around his neck. “R-ready,” he said, and Sean hooked his elbows under Elijah’s bare knees, and rose to his feet in one smooth motion. He kept his torso tilted forward; it wasn’t going to be easy for Elijah to hang on with only one arm in working order.

“You know, the last person I gave a piggyback ride to was Mack,” Sean commented as he started walking cautiously forward. “And he was three years old at the time.”

He fumbled one-handed with the mag’s on/off switch, doubting that he would ever use a flashlight again without a thrill of anticipatory dread. But a steady stream of light poured out when he turned it on, and one tiny worry was eased at least.

Maggie once again assumed the lead. She cut across the clearing into a side path that bypassed the stand of scrub oaks, and eventually connected with the path they had been following when she found Elijah.

“How far is it to the house from here?” Sean asked, the flashlight playing over the shadowy imprints of foot and paw prints that were pointing in the opposite direction.

“About t-two and a half m-miles as the c-crow flies,” Elijah replied. His chin was resting on Sean’s shoulder, so that he spoke almost directly into his ear. His voice was so thready that Sean would
have had trouble hearing him otherwise, even though the woods were hushed, and their passing was nearly silent.

*As the crow flies.* Sean wondered what the hell that meant in real terms. The way these trails meandered through the woods, it could be closer to three miles. It seemed a daunting distance, and while his shorter stature was something with which Sean was truly comfortable, it would be a lot more helpful right now if he stood about 6’5” and was built like a tank.

“Two and a half miles-- is that all? Piece of cake,” Sean said aloud with a confidence that sounded patently false to his own ears. Who did he think he was kidding, anyway? His back was already protesting from the stooped posture he was forced to assume.

They kept on walking, and despite the silence around them, Sean had a strange sensation that they were not passing unnoticed. Glancing to his right, he was startled by the liquid gleam of a pair of eyes watching them from the shadows. And then he became aware of more and more pairs of eyes, some at his level, others lower, all around them. But oddly, these watchers, whomever they were, didn't make him uneasy or fearful; nor did Maggie or Elijah give any indication that there was anything to fear. Rather, he had a strong impression of affection mixed with sadness. Elijah wasn’t only the guardian of the people who lived in the pines, Sean realized, but of the animals, too. He suspected that those animals-- deer, rabbits, opossums, foxes and who knew what else-- were the ones watching now, too timid to venture any closer, as their injured Woodjin was carried home.

As the minutes passed, Elijah’s strength began to fade. Twice, his hold around Sean’s neck slackened, and he had to catch himself, while Sean, his sockless feet slipping inside his shoes, struggled not to lose his balance and send them both crashing to the ground. Maybe the best thing, Sean decided, was to keep talking, give Elijah something to focus on, and him something to take his mind off his fears, which were many and multiplying rapidly as roaches in a New York City dumpster.

“You know,” he said conversationally, as if they were sitting in the cabin’s sunny kitchen chatting over huckleberry pancakes-- and oh god, how he wished they were-- “you’ve told me the story behind the names of all your animals, except for Maggie. How’d you come up with hers?”

“D-didn’t,” Elijah said.

“Oh, you mean that doctor named her? The one who gave her to you?”

“N-no… n-not Dr. Holm. It w-was M-Maggie. Sh-she t-told me… her n-name.”

“Are you serious?” Maggie cast Sean an amused look over her shoulder. He wasn’t sure if he should be more worried or pleased about the fact that he could read the amusement in her amber eyes so easily.

“It’s t-true.” Elijah tightened his hold on Sean’s neck, and buried his face in the skin above the collar of the windbreaker. “You’re s-so w-warm, Sean,” he whispered, and the words sounded dreamy.

The tickle of Elijah’s breath on the sensitive skin beneath his ear sent a shiver running through Sean. “Chris complains that it’s like sleeping with a furnace,” he said without thinking. *Oh Jesus, Astin.* Sean mentally smacked himself in the forehead. *Way to go. Bring up the woman in your life to the guy you’re in love with. Fucking brilliant.*

“C-Chris,” Elijah said succinctly, “is an idiot,” and he pressed his cold lips against that sensitive skin. It was like being struck by a bolt of lightning: every tiny hair on the back of Sean’s neck stood on end.
It might be only 20 degrees out, and he might be only half-dressed, but Sean had never felt more like a furnace in his life. This night just seemed to keep on throwing him curve ball after curve ball. How could he possibly be aroused under the circumstances? But his body obviously didn’t give a damn what the circumstances were. He swallowed hard, and said, “Maybe we should talk about something else.”

“’kay,” Elijah agreed. “K-kind of tired, though.”

“Elijah, I know it’s not easy, but you’ve got to try and stay awake,” Sean said as calmly as he could, trying to quell the nigglng panic inside him. “Tell me what happened tonight,” he suggested, for there’d been no time yet to discuss it, and discovering how Elijah had been shot- and even more importantly who had shot him- was at the top of a very long list of questions he had. "The Reader's Digest version will do for now."

“I was c-called. Bridge w-was out.”

Sean wondered exactly what it meant for Elijah to be ‘called’, but an explanation could wait for another time. “The Quaker Bridge?” he asked instead, feeling a pang at the thought. It was there that Elijah had told him so much-- and so little-- about what it meant to be the Woodjin. It was there that he’d watched Elijah stretch, languid as a cat in the winter sunshine, and thought how very beautiful he was…

“Y-yes, the Quaker B-Bridge,” Elijah replied soberly. “There w-were two people-- a m-man and a woman-- in a truck. They w-would’ve gone into the river, Sean.”

“Dear god.” That afternoon on the bridge, Sean had stared down into the dark eddying waters of the Batsto and seen vividly in his mind’s eye the fate of the stagecoach and its passengers if the white stag had not appeared and blocked their way. It was all too easy, therefore, to envision what would have happened to the couple in the truck without Elijah's help. It was a chilling scenario. But something didn't quite add up.

“I don’t understand, though,” Sean asked, puzzled. "How did you end up getting shot?”

Elijah didn’t say anything for a moment, as if he was reluctant to answer the question. “The man… he didn’t realize w-why I was there. He w-wanted me to move but I c-couldn’t.”

There was a sudden buzzing sensation in Sean’s head, as if it might actually explode with rage. “Are you telling me that he’s the one who shot you? The man whose life you saved?” His voice rose, echoing through the trees. If he’d been angry when he first discovered that Elijah had been shot, his anger now was completely off the charts, somewhere up in the stratosphere. “That motherfucker. I'm going to find him and cut his balls off. And then--" But he couldn’t even come up with a punishment dire enough.

“Sean, no,” Elijah sounded distressed. “P-please. I s-saved them, and that’s all th-that matters.”

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“Sean, no,” Elijah sounded distressed. “P-please. I s-saved them, and that’s all th-that matters.”

“Elijah, he might have killed you,” Sean said, his voice trembling with the force of his emotions, unable to believe what he was hearing. "You can't possibly just dismiss that as if it's of no importance!”

And he might yet succeed in killing him... Sean forced the thought away. Elijah was going to survive. That bastard was not going to take a life so special, so precious, not only to Sean, but to this place and its people.

But Elijah was shaking his head emphatically in response to Sean’s words. “You have t-to
understand. Most outsiders, they’re afraid of what I-I am. He w-wasn’t like you. I told you once, y-you’re different. And the g-girl, she t-tried to stop him. L-let it go, Sean. F-forgive him. Please.”

Sean was silent, while his anger battled with the compassion that Elijah was asking him to show. He was beginning to comprehend now the depth of sacrifice the Woodjin was expected– no, willing– to make to fulfill his duty, even to the loss of his own life. Elijah didn’t care that he had been shot, as long as he had saved the lives he’d been called to save.

In that instant, any traces of doubt still lingering in Sean’s heart about how much he loved this man vanished forever. But if he wanted to share a life with Elijah– and he did more than ever– then he was going to have to accept Elijah as he was, accept that his duty as Woodjin would come before anything– even Sean. He understood now, too, a little of what Elijah’s mother must have been up against, and why it had been so hard for her when her son became the Woodjin that she had chosen instead to leave the pines.

Sean let out a long sigh, and with it the anger tightly coiled inside him. “I can’t promise to be as forgiving a person as you are, but I’ll try,” Sean offered quietly. “I’m sorry for upsetting you, Elijah. Please forgive me.” Awkwardly, he turned his head and kissed the closest bit of Elijah he could reach, which was his chin, the skin slightly bristly and cool beneath lips.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Elijah whispered, and his arm hugged Sean closer. ”But Sean, the b-bridge…”

“You just tell me who needs to be informed, and I’ll call them as soon as we get back,” Sean promised.

“Thank you.” As if that promise released some tension inside him, Elijah seemed to relax. Anger had fueled a surge of energy in Sean, and he’d unconsciously started walking at a quicker pace. But when asked, Elijah said they had another mile and a half to go, and Sean was disappointed that they weren’t closer to home. He determined not to bring up any other upsetting topics, but instead kept up a running monologue of funny stories from his and Mack’s childhoods, and any amusing anecdotes, jokes, even silly songs, that popped into his brain. An occasional faint chuckle told him that Elijah was still awake and listening.

But Sean’s pace was starting to lag, and Elijah’s cheek pressed against his neck no longer felt icy cold but flushed and warm. Oh god, please don’t let him be running a fever. More and more Elijah felt like a dead weight on his back– don’t use that word, Sean– and Sean’s arms were aching and the muscles in his lower back screaming in protest. But he hadn’t been shot, had he? If Elijah could hang in there so bravely, without a single word of complaint, then Sean could bloody well keep walking.

He didn’t think they had all that much further to go when Elijah suddenly stiffened, his arm tightening convulsively around Sean’s neck. Sean instantly panicked, thinking Elijah must be having some kind of seizure.

“Elijah!” he exclaimed, his voice sharp with fear. “Elijah, talk to me.”

But before Elijah could reply, a sound rent the quiet night, a sound that made Sean’s blood run cold: an unearthly, inhuman scream of rage. Funny that. Sean had always thought it was just a euphemism, and that your blood couldn’t really run cold. But oh, it could-- when the Jersey Devil was pursuing you. He’d honestly forgotten about that threat, fool that he was. He’d thought they were home free, and now…
“How far-- Elijah, how far are we from the house?” Sean demanded, lengthening his stride. He’d run if he had to, though he’d sworn not to run from the Devil again. But all that mattered was getting Elijah to safety; meaningless heroics were for morons.

“About half a m-mile. Sean, I’m s-sorry.” Elijah sounded distraught. “He must’ve p-picked up the trail of my blood.”

And from that, Sean gathered that Elijah didn’t expect them to make it in time. Maggie’s fur was standing on end, as if she was a cartoon cat whose tail had been stuck in an electric socket. It was the first sign of fear she’d ever evinced, and it wasn’t an encouraging sight. The watching eyes in the shadows had all melted away. But goddamn it, Sean thought, they hadn’t come this far to fail so close to home.

“I’m going to have to run, Elijah. Hold on, please, hold on.” Sean broke into a jog, his heart breaking for the pain he knew it had to be causing Elijah, his injured shoulder banging against Sean’s back with every stride. But Elijah didn’t utter a sound, just held to Sean’s neck with grim determination.

It was no good, though. Sean couldn’t keep up the pace. His lungs seared by the bitter cold, and his leg muscles cramping, Sean had to drop back to a walk, afraid that he would stumble and fall. The sounds of pursuit, those gibbering shrieks and crashing noises that Sean recalled so vividly from the other night, were growing closer and closer. Any second now, Sean expected those vast bat wings and glowing red eyes to appear. His heart was hammering and he felt sick to his stomach. Some hero I am, he thought, hoping he wasn’t going to disgrace himself and wet his pants.

“Sean, you have to l-leave me. Put me d-down and go,” Elijah said, as it became clear that they were never going to reach the house in time. “You can m-make it to safety without me slowing you down. There’s a w-ward around the property he c-can’t cross. It’s only a few hundred yards away. P-please. Put me d-down and go.”

“That,” Sean gasped, turning to face their enemy, who from the sound of it would come into view any second, “is the first ridiculous thing you’ve ever said to me, Elijah. Are you trying to disillusion me so early in our relationship?”

“Sean,” Elijah pleaded, and Sean could feel hot tears burning on his neck. “Please.” But his arm tightened as if he couldn’t bear it if Sean actually did obey him, or perhaps he simply recognized the futility of even asking.

“One for all, and all for one’, Elwood,” Sean said, for it was clear that Maggie wasn’t about to abandon Elijah either. She still looked like an electrified cat, and she was emitting a rumbling growl that would’ve scared the shit out of him if he didn’t know whose side she was on. “Although we’re the motliest looking Three Musketeers in history.” He gripped the flashlight with a palm that was definitely sweating, and then his mouth went dry. “Holy shit.”

Those pitiless red eyes had finally appeared, and were moving rapidly toward them, eerily disembodied, until the Devil drew near enough for Sean to see clearly the body to which they belonged. The first time he’d encountered the Devil, he’d had no light and no desire to get a closer look at the thing chasing him through the woods.

Close to seven feet tall, its vast bat wings must have spanned a good ten feet. Its long forked tail whipped angrily from side to side, and its hind legs ended in cloven hooves. Its face was like nothing Sean had ever seen before, vaguely human, as if someone without any knowledge of what a real human face should look like had created it. Its six-fingered hands ended in gleaming razor-tipped claws, and its skin was the scorched black of burned earth. Against it, the white fangs and red eyes glowed with obscene intensity.
Though every atom of Sean’s being was screaming at him to run, he stood his ground, and the Devil halted, as if puzzled by this unprecedented behavior; even his constant gibbering, which Sean had no trouble interpreting for himself as detailed descriptions of exactly what the Devil intended to do to them when it caught them, had ceased.

“Go ahead, make my day,” Sean growled defiantly into the silence, and then, out of nowhere, an idea came to him. Perhaps it was something he’d read in a book, but from desperation, and lack of anything better to try, he raised the flashlight and shone it full in the Devil’s red eyes.

The creature screamed in agony, and flung its arm up to cover its face, staggering back. Sean didn’t waste a nanosecond, he turned and ran like the devil was at his heels-- which, as a matter of fact, it was. Or soon would be.

“Hold on, Elijah,” he gasped, and Elijah clung to him like a limpet as Sean careened down the trail, Maggie keeping pace at his side. He prayed fervently to whatever deities might be listening that he’d gained them enough time to make it safely inside the ward around the property. Three hundred yards, two hundred yards-- he could hear the Devil crashing after them again-- one hundred yards... Sean could see the lights from the kitchen windows now, and with the finish line in sight, he gained the impetus for a final, desperate burst of speed.

The Devil let out a shriek of frustration so earsplitting and so close that it actually parted the hair on Sean’s head as he barreled out of the pine trees and into the yard.

They’d made it.

Sean didn’t stop running until he was halfway to the house, and well away from the spot where, just beyond the ward, the Devil continued to rant and rage over their narrow escape.

“Jesus, he sounds pissed,” Sean gasped on a sort of hysterical laugh, and then he heard, weak but clear, what had to be the best sound in the entire world: Elijah’s giggle.

And that’s when Sean knew for certain that they really were safe.
Released from the tension of their terrifying confrontation with the Devil, now a fading presence as he retreated into the depths of the pines, Sean became stunningly aware of exactly how cold, sore and tired he was, and how heavy Elijah felt. He had only one goal now: to get them into his Beemer, crank up the heat, and race Elijah to the nearest emergency room.

Gritting his teeth for another effort, Sean set out at a stiff, painful walk across the yard, angling toward the side of the cabin closest to where his car was parked.

“W-where are you g-going?” Elijah whispered.

“To my car. How far is it to the hospital from here?”

Elijah’s reaction to his question was startling. “N-no, Sean,” he said, with surprising strength and an underlying note of fear in his voice. “No h-hospital.”

“Elijah, if you’re worrying about what we’re going to tell them, I’m sure we can come up with a good explanation on the drive over there.” Sean spoke with an assurance he didn’t really feel. He could just imagine what the emergency room staff was going to make of them—both half-clothed and covered in blood, and Elijah with a bullet hole in his shoulder. A gunshot injury would inevitably mean police involvement and a lot of awkward questions that they could answer, at best, with partial truths.
An insidious little voice in Sean’s mind piped up then, and whispered that if the police became involved they would be duty bound to hunt down the bastard who’d shot Elijah, even if Sean had promised not to go after the son of a bitch himself. He felt a grim satisfaction at the thought—but also a twinge of guilt.

But Elijah was shaking his head vehemently, soft hair brushing against Sean’s neck. “We can’t,” he insisted again. “S-Sean, I…” he hesitated, and Sean could hear him swallow hard. “I’m n-not… normal. My b-blood, and other th-things. They’ll f-find out. P-please.”

The little voice was abruptly silenced. Sean didn’t even have to think about it twice. Without another word, he changed direction, moving through the snow toward the mudroom door. Protecting Elijah’s true identity was more important than any desire for revenge—it was more important than anything.

In a night filled with soul-shaking discoveries, Sean made yet one more: there was nothing he wasn’t prepared to do to safeguard this extraordinary young man whom he loved. Nothing.

But still, the unexpected turn of events had his stomach roiling with panic and fear. He’d believed that soon he could turn Elijah over to the capable hands of emergency room surgeons, and now… Oh god, why had he ever dredged up the memory of that old western he and Mack had watched, and the butchery that had passed for surgery then?

“D-Dr. Holm. He knows. C-call him.” After that brief spurt of energy, Elijah’s voice had faded again, becoming the barest thread of a whisper.

Dr. Holm. The man Elijah had told him about, the one who had become a doctor later in life. Sean’s panic eased a little. He wouldn’t be on his own after all, and even if Dr. Holm wasn’t a trauma specialist, he had to have more experience with bullet wounds than Sean-- hell, he could hardly have less. And most important of all, he knew what Elijah was, and Elijah clearly trusted him.

“Okay. Let’s just get you inside and into bed, and I’ll call him.”

Maggie disappeared through the cat flap, and Sean wished he could follow after her. It was awkward as hell getting close enough to grab the doorknob without dropping Elijah or smashing his kneecap into the door. He managed it, though, turning the knob with fingers so numb that he couldn’t even feel the coldness of the brass beneath their pads.

He’d thought the mudroom was cold. But cold was definitely a relative thing, he discovered, for the room was a deliciously warm haven by comparison with outside. Sean kicked off his ruined running shoes, profoundly relieved to be rid of them at last, and crossed to the kitchen door and maneuvered it open.

A rush of warmth embraced him, but it wasn’t simply the temperature. It honest to god felt as if the house itself was welcoming them back. And not only the house, for there was Rocky, out of his nesting box and sitting on the kitchen table as if he was doing an impersonation of a coffeepot, with his tail curled over his back and his front paws held spout-like at his breast. Fred had abandoned the sanctuary of the bathroom and was waiting just inside the door, raised up on his clawed feet with his scrawny orange-brown neck outstretched to its full length.

“H-heyyyy,” Elijah said, as Rocky began to chatter and Fred blinked his tiny red eyes, “I’m h-happy to s-see you, t-too, and d-don’t worry, I’m g-gonna be okay.”

Sean came perilously close to losing it then, especially when Maggie touched noses with Fred and then jumped onto the kitchen table and exchanged the same reassuring greeting with Rocky. But this was no time for emotional displays, so he got hold of himself and headed toward the hall, setting the
mag on the kitchen counter as he passed. It probably ought to be bronzed or put in the Flashlight Hall of Fame, he thought inanely. The sheer ridiculousness of the idea nearly made him laugh out loud, and chased the remnants of tears away.

“All the l-lights are o-on,” Elijah remarked as Sean exited the kitchen, followed by Maggie and Rocky. Yellow light spilled into the hall from every doorway “That’s w-weird.”

“That was me,” Sean apologized. “I didn’t know where you were, and I ran through the house throwing switches.” He didn’t add that he’d been terrified of discovering Elijah’s bloody, dismembered body and whoever or whatever had attacked him, and he’d turned on the lights as much for his own comfort as anything else. But Sean suspected that Elijah understood exactly why he had the house lit up like the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, for he hugged Sean a little tighter.

“My bedroom… you have to t-turn right at the e-end of the hall.”

“I know. I went in there earlier, looking for you.”

“S-sorry about the m-mess.” Elijah sounded mortified.

“Don’t apologize; it’s nice to know you’re only human like the rest of us.” The words slipped out without conscious thought, and if Elijah was mortified by his messiness, Sean was beyond mortified by his tactlessness. Open mouth, insert foot, Astin. “Elijah, I didn’t mean… that is, I… it’s just a saying…”

He heard a peculiar choking sound in his ear, and then Elijah gasped, “Ow. Ow. D-don’t make m-me laugh. H-hurts.”

Elijah was laughing. In spite of everything, he was laughing, and Sean fell ever more deeply under the Woodjin’s spell. He carried Elijah into the bedroom, stepping carefully over the small mountains of CDs, magazines, clothes and books on his way to the bed.

And then at last he was able to set his precious burden down. He turned his back to the bed and bent his knees until Elijah’s bottom met the edge of the mattress. “Okay?” he asked, and Elijah said, “Yeah,” and his arm dropped away. Sean straightened, feeling oddly light and a little bereft at the loss of that warm clasp and the tickle of Elijah’s breath in his ear. But his aching back certainly thanked him, as did his shoulder and arm muscles, which were quivering like dune grass in a nor’easter.

He turned around in the nick of time to catch Elijah before he slumped sideways, utterly worn out. “Hang on, let’s get this coat off you first before you lie down,” he said, steadying him with arms that protested loudly at being put to use again so soon.

Clumsily, for his fingers were prickling with painful pins and needles as the circulation returned to them, he unsnapped the down jacket, then eased it off Elijah’s shoulders and set it aside. The sweatshirt, Sean was relieved to see, was still holding Elijah’s right arm securely in place. He peered closely at the scarf with which he’d bound the wound, but didn’t detect any obvious signs of bleeding showing through. Amazingly, his amateurish bandaging job seemed to have held up.

Still steadying Elijah with one arm, Sean pulled back the comforter and top sheet, and piled the several pillows against the headboard. Then he helped Elijah swing his legs up onto the bed and lie back against them. In the process, the flannel shirt was rucked up around Elijah’s hips, and Sean was forcibly reminded that the young man had neither underwear nor pants on. Not that Sean had any objection to the sight of the nest of dark curls at the juncture of his pale thighs or his soft pink cock--
far from it— but now was no time to be distracted, and he’d discovered that when it came to Elijah, he was eminently distractible. Hell, he could still feel the touch of Elijah’s cold lips on the sensitive spot below his ear, burning like a brand.

“My b-bottom’s frozen. I c-can’t feel it. And as f-for my b-balls,” Elijah joked weakly, “I th-think they’ve g-gone into p-permanent hiding.”

It was on the tip of Sean’s tongue to offer to coax them out of hiding and warm that frozen bottom, but he bit the words back. He’d never shared that kind of teasing, sexual banter with Chris, or anyone else for that matter, but he wanted so badly to share it with Elijah—an Elijah who was in a condition to reciprocate, which most definitely was not now.

**Stick to the practical, Sean.**

“Do you have pajama bottoms or sweats I can get for you?” he asked.

Elijah pointed with his left hand at a sturdy old-fashioned oak dresser against the wall at the far end of the room. Sean went over to it and ransacked the half-opened drawers until he found a pair of plaid flannel pajama bottoms and thick wool socks. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stripped the cold damp socks from Elijah’s feet and replaced them with the warm dry ones. The skin was still icy to the touch, however, and Sean wished he knew what the signs of frostbite were. Was there something he should be doing besides covering Elijah’s feet with dry socks? *You're likely to do more harm than good, playing at doctor. Let the real doctor handle it.*

Setting that worry aside, he helped Elijah into the pajama bottoms. As he slid them inch by inch up Elijah’s slender, muscular legs, Sean noticed a thin jagged scar above his left knee, and another longer scar halfway up his right thigh; he had a pretty good idea how Elijah had gotten those scars, and wondered how many others he had, and how often Dr. Holm had been summoned in the middle of the night to tend his wounds. Farther up, just above his right hip, Elijah had a small black tattoo that Sean suspected was related somehow to the silver ring he wore, for the writing appeared to be the same. There was so much he didn’t know about Elijah yet, and he burned with curiosity, wanting to know *everything*. But there would time for that later. There had to be.

“F-feels better already,” Elijah whispered gratefully when the pajama bottoms were in place, and this time Sean was certain he wasn’t lying.

“Good.” Sean pulled the sheet and comforter up to Elijah’s waist. “Now I need a phone so I can call Dr. Holm.”

“There’s a p-portable phone in the family room. Speed d-dial is 4.” The hitch and stammer in Elijah’s voice were nearly gone now that he was warming up, but his eyes looked fever bright and there was a hectic flush on his cheeks. It might simply be the exposure of his chilled skin to the warm air inside the house, but the tide of panic and fear that had briefly receded rushed back again.

Sean tried to disguise his worry, however, and stood up, saying easily, “I’ll be back in a few. Hang tight.”

He had taken only two steps toward the door when a gasp from Elijah halted him and he whirled around, heart in his throat. “What’s wrong?”

“My f-feet. Oh Sean, your feet.”

Sean glanced down; to his surprise, both his feet were streaked with blood. The skin had been rubbed raw in a number of places by the damp leather of his running shoes, and between the cold
and his worry about Elijah, he hadn’t even felt it.

“It’s nothing,” he said reassuringly. “Doesn’t hurt a bit.” Which was an outright lie—for of course as soon as he was made aware of the state of them, his feet started to sting like a son of a bitch, as if they’d been waiting in line behind his back and arms for their turn to complain.

Elijah knew he was lying. “It’s all my fault,” he whispered.

“Hey, if a few blisters are the worst I have to deal with after what we just went through, then I’m damned lucky,” Sean replied. “I want you to stop worrying, okay? Now I’m going to call Dr. Holm.”

But he made certain not to limp until he was well out of the room.

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The phone was on the desk next to Elijah’s computer. As Sean removed it from the charger, he realized that he had absolutely no idea what time it was, or how early he’d be waking the doctor. He hit the speed dial number Elijah’d given him, and glanced at his Rolex; the crystal had been badly scratched somewhere along the line, but he could still make out the time: 4:57 a.m. It was nearly morning. Incongruously, it seemed to Sean both no time at all and forever since he’d woken up with that lancing pain in his shoulder and arm and known that Elijah was in trouble.

Please be home, he prayed as the phone on the other end began to ring. Please don't be out on another emergency…

To his intense relief, it was answered on the third ring. A woman’s voice, husky with sleep, said, “Hello?”

“I’d like to speak to Dr. Holm, please. It’s an emergency.”

“Ian,” Sean heard the woman say, “it’s for you. He says it’s an emergency.” There was a series of rustling sounds—obviously the couple was still in bed.

“Dr. Holm speaking.” The doctor’s voice was crisp and no nonsense, even at this early hour, and immediately instilled in Sean a feeling of confidence.

“Dr. Holm, this is Sean Astin. I’m a friend of Elijah Wood. I apologize for waking you, but Elijah has been in an accident—he was shot in the right shoulder. We’re at his house now, and he asked me to call you.” Sean hoped the doctor wasn’t going to waste time subjecting him to an inquisition, that he’d said enough to allay any immediate concerns the man might have about this stranger who was calling him.

Apparently he had. Dr. Holm asked no unnecessary questions, just barked out: “Keep pressure on the wound and keep Elijah quiet. Don’t let him move. I’ll be there as fast as I can—about half an hour.”

“Doctor,” Sean said quickly before Ian Holm could hang up, “there’s something else I need to tell you. The Quaker Bridge—Elijah says it’s collapsed into the river. He wants to be sure the appropriate authorities are notified as soon as possible.”

“I’ll take care of it. Thirty minutes, Mr. Astin.”

There was a click and then a dial tone.
Sean disconnected the phone, but took it with him as he retraced his footsteps to the bedroom. He noticed Fred making his stately, ponderous way down the hall, and detoured to pick him up. “Don’t tell the hare you pulled a Rosie Ruiz, okay?” Fred only blinked his tiny red eyes. He was probably sick and tired of tortoise and hare jokes, thought Sean, or possibly the reference to Rosie Ruiz was a bit obscure for a box turtle, even one as wise as Fred.

When he entered the bedroom, turtle in hand, he found Elijah being watched over by Maggie, who had climbed into his lap, and Rocky, who was curled up on the young man’s left shoulder. Elijah was awake; when he saw Sean, he smiled sleepily. “Hey,” he whispered.

“Hey.”

Jesus, Sean thought, Elijah looked so small and vulnerable lying there. His complexion was chalk white beneath the spots of color burning on his cheeks. The half-hour wait for the doctor suddenly seemed like an eternity. “How’s your bottom doing?” he asked with deliberate lightness.

“I can feel it again,” Elijah whispered. “That’s pretty good, huh?”

“Yeah, it is,” Sean smiled down at him. “I got through to Dr. Holm. He’s on his way.” Elijah’s mouth opened, so Sean quickly added, “Not to worry: I told him about the bridge and he said he’d take care of it.”

“Thanks,” Elijah said, and relaxed against the pillows.

“Fred here wants to join the party,” Sean remarked, holding up the turtle, whose scaled legs were moving as if he was swimming through the air. He started to set Fred on the floor, but Elijah said, “On the bed. He wants to see.”

Considering what the doctor was probably going to do to Elijah, Sean thought Fred might come to regret that decision, but he set the turtle down on the cream and gold striped comforter, and stood the phone on the nightstand. It hit him then that there was nothing else he had to do until Dr. Holm arrived. And just like that, exhaustion crashed over him like a wave, and he thought longingly of lying down on the bed beside Elijah, closing his eyes and…

“Sean?”

With a start he realized that he actually had closed his eyes, and was almost literally asleep on his feet. “Yeah?”

“Please,” Elijah urged him, “sit down. You look so tired.” His overly bright blue eyes were searching Sean’s face, taking in every line and crease and shadow.

But Sean shook his head. “If I sit down, I’ll fall asleep for sure, and I don’t want to make a bad impression on Dr. Holm. Well,” he huffed a small rueful laugh, “any worse of an impression than I’m already bound to make, looking like this. How about I clear a path to the bed for him instead?”

Sean needed some way to keep busy until the doctor arrived, and the room was rather a minefield to traverse.

When Elijah made no objection, Sean moved to the end of the bed and retrieved the down jacket. He draped it carefully over the back of a wheeled desk chair, and then turned his attention to the piles on the floor. Ignoring the loud protests of his strained back muscles, he bent and picked up a lopsided stack of plastic CD cases. To his chagrin, Sean didn’t recognize a single one of the album titles, and determined to start getting himself up to speed on the music front as soon as possible. Looking around for a free space, he discovered one on top of the dresser beside an iHome stereo with an iPod
plugged into it. He set the CDs down, thinking that Elijah definitely liked to have his music everywhere around him.

Elijah said softly, “You won’t make a bad impression on Dr. Ian.”

“If he doesn’t give me the third degree, I’ll be very disappointed in him,” Sean replied. He gathered up an armful of wrinkled tee shirts, boxers, and jeans with their legs inside out that were lying on the floor next to the dresser. “Where do you want me to put these?”

“Hamper in the corner,” Elijah said then added with a slight frown, “Why should Dr. Ian give you the third degree?”

“Because he doesn’t know me from Adam, and I’m the one who called to tell him you’d been shot,” Sean said, lifting the lid of the wicker hamper and dumping the clothes into it. He fixed Elijah with a serious look. “He has to be wondering how I’m involved, and ready to kick my ass or worse if he discovers I’m somehow responsible. I’d expect no less of anyone who cares about you.”

A mulish expression that Paco might have envied appeared on Elijah’s face. “Sean, I won’t allow him—”

But Sean quickly interjected, “No, that’s as it should be. I’m a total stranger to him, and your secret is much too important to trust to just anyone. Look, no more talking, Elijah: doctor’s orders. Dr. Holm said you should be quiet and rest.” He grinned. “Besides, I’m a New Yorker. There’s nothing he can dish out that I can’t take.”

“Tough guy, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s me. Mr. Tough Guy. Now shaddup wouldja?” Sean put his best New York-ese on, and was rewarded by a smile.

Warm, fuzzy sensations weren’t something Sean was accustomed to feeling, but the way Elijah jumped to his defense was kind of like being wrapped in that comforter and hugged, he thought. The unaccustomed sensation stayed with him as he moved around the room, his heart beating a little faster with the hope that he might soon become intimately familiar with this place. Painted a soft fern green with white trim, it was slightly smaller than the room in which he’d stayed, but the sturdy oak four-poster bed was definitely large enough for two—with plenty of room left over for Maggie, Rocky, Fred and who knew what other animals. Funny, considering he’d never had a pet of any kind, the idea didn’t disturb him in the least. But then, he’d fallen in love with a guy who could turn into a white stag, hadn't he?

The other bedroom must be the one that had belonged to Elijah’s parents. The beautiful double wedding ring quilt on the bed was obviously a treasured family heirloom. Sean might not have known Elijah long, but it seemed very much in character for him not to lay claim to the master bedroom after he became legal owner of the house, but leave it in readiness for his mother’s visits—or for lost travelers whom he rescued in the pines.

Wrestling with a stack of slippery magazines, Sean wondered again at the fascinating dichotomy that was Elijah Wood: a young gay man into movies, music and the latest technological toys, but also a serious-minded and dedicated Woodjin who was an integral strand in the warp and weft of the Pine Barrens. Cheek by jowl on the wall with another of Hannah Wood’s delicately rendered watercolors was a framed photograph of the Smashing Pumpkins autographed by the band members, while the bookshelves that lined one wall were filled with an eclectic mixture of Rough music guides, books on film history, childhood classics such as My Side of the Mountain, The Incredible Journey and
Ring of Bright Water, and anthologies of gay short fiction.

There was a rectangular spot on the wall opposite the bed where the fern green paint appeared a shade lighter. To judge from its size and shape, Sean was certain that the drawing of the white stag that Elijah had given him must have hung there, where Elijah could see it first thing in the morning and last thing before he fell asleep.

Yet he gave it to me freely, believing that I wasn't ever coming back.

The immensity of Elijah’s generosity staggered Sean.

He started putting the issues of *NME* in order by date, but then paused to glance over at Elijah, something he felt compelled to do every few minutes or so. He couldn’t help himself. Like a miracle they’d both survived those terrifying hours in the woods, but only by constantly reassuring himself of Elijah’s presence in the room, safe from further harm, could Sean really believe it.

A gleam of blue like the flash of a bluebird's wings told him that a sleepy-eyed Elijah was watching him, too, as if he sought the same reassurance. He was slowly stroking Maggie’s rust and black fur; the rumble of her purr was loud in the quiet room. Rocky appeared to be sound asleep, his tail was curled around him and his head hidden under the collar of the flannel shirt.

It occurred to Sean that he wasn’t the only one who would have to make adjustments, if things turned out the way he fervently desired, and he hoped Elijah’s animals weren’t going to mind sharing their bed with him. Maggie looked at him just then, and he could have sworn there was amusement in her amber eyes, as if she knew exactly what was in his mind.

“You're smiling. Why?” Elijah asked curiously, tilting his head to the side in that way that Sean found so utterly charming.

He hadn't realized that he was. “Just thinking about Maggie. She’s a remarkable cat.”

"She is remarkable,” Elijah agreed, looking down at Maggie with love and affection, and the sound of her satisfied purring grew louder and her eyes narrowed to amber slits.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Elijah the real reason for that unconscious smile, but a sudden superstitious fear came over him. Elijah may be safe from the Devil, but he’s not out of danger yet. Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?

His gaze returned to that pale rectangle on the wall. Although he knew Elijah should be resting and gathering his strength for what was coming, Sean couldn't let another moment pass without bringing up the gift. If anything happened… *Don’t think like that. Elijah’s young, strong and healthy. He’s going to be okay.*

“Elijah,” he said abruptly, and he was no longer smiling now, "I haven’t had a chance yet to thank you for your gift. To say that I was floored that you'd give me one of your great-grandmother’s drawings is an understatement, but then to discover it was a drawing of the white stag…” He paused. “I’m usually not at a loss for words-- quite the opposite, in fact, as you’ve probably noticed-- but I honestly don’t know what to say. You shouldn’t have, but… thank you.”

“Please don't thank me.” Elijah’s voice was low but intense. “Sean, do you have any idea what it meant to me when you said that you felt lucky to have met the white stag? Lucky-- despite being chased and nearly caught by the Devil?” His throat worked and he appeared to be having as much difficulty finding words as Sean was. "You can't imagine…"

“I think I can, actually.” It would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise, when Elijah was lying there
with a bullet hole in his shoulder, the victim of an ungrateful bastard who couldn’t recognize the white stag for what he was: the guardian sent to save his unworthy ass. How many other times had Elijah had been hurt through ignorance, prejudice or fear? “Although,” he went on soberly, ”it’s difficult for me to understand how people can be so blind.”

“But there are still those with eyes to see, like you. I meant what I said to you that morning, you know. You’re a very special man, Sean.”

In an instant, Sean was transported back to the starlit clearing in the pines, and the wonder and magic of their first meeting. As they had then, so, too, now did Elijah’s eyes-- the stag’s eyes-- hold him captive, and Sean felt again that profound sense of connection. Only now he understood that the connection wasn’t one-sided, as he’d thought, and that it was as special to Elijah as it was to him. Sean sent up a silent prayer: Please let me be worthy of it. Let me be worthy of him.

It was Maggie who broke the spell. She sat up suddenly, her ears at attention, and uttered a low mrrrow. Sean hastily shoved the magazines into an empty spot on the bookshelves then glanced at his watch: exactly half an hour had passed since he’d spoken to Dr. Holm.

“I’ll go let the doctor in,” he said quietly, and the prayer he sent up this time was of a different kind.

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To Sean’s surprise, Maggie jumped down from the bed and accompanied him to the front door. Then he remembered Elijah telling him that Dr. Holm was the one who had rescued her as a kitten and given her to Elijah. Of course she’d be anxious to greet such an old friend. But whatever the reason, he welcomed her intrepid presence at his side while he waited to open the door for Dr. Holm, who was retrieving a bag from the back seat of his black Ford Explorer.

Sean had dined with kings and queens, shaken the hands of prime ministers and presidents, but rarely had he been as nervous as was about meeting this man for whom Elijah obviously cared so much. He had a suspicion that no amount of money or social status would impress Ian Holm. Relying instead on his own shaky personal merit was nearly as terrifying a proposition for Sean as facing the Devil in the woods.

Dr. Holm looked to be in his early seventies and he had a shock of white bed hair that was standing up every which way. He was as brisk and no-nonsense in person as he was on the phone, and shook Sean’s hand firmly as they introduced themselves to each other. Shrewd blue eyes took in Sean’s haggard face, filthy wrinkled clothes and blood-streaked feet, and Sean wondered what conclusions he was drawing. The doctor’s salt-and-pepper eyebrows raised, and he said, “I’m going to want to take a look at those feet, Mr. Astin.”

“But you’ve seen to Elijah,” Sean said firmly, nerves vanishing in the face of his concern for Elijah.

“Of course,” Dr. Holm agreed. He unwound a red wool scarf from his neck, removed his navy duffle coat, and dropped both on the seat of a chair. Judging by the sloppily buttoned green cardigan and black turtleneck he wore, both of which appeared to be inside out, he must’ve dressed in an almighty hurry. Dr. Holm gave Maggie, who had been winding around his legs, a brief pat and hello, and said, “Let’s go.”

The doctor led the way to Elijah’s bedroom, moving through the house with the ease of long familiarity. Studying that upright figure striding in front of him, every instinct Sean had honed during years of business dealings shouted that Dr. Holm was to be trusted. But his eyes were drawn to the medical bag the older man was carrying. Black, bulky and old-fashioned, it inevitably had Sean
remembering that Western again, and his heart sank as images of rusty medical instruments, jars of leeches and bottles of applejack passed through his mind. Then he felt ashamed, for that was precisely the kind of stereotyping the people in the pines had been battling for centuries.

Predictably, the first words out of Elijah’s mouth when they entered the room were, “Dr. Ian, I’m so sorry for dragging you out of bed.” Sean wondered if Elijah ever thought of himself first.

“I’ll bear up under the loss of an hour’s sleep, Elijah,” the doctor said equably, going to the bed and setting his bag down on it. He didn’t appear at all surprised by the sight of the gray squirrel sleeping on Elijah’s shoulder, or the box turtle lumbering slowly across the covers. But he said, “I’m afraid this little fellow is going to have to move.” He crooked his arm and held it out. “Come along, Rocky.”

Sean was secretly chagrined when Rocky yawned, uncurled and climbed onto the doctor’s forearm, and then scurried into his nesting box when Dr. Holm held his arm up to the opening. It seemed ridiculous to crave the approval of a squirrel, but there it was: he wanted Rocky to like and accept him, too. Rocky’s beady dark eyes appeared in the opening. He stared at Sean and his expression seemed to say, "The jury's still out on you."

The doctor then turned his attention to Elijah. “All right, young man, let’s see what you’ve done to yourself this time.” With deft fingers he unbuttoned the flannel shirt and pushed it back, and then undid the knotted sleeves of the sweatshirt and removed it.

So much blood. Dry and flaking or slightly tacky, it covered most of Elijah’s right arm, chest and ribcage, stark against the ivory pallor of his skin. Sean had forgotten exactly how much blood there’d been. Elijah had told him that his blood wasn’t ‘normal’. What did that mean exactly? And what if he needed a transfusion? Was there even a compatible blood type for someone like him?

“Hmm.”

Dr. Holm was frowning at the makeshift bandage, and embarrassment temporarily displaced Sean’s worry. “I’m the one who bandaged Elijah’s shoulder,” he admitted. “I apologize for the very unprofessional job, Doctor.”

“Not at all,” the doctor replied mildly, his brow smoothing out. “When I was serving in Korea, long before I became a doctor, there weren’t always medics or adequate medical supplies on hand when someone was injured. But as long as what we cobbled together did the job, that was all that mattered--and as there’s no evidence of continued bleeding, I’d say you did the job, Mr. Astin.”

“Of course he did,” Elijah chimed in. There was a hint of challenge in his voice, as if he was daring the doctor to disagree.

Dr. Holm’s eyebrows elevated again, but he made no comment, only reached for Elijah’s wrist, still cradled against his breast. “Give me your arm. But easy now.”

Elijah obediently allowed the doctor to straighten out his arm and gently move it. But his teeth were sunk hard into his lower lip, and he avoided looking at Sean, as if determined not to let him see how much pain the movement was causing him.

Oh Elijah, you don’t have to be brave for me. Impulsively, Sean sat down on the bed across from Dr. Holm and held out his hand. With a grateful look, Elijah curled his fingers around Sean’s; the grip of that work-roughened hand was reassuringly strong, and Sean realized how much he needed that physical connection between them, too.
Maggie was sitting on the end of the bed, meticulously grooming her front legs, still slightly damp from the long trek through the snowy woods; she ceased her ablutions and fixed her great eyes on Elijah. Rocky was peering down from his perch over the headboard, and Fred’s wedge-shaped head with its hooked nose rose out of the coverlet like a tiny periscope from a cream-and-gold colored sea. It was a strange, almost fantastical, scene, and one Sean would never forget as long as he lived.

Having expected the doctor to examine Elijah’s injury immediately, Sean was surprised when, after that cursory glance at the bandage, Dr. Holm ignored it. Instead, he undid the clasp on his medical bag and took out a white electronic device that looked to Sean like an oversized mp3 player, with a LCD display and a set of headphones attached.

“What is that?” he asked curiously.

“A hand-held Doppler ultrasound machine,” Dr. Holm said as he removed a white plastic tube of conducting gel from the bag. “They’re mainly used for fetal heart monitoring, but in this case I’ll be using it to measure Elijah’s pulse and determine the extent of the damage caused by the bullet. It’s important to determine whether he has adequate blood flow in his arm before deciding what course of treatment to pursue.”

Dr. Holm squeezed a dollop of clear gel on the head of the Doppler machine, set aside the tube and then placed the headphones over his ears. With the head of the machine pressed against Elijah’s wrist, he turned it on and listened intently for a time, eyes closed in concentration, before shifting the head to the pulse on the inside of Elijah’s elbow and listening again.

When he appeared satisfied that he’d gotten whatever information he needed, he removed the headphones, and shut off the Doppler machine, but to Sean’s disappointment offered no more than a very vague and uninformative ‘hmm’.

What exactly does ‘hmm’ mean? Sean wanted to demand, but he had a feeling the doctor wouldn’t appreciate a litany of questions right then. He’d learned enough during his father’s time in the hospital to recognize when it was best to allow a doctor to work without interruption, no matter how frustrating it was for someone like Sean, whose native curiosity inclined him to ask question after question.

The remainder of the examination was quick but thorough, and Dr. Holm’s poker face remained entirely uninformative. But Elijah’s complete faith in the older man was obvious. He never questioned anything the doctor asked him to do, even when there was discomfort involved, as there was when he had to open and close his right hand several times under Dr. Holm’s eagle eye.

“Is there any numbness or tingling in your fingers, Elijah?” he asked, and then added in the tone of one who had long experience of dealing with the stoical young man, “Be truthful now.”

“No numbness,” Elijah replied evasively.

“But there’s some tingling?” Dr. Holm prompted.

“A little,” he admitted. “But not very much. Honestly.” He hesitated. “When it first happened, there was a sort of grinding sensation in my shoulder whenever I moved it, but since I transformed, it seems to be gone.”

“Elijah!” The exclamation was sharp as the crack of a whip, startling in its intensity. Then the doctor seemed to catch himself; more quietly he added, as if he hadn’t had that brief loss of control, “So the grinding sensation is gone? You’re sure of that?”
It took a bewildered Sean a moment to figure out what had just happened. Then the light dawned. But of course—Dr. Holm still had no idea that Sean knew the truth about Elijah. He was understandably concerned that Elijah was on the verge of revealing his secret.

“It’s all right, Dr. Ian,” Elijah said calmly. “Sean knows about me. He knows that I’m the white stag. We can talk freely in front of him.”

“Indeed?” Those piercing blue eyes widened with surprise, and Sean had a feeling that very little surprised Ian Holm. But the look he gave Sean then was unmistakable: *You and I, it said, are going to have a little talk later.* He returned the look steadily.

“You can trust him,” Elijah insisted, his *gaze* going from one man to the other. “Sean’s the bravest person I’ve ever met. He faced down the Devil and saved my life.” Maggie spoke up then, with a supportive *meow*.

“Don’t listen to Elijah, Dr. Holm,” Sean said, flushing. “Or Maggie. I was scared out of my mind.”

“If you weren’t scared out of your mind, coming face to face with that monster, I’d question your sanity,” Dr. Holm said dryly, but his face was still troubled.

“Sean was amazing,” Elijah enthused. “I wish you could have seen him.”

*Go ahead. Make my day.* The words flashed into Sean’s mind, and he nearly groaned aloud. Had he really said—no *growled*—those words, as if he’d been channeling Schwarzenegger? His eyes met Elijah’s, and they were brimful of tender laughter. He knew exactly what Sean was thinking. A thrill ran through Sean at the intimacy of the moment, of having this private memory to share with Elijah, to laugh over later—their very first.

The sound of a throat being cleared interrupted their silent exchange. “Well, what’s done is done,” Dr. Holm said in a voice that couldn’t have indicated more clearly that, the support of Elijah and Maggie notwithstanding, he wasn’t yet ready to embrace Sean and welcome him into the piney family.

*No wonder he and Rocky are pals,* The irrepressible thought popped into his mind.

“Let’s return to the matter at hand, shall we?” the doctor continued. “You’re absolutely certain that there's no grinding sensation left, Elijah?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Elijah replied, moving his arm a little as if to prove it.

“The bullet might have shifted during your transformation,” Dr. Holm said thoughtfully.

“Then it’s definitely still in there?” Sean asked, relieved to have his own conclusion confirmed. At least he hadn’t overlooked anything obvious.

“Oh yes, without a doubt. Well, before I can take care of that wound, I need to disinfect my hands and get some supplies together.” Dr. Holm took a bottle of surgical scrub from his medical bag. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He gave Elijah a mock stern look. “No getting up and dancing around the room while I’m gone, young man. Mr. Astin, keep an eye on him.”

No one had ever looked less like getting up and dancing than Elijah, but Sean said lightly, “I’ll do my best.”

Elijah sank back against the pillows with a sigh as the doctor left the room. He was clearly glad of this brief respite. Sean sat holding his hand, stroking the edge of his bloodstained thumb along the
backs of his fingers in a soothing motion, over and over.

“Do you dance around the room?” he asked softly. There would be time later to talk about Dr. Holm’s reaction to the news that Sean knew the truth about the Woodjin.

Elijah turned his head on the pillow. His face was drawn with pain, but he summoned a smile. “Sometimes we do-- Maggie and Rocky and I, that is,” he clarified. “Fred isn’t exactly built for dancing. Dr. Ian caught us once. He likes to tease me about it.”

The mental image of Elijah dancing with his animals was charming, yet at the same time strangely sad. Elijah had been deprived of the sorts of pastimes a young man his age would normally enjoy, such as nights out dancing with friends… “I’d love to see that.”

“It’d be more fun if you danced with us.”

“I’m not a very good dancer, but I’m game to try.”

“Then it’s a deal. Besides, you don’t know from ‘not very good’ until you’ve seen Rocky dance.” There was a burst of indignant-sounding chattering from above them; Elijah’s weary smile widened until it was a fair approximation of the infectious grin that could light up an entire room. “Rocky doesn’t like it when I insult his dancing. If he wasn’t so worried about me, he’d be dropping acorns on my head.”

Sean almost said the words then, almost blurted them out.

I love you, Elijah.

He might have, even though the timing was all wrong and it was much too soon, if Dr. Holm hadn’t chosen that exact moment to return to the room, carrying a plastic basin in hands that were now encased in latex examination gloves.

But reality returned with the doctor, and worry as well.

“All right, round two, Elijah. Let’s get a look at that bullet hole,” said Dr. Holm, sitting down on the bed again with the basin on his lap. It was half-filled with what looked to Sean like plain old soapy water but it had a strong medicinal smell.

The folded tee shirt was crusted partially to the wound, but Dr. Holm dampened the fabric with water from a squirt bottle until it came free without causing any further trauma. The white cotton was nearly soaked through with blood, but it had done its job: the bleeding was all but stopped. Only a trace of reddish fluid showed at the bottom edge of the bullet hole, pooling there but not spilling over.

Revealed in the brighter light of the bedroom, the ugly wound looked uglier than ever, the edges puckered and blackened and the skin surrounding it already discolored with bright purple and blue bruising. Dr. Holm took out the penlight again and shone it on the hole, doing more of that maddening and uninformative hmm-ing as he bent close, nose almost touching the blood-streaked skin.

Finally he switched off the penlight and sat back. “You’re a very lucky young man, Elijah,” he pronounced. “The bullet managed to avoid doing any significant damage, a minor miracle considering all the vascular structures that go through your shoulder. You’ll carry that piece of metal around for the rest of your life as a souvenir, but once the wound is healed, it shouldn’t cause you any further trouble. I’ll clean it and dress it, and in a couple of weeks, you should be pretty meddlin’ smart-- provided you don’t overdo it, of course.” He gave Elijah a stern look.
“But, I don’t understand,” Sean said, and he wasn’t referring to the doctor’s pineland colloquialism. “Do you mean you’re not going to remove the bullet? But it can’t possibly be safe to leave it in there, can it?”

On one level, he was more than relieved to hear the doctor’s optimistic prognosis and realize that he wasn’t going to have to help re-enact that awful scenario from the western. But relief was counterbalanced by worry that Dr. Holm was making a huge mistake, one that might cost Elijah his life through infection or other complications.

“You can do more harm than good trying to remove a bullet, especially in the shoulder,” Dr. Holm explained patiently. “Even the most skilled surgeons these days only do so if there is sufficient cause. In Elijah’s case, it would be foolhardy to attempt it and risk making matters worse.”

Sean’s continuing doubt must have been showing on his face, for the doctor went on in a testy voice, “Whether you believe me or not, Mr. Astin, it’s the truth. Even a doctor in the Pine Barrens can manage to be conversant with the latest medical advances, you know. I gave up digging bullets out with dull knives many years ago.”

“Dr. Ian.” Elijah spoke up then. His voice was quiet, but the reproach in it was unmistakable. “That wasn’t fair. Sean isn’t like that.”

This was the Woodjin speaking now, not Elijah, and surprising as it was to see this new facet of his personality, one that Sean had not suspected existed, Dr. Holm’s reaction was even more surprising. His eyes dropped before the young man’s unyielding blue gaze. “The Woodjin is right; that wasn’t fair, Mr. Astin. Please accept my apologies. Old habits die hard, and as you’ve probably noticed, we have a tendency to be suspicious of foreigners here.”

“No apology is necessary, Dr. Holm,” Sean assured him. “You have some justice on your side; I confess that when I saw your medical bag there, I started wondering what you were carrying inside it.”

“This thing?” Dr. Holm actually smiled, his face creasing into lines that showed he wasn’t always as dour as he had appeared thus far. “I suppose it is rather old-fashioned, come to think of it. But although leeches still have their place in a doctor’s toolkit, I have no plans to take any more blood from Elijah. He’s lost quite enough already.” Still smiling, he tore open a paper packet containing a surgical sponge, and dipped it in the basin.

“Leeches?” Just the thought of those disgusting-looking creatures latching onto Elijah’s smooth skin and sucking his blood made him shudder with horror, like Humphrey Bogart in…

“The African Queen,” Elijah murmured, as if he’d been reading Sean’s mind. “Great movie, but it gave leeches a bad name.”

“Elijah, please don’t tell me you’re president of the Save the Leeches Society, or expect me to join it if you are. Even for you I won’t do that,” said Sean, hoping to divert Elijah’s attention from what Dr. Holm was doing. The doctor had started sponging the blood from around the wound, and though he was being as careful as possible, even the slightest touch on the torn and bruised skin was making Elijah wince.

Elijah managed to summon a small laugh, and Dr. Holm gave Sean a quick, approving look: his first, and Sean valued it. But by the time the blood was cleaned away, the water in the basin had turned pink, and Elijah was no longer laughing but drawn and paler than ever. Beads of perspiration had appeared on his forehead, and his blunt nails were digging into Sean’s flesh, adding crescent-shaped white marks to the collection of scrapes and bruises that already covered his hands.
“Sorry,” Elijah apologized when he realized what he was doing, and relaxed his grip.

“Hush, it’s nothing. If I could, I’d take all the pain for you,” Sean replied quietly.

“Sean…”

Dr. Holm’s keen glance went from one man to the other. But he only said, “Lean forward, Elijah. I still have to flush out the wound.”

Obediently, Elijah leaned forward while Dr. Holm prepared a large syringe, filling it with saline solution from another bottle.

“Mr. Astin, I could use your help. If you wouldn’t mind supporting Elijah… I’m sorry, Elijah, this will cause you some discomfort, but it’s imperative that the inside of the wound be as clean as possible to prevent infection.”

Sean moved closer to Elijah’s left side and slid an arm around his narrow waist, thinking this was definitely not the way he had envisioned holding Elijah for the first time. He could smell the familiar scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses, the scents that were uniquely Elijah, but they were subdued and overlain by the sickly copper tang of blood and the medicinal smell of the soap the doctor had been using. The smooth muscles beneath Sean’s arm were tense as Elijah braced himself for what was coming.

“Here we go.” Dr. Holm depressed the plunger on the syringe, and Elijah’s entire body jerked as the saline entered the wound. With a choked whimper of pain, Elijah turned his head, burying his flushed face in the crook of Sean’s neck. He was trembling violently. Sean tightened his hold, and whispered into his hair, “It’s okay, it’s okay. It’ll be over soon.”

But it wasn’t over nearly soon enough to suit Sean. A stream of foamy red fluid flowed from the bullet hole into the basin as Dr. Holm continued to flush out the wound, refilling the syringe several times. Even though there was no alternative, it still hurt like hell to hold Elijah this way, helpless to do anything to ease his suffering. The fact that Elijah refused to make a sound only made it worse.

“Nearly done, Elijah,” Dr. Holm said, grim-faced. Then, a few moments later, “There. That should do it.”

Elijah slumped limply against Sean. Dr. Holm set the basin aside and then carefully dried the area around the wound. From the depths of the medical bag, which was beginning to seem to Sean like some magician’s trick hat, he produced a glass jar. When he unscrewed the lid, the pungent smell that filled the air was immediately familiar to Sean. It was the same blue-green salve that Elijah had put on Sean’s scratches. Dr. Holm spread a thin layer around the edges of hole and just inside it. Elijah was so worn out by this point that he didn’t even flinch.

“We don’t suture wounds like this,” Dr. Holm commented as he covered the bullet hole with a large sterile pad and began winding gauze over it with quick, expert motions. “They need to be able to drain. The last thing you want to do is close the hole and trap bacteria in there.” He followed the gauze with an Ace bandage, and last of all placed Elijah’s arm in a simple cotton sling. “Help Elijah lie back now,” he directed.

Sean did, although he would have been content to keep holding Elijah indefinitely. The warm weight of his body, the way he fit against Sean’s side, felt so perfect, so right.

“I’m going to check out the rest of you,” the doctor said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

“Oh joy… I… can hardly… wait.” Elijah’s voice was slurred with exhaustion.
Dr. Holm chuckled. “This won’t take long, I promise.” He was as good as his word. He anointed a few scrapes and scratches with the salve, and was able to reassure Sean that there was nothing seriously wrong with Elijah’s feet. “All done,” he pronounced, pulling the sheets and comforter up around Elijah again. “I’d like to get a dish of that herb tea into you, though, before you fall asleep.”

“You aren’t going to put Elijah on antibiotics?” Sean asked.

“We tried that experiment once when Elijah was a child. The damn things nearly killed him. No, Mr. Astin, for the Woodjin the old ways are still the best ways,” Dr. Holm said.

Sean recalled the nearly empty medicine cabinet in Elijah’s bathroom, and one more small mystery was explained. He didn’t know much about herbs or folk medicine, but mentally added both to the ever-growing list of things he would need to learn if he was going to share a life with Elijah. He wasn’t going to sit helplessly by again while someone else took care of Elijah’s hurts.

"I can make the tea," Sean offered as a first step. "I know where it's kept."


"I intend to take care of them, Elijah. Tell you what," the doctor said, as he stripped off the gloves and put them in a plastic bag along with the other trash, and then began to pack up his things. "Mr. Astin and I will go along to the kitchen, and I can clean up his feet there and he can make you your tea. I’ll be by a little later to check up on you, but I have to do my rounds first and you have to get some rest." He snapped the bag shut and smiled down at Elijah. "Will that satisfy our Woodjin?"

Elijah nodded, and held up his uninjured arm. The doctor bent to receive a warm hug around the neck and a whispered, "My blessing on you, Dr. Ian, and thank you."

"The best thanks you can give me," Dr. Holm replied gruffly, straightening, "is to stay in that bed and rest."

"I'll try."

"I expect you to do more than try, young man. Maggie? You know what you have to do.” The cat got up and padded soft-footed across the bed to settle firmly on Elijah’s lap. “Would you mind carrying my bag, Mr. Astin, so I can take this basin?”

“Not at all.” Sean picked it up, and his eyes met Elijah’s. In another of those wordless moments of communication, he could tell exactly what Elijah was thinking: You look good holding that.

It felt good, too.

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Sean expected Dr. Holm to start cross-examining him the moment they stepped out the door. But the doctor said nothing until they entered the kitchen, and then only uttered a curt, “Have a seat.”

Sean set the doctor’s medical bag down and sunk wearily into a chair. He wondered if he should initiate the conversation, but he simply couldn’t summon the energy. Instead, he rested his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, trying and failing to suppress a jaw-breaking yawn. God, he would give anything for a shower, he thought, a long, long, long hot one. And then a bed and some sleep-- no, lots of sleep.

He gazed blearily out the picture window, surprised to see that it was growing light outside: the sky
over the pines was no longer impenetrable black, but pewter gray. Dimly, he could make out the shapes of birds fluttering eagerly around the feeders, and hear Paco’s distinctive bray from the barn. It must be nearly time to feed the animals. Someone would have to take care of that—no matter what, they couldn’t go hungry, especially in this cold weather—and he supposed that that someone would have to be him, because he sure as hell wasn’t going to let Elijah do it. A shower and sleep would definitely have to wait.

There was a hiss as the gas burner on the stove caught and a metallic clink as Dr. Holm set the kettle on to boil. Sean turned his gaze back to the doctor, who was scooping herbs into the blue willow teapot. So much for him making the tea, he thought ruefully. There was already a pair of mugs on the counter, and Sean hoped that the second mug was meant for him. He could use something hot to drink.

Dr. Holm had emptied the basin and rinsed it, but now filled it again and added soap. Then he carried it over and set it on the floor by Sean’s bare, bloody feet. “Set your feet in there,” he directed. Sean did. The warmth of the water on his still-chilly feet was welcome, but the sting of it in the raw, abraded flesh made him let out an involuntary hiss of pain. He was glad Elijah wasn’t there to hear it, and grateful to Dr. Holm for suggesting they remove to the kitchen.

“You did quite a number on your feet,” Dr. Holm remarked. He was rummaging in his bag again.

“Running around the woods in wet shoes without socks probably wasn’t very wise,” Sean commented.

The doctor knelt by the basin and lifted one of Sean’s feet. Holding it gently, he examined it, turning it this way and that. “These are all superficial abrasions, fortunately. You should be fine in a few days.”

“That’s good news.” Sean repressed a wince as Dr. Holm began to clean a very tender abrasion on his heel. His touch was as gentle as his manner was brusque, however, and Sean was reminded of some of the doctors and nurses who had cared for his father.

“But I’ll confess I’m curious to know how you came to be running around the woods in wet shoes without socks.” The doctor raised his head and fixed Sean with those piercing blue eyes. “You are under no obligation to tell me what happened tonight, Mr. Astin, but considering the circumstances, it would be better if you did.”

“Because I know about the white stag, you mean?”

Dr. Holm visibly flinched, as if hearing those words spoken aloud was like a slap to the face. “Yes. You’re privy to a secret that very few people outside the pines have ever learned. I wonder if you can possibly understand the seriousness of the situation. It’s now within your power to do great harm to Elijah and to all of us who live here.”

“Dr. Holm…” Sean began.

"I love that boy,” Dr. Holm stated abruptly then corrected himself. "No, Elijah’s not a boy, he’s a man, and he’s been a man since the day his father died and he took on a responsibility that shouldn’t have been his for years, a responsibility he has never once shirked or resented." He paused. “Warren Wood was a very dear friend, and his death was a terrible loss to all of us. Elijah will tell you, if he hasn’t already, that his father was a great Woodjin, and so he was. But not as great a Woodjin as his son is. There never has been a Woodjin to equal Elijah, except perhaps the first.”

“Jordan Wood? Elijah told me a little about him.”
The doctor nodded. “But the world is a vastly different place from what it was in Jordan Wood’s day, and the consequences of discovery for someone like Elijah far more severe.”

Sean didn’t need to be told that. He dealt with the press on a regular basis and understood better than Dr. Holm what would happen if they got wind of the mysterious man who could transform into a stag. The media circus that would result would put any celebrity or political scandal to shame. The very idea of reporters and curiosity seekers staking out the cabin, destroying the tranquil beauty of this place in their insatiable greed for a sensational story, made Sean’s skin crawl with loathing. Then there were the scientists who would want to study Elijah, make him some kind of fucking human guinea pig, and god only knew what else…

“If you betray Elijah,” Dr. Holm went on, “if you reveal his secret to anyone, I swear to you, Mr. Astin, that I will hunt you down and when I find you, you’ll think that confronting the Devil was a picnic by comparison.”

He meant every word, too. Sean could see it in his eyes: implacable, hard as flint. But hadn’t he himself already come to that same conclusion, that there was nothing he wouldn’t do to protect Elijah and his secret?

“Dr. Holm,” he said quietly, “for what it’s worth, you have my promise that I will never reveal his secret to a living soul. But you don’t know me, and I realize that a promise from a near stranger can mean little to you. Perhaps if I tell you how Elijah and I first met, and about what happened tonight, you’ll understand why I would rather die than betray him that way.”

While Dr. Holm continued tending to his feet, Sean quickly related the story of his first encounter with the Devil and his rescue by Elijah. He suspected that the doctor had heard many such stories over the years, but what had happened tonight was a different matter altogether. He wasn’t prepared to tell Dr. Holm about waking with that pain in his shoulder, or about his apparent connection to Elijah, not when he hadn’t yet told Elijah about it. Nor were other details-- a thankful kiss on the soft fur between the stag’s eyes, cool lips pressed to Sean’s neck-- relevant, and besides, the doctor was far from stupid and had clearly noticed the significant looks he and Elijah had been exchanging. So Sean skirted around the reason he had come to the cabin in the middle of the night, and concentrated instead on what Elijah had told him about the circumstances of his shooting, on finding Elijah as the stag and his transformation into his human self, and on their flight through the woods with the Devil hard at their heels.

“I couldn’t take him to the hospital, for obvious reasons,” Sean concluded. “Elijah asked me to call you instead, so I did. The rest you know.”

Dr. Holm hadn’t said a word while Sean was speaking, nor had his neutral expression changed-- except when Sean repeated Elijah’s explanation for how he’d come to be shot. Then those salt-and-pepper brows had snapped together and the fingers spreading salve on one of the abrasions had stilled momentarily.

“Elijah won’t hear of trying to find the man who shot him,” Sean said into the silence that fell when he was done, thinking of the doctor’s reaction.

“Are you surprised?” Dr. Holm spoke at last. “The Woodjin is sworn to protect, not to harm. Ask Elijah to tell you the meaning of the inscription on his ring.”

“But I don’t understand,” Sean’s frustration spilled over, and he clenched his hands into fists on his thighs. “Why couldn’t that son of a bitch see that Elijah was trying to save him?”

Dr. Holm climbed stiffly to his feet and looked down at Sean with compassion in his eyes. “Do you
know the legend of the first Woodjin and what happened at the Quaker Bridge in 1772?” he asked.

“Yes. He saved a stagecoach from falling into the river when the bridge was washed out.” Just like Elijah saved that truck tonight.

“And do you recall what the coachman did when he saw the white stag blocking their path?”

Sean thought a moment, calling into his tired mind the story from the book Elijah had left for him in the bathroom. “He grabbed his rifle,” he said slowly, understanding dawning. “He meant to shoot the stag, didn’t he?”

“Humans have always had an unfortunate tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. It seems we haven’t come very far as a species in all these years, have we?” The shrill whistle of the kettle sounded, and Dr. Holm went over to the stove and removed it from the heat.

He poured the hot water into the teapot, and then turned and leaned against the counter, fixing Sean with a serious look. “If I’ve seemed harsh or overly suspicious, I’m sorry. But you’ve only known Elijah a few days, and it’s clear that he already thinks the world of you. There is nothing that would please me, or any of us who love him, more than for him to find the happiness he deserves, but protecting him is second nature to us. Not only because he’s our Woodjin, but because he’s a very special young man who has endured too much loss in his life.”

“We take care of each other around here,” Sean quoted slowly, remembering the times Elijah had said that to him.

“Exactly. In fact, that might be considered the unofficial piney motto,” Dr. Holm said, with a trace of humor.

“It sounds like a fine one to me.”

The doctor poured the steaming tea into the mugs and brought them to the table. He handed them to Sean. “You saved the life of our Woodjin tonight. For that you will always have the gratitude of the people here, and find a welcome in our homes.”

“Thank you.” Sean flushed with equal parts pleasure and embarrassment at the unexpected words. But what Ian Holm said next flabbergasted him entirely.

“I’m inclined to believe that you can also save his life in a different way,” Dr. Holm added quietly. “Now take Elijah his tea, and then get some rest, Sean.”

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With Dr. Holm’s reassurance that someone would be arriving shortly to take care of the animals easing his mind, Sean carried the tea mugs back to Elijah’s bedroom. He still felt rather dazed by the turnaround in Ian Holm’s attitude. Not that he’d earned the doctor’s wholehearted approval yet, but it was a start, and one he hadn’t anticipated by a long shot.

He stepped cautiously into the room, not wishing to disturb Elijah if he was sleeping. It appeared that he was, for his eyes were closed and his lips slightly parted, his chest rising and falling in slow even breaths. Maggie, who after her heroic efforts certainly deserved more than a catnap, was stretched along Elijah’s side, sound asleep. Her whiskers were twitching a little, and she was flexing her claws, perhaps chasing a mouse in her sleep. Rocky was nowhere in sight, presumably sacked out in his nest, and Fred was closed up inside his shell, fore and aft.

Sean stood by the bed, staring down at Elijah’s peaceful face, and he simply couldn’t bring himself
to wake him, even if Dr. Holm wanted him to have the tea. He carefully set the mug down on the nightstand with a nearly inaudible *clink*, but when he straightened again, Elijah’s lashes were fluttering, and his eyes slowly opened, a miracle of blue.

“God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Sean whispered remorsefully.

“You didn’t,” Elijah assured him, smiling. “I wasn’t really asleep, just waiting for you to come back,” He looked like a drowsy kitten with his tousled auburn hair and sleepy smile, and so beautiful it made Sean’s heart catch. “Everything okay?” Elijah asked with a touch of anxiety. “Dr. Ian didn’t give you a hard time, did he?”

“A little bit, but that’s okay. I told you, I would’ve been disappointed if he hadn’t. But everything’s fine now.” It was more or less the truth, thank god. Sean picked up the mug he’d just set down and handed it to Elijah. Then he settled on the edge of the bed and studied Elijah as he blew on the surface of the hot liquid to cool it, and then took a cautious sip. His color definitely looked better and his eyes were clearer and less feverish-looking. “How are you feeling?”

“Happy. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.” The raw honesty of Elijah’s response undid Sean.

“I had to come back, Elijah,” Sean replied, returning honesty with honesty.

“That’s what you said when you found me. Why? Why did you have to come back?”

But Sean shook his head. “You need to rest. We can talk about it later, after you’ve had some sleep.”

“I won’t be able to sleep until I know,” Elijah insisted. “Sean, *please*.”

Reluctantly, Sean gave in to the appeal in those vivid blue eyes. “All right. But I want you to drink your tea before it gets cold.”

Obediently, Elijah raised the mug to his lips and took another sip. “Don’t keep me in suspense,” he prompted. “Start talking.”

“It’s hard to figure out where to start exactly.” Sean huffed a laugh. “If I told this to anyone else, they’d think I was crazy. Hell, maybe even you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Why? What happened?”

Sean’s tired brain tried to formulate a coherent, detailed response, but in the end, he opted for simple and straightforward: “I felt the moment when you were shot, Elijah. Here.” He touched his right shoulder, and Elijah’s eyes widened in astonishment. “The pain was so intense it woke me out of a sound sleep. At first I thought I must be having a heart attack, or maybe,” he joked, “an attack of indigestion from eating too many Butterscotch Krispies.”

“Sean, can’t you ever be serious?” Elijah said, but the softness of his expression belied the words.

“Sorry. But saying it aloud seems so strange. You see, suddenly I knew, Elijah, somehow I just *knew* that the pain I was experiencing was your pain and that something bad had happened to you.”

“You came because you knew something had happened to me? *You experienced my pain?*” Elijah sounded almost dazed. “But that’s only ever happened once before with a Woodjin and someone else-- with my great-grandparents.”

Sean felt staggered by what Elijah had just told him. “Wow.” Beyond lame, but it was the only word he could come up with under the circumstances. “Was it a one-shot deal with them?”
“No. According to Dad, Hannah always knew when Great-Granddad was being called or was in trouble.” For a long moment they stared at each other, neither quite sure what to say. Then Elijah asked, “So what did you do when you realized what the pain meant?”

“I jumped in my car and drove here like a bat out of hell. In fact, I don’t think I even closed the back door on the way out, I was in such a hurry.” Funny that. Once the very idea of going off and leaving a house unlocked would have driven him mad with worry, but now, it seemed completely unimportant.

“You listened to your instincts. Oh Sean.”

“They were screaming pretty loudly, Elijah,” Sean said with a wry smile. ”But unfortunately they weren’t very specific. When I arrived here, I didn’t know what to expect. I tore the house apart looking for you, but I couldn’t find you anywhere. Then Maggie led me into the mudroom and I discovered your clothes hanging by the door. I couldn’t believe you would voluntarily go outside undressed in weather like this, and well... you don’t even want to know all the crazy scenarios I imagined.”

“When did you finally figure out the truth?” Elijah asked softly.

“When I saw your footprints change in the snow. There was no other conclusion I could possibly draw than that you and the stag were one and the same. And then it seemed so blindingly obvious; I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t suspected the truth, right from the very beginning. But...” Sean hesitated, and then continued slowly, “This probably won’t make any sense, but all along I had a feeling there was something important that I was forgetting about the night I met you; some memory that I simply couldn’t hold onto, no matter how hard I tried. It was almost as if a veil had been drawn across it, preventing me from remembering. Until I saw those footprints, that is, and then suddenly I knew what it was: the stag's eyes--they were your eyes, Elijah. How could I ever have forgotten how they looked? God, I feel such a fool...”

“Please don’t, because it wasn't your fault,” Elijah said, and his cheeks had reddened.

“What do you mean it wasn't my fault?” Sean asked in total confusion.

Elijah was fiddling with his silver ring, using his thumb to twist it to and fro on his ring finger. ”It’s hard to explain, but as Woodjin I have a certain... ability, I guess you can call it, that I can use to prevent people from discovering my identity. I was certain you’d gotten a good look at my eyes that night, and, well, they’re pretty distinctive. Distinctive enough that you might easily have put two and two together when you met me-- the human me, that is. So while you were sleeping, I... made sure you wouldn’t remember.”

“You mean you used a forgetfulness spell, like the **obliviatus** charm in *Harry Potter*?” Sean supposed he should be disturbed by the idea, but he was fascinated by this revelation of yet another aspect of the Woodjin’s powers. Truth was indeed stranger than fiction...

Elijah looked intensely uncomfortable at the comparison. “I suppose, although it’s limited strictly to situations where I’m in danger of discovery. And I don’t like to think of it as a spell or charm. In fact, I don’t like to think about that ability at all. It seems so dishonest to mess with someone’s memory.” His lips twisted into a wry grin. “It was the one part of the training my dad gave me that I totally sucked at, because my heart was never really in it. Luckily, it hasn’t been necessary for me to use it very often. Guess I wouldn’t fit in at Hogwarts very well, huh?” His eyes were filled with regret as he looked at Sean. “You have every right to be angry with me, Sean. But I... I was so afraid. Afraid of how you’d react if you discovered the truth about me.”
“Elijah, I’m not angry with you. You did what you had to in order to protect yourself. Frankly, it’s a relief to know that you can, and that there isn’t anyone out there who could betray your secret.” His conversation with Dr. Holm was very much in the forefront of his mind.

“There is one person,” Elijah whispered. The remembrance of past pain was reflected not only in the tone of his voice but also in the sudden shadow that crossed his face. “Someone who knows that I’m the white stag.” He laughed, a bitter sound that, coming from Elijah, shocked Sean to the core. “But I won’t ever need to worry about him saying anything to anyone.”

Sean felt a sudden chill; he set his mug aside, knowing he couldn’t choke down another mouthful. “Who is this guy?” he asked.

“Someone I need to tell you about so you understand… why I did what I did to you.” Elijah swallowed hard, Adam’s apple bobbing. “Someone I was involved with a few years ago. His name is Matt.”

With every new revelation, more puzzle pieces slid into place, and Sean understood that the losses to which Dr. Holm had referred included more than the death of Elijah’s father and his mother and brother leaving the pines.

“It was the summer after my mom and Zach moved to Iowa,” Elijah continued. “Matt was from California, but he was vacationing in the area with some friends. I had a summer job, leading kayak tours through the pines, and Matt and his friends signed up for one. That’s how I first met him.”

Elijah tilted his head back; he stared at the ceiling with unseeing eyes, lost in memories that clearly weren’t happy ones.

“We really hit it off, you know? Right from the start. We had so much in common, or at least I thought we did. Matt was in a master’s program in oceanography at UCLA. He loved the outdoors-- camping and hiking and kayaking-- and he was into a lot of the same music that I was.” Elijah gave Sean an apologetic sideways glance. “I guess it didn’t hurt that he was very good-looking, too.”

In his mind’s eye, Sean could picture Matt: a tall, tanned, athletic blonde surfer type-- his complete antithesis, in fact. It was difficult not to loathe the guy, and he hadn’t even heard the entire story yet.

“After that first day trip, he signed up for two more, and he made it pretty clear that it was so he could get to know me better. I was really flattered. No one had ever seemed interested in me before, not the way Matt was. So when he asked me to have dinner with him, I said yes.” Elijah looked at Sean as if pleading with him to understand. “I was so lonely, Sean. I missed Mom and Zach, and Hannah was in college then and not around much. I’d never had many friends my own age, and I couldn’t go to college myself, only take correspondence classes.”

“Elijah, you don’t have to justify what you did,” Sean said gently. “The wonder would be if you hadn’t gone out with someone like Matt.”

“It’s just… I hate to think how stupidly naïve I was. But it almost seemed like it was fate, Matt showing up so soon after Mom and Zach left. As if he’d been sent to make up for me losing them.”

Sean could vividly picture that 21 year-old Elijah, on his own for the first time in his life, and with such a weight of responsibility resting on his shoulders. With his open and caring nature, he’d have been vulnerable to the first guy to pay him the slightest bit of serious attention.

“Pretty soon we were dating regularly, seeing each other nearly every day, and when Matt’s friends moved on, he decided to stay behind. He even hinted that he was considering a transfer to a school in
New Jersey in the fall so he could be with me. I couldn’t believe my luck. But there was only one problem. After a couple months, things weren’t moving fast enough for Matt, but they were moving too fast for me.”

“Meaning he wanted you to have sex with him?” Sean asked, and dread crept over him, remembering that moment in the mudroom when Elijah had shied away from him. Oh dear god, please don’t let it be that he was forced against his will...

“Yeah, he did. Oh, we’d made out and fooled around a bit, but nothing more serious than that, and Matt acted like it was no big deal. But I could tell that he was getting impatient with me, and I was afraid he’d think I was some kind of cock tease. It wasn’t that at all; I mean, I wanted to have sex with him…” Again Elijah gave Sean an apologetic look.

“Is there any guy that age who doesn’t want to have sex-- 24/7 if he can get it?” Sean said lightly, and was rewarded with a grateful look.

“But it wasn’t a simple, straightforward decision, not for me, at least.”

“Why not?”

“Because I honestly thought I was in love with Matt, and that he was in love with me. I believed that we’d be together forever. And believing that changed everything.” Elijah stopped, his throat working. What he had to say next was proving tremendously difficult for him.

“Elijah, whatever it is, you don’t have to tell me,” Sean said. “Not now or ever. Not unless you want to.”

“No, no. I do have to tell you. It’s important to me that you understand, Sean. I don’t want there to be any more secrets between us. Because it was a secret that nearly destroyed my family. My dad… he was a great Woodjin, like I told you, but he made one terrible mistake in his life, a mistake that haunted him right up until the day he died.” He paused. “He didn’t tell my mom what he was until after they were married and she was pregnant with Zach. He… he used his… ability to make sure she didn’t find out.”

Sean closed his eyes briefly. “Oh Elijah.” No wonder he had such mixed feelings about messing with anyone’s memory.

“Dad was afraid that she might change her mind about marrying him if she knew the truth. It was wrong of him, I know, and I’m not making excuses, but try not to think too badly of him.” Elijah’s eyes implored him to understand, and in them Sean saw the depths of loneliness and solitude that a Woodjin could be forced to endure.

“Hell, with my track record at relationships, who am I to cast stones?” Sean said. And if your mother had decided not to marry him, you wouldn’t exist, Elijah, and this world would be a much poorer place.

“I expect you can imagine how my mom reacted when Dad finally told her the truth,” Elijah went on soberly. "She’d never really liked the pines; it was too different from where she’d grown up. She’d hoped that Dad might consider a move to Cedar Rapids eventually, or at least somewhere in the midwest, closer to her own family. Instead, she was faced with the reality that Dad’s responsibilities as Woodjin meant they could never leave the pines. Mom never really forgave Dad for not trusting her, for keeping something so important from her. Even now, after all these years, she’s very bitter about it.”
“I can understand why. He didn’t give her the chance to make her own decision, but made it for her. That was hardly fair.”

“No, it wasn’t. Mom was so devastated that after Zach was born, she almost took him and went back to Cedar Rapids. In the end she decided to stay, because she loved my dad, despite everything. But then I came along, and it became clear what I was— that I was like Dad... Mom was horrified. You see, not long before I was born, Dad was involved in a fight with the Devil, and he was cut up pretty badly— came close to dying, in fact. If it weren’t for Dr. Ian, he probably would have. Mom couldn’t bear the idea that that might happen to me some day. From the time I was little,” Elijah went on quietly, “Mom had this way of looking at me, as if she was saying goodbye to me with her eyes. I didn’t understand what it meant for the longest time. But to her, my being born the Woodjin was a fate almost worse than death. I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t hurt, knowing that Mom would rather I be a burger flipper at McDonald’s than the Woodjin.”

“Of course it hurts. Oh Elijah, I’m sorry.” But at the same time, Sean felt a reluctant sympathy for Elijah’s mother. Every time the Woodjin was called, every time he transformed and vanished into the pines, there was no guarantee he would ever return. What self-respecting parent wouldn’t be worried sick at the thought of their son encountering a monster in the woods? The white stag had seemed to Sean like a creature out of a fairy tale come to life. But even fairy tales, he now realized, had their dark side, too.

“Please don’t think that I blame her, Sean. She’s my mom, and she only wants me to be safe. I know how hard it was—it still is—for her. But Dad made me promise that I’d never make the same mistake that he did and keep the truth from someone I loved or use my ability to deceive him. Not that he even needed to make me promise— not after seeing how his deception nearly destroyed his and Mom’s marriage.” Elijah swirled the remaining tea in his mug and stared at it in apparent fascination. “All of which is to say that eventually I decided to tell Matt the truth.”

“I gather it wasn’t a success.”

Elijah sighed. “That’s an understatement. At first Matt thought it was simply a joke and I was pulling his leg. But when I insisted that it was the truth, he got angry with me. He wanted to know why I was jerking him around like that, making up ridiculous lies.”

Oh yeah, Sean loathed this Matt guy all right— with a passion. “What did you do then?” he asked gently.

“I told him I could prove it.”

“You mean you transformed?” The idea was unsettling, and Sean felt a ridiculous, childish resentment that Matt, the unworthy bastard, should have been privileged to witness that moment of sheer magic and wonder.

“No,” Elijah said, “we were having dinner at a restaurant and there were other people around; it wouldn’t have been safe. God, I was so naïve,” Elijah repeated with bitter self-reproach. “It never occurred to me that he wouldn’t believe me, that it would be necessary for me to prove it to him. But there was something I could show him, even there in a crowded room.” He reached over and set his mug next to Sean’s on the nightstand, and then took Sean’s hand and guided it to his head, placing it palm downward on his hair. “Feel,” he said simply.

Sean parted the soft auburn curls with his fingers and searched until he encountered something unexpected to the front and side of Elijah’s skull, perhaps two inches from his hairline: a slightly raised round callus about the size of a half-dollar. It took him a moment to figure out what it was, and then he understood. He’d seen the same thing in photos of deer that had shed their antlers. There was
Sean searched his memory. Ped-something… Yes that was it. Pedicles: the source of his antlers when Elijah transformed into the white stag. The pedicle was soft and slightly yielding on top, but there were tiny hard ridges around its edges. Wordlessly, Sean moved his fingers across Elijah’s head, searching until, as he expected, he found its mate on the opposite side.

“Sean, I feel terrible about what happened in the mudroom the other day,” Elijah whispered. “About shying away from you like that. But I was afraid that if you discovered these, you might discover the truth, too, and suddenly I panicked. I couldn’t stop remembering what Matt said when he figured out what they were and realized I wasn’t lying to him.”

“What did he say?” Sean was beyond relieved that Elijah hadn’t been forced to have sex with Matt, the way he’d feared, but the bile was rising in his throat, sour and burning, as he waited for Elijah’s answer.

“He said… he said that I… I was a freak, and that no one normal would ever want anything to do with me. I could see the revulsion in his eyes, Sean. As if I wasn’t even human to him anymore.” Elijah’s hand was clenched into a fist in the covers as he relived the humiliation and pain of that moment. “Then he got up from the table and walked out of the restaurant. Just left me sitting there alone. I never saw him again.”

That buzzing sensation was back, stronger than before; Sean’s head swam with an impotent rage that was even greater than that he’d felt for the man who shot Elijah. But he only said, “Funny, I never liked the name Matt. I always thought that if I had a son, the last name I’d ever choose was Matt.”

“That’s what I said…” Elijah’s laugh was half a sob.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am that you were hurt by that worthless son of a bitch.” Sean moved his hand in a caress down the graceful curve of Elijah’s cheek, and across the strong line of his jaw.

“You aren’t a freak; you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever had the privilege to know. And if that means I’m not normal, then hell, I’m proud not to be.”

Elijah captured his hand and kissed the palm, dirty and bloodstained as it was. “Thank you,” he whispered, and more than the thank-you, his expression showed how much Sean’s words meant to him.

“But there’s one thing I still don’t understand,” Sean remarked. “If you didn’t use your ability on him, how is it that Matt didn’t discover these pedicles before? Surely he must have put his hands in your hair sometimes when you were making out.” I would have. I’d have put my hands all over you, every single inch…

Elijah looked suddenly, acutely embarrassed. “He didn’t, though. It was my sister Hannah’s idea, actually. She suggested I put a ton of gel in my hair. You know, that extra hold stuff that makes it spiky and stiff as a board? She said he’d never want to put his hands in it and get them all sticky. She was right; it worked better than any charm I could ever cast.”

The unexpectedness of the explanation took Sean totally off-guard. He couldn’t help it; he burst into laughter. “I’m sorry,” he gasped, “I shouldn’t laugh, but… hair gel?”

Elijah was still looking rather red-faced, but he said, “I don’t mind; I like it when you laugh. You have the most gorgeous laugh lines.” He reached out and traced one of the deep lines that radiated from the corner of Sean’s right eye, and his own eyes had never looked bluer. “Did you know there are six of them on this side and seven on the other? I counted them once when you weren’t looking.”
It was Sean's turn to be embarrassed. The word 'gorgeous' in relation to him took some getting used to. As usual, he sought refuge in humor. "And to think, I was recently advised by one of my clients that it was time to look into Botox injections."

"You're joking."

"Actually, for once I'm not. He's a Manhattan plastic surgeon, and his patient list is like a who's who of the rich and famous."

"Don't you dare let him inject you with that stuff!" Elijah exclaimed, looking horrified.

"I have no intention of letting him anywhere near me," Sean assured him, smiling.

"Good."

But then Sean turned serious. “You know, in a selfish way I’m grateful that Matt couldn’t see his ass for a hole in the ground. Because if he could have, if he’d understood exactly how lucky he was to have you, you’d be living here in cozy domestic bliss with Matt,” and it was hard not to spit the name like a curse, “and I’d be out in the cold, literally and figuratively.”

“You wouldn’t have been out in the cold, Sean,” Elijah replied. “It wouldn’t have lasted with Matt, because I never really loved him. What I loved was the dream he represented: someone willing to share my life, even knowing what I am and how I’m bound here. After Matt, it seemed like an impossible dream, and I tried to accept the fact that I’d always be alone. I honestly believed that I had, until four nights ago when I was called, and there you were, and you looked at me in a way no one had ever looked at me before. I think down deep I knew right then what it really means to love someone.”

Sean opened his mouth to speak, but Elijah quickly added, “Please, you don’t have to say it. I know it’s too soon, that we only met a few days ago. I know you hadn’t planned on coming back here, that you have Chris and your own life in New York. But Sean, I was too much of a coward to ask you to stay the last time, even though I wanted to, so badly, and I won’t make the same mistake twice. Not if there’s any chance that you might consider staying this time.”

The aching vulnerability in Elijah’s expression nearly broke Sean’s heart, while at the same time his entire being felt transported by Elijah’s words: I think down deep I knew right then what it really means to love someone.

“If you were a coward, then so was I,” Sean said quietly. “I wanted to ask you if I could stay, and I didn’t even reach the end of your driveway that morning before I was cursing my stupidity for not doing so. I spent two lonely days at the shore thinking about you, and dreaming about you, and missing you. Elijah, I was going to come back, even without what happened tonight. It wouldn’t have been right away, because there were things I needed to settle first-- things I still need to settle-- but when I had, I was going to come back and hope there would be a welcome for me at the door.”

“There would have been, and there always will be,” and it was more than a promise, it was a vow. “I don’t care if it’s too soon,” Elijah went on, almost fiercely, “or we’ve only known each other a few days, I’m going to say it anyway while I have the chance: I love you, Sean.”

“You have no idea how glad I am that you do, Elijah, because you’re not the only one who fell in love that night.” Sean smiled, and the tight ache in his throat eased. “I hope you won’t take that the wrong way.”

“I don’t know,” Elijah replied, and a spark of mischief had entered his eyes. “Should I be jealous of
“Definitely not,” Sean replied, and curled his hand at the nape of Elijah’s neck. Very slowly, never taking his eyes from Elijah’s face, he leaned forward. “I love you, too, Woodjin,” he whispered, tilting his head to one side, and then at last Sean felt the exquisite softness of Elijah’s mouth beneath his own. It was a kiss of promise, not of passion, and short-lived. Elijah’s lips opened to his; there was a delicate meeting of tongues, a swirl and dip to taste velvet-hot depths, and then their mouths separated. But they remained close together, foreheads touching and eyes closed, and for the first time in his entire life, Sean knew that he was truly home.

“You should sleep now,” he said, drawing back. He lightly caressed a dark smudge beneath Elijah’s eye with his thumb. “Dr. Holm would have my head if he knew I’d kept you up talking for so long.”

“I’m not sorry we did,” Elijah said.

“Neither am I, believe me, but we’ve talked enough to satisfy even me for the time being. Now lie back and go to sleep.”

“But what about you?” Elijah asked as he settled against the pillows with a yawn.

“I’ll go crash in the other room.” If he even had the energy to walk that far; he wasn’t certain that he did.

“No way. You’re sleeping here, with me,” Elijah said obstinately.

“You sure?”

Elijah rolled his eyes, and Sean grinned. He got up, trying to ignore the complaints from various parts of his aching body, and stripped off his ruined jeans and the windbreaker, dropping them carelessly onto the chair where he’d hung Warren Wood’s down jacket. It occurred to Sean that he didn’t have any spare clothes with him, and he wondered what the hell he was going to wear when he got up. But he was too tired to worry about it. Maybe tiny elves would come in while he was sleeping and leave him clean clothes. It was the Woodjin’s house after all, and anything was possible.

Leaving his boxers on, Sean shuffled back to the bed, and climbed in beside Elijah. It didn’t feel at all awkward or strange… only right.

“You’d better put Fred on the floor,” Elijah murmured. “I’m afraid he still doesn’t quite understand the concept of housebreaking.”

Yes, it was definitely the Woodjin’s house all right. Sean located the box turtle hidden in a fold of the comforter, picked him up and leaned over the side of the bed to set him on the floor. “Night, Fred,” he said, and then realized that morning sunshine was streaming through the windows. His entire world had been turned topsy-turvy, he thought as he straightened, and it was the most fucking fantastic feeling imaginable.

Edging close to Elijah so that their bodies were just touching along the length of one side, Sean eased an arm beneath his neck. The young man turned slightly toward him, and Sean carefully gathered him in. With a contented sigh, Elijah pillowed his head on Sean’s shoulder.

“Mm, you’re so warm,” he murmured, as he had earlier in the woods, and within moments his eyelids had drooped shut, dark lashes fanning out on his cheeks, and he was asleep. Sean rested his cheek against Elijah’s hair, struggling against the fatigue that was pulling him inexorably under. He wanted to savor this moment of unalloyed happiness, store it in his mind so that he would never
forget how it felt to hold a sleeping Elijah in his arms for the first time. But the comfortable mattress, the warmth of the comforter and the blissful weight of the Woodjin’s head on his shoulder conspired against him. With the well-loved scents of pinesap and woodsmoke and dried grasses enfolding him like an embrace, Sean fell at last into a deep and dreamless sleep.
When Sean returned to consciousness, he thought he must still be asleep and dreaming, for the scents of pinesap and woodsmoke and dried grasses were teasing at his nose, and it seemed to him, impossibly, that he held Elijah in his arms. But the warmth of Elijah’s body pressed against his side, the intimate feel of his flannel-clad thigh thrown across Sean’s bare legs and the puffs of breath damp against his neck felt absolutely real. His eyes flew open, sight seeking to confirm what his other senses were telling him.

The pale winter sunlight streaming through the windows revealed that it was no dream, for this was Elijah’s room, and he was lying in Elijah’s bed—with Elijah. Stray wisps of soft hair were tickling Sean’s chin, and the sleek muscles of the young man’s back were satin-smooth and firm under his encircling arm, but there was something coarser, like twisted fabric, pressing uncomfortably into the tender skin on the inside of his elbow. Confused, Sean craned his neck to look down, and the moment he caught sight of the sling confining Elijah’s right arm, memory came flooding back in a rush, bringing with it a cascade of divergent emotions: joy, relief, and above all else, worry about the bullet wound.

Sean levered himself awkwardly up onto one elbow in the slippery pillows, the better to see his sleeping lover’s face. Lover. Sean was startled by how effortlessly the word had flowed into his mind, for it had always been a struggle to refer to Chris as his lover, despite their years together, as though some part of his brain, a wiser part as it now appeared, rejected the word in relation to her. But such was not the case with Elijah, whom he’d known for less than a week. And they hadn’t
even made love—yet.

A now-familiar spark of heat kindled in the pit of his stomach at the promise implicit in that simple three-letter word, but yet was definitely not now, given the shape they were both in. Although if Elijah was to awaken and smile at him the way he had earlier, so drowsy and tempting, Sean suspected his own body would be more than up for the task.

But Elijah showed no signs of waking, so Sean ignored the stirrings of desire, and studied Elijah carefully. What he could see of his face was flushed, but not, to Sean’s critical eyes, with fever, only sleep. Very gently, he touched the young man’s forehead with the backs of his fingers. The skin felt warm but not febrile, and a coil of tension inside Sean unwound and relaxed. Dr. Holm had been right: the old ways were the best ways for the Woodjin. Still, he’d feel a lot happier when the doctor returned to change the bandage and was able to confirm that Elijah was doing as well as he seemed to be.

As he withdrew his fingers, Sean grimaced at the smears and streaks of dried blood on them; the blood was even lodged under his nails and crusted around the cuticles. His arms and chest weren’t much better, painted in graphic reminders of the events of the previous night. Then a wry smile quirked his lips; it was déjà vu all over again, apparently: for as on his first wakening in the Woodjin’s house, he was filthy, sore and, his full bladder reminded him, in need of a pee. He would have to get up soon, much as he would prefer to stay cocooned with Elijah in this temporary oasis of peace and tranquility, shut away from the rest of the world. For one thing, he had no desire for anyone to walk in on him and Elijah like this—although he had a suspicion that that would be rather like closing the barn door after the horse had escaped.

His critical faculties, no longer preoccupied with Elijah’s wellbeing, had started noticing certain things they hadn’t when he first awoke. Such as the hiss and crackle of burning wood in the fireplace: a fireplace that had been cold and dark when he climbed into the bed some hours earlier.

And then there were the bloodied clothes he’d left on the chair. Jeans, windbreaker and down jacket were now gone, vanished, and in their place was a large white plastic shopping bag. From his spot in the bed, Sean could easily make out the distinctive blue logo splashed across the front. Perhaps there really were elves in the Woodjin’s house, as he’d jokingly speculated, elves who didn’t conjure new clothes out of thin air or sit beneath toadstools and sew them out of cobwebs, but bought them at Wal-Mart.

But what was more likely, of course, was that someone, or even several someones, human someones, had been in the bedroom while he and Elijah were sleeping, had laid the fire and removed Sean’s clothes.

Had seen the two of them entwined beneath the blankets like the lovers they weren’t quite—yet.

It wasn’t a comfortable thought; in fact, it was a downright worrisome one. What did they feel about a virtual stranger being in bed with their Woodjin? Dr. Holm had said Sean would always have the gratitude of the pineys for saving Elijah’s life, but gratitude wasn’t the same thing as acceptance, and if he couldn’t even manage to win over a squirrel, how would he ever succeed with Elijah’s friends and family?

Sean could have used a dose of Maggie’s unquenchable optimism and support right then, but the calico cat was nowhere in evidence. Neither were Rocky or Fred, for that matter. Probably gone off to the kitchen for breakfast. No, he corrected himself, not breakfast, but lunch or an early dinner. His sense of time was a bit muddled at the moment, day and night turned upside down just as his life had been, but a quick glance at his scratched-up Rolex showed that it was quarter past three in the afternoon—Friday afternoon, if he was counting up the days correctly.
With a sinking sensation, he thought of Chris. Shit. She was going to be fit to be tied. He’d more or less promised he’d be back in the city today. He was going to have to call her soon; he owed her an explanation for why he was being delayed—although what the hell he was going to tell her was a very good question. What’s more, he’d left her holding the bag at Clicktwice, and knowing how the company grapevine worked, whatever story she’d invented to explain his sudden absence this week had undoubtedly grown in the telling. He’d have a lot of small fires to put out when he returned.

That world, those worries, seemed strangely remote, however, as if they belonged to a different Sean, the one who had existed before that moment he parked his Beemer on the sandy shoulder of a quiet back road to watch the sunset over the Pine Barrens and shut off the engine. He could visualize the company offices that took up an entire floor of Trump Tower, and picture his administrative assistant Liv frowning as she opened his mail, fielded his calls and did her very efficient best to cope with the backlog that must be piling up. She wouldn’t be the only one wondering about his uncharacteristic absence and silence, but instead of guilt Sean felt a childish and unworthy resentment, because if this really were a fairy tale, all the obstacles between him and Elijah would have disappeared, vanished in a puff of smoke, with their first kiss and the words I love you.

Damn it, I don’t want to leave, Sean thought, as he had that morning he watched Elijah make his way across the frozen yard in the gray light of dawn and believed he would never have more than that one brief glimpse of magic. Only now the wish was even more fervent, the idea of separation even more unbearable, because Elijah loved him. Unbelievably, Elijah loved him. His arm unconsciously tightened, binding them together. He turned his head and rested his cheek against the softness of Elijah’s sleep-mussed hair.

Not yet. Not so soon. We’ve had so little time together.

Elijah burrowed closer as if he had been reading Sean’s mind.

“I’m sorry,” Sean whispered. “Elijah, I’m so sorry.”

But like it or not, he had no alternative but to return to New York, and by Sunday afternoon at the very latest. Monday morning was the all-important Board of Directors’ meeting for which he’d done far too little preparation, but for which he absolutely had to be present. Time was no friend to him and Elijah, and already their separation was looming like the late afternoon thunderheads that would mass on the mainland on summer evenings before scudding across the bay to lash the island with wind and torrential rain.

He studied Elijah’s sleeping face again, but with a different purpose now. He wanted to drink it in, absorb it, hoard every line, angle and curve of it to sustain him against the days they’d be apart, the way Rocky hoarded acorns for the winter.

Elijah’s closed eyelids appeared almost translucent, a thread-fine tracery of blue veins visible, and this, combined with the faint dark smudges beneath his eyes, gave him an overall impression of delicacy. But Sean knew now, better than anyone, that there was nothing delicate or weak about Elijah. From the very first he’d thought Elijah beautiful in spirit as well as body; and having witnessed firsthand his indomitable courage, his selflessness and his compassion, that beauty was increased a thousand-fold in his eyes.

His gaze dropped to Elijah’s mouth, lips slightly parted as if in invitation. Heat flared inside Sean again as he recalled their softness and the all-too-brief taste he’d had of them. Oh, but he was tempted, imagining how Elijah would stir to wakefulness, and open his mouth to Sean’s kiss… Then, with a loud crack, a log in the fireplace broke apart, and Sean started. Bad enough anyone should see them sleeping, he sure as hell didn’t want to be caught with his tongue down Elijah’s throat.

An incoherent murmur of protest came from Elijah when Sean eased his cramped arm out from
beneath him and sat up. “I’m sorry,” Sean whispered a third time, bending to place an impulsive kiss on Elijah’s naked shoulder, and as much as Sean would’ve liked to witness the heart-stopping flash of blue as Elijah’s eyes fluttered open, he could only be glad when, with a tiny hitching sigh, the young man fell back asleep as quickly as a child. Healing sleep was what Elijah needed most right now, not lovemaking. He had a sneaking suspicion that Elijah wasn’t going to be a particularly cooperative (or patient) patient when he finally awoke, and keeping him quiet was likely to prove difficult indeed.

Sean slid gingerly out of the bed. His muscles, especially those of his lower back, strained from carrying Elijah for so long, protested loudly. He shrugged off the discomfort; being stiff and sore was a state he was fast coming to consider normal. He had just finished pulling the sheets and comforter up over Elijah and tucking them in when a soft mrrrow sounded from behind him. Maggie trotted into the room with her usual uncanny timing, and leapt up onto the bed. She crossed to Elijah’s side and curled up against his chest, purring quietly. She fixed her steady amber gaze on Sean and for once he had no trouble reading it: ‘You go on ahead,’ it said, ‘I’ll watch out for Elijah.’

“Thanks, Maggie,” Sean said softly, and then added, “I haven’t forgotten my promise, you know. Catnip and filet mignon, as much and as often as you want.”

Maggie’s ears swiveled forward at the words, like tiny satellite dishes catching a signal, and a smile tugged at Sean’s lips as he turned away from the bed.

He shuffled more than walked over to the chair and opened the white plastic Wal-Mart bag. Inside it he discovered two pairs of men’s Levis, blue and black, a package of white cotton Fruit of the Loom boxers and one of matching tee shirts, a package of white athletic socks, and three Hanes sweatshirts in navy blue, gray and forest green. Everything was exactly the correct size for him. On the floor beneath the chair he noticed a brand new pair of running shoes, also in his size.

A fleeting image of Chris’s horrified expression when Sean turned up wearing Wal-Mart’s finest flashed through his mind. Well, she might not be caught dead, but Sean was beyond grateful to whoever had gone to so much trouble for him.

Sean gathered up the blue jeans, the forest green sweatshirt and some underwear and after one last look at the tousled dark head barely visible among the pillows, went to the doorway. There he halted, and peered cautiously into the hall, looking left and right before daring to set foot out the door. He’d make one hell of a great impression, walking around in nothing but a pair of maroon paisley silk boxers and a disturbing amount of Elijah’s blood. No one was in sight, thankfully, but as he tiptoed with exaggerated caution toward the bathroom, holding the clothes in front of him like a shield, he could hear voices rising and falling from the vicinity of the kitchen, though he couldn’t quite make out what they were saying.

His behavior felt unpleasantly furtive, as if he was an unfaithful husband beating a hasty retreat after an illicit affair with a friend’s wife. But there was no reason to feel guilty; he hadn’t actually had sex with Elijah. The voice of his conscience piped up then: But you would have if you could, and you know it. So stop splitting hairs. None of this was supposed to happen until after you’d separated from Chris.

Having gained the safety of the bathroom unnoticed, Sean quickly shut and locked the door. When he turned around, he discovered Fred regarding him with his usual phlegmatic expression.

“Sometimes having a conscience really sucks, Fred,” Sean remarked as he set the new clothes down beside the stack of magazines on the low table next to the toilet.

Fred blinked his eyes.
“Yeah, I know. It won’t be forever.” Sean stripped off his boxers and let them puddle on the floor, wishing it were as easy to shed the numerous complications in his life. “But it’ll sure as hell feel like it.”

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When Sean eventually emerged from the bathroom, he was clean, shaved and dressed, and the abrasions on his bare feet were covered in salve. He hesitated, wondering if he should return to the bedroom and check on Elijah. But Maggie could be trusted to find him if Elijah needed him, and a whiff of coffee wafting from the direction of the kitchen had his mouth watering. That herbal tea was great stuff, no doubt about it, but sometimes what a person really needed was a good strong cup of coffee—several strong cups, as a matter of fact. Not to mention some food. He hadn’t had anything solid to eat in nearly 24 hours, and he felt faintly queasy with hunger.

The same uncharacteristic nervousness that had plagued him while he waited by the front door for Dr. Holm returned as Sean made his way down to the kitchen. He had no idea what sort of reception would be awaiting him.

Although he’d heard at least two distinct voices coming from the kitchen earlier, when he walked into the room, only one person was present. It was a woman with long, silver-white hair braided and wound in a tidy coronet around her head. She was wearing faded jeans turned up at the cuffs to show the red plaid flannel lining, battered L.L. Bean boots half-laced, and a red polar fleece vest over a beige cable-knit sweater.

She was standing at the kitchen table, removing the aluminum foil from a large casserole dish, and looked up as Sean came in. Immediately a welcoming smile lit her face. It was as if a lantern had been kindled inside her, and lent her lined and somewhat careworn features a rare and special beauty. Sean’s apprehensions evaporated under its influence like morning mist in the sun.

“There you are,” she said. “We heard the shower going, and thought you must be up.”

“We?” Sean looked around, but other than Rocky perched in his favorite spot on top of the refrigerator, his cheeks bulging with food and his tiny paws deftly shelling a peanut, she appeared to be alone in the kitchen.

She chuckled. “I meant Martha Holm, not Rocky. She’s gone to sit with Elijah. I’m Katie Jenkins, by the way.”

“How do you do?” Sean walked purposefully forward with his hand outstretched. “I’m Sean Astin.”

But rather than a formal handshake, Katie Jenkins took Sean’s hand between both of hers. The joints of her fingers were swollen and distorted by the arthritis that Elijah had worried over when he and Sean met Bill Jenkins out by the Quaker Bridge, but her clasp was warm as she pressed his hand before letting it go. Tears sparkled in eyes the rich tea-brown of cedar water, and her voice trembled with emotion as she said, “I know right well who you are, Mr. Astin. Ian told Bill and me what you did for our Woodjin last night. How can we ever thank you enough? If it wasn’t for you, we might have lost him, and…” She bit her lip, obviously struggling for control.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said quietly. “And please, call me Sean.”

“Then I hope you’ll return the favor and call me Katie.” Katie Jenkins drew a shaky breath, and summoned another smile. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually such a watering pot. But Elijah is… well, we think the sun rises and sets on him, and not just because he’s our Woodjin.”
“I can understand why.” Because I think it does, too.

But though he hadn’t spoken the words aloud, the look Katie Jenkins gave him then made it plain that he didn’t need to. “I see you found your clothes. I hope they’re all right,” she said with a hint of anxiety. “I sent Bill to the Wal-Mart with a list. I’d rather have gone myself—you can’t always trust a man with that kind of chore—but I didn’t like to leave Elijah.”

“They’re perfect, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am to both of you.” Sean hesitated, thinking about the amount of money they must have spent, and then added, “If you let me know how much it cost, I can send you a check…”

Katie looked shocked. “A check? I wouldn’t hear of it. We take care of each other around here, Sean. Besides, you’re Elijah’s young man, and that makes you like family.”

Sean choked a little, turned it into a cough and raised his fist to his mouth to hide his involuntary smile. Elijah’s young man? Well, he supposed it was true, although that wasn’t exactly the way he’d have phrased it or, he suspected, the way Elijah would have phrased it either. But he couldn’t deny the idea of being Elijah’s young man, of Katie and hopefully the other pineys accepting him as such, was very, very appealing.

Apparently having decided that the issue of repayment had been settled, Katie went on, “But I haven’t asked how you’re feeling. Ian told me what happened to your poor feet.”

Her concerned gaze dropped to Sean’s bare feet, and he had to resist an impulse to hide them from view like a guilty child. “They’re fine, really. Dr. Holm said the abrasions are superficial, and I already know from experience how well this salve works.”

“Better than any of those store boughten brands,” Katie agreed. “But you best have Ian take another look at them when he gets here, just to be on the safe side.”

Sean nearly found himself replying, “Yes, ma’am,” for Katie’s speech patterns and expressions, like her husband’s, came from a quainter, more formal time, but instead he said, “I’ll do that, I promise. Do you know when he’ll be returning to check on Elijah?”

“Well, he stopped by about an hour and a half ago, but you and Elijah were still sleeping, and he didn’t like to wake you.” Katie spoke matter-of-factly, but Sean could feel his cheeks growing hot while he imagined Dr. Holm, his wife Martha, Katie plus who knew how many others, gathered around the bed while he and Elijah slept on, oblivious to their rapt audience. “He said he’d be back around 5 o’clock. That gives you plenty of time to eat before he arrives. Go have a sit down at the table, Sean, and I’ll fix you a plate. You must be starving.”

“I am pretty hungry,” Sean admitted, pulling out a chair and sitting down. “Katie, what is all this?” He gestured at the numerous Tupperware containers, crock pots, casserole dishes, pie plates and cake stands that covered one end of the kitchen table or stood on the counter. There was enough food assembled to feed a small army.

Katie smiled. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” Sean was flabbergasted. “But I don’t understand…”

“There’s not a piney hasn’t heard what you did for our Woodjin,” Katie explained. “How you stood up to the Devil for him, and carried him home, and folk have been coming by all day, bringing food and wanting to say ‘thank you’. It was like the Grand Central Station here for a while, but Martha and I didn’t want folk hanging around like a bunch of shacklins and disturbing you, so we sent them
home.” She went unhesitatingly to the cupboard where the mugs were kept and took one out. Like Dr. Holm, she evidently knew her way around Elijah’s house. “How do you take your coffee?” she asked. “Or do you prefer tea?”

“Coffee, please,” Sean said fervently. Katie chuckled again as she removed the glass decanter from the Mr. Coffee machine and filled the mug. “And black is fine, thanks.”

Katie brought him his coffee, and said, “Now, what can I get you to eat?”

“I’d really like to try a little bit of everything,” Sean said as he took the mug from her. He felt ashamed now that he had doubted his welcome, even for a moment. “I wouldn’t want anyone to feel left out, not when they’ve gone to so much trouble.” He took a large swallow of the coffee, and closed his eyes in sheer bliss. He nearly groaned aloud as it burned a path down to his stomach and caffeinated warmth spread inside him.

“Trouble? Don’t you think it for a moment.” Katie returned to the stove, and began stirring a pot with a long-handled wooden spoon; the smell of whatever was simmering in that pot set Sean’s stomach rumbling impatiently. “We’ve enough experience of heroes behind the store to know a true one when we see him.”

There it was again, that word: hero. “I’m no hero, Katie,” Sean protested, and his cheeks grew hot. But Katie only smiled and said, “If you thought you were a hero then you wouldn’t be one, now would you?”

Sean supposed that was an example of piney logic, and it made sense, in a strange sort of way.

Katie carried a soup bowl with tendrils of steam rising from it to the table and set in front of him. “You’re in for a real treat,” she said. “Marilyn Schmidt made you some of her pepper pot soup. It’s the best in the pines. You’ll want to put some of this cider vinegar in it,” she added, handing him a glass cruet half-filled with cloudy golden liquid.

Sean poured a small amount of vinegar into the soup, stirred it, and then spooned some up. It was delicious: spicy and stick-to-your-ribs thick with beef and potatoes. He was blowing his diet six ways from Sunday again, but after everything he’d been through in the past few days, what the hell, he’d earned a break.

Katie was back a few minutes later bearing a large Blue Willow dinner plate filled with cranberry potpie, sliced ham, green bean casserole, candied yams, macaroni and cheese, corn pone, and several different salads. At Sean’s expression, she chuckled again. “You asked for a little bit of everything, and this is everything except for dessert.”

“I didn’t realize how much everything there is,” Sean said, wondering how he was ever going to finish it all. “But I’ll feel strange eating by myself, Katie. Come and sit down, won’t you?”

Sean braced himself to be bombarded with questions when Katie was seated opposite him with her own coffee and a slice of orange-glazed Bundt cake, maybe even questioned about his intentions toward Elijah. But she only smilingly encouraged him to eat up, and otherwise seemed content to sit in silence.

“Have you lived in the pines your entire life?” Sean’s native curiosity got the better of him after the silence had stretched out for several minutes.

“Oh yes, I’m a piney born and bred,” Katie replied readily and with evident pride. “I’m a Brower—that’s with an ‘o’, but we pronounce it ‘Brewer’. The first Browers settled here after the Revolution.
They were Loyalists, and there weren’t many safe places outside the pines for a Tory to live, if he didn’t want to return to England or go up to Canada."

Sean nodded, recalling what Elijah had told him out by the Quaker Bridge. “What about Bill?”

“His family came here even earlier, from Massachusetts, though they were from England originally. The Jenkins’ were smugglers, like a lot of folk back then, and made a right fine living at it, too. They smuggled sugar, molasses, tea, coffee—anything they could sail up river under the noses of the Royal Navy and sell for a profit. Jenkins is one of the oldest surviving towns in the pines, and it was settled by Bill’s ancestors.”

Katie enjoyed talking, that was clear, and with a little encouragement, was soon telling Sean all about the family cranberry business that was managed by her brother Jim, about Bill’s renown in the pines as a decoy carver, and about her two sons, Bill, Jr—a state trooper who lived in Cherry Hill with his wife and the youngest of his five children—and Peter, a recently-divorced pharmacist who lived outside D.C.

“Bill and I have four great-grandchildren now and another on the way, though we don’t see them as often as we’d like. We were hoping at least one of our grandchildren would settle in the pines; they seem to like it well enough whenever they visit. But it doesn’t look like it’ll ever happen,” she said sadly. “They’ve spread out around the country, found jobs in places like New York and Chicago.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, because I can’t imagine a more beautiful place to settle and raise a family.” Sean stared out the picture window. The sun was going down, and the sky appeared very much as it had when he’d pulled over on the shoulder five days earlier: the sunset colors so varied and intense that they were almost surreal.

Oddly, he didn’t feel apprehension at the gathering darkness, or the knowledge of what was out there, roaming the woods. Of course, if he were to encounter the Devil again, he’d still be scared shitless, but now that he’d actually seen him, looked him in the eyes and lived to tell the tale, he felt different somehow. The Devil, like the Woodjin, was part of the pines—that darker part of the fairy tale—but a part of it nonetheless.

“I can’t blame them, really,” Katie said thoughtfully. “The truth is, it’s not an easy place to carve out a life, and the old ways are dead or nearly so. Soc-i-o-l-o-gists,” and the exaggerated manner in which she said the word held a fair measure of scorn, “say we had the last remaining hunter-gatherer culture in the United States. Every season had its different work, you see, and we lived in rhythm with the land, took only what it had to give and at the proper time. Folk used to be able to make a decent living at mossin’ and beating berries and coaling—my dad was a collier by trade—but not anymore. Change is inevitable, I suppose, but there are those who’d be just as glad to see the pines in the hands of developers, and covered in condominiums and malls.”

“They paved paradise and put up a parking lot,” Sean murmured, the words from an old Joni Mitchell song coming into his mind. “What a tragedy that would be.”

Katie stretched her hand across the table and held Sean’s wrist in a warm grip for a moment before releasing it. “Bless you for saying that. But maybe you understand a little now why young people don’t come and settle here and those who are born in the pines mostly don’t stay. Elijah is an exception, of course, because he’s the Woodjin, but he’s spent too much time alone with no one for company except his animals. It’s been a real worry to us that he’s had so few people his own age to socialize with. Bill and I have done our best to stand as parents to him since Warren died and his own mother couldn’t see fit to—” She broke off, obviously not wanting to say anything negative about Debbie Wood to him, and added with forced lightness, “Although try as we might, we’ve never been able to take to that music he’s so crazy about.”
Sean had to smile at that, for he could well imagine that the Jenkins’ taste in music was light years apart from Elijah’s, but his smile faded before the sudden seriousness of her expression.

“Bill liked you right off, Sean,” she said, leaning forward with her hands cupped around her mug, “and he doesn’t often take to foreigners. And more important, he could see right away how much Elijah liked you. When Elijah told us last night at dinner that you wouldn’t be coming back, that you had a girlfriend and your own life in the city, I can’t tell you how disappointed me and Bill were—we had such high hopes, you’ve no idea. But I got this funny feeling as I was climbing into bed—it happens to me from time to time, although I don’t go in for all that psychic mumbo-jumbo—and I turned to Bill and I said, ‘You mark my words, he’ll be back.’”

It had been a night for funny feelings, Sean thought. But though he felt confident that Katie would understand if he told her about the connection between him and Elijah, he wasn’t ready to share that secret with anyone. And there was something more important he had to say, something he owed to this kind-hearted and generous woman who thought the sun rose and set on Elijah.

“Katie, I won’t lie to you: what Elijah told you is correct. There is a woman I’ve been living with for a number of years, and leaving her is going to be messy and some good people are going to be hurt by my actions.” Like Anna, who had always gotten on with Chris like a house on fire, and would be crushed when she heard the news.

“I expect they will, but then life can be messy and hurtful sometimes,” Katie replied with the practical acceptance of one who had seen and endured much in her life. Sean wondered exactly what she knew about that fucker Matt and his relationship with Elijah. Elijah would undoubtedly have tried to shield her and everyone else from the worst of it, but she had to be aware that it had ended badly. “The question you have to ask yourself is whether or not it’s worth it.”

“For Elijah?”

The unthinking vehemence of his reply made Katie’s eyes sparkle with delight. “I was afraid I might’ve scared you off with all my depressing talk.”

Mack had said to him on the phone the previous day: You used to see a problem and go right for the fix. Beyond a life with Elijah, beyond his goal of becoming a doctor, Sean felt the stirrings of excitement at the idea of being a part of this community, of discovering how best he could contribute and make a difference.

“No,” he said with a smile, “you most certainly haven’t scared me off.”

“I’m right glad to hear it.” Katie smiled back. “Well now, what about another cup of coffee and a piece of my huckleberry pie—if you’ve still got room, that is.”

Sean realized with surprise that while they’d been talking, he’d finished the soup and cleaned his plate. “I’ve definitely got room. I saw the way Elijah’s eyes lit up at the mention of your baking.”

Katie was blushing as she got up from the table.

The pie was warm, smothered in cream, and one bite had Sean’s own eyes lighting up. After topping off Sean’s coffee, and accepting his compliments with shy pleasure, Katie stepped out of the kitchen to bring Martha Holm a dish of tea—as he was already coming to think of it—and to check on Elijah.

Sean didn’t linger over his dessert, delicious as it was. He was anxious to get back to Elijah himself, but there was one thing he had to do first, and that was to call Chris. He didn’t want that difficult
conversation hanging over his head like the sword of Damocles any longer. It was twenty minutes to
five, which should leave just enough time to call her before Dr. Holm arrived.

The kitchen phone was mounted on the wall to the left of the mudroom door. Sean picked up the
receiver and without hesitation, but with a heavy heart, dialed a toll-free number. Here was the first
act of a deception that, while necessary to protect Elijah, was not going to be easy for Sean’s
straightforward nature to perpetrate. When prompted, he entered a password, and then dialed Chris’s
cell phone number. His call to her would now be untraceable, no electronic footprint left behind to
lead anyone to Elijah.

“Hello?” Chris picked up on the second ring. ‘Unknown Caller’ was all that would be showing up
on her phone’s LCD display, and she could have no idea who was on the other end.

“Chris, it’s Sean.” His lips felt stiff, the words difficult to push past them.

“Well gee, how thoughtful of you to find the time in your busy schedule to call me, Sean,” she said
with exaggerated sweetness. “Let me guess: you’re calling to tell me that you’ve been delayed and
won’t be home today after all.”

Her voice was an assault on his ears after the musical lilt of Katie’s pines accent. Sean gritted his
teeth. This was going to be even worse than he’d anticipated. “As a matter of fact, yes, that is why
I’m calling. I’m really sorry, Chris; I fully intended to drive back this morning, but something came
up.” God, did that answer sound as lame to Chris as it did to him?

Apparently yes. “Came up?” Chris repeated in disgust. “I’ll bet it did. Tell me, are you being
deliberately offensive or was that honestly a slip of the tongue?”

“What?” Sean said in confusion, thrown off-balance by the unexpected angle of her attack. “What
are you talking about?”

“Oh please, don’t play the innocent with me. I’m talking about whatever woman you’re having an
affair with,” she elaborated. “I admit it took me some time to figure out what’s been going on,
because I honestly never imagined you’d do something like that. I only hope she’s not someone from
our social circle, Sean. Liz Smith and Cindy Adams will have a field day in the Post if they get wind
of it; you know that neither of those old biddies has ever liked me. Besides, now is the worst possible
time for any bad publicity that could adversely affect the company’s financial stability.”

“Chris…” he tried to break in, but to no avail.

She swept on as if he hadn’t spoken. “I thought you were simply overreacting to what happened at
New Year’s Eve, blowing things out of proportion the way you usually do. I figured a couple of
days spent sulking down at the shore and you’d get over it. But it was all pretence, wasn’t it? You
know, you missed your real calling, Sean. You should have been an actor. I actually bought into that
‘I need to get away and think about my future’ mid-life crisis shit.”

How could Chris be so right and yet so horribly, horribly wrong? The unjustness of her insinuation,
that he’d lied about his reasons for leaving the city, caused an impotent anger to well up inside him,
and he found himself holding the receiver so tightly that he was afraid he might shatter the plastic. He
would have felt more guilt about the inadvertent truth in her accusation, had it not been abundantly
plain that the only thing his supposed affair was hurting was Chris’s ego, and that its effect on
Clicktwice was far more important to her than any effect it had on her personally.

It took an effort of will to relax his white-knuckled grip, but he managed it, and said with forced
calm, “It wasn’t pretence, Chris. I’m not having an affair with another woman, and I left for precisely
the reasons I told you.”

“Then I’d appreciate an explanation for exactly what ‘came up’, Sean, and it had better be a good one.”

He ran his hand through his hair and began pacing the length of the phone cord like a tethered tiger. “I was on my way to the shore—alone—when the Beemer broke down, right in the middle of the Pine Barrens. I left my cell phone at the apartment and I couldn’t call Triple A, so I decided to go and look for help. I stupidly managed to get myself lost in the woods,” I was lured into them by the Jersey Devil, actually, “but fortunately I was rescued by one of the locals.” A young man who just happens to be able to transform into a white stag.

If the situation weren’t so deadly serious, Sean might have found some grim amusement in imagining Chris’s reaction to the real story. “I got pretty scratched up while I was stumbling around the woods in the dark, and the guy who found me very kindly let me stay at his place until I felt well enough to leave. Then I headed straight to the shore—alone, Chris—which is where I was when I left you that message. I fully intended to return to the city this morning, but…”

“But what?” Chris demanded, although she was sounding somewhat mollified.

Sean selected his next words with the utmost care, for he wanted to stick as closely to the truth as possible, but without revealing anything specific about Elijah or giving any hint of his true feelings for him. “But I found out last night that the man who rescued me was injured in an accident. He lives alone, Chris, and after how kind he was to me, it seemed the least I could do to return the favor and help him out for a couple of days.”

“I see.”

No, I really don’t think you do, Chris. Sean could picture her clearly, tapping her flawlessly manicured nails with frustrated impatience, trying, and failing, to understand where Sean was coming from.

“Let me get this straight. We have a critical directors’ meeting on Monday—possibly the most critical in the history of the company— but you’ve decided it’s more important to play Good Samaritan to some stranger—a piney, for Christ’s sake.” She said the word with a derision that roused anger of an entirely different sort in Sean’s breast, as he recalled Elijah asking him to forgive the man who had shot him, and whose ungrateful life he had just saved. “You know, if it were anyone other than you,” she continued, “I wouldn’t believe it for a second. But you’ve always had a weird fascination with that place, god knows why, and it’s exactly the sort of ridiculously quixotic behavior I’d expect from you.”

“It might seem quixotic to you, but I happen to owe that piney my life,” Sean replied, and refused to hide his anger because to do so was to dishonor Elijah, and everything he stood for. “So yes, right now being here for him is more important.”

Chris let out a long-suffering sigh, the one she gave whenever she knew she’d pushed Sean to his limit. “Fine. Whatever. Do what you have to do. But swear to me you’ll make it back in time for the meeting.”

“I’ll be back by Sunday afternoon, I swear.”

“Thank you.”

There was an awkward pause, the sort that had punctuated so many of their recent conversations,
moments when neither knew what to say to the other, as if they were strangers struggling to make polite conversation at a dinner party.

“Well, I’d better go,” she said finally. “I’m meeting some people for cocktails at 6:30 and then we’re having dinner at Jean Georges.” Her voice tightened. “I’d hoped you’d be able to join us.”

‘Some people’ meaning prospective clients you’re wining and dining, Sean thought. Chris never stopped thinking about Clicktwice; it truly was her life. It simply wasn’t his anymore, and hadn’t been for a long time. “You’ll manage just fine without me, Chris. Please let’s not get into another argument.”

“All right; forget I said it.” Expecting her next words to be good-bye, Sean was surprised when instead she said, with unusual tentativeness, “Sean?”

“Yes?” He tensed, dreading what was coming next. He hated lying to Chris, even by omission, although he knew he had no other choice.

Her voice softened. “You mentioned that you got scratched up when you were lost in the woods. Are you okay?”

Oh Chris… Why is it always too little, too late?

“I’m fine.” Then, though he knew it was childish and unworthy of him, Sean added with a hint of bitterness, “So you don’t have to worry, Chris, I won’t embarrass you in front of our Board of Directors.”

Chris was silent. “I deserve that, I suppose,” she said quietly after a few moments. “But Sean, I have been worried about you.”

Not as worried as you are upset at the thought of me missing the fucking directors’ meeting. But this time he held back the words. What good would it do, after all?

Instead he said, “I know, and I’m sorry to have caused you worry.” Sean hesitated. He hadn’t intended to bring up the problems between them on the phone, but it was dishonest to act as if it would be life as usual when he returned. “Chris, I’ve done a lot of thinking this past week, and when I get back, we have to talk. We can’t go on pretending that everything is fine between us. You and I both know it’s not, and hasn’t been for some time.”

She didn’t bother to deny it. “Can it wait until after the meeting, Sean? I can’t concentrate on anything else until that’s over.”

“It can wait,” he conceded. What was the use of arguing? He knew where Chris’s priorities lay.

After a quick good-bye, Sean hung up the phone, emotionally drained in a way that only Chris could make him. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead wearily against the cool plaster of the wall. If this was a foretaste of what lay in store for him, the next few weeks were going to be hellish ones. But I’ll protect Elijah from the worst of it. That much at least I can do.

The very thought of Elijah gave him strength; he pushed away from the wall, and then started when a sudden weight landed on his right shoulder. He turned his head, expecting to see Dr. Holm or Katie, but instead found himself staring straight into a pair of beady dark eyes, barely an inch away. It was Rocky. The squirrel had abandoned his favored spot on top of the refrigerator and must have taken a flying leap from the end of the kitchen counter onto Sean’s shoulder.

“Hey, Rocky.” Sean swallowed hard past a sudden lump in his throat, and huffed a small laugh.
“You sure picked a good time to decide you like a guy,” he said, absurdly touched by this unexpected development. He’d figured it would be years before Rocky stopped staring at him with suspicion much less sat on his shoulder wearing what looked like a sympathetic expression.

Rocky chattered something indecipherable and offered Sean a peanut. Fortunately it was still in its shell; Sean wasn’t sure he could’ve eaten one the squirrel had pulled out of his cheek pouch, and he definitely didn’t want to reject this peace offering.

“Thanks,” he said, taking it. “Funny, I was just thinking that I could really go for a peanut.” Rocky chattered again excitedly and flicked his bushy tail. “Hmm, maybe we better go find our interpreter. Hopefully he’s awake.” Because Jesus, I really, really need him.

But first Sean snapped open the peanut shell, popped one of the peanuts into his mouth, and gave the other to Rocky, who stuffed it into an already bulging cheek. It seemed only right to share it with him, seeing that they were now friends.

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Elijah was awake, and from the way his eyes instantly met Sean’s as he entered the bedroom, it was obvious that he’d been watching for him. Sean was peripherally aware of Katie and another woman sitting in a pair of chairs next to the bed, but Elijah drew him to his side like a lodestone, and nothing else existed in the world right then except a young man with kitten-fur auburn hair and eyes bluer than a cloudless summer sky.

The smile that spread over Elijah’s face when he saw Rocky, perched on Sean’s shoulder with his front paws gripping the neckline of the green sweatshirt, could have lighted the entire east coast with its radiance.

“I feel like Sally Field,” Sean confessed as he sat on the edge of the bed, and couldn’t hold back a goofy, but very, very happy grin. “He likes me. He really likes me.”

Elijah laughed, and said, “I knew he’d come around. Pineys might be stubborn, but they’re not stupid.” Rocky started chattering again, leapt down from Sean’s shoulder and in a few quick bounds, had gained the safety of his nesting box, where he was undoubtedly adding to his stash.

Forgetting, or not caring, that they had an audience, Elijah held out his left hand and Sean took it. His touch flowed straight into Sean like an electrical current, setting his nerve endings tingling with awareness and warmth. “How are you doing?” Elijah asked, his eyes searching Sean’s face.

“Shouldn’t that be my question?” Sean replied, and the contrast between Elijah’s caring concern and Chris’s near-afterthought could not have been more striking. He felt both uplifted and depressed at the same time. So many years wasted. So fucking many years. “I’m doing great, but I’m not the one with a bullet hole in my shoulder.” He ran his thumb in a light caress over Elijah’s knuckles. “What about you?”

Elijah scowled. “I want to get up, but Martha and Katie—not to mention Maggie,” and he glared down at the cat draped insouciantly across his legs, “won’t hear of it until Dr. Ian’s examined me.” He addressed his next remark to the women sitting behind Sean. “You’re both tyrants,” he complained, and Katie’s chuckle mingled with the soft laughter of Martha Holm, and drew Sean’s attention to the fact that he’d not introduced himself to the doctor’s wife. She must think him totally lacking in manners.

Releasing Elijah’s hand, Sean stood up in a hurry. “I apologize for my rudeness,” he said, turning to Martha Holm, and barely managed not to gape. The mental image conjured by her rather old-
fashioned first name was nothing remotely like the real woman who rose from her chair to greet him and laughingly replied, “Please don’t apologize; in your place I’d have done exactly the same.”

Taller than Sean by several inches, Dr. Holm’s wife was strikingly attractive, with strongly marked features, clear gray eyes and blonde hair that fell loosely around her shoulders. She wore her clothes—black jeans and black leather boots, a multi-colored woven vest and an oversized white blouse cinched at the waist by a wide leather belt with a silver and turquoise buckle—with a stylish elegance that Chris might have envied, but the hand she offered him was unadorned save for a simple gold wedding band, and her clasp was strong. She was at least twenty-five years younger than her husband, Sean judged, and his curiosity was piqued. They seemed an unlikely couple—although perhaps no unlikelier than he and Elijah, come to think of it.

But his curiosity had to go unsatisfied for the time being, because they had barely got past the handshake-and-hello stage when Dr. Holm appeared in the doorway, medical bag in hand. He looked considerably less rumpled than he had that morning: his thick white hair was combed and his sweater was on right side out. But his brusque manner was very much in evidence, and with no more than a curt nod to Sean in passing, a brief hello to Katie and a touch on his wife’s arm, he went to the bed and set down his bag.

“Well, Elijah, how are you feeling?” Dr. Holm asked, fixing him with that penetrating stare that said, ‘Don’t bother to lie, I’ll figure out the truth anyway’.

“Hungry,” Elijah complained. “And I want to take a shower, Dr. Ian. I feel like something the cat dragged in backwards—sorry, Maggie—and I hate for… well, for anyone to see me looking like this.” But he glanced toward Sean as he spoke, and it was obvious whom he meant.

As if you could look anything but beautiful in my eyes, thought Sean. He wished he could say the words aloud, but he was all too well aware of their audience. Katie was watching them with the dewy-eyed expression of one whose fondest dreams are coming true; Sean expected her to pull out a Kleenex and start dabbing at her eyes any moment, and if she did that, he’d probably start tearing up, too. And then there would probably be some sort of group hug and… oh, god.

Dr. Holm smiled faintly. “If you’ll just be patient a little longer, you can get cleaned up and have something to eat. In the meantime, maybe Katie will fetch you a dish of herb tea.” He glanced at Katie, who nodded and got up, though she clearly would rather have stayed.

“I’m sick of herb tea; I’d rather have a beer,” Elijah grumbled, as Katie left the room.

“I’m sure you would, but alcohol will only inflame the wound and delay healing,” the doctor said, prepping a digital thermometer. “And you do want to get better, don’t you?”

“Of course, but…”

Dr. Holm obviously had long experience of dealing with Elijah, and silenced his complaints by the simple expedient of placing the thermometer in his mouth. “Keep that under your tongue, and no talking,” he warned.

Sean bit back a smile at the disgruntled look on Elijah’s face. As he’d suspected, Elijah was anything but a patient patient. Of course, there were other ways of getting around Elijah’s ill humor, and Sean’s gaze was inexorably drawn to the marble pure pallor of Elijah’s chest and the rosy pink nipple that was beaded in the cool air. Sean’s eyes moved up to Elijah’s mouth, pursed around the thermometer, and the mental image that flashed into his brain then would’ve probably caused Katie to faint if she could have seen it. Good thing she couldn’t read his mind, and know exactly what he was picturing those lips wrapped around.
“Now that we have some peace and quiet…” Dr. Holm said dryly, ignoring Elijah’s scowl, and his fingers went to the sling and deftly untied it. He handed it to Martha, who had taken up a position at her husband’s side as if she was well used to assisting him. Given how distracted his mind was at that moment, Sean was content to remain where he was, with Elijah out of temptation’s reach. The irony was exquisite, really. For so many years he’d thought he was somehow lacking in that department, but now making love with Elijah was practically all he could think about, even at the most inopportune times.

But it was only practically all Sean could think about. As Dr. Holm carefully uncovered the bullet wound and discarded the soiled bandages, concern drove away every other emotion, intensified by the sudden intake of breath and soft, sympathetic, “Oh Elijah!” that escaped Martha as the full reality of what had happened hit home for her. She appeared on the verge of tears, and no wonder, for the livid bruising on Elijah’s shoulder and upper arm—a panoply of bright purples, greens and blues—outrivaled a Pine Barrens sunset in its intensity, and the bullet hole itself was raw and ugly.

“Prhf dorf wrhf Mrth,” Elijah mumbled anxiously around the thermometer. “Ahm fahn.” Although his words were mostly unintelligible, the meaning was clear: Please don’t worry, Martha. I’m fine.

Somehow it didn’t surprise Sean that Elijah would be the one offering comfort. But the wound did, at least to Sean’s less than expert eye, appear less angry-looking than it had been that morning, and no discharge was apparent from the site. Surely that was a hopeful sign.

The person who would know for certain, of course, was Dr. Holm, but he only muttered another of his seemingly endless supply of maddening ‘Hmms’ as he examined the bullet hole with his penlight. Sean had no idea if it was a good ‘hmm’ or a bad ‘hmm’. The doctor had just shut the light off when the thermometer suddenly started emitting a series of rapid beeps. He removed it from Elijah’s mouth and consulted the digital display. “100.3º. Good,” he said.

“Good? Isn’t that pretty high?” Sean questioned uneasily. Hey, 98.6, it’s good to have you back again. The silly song lyrics ran through his mind.

“Elijah’s resting body temperature is a couple of degrees higher than an average person,” Dr. Holm explained, removing the covering from the tip of the thermometer. “100.3º is perfectly normal for him.”

Sean was fascinated by this new revelation about Elijah. “Then in that case, what would constitute a fever for him?” he asked.

“Anything over-,” the doctor began, but he was abruptly cut off by a tense, almost angry-sound voice. Elijah’s voice.

“Will you both please stop discussing me as if—as if I’m dumb, and can’t speak for myself? I’m not the stag now—I’m me, Elijah.” Splotches of scarlet had blossomed on his cheeks, neck and chest, and his voice was literally shaking with the force of his emotion.

A shocked silence fell in the wake of his outburst. Elijah looked at Sean, and with a sickening sensation, Sean understood that this was the heartfelt distress of a young man who had been badly wounded by that cruelest weapon of all: words. You’re a freak. No one normal will want anything to do with you.

“My resting body temperature is higher than other people,” he said, speaking now to Sean and only Sean, “and for me a fever is anything over 101.5º. My blood is a type that has no match, so Dr. Ian has to collect and store it, in case I ever need a transfusion. I can’t eat meat or take simple medicines like antibiotics and aspirin because they make me sick.” He held Sean’s gaze bravely, but there was a
flicker of apprehension in his eyes as he added, “It’s not just the pedicles. There’s so much about me that’s different, Sean.”

It was obvious that the effect of Matt’s words would not be easily erased—they had burned into Elijah’s soul like acid. Time and a lot more reassurance were going to be necessary to convince Elijah that Matt-the-Fucker (as Sean now thought of him) couldn’t have been more wrong.

Dr. Holm’s expression was impassive, but his eyes were intent, flicking back and forth between Sean and Elijah as if he was a spectator at a tennis match.

“Elijah, we’re all different to one degree or another,” Sean said quietly. “Plenty of people can’t take penicillin or tolerate aspirin. Did you know that I’m allergic to monkfish? It makes me break out in hives—not a pretty sight, let me tell you. The thing is if you really love someone, those differences don’t matter.” He tried to put into his smile then as much love and reassurance as he possibly could. “They certainly don’t matter to me. In fact, they only convince me that you’re even more special than I already knew you were.”

Elijah’s eyes had never looked more intensely blue, rimmed in pink and shining with unshed tears. “Sean, I’m…” he faltered, but his apology died unspoken before the decisive shake of Sean’s head.

“You’re going to let Dr. Holm finish what he needs to do, and then you’re going to have a shower, something to eat, and more rest,” Sean said with the calm authority of one who helmed a multi-billion dollar corporation. “Okay?”


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Sean left Katie and Dr. Holm to assist Elijah with showering and changing, while he and Martha went to the kitchen to get some dinner together for Elijah and the doctor. It was the most sensible division of labor, if not exactly Sean’s first choice. But to put him and Elijah together in the bathroom alone (well, except for Fred, whose imperturbability was, Sean thought, one of his most endearing character traits) was unwise. He doubted he could help Elijah undress and wash without succumbing to the temptation to do more. For someone who had always prided himself on his self-control, this was a humbling realization.

They exchanged a lingering and regretful look before Sean left Elijah to finish his herb tea, while Dr. Holm affixed a temporary water-repellent bandage to the wound and Katie hovered nearby like an agitated mother hen with her only chick.

A small television on a stand in one corner of the kitchen was tuned softly to the evening news while Sean and Martha worked in companionable silence. They heated up casseroles and dished food onto plates for Elijah and Dr. Holm, who, Martha informed him ruefully, almost never slowed down long enough to take a lunch break.

There had been an almost palpable shift in the atmosphere in the bedroom after Elijah’s whispered ‘Okay’. The closing of a circle was the best way Sean could put it to himself, as if on some deeper, more intrinsic level, he’d been accepted by the Holms as part of Elijah’s life and world.

“Ian was right about you,” Martha commented suddenly as she added some of the cranberry potpie to her husband’s plate. “He said you’d be good for Elijah, and you are. You found exactly the right words to say to him.” She gave him a sidelong glance, her mouth quirking up at one corner. “Although I imagine you would have preferred to do so without the audience.”
Sean was startled into laughter by the unexpectedly blunt observation, and thought how refreshingly honest she was—no surprise in the wife of Ian Holm. “I didn’t mind, Martha, but I’d prefer that the audience not make a habit of appearing in our bedroom while we’re sleeping.”

“If it’s any consolation to you,” Martha replied, a twinkle remarkably like her husband’s lurking in her clear grays eyes, “the only ones who saw you were Ian, Katie and me.”

“Oh, it definitely is. When Katie said it was like the Grand Central Station here, I had visions of a line snaking through the bedroom and someone collecting tickets at the door.”

It was Martha’s turn to laugh. “No, it was nothing like that, though we had quite a job keeping people out. To say that they’re all anxious to meet you is a vast understatement.” She gave him another of those sidelong looks. “I hope you won’t mind me saying this, but you have no idea how difficult it was not to run home and get my camera. The two of you looked so beautiful together. In fact, I’d love to photograph you and Elijah some time.” She smiled at the taken aback expression on his face. “I didn’t mean like that, although if I thought you’d agree…” She left the sentence dangling invitingly.

“You’re really serious.” He wondered what Elijah would think of the idea.

“Oh absolutely,” Martha assured him. She picked up a bread knife and started slicing a loaf of homemade bread—real homemade bread that had been kneaded by hand, not the kind that came from a bread machine. “Elijah’s one of my favorite subjects, you know. I’ll have to show you the photos I’ve taken of him. They’re some of the best work I’ve ever done. Of course, he’s any photographer’s dream to shoot. The camera simply adores his face, and he has those extraordinary eyes.” Her voice turned thoughtful; her hands momentarily stilled. “But it’s more than that. Most people have some degree of self-consciousness when they know they’re being photographed. It’s only natural to worry about how you’ll appear and what the camera might reveal. But Elijah never thinks about it—he’s simply himself, every movement, every pose is completely artless.”

A mental slideshow of images flashed through his mind: Elijah tugging an ugly gray hat over his hair… hugging Paco… cradling a baby squirrel in his hands… laughingly detangling Rocky’s paws from his hair… sinking to the carpet in the family room with unconscious grace… He knew exactly what she meant. “I’d really love to see those photos,” he said.

“Then you shall,” Martha promised. “Perhaps I should explain that I’m a photojournalist by profession—a semi-retired photojournalist since I married Ian and moved to the pines seven years ago.” She held out a couple of slices of the bread, and Sean took them and set them along the edge of Elijah’s nearly full plate.

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“No, I’m a native Californian, although I’ve lived all over—wherever my work took me. This is the longest I’ve ever spent in one spot since I graduated from college.” Martha went to the refrigerator and opened the door.

“Then you didn’t grow up here?” he asked, helping himself to a slice and biting into it. He still felt hungry, and the enticing aroma of the yeasty warm bread was too much to resist.

“No regrets?” The question slipped out, and Sean immediately caught himself. “I’m sorry, Martha. That was rude. It’s none of my business.” But he couldn’t deny he was curious, for here was someone who had made a life choice very similar to the one he was making.

Martha removed the butter dish from a shelf and closed the door. “I don’t mind. Under the circumstances, I think you have a right to know. Possibly more than you realize.” Sean wondered what she meant. “I came here for the first time eight years ago, on assignment from National
Geographic to take photos for an article on Pine Barrens history and culture. I arrived, like most people, with a boatload of misconceptions and preconceived notions about this place. They didn’t last long, and now I honestly can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“I subscribe to National Geographic;” Sean commented, “but I don’t remember ever seeing that article.”

“You wouldn’t have, because it never got published,” Martha replied with a wry expression. “I had an accident the day I arrived. I was photographing one of the old bog iron mines, and fell and fractured my ankle. My own stupidity, of course, as Ian never fails to remind me—I should have hired a local guide. But it did lead to our meeting, as I never fail to remind him.”

She gave Sean a look then that he couldn’t interpret. “Of course, I could have finished the assignment at a later date, but by then I had decided it would be better not to bring any more publicity to the pines.”

“Why?” Sean asked curiously.

“Because Ian wasn’t the person who found me; it was Elijah.”

There was a silence while the implication of her words sank in, and Sean, with a thrill of understanding, put two and two together. “Dear god,” he breathed. “You’ve met the white stag.”

“Yes,” Martha said softly. “I’ve met the white stag: a creature straight from the pages of a fairy tale, more beautiful than dreams.” She half-chanted the words, in unconscious echo of Sean’s own thoughts that never-to-be-forgotten night. In her clear gray eyes Sean saw reflected the same child-like sense of wonder in the presence of true magic that he had experienced, and he could tell that for her, the memory of that encounter was as vivid now as it had been eight years earlier.

“But unlike you,” she went on, “I didn’t discover the truth right away. In fact, it wasn’t until I’d known Ian for nearly a year that I was told. I sometimes wonder if he ever would have told me, the habit of silence about the Woodjin is so deeply ingrained in him and everyone else here. It was Elijah himself who finally spilled the beans, not surprisingly.” Then Martha laughed. “You don’t know from stubborn until you’ve lived among pineys for a while, but there are no kinder-hearted, more generous people anywhere. So, to answer your question, Sean: I have absolutely no regrets. One of these days when we have more time, I’ll tell you the entire story of my encounter with the white stag. But right now,” she said more prosaically, setting her husband’s dinner plate on a tray, “there’s a hungry Woodjin and his doctor waiting to eat.”

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Sean helped Katie into her coat. “If you need us for any reason, you just give a holler, Sean,” she abjured him as she put one arm in the sleeve. “It doesn’t matter if it’s the middle of the night, me and Bill will come right over.”

“Well, I’ll do that, I promise,” Sean replied, lifting the heavy red wool up and over her shoulders. “Although I hope it won’t be necessary.” And he meant that in more ways than one.

Over Katie’s coronet of white hair, his eyes met Martha’s, and the special bond they now shared arced between them. She smiled sympathetically, and Sean was fairly certain that she had caught the underlying meaning in his words.

Dr. Holm tugged on his brown leather gloves and gave Sean a considering look from under lowered eyebrows. “I doubt it will be necessary. Elijah’s doing remarkably well. But of course, if there’s any
question at all, you should call me. Otherwise, I’ll see you in the morning, Sean. Seven o’clock sharp, mind you.”

By the faint emphasis the doctor placed on the word ‘sharp’ and the sudden twinkle in those observant blue eyes, Sean was absolutely certain that Dr. Holm had caught the underlying meaning, but he managed (with some difficulty) to maintain a bland expression as he replied, “Thank you, Dr. Holm. Of course I’ll call you if there’s any question about Elijah’s condition.”

“Good,” Dr. Holm said, and then added irritably, “But if you call, for god’s sake, use my given name, young man. You make me feel about 130 years old.”

First Rocky, now Dr. Holm, Sean thought irrepressibly. Take that, Sally Field.

As they said their good-byes, Sean felt immeasurably relieved to know that these three good people were there for Elijah, and for him, if necessary. But please god, it wouldn’t be necessary, and this time he was thinking only of Elijah’s safety and wellbeing.

“Goodness, I almost forgot,” Katie said, stopping halfway down the front steps and turning back. “I have something for you.” She fumbled awkwardly in the pocket of her vest with her mittened hand. “I found this in your windbreaker, and I thought you’d want it.”

He took a small object from her outstretched hand. It was the cat’s eye shell that he’d picked up on the beach and thought that Elijah might like. Funny, he thought as his fingers closed around the shell’s smooth convex surface, but that seemed a lifetime ago now.

“Katie, thank you.” He was touched that she would have gone to the trouble to rescue something that to many people would seem of little value or importance.

“It was a gift from the sea,” she replied, “and we can’t treat those lightly, now can we?”

“No, we can’t,” agreed Sean. In the world from which he came, such a sentiment would be thought mad indeed, but not here. This is where I truly belong. He felt it more strongly than ever.

Not until he was satisfied that both cars had started in the bitter cold, and the red taillights were receding down the snow-covered drive, did Sean finally move.

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When Sean rejoined Elijah, he was propped up in bed by a mound of pillows with Maggie sprawled along the length of his left leg, and an issue of the NME open on his lap. He was wearing a blue-striped flannel pajama top that concealed his freshly bandaged right shoulder, and it was hard to believe that not quite twenty-four hours had passed since Elijah had been shot. His strength and resilience were truly remarkable.

Once again, Elijah had been watching for him, and once again their eyes instantly met as Sean came through the door. The world stuttered to a halt, and Sean’s stomach plummeted as if he’d plunged straight off the edge of the earth and was freefalling through space.

He went to the bed and sat down in the same spot that he had occupied earlier when he brought Elijah his dinner. Then, as now, Elijah smelled enticingly of bayberry and mint toothpaste and the pines, and his shining auburn hair clearly had not a drop of off-putting gel in it, but instead was thick, plush and inviting his touch.

“Anything interesting in the magazine?” he asked, while their eyes held an entirely different, wordless conversation.
“Reviews of about ten new CDs I’d love to buy,” Elijah said, closing the magazine and setting it aside without taking his eyes from Sean.

“Put them on your Amazon wish list,” Sean advised.

“How did you know I had one?”

“Anyone as crazy into music as you are has to have an Amazon wish list,” he teased. He would have to find out Elijah’s user name, he thought, and he also needed to know when Elijah’s birthday was so he’d have an excuse to buy him everything on his wish list. He’d learned enough about the stubbornness of pineys to be certain Elijah would put up a fight otherwise. “Now, tell me how you’re feeling.”

“I’m feeling fine,” Elijah said, “and I’d love to get up for a while. I think I’m growing roots into this mattress.” He wriggled a little as if to prove the point, but Sean refused to be distracted.

“Nice try,” he retorted, “but it’d be worth my life if I let you get up. Ian gave me very specific instructions before he left: If you have to sit on Elijah to keep him in that bed, do it.”

Maggie gave an affirmative meow, and placed one orange paw on Elijah’s leg as a reminder that he needed to stay right where he was.

“Another conspiracy,” Elijah complained, but good-naturedly, as if he’d known it was a long shot. “Although if you were to sit on me,” he added, with a definitely flirtatious glance at Sean, “I don’t suppose I’d mind it too much.”

Sean grinned, and dug the cat’s eye shell out of the front pocket of his jeans. “Here, I have something for you. I found this on the beach day before yesterday. I thought you might like it, although I didn’t know then if I’d ever have the chance to give it to you.” He held out the shell with its delicately whorled center and bands of black and gold. Elijah took it in his good hand.

It felt intrinsically right that the first present he should give to Elijah be not something bought with his millions at a trendy shop in Trump Tower or even from an Amazon wish list, but a gift from the sea, as Katie had called it. Elijah’s reaction was exactly what he would have expected, too.

“It’s beautiful, Sean,” Elijah exclaimed, examining the shell closely. “I’ve never seen such a perfect cat’s eye. What do you think, Maggie?”

Maggie’s ululating response was impossible to decipher.

“What did she say?” Sean asked.

“That it doesn’t look anything like a cat’s eye,” Elijah laughed. “She can be very literal sometimes.” He held it to his nose and sniffed. A delighted smile curved his lips. “It smells like the ocean.” He flicked his pink tongue out and touched it to the shell, leaving a tiny damp spot behind. “And tastes like it, too.”

Elijah’s transparent enjoyment in such a simple gift delighted Sean, while his sensuous exploration of the shell had an entirely different effect—all the more so because the eroticism of his actions was so completely unintentional. A shiver of anticipation raced through him as he imagined Elijah exploring him with the same thoroughness, smelling and touching and tasting him.

Elijah next put the opening of the shell to his ear; eyes half-closed, he listened intently.

“Can you hear the ocean?” Sean asked quietly, and the question was tinged with sorrow for all the
oceans, lakes and rivers that Elijah would never see in person.

“The waves are more of a sigh and murmur than a crash,” Elijah said, and then leaned forward and placed the shell to Sean’s ear. “But you can hear them. Listen.”

Sean’s hand instinctively rose to cover Elijah’s and hold the shell in place. He closed his eyes, trying to focus on what the shell was saying, not on how perfectly Elijah’s cupped hand fit inside his own, as if they were a pair of Russian nesting dolls. Elijah’s hearing must be unusually keen, he realized, for what he heard was not a sigh or a murmur, but only a faint whisper.

He opened his eyes, and caught Elijah watching him, much as he had that day out by the cedar swamp. Only this time, Elijah didn’t look away, didn’t blush, but instead held Sean’s gaze, making no attempt to hide the love shining in his eyes. And why should he? A small voice inside said. You’re his now, and he’s yours, and everything between you is good and right.

Better than good and right, Sean decided a moment later, as a warm arm slid around his neck, and Elijah hugged him. “Thank you,” he said into Sean’s neck. Careful not to jar the injured shoulder, Sean wrapped his arms around Elijah’s waist, reveling in the touch of that lean but firmly muscled body against his own. How had it taken him so long to understand that this, this was what he craved? Or maybe it was only Elijah whom he craved, Elijah and no one else.

But simply holding Elijah wasn’t enough to satisfy his craving, not when soft flannel covered skin that was even softer; yielding to temptation, Sean slid his hands beneath the hem of the loosely buttoned pajama top and skimmed them up and across the narrow wings of Elijah’s shoulder blades and then down again to the tender hollow at the base of his spine, claiming every square inch of bare satin skin in between for his own.

Elijah drew in his breath sharply, and let it out on a muffled gasp.

“Are my hands too cold?” Sean asked in concern. He lifted them slightly; heat radiated from Elijah’s skin, warming his palms as if he held them at a wood stove.

“No,” Elijah whispered, “just please… don’t stop.”

So Sean didn’t. He let his hands wander where they would, exploring the swell of firm muscle and the hard edge of bone, and then playing lightly over each rise and dip in Elijah’s spine, like a musician fingerining the frets on the neck of a violin, drawing wordless hums of pleasure from Elijah as if he was indeed an instrument tuned to Sean’s touch.

“That feels so good,” Elijah said in a dreamy voice, rubbing his cheek against Sean’s sweatshirt and pressing closer. “You feel so good.”

There was a silence then broken only by the hiss and pop of pine resin from the logs burning in the fireplace and the soft, quick inhale and exhale of Elijah’s breath as Sean’s fingers teased along the elastic waistband of his pajama bottom.

Then softly Elijah said, “I’m sorry for behaving like such an idiot before, Sean. I wish I could promise that it won’t happen again, but Dr. Ian can tell you what a terrible patient I am. You’re going to have to put up with me for the next few days, I’m afraid.”

Instinctively, Sean stiffened; his hands stilled. At the tensing of his body, Elijah lifted his head and drew back. “What is it? What’s wrong?” His worried eyes searched Sean’s face.
Sean sighed and moved his hands to Elijah’s hips, lightly resting them there. He should have known it was too good to last. “Elijah,” he broke the news as gently as he could, “I have to return to New York on Sunday morning.”

“But that’s the day after tomorrow.” Elijah couldn’t hide the depth of his dismay. “Do you really have to leave so soon?” His happiness dimmed, as if a cloud had passed over the sun.

“I’m afraid so,” Sean said, wishing there was any way to soften the blow. “The Board of Directors of Clicktwice is meeting on Monday. If it was any other time, I’d find a way to get out of it, but I simply can’t, not now. It’s too vitally important that I be there.”

Without a second thought, Elijah set aside his own disappointment. “That sounds pretty serious,” he said quietly. “Can you tell me about it?”

The spell had been broken, shattered by the realities that existed outside the pines. Reluctantly, Sean dropped his hands and linked them loosely on his thigh. His shoulders bowed under the double yoke of duty and responsibility that were going to separate him from Elijah, and far too soon. As he’d said to Fred in the bathroom earlier, it really sucked sometimes having a conscience.

“Well, to make a long and pretty boring story short, last fall we were approached by a company interested in buying Clicktwice,” he began, and recalled Chris’s reaction: an instantaneous and almost fanatic opposition to the very idea of selling the company. When Sean had suggested mildly that they at least talk to the company’s representatives rather than reject the proposal out of hand, she had gone ballistic. It had led to the worst fight they had ever had, and, inevitably, to Sean’s capitulation.

“It was Google, wasn’t it?” Elijah said unexpectedly, and then looked self-conscious and slightly embarrassed as Sean stared at him in surprise. “I did an Internet search on your name,” he confessed, “There was an article that mentioned it.”

“You looked me up on the Internet? I’m flattered,” Sean said lightly, hoping to ease Elijah’s embarrassment, but humor quickly died. “If you read the article, then you know we turned down a pretty substantial offer.”

“$1 billion, it said. It’s kind of hard to wrap my mind around an amount like that.”

“Sometimes it’s hard for me to wrap my mind around it,” Sean replied ruefully. “But Google hasn’t given up, they know our software can improve the advertising they have on their site—make it less intrusive and more useful to their users—but they aren’t the only player in the game now. Microsoft has started putting out feelers, too. If we were in the market to sell the company, there couldn’t be a better scenario then to have those two involved in a bidding war. But despite the fact we aren’t in the market, there’s still a very real possibility that one of them could end up acquiring Clicktwice, whether we like it or not.”

“But it’s your company,” Elijah said, puzzled. “How can they make you sell it if you don’t want to?”

“It’s not ‘my’ company anymore, Elijah; Clicktwice went public a few years ago. Its fate is in the hands of the shareholders and Board of Directors. Right now, given the amount of money involved—considerably more than the original $1 billion Google offered—there’s a great deal of incentive for us to sell, and increasing pressure from within and without to do so.”

“I don’t understand how they could do that to you, when you’re the one who started the company.” Elijah set the cat’s eye shell down on the bed and placed his hand over Sean’s. “That’s not right,” he said indignantly.
Sean stared down at that hand: small, scarred and calloused. He would never forget how it had soothed him out of a nightmare and into dreamless sleep, before he even knew to whom it belonged. It had been a lifeline then, and it was now, and he believed with all his heart that it always would be.

“It’s not a question of right or wrong, Elijah,” he replied. “It’s a business decision, and sentiment isn’t going to hold much sway when billions of dollars are involved.” Sean laced his fingers through Elijah’s. “But please don’t feel too badly on my account. It’s my employees who will be most affected by a takeover. They’re the ones I’m worried about, not me. They could stand to lose their jobs under new management. It happens all the time—the ‘new broom sweeping clean’ phenomenon. I don’t want to see a lot of good people, people who have devoted years of their lives to Clicktwice, kicked in the teeth like that.” He held Elijah’s gaze, asking for his understanding.

“That’s why I have to go back. For them. I couldn’t live with myself if I just stepped aside and let the worst happen without a fight, and Monday’s meeting could get contentious, no doubt about it.”

“Of course you can’t just step aside,” Elijah said without hesitation, “and besides, the threat of the company being taken over against your will has to be difficult for you, too. After all you’ve devoted more years to it than anyone.”

Though he was deeply touched by Elijah’s concern, Sean wasn’t going to pretend anymore. He’d played that game for far too long.

“I’m more than ready to let Clicktwice go. I should have sold the company years ago when I’d made enough money to pay off my dad’s medical bills, and ensure that my mom and Mack would never lack for anything for the rest of their lives. I didn’t, because until I met you, there was nothing else in my life worth leaving it for, and the company matters so passionately to Chris.” He shrugged. “It was easier simply to… drift, I guess you could say, keep working and piling up money I don’t need or know what to do with. I’ve never aspired to own yachts or mansions or belong to an exclusive country club and play golf every weekend.”

“Sean…” Elijah began, stopped, began again, hesitantly, “I know it’s not really any of my business, but exactly how—how rich are you?”

Sean rubbed his thumb along the back of Elijah’s hand, trying to soothe away the tension that had gathered there. “Before I answer your question, there’s something we need to settle, Elijah. Everything about me is your business now, and I don’t have any secrets from you. So please don’t ever think you can’t ask me questions. Okay?”

Elijah nodded slowly. “Only the same thing has to go for you, Sean, because it hurt to keep the truth from you. It hurt a lot. I don’t want you to think I’m a secretive person.” That hurt, and the hurt that came from a lifetime of guarding his secret, was reflected in his eyes. Elijah paid a painful price for protecting his identity as the stag, when his nature was to be open, honest and giving.

“I could never think that, Elijah, and you don’t have to worry that I’ll hesitate to ask you questions,” Sean stated calmly. “In fact, I guarantee that pretty soon you’ll be wishing I’d just shut up and stop making you answer so many.” That caused a reluctant grin to tug at Elijah’s lips. “But to answer your question, my net worth right now is about $250 million.”

“250 million dollars?” Elijah repeated, his grin vanishing to be replaced by an appalled expression.

Sean had to laugh. “That’s not the usual reaction I get, Elijah.”

“It’s just—well, it’s so much money.” Elijah sounded troubled, and a frown line had appeared between his brows.
“Yes, it is, although compared to the Bill Gates of the world, I’m small peanuts,” Sean replied. “But it’s an absurd amount of money for one person to have, and if I’ve learned one thing, it’s that it most definitely can’t buy you happiness. In fact, after you’ve been burned a few times, you start to question whether anyone cares about you for yourself or if all the flattery is just meaningless bullshit designed to get something out of you.”

Elijah bit his lip, clearly struggling against an outburst of some sort. “I hate to think of anyone treating you like that,” he finally said in a small voice, and his fingers clenched around Sean’s almost painfully. “I hate it. Can’t you, I don’t know, give all the money away or something?”

“I’ve thought about giving it all away, believe me,” Sean said. “You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about it. But it’s not that simple, and I’d be lying if I said that being wealthy doesn’t have some advantages. For one thing, it’s enabled me to set up a cancer research foundation in memory of my dad. I’ve poured millions into that. I sit on the boards of numerous charitable organizations, too, as I think told you. I try to give when and where I can, and there’s definitely satisfaction in being able to help those who are in need. But what I said to you once before is true: anyone can write a check. Helping others the way you and Ian do—hands-on, lifelong work—is where the greatest fulfillment lies. I never meant to spend my life running a corporation.”

“Have you given any thought to what I said to you before you left?” Elijah asked. “About going back to school to become a doctor, I mean. I just know you’d be a fantastic doctor, Sean, and Dr. Ian has said a hundred times at least that he’d love to have a partner in his practice. I’m sure he’d happy to have you.”

A vision sprang up before Sean’s eyes then, of him living a busy, useful life as a doctor here in the pines with Elijah. An almost giddy sensation swept over him, but he said, a little slyly, anticipating Elijah’s reaction, “You’re getting ahead of yourself, Elijah. I’ve only just requested catalogs for post-baccalaureate programs. It’s going to be a while before I’ll actually have my medical degree.”

“Oh Sean.” Tears were suddenly standing in Elijah’s eyes. “You mean you’re going to do it?”

“I am. I really am. I’m going to be a doctor.” It felt so incredible to say the words aloud to the person who was responsible for giving him back his dream.

They came together in an embrace of pure, undiluted joy. “I’m so proud of you,” Elijah said, and in his voice Sean heard an echo of his father, the only other person who had ever truly believed in him.

“I’ve got a long, tough road ahead of me,” Sean reminded him, but he was smiling, because it was a road he was anxious to set out upon, and in his mind’s eye he could see his dad and the proud expression on his face. “Remember, I haven’t been in school for a lot of years, and I’m pretty sure I’ve forgotten most of the science I ever learned.”

“I can help you with your studying, and I’m sure Dr. Ian will help you, too, and you can accompany him on his rounds and get an idea of what it’s like,” Elijah’s voice was animated, his eyes bright as stars, and he was chattering nearly as excitedly as Rocky. “We can talk to him tomorrow morning when he comes to see me, and maybe next weekend you can go with him.”

At Elijah’s words, Sean came crashing back to earth with a sickening jolt. Shit. He still hadn’t told Elijah everything he’d decided. It seemed beyond cruel to ruin Elijah’s joy in this moment, but he had no choice.

Elijah was staring at him. The excitement slowly drained away and his face fell. “You’re about to tell me something else I don’t want to hear, aren’t you?” he said, with a valiant attempt at humor.
Sean ran a frustrated hand through his hair, dropped it, and sighed. “Elijah, until this is resolved—not only what is happening with the company, but my separation from Chris—I’m not going to be able to come back to the pines or see you. In fact, no one in my life except my brother Mack, who already knows about you, will even be aware that you exist.”

There was silence while Elijah absorbed the news. A shadow passed over his face, leaving a troubled expression in its wake. “I don’t understand, Sean. Why is that necessary?”

“Because, ridiculous as it might seem, when the news gets out that Chris and I are separating, the media, especially the local media, are going to jump on the story. There’s going to be a lot of speculation and gossip, and I don’t want reporters coming here, harassing you and your friends and family.” Sean thought of the Post’s gossip columnists, with their long-standing grudge against Chris. He imagined what a field day they’d have if they discovered not only that he’d left her, but that he’d left her for a gay man who lived in the Pine Barrens. God. Just imagining what they might write made him sick. But beyond that, he was haunted by his conversation with Ian Holm about the dangers to Elijah if his identity as the white stag was uncovered. “I could never forgive myself if through me your secret was discovered.”

“I don’t care,” Elijah said, his jaw set in a stubborn line. “I’m willing to take that risk.”

“But I’m not willing for you to take it,” Sean said bluntly. “Elijah, you have no idea the lengths to which some of these reporters will go for a story. I could tell you tales that would curdle your blood. It will make our separation so much easier to endure if you’re safe out of the mess until it’s over. Please try to understand that I only want to protect you.”

When Elijah said nothing, Sean continued, “Even if I had never met you, I would have left Chris, and sooner rather than later. The reason I was on my way to the shore in the dead of winter was because I needed a quiet place to think about my future with her, to decide once and for all to end our relationship. So you see, this would have happened anyway, and there’s absolutely no reason for you to be involved.”

“Except for how much I’ll miss you, Sean.”

The simple statement bruised Sean’s heart. “We can still talk on the phone.” It was small consolation, but the best he could offer. “I’m going to set up a private number just for your use. You won’t be able to call me at work unless it’s an emergency, but we can talk every night. No, we will talk every night, I promise you.”

Elijah’s head was bent, hiding his expression, but Sean could see the bob of his Adam’s apple when he swallowed, as if there was a constriction in his throat. “How long will it be before you can come home?” he asked in a low voice, agreement, however unwilling, implicit in the question.

Home. There was a constriction in Sean’s own throat. This was indeed his home now: the home of his heart. “I’m not sure. A lot will depend on Chris, and how difficult she decides to make things. We never married, which legally creates some gray areas, but fortunately we do have a written property and financial agreement.” He smiled wryly. “Chris was the one who insisted we have it, and that we update it regularly, and it’s a damn good thing she did. Not that that doesn’t mean there won’t be lawyers involved, of course, but I don’t intend to fight her over anything.”

The smile morphed into a laugh devoid of amusement. “Although all we’ve done for months is fight, or so it seems,” Sean said. “It’s ironic as hell, you know. The same personality traits that made us so compatible in the workplace are the ones that drove each other crazy when we started living together. We never should have tried to be more than colleagues and friends. The fact is that Chris will be more upset by my leaving the company than she will by my leaving her.”
“Like I said to you before, Chris is an idiot.” There was a fierceness in Elijah’s voice that stunned Sean, an almost feral intensity that spoke to something inside him that he had never before known existed.

The pines scent around Elijah intensified, as if his stag nature, the protector, had come to the fore. It was intensely arousing, and in an instant, the atmosphere inside the room changed, turned electric. The pupils of Elijah’s eyes expanded, until only a thin rim of purest blue was left, burning around the edges like the sun during a total eclipse.

“We studied a poem in school once,” Elijah said, “I can’t remember the name of the author or title, but there’s one line that stuck in my memory. But at my back I always hear, Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.”

“To His Coy Mistress’ by Andrew Marvell,” Sean supplied, and understood exactly what Elijah meant, what he wanted. Their entwined fingers were suddenly slippery with sweat; a heated flush crept over his body and a drumbeat began to pound in his veins. “Are you trying to say that I’m coy?”

“No, I’m saying that I don’t want to waste anymore time. I want to make love with you, Sean.” Elijah disentangled his fingers, and cupped his hand possessively at the back of Sean’s neck. He stroked his thumb against the short hairs at the nape, raising goosebumps along Sean’s skin. “Now.”

There was a muffled thump as Maggie jumped off the bed; neither noticed.

“You know, the only line of that poem I can remember is this...” Raising his hands to frame either side of Elijah’s face and looking deeply into his eyes, Sean quoted softly, “Thus, though we cannot make our sun stand still, yet we will make him run.”

“I like that line better,” Elijah whispered, as he pulled Sean toward him. “Let’s make him run like the Devil’s at his heels.”

“You’re sure you feel up to this?” Sean had to ask.

“Sean?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you shut up and kiss me?”

This kiss was as different from the sweet and simple one they’d exchanged that morning as a kitten was from a full-grown tiger; as if they could indeed hear Time’s winged chariot hurrying near, their mouths opened desperately to each other, and neither wasted time but immediately deepened the kiss, slanting their mouths first one way then the other, accidentally bumping noses and laughing breathlessly, then diving in again.

Sean could not get enough of the taste of Elijah, a taste smoother and richer than the finest single-malt Scotch whisky, and even more potent. It went straight to his head; instinctively, with barely a thought for Elijah’s injured shoulder, he pushed the younger man down into the pillows then planted one knee on the bed and swung his other leg over so that he straddled Elijah’s blanket-covered thighs. His jeans pulled uncomfortably tight across his growing erection, but Sean ignored the discomfort and with impatient, shaking fingers fumbled open the buttons of Elijah’s pajama top and pushed the sides apart. Then, like a starving man at a banquet with too many glorious dishes to choose from, Sean simply stared.

Elijah looked… he looked… For once, words failed him. Sean wished he were an Andrew Marvell,
a poet who could do justice to the sight before him: Elijah, watching him with heavy-lidded eyes, the pupils so dilated now that they appeared almost completely black. His cheeks were flushed and damp with perspiration, his lips were swollen and red, and his chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Sean…” Elijah held out his good arm, and the smile that curled the corners of his lips would have made the Mona Lisa envious. Mysterious, seductive, and knowing, it challenged and invited him to continue what had been started.

Bracing on his left arm, Sean leaned in, and buried his hot face in Elijah’s neck. He inhaled the intoxicating scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses, and then found the pulse beating furiously at the base of Elijah’s throat. He soothed it with lips and tongue, and then moved on, planting wet, open-mouthed kisses on Elijah’s exposed neck, and soft, brushing kisses along the silken smoothness of his left shoulder. He searched blindly for a tight-budded nipple, found it, and then rolled it between thumb and forefinger. Elijah gave a wordless cry and arched his back, fingers fisting helplessly in green cotton.

“Elijah,” Sean breathed the name against his skin like a prayer. “Elijah.” He shifted downward to take the nipple in his mouth and suckle it, while he reached for the hem of his sweatshirt, desperate now to remove it and feel that supple, satin skin against his own.

“Elijah.”

For a moment, Sean thought it was his own voice speaking, until the voice called out, in very feminine tones that cut through the erotic haze like a knife, “Elijah, we’re here. I brought you the Shiner Bock you wanted, but you’ll have to get it out of the car. My arms are full.”

“Oh gollykeeper!” Elijah exclaimed, sitting up so fast that Sean was knocked off-balance and toppled onto his back with a startled exclamation. “It’s Hannah! I totally forgot that she and Jordan were coming to visit this weekend.”

“Gollykeeper?” A hysterical sort of half-laugh, half-moan of dismay escaped Sean, induced entirely by panic at the thought of being found in bed with Elijah again, but this time by his sister and in the middle of having sex. He righted himself and scrambled off the bed like a man demented—which was more or less how he felt. He had never been so aroused in his entire life, and he thought he might literally explode with frustration.

“It’s a pines cuss word,” Elijah explained, erupting into helpless giggles at the sight of Sean frantically and futilely trying to tug his sweatshirt down to cover his blatant arousal. “Here.” He grabbed the NME and thrust it at Sean. “Take this.”

It was no use, Sean thought, as he held the opened magazine with forced casualness in front of his crotch. They were doomed. Even if Hannah couldn’t see his erection, the atmosphere in the room fairly shouted ‘hey, we’re having sex’. He kept his eyes averted from the sight of Elijah, with his tousled hair, kiss-roughened lips and pajama top hanging wantonly from one elbow, and desperately willed his body to behave.

Moments later, a diminutive whirlwind blew into the room, a whirlwind with short platinum blonde hair, an adorable brown-haired, brown-eyed toddler balanced on her hip and a quilted diaper bag slung over her shoulder. Even had Sean not known who she was, he would have guessed, for Hannah bore a startling resemblance to her older brother.

“Elijah, you could at least have…” Hannah began, and then her eyes, large and expressive blue eyes a few shades paler than Elijah’s, fell on Sean. They moved questioningly from him to Elijah, and Sean could see the exact moment she noticed the white bandage and sling, no longer hidden from
view by the pajama top. He would rather she have noticed his hard-on, he decided, as her face went chalk white with shock.

The child on her hip was holding out his arms toward Elijah, burbling happily, “Lijah! Lijah!” But if Jordan was happy, his mother was anything but.

“Oh my god,” Hannah exclaimed in horror, and her accusing stare fell squarely on Sean. “Oh my god. What have you done to my brother?”
The character of Pete Gunner is partially based on a real Piney. Legends mentioned in this chapter come in part from John McPhee's *The Pine Barrens*. The explanation for the Jersey Devil is not one I made up, but the one that I felt best fit this story (for obvious reasons). The recounting of Emilio Carranza's story is based on a memorable RL encounter that a friend and I had with a Piney :-) Lastly, those of you who cry easily might want to have some Kleenex at hand.

Sitting on the sofa in the family room, Sean leafed slowly through the pages of one of Hannah Wood’s sketchbooks. Like the other he’d seen, it was both an astonishingly detailed catalog of the flora and fauna of the pines, and a feast for the eyes. It was also a reminder.

*I have to return to the shore to get my drawing and close up the house,* he thought, and mentally calculated the extra hours it would take to detour there before heading back to New York on Sunday. Extra hours that could have been spent with Elijah.

This time he didn’t even allow himself the thought that he didn’t want to go; he *had* to go, that was all there was to it. He would make the most of the limited time that he and Elijah had left—even if, he thought ruefully, they didn’t succeed in spending any of it alone, as seemed likely now that
Hannah and Jordan had arrived. Sean had wrestled his aching, protesting body into submission, but he couldn’t help wishing that Hannah had showed up just half an hour later. They’d been so close… But fate seemed to be conspiring against them.

Realizing that he’d just turned several pages without seeing them, Sean forced himself to slow, to concentrate, to go back and give the drawings the attention they merited. But it wasn’t possible to concentrate fully when at that very moment Elijah and his sister were discussing Sean. He understood why Elijah had asked him to leave him alone with Hannah, once she’d calmed down enough to *listen* and Elijah had convinced her that Sean was neither a murderer nor a rapist, and that it was not at all necessary to call the police.

Understood, but he definitely didn’t like it. Sitting on his hands and waiting was not something at which he had ever excelled—especially right now.

It was clear that of all the people around Elijah whom he loved—Katie, Ian, Martha, Bill—Hannah was the most important and influential. Her opinion would carry heavy weight with him. Sean couldn’t believe that it would ultimately have any effect on Elijah’s feelings for him, but he didn’t want to be an obstacle between Elijah and his sister, especially as the younger man had already suffered the loss of his father and temporary estrangement from his mother. Elijah needed Hannah in his life.

When Sean had left the room, Hannah was still looking piney-stubborn and stormy-eyed, but Elijah, cradling his nephew Jordan in his good arm, had been wearing an expression of such love and tenderness on his face that tears began to prickle in Sean’s eyes. The toddler obviously adored his uncle equally in return. No surprise there.

Sean stroked Maggie’s soft fur while he turned a page of the sketchbook with his other hand. Her small body vibrated under his palm with the force of her purring, and he took comfort from that. She was so attuned to Elijah that if he was in any distress she would surely know.

“So look at this, Maggie,” Sean said, angling the sketchbook toward her. A flower of a blue so intense it hardly seemed possible glowed in the center of the page. “It’s called gentian, but maybe ‘Elijah’ would be a better name for it. It’s the closest thing I’ve seen to the color of his eyes, though I doubt even this is quite as blue. What do you think?”

Maggie contemplated the drawing with an expression that was almost scarily human, and then uttered a low *mrrrowr*.

“I’ll take that as an affirmative,” Sean said, and somehow it didn’t feel strange, holding a ‘conversation’ with Maggie. “I wonder if the first Woodjin had eyes similar to Elijah’s.” He recalled that odd vision he’d had out by the cedar swamp, when it had seemed for a moment as if he was looking through different eyes at an Elijah from a different time. Rarely had he been anywhere in which he felt so strongly the presence of those who had gone before, as if he might actually glimpse shadowy figures if he glanced quickly enough in the right direction...

What Maggie might or might not have replied to Sean’s comment, he never discovered, for just then her ears flicked forward and she was the one who glanced around—toward the door. Almost immediately thereafter, a sound of swift footfalls could be heard, heading in their direction. Sean closed the sketchbook, set it aside and climbed to his feet just as Hannah Makoare entered the room.

She didn’t pause or utter a single word, only ran forward and threw herself at Sean, who staggered a little under her slight weight and instinctively put his arms around her. She clung to him, burying her face against his chest, and her thin shoulders were shaking under the oversized black cardigan that was belted around her narrow waist.
Sean had the distinct impression that Hannah was no longer angry.

“Hey,” he said, rubbing a comforting hand between her shoulder blades when she showed no sign of stopping, “I’m really not that bad, you know. I shower every day and use deodorant, too. Elijah could have made a much worse choice.”

A watery-sounding giggle remarkably like her brother’s escaped Hannah and she glanced up. Her face was streaked with tears, but she was smiling.

It was so odd, Sean thought. Here he was holding a young and attractive woman in his arms, a woman who closely resembled her very attractive older brother, if a more feminine, slighter version of him. But nothing stirred inside him when he looked into her prominent blue eyes. *Good thing, too,* an amused voice inside him piped up, *as she’s a married woman.*

Hannah’s smile faded, and her expression grew solemn. She pulled back a little, her hands resting lightly at his waist, and said, “Elijah told me what happened: how he was shot,” her voice faltered, “and how you found him and carried him home. How you stood up to the Devil for him.” Fresh tears welled up in her eyes. As Katie had done in the kitchen earlier, she took his hand between both of hers. “You saved my brother’s life. I can never thank you enough.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Sean replied, and hoped fervently that she wasn’t about to use the dreaded ‘H’ word.

But Hannah didn’t use the ‘H’ word. “I do,” she said passionately. “I do have to thank you. Because it wasn’t only Elijah you saved last night. If you only understood,” she added in a whisper, and the tears flowed faster, “exactly what it means to me and my husband Lawrence.”

“I can make an educated guess.” Like a swift-blooming wildflower after a summer storm, knowledge suddenly grew inside him. The seed had been planted not by any one particular event or comment, but several things that Elijah had said or inferred, and by the deep love he and Jordan so clearly shared. “It’s Jordan, isn’t it?”

Hannah nodded, and digging a tissue out of her sweater pocket, wiped her eyes. “Yes. He’s going to be the next Woodjin, and if it wasn’t for you, he’d be growing up without Elijah to teach him everything he’ll need to know.” Her lower lip began to tremble and she pressed the crumpled tissue to her mouth.

“You, sit down.” Sean put his arm around her shoulders and guided her down onto the sofa then sat down beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she’d gained control of herself. “But Elijah was only fifteen when our father died, and I saw what it did to him, having to take on that responsibility so young and before his training was complete. Oh god, I don’t ever want that to happen to Jordan.”

“It’s a burden no teenager should have to assume, much less a young child,” Sean agreed, thinking of his sixteen-year-old self, trying desperately to hold his family together after his dad’s death. His mind turned to a question he hadn’t yet had a chance to ask Elijah, and he asked it instead of her. “Hannah, if you don’t mind me asking, how did your father die? Elijah told me there was an accident, but he didn’t elaborate.”

Hannah hunched forward, platinum-blonde head bowed, forearms on her jeans-clad thighs. “Dad was called,” she said softly, twisting the damp tissue between her fingers. “It was late winter. There was a man who’d gone ice fishing on one of the lakes, and he’d fallen through the ice.” Her expression was far off as she gazed down the path of memory, but her fingers with their fuschia-
tinted nails continued to fret at the tissue. “Dad’s weight as the stag was too heavy for the ice to bear, so he transformed and went in to rescue him. He never should have done it,” she added sadly, “but he couldn’t *not* do it, because he was the Woodjin.”

Bare footprints in the snow. Sean could see them with his mind’s eye, and Elijah curling his freezing toes into his father’s down jacket, desperately trying to keep them warm. Dear god, to have voluntarily walked naked into frigid water… It was practically tantamount to committing suicide. Hypothermia would have set in within minutes. But Elijah would have done, he would *do*, exactly the same thing, and without a moment’s hesitation. Sean shivered—and not with the cold.

“Elijah sensed something had gone horribly wrong with Dad—he always knew. They had this sort of…connection. Elijah called Dr. Ian and they went to find him. Dad had managed to get the man to safety, but he’d been panicking and nearly drowned Dad and it was so cold. Dr. Ian tried to save him, but… it was too late.” Hannah’s voice was the mere thread of a whisper. “I don’t think Dr. Ian has ever forgiven himself, but it wasn’t his fault.”

“Oh god, I’m so sorry, Hannah,” Sean said, and reached out to touch her hand. It was cold and trembling.

“Dad lived just long enough to give Elijah his ring and his blessing.” Hannah turned her tear-stained face to Sean. “Do you know what Elijah’s first duty as Woodjin was? It was to block the memory of the man whose life Dad had saved, so that he would never remember that he owed his life to Warren Wood. Can you imagine what that must have been like for Elijah? He’d always hated that part of his training anyway.”

Sean’s throat was tight. “I can’t imagine.” The level of guilt Elijah felt about blocking Sean’s memory was even more readily explained now.

“I remember the first time Elijah was called,” Hannah went on. “It was only a couple of months after Dad died. Mom begged Elijah not to go, but he had to, he *had* to, and we sat together in the dark kitchen holding hands and praying that he’d be okay.” She fixed Sean with a look profoundly sad and yet at the same time fiercely proud. “The hardest part of loving the Woodjin is the waiting, Sean. The not knowing.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to take up needlepoint or sudoku or something,” Sean said lightly, “to pass the time until he comes home. But Hannah, the waiting won’t be quite the same for me. We don’t know for certain, but Elijah and I seem to share the same sort of connection he shared with your dad. I think I’ll always know if he’s okay.”

There was something very much like wonder in her eyes then. “That’s what Elijah said. I still find it hard to believe.”

“Before I met your brother, I would have told you it was impossible, not just hard to believe,” Sean said frankly. “I was skeptical of anything that smacked of the supernatural, and I thought I’d left my childhood fascination with magic and fairy tales behind me for good.” He huffed a small laugh. “No one could have been more shocked than I was to discover that real magic does exist, or that I could experience someone else’s pain as vividly as if it were my own.”

“I hope you understand just how rare it is for a Woodjin to share such a bond with anyone besides another Woodjin.” There was a frown line between Hannah’s brows, and she sounded troubled.

“I do understand, and please believe that I don’t take the knowledge lightly,” Sean tried to reassure her, but Hannah didn’t appear particularly reassured by his words.
“I’m protective of my brother, even if he is older than me,” she said. “Too protective, he’ll tell you, and I suppose in a way he’s right. But ever since I married Lawrence and left the pines, Elijah has lived alone, and I feel horribly guilty about that. He won’t even discuss our moving here, or at the very least me and Jordan living with him during the week, and believe me I’ve tried.” Hannah sighed. “My brother is not only the most selfless person in the world, but also the most stubborn. He’s right that it wouldn’t be a very practical solution, given Lawrence’s job— he’s a movie stuntman, in case you didn’t know. As it is, Lawrence misses out on opportunities for work because he isn’t based in the LA area. But that doesn’t stop worrying about Elijah from being practically a full-time job.”

Her mouth twisted into a rueful smile. “I’d list all the reasons why I worry, except we’d be sitting here until the cows come home, and you can probably guess what some of them are. But you might not be aware just how much the process of transforming takes out of Elijah, even when he hasn’t been injured. It’s exhausting for him, Sean, and it hurts that there’s no one waiting to take care of him the way Mom and I used to.” Maggie, curled at her side, let out an offended-sounding meow, and Hannah bent to kiss her on the head. “Sorry, Mags. I know that you and Rocky and Fred do the best you can.”

Having witnessed that electric surge of energy for himself, Sean had no doubt that it was exhausting, and required enormous reserves of strength. Thank god Elijah was able to tap into that strength last night, he thought, or Hannah and I wouldn’t be having this conversation, but a very different one.

“Hannah, I promise you that it won’t be like that for much longer. Soon I’ll be there to take care of him when he comes home.”

But these words didn’t seem to reassure Hannah any more than his earlier ones had.

“Elijah said that you’re leaving on Sunday to go back to New York,” she remarked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Sean admitted. “I have a lot of loose ends to tie up before I can move here permanently.”

Hannah studied Sean for a long moment, her expression somber. “You know, I may be a piney, Sean, but I’ve lived outside for a few years now. Your world isn’t a mystery to me, but to pineys like Katie and Bill, it is. They may have done some traveling, but the pines are all they really know, all they really want to know. Elijah is…” she sought for the right words, and then said, “he’s everything to them, and so is his happiness.”

We think the sun rises and sets on him, Katie had said.

“What exactly are you driving at?” Sean asked, figuring there was no sense in beating about the bush. He might as well know where he stood with Elijah’s sister.

“That to them you’re like manna from heaven—a sort of white knight riding to Elijah’s rescue, and they aren’t going question the whys or wherefores or wonder if you’re simply too good to be true,” Hannah replied with equal bluntness. “I’m sure Katie is totally over the moon, and everyone else is almost as eager as she is to accept you as Elijah’s partner, because they so desperately want him to be happy.”

“Is that what you think? That I’m ‘too good to be true’?”

It was a crushing disappointment, but he should have realized that things had gone much too smoothly thus far. He could only hope that this was simply a bump in the road to his future with Elijah, not a patch of treacherous sugar sand to bog them down.
“I think that you met my brother under the most dramatic circumstances anyone possibly could, and
that it’s only natural for you to have a romanticized vision of this place,” Hannah said. “But I can’t
help but wonder what will happen later, when the glamour has worn off and you discover what it’s
really like here and what you’re up against. Like I said, I live in the outside world, and it’s nothing
like the pines, Sean. Yes, we’ve got most of the modern conveniences now, but there are no trendy
stores, no Starbucks on every other block. The fact is, a lot more people leave the pines than ever
come to live here. It’s too quiet and too isolated.”

“Martha seems to like it here well enough,” Sean commented reasonably. It was difficult to restrain
himself from bursting into an impassioned defense of his commitment to Elijah and a life in the pines,
but he held back the flood of words. From Hannah’s standpoint, his relationship with Elijah must
seem improbable at best and doomed to failure at worst.

“Martha’s situation is very different, Sean. She and Dr. Ian can leave the pines at any time, and for as
long as they like. You and Elijah will never be able to do that. The most my brother can spend
outside the pines is a few hours, and even that is terribly hard for him, because if something were to
happen and he wasn’t here to prevent it, he would never forgive himself. He’s tied here, and
therefore so are you, unless you’re prepared to go places by yourself.”

“I’m a businessman. I’ve traveled all over the world,” Sean said. “There’s absolutely nothing left that
I have to see.”

“What about your family and friends?” Hannah challenged him. “Will you give up seeing them?
And if you don’t, then how exactly are you going to explain to them that they can never meet Elijah
unless they come here? How will you deal with a lifetime of lying to them? You can never tell them
the truth about Elijah, Sean. Have you considered that?”

“Hannah…” Sean tried to interrupt her, but she was on a roll now, and there was no stopping her.

“Please don’t get me wrong, Sean. I love my brother more than almost anyone in the world, and
nothing would make me happier than for him to have someone permanently in his life. But he’s
already been hurt once, and I don’t want him hurt again.”

“Hannah…” Sean tried again.

But Hannah swept on, her hands now clenched into fists on her thighs, “Has Elijah told you about
our parents yet? About how their marriage was poisoned and nearly destroyed because of what my
dad was, because of the risks he had to take and the reality that being Woodjin had precedence over
everything else—even his own family?”

“As a matter of fact yes, I have told him,” said a mild voice from across the room. “Sean knows all
about Mom and Dad and he knows about Matt, too. And it’d be real nice if you let him get a word in
edgewise, Han, although I suppose he might as well get used to the way you highball over people,
seeing that he’s going to be part of our family.”

Sean’s startled gaze found Elijah standing in the doorway. He was clutching the wood frame with his
good hand, and Sean was up and moving before the last word had left his mouth.

“Elijah, what are you doing out of bed?” he exclaimed, torn between fear at the damage Elijah might
have done to himself and frustration that he’d defied Ian’s orders. Without giving the younger man
time to answer, he swooped in and picked him up, sliding one arm beneath his knees and the other
around his shoulders. Ignoring the protests of his still-tender back muscles, Sean carried Elijah to the
couch and set him down. Then he knelt in front of him and took his left hand, noting anxiously how
cool it felt. “What kind of crazy ass stunt was that?” he demanded, frustration winning out.
“Jordan fell asleep, so I thought I’d better come and stop my interfering busybody of a sister from harassing you,” Elijah replied, giving Hannah an exasperated glance. “I just knew she’d start in on you, even after she promised me she wouldn’t.”

“I don’t care,” Hannah said stubbornly. “You and Sean barely know each other, and you’re talking about him moving in with you. Sweetie, you’re too naïve and trusting for your own good, and you’re setting yourself up to be hurt again, I just know it.”

A sound eerily like that of a whistling teakettle escaped through Elijah’s now-gritted teeth. His cheeks were suddenly flushed and his eyes stormy. “You forgot to add the bit about me not understanding what people are really like in the outside world.”

“They bring their fear and intolerance here with them.” His voice softened. “But they also bring their goodness, like Martha did, and now Sean.”

As their heated conversation passed back and forth over Sean’s head, it barely made an impact on him; he was too absorbed in carefully pulling back Elijah’s pajama top to examine the bandage over his bullet wound. But it was still a pristine white with no signs of seepage. Letting the flannel fall back into place, he sat back and released the pent-up breath he’d been holding. He was, he discovered, literally trembling with reaction. “Elijah, I… you…” Words failed him. He wanted to hold Elijah close in his relief, but Hannah’s presence inhibited him.

“I’m sorry,” Elijah sounded truly contrite as he transferred his gaze to Sean. Raising Sean’s hand to his lips, he kissed it. “I really am sorry for worrying you.”

The simplicity of the gesture, the way those blue, blue eyes held his own, making him feel once more as if they were the only two people in the entire world, undid Sean, as did the press of exquisitely soft warm lips against his skin. He let go fear and frustration, and the trembling subsided.

“I’m beginning to think worrying will be a permanent condition,” Sean joked weakly, and gave Elijah’s knee a little reproving shake before getting up and sitting down beside him on the couch.

Hannah was observing them closely. Her lips were compressed, her eyes troubled, and Sean had little difficulty in deciphering her thoughts. She was wondering who he really was—a knight in shining armor who had saved her brother’s life and won his heart, or a self-centered bastard from the city who would end up breaking that same heart. But his corporate leader’s eloquence and his impressive vocabulary weren’t going to convince Hannah of his sincerity. Only time would do that.

“Hannah, you look like a progger who just got bit by a snapping turtle,” Elijah commented, and then added gently, “I understand why you’re concerned after what happened with Matt, but I’m not making a terrible mistake this time. Have a little faith in my judgment, okay?”

“You can’t know that,” argued Hannah, who seemed prepared to go another 12 rounds with her brother. “I met Matt, don’t forget. He seemed like a really nice guy, too, and he acted like he was crazy about you.”

Sean opened his mouth to protest at the comparison—how could Hannah possibly put him in the same league as Matt-the-Fucker, who had rejected the very essence of Elijah’s soul? But Elijah beat him to the punch.

“He was crazy about me until he learned the truth, and then he decided I was some sort of freak. But
Sean…” Elijah turned his head to smile at Sean, and his eyes were shining, dazzling as a cloudless summer sky. “Hannah, learning the truth has only made him love me more.”

At her brother’s simple statement, the wind went out of Hannah’s sails. Sean couldn’t say she looked happy or reconciled, but she appeared at least temporarily resigned. It was a start. As for Sean, the imprint of that dazzling smile was burned on his retinas as if he’d been staring straight into the sun, and he wondered anew how he could possibly have been so lucky as to win the love of this fearless, beautiful, magical young man.

“Well, now that we’ve settled that, how about some ice cream and a movie?” Elijah proposed brightly, relaxing back into the sofa. At Sean’s dumbfounded expression, he said, “Oh come on, Sean, now that I’m here you have to let me stay.”

Sean’s eyes met Hannah’s, and simultaneously they started to laugh.

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Hannah volunteered to get the ice cream, but said she had to put Jordan to bed in his cot first. “Don’t start the movie without me,” she warned, and then added with a grimace, “I just hope Jordan doesn’t wake up. He slept in the car part of the way here, but he didn’t nap at all before that and he’s going to be very cranky tomorrow if he doesn’t get enough sleep.”

Elijah closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment. “Jordan won’t wake up,” he assured her. “He’s out like a light.”

“You Woodjins can be very useful to have around sometimes,” Hannah joked. She gave her brother a quick hug and a kiss, and got up.

“Where will Hannah and Jordan sleep?” Sean asked after she’d gone.

“Next door to me, in Hannah’s old bedroom,” Elijah said, with a rueful look. It wasn’t at all necessary for him to elaborate on what that meant. “But I was thinking that after you move in, we can use my parents’ old bedroom—the one you slept in. It’s larger than mine, and then we can turn my room into a study for you. You’re gonna need someplace quiet to do your schoolwork.”

“Are you sure about that? I don’t want you to feel you have to turn things topsy-turvy for me, Elijah.”

Elijah colored a little and looked down at his lap. “I know this place isn’t anything like what you’re used to. I want you to be happy and comfortable here.”

“Hey,” Sean said, putting his arm around Elijah, “the only thing I need to be happy and comfortable is you. Well, okay, and a mattress for us to be comfortable on. I’m getting too old to sleep on the floor.” He studied Elijah’s downturned face. “Aha, you’re smiling. That’s better. We’ve got enough to worry about without adding anything superfluous to the list. I love this house and I did from the moment I first saw it. We’re going to be as happy as a… well, what would a piney say?”

“As happy as a skunk in a whirlwind,” Elijah supplied, and his smile widened.

“A skunk in a whirlwind?” repeated Sean, grinning. “Oh, I am definitely going to use that expression at the Board meeting on Monday.” He was rewarded by a giggle. “Now, what are we going to watch?”

“How about Empire Strikes Back?” suggested Elijah. “Have you ever seen it? I’m a total Star Wars geek, and that’s my favorite of the trilogy.”
“I saw it when it was first in theaters, but not since then. All right, *Empire Strikes Back* it is.” He got up and went to the entertainment center and browsed through the DVDs until found the right case. Truthfully, space fantasies weren’t his thing, but he’d sit through a 24-hour *Star Wars* marathon if it made Elijah happy. He snapped open the case, removed the shiny silver disc, and then studied the DVD player.

“Sean?”

“Yeah?”

“Hurry up. We’re missing a golden opportunity here.”

“Good point.” Sean punched the ‘open’ button, hastily dropped the DVD into the carriage, and closed it. Then he grabbed the remote and returned to the young man who was holding his arm out to him in invitation.

Already kissing those soft lips felt like coming home, their shape and touch intimately familiar to Sean in a way that Chris’s had never been. Mindful of Hannah’s imminent return, they resisted the urge to deepen their kiss, but kept it light and almost teasing. After a few minutes their feline sentry sounded the alarm, and they separated with only a lingering regretful look, one final brush of lips on lips, and none of the frantic haste that had resulted from Hannah’s earlier interruption.

By the time Hannah appeared, Sean was aiming the remote at the TV and Elijah was cuddling Maggie in his lap. She gave them a suspicious look as she set a small tray containing three bowls of peanut butter Kandy Kake ice cream, spoons and napkins on a side table, but if she guessed what they’d really been up to in her absence, she decided not to say anything about it.

Despite his valiant attempts to stay awake, Elijah was soon yawning and his head nodding. Long before Han Solo was dropped into the carbon freeze chamber, he had fallen sound asleep. Sean rescued the half-empty bowl of ice cream from his slack fingers and set it on the tray. Elijah had come to rest against Sean’s side, but his head was at an awkward angle, so Sean adjusted their positions; he didn’t want the younger man to end up with a stiff neck. Hannah was covertly watching him as he gently shifted Elijah’s head into the crook of his shoulder, and he sympathized with her obviously conflicted emotions. But she was just going to have to deal, he decided.

They continued to watch the movie, but Sean suspected that Hannah was paying as little attention to the action on the screen as he was. The climactic moment between Luke and Darth Vader didn’t come remotely close to competing with what he saw in his mind’s eye: that shining look of pure love that Elijah had given him. Having bestowed his heart, it seemed that Elijah would hold nothing back, allow no one, not even his sister, to put a damper on his joy. It was this, of course, that worried her: her brother’s willingness to say, ‘I love and am loved in return’, to open his heart so completely to someone he had barely met. Hell, in her place, he’d be worried, too.

Hannah, biting at her lip, continued to shoot surreptitious glances at them. Finally, she said softly, “I want to apologize if I’ve given you the impression that I don’t appreciate what you did for Elijah last night. I truly meant what I said, Sean: I can never, ever thank you enough.” She began swirling the dregs of her ice cream around with the spoon. “Sometimes I think my brother is too good for this world, you know? He will never willingly believe the worst of anyone. He was even making excuses for the guy who shot him. I wish he had a shell like Fred to protect him, but then he wouldn’t be Elijah anymore.”

“What I think is that your brother is good for this world,” Sean replied seriously. “He has a capacity for empathy and forgiveness that can only bring out the best in others. Meeting Elijah was a profoundly life-changing experience for me, Hannah. He restored my faith in dreams, and showed
me that it’s never too late to pursue them. Even if I never saw him again, I’d carry that gift with me for the rest of my life.”

“Do you really love my brother?” Hannah burst out. “Enough to put up with all the deception and difficulty it will involve?”

“I do.” Two simple words into which he put as much conviction as he possibly could.

“If you ever betray him…” she said in a low, fierce voice, gripping the handle of the spoon as if it were a dagger.

“You can have what’s left after Dr. Ian is through with me,” Sean promised. “But I won’t betray him, Hannah. I give you my word.”

She studied him for a long moment, and then said, “I’m not going to lie to you and claim that I’m totally okay with this, Sean, not when it’s all happened so fast.”

“As long as you’re willing to give me a chance, so years from now, when Elijah and I are celebrating our golden anniversary, I can remind you of this conversation.”

Hannah smiled faintly. “If that day ever comes, I hope you will remind me.”

The closing credits were now rolling across the screen to the distinctive John Williams score. Sean picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

“I guess we’d better get Sleeping Beauty here back to bed,” he said.

“His is beautiful, isn’t he.” Hannah gazed down at her peacefully sleeping brother with tenderness in her eyes, and then her lips quirked into a wry grin. “God, it’s a good thing he can’t hear me say that. He’d be so pissed.”

Sean shifted around and slid his arm beneath Elijah’s thighs. “I expect he’d be even more pissed about this,” he remarked as he braced the backs of his knees against the sofa and rose slowly to his feet, cradling Elijah to his chest.

A sudden twinkle lurked in the back of Hannah’s prominent blue eyes. “Oh, I’m not so sure. My brother’s quite the romantic, you know. And he’s always had a thing for fairy tale princes.”

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Hannah went on to her bedroom with a quiet ‘good night’, after helping Sean get Elijah settled in his bed. Like Jordan, he was out like a light, and didn’t so much as stir as Hannah held back the covers and Sean gently set him down. After she’d gone, he played their conversation over in his mind. They’d reached a rapprochement of sorts, he thought, and it seemed she was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt as he’d asked—after all, she’d left them alone, hadn’t she, and without so much as a hint that Sean should find someplace else to sleep.

Of course, Hannah might assume that he was sleeping in the spare bedroom, Sean decided as he smoothed the comforter with the palm of his hand. But it was out of the question. He would only toss and turn and fret with worry about Elijah. Better he should stay here, where he could keep an eye on him. Climbing into bed with Elijah was also out of the question; the knowledge that Hannah and Jordan were sleeping on the other side of the wall was enough to squash that idea.

So instead, he went to the fireplace and added more logs, for the air was cooling; the wind had picked up again, and a soft whistle could be heard in the chimney. When he was done, Sean went to
the window and pulled back the curtain to look outside. The moon was high overhead and brighter
than the previous night. Tattered shreds of cloud raced across its face and the snow glittered silver in
its light. He wondered where the Devil was. Out roaming the pines looking for mischief, or did he
have a bolt hole somewhere? An image of a dank, dark, bone-strewn cave came into his mind. Sean
shivered and let the curtain drop.

He grabbed a stack of the NME, deciding he might as well begin familiarizing himself with the indie
bands Elijah loved. He settled in one of the chairs that Katie and Martha had brought into the room
earlier, and started to read. At some point in the midst of perusing an interview with an obviously
famous musician of whom the entire world appeared to have heard except for him, Sean dozed off,
chin drooping to his chest.

When Sean awoke with a start some time later, the room was dark; the fire had died down to a few
glowing embers. He peered blearily at the digital clock on the bedside table: 5:11 a.m. There was a
weight on his shoulders, and he realized that someone had draped a blanket across them to keep out
the cold. How odd, he thought, and then his eyes, adjusting to the darkness, revealed a sight that
caused him to throw back the blanket and leap to his feet in a panic. The bed was empty.

Elijah was gone.

Okay, okay. Sean cautioned himself. He probably just had to use the bathroom. Or maybe he was
thirsty and went to get a drink of water. It would be like Elijah to see Sean sleeping and decide not to
wake him, but instead cover him with a blanket, thinking as always of others before himself.

We are so going to have a talk about this, Sean decided grimly as he headed for the bathroom,
intending to barge right in and give Elijah a piece of his mind. But the bathroom door was ajar, and
when he flipped on the light switch, he discovered only Fred, shut up tightly in his shell. All right,
they’d have their little talk in the kitchen instead. Only Elijah wasn’t in the kitchen either, nor was
there any sign of Maggie.

Shitshitshit.

Cold fear clawed at Sean’s guts. This was too eerily reminiscent of the other night. Had Elijah been
called and Sean had not known? Despite what he’d said to Hannah, they had no real proof, after all,
that the connection between them was more than a one-time freak occurrence. God. God. Elijah
could be out there in the pines again, wounded and weak… The thought was even more terrifying
now that he’d seen the Devil face to face. Shit. Why hadn’t Elijah woken him? Instead of a talk, I’m
going to kill him when he gets back. That’s all there is to it.

Briefly, he contemplated waking Hannah, but almost immediately decided against it. Unless it
proved absolutely necessary, it was better not to involve her. There was no point in sending her into
a panic, too.

He pushed through the door to the mudroom, where he discovered Elijah’s boots and coat missing.
Not called then, but for some unknown reason, he’d felt compelled to go outside. Then Sean noticed
that the lights in the barn were on, and his panic subsided a little. Elijah must have woken up early,
and instead of staying in bed like any sane person who was recuperating from a bullet wound, had
felt it his duty to get up and go muck stalls or something. Yes, I’m definitely going to kill him.

Sean returned to the spare bedroom, and with jerky, impatient movements put on the running shoes
Katie and Bill had bought for him. As he tied the laces, he plotted his course of action: go to the
barn, hogtie Elijah, drag him back to his bed and chain him there. Hopefully before Ian Holm
arrived, discovered that Sean had been a total failure as a caretaker and killed him. Assuming that is
that Hannah didn’t get to him first. Well, at least Elijah and I will both be dead, he thought with grim
humor.

When he stepped outside, the intensity of the cold literally stole his breath. Hunching his shoulders and tucking hands beneath his armpits to keep them warm, Sean jogged stiff-legged across the yard to the barn. The door handle was so cold that it practically burned his palm. He slid the heavy wooden door open just enough to squeeze through, as Elijah had once done, and quickly closed it. The propane heater in the ‘hospital’ was running and a rush of warmth greeted him, as did the sight of an ugly gray hat pulled haphazardly over bright auburn hair.

Sean was almost dizzy with relief, for a part of him had been wondering what on earth he would do if it turned out he was wrong, and Elijah wasn’t in the barn after all.

The young man was kneeling on the bare wood floor with his back to Sean, and he was wearing his flannel pajamas under his fleece-lined barn jacket. Maggie was sitting beside him.

“Elijah,” Sean said quietly, holding onto the frayed ends of his patience with difficulty, “would you care to explain exactly what you think you’re doing?”

Elijah glanced back over his shoulder. His face was set and serious. “I’m glad you’re here, Sean,” he said. “I was just going to send Pete to get you.”

“Pete?” So focused had he been on Elijah’s kneeling form that he hadn’t even noticed that there was a second person in the room. A gaunt-looking older man with long gray hair under a faded blue cap with a logo for a charter fishing company was crouching opposite the young man. He had on faded Levis, duck boots laced with frayed twine, and a stained and patched canvas jacket belted around his middle with an old leather belt. Everything he wore looked as if it had seen better days at least ten years earlier, and to Sean’s startled gaze he looked like nothing so much as one of the homeless men who slept on lengths of cardboard in the subways.

“This is Pete Gunner,” Elijah said. “Pete, I’d like you to meet my friend Sean Astin.”

“How do you do, Pete?” Sean said. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

Pete glanced up at him, nodding and barely making eye contact before looking away. He said in a soft, slightly slurred voice, “I brung the Woodjin a fox. She’s been hurt bad.”

Sean moved closer and looked over Elijah’s shoulder; an involuntary gasp escaped him. “Oh Jesus,” he breathed.

Resting on its side on a moth eaten brown blanket was a red fox: a truly magnificent animal with thick sable-tipped fur of burnished orange and a bushy tail that looked as if its tip had been dipped in white pain. But the fox’s left hind leg was encased in rusted steel, like the victim of some bizarre medieval torture device. Jagged metal teeth bit cruelly into the skin halfway between paw and hock, and blood was trickling down, staining the blanket almost black. The fox was panting, her ribcage rising and falling rapidly, and her mouth was open, lips curled back in a rictus of pain to reveal sharp white teeth.

Nausea rose up in Sean. It was a trap. The fox had been caught in a trap.

“How can I help, Elijah?” he asked quietly, kneeling down beside him. His anxiety and frayed patience seemed petty and immaterial now.

“We have to spring the trap and free her leg,” Elijah said. “But it requires both hands, and I only have one, and Pete isn’t strong enough.”
“I’m sorry I bean’t able to do it, Woodjin,” Pete apologized.

“It’s all right, Pete,” Elijah reassured him. “Sean can help.”

Pete transferred his gaze to Sean, something that seemed to take every ounce of his courage, and Sean realized that he was exceedingly shy. “It’s the palsy,” he said, and held up his hands, large hands dotted with brown age spots; they were visibly shaking, and small tremors were jerking his head and shoulders, too. Pete must have Parkinson’s, Sean thought.

“The release mechanisms are located on either side of the jaws—here and here.” Elijah pointed. “You have to push down on both sides simultaneously.”

“Will she lie still? I’m sure it’s going to be painful.” There was an understatement if ever there was one, and the fox’s teeth were sharp as razors. If she lunged around and nailed him, it would be no joke.

“She’ll lie still,” Elijah promised. “I’d never risk you getting hurt.”

Sean moved behind the fox. He could see her shock-dulled eye tracking him. It must be agony for this wild creature to tolerate not only the pain of her injury, but being surrounded by three humans, even if their intention was to help her. Thank god for Elijah, who had placed his hand on her neck, and was now crooning softly to her under his breath. Sean couldn’t make out what he was saying—if indeed he was using words.

“All right, you can go ahead,” said Elijah. “She understands that she’s not to move.”

Please don’t let me mess this up and hurt her more, Sean prayed, but Elijah’s calm, steady gaze held nothing but confidence as he watched Sean place his hands in on either side of the steel jaws in the spots he’d indicated.

Sean averted his eyes from the fox’s mangled leg as he pressed down hard on the releases with his palms, but the rusted metal resisted the pressure and didn’t budge. Gritting his teeth, Sean brought all his weight to bear on it, and then suddenly with a high-pitched squeal, the jaws of the trap sprang apart, freeing the fox’s leg from their cruel grip. Blood immediately welled out from the deep wounds left behind, but Elijah was prepared. He handed Sean several large sterile gauze sponges to stanch the bleeding. “Wrap those around her leg,” he instructed.

As Sean did, Pete reached in and removed the trap. A few seconds later there was a hollow clanging noise as he dropped it in the trash can. “Just where the fucking thing belongs,” Sean muttered, not even aware he’d spoken aloud until Elijah said quietly, “Yeah,” and then added, “Okay, now I need you to pick her up and put her on the table, Sean.”

The fox started to struggle when Sean picked her up in his arms. Elijah rested his hand on her flank, stroking it while he crooned more of those words-that-weren’t-quite words. Her struggles ceased, and she remained quiescent as Sean carried her to the stainless steel examination table and laid her down on the soft fleece pad that covered the top.

“I thought leg hold traps were illegal,” he remarked in a voice that a shook a little with anger for what had been done to this beautiful animal.

“They are now,” Elijah said. He peeled back the blood-soaked gauze and studied the wounds, and if he felt the same sickening sensation as Sean at the sight of the torn flesh, he didn’t show it. “But they weren’t always illegal, and there are still abandoned traps hidden here and there in the woods. This isn’t the first time I’ve had an animal brought to me that stepped in one. Thankfully Pete found this
girl before she was desperate enough to start freeing herself, or her injuries would be a lot more severe.”

More severe? That seemed difficult to imagine, and Sean was about to ask what he meant when Pete said, “I saw a fox once’ that had only three feet- he’d got caught in a trap and chewed the other right off.”

“Oh dear god.” The mental image was horrifying.

“It’s not a… pleasant sight,” Elijah said soberly. “But thankfully Pete found her in time. She owes you her life, Pete.”

Pete shuffled his feet, looking embarrassed, and said nothing. Sean wondered what his story was, but there was no time for speculation. Elijah put him to work gathering the necessary supplies to clean and treat the fox’s wounds. He flushed out the cuts with Betadyne solution and a syringe; it was gruesome work, but after dealing with Elijah’s bullet wound in both his stag and human forms, nothing would ever seem as daunting by comparison.

Elijah took over when he was satisfied that the dirt and rust had been thoroughly removed. He picked up the fox’s leg in his good hand, and all the while he gently manipulated the limb, checking for the extent of the damage the trap had done, Elijah crooned softly under his breath to the fox. Sean still couldn’t understand any of it, but then, he supposed, it wasn’t about words, and the soothing, calming effect on the fox was clear. His own tense nerves relaxed; such was the power of Elijah’s magic. If only there was some way to bottle that ability, he thought. Every veterinarian in the country would be grateful.

“How bad is it?” he asked when Elijah finally set the leg down.

Elijah straightened, and he was smiling in relief. “Nothing’s broken, and I’m pretty sure there’s no tendon damage either. The leg feels stable to me. She was very lucky that the trap closed where it did. There’s a lot of soft tissue damage, but she should make a good recovery.”

“Thank god,” Sean whispered, and Elijah slid his arm around him and gave him a quick, reassuring hug.

“You’ve got a kind heart for a foreigner,” remarked Pete. “But then you saved the Woodjin’s life,” he added simply, as if that said everything.

It was Sean’s turn to be embarrassed, and to cover it he grabbed the jar of blue-green salve that sat among the gauze pads and rolls of Vetwrap. “Do you want me to put this on her cuts? Or do they need suturing first?”

“No sutures,” Elijah said, shaking his head. “These wounds are very similar to my bullet wound: they have to heal from the inside out. There’s too much risk of infection if they’re closed. We’ll pack them good with the salve and bandage them, and then she can go in a cage to rest.” He picked up a paper packet that contained a pair of surgical gloves. “Put these on first, Sean.”

Sean set down the salve and took the gloves; as he pulled the thin latex over his hands, he studied Elijah’s face. The immediate crisis over, a wave of tiredness had clearly replaced the adrenaline surge of energy. Elijah’s right eyelid was drooping and there were faint lines bracketing his mouth. He needed to go back to bed and rest. It was only his apparently limitless strength of will that was keeping him on his feet.

“Okay, Doctor Doolittle, what next?” Sean said lightly, flexing his fingers.
“Rex Harrison or Eddie Murphy version?” Elijah wanted to know.

“Rex Harrison, of course. I saw it when I was a kid and god, did I want to be able to talk to the animals.” Sean grinned. “And now I know someone who can. How cool is that?”

“Yeah, but remember what I told you- this Doctor Doolittle can’t sing worth a darn, so don’t expect any musical numbers,” Elijah warned him.

“Rex Harrison couldn’t sing worth a darn either, and it never stopped him,” Sean teased.

“Just open that salve, would you, and count yourself lucky I’m not as daring as Rex Harrison,” Elijah said, but he was grinning, too.

Pete was watching them with a sort of open-mouthed surprise, and Sean supposed that this sort of banter was out of the question for him and the others whose reverence for their Woodjin was so great that they wouldn’t even call him by his first name.

With Elijah’s guidance, Sean managed to get the fox’s leg successfully bandaged without making a mull of it. The vivid purple color of the Vetwrap was a touch of brightness that probably did little to cheer the fox, but somehow put extra heart into Sean. Then he carried her over to the row of wire mesh cages. Elijah opened the door to one that was lined with several thick fleece pads, and Sean carefully set her inside.

She immediately explored the small confines, hopping on three legs, until, satisfied that she was safe, she circled around several times and lay down, tucking her pointed muzzle under her bushy tail and closing her eyes. Pete brought over a small stainless bowl half-filled with fresh water, and Sean took it from his trembling hands and set in the holder inside the cage before closing and latching the door.

“Sean, thank you for all your help—you were amazing.” Elijah smiled at him, and his tired eyes were glowing with pride. Then he turned to Pete, and gave the old man a one-armed hug that caused him to blush scarlet. “And so were you, Pete. It was a long way to carry her, and in the dark, too.”

“You carried her?” Sean asked, startled.

“I ain’t got a car, Mr. Astin. Never have owned one. My feet carry me where I need to go, unless it’s outside, and then the Doc gives me a ride.”

“Pete, please call me Sean, okay? But aren’t you afraid? Of the Devil, I mean.” He never wanted to walk alone through the pines at night again. He’d done it twice, once out of stupidity and once out of necessity, and that was more than enough to last him the rest of his life.

Pete considered the question; all the while his head jerked and his hands shook, but he was otherwise, Sean realized, remarkably fit looking and could probably walk Sean into the ground. “I cain’t say as I am. I seen him a few times, been chased by him once’t when I was young. Got all scratched up before the Woodjin saved me.”

Sean looked at the backs of his hands, still bearing faint reddish lines from his own mad dash through the pines, and barely repressed a shudder at the memory. Yet Pete, too, had seen the white stag, and he realized that it must have been Elijah’s grandfather who saved him.

“But I’m acquainted with his ways,” Pete went on, “and he cain’t trick Pete Gunner no more.”

“I’m glad to know that,” Sean replied.

“Pete, Sean and I still have one more thing we need to take care of,” Elijah said, “but why don’t you
go ahead to the house, get yourself some food and something hot to drink. Hannah arrived last night with Jordan. She’ll be so glad to see you.”

“Hannah’s here?” Pete asked, and his face lit up with a smile that showed he must once have been a handsome man. “I ain’t seen her since Christmas, Woodjin.” His jerking and shaking increased, as if his happiness at the news had no other way to express itself.

“Then you go along,” Elijah told him. “And when Dr. Ian arrives, you tell him not to worry, that Sean and I will be there real soon.”

After Pete had gone, Sean said, “His face lit up like a lantern when you told him Hannah was here.”

“Pete loves Hannah, always has, since she was little. She’s the closest thing to a daughter he’ll ever have.”

“Didn’t he ever marry?” Sean asked curiously.

“No, he could never work up the nerve to court a girl. He’s the kindest, gentlest soul you’ll ever meet, but he’s as shy and as wild as this fox.” Elijah looked sad. “My dad was probably the closest friend Pete ever had. It was a terrible thing for him when Dad died. He took off into the pines and we didn’t see him for a couple of months. You have no idea how relieved we all were when he finally turned up again. He can’t be found when he doesn’t want to, even by me.”

Just then an impatient squeaking started. It was the squirrel babies, sensing that dawn had arrived and it was nearly time for their first meal of the day. Sean went to look in at them. “They’ve gotten so much bigger in just a few days,” he marveled. “Their eyes are fully open.”

“They’re thriving.” Elijah said, joining him by the incubator. “You can practically see them growing minute by minute.”

“And the opossum? How he is doing?” His gaze transferred to the large pen where he’d last seen the sleeping opossum hanging by his tail, but it was empty.

“I released him.” Elijah’s eyes were apologetic. “He wanted to be set free. I wish now I’d waited so you could have been with me, but I didn’t think you were ever coming back.”

“It’s all right.” Sean put his arms around Elijah, and the young man settled against him with a tired sigh. “I was intending to tick you off for disobeying doctor’s orders again, but under the circumstances, I can’t. But why didn’t you wake me?” he asked, gently rubbing his back, the way he’d done to Hannah, but the feelings Elijah’s lean but strong body evoked in him were very, very different.

“I didn’t want to disturb you. You needed to sleep so badly.”

“If you knew how scared I was when I woke up and couldn’t find you…” Sean whispered into the scratchy gray wool.

Elijah’s arm tightened around his waist. “Maggie said I should wake you, but you looked so tired. I’m sorry for worrying you.” He gave a rueful laugh. “I seem to be saying that a lot, don’t I?”

“Nah. But I’d a million times rather miss a little sleep than leave you to deal with things alone. So listen to Maggie next time. One for all, and all for one, Elwood, remember?”

Maggie, who was twisting in and out of their legs, her tail flicking, voiced her agreement with this sentiment very emphatically.
“I’ll try.” Elijah rubbed his cheek against Sean’s shoulder in mute apology and then pulled back. “Now we better get things cleaned up and go before Dr. Ian gets here.”

“Go where?” Sean had honestly thought Elijah was simply buying them a little time alone together.

“Into the woods.” At Sean’s incredulous expression, Elijah went on quickly, “The fox has a mate, Sean, and he’ll have followed Pete. He’ll be fretting, wondering what’s happened to her.”

“Elijah, can’t it wait until later? You’re not up to this.”

Elijah’s face set into stubborn lines. “He won’t be far inside the trees. I can easily walk that short a distance. Besides, wouldn’t you want to know as soon as possible that the one you loved was safe?”

Sean had no answer to that argument. When they went outside a short time later, they discovered that dawn had arrived in a swirl of pinks, lavenders and palest gold. With Maggie trotting at Elijah’s side, they retraced Pete’s footsteps across the yard. The cold air seemed to revive Elijah’s flagging energy, and he walked over the brittle snow with sure strides.

“Hannah told me about your dad,” Sean said quietly, recalling what Elijah had told him about Pete and the depth of his grief over the loss of Warren Wood. “I’m sorry, Elijah.”

“I miss him every day,” was all Elijah said, in a very quiet voice.

“I know.” Sean took his hand in a comforting grip. “Believe me, I know.” He hesitated. “She also told me about Jordan, and I’ve been wondering how that will work. When will he become the Woodjin? When he reaches a certain age?”

Elijah’s cold fingers suddenly and convulsively tightened on Sean’s hand. “Sean…” He sounded as if he very much didn’t want to continue whatever sentence he had been about to start.

“Uh oh, I have a feeling you’re about to tell me something I’m not going to want to hear, aren’t you?”

“The truth is, I really have no idea when it will be Jordan’s time,” Elijah replied, stopping short. “Have you ever heard those reports on the news—the ones that talk about the most dangerous jobs?”

“Yeah, I seem to recall reading that timber cutters and airplane pilots head the list.” Sean didn’t like where this was heading at all.

“Well, being Woodjin is a very dangerous job. So dangerous, that it should probably rank number one, above timber cutters and airplane pilots.” He hesitated. “No Woodjin has ever lived long enough to retire, Sean. That’s why it’s so vitally important that we get our training early.” Elijah looked at him apprehensively. “I should have told you right away, I know. If you want to change your mind…”

“Why would I want to change my mind?” Sean replied calmly, walking on. “For one thing, I love you, and for another I fully intend for the both of us to live to a ripe old age. You’re going to be the first retired Woodjin, with a pension plan and everything, and we’ll sit by the fire telling Jordan’s grandchildren the story of how we met.”

“That’s a beautiful image,” Elijah said. He sounded almost wistful.

“We’ll live it someday,” Sean said.

“How can you be so positive?”
“Well, I already told Hannah I intend for us to celebrate our golden anniversary, and you wouldn’t want to make a liar out of me, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t ever want to do that,” Elijah agreed, and his tense grip on Sean’s hand relaxed.

They had reached the tree line, and Sean was relieved that the path Pete had traveled was not the same one that he and Elijah had taken with the Devil on their heels, but another path that lay about a hundred yards west. He wasn’t anxious to revisit that scene. They didn’t speak as they stepped into the shadows of the pines, and before they’d walked twenty yards, Elijah was proved right. A red fox crept cautiously out of the underbrush, and froze, ears pricked as he eyed them warily.

“Wait here,” Elijah instructed him and Maggie, and walked slowly forward.

Elijah had already given Sean enough astonishing memories to last a lifetime. Yet here was one more, an encounter that would remain indelibly printed in his mind forever. The fox, like his mate, was a magnificent animal, with the same rich russet fur, black points and white-tipped tail. His amber eyes appeared bright and filled with intelligence. Elijah crouched in front of him, the hem of his coat trailing in the snow, and stretched out his hand. The fox stepped close and touched the tip of his black nose to Elijah’s fingers.

As if that contact held an unspoken invitation, Elijah moved his hand and rested it on the fox’s thick ruff. Then he bowed his head and began a silent communion with the wild animal, who stood like a statue, suffering Elijah’s touch. The wind whistled eerily through the trees, the pine needles whispered their secrets, and Sean watched, spellbound, his eyes riveted to that small hand that held such power. At last Elijah dropped his hand and rose to his feet. For a long moment he and the fox stared at each other, and then, like a ghost, the fox was gone, vanished.

Elijah turned around, and to his dismay Sean could see the silver trails of tears running down his cheeks. Maggie bounded forward, crying her distress, and wound anxiously around his legs.

“Elijah, what’s wrong?” Sean demanded, hurrying to him. “The fox?”

“He won’t come past the edge of the woods, Sean,” Elijah said sadly. “He wants to be with his mate, but he’s too afraid.”

“It won’t be for long, though. You said her injuries should heal just fine.” Sean tried to console Elijah, but the tears only ran faster, and Elijah wiped them away with the backs of his fingers. “He’ll be reunited with her soon.”

“You don’t understand.” Elijah’s eyes were anguished as they met his. “It’s me. I’m the fox: too afraid to venture beyond the edge of the wood. You’re leaving tomorrow, for who knows how long, and I can’t follow where you’re going. If something were to happen to you out there, I couldn’t be with you, any more than the fox can be with his mate.”

“Oh Elijah.” Sean pulled him close, and Elijah bowed his head against Sean’s chest. His shoulders were shaking and his muffled sobs tore at Sean’s heart. It was only natural after all he’d been through, having pushed himself physically and mentally to his very limits, that Elijah should finally succumb to tears, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear him cry.

“And dam it, Sean,” Elijah finally whispered, “we didn’t even get to have sex. I love my sister, but why did she have to show up just then?”

“I’ve asked myself that same question about a thousand times, Elijah,” Sean said wryly. “Maybe it was for the best. We were both so exhausted that it might have ended up being a non-event.”
“That’s not the impression I got,” Elijah said, and he sounded more like himself again.

“I guess I need to think that, or I’ll lose my mind,” Sean joked, and Elijah laughed. “Better?” he asked softly, and Elijah nodded. “Then how about a kiss before we go back?”

Elijah’s mouth tasted of the salt from his tears, and his breath hitched on a tiny hiccup, but somehow that made their kiss all the sweeter. They drew apart at last, and Elijah complained, “Your nose is cold.” But his eyes were the burning blue of a pines gentian, and a smile was on his lips.

“So is yours,” retorted Sean, rubbing the tip of his nose playfully against Elijah’s. “Ready to face the music and dance, Elwood?”

“Follow the Fleet,” Elijah promptly supplied.

“I knew there’s a reason I love you,” Sean replied, and holding Elijah tightly against his side, they walked back to the house with Maggie.

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“Two of my uncles helped to carry his body out of the swamp,” Katie said. “They took him to Buzby’s General Store on the back of a truck.”

“There’s a memorial for him out on Carranza Road,” Joe Nichols added. “It was built in 1930, two years after the plane crash. Every penny of the money was donated by schoolchildren in Mexico.”

“The American Legion holds a ceremony at the memorial on the anniversary of his death,” put in Bill. “Why, you could highball by there every day for the rest of the year and not see a soul, but come July 13th, hundreds of people show up from Mexico and all over. Emilio Carranza ain’t been forgotten, and it’s been nearly eighty years.”

There was a general nodding of heads at this from the twenty-odd people gathered in the kitchen. The number had fluctuated all afternoon as pineys came and went, bringing even more food with them until Sean calculated Elijah wouldn’t have to cook for himself for at least a month, possibly longer.

“You’ll have to show me the memorial when I return, Elijah” Sean said to the young man who was sitting between Katie and Bill on the other side of the table. “I’d like to see it.”

“I stop by every few days,” Katie said. “Sometimes teenagers from outside will have parties there at night, and they leave their beer bottles and trash lying around.” She shook her head. “The police don’t have time, so I clean up the mess, make sure the place stays nice.”

“Parents outside don’t raise their young’uns with respect for others,” said Budd Harris. “No piney child would behave like that.”

There was more nodding of heads in agreement.

To his right, Martha asked sotto voce, “Would you like another cup of coffee, Sean?” She gave him a sympathetic smile. He supposed he must look pretty wrecked by now. He was definitely feeling the effects of the past few largely sleepless nights.

“Thanks.” Sean handed her his empty mug, and she got up and went to the coffee maker, that had been going non-stop all day. His eyes met Elijah’s across the table, and he marveled at how rested the younger man looked. Elijah was dressed in jeans and the red plaid flannel shirt he’d been wearing that first day, when he’d cooked Sean pancakes. The shirt was buttoned over his sling-
confined right arm, hiding it from view, and his eyes were clear, alert and astonishingly blue. No one would ever guess that it wasn’t even forty-eight hours since he’d suffered a bullet wound.

But Elijah had slept for a solid seven hours straight after they got back, and had only joined the party in the kitchen about an hour ago, after Ian, between rounds, had stopped in, changed his bandage and given him the green light to get up. “Although I shouldn’t simply on principle,” the doctor had said gruffly, “after the stunt you pulled this morning.”

On their return to the house, Sean and Elijah had found Ian, Katie, Bill, Pete, Hannah and Jordan awaiting them in the kitchen. Jordan, sitting in a high chair with a bottle of milk and a small mountain of Cheerios, had been the only one who greeted them with unalloyed delight, kicking his legs and calling, “Lijah! Lijah!”

The others had seemed in varying degrees torn between hugging them in relief and smacking them upside the head for being so foolish, especially when they caught sight of Elijah’s still-puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

But Ian and Katie had immediately swooped on Elijah and whisked him off to his bedroom, wasting no time on recriminations. Sean had gone with them, and been drafted as doctor’s assistant in Martha’s absence. Ian had looked distinctly pleased at the state of Elijah’s wounded shoulder, which was clearly healing well, although he’d used a full complement of annoying ‘hmms’ simply, Sean suspected, to punish him. The doctor had declared Elijah a lot luckier than he deserved, shot Sean a sour look that said, “It’s a good thing, too, or you’d be toast,” and then asked Elijah to tell him about the fox’s injuries and what he’d done to treat them.

“You’re an old fraud,” Sean had wanted to say as Ian gently promised Elijah that he’d look in on the fox before he left. But he’d decided not to push his luck. He was still alive, after all.

After downing another dish of herb tea without complaint, Elijah had fallen asleep, his hand tucked beneath his cheek like a child. When he was sure that Elijah was out for the count, Sean had gone to shower and shave, fill the now-wakeful Fred in on what was happening, and then get himself some breakfast. By then pineys had started to arrive, each of them seeming intent on embarrassing the hell out of Sean by handing him yet another container of food, expressing undying gratitude to him for saving the Woodjin’s life and then making him squirm by calling him a hero.

Sean had always had a good head for remembering names, a knack honed over the years of running Clicktwice and promoting the company at expos and conventions all over the world. But after a few hours, his head was whirling with Browers and Jenkinses and Browns and Whites and Harrises and Leeks and Adams, for every introduction was accompanied by a lengthy explanation of how the person in question was related to every other family in the pines, either by marriage, blood or friendship.

Like Katie, these pineys were reticent until he asked the first question, and then the floodgates opened. They were marvelous storytellers, one and all, and Sean listened raptly to their tales about the pines. In addition to Emilio Carranza, the Mexican Lindbergh whose plane went down in the pines on a goodwill flight from New York to Mexico City, Sean heard about other colorful characters from pines lore: the African-American James Still, known as the Doctor of the Pines, who became renowned for his medical skills in the 19th century, and Salt Caesar, a woodcutter who could reputedly chop ten cords of wood a day. There was Jerry Munyhon, a wizard of distinctly unusual talents, who could convince a woman that she was walking through thigh-deep water instead of on dry land so she’d give her skirts a hike, and Peggy Clevenger, a witch who could turn herself into a rabbit. There was much good-natured ribbing and arguing over the facts of these stories, and Sean found himself wondering how much actual truth there was to them, like the one about Fiddler
Sammy Buck and the Air Tune he played, a song of such haunting beauty that it saved him from being taken to hell by the Devil. A tune, Sean was assured, that still existed, just beyond the range of human hearing.

The Devil featured in any number of their stories, and had he not seen the creature for himself, he’d have considered it all good-natured pulling of the foreigner’s leg by a bunch of locals. But every piney seemed to have seen him at least once, and there was a look of remembered horror in their eyes that couldn’t be faked. He felt certain that the same look would be in his own eyes when he spoke about his encounter with the legendary creature years from now.

“Besides,” Emily Harris, Budd’s wife, was saying now, “no one with a lick of sense would drive into the pines at night. Foreigners don’t believe the Devil really exists, and if it weren’t for our Woodjin, many of them would never come back out again alive.”

“I wouldn’t have, that’s for certain,” Sean agreed.

Emily blushed scarlet. “I beg your pardon, Sean. I didn’t mean to imply that you haven’t got a lick of sense.”

“That’s all right, Emily,” Sean laughed. “Following that light was not the smartest thing I’ve ever done.” Although it led to my meeting Elijah, so in reality it was the smartest thing I’ve ever done. “But I’m curious: who or what exactly is the Devil?”

All eyes turned at once to Elijah, and Sean was struck again by the extreme deference with which these people, all of whom were old enough to be either his parents or grandparents, treated him. It also drove home to him the fact that there wasn’t a native piney in the room, outside Hannah and Elijah, who was under fifty years old.

What Elijah and Katie had both said was true: the old ways of life in the pines were dying and young people weren’t staying, but going outside to find work and build their lives. No wonder Elijah was lonely. These were good people who loved Elijah dearly, but he would always be first and foremost the Woodjin, and an object of reverence to them.

Sean had even seen it in their attitude toward Jordan, although the tiny Woodjin-to-be, who was currently down for a nap, was such a charmer that as he was passed from lap to lap, it was impossible for anyone to maintain a reverent distance from him. But what would Jordan’s lot in life be when he eventually became Woodjin? Sean wondered. Who would be left, even to reverence him, once all these people were gone?

“Do you remember me telling you that most of the stories about the Devil are apocryphal?” Elijah asked, bringing Sean’s attention back to the topic at hand.

“I remember.” I remember every word you’ve ever said to me, Elijah. Had there not been a fascinated audience raptly listening, Sean would’ve said it aloud. But a faint smile crept into Elijah’s eyes, and Sean thought he might have heard the unspoken words, too.

“There are a number of theories about the origins of the Devil,” Elijah began. “You’ve probably heard the most common one—that he’s the child of a Mrs. Leeds, who when she discovered that she was pregnant with her thirteenth child, made a wish that he would be born a devil, and so he was.”

“I have, but I take it there’s no truth to it?” Looking around the room, Sean could see the pineys grimacing or smiling with rueful amusement at what was clearly to them a preposterous story.

“Not a word of truth to it,” Elijah said. “The Devil isn’t a deformed human with wings. He’s not an
oversized fruit bat, a sand-hill crane or a pterodactyl, either. Believe it or not, those are all theories that are embraced by outsiders.”

“Having seen him for myself, I know for sure those last three theories are completely bogus,” Sean said, nearly shuddering at the memory of pitiless red eyes, vast wings and skin like scorched earth. “But then what is the true explanation?”

“The true explanation is the one that people outside the pines give the least credit to, I suppose because in many ways it’s the most frightening. But the real truth is that he’s a demon, Sean, a spirit from the underworld. In the craze to mine for bog iron in the eighteenth century, some of the miners grew foolish and greedy. They dug deeper than they should have searching for more and more ore, and released him into our world.”

“Like the Dwarves in Moria,” Sean remarked, struck by the similarity of the stories. What was it Tolkien had written about the Dwarves? Something like ‘they dug too greedily and too deep’.

“That’s right,” Elijah said. “I suppose you could call him a sort of Balrog.”

Judging from the number of blank expressions that greeted this exchange, most of the pineys hadn’t read Tolkien, so Sean explained, “It’s from a book, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien.”

“A book based in part on existing legends,” Martha said thoughtfully. “How interesting, Sean. I never looked at the Devil that way. Who knows how many other such legends might in fact be true?”

“My dad thought that a lot of them probably were true,” Elijah replied earnestly, leaning forward with his elbow on the table. “Other demonic tales exist that are remarkably like ours, Martha. There’s good reason to believe that demons have been let into the world in other countries; the stories are too similar for it to be sheer coincidence.”

Not a happy thought, Sean decided, unless they had their own Woodjins, too. “But if the Devil is a demon released into our world, why doesn’t he ever leave the pines?”

“Because in some way we don’t quite understand, he’s tied to the place where he was released,” Elijah explained. “He can only travel so far from it, and no more.”

“And where is that place?” Sean wanted to know.

Elijah lifted his left shoulder in a shrug. “No one knows, not even me. It must be one of the old bog iron mines, but there’s a glamour over it that hides it from view. Just as he can’t cross the wards around this property, I can’t see where he lives.”

“So there’s no possibility of finding and destroying him, or forcing him back underground?” Sean was disappointed, for in light of what Elijah had told him about the dangers of being Woodjin, the idea of hunting down the Devil and getting rid of him once and for all was very, very appealing.

Elijah shook his head. “No, not so far as I know.”

There was a short, uneasy silence; not a person in the room, Sean thought, save perhaps Pete Gunner, could contemplate that reality without a chill. Generations of pineys had lived with a monster in their midst, and between them and that monster stood only the Woodjin. It was a frighteningly awesome responsibility that Elijah and his ancestors bore.

“But look at it this way, Sean,” Elijah went on lightly, “I’ll never be out of a job no matter how bad the economy gets.”
The building tension in the room was released as everyone laughed, and Sean had never admired Elijah more. But just then Elijah went suddenly still, and a far-off look appeared in his eyes, as if he was hearing something no one else could hear.

“Hannah,” he said, turning to look at his sister, “Jordan’s waking up from his nap.”

Hannah was sitting with Pete in the corner on the far side of the hutch. Just as Rocky had sought the safety of his refrigerator top, where he was observing the goings on with suspicion, the old man had retreated to the furthest corner of the room, seeming overwhelmed with shyness at the sight of so many people, even though they were mostly people he knew well. Hannah was holding his hand, and Sean found the sight of the tall, gaunt, ragged old man and the elfin young woman with her fashionable haircut and clothes an oddly touching one.

“Thanks, Lij.” Hannah released Pete’s hand, and stood up. “I was about to go and wake him anyway. He’ll be ready for a bottle and a diaper change.” She and Katie exchanged a significant look, and Sean wondered what it meant. “And my brother needs to rest,” she added in a no-nonsense voice, looking around the room, “so I’m afraid we’re going to have to break up the party now.”

Hannah would have made a great general, Sean thought, amused. Within seconds, or so it seemed, she and Katie had mustered the troops, and people were donning coats and hats and taking their leave. Each and every piney came to Elijah to ask for his blessing; Elijah being Elijah, they also got a hug. As Sean shook hands with these people who had welcomed him with unqualified kindness, he looked forward to the day that he became part of their extended family and hopefully earned the right to call himself a piney.

“You’ll be coming back, Sean?” Pete asked. His soft, slurred voice sounded anxious.

“I’m not exactly sure when, but I will be back, Pete, I promise.” He took the old man’s trembling hand between his own and pressed it.

Pete nodded. “Maybe the Woodjin can bring you to visit me. The road ain’t been scienced where I live, so it’s quiet and peaceful. My cabin ain’t much to look at, but I built it right by a bog, and it’s as pretty a place as you’ll ever set eyes on.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Sean said sincerely. “I look forward to seeing it. But you’re not walking home, are you?”

“I’ll be riding with the Harrises. They bean’t living too far from me.”

“Good.” Sean was relieved. He felt drawn to this strange, shy, good-hearted old man who had carried an injured fox for miles through the woods on a bitter-cold night. He hoped they would become friends.

Martha gave him a warm hug and her business card. “I’m in the city on a regular basis, Sean. If you ever want to have lunch or dinner, or just talk, give me a call.”

“I’ll do that,” Sean said, sliding the small buff card into the back pocket of his jeans.

When everyone save Bill and Katie had gone, Hannah heated a bottle of milk for Jordan in the microwave, and then disappeared. Bill, who had taken over caring for the animals while Elijah recuperated, went out to the barn to give them their evening meal. Katie instructed Sean and Elijah to stay put at the table and relax, and then started gathering up the empty coffee mugs.

Perhaps he was punchy from lack of sleep, but Sean was suddenly overcome with a mischievous impulse. He grinned slyly at Elijah and stuck his stocking foot out under the table to tickle Elijah’s
bare toes. He’d tried playing footsie with Chris a couple of times, only to have her look at him as if he had two heads, and make a withering comment about adults who acted like children. Somehow he thought Elijah wouldn’t react quite the same way.

Elijah jumped as Sean’s foot touched his, bit his lip, and glanced at Katie, who was humming to herself as she dumped a used coffee filter into the garbage. Then he slid his own toes up under the hem of Sean’s pants leg, and lightly stroked the back of his ankle.

Feeling absurdly light-hearted, Sean retaliated. Katie was too busy loading the dishwasher, shoehorning leftovers into a refrigerator that was packed to the gills, and wiping off the counters, to notice that their replies to her suggestions about which of the leftovers they should have for dinner were distracted.

Just as she closed the dishwasher door and turned the machine on, Hannah appeared. To Sean’s surprise, she was dressed for the outdoors, and she had the quilted diaper bag slung over her shoulder.

“We’re ready, Katie,” Hannah announced. “Bill’s putting Jordan in his car seat.”

“Hannah? What’s going on?” Elijah asked, sitting up straight in a hurry.

“Jordan and I are spending the night with Katie and Bill,” she replied.

“You are?” Elijah’s voice rose and ended with a squeak.

“Yes, we are,” she said firmly. “What time are you leaving in the morning, Sean?”

“Eight o’clock,” Sean replied. He now understood what the look that had passed between the two women earlier had meant. Hannah had planned it all in advance. She was leaving the field clear so that he and Elijah would have a chance to spend their remaining hours together alone. Sean pushed back his chair and stood, resisting the urge to grab Hannah and whirl her around. In the face of her uncertainty and doubt about their relationship, it couldn’t have been an easy decision for her to make, and he was beyond grateful.

“Then I’ll see you both around 7:30.”

Elijah rose from the table and went to his sister. They held each other tightly, blonde hair and auburn intermingling as they rocked back and forth. “Thank you,” Sean heard him say softly.

“Yeah, well, I kind of owe you one after last night,” Hannah admitted. “I know my timing sucked.”

Katie folded the dishtowel and set it on the counter. Then she unrolled the cuffs of her sweater sleeves, and proclaimed, “I’m all done.” She held out her arms to Sean, and gave him a tight hug. “We’ll miss you, Sean,” she said warmly, and he could see the sincerity shining in her tea-brown eyes. “Don’t let those city folks keep you away from us too long.”

“I’ll try not to let them,” Sean promised her, hugging her back just as hard, “and I’ll miss you, too, Katie.”

Then Katie embraced Elijah, and warned him not to overdo it—an admonishment that caused Hannah to clap her hand over her mouth against a fit of giggles. Her laughing eyes met Sean’s, and he knew that she not only had not the slightest doubt what was going to happen after she left, but that she was okay with it.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Sean,” she said, giving him a quick hug. Then in the twinkling of an
eye, almost as if by magic, Hannah and Katie were gone, and the kitchen was empty except for
Elijah and him, a calico cat and a gray squirrel.

To all intents and purposes, they were alone.

Sean and Elijah stared at each other incredulously, stunned by the swiftness of this totally unexpected
development.

“I think I love your sister,” Sean remarked. Elijah raised his eyebrows. “In a purely platonic, fraternal
way, of course.”

“Good thing. You haven’t met Lawrence yet.”

“Big guy, is he?”

“Makes about three of me.”

“To be honest, your sister scares me more.” Sean was only half joking.

Elijah grinned. “She’ll come around, never fear.”

“I hope so.”

“So, what do we do now?” Elijah said, changing the topic.

Sean smiled and held out his arms. “Do you really have to ask?”

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“I have this sinking sensation that it’s simply too good to be true,” Sean said, drawing back. Their
kiss had been overshadowed by a sense of impending doom that left neither fully able to lose himself
in their embrace.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. The odds are someone will show up looking for a hat or glove or
scarf they left behind,” Elijah agreed gloomily. “It’s inevitable.”

“How about we get ourselves a beer and go relax in the family room for a while, until we’re sure the
coast is clear?” Sean suggested.

“A beer?” Elijah asked eagerly, his eyes lighting up.

Sean laughed. “I take it that plan meets with your approval.”

He dug through the packed refrigerator until he unearthed two bottles of Shiner Bock, and held them
up with a triumphant “Voila!”

“Good thing Dr. Ian isn’t here to see this,” remarked Elijah with ill-disguised glee, as Sean found a
bottle opener and popped the caps.

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him,” Sean said, handing him his Shiner Bock.

They started to move toward the door, when Elijah stopped and looked back. “Aren’t you coming,
Rocky?” he asked the squirrel, who was still sitting atop the refrigerator as if even more dubious than
Sean and Elijah that they were really and truly alone. But after one last suspicious glance around the
kitchen, he appeared to decide to risk it. He leapt down to the counter and ran along its length until
he was close enough to Sean to jump onto his shoulder. A spate of indecipherable Rocky-chatter was
translated for him by Elijah. “Well, let’s just put it this way, Sean,” he said, his voice trembling with laughter, “if you were a nut, you’d be an acorn, and that’s the highest compliment Rocky can give someone.”

When they reached the family room, Rocky scrambled down from his shoulder, and Sean went to feed the woodstove while Elijah turned on the stereo.

“Can we listen to that Stone Roses album again?” Sean asked. It was important somehow that everything be as much like their first evening together as possible. He had a strange feeling that he was being given a second chance to relive the events of that night, sort of like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day. Only I’m going to get the ending right this time, he vowed.

“Sure,” Elijah replied. He flipped one-handed through the binder until he found the plastic sleeve that held the CD, then slid it out and put it in the player.

As the music started, Elijah settled cross-legged on the richly colored Navajo rug with his beer, and leaned his back against the sofa. As if on cue, Maggie and Rocky curled up again together in front of the woodstove, and small clouds of white streamed from the snout of the dragon steamer on top of it.

Déjà vu all over again, Sean thought, as he walked over to the sofa and sat down in the same place he had the first time. “Do you ever actually use this couch the way it’s meant to be used?” he asked. “You know, for sitting on?”

“Not usually. I can’t stretch my legs out and still sit up.” Elijah uncrossed his legs and demonstrated, wriggling his bare toes for good measure.

“There’s a peculiar logic in that explanation,” Sean said, smiling.

Elijah inched over, wriggling his butt, until his side was pressed warm against the length of Sean’s calf. The heat of Elijah’s body seeping through the leg of his jeans reminded Sean of the stag, and that never-to-be-forgotten journey through the starlit pines.

Elijah tilted his head back to look at Sean, and for a brief moment, Sean seemed to see superimposed over the flawless perfection of Elijah’s face, the equally flawless perfection of the white stag, and the blue eyes that met his own were both Elijah’s eyes and the eyes that first captivated him across a sandy clearing in the woods. And then the stag’s image shimmered and dissolved away. But stag or human, Sean loved him.

“I wanted to sit close to you like this last time, while we were watching Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” Elijah confessed.

“And I wanted you to sit close like this last time.” Sean hovered on the verge of confession as I Wanna Be Adored played in the background, thinking about how he’d sat on the floor of his study at the beach house, aroused and aching and filled with despair. “Elijah…”

“What is it?” Elijah’s brow wrinkled into upside-down lines.

“When I was at the shore, I downloaded The Stone Roses from iTunes. Then I… well, I jerked off to this song, thinking about you.”

A tinge of pink appeared on Elijah’s cheeks. “You did?”

“Oh god, maybe I shouldn’t have told you that.” Sean’s own cheeks were burning. Great, now he’d embarrassed Elijah by his inability to keep his big mouth shut.
“Why shouldn’t you have told me? You can tell me anything, Sean. Besides, how could I possibly mind?” He gave Sean a mischievous look from under his lashes. “You bought a Stone Roses album because of me.”

Sean grinned, relieved, and reached down to ruffle Elijah’s hair; this time Elijah didn’t shy away. God, he loved the feel of Elijah’s hair: it was as soft and plush as mink, and he let his hand linger, running the shining auburn strands through his fingers, delighting in the sensation. *Matt-the-Fucker never got to do this*, Sean thought with satisfaction.

Elijah heaved a sigh of pure contentment, and Sean pushed his hand deeper, intending to massage Elijah’s scalp with his fingertips. And then his forefinger brushed against the hard, ridged edge of one of the pedicles; obeying some instinct he didn’t understand, he circled the pad of his finger over the softer, slightly yielding center. Elijah’s breath caught; he let out an involuntary moan, and it was definitely a moan of pleasure not pain.

Intrigued by this unexpected reaction, Sean repeated the motion, but pressed down harder, and Elijah moaned again. His eyelids had drifted downward, and a hectic flush stained his cheekbones. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, and he shifted restlessly in a way that could mean only one thing: he found what Sean was doing intensely arousing.

“Does that feel good?” Sean asked, stroking the pedicle again.

“Ah… yeah.” Elijah sounded almost dazed. “I had no idea…” He opened his eyes and looked up, and once more the pupils were so enlarged that only a thin rim of intense blue could be seen. His breath was coming fast through parted lips, and Sean could no more have resisted their unspoken invitation than a honeybee could have resisted the sweet nectar of a flower. The crucial moment had arrived, the chance to get the ending right this time, and Sean didn’t hesitate.

Setting his beer aside, Sean dipped his head to capture those full lips in a suckling kiss, tasting Shiner Bock and the whisky-rich, velvet-smooth nectar that was pure Elijah. The scents of pinesap, woodsapoke and dried grasses intensified, swirling around them, as Elijah’s hand went to the nape of his neck to pull him deeper into the kiss. His palm was damp from holding the sweating beer bottle, and an electric sensation shivered down Sean’s spine at the cool touch on his overheated skin.

But the positions in which they were sitting made lovemaking awkward, so Sean twisted around and slid down from the couch, straddling the younger man’s lap with his knees. He delved both hands into Elijah’s hair, and caressed the pedicles with his thumbs.

“Ohhhh.” The long, drawn out moan was torn from Elijah’s throat, and Sean reveled in the sound and in the hardness of the erection pressing against his own rapidly hardening groin. He ground his hips down, rubbing taut denim against taut denim, and Elijah cried out and his body jerked spasmodically. Sean clamped his mouth over Elijah’s, drinking down the ecstatic whimpers as he rocked gently against him.

Elijah’s good hand began scrabbling at Sean’s sweatshirt, tugging at it imperatively, and Sean finally relinquished Elijah’s mouth and sat back, breathing hard. He crossed his hands at the hem of both sweatshirt and undershirt and in one smooth motion pulled them both over his head and flung them away. Immediately, Elijah was devouring his naked chest, shoulders and arms with greedy eyes, and the body Sean had always thought inadequate seemed suddenly desirable, and burned wherever the heat of that blue, blue gaze touched it.

“You’re gorgeous,” Elijah whispered, almost reverently, and reached out with fingers that trembled. “Even in the woods after I’d been shot, I wanted to touch you.” He stroked his fingers up Sean’s right arm, then along the line of shoulder and collarbone, and moved down over the swell of pectoral
muscle, pausing to circle briefly around his nipple before threading through the crisp mat of hair, and following it south to where it narrowed and disappeared below the waistband of Sean’s jeans. A trail of fire lingered on Sean’s skin wherever Elijah had touched him.

“Your turn now,” Sean said hoarsely, and with fingers that shook almost as badly as Pete’s, he undid the buttons of the flannel shirt. Elijah leaned forward so that Sean could pull it free from behind him, and then it, too, was flung away. Sean already knew how that perfect, pale skin tasted beneath his lips, and he wanted to feast on it again, and to feel it against his own. But that would require some rearranging of positions.

“Elijah, let’s move over here,” he suggested, and shifted away, to lay back full length on the carpet. “It’ll be safer for your shoulder if you’re on top.” Elijah scrambled eagerly to his knees, and then he was the one doing the straddling, settling atop Sean’s thighs, so that their arousals were brought into stunning contact.

*It’s going to happen,* Sean realized in an odd moment of crystalline clarity. *It’s really going to happen now.* And somehow the enormity of that truth filled him with paralyzing terror as the twin demons of self-doubt and inadequacy that had increasingly plagued him over the unhappy years reared their ugly heads. As Elijah leaned in eagerly toward him, he held him off with one hand at his left shoulder.

It took a moment for Elijah to figure out that something was wrong. “Sean, what is it?” he demanded. “Oh no, please don’t tell me you hear someone coming!” It was almost a wail.

“No, it’s not that. It’s—Elijah, I-I’m afraid,” Sean confessed.

“You’re afraid?” Elijah repeated, staring down at him incredulously. “You? The man who stood up to the Jersey Devil?”

“I’ve never made love to a guy before. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I thought I’d have to time to read up on it first.”

Elijah looked as if he badly wanted either to laugh or scream, or possibly both. “Sean, it’s the first time for me, too. But we’re both bright guys, and it’s not rocket science—we don’t need diagrams or instruction manuals.”

Sean moved his hand to cradle Elijah’s flushed cheek. “But I want it to be perfect for you, Elijah. I don’t want to mess this up.” Nothing had ever seemed so important.

Elijah’s reaction was to roll his eyes in disbelief. “There’s only one possible response to that,” he said, and then he growled: “*Go ahead, make my day.*”

As if the words held some sort of magic spell, Sean’s fear vanished as quickly as it had appeared; desire roared back into life, and then they were kissing again, wildly, as if it was necessary to make up even that short amount of lost time. Sean spread his legs wider so that Elijah could stretch out full length against him, cradled in the juncture of his thighs, and the first touch of Elijah’s silken smooth chest against his own was like setting a match to dry tinder.

It was difficult in the intensity of the fire that consumed them to be mindful of Elijah’s injury, but the brush of rough linen from Elijah’s sling kept some small part of him grounded and aware, even when Elijah began to drag his chest back and forth against Sean’s, the exquisite friction driving him nearly mad. He couldn’t wrap his arms around Elijah’s back and crush him to him, the way he wanted. Instead, he forced his hands to rest at Elijah’s hips, gripping hard enough to leave bruises, while Elijah tasted Sean’s skin, pressing hot kisses to the side of his neck, and licking at the sweat that had
gathered in the hollow at the base of his throat.

A wordless hum of pleasure escaped Elijah as he slid down to bury his face in Sean’s sweat-dampened chest hair, breathing deeply, and then he turned his attention to one of the flat copper discs surrounded by a whorl of bronze-gold hair. He laved the nipple with the flat of his tongue before taking the tiny nub in his mouth and suckling hard. The effect was like fireworks exploding along every nerve ending, and Sean’s back arched involuntarily as he cried out.

“Sean,” Elijah murmured, raising his head to look at him. “Sean, you’re so beautiful.” And seeing himself reflected in Elijah’s eyes, for the first time in his life, Sean truly felt that he was. Elijah’s unsteady fingers went to the button of Sean’s jeans and fumbled with it. “I want to see the rest of you,” he said, his gaze falling to the blatant evidence of Sean’s arousal straining against his jeans.

“Hang on. Let me get it.” Sean unfastened the button just in time, for Elijah was already tugging at the bulging zipper. Each tug was torture and ecstasy rolled into one, and the moment the rasping sound ceased, Sean started shoving at his jeans as if he was going for the world stripping record. Somehow, he managed to get both jeans and boxers over his erection, down to his ankles and kicked away with Elijah still straddling his legs—no mean feat. The look of profound awe on Elijah’s face when he finally saw the rest of Sean, in particular that aching, pulsing part of him that now stood stiffly at attention from a nest of dark gold curls, was an ego rush the likes of which Sean had never known. He could live on it for years—decades—hell, millennia.

“Wow,” Elijah breathed in wide-eyed wonder, “lucky me.”

Sean tilted his head back and laughed, a helpless, giddy laugh that morphed into an involuntary moan as Elijah ran an exploratory finger along the length of his cock, and around the crown. “Elijah,” he bit out, “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I’m about to go off like a rocket. It won’t take much, believe me. God, I could come just from the way you’re looking at me.”

“Don’t you dare,” Elijah warned, and for a guy with just one functional arm, he was out of his own jeans and boxers in a pretty impressively quick time, too. Sean barely got a glimpse of Elijah’s cock, flushed rose and glistening with dampness, before the young man was covering him with his body. Sean hooked his ankles over the backs of Elijah’s calves, cupped his palms over the satin smoothness of his buttocks, and pulled him in, trapping their erections tightly between them.

For a long moment they remained like that, in an almost trancelike state of total bliss, looking deep into each other’s eyes. But their throbbing cocks were demanding action, and Elijah braced his forearm on the carpet beside Sean’s head, took his mouth in a fierce, possessive kiss, and began to move against him. His movements were hesitant and a bit awkward at first as he tried to find the right angle, but he soon found a rhythm that suited them both, and their cocks were sliding against each other, slick and hot. Their kiss deepened, tongues dancing to the beat of the music that pulsed in the air around them. One of Sean’s hands dove into Elijah’s hair and stroked the nearest pedicle, and Elijah’s movements immediately quickened, he whimpered against Sean’s lips, and the wild pines tang around them grew ever stronger, so that they might almost have been making love outside in the woods.

Sean hadn’t been exaggerating about being ready to go off like a rocket; far too soon, his orgasm was cresting like a wave inside him, rising up with a power and intensity that he’d never come close to experiencing before. Elijah suddenly tore his mouth away, and buried his burning face in Sean’s shoulder, almost sobbing, and the sudden, jerky motion of his hips told Sean that he was riding the crest of the same wave. There was a moment when time seemed suspended, the wave at its peak, as both men stiffened simultaneously, and in a mad blur of intense sensation release thundered through Sean. His body spasmed again and again, and he lost all sense of direction and self, as if he was
actually caught in a tidal wave and being tumbled helplessly in the surf. It was terrifying and glorious and he clung to the only anchor he could find in the maelstrom: the sharp cry that was his name on Elijah’s lips. When he finally came back to himself, he had made it safely to shore, with Elijah sprawled limply on top of him. Warm wetness pooled on his belly, and Sean was dimly aware that it was Elijah’s seed as well as his own, and the knowledge filled him with elation.

“Oh wow.”

Sean wasn’t positive who had spoken, but he was at least positive that it was one of the two of them, and not some relative with a poor sense of timing. But even if it was… they’d done it. Hallelujah, he thought jubilantly, they’d done it! Of course, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to move again for the foreseeable future, or possibly ever, but who cared?

Elijah slowly raised his head and stared at Sean, his expression solemn. With his ruffled hair and round, unblinking eyes, he bore an uncanny resemblance to an owl. And then he smiled. It was a smile so radiant that Sean suspected if a plane were flying 30,000 feet overhead at that moment, the passengers could look down and pinpoint their exact location.

“Well, I’d say you definitely made my day.” Elijah propped himself up on Sean’s chest, and instead of an owl, he now resembled a cat who had got at the cream. Sean expected him to start licking his whiskers like Maggie any second.

“I guess I’m never going to live that down, am I?” Sean said, pillowing one arm behind his head, the better to admire the lean, smoothly muscled back and shapely buttocks draped over him, a view he’d not had time to appreciate fully before.

“Are you kidding? Sudden Impact has now replaced Harvey as my all-time favorite movie,” Elijah declared. “I’m ordering a copy from Amazon and we’ll watch it every day.”

“Have a thing for Clint Eastwood, do you?” Sean cocked an eyebrow.

Elijah giggled. “Nope, but I do for a certain guy who makes him look like a total wimp.”

Sean colored with embarrassment, and Elijah leaned in and placed a tender kiss at the corner of his eye.

“That’s another thing I’ve wanted to do, ever since I took you to the cedar swamp. I love your eyes, Sean. I love you.” He kissed the corner of his other eye, and then his mouth, lips clinging briefly and warmly. Then Elijah rested his cheek over Sean’s heart, and said, “I’m happier than a skunk in a whirlwind.”

“So am I,” Sean replied softly as he smoothed Elijah’s spiky hair, “so am I.” They remained like that while their bodies cooled and their heart rates slowed, and it felt as if time’s wingèd chariot slowed, too, perhaps in repayment for the hours already lost. Sean continued to stroke his hand gently over those silky auburn strands, and the love he felt for this extraordinary young man seemed almost more than his heart could contain. He understood at last that perfect happiness really did exist outside the pages of a fairy tale, even if it was only for one brief shining moment, and he meant to hold onto this moment for as long as he possibly could.

Eventually the final notes of the last Stone Roses track died away, and Maggie’s rhythmic purr and the crackle of wood burning in the stove were the only sounds in the room.

Sean shifted a little and winced. He hated to admit it, but his sore back was killing him, and his legs were turning numb. “Elijah,” he said regretfully, “do you remember what I said about being too old
“You okay?” Elijah asked with quick concern, lifting his head and searching Sean’s face with worried eyes.

“Never better,” Sean reassured him, “but this floor’s a little hard. How about you? How does your shoulder feel?”

“What shoulder?” Elijah joked.

They literally had to peel themselves apart, a process that struck them both somehow as hysterically funny, and then they headed for the bathroom. Sean carried their discarded clothes in one arm, and kept the other around Elijah’s waist. Not to be constantly touching him while he could was somehow unthinkable.

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“I’m afraid we’re shocking Fred,” Sean commented, coming up for air.

What had started out straightforwardly enough, with a damp washcloth and bayberry soap, had soon turned into sensuous exploration. They were still too satiated for true arousal, but they couldn’t seem to stop kissing and caressing each other. The knowledge that this would be their last opportunity for some unknown length of time was at the back of Sean’s mind, and he knew it was at the back of Elijah’s mind, too.

“Oh, Fred’s not shocked,” Elijah assured him as he brushed a kiss along Sean’s jaw. “He’s crazy about you, and if you’re happy, he’s happy.”

“While I’m delighted to hear that my happiness is Fred’s happiness, let me point out that he’s now facing away from us, Elijah,” Sean said, staring over Elijah’s head at the box turtle, who had with painstakingly slow steps, like an 18-wheeler making a three-point turn, turned his back on their antics.

“He’s just being tactful.” Elijah drew the warm cloth down Sean’s back in a gliding sweep that ended at the base of his spine. “Box turtles are like that, you know.”

“If you say so.” He wondered briefly if Elijah was pulling his leg, but then the hand holding the washcloth moved lower, and he forgot all about box turtle tact, or the lack thereof.

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Still jumpy about the possibility of unexpected visitors, they dressed before leaving the bathroom. Elijah’s stomach had growled audibly a couple of times, so they made the kitchen their next stop. Neither could remember what Katie had said about the leftovers, so Sean randomly pulled a few Tupperware containers out of the refrigerator, found them two more cold beers, and grabbed some silverware from the drawer.

It was definitely one of the most unusual meals he’d ever eaten, and he’d eaten some very unusual meals during his travels overseas. They fed each other alternating bites of pasta salad, butterscotch pudding, cold broccoli quiche and chocolate pie, interspersed with sips of Shiner Bock. But as Elijah pointed out, the food all ended up together in your stomach anyway, so what did it really matter? And Sean could say with absolute certainty that on Elijah’s lips, the mixture tasted ambrosial.

By that point, they were sharing a chair as well as a fork, and the light-hearted atmosphere that prevailed might have continued had Sean’s eyes not fallen on the wall clock. His heart sank when he
noticed the time. It was nearly 8 p.m. In only twelve hours, he would have to leave. Time was speeding up again, as if the hour and minute hands were engaged in a frantic race to reach the morrow.

Elijah sensed the shift in Sean’s mood immediately, and sat back on his lap, bracing his hand on Sean’s chest. He followed the direction of Sean’s gaze, and frowned. Then he grasped Sean’s jaw and gently turned his head until he was looking directly at him. Holding his eyes, Elijah said softly, “Don’t look, Sean. Don’t count the minutes. Don’t let anything ruin this.”

But it was too late. The spell had been broken, and they both knew it. With a final kiss and a sigh, Elijah slid off Sean’s lap.

“Elijah, I’m sorry.” Sean felt terrible for wrecking their happy mood.

“It’s okay,” he said, lightly touching Sean’s arm in reassurance. “We have to go change the fox’s bandage anyway, and I want to see if she’ll eat something. Dr. Ian said she wouldn’t touch anything he offered her, and that’s not good. She needs to keep her strength up.”

They bundled up against the cold and walked across the yard hand-in-hand. There was no need to bring the mag, for the moon was shining brightly enough to light their way. In its silvered radiance Elijah appeared a being of infinite mystery; the subtle hollows and angles of his face were emphasized by faint shadows, and his eyes were glimmering, liquid and deep. Sean halted, and Elijah looked at him questioningly. He said, “I want to remember you like this,” and they stood staring at each other, breaths mingling in white clouds that lingered on the frigid air, until, without a word, they walked on.

The fox was alert and watchful when they entered the barn and turned on the lights. Elijah was pleased. “They’re nocturnal,” he explained to Sean, “so if she wasn’t awake, I’d be worried. Her eyes are clear, and she hasn’t chewed at her bandage. Those are all good signs.”

She proved a cooperative patient once again, and with less necessity for Elijah to calm her. Sean cut away the Vetwrap and gauze with bandage scissors, and already his hands felt more deft and confident as he followed Elijah’s instructions, cleaning and treating and rebandaging the wounds. There was an intimacy in working with Elijah like this, different from the physical intimacy they had shared, but just as fulfilling in its own way. He’d felt it that first time he’d helped Elijah feed the squirrels, and he felt it even more strongly now. He hated to think that after tonight someone else would help Elijah with the fox, and that she would be set free to join her mate while he remained trapped in New York.

Elijah had brought a raw egg for the fox to eat, and he gave it to her after she was returned to her cage. While Sean watched with fascination, she held the egg between her front paws, delicately cracked it with her teeth, and lapped up the yolk. Elijah offered her a little canned cat food, and she ate that, too.

“I told her about her mate,” Elijah said, “and she knows he’s worrying about her and that she needs to get well as quickly as she can.”

Before they left, Sean took a final peek at the baby squirrels, sleeping soundly curled up together in their nest of tissues. It was likely they, too, would be gone by the time he returned. It was a depressing thought, and it must have showed on his face, because Elijah pulled him close and cradled his head against his breast, and said, “Please don’t be sad. Please.” But he sounded as if he was speaking as much to himself as to Sean, and they remained like that for a very long time.

They were both subdued when they returned to the house, and the sight of the half-eaten food on the
kitchen table, the fork they’d shared and the empty beer bottles seemed almost cruel to Sean’s eyes now. Everything was a reminder of what he wouldn’t have for the foreseeable future. But nothing smote his heart as hard as the sight of Elijah, for there were dark smudges of weariness under his eyes once more, and he was moving tiredly as he picked up one of the Tupperware containers and carried it over to the sink.

“Leave the dishes, Elijah,” Sean said gently, “and let’s go to bed.”

They undressed each other by the light of the fire, not with their earlier desperate passion, but with slow, careful tenderness. This time it wasn’t about sex, but about the need to store up memories against the lonely days ahead. The flickering flames cast a warm glow over Elijah’s pale skin, and Sean couldn’t decide whether Elijah was more beautiful by sunlight, moonlight or firelight. *Soon I’ll have the rest of my life to make up my mind.* He clung to the hope fiercely as they climbed into bed.

There was an aching sense of familiarity in how Elijah fitted himself against Sean, throwing one slender muscled thigh across Sean’s legs, and tucking his head into the hollow of his neck. Elijah yawned and rubbed his cheek against Sean’s shoulder, *like a tired kitten*, and that was Sean’s last conscious thought before sleep pulled him under fathoms deep.

He woke to pale gray light suffusing the room, and immediately berated himself as an idiot for wasting so much precious time in sleep. At some point during the night, he and Elijah had shifted so that he was spooned around the younger man’s back, snuggled up against him from chin to toes. His cock had apparently woken up before the rest of him, and was now curving hotly between the smooth round globes of Elijah’s buttocks. A quick glance down showed that the corresponding part of Elijah had woken early, too, and Sean’s gaze lingered, given an opportunity it had not had the previous night to study Elijah’s erect cock.

It was typical guy behavior to compare penis sizes, although that wasn’t why Sean was looking. Elijah wasn’t as large as he was, but he had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. He wondered how it would feel to touch Elijah there; he hadn’t had an opportunity to do that, either. It would be a shame to leave without knowing… *Well, no time like the present.* His right hand had been splayed at Elijah’s waist; he moved it downward and wrapped his fingers around the base of his shaft. It was firm, full and slightly damp, and the vein that ran along the underside from root to crown was pulsing beneath his fingers. He supposed every guy had a certain way he liked to be touched; Sean only knew what he preferred. Would Elijah prefer it, too? What the hell, he decided, and moved his hand in a circular motion.

A low gasp startled him, and Sean turned his head. Slumberous blue eyes met his, and then narrowed as Elijah gave him a drowsy, delighted smile. “Good morning,” he practically purred, and joined his hand to Sean’s over his erection, lacing their fingers together. “I really like the way you wake a guy up.”

There was a dream-like quality to the next minutes, as their joined hands moved languidly on Elijah’s cock, and Sean learned that what pleased him also pleased Elijah. With each twist and pull, Sean slid his cock, slick with wetness, along the crease between Elijah’s buttocks. Their kisses lingered, wet and open mouthed, and their climax was a long slow burn that only at the very last exploded in a frenzy of movement and starbursts of color and sensation.

When it was over, Sean grabbed a handful of Kleenex from the bedside table, and after a cursory clean-up job, he and Elijah remained in bed, and avoided looking at the clock. The increasing brightness of the room told Sean it would soon be time to get up, but he wasn’t about to move until it was absolutely necessary.

The fingertips of Elijah’s right hand were resting lightly on Sean’s chest, and the curiously engraved
ring he wore on the third finger, the ring his father had given him the day he died, caught Sean’s attention. He touched the wide metal band that was just visible outside the protection of the sling.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about your ring,” he said softly. “Ian told me I should ask you what the words on it mean. I don’t recognize the script. What language is it?”

“It’s Lenape—a language that’s nearly dead now,” Elijah replied. “Very few people can speak or write it.” He twisted the ring around slowly with his thumb so that Sean could see the engraving. “This ring was made by the first Woodjin, Sean, and what it says is: If not now, when. After the Devil was let loose and began attacking people, there was widespread panic. Pineys stopped going out at night, and some even talked about offering him sacrifices—human sacrifices—to try and appease him. But Jordan Wood realized that the powers he’d inherited from his Indian forebears could be used for more than just rescuing lost travelers. In fact, he wrote in his journal that he believed it was for just such a purpose—to fight the Devil and protect the people of the pines—that he’d been given those gifts. This ring is a reminder, Sean, of the sacred trust that I bear, and even more, it’s a reminder that if we don’t stand up to evil, each and every one of us, who will?”

“He must have been a very extraordinary man,” Sean said quietly.

“He was.” Elijah smiled wryly. “He was a little guy like me, too.”

“And did he also have blue eyes?”

Elijah nodded. “In fact, I’m supposed to look a lot like he did.”

Sean knew then beyond a shadow of a doubt that the vision he had seen when they were walking to the cedar swamp, of a young man in buckskins carrying a musket over his shoulder, had been Jordan Wood.

“What about this?” he lightly touched the black tattoo low on Elijah’s abdomen. “It looks like the same writing.”

“It is. It’s my stag name.” Elijah hesitated. “Have you ever heard of a ‘vision quest’?” he asked.

“It’s some sort of Native American coming of age ritual, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. You see, a Woodjin doesn’t come into his full powers until he goes on his vision quest. I was eleven years old when I went on mine. When—when we have more time, I’ll tell you the whole story, but for now, I’ll just tell you the most important part. On a vision quest, you go off alone into the wilderness for several days, without food or drink.” A far-off expression came into Elijah’s eyes. “After a time, you start to sort of… hallucinate, and that’s when you have your vision. In mine, a white stag appeared to me, and it was he who told me my name. I’m pretty sure the stag was Jordan Wood.”

“Wow,” Sean breathed.

“Yeah. It was… amazing. But the thing about names is that they can confer power on the hearer, Sean. So much as I hate to keep anything secret from you, I can’t tell you what it is. That name has never been said aloud and never will be, because it could give the Devil power over me.” Elijah looked apologetic and a little anxious. “I hope you’re okay with that.”

“I’m having some trouble wrapping my brain around the whole idea, but of course I’m okay with it.” Sean realized just how much he still had to learn about Elijah and what it meant to be the Woodjin. Questions crowded his brain, questions there was no time to ask Elijah now—except for one. There was one question he simply had to ask, a question that had been on his mind ever since he
discovered the truth about the white stag.

“What’s it like,” he asked quietly, “to be the stag?”

Elijah was silent for a long time, so long that Sean thought he might have fallen asleep again, but then at last he spoke. “I never had a frame of reference for it,” he said. “I never had a way to explain how it feels to be both yourself and a part of something greater, to be more alive than you ever knew it was possible to be, and never to want that feeling to end.” He looked up at Sean, and his eyes were filled with wonder. “Until now. It’s like making love with you, Sean. That’s what being the stag is like.”

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Sean crouched down until he was nearly nose-to-nose with Fred. “Well, this is good-bye for a little while, Fred,” he said, reaching out to scratch the turtle under the chin. “I’ll miss you, buddy.”

Fred slowly blinked his small red eyes, and a rush of tears pricked Sean’s own eyes. *Shit.* This didn’t bode well, if just a blink from Fred could make him want to cry. He was determined not to make an ass of himself by going to pieces. He and Elijah weren’t parting forever—it only seemed that way. *Shit.*

He straightened, and looked sadly down at Fred, who craned his long neck up to watch him. “You behave yourself, and don’t go throwing any wild parties in here or anything,” he said, and hurried out of the bathroom and toward the front door where Hannah and Elijah were waiting for him.

What few possessions he had to take back with him were already packed in the Beamer, and the engine was idling. Elijah had gone out and started it, saying he wanted the interior of the car to be warm for him. He had been obviously trying to keep busy ever since they got up, and it broke Sean’s heart to see his desperation not to give into the sadness that was overwhelming them both.

As Sean walked down the hall Maggie came running to meet him, and he stooped to pick her up, burying his face in her soft fur. “God, I’m going to miss you, Maggie,” he whispered, and she wrapped her paws around his neck and butted her head under his chin. “Take care of him for me, will you?” She uttered a low *mrowr,* and with a final kiss on top of her head, he set her down, and walked over to where Elijah was standing with his sister. He looked paler than death, and his eyes were red-rimmed, but dry.

Sean had already said goodbye to a confused and unhappy Rocky in the kitchen, and now he and Hannah embraced: the last goodbye save one, the most difficult one of all. “Thank you for everything, Hannah,” Sean said quietly. He wanted to say to her, as he had to Maggie, “Take care of him for me,” but with Elijah standing right there, he couldn’t, and besides, the words were unnecessary. Hannah had already informed Elijah that she was taking him back to the Jenkins’ house for the rest of the day, and Sean knew that he would be surrounded by their love and caring for as long as he needed it.

“I’ll walk you out to the car,” Elijah said in a subdued voice.

It was another bitterly cold day, and the sky was now a leaden gray, as if the pines itself was reflecting the Woodjin’s sorrow. When they reached the car, Sean took one final look around at this place that had become so incredibly dear to him, and then he looked at Elijah. He was watching Sean as he had that day out by the cedar swamp, drinking him in as if he was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

“Elijah…” Sean began, but his voice cracked and he couldn’t go on, and treacherous tears filled his
eyes. With total disregard for his injured shoulder, Elijah threw himself at Sean and they clung to each other. I can’t let him go, Sean thought despairingly, as their mouths met in a final, desperate kiss. I can’t.

But in the end, at last, they separated, and Sean said in an unsteady voice, “Would you give me your blessing before I leave, Woodjin?”

Elijah swallowed hard, and then he cupped his hand at the back of Sean’s neck, and leaning in, placed a soft kiss on his brow. The scents of pine sap, and woodsmoke and dried grasses, the Woodjin’s scents, filled the air around them. “My blessing on you today, Sean, and every day until you come home,” he said, and released him.

“Thank you. Elijah, I’ll call you tonight, when I… when I get—back to the city.” Sean was barely able to get the words out.

“Okay,” Elijah whispered in a stricken voice, and that single word was so shatteringly sad and resigned that Sean’s shaky self-control started to crumble.

“I’d better go,” he blurted, reaching blindly for the door handle. “I love you, Elijah.”

As Sean drove away, he tried not to look in the rearview mirror, but just before the final turn that would take him out of sight of the house he gave in, desperate for a last glimpse of Elijah. Hannah was holding her brother in her arms, and his head was bowed on her shoulder.

I can’t bear this, Sean thought, as he wiped the tears from his cheeks, but he didn’t turn around. Instead he kept driving, heading back to his old life, a life that no longer felt quite real to him.
Media outlets and reporters included here are all real, and the facts are accurate to the best of my ability as a non-business tycoon and non-lawyer.

Hostile Takeover: a type of corporate takeover which is carried out against the wishes of the board of the target company.

January

January 16, 2006

They faced each other across the width of the dining room table. It might have been an ocean between them, Sean thought. An ocean made of gleaming mahogany, and tossing with Waterford crystal and Irish linen, with sterling silver and Lenox china. He felt vaguely nauseous, as if he was in fact on a pitching boat, and entirely out of place. Less than 48 hours ago, Elijah had been straddling his lap in a kitchen chair and feeding him bites of cold quiche from a Tupperware container in between kisses.

“We’ve got to keep an eye on Parker and Ferguson, Sean,” Chris was saying as she cut into her filet
mignon. “They’re the weak links in the chain, and I don’t trust them not to want us to sell out if Google comes back with a counter offer.”

Chris’s words washed over and around him, and then eddied away. He’d fought the good fight at the directors’ meeting, and largely because of his persuasive powers, the Board had unanimously voted to refuse Google’s takeover bid. But he’d felt outside himself the entire time, an imposter Sean going through the motions. He had to get a grip, he told himself, and re-engage this world that had, after all, been the only one he’d known for nearly half his life. His job wasn’t done yet, and until it was, he owed it to the people who worked for him and relied on him to give them his best.

But the pep talk couldn’t still the small voice in his mind that continued to ask the same question it had ever since he drove out of the Lincoln Tunnel into the hustle and bustle of the city and knew that the pines, and Elijah, were truly behind him now: *What am I doing here?*

Suddenly, Sean laid his fork and knife down on his plate; the musical chime raised by costly silver on costly china sounded false and hollow. He and Chris had decided to leave their discussion until tomorrow rather than pile more stress on top of what the day had already brought them, but it was an intolerable situation. This farce of normalcy couldn’t continue.

Last night Sean had escaped to his study, pleading, truthfully, mountains of e-mails to answer and preparations to make for the meeting. But first he’d called Elijah; their conversation was no more than a brief, agonizing exchange of *I miss you, I love you* that left him feeling bereft. To distract himself from the pain, he’d thrown himself into work, and not until the sky began to lighten had he paused to take a cat nap on the sofa, before showering and dressing for the Directors’ meeting. It had been a wrench to set aside the inexpensive jeans and sweatshirt Katie and Bill had given him and assume one of his Armani suits and silk ties.

Tonight would be different. He no longer had an excuse to spend the night in his study. Despite their growing alienation from each other, he and Chris had continued to share a bed, even if it was in the manner of strangers who were bunking together out of necessity: each clinging doggedly to their own side lest they accidentally touch in the middle. But it was simply out of the question now. The only person with whom he would ever, could ever, share a bed in future was Elijah.

“Chris.”

Something about the manner in which he spoke her name alerted Chris to his intention. She stared at him, fork poised in mid-air, and he wondered if he was imagining the flicker of apprehension in her fine gray eyes. Tiny bracket lines of tension appeared on either side of her mouth. Sean’s foot began jittering nervously beneath the table and his gut was churning.

During the drive back to the city, he’d mentally rehearsed what he would tell her, gone over and over it in his mind. But all the explanations and apologies in the world wouldn’t soften the blow, if blow it was. The unvarnished truth was all he could offer.

“Chris,” Sean said quietly, “I’m sorry, but we can’t go on like this anymore. It’s over.”

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Sean was on the verge of total meltdown by the time he got checked into a suite at Trump Tower. As he’d predicted to Elijah, it was his decision to leave Clicktwice that had hit Chris hardest, and sent her straight over the edge. An ugly quarrel had ensued, with truths spoken that had been simmering below the surface for months. This wasn’t how he’d wanted them to part, in anger and bitterness, but he’d felt helpless to steer the confrontation into calmer waters. He was deeply ashamed now that he’d allowed Chris to goad him into a fight, but if he was truthful with himself, he had to admit that there
had been more real passion of feeling in the ending of their relationship than there had been at its beginning. It should have ended long ago, and would have, if only he hadn’t been so passive, so certain that the future held nothing for him beyond what he already had. It was his own fault, and he, and no one else, would have to bear the guilt that knowledge brought.

It was shortly after one a.m. when Sean finished putting away his clothes and collapsed on the bed. His head was throbbing and he felt like total shit- worse, if truth be told, than he had after being chased through the woods by the Devil. But he still had to call Anna and Mack, let them know about the break-up and where he was staying—although it was likely that Chris had already called his mom and given her an earful.

First, though, before he did anything else, he needed to talk to Elijah.

He’d propped Hannah Wood’s painting against the wall above the dresser as soon as he arrived. With the white stag now watching him from the shadows with his great eyes like stars, Sean took out his cell phone- the one he’d left behind that life-changing day he’d headed to the shore- flipped it open and dialed the necessary numbers to reach Elijah without the call being traceable.

Subpoenas for phone records would undoubtedly be requested by whatever law firm Chris hired to try and prove her renewed conviction that he’d been cheating on her with another woman. A woman, according to her, who was after his money and prestige, and would rub Chris’s nose in it every time they met at some high-brow society function or other. And there would be lawyers. She’d made that abundantly clear, hurling the threat at him as he quickly packed enough clothes in a suitcase to last him a few days.

You’re going to pay for betraying me like this, Sean. Don’t think I’ll make it easy on you, not for a single minute.

The irony of her misassumption was so immense that it would have been funny if the situation were any less dire. But he couldn’t tell her that he was turning his back on this life for good, or that he meant to spend his future in the Pine Barrens with a young man who talked to animals, and who couldn’t attend an opera gala or gallery opening even if he wanted to.

The call clicked through, and Elijah answered on the first ring, as if he’d been hovering by the phone, waiting. “Sean?”

“Hey,” Sean breathed, and suddenly he was shaking and a flood of tears was blurring his vision.

“Sean, are you okay? I’ve been so worried about you.”

“No,” Sean replied, for there was grief at the close of this chapter of his life that had started with so much hope and promise, guilt for the depth of his relief that it was finally ending, and above all else, longing for the young man on the other end of the line, so near and yet so very, very far away. “No, I’m not okay.” And he started to cry.

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“Sean, you’re making a terrible mistake, but it’s not too late to mend fences. I’m sure Chris will take you back if you ask her.”

“It is too late, Mom, and I have no intention of asking her to take me back,” Sean repeated patiently and for the dozenth time at least. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He’d known their conversation would be largely an exercise in frustration, and so it was proving. “Please believe that I didn’t arrive at this decision lightly, or with any intention of hurting
her or you.”

He wanted to say, Can’t you even try to see my side for once? After all, I’m the one who is your child, not Chris.

“Chris is a beautiful, smart and successful woman. I just don’t understand how you can throw her away like this. Honestly, Sean, there have been times lately when I’ve felt like I hardly know you anymore.”

But Anna never had known who her eldest son really was, and so Sean tried to ignore the stab in his heart that her words caused. Chris’s social prominence, her place on numerous ‘best dressed’ lists, the glamorous lifestyle she and Sean had led, not to mention the incredible success of Clicktwice, blinded Anna to all else. The years of hardship and struggle while John Astin was dying of cancer had given her an almost pathologic fear of poverty.

“Chris and I have grown apart. We have completely different goals in life now, and I want—I need—to pursue mine while I still can.”

“But a doctor, Sean? Didn’t you see enough of doctors while your father was in the hospital?” Anna asked bitterly. What she had taken away from the experience was a dislike and mistrust of the medical system that had not only been unable to save her husband’s life, but had also robbed them of their life savings.

“I saw enough to admire their calling and their commitment to helping others. Mom, you know it’s what I dreamed about before I became so involved with Clicktwice,” Sean reminded her. “And I can’t think of any better way to honor Dad’s memory than to become a doctor.”

“Well, I don’t know, Sean.” Anna sounded softened, but doubtful. “If you ask me, you’re simply going through a mid-life crisis, and you’ll regret it when you come to your senses. Only by then it will be too late, and Chris will have found herself another man who can appreciate her worth.”

“I hope she does, Mom. I want Chris to be happy, and she definitely wasn’t happy with me. Please try and accept that this is the best decision for both of us.”

When Sean eventually hung up the phone, Anna still wasn’t convinced, and even though the result was about what he’d expected, he was still disheartened. His mother didn’t yet know about Elijah or that her eldest son was gay, and if she had so much trouble accepting his separation from Christine, what on earth would she make of that?

But in the power of Elijah’s goodness, Sean had the utmost faith; he refused to believe that his mother wouldn’t come to accept, and even love, Elijah in time.

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The first words out of Mack’s mouth (after ‘No shit, you really left Chris?’, that is) were, “I’m proud of you, Sean.” They were words that soothed the raw places inside Sean that his conversation with Anna had left. At least someone in his family was on his side.

“When will you tell her about Elijah?” Mack asked next.

“When this mess is finally resolved and it’s safe for me to join him in New Jersey. And Mack, that brings up an important favor I have to ask.” Sean put every iota of gravity into his voice that he could muster. “I need you to promise me that you won’t mention Elijah to anyone, not even Mom, until I give you the okay. I want him kept completely out of this.”
“Are you sure that’s wise?” Mack sounded skeptical. “Reporters are nosey sons of bitches, and it’ll be a hell of a mess if Chris and Mom find out about Elijah from one of them instead of you.”

“I don’t plan to give the reporters anything to be nosey about,” Sean replied. “For all intents and purposes Elijah doesn’t exist, and you never heard me mention him, capisce? We’re not even going to see each other until it’s all over.”

“All right, I solemnly swear not to breathe a word to anyone, but don’t you think you’re going a little overboard?”

“No, I don’t. Elijah has led a pretty sheltered life, Mack, and it’s not fair to him or his family to subject them to harassment by the media.” Every word of which was true—but it was only half the truth. A time might someday come when Mack could be trusted with Elijah’s secret, but Sean was prepared to keep the knowledge from him forever if necessary. Given what was at stake, it was a sacrifice he willingly made.

“I was really looking forward to meeting your Elijah,” Mack said regretfully. “But if Chris tries to drag things out who the hell knows when that might be?”

“Chris is understandably upset with me, but I’m hoping in time she’ll calm down and see reason so we can end things civilly and without a lot of publicity. My bigger worry right now is the effect on the company while we deal with all this shit with Google. The timing couldn’t possibly be any worse, Mack. One way or another, Chris and I still have to work together and keep up the morale of our employees, not to mention placate our investors.”

“Jesus, talk about an awkward situation.”

Sean rubbed the back of his tense neck and sighed, “Yeah.”

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The New York Times
January 17, 2006

CLICKTWICE REJECTS GOOGLE BUYOUT OFFER

The Board of Directors of Clicktwice, Inc., yesterday rejected a $3.1 billion offer from Google, Inc., to buy the Internet advertising firm, currently the world’s largest digital marketing technology and services company. Clicktwice Chairman and CEO Sean Astin said that the board vote was unanimous and that the strength of the company’s financial performance meant there was no appreciable benefit to shareholders by accepting the offer. “We will continue to expand our client base and remain responsive to changes in technology to improve the services we offer. Our commitment to our customers and investors is absolute.”

Google CEO Eric Schmidt said via phone interview from California that Google would reconsider its options, and did not rule out the potential for approaching shareholders directly with a new offer. “The addition of Clicktwice’s marketing technology would greatly enhance our ability to deliver search results tailored to our user’s needs,” said Mr. Schmidt, and indicated that a decision regarding Google’s next step will be made within two weeks.

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New York Post, Page Six, Cindy Adams
Is it over between longtime partners Sean Astin and Christine Harrell? Rumors are circulating that Sean checked out of their posh digs on Central Park West and into a suite at Trump Tower two nights ago. Do I smell the scent of another woman? This inquiring mind means to find out. Stay tuned, folks…

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New York Post, Page Six, Cindy Adams

A WOMAN SCORNED
January 25, 2006

As I reported last week, rumors have been flying that it’s all over between New York power couple Sean Astin and Christine Harrell. Well, folks, according to the horse’s mouth herself, the rumors are true. I caught up with (or should I say cornered?) the woman gossip columnists love to hate in the little girl’s room at Jean George last night. After flipping me the bird in the best tradition of this grand old city, Chris confirmed that it’s true. Is there another woman in the picture? She wouldn’t say. But Sean darling? Remember that old saying about ‘hell hath no fury’? From the look in your ex’s eyes, I’d recommend you hire a taste tester. Pronto.

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January 31, 2006

“So, how’d it go?” asked Sean, at the precise moment Elijah said, “So, how’d it go?”

Both men started to laugh.

“You first,” Elijah prompted. “What did your lawyer say?”

“She seems cautiously optimistic. New York doesn’t recognize common law marriages, so the odds of the court ruling in Chris’s favor are slim, especially as we have a property agreement already.”

“That’s good news, then.” Elijah sounded so happy that Sean felt compelled to utter a caution.

“Don’t get your hopes too high just yet. According to Philippa there is precedent for the courts to hear a lawsuit involving unmarried partners, so we’re not home free. A lot will depend on the judge that is assigned to the case and how persuasive Chris’s lawyers are.”

“And when will you know who the judge is going to be?”

“A couple of weeks apparently, and then who knows how much longer for a ruling to be made,” Sean said heavily. “The entire process will probably take a good three months.”

There was a short silence while Elijah absorbed this information. “That long, huh?” he said, trying but failing to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Yeah, I’m afraid so.”

“Well,” Elijah said with determined optimism, “it could be worse, and by the time you get home again, the whippoorwill shoes will be blooming, and we can kayak through the swamps to find them. The pines in the spring are so beautiful, Sean; I can’t wait to show you everything.”
“I can’t wait to see it all.” Sean stared out the window of his bedroom at the magnificent view of the nighttime city skyline, and wished he could see beyond it to the homelier sight of smoke pouring from a chimney and yellow light streaming through curtained windows. Most of all he wished he could see right through those windows and into Elijah’s eyes…

But no amount of wishing would make that happen, so he shook himself and said, “Now tell me how everything went with your mom and Zach. Did they get off okay?”

“Yeah, everything went fine. No delays or problems at the airport. Mom called as soon as they got home.”

“That’s terrific. But how are you doing, Elijah? You must be missing them.” The thought of Elijah alone again and missing his family caused Sean’s heart to clench. It hurt like hell not to be there for him.

“A little,” Elijah admitted. “It would’ve been great if they could’ve stayed for a few more days, but at least they made it here in the first place, thanks to you. Sean,” there was a sudden catch in the young man’s voice, “what you did for us, it was so generous, so…”

“Uh-uh,” Sean broke in. “I thought we clearly established that you weren’t going to say ‘thank you’ any more.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. I’m supposed to tell you all the other ways I intend to thank you when I see you again,” Elijah laughed, and the sound eased the aching tightness coiled inside Sean.

“No time like the present, Elijah. Start talking.” A grin curved Sean’s lips as a different sort of sensation coiled in the pit of his stomach, one that was akin to flames erupting out of smoldering ashes. “Tell me how you’d like to thank me,” he said in a low, husky voice.

There was another short silence. “Now?”

“Yeah, right now. Talk to me.”

“Oh. Oh. You mean phone sex?”

The mix of nervousness and enthusiasm in Elijah’s voice made Sean chuckle. “You’ve never done this before, huh?” Thank god, he thought, as Matt-the-Fucker’s name flitted in and out of his brain like a black fly at the beach—briefly stinging before taking off again.

“No time like the present, Elijah. Start talking.” A grin curved Sean’s lips as a different sort of sensation coiled in the pit of his stomach, one that was akin to flames erupting out of smoldering ashes. “Tell me how you’d like to thank me,” he said in a low, husky voice.

“No, have you?”

“Never.” Chris had made it clear that that sort of love play was off-limits. Sean understood now that there had never been the requisite level of sexual trust between them that would allow for such intimacy. “But how difficult can it be? Of course it’s natural to be a little nervous- I mean hell, I’m a little nervous, but the important thing is to feel comfortable, Elijah, so don’t hesitate to tell me if we’re going too fast or if-“

“Sean?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to go down on you.” The words emerged in a breathless rush, so quickly that Sean wasn’t sure at first if he’d heard them correctly.

“What?” he said.
“You want to know how I’d like to thank you, well, that’s at the top of the list. I want to go down on you, Sean. I want to know how you’d taste and feel in my mouth. I want…” Sean heard Elijah swallow. “I want you to touch yourself now and imagine that I’m… I’m kneeling between your legs with your cock in my mouth. You have no idea how many times I’ve gotten off imagining doing that to you.” He choked out a laugh. “Like practically every single morning since you’ve been gone.”

The image that leaped immediately into Sean’s mind, of Elijah naked and aroused, kneeling between his spread thighs and closing that perfect mouth around him, sent every scrap of blood in his body rushing inexorably down to his groin, leaving him almost light-headed. Within seconds Sean was achingly aroused, and he wondered dazedly if any phone sex had ever gone from zero to sixty so fast.

He wedged the cordless phone between his shoulder and jaw while with shaking hands he groped for the elastic waistband of his boxers.

“I have to take off my boxers first.” He raised his hips so that he could work the underwear down over his hips and buttocks, gasping as the silk fabric brushed the head of his cock that was curving up toward his belly. “And what about you?” he gritted out. He tossed away the boxers with a moan of relief. “Who’s going to take care of you?”

“I’ll take care of myself,” Elijah said. “I can multi-task.”

Sean laughed, and hoped there’d always be laughter in their bed- or separate beds, in this case. He heard a rustling sound, and said, “Tell me what you’re doing now. I want to picture you.”

“I’m taking off my clothes- boxers and tee shirt. You started out ahead of me, so I’m taking them off fast.”

“You better, Elwood, because if you don’t get that sexy mouth of yours on me soon, I’ll spontaneously self-combust.” Elijah’s giggle sent another jolt of arousal rocketing through him, and he groaned.

“Almost done, Sean.” The rustling sound vanished, and then Elijah’s voice said in a hot whisper, “Ready or not, here I come.” Sean wrapped his damp palm around his shaft, squeezed hard and moaned. “Does that feel good?” Elijah almost purred. “My tongue licking you?”

Sean closed his eyes and let Elijah’s words transport him back to the pines and into their bed. Instantly, he could see Elijah with crystal clarity: his pale skin was lightly sheened with perspiration, his body backlit by the flickering fire so that it was limned in gold, and his blue eyes were dark with need as he ran his tongue along Sean’s shaft, while one hand petted along Sean’s thigh. Even the scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses, ghost-like and elusive, seemed to hover in the air around him, so real was the image in his mind.

“Oh god, yes.” Sean relaxed his grip and his fingers slid lightly and tortuously up and down his shaft. “Ah… so incredible. Are you touching yourself?” he asked, needing to know and complete the vision.

“Yeah I am, and I don’t think I’ll last long; I was so hard already from just the thought of tasting you. Oh Sean, you’re smoother and sweeter than Kandy Kake ice cream,” Elijah breathed.

A panting laugh escaped Sean at the comparison, so perfectly Elijah, but it cut off with a gasp as he ran his thumb along the ruby crown of his cock, catching the slick fluid welling up, spreading it around, while he imagined Elijah’s tongue licking it away. “I’ve never felt anything like your mouth on me- so hot, so good. Don’t stop, whatever you do, don’t stop.”
“I won’t. In fact, I’m gonna take you deeper, Sean, the way I’ve dreamed of doing.”

Sean’s hand moved, tightened, became Elijah’s hot-silk mouth engulfing him and sucking hard. “Ohhh, Elijah, ohhh…” The twist and pull rhythm of his hand, slippery with sweat and pre-come, mimicked the motions of vision-Elijah’s bobbing head.

The edges of Sean’s conscious mind blurred and faded; only with Elijah had he been able to let himself truly go, relinquish the almost manic self-control that had ruled his life since his father’s death. Dimly he heard Elijah panting, “Sean, are you still with me?”

“Sorry… I’m… ah… I’m getting close, Elijah.” He shifted restlessly, arching up into his grip. “What… about… you?”

“Nearly, ah, there. Just a little longer…”

The erotically explicit sounds coming through receiver now obviated the need for explanation. The blood thundered through Sean’s veins, drowning out everything but his own incoherent moans, and the low tense unh unh unhhh that he already recognized as the sound of Elijah nearing his climax. It was the most arousing sound Sean had ever heard, and sent him hurtling straight toward the edge.

“I’m coming, Sean,” Elijah blurted out, just as Sean moaned, “Elijah. Elijah.” and then the hot spill of seed trickled over his fingers.

They both lay spent and panting into their respective phones for several minutes. Weakly, Sean groped for the box of tissues on the bedside table, pulled one out and began to wipe off his fingers. Then he paused, touched his tongue to a pearly drop of fluid on the back of his thumb, and made a face.

“Better than Kandy Kake ice cream? Really?”

Elijah giggled. “Absolutely.”

“I guess there’s no accounting for taste,” Sean remarked, but a delicious post-sex lassitude was drugging his senses. He knew that he would sleep soundly for the first time since leaving the pines, and that he and Elijah had discovered the best possible way to survive the days apart with their sanity intact.

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February

February 2, 2006

Google Ups the Ante—One Last Time

Internet giant Google, Inc. (GOOG), whose $3.1 billion takeover bid was rejected in January, has made a final buyout offer of $3.6 billion to the board of directors of Clicktwice, Inc. (CLCK), a digital marketing technology company. In a letter to Clicktwice CEO, Sean Astin, Google informed the board that they have until February 15 to accept the offer or risk a hostile takeover attempt. Sources inside the company say that major shareholders in Clicktwice have been pressuring the board to do a deal with Google, and if this final offer is refused, it seems likely that Google will approach company shareholders directly with the offer. Clicktwice stock shares have reflected the uncertainty of the company’s future, their volatility in recent days resulting not only from Google’s bid to buy the company, but the high-profile separation of Astin and company president Christine...
February 4, 2006

Elijah swung his arms jubilantly as he walked across the twilit yard. He was out of the confines of a sling at last! The unaccustomed movement caused a slight twinge in his right shoulder, but that would pass soon enough, and at least the sharper, shooting pains were gone. The bullet that remained inside him didn’t look as if it was going to be a problem, just as Dr. Ian had predicted.

Of course he had solemnly promised the doctor not to overdo it once he was allowed to dispense with the sling, but Elijah was anxious to test the strength and mobility of the damaged shoulder. He needed to know what his limitations were if he was called.

So far, so good, he thought, circling his arm. There was a slight pull on the scar tissue as his hand described a shallow arc through the air, but with time and work Dr. Ian was optimistic that he would regain his full range of motion. The doctor had consulted with a physiotherapist who had developed a series of stretching and strengthening exercises for Elijah, and he was obediently performing them every day. Not that he could slack off if he wanted to, Elijah thought humorously, because practically the first thing Sean asked him every night when he called was, “Did you do your exercises today?” Between him and Maggie, not to mention Dr. Ian, there was no escape.

But even this early in his recovery, Elijah judged, it should be possible to bear the stag’s far more considerable weight if it proved necessary. In a few more days- and with Dr. Ian’s somewhat grudging permission- he would transform into the white stag and see for himself. A thrill of anticipation coursed through him as he imagined running free through the woods, his every sense keenly and completely alive, but he tamped it down. Right now there was another recovering patient to think about, and he smiled down at the silent companion trotting by his left side.

The red fox was sound again, moving easily across the frozen ground with no trace of a limp. The severe wounds from the leg hold trap had healed swiftly and without complications, and Elijah’s heart rejoiced, for in a few minutes she would be reunited with her mate at last and free to return to the remote corner of the pines where their den was located.

The fox didn’t need him for guidance, for the reynard had been haunting the perimeter of the yard for the past nineteen days, and she knew it. But she remained beside Elijah, out of respect and gratitude for the care he had given her. Foxes, as Elijah had learned over the years, had a grace of spirit that many people could study and learn from.

They entered the woods on the same sandy path that Pete Gunner had used when he brought the injured vixen to Elijah, and a sudden lump formed in Elijah’s throat, remembering how he and Sean had later visited her mate, after Sean had tended to her wounds. It would have meant so much to Sean to be here and witness their reunion.

He’d considered asking Crystal to join him, for she’d been a huge help to Elijah in taking care of the vixen while he was hampered by having his arm in a sling, but in the end he decided against it. He was sensitive to Sean’s lingering misgivings about Crystal, understandable considering the circumstances. Sean still wasn’t convinced that trusting Crystal with the truth had been wise. There was also the fact that Sean was, Elijah thought ruefully, a tiny bit jealous of Crystal, too. Not in any sexual sense, of course, but because she was free to visit and help Elijah with the animals, while he was stuck in New York. Sean was far too generous of spirit to resent her for it, but there was no doubt he wished he was in Crystal’s place.
Just inside the fringe of the pines, the male fox emerged silently from the underbrush, not even a rustle of dried leaves heralding his arrival. He gave a low, joyful yip at the sight of the vixen, and she bounded forward to meet him, her burnished copper coat gleaming in the fading light.

They brushed against each other again and again, bodies twining in a sinuous dance of almost rapturous bliss at their reunion. Elijah’s eyesight grewblurry as he watched them and listened to their trilling purrs of happiness, such a far cry from the plaintive barks of longing he’d heard them exchange late at night. But he fiercely blinked back the moisture, not wishing to miss one step in their dance of joy so that he could describe it all in detail when Sean called that night. They were learning to see their respective worlds through each other’s eyes, and never before in his life had Elijah been so keenly aware of his surroundings, of storing up images and memories that he could later share with Sean.

Reassured of his mate’s wellbeing, the reynard nudged her with his nose and yipped softly, anxious to be away. The fox’s amber gaze found Elijah one final time, and in it he read both thanks and farewell.

“There is no billing and cooing for former lovebirds Christine Harrell and Sean Astin this Valentine’s Day, but Chris must be cooing in triumph. Notoriously lenient Family Court judge Bernard Hill has been assigned to hear her palimony suit, and that has to be a better Valentine’s gift than a dozen red roses and a box of truffles from La Maison Du Chocolat. I ran into her estranged partner at the International Center for Photography, where he was attending the reception for the opening of the Martha Holm exhibit ‘Photographs from the Edge of the World’, but the normally voluble Sean wasn’t talking, and if there’s another woman in his life, he’s keeping her all too well hidden for this gossip columnist’s taste.

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Businesswire
February 24, 2006

David vs. Goliath

Buzz in the business world this week revolves around the face-off between web advertising firm Clicktwice and Internet giant Google in a modern day version of David versus Goliath. On February 15, the Clicktwice board of directors turned down a second Google buyout offer of $3.6 billion. Now Goliath is taking more aggressive measures, and yesterday announced that it will bring the fight directly to company shareholders in an effort to unseat the Clicktwice board of directors.
and install their own candidates. Reached at the Apple Expo in Paris, Clicktwice Chairman and 
CEO Sean Astin said the company is prepared to go to the distance and won’t knuckle under to 
Google’s hostile takeover attempt. Can they hold out? Only time will tell.

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February 25, 2006

“If it’s Tuesday, this must be Belgium,” said Elijah.

“Except of course that it’s only Saturday and I’m in Paris, and I won’t be in Brussels until 
Wednesday.” Sean yanked on his red silk tie to loosen it and unbuttoned the top of his now-limp 
white button-down, then sat down on the edge of the hotel room bed and kicked off his shoes.

“Did you ever see that movie, Sean?”

“You mean the one with Suzanne Pleshette, right? I saw it once when I was a kid. In fact, I kind of 
had a crush on Suzanne,” Sean confessed, flopping back on the peach-colored satin duvet with a 
relieved sigh. He flexed his stocking feet, which ached after standing all day on the unforgiving 
concrete floor at the expo center. “Dark hair, large expressive eyes, that flawless skin…”

“I get the impression you’re trying to tell me something,” Elijah remarked, sounding amused.

“I suppose I was searching for you even then,” Sean replied thoughtfully, pillowing his head on one 
am. “I was just a little confused about the gender I was searching for.” His words ended on an 
involuntary yawn. Maybe it had been a mistake to lie down on the oh-so-comfortable bed in his 
room at Le Meurice. It was tempting to close his eyes and give in to the pull of weariness, even with 
Elijah on the phone.

“Tired?” Elijah’s voice was soft and sympathetic.

Sean stifled another yawn. “A bit jet-lagged still, that’s all. I’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep.
God, I wish I could beg off this dinner, but not a chance. The whole point to my being here is to 
schmooze the Apple guys and reassure them that all this shit going on with the company right now 
doesn’t impact our ability to do the job for them.”

“It doesn’t seem fair that you should have to do this on your birthday, though.”

It wasn’t the first time Elijah had said this. Despite the birthday package filled with gifts and assorted 
pines goodies- such as Katie’s cranberry bread- that had arrived at Trump Tower a few days before 
Sean left New York for Paris, Elijah felt that he could have, and should have done more.

“If I can’t be with you, Elijah, it’s far better that I’m here rather than in New York. In fact, this 
overseas trip is a blessing in disguise. Things are so tense at Clicktwice that it’s healthier for 
everyone if Chris and I aren’t in the office at the same time. Poor Liv has been wearing a path in the 
carpet going back and forth between our offices with those damned notes we’ve been writing each 
other.”

Elijah sighed. “Maybe, but I hate that you’re spending your birthday with a bunch of strangers. Do 
they even know it’s your birthday?”

“No, I haven’t told them.” Suddenly Sean started to laugh, the sound rumbling in his belly.

“What’s so funny?”
“Oh, I’m just picturing the reaction I’d get if I was to tell my dinner companions that I was wished a happy birthday over the phone this morning by a cat, a squirrel and a box turtle. They’d think I was nuts- no offense to Rocky. Of course, I’m not actually positive Fred said ‘happy birthday’. All I could hear was a very, very faint blinking sound.”

Elijah giggled. “Fred may not be a great conversationalist, but his heart is in the right place.”

“And so is yours, Elijah. Honestly, I don’t know how I’d survive all this without you. Even if we can’t be together today, this is still the best birthday I’ve had since before my dad died.” When Elijah didn’t say anything, Sean said, “Elijah? You still there?” Cell phone reception in the pines could be spotty, and it wouldn’t be the first time one of their calls had been abruptly cut off.

But Elijah said quietly, “I’m here. It’s just… Sean, it doesn’t seem fair that you’re stuck in Paris alone on your birthday with no one to celebrate with, especially after how you made it possible for my mom and Zach to be with me. But I swear, I swear,” and his voice actually cracked on the word, “that next year will be totally different. We’ll have a big party here and invite everyone, and Bill will play his fiddle and we’ll dance all night- you and me and Maggie and Rocky.”

“Are The Stone Roses part of Bill’s repertoire?” Sean teased, because he hated for Elijah to be so upset on his behalf.

“It’s not a joke, Sean.” Elijah sounded as close to cross as his loving nature would allow.

“I know that. But what you have to believe is that I’m not alone. You’re with me every second of every day, wherever I am and whatever I’m doing. You remember yesterday, when I stood at the top of the Eiffel Tower and described the view for you, and then I held up my phone so you could hear the wind? I felt so incredibly close to you then, Elijah. Don’t laugh,” Sean said softly, “but I swear I could smell the pines, all the way across the Atlantic.”

“Laugh? Oh Sean…” Elijah’s voice caught again.

“We’ll always have Paris?” Sean quipped.

At that Elijah laughed despite himself and said, “I’ve always thought Rick and Captain Renault made a more convincing couple. Sean, I love you, even if you drive me nuts by refusing ever to be serious.”

“I’m serious sometimes, I swear,” Sean protested. “And I love you, too. But now,” he glanced at his faithful Rolex, in which he’d had the badly scratched crystal replaced, and grimaced, “I’d better go. I’ve got to shower and change before dinner.”

“Don’t call me later- go straight to bed and get some rest, okay?”

“Yes, mom,” Sean replied. Elijah’s infectious giggle lingered in his ear as he disconnected. After that one meltdown the night he left Chris, he tried never to allow their phone calls to end on a down note. It would be too easy to slip into negativity, to piss and moan about their separation. So no matter how difficult it was, and it was incredibly difficult at times, Sean kept his moments of depression to himself. He found other ways to deal with it, rather than weigh Elijah’s bright spirit down.

Sean made no immediate move to get up from the bed; instead he turned his head, the softness of the down-filled satin duvet echoing the remembered feel of the white stag’s fur beneath his cheek that wondrous night he and Elijah met. His gaze went to the ornate gilt and marble nightstand beside the bed and found a photograph in a brushed aluminum frame that he had set there. It was a black and white photo of Elijah that Martha Holm had taken- a recent photo that Elijah had had taken as a
Valentine’s gift for Sean.

Sean smiled a little as he recalled the cloak and dagger at Martha’s photography exhibit ten days earlier. With that gossip columnist from the New York Post present and watching Sean’s every move like some glitzy society bird of prey, he and Martha had had to be extremely careful not to give her any reason to believe they had more than a passing acquaintance. An ICP reception wasn’t his usual milieu, and Cindy Adams knew it. She paid little to no attention to the stunning photographs Martha had taken on her journeys to the far-flung corners of the world; instead her speculative gaze Martha had followed Sean, and said quite clearly, *Are you here because of some woman?*

She’d quizzed Sean with her usual combination of remorselessness and charm when she finally managed to trap him at the buffet table. Sean wasn’t particularly adept at prevarication, but he thought he’d acquitted himself pretty well and not given anything away, deflecting her questions about his love life with a laugh and disbelieving shake of his head. “Do you really think I’m anxious to get involved with anyone else right now?”

In the end Cindy, none the wiser, had departed for some other society event, and he and Martha had met for a cup of coffee at a small café when the reception was over. He hadn’t realized until the words burst from him, “Tell me how Elijah is doing, Martha,” what an immense relief it was to talk to someone who knew, not only about him and Elijah, but also about the white stag. The strain of maintaining his double life, of being constantly on his guard so as not to let a single miscalculated word slip that could raise suspicion, was far greater than he’d known.

Martha had patiently answered all Sean’s questions, reassured him that Elijah was indeed telling the truth when he claimed to be feeling better, and indulged Sean’s simple need to speak Elijah’s name aloud. Her sympathetic gray eyes told him without words that she understood. Before they parted, Martha handed him a shopping bag that contained a package gift-wrapped in shiny red paper. “A slightly belated Valentine’s present from Elijah,” she’d said with a mysterious smile.

Sean was looking at that present now, and into a pair of eyes unlike no other in the world, luminous eyes that had held him captive the first time he beheld them, and every time since.

Elijah was kneeling in the snow and looking up into the camera’s lens as directly and unselfconsciously as a child. Clumps of snow clung to his spiky hair, to his eyebrow and lashes, and dusted the simple dark sweater and jeans he wore. His arms dangled at his sides and beneath his eyes were dark smudges that told of the painful physical ordeal he’d endured. His expression was as ambiguous as the Mona Lisa’s, lips slightly tucked at the corners; Sean could never decide from one moment to the next if Elijah was about to smile at him or frown. All the sorrow and uncertainty of their current situation was etched in his face, and somehow it meant more to Sean that Elijah would allow his vulnerability to show than if he’d put on the biggest, brightest smile in the world.

Beyond that, Martha had somehow, miraculously managed to capture both Eljahs: the Elijah who was Sean’s friend and lover, and the Woodjin, the mysterious and magical guardian of the pines. It was an astonishingly powerful photo, and it was his and his alone. He’d never considered himself the possessive type until he met Elijah, but Sean definitely didn’t want to share this with anyone else. Martha had promised him that no further prints would be made— even as she ruefully acknowledged that it was one of the best photos she had ever taken.

*How could it not be,* Sean thought, *with Elijah for her subject?*

It was supremely easy to lose himself in contemplation of Elijah’s haunting beauty, and Sean allowed himself the luxury for a few minutes, before reluctantly getting up from the bed to shower and dress for dinner at the hotel’s three-star restaurant. But before he left his hotel room, Sean did something he’d not yet confessed to Elijah, a simple ritual that he followed every morning before he left for
work and every night before he turned out the bedside light: he touched his fingers to his lips and then placed them gently against the smooth glass, directly above Elijah’s mouth. “See you later,” Sean whispered, and then he carefully hid the photo away in a drawer and went downstairs for dinner.

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March

March 14, 2006

Liv set the steaming coffee mug down at Sean’s elbow. “Here you go.”

Sean glanced up from his computer monitor. “Liv, you don’t have to do that,” he scolded.

It was an old argument between them.

“You won’t take the time to get the coffee yourself,” she countered, “and you can deny it all you like, but you’re still jet-lagged from your trip. You need the caffeine. Anyway, how many times do I have to tell you that I don’t mind?”

“You should mind. The days are long gone when a secretary’s duties included making her boss coffee,” Sean said, but he picked up the navy blue mug, emblazoned with the Clicktwice logo, took a sip of the heavenly smelling brew and gave her a grateful smile. Liv knew exactly how Sean liked his coffee.

Liv shook her head. “I swear, boss, you’re more of a feminist than I am,” she joked.

Before Sean could come up with a suitable retort, his cell phone vibrated. He glanced down at the display and froze. It was Elijah’s number. This was the first time he’d ever called Sean at work, and they’d decided he would only do so in the case of an emergency. A frisson of fear ran down his spine and he fought to keep his expression neutral even while a series of horrific images flashed through his mind, images he didn’t have to conjure from his imagination. He’d seen Elijah wounded and bleeding. He’d looked the Devil straight in his flaming red eyes.

He thanked god fervently that he was alone with Liv, the only person at Clicktwice he trusted absolutely, and not in a meeting with Chris, who was so adept at reading his emotions.

“I have to take this call, Liv,” Sean said with forced calm. “If you wouldn’t mind…” He nodded toward the half-open door between their two offices.

Liv was eyeing him with concern, a faint frown contracting her smooth white brow; obviously he hadn’t succeeded in disguising his worry from her. But she said nothing, only quietly left the room and closed the door behind her. He sometimes thought she suspected that he had someone new in his life, but if so she never let on, and he blessed her discretion and her loyalty. She disdained the water cooler gossip that others indulged in, and in innumerable small ways eased the stress that the current situation between him and Chris created.

The moment the door closed, Sean picked up the call. “Elijah?”

“Sean, I’m sorry; I know I shouldn’t have called you at work, but I…” Elijah’s voice caught.

“That’s okay,” Sean said quickly. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s Clack. He’s sick.” The words were clipped, and Sean could hear the tightly controlled fear in
Sean had jokingly dubbed the two noisy baby squirrels Click and Clack after Elijah made him listen to an NPR radio show called *Car Talk*. The engaging hosts with their non-stop banter had irresistibly reminded him of the squirrels, whose high-pitched chattering could be heard in the background whenever Elijah was talking to him from the ‘hospital’. The silly names had stuck despite Elijah’s caution that it wasn’t wise to name animals that were going to be released into the wild, lest one become too attached to them. Now he began to understand why.

“Oh Elijah,” he breathed. “What happened? You said they were nearly ready to be released.”

“I noticed last night that Clack was a little quieter than normal,” Elijah said miserably, “but I didn’t think much of it. I just thought he was tired- he and Click were playing almost non-stop yesterday. Then this morning he didn’t come out of the nesting box with Click when I turned the lights on, so I went into the pen to check on him. He was curled up in the corner of the box, and his nose was runny and he was making a rattling noise every time he breathed. I called the vet right away, and he came out as soon as he could. It’s what I was afraid of, Sean- Clack has pneumonia.”

“Pneumonia?” Sean repeated, his heart sinking. “That sounds really serious.”

“It *is* serious. It’s the most dangerous illness a baby squirrel can have, and a lot of them don’t pull through it…” Elijah’s voice wobbled.

“But some of them do pull through, right? So there’s no reason to assume that Clack won’t,” Sean said, putting as much positive energy into his words as he could.

“I don’t know. Oh Sean, if you could see him… He’s just lying there on the heating pad, fighting to breath. And Click- he’s all confused. They’ve never been separated before, and he’s too young for me to help him understand what’s going on.”

Elijah sounded perilously close to tears, and it was all Sean could do not to blurt out, “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” drop everything, and race out of the office to go to him.

Instead, Sean forced himself to stillness. “What are you doing for him?” he asked.

“He’s isolated from Click, of course, and he’s on a nebulizer to help him breath and get the antibiotics he needs. I’ve been giving him Pedialyte to keep him hydrated, and he has the heating pad to keep him warm.” As Sean had hoped, listing the positive things being done helped to steady Elijah.

“Did the vet give you a prognosis?”

“He thinks he’ll make it, if he gets good supportive care.”

“Then there’s no question of him recovering, because he’s in the best possible hands- yours.”

“But he shouldn’t have gotten sick in the first place,” Elijah fretted. “It’s my fault. I should have realized that there was something wrong with him last night and called the vet then.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Elijah, don’t go down that road. Beating up on yourself isn’t going to help matters.”

“I know, but…”

“No ‘buts’. Listen, I want you to call Bill as soon as we’re done and ask him to come out and give
you a hand. There are all the other animals to see to, and you’re going to be exhausted if you try to take care of everything by yourself.” Sean didn’t have to ask if Elijah was going to be staying at the barn pretty nearly 24/7 nursing Clack. Some things went without saying.

“That’s a good idea. I should have thought of it myself,” Elijah said ruefully.

“You would have, when you calmed down.”

“Sean?”

“Yeah?”

“I hope you’re not too upset with me for calling you at work. I know this isn’t a real emergency, but I was starting to panic a little and I… I had to talk to you.”

“I’m not upset at all. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved,” joked Sean. “I was beginning to worry that you didn’t need me.”

Elijah gave a shaky laugh. “Not need you? Oh Sean, I need you if just to make me laugh.”

“Well laughter aside, there is nothing and no one in this world more important to me than you,” Sean went on, dead serious now. “If you need me for any reason, at any time, I’m here for you. I don’t give a shit if it’s an emergency or not. You call me.” He paused for a few beats to let the words sink in, and then said softly, “Elijah, I wish I could be there with you.”

“I know you do. But you have no idea how much you’ve helped already.” Elijah sighed. “I better let you go.”

Sean glanced at his watch. “I have a meeting with our software developers in a little while. I should be done by 4 o’clock. I’ll call you then to see how things are going.”

“Okay. Sean, I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Sean had never been so reluctant to hang up the phone. After he did, he sat there, staring sightlessly at the screensaver on his computer’s monitor, and for the first time he seriously questioned the wisdom of his decision to keep his and Elijah’s lives entirely separate. He should be there for Elijah, goddamn it, not leaving it up to Bill and the other pineys to step in and do what by rights was his responsibility. Frustrated anger surged up inside him, and he forced it back down with difficulty, relaxing his suddenly tight grip on the arms of his chair. Getting angry wouldn’t solve anything.

Sean slowly let out a shuddering breath, and his gaze traveled around his office, ending with its stunning view of Central Park, where the trees were budding for spring was just around the corner. Most people would kill to have the kind of office he did: spacious, light-filled, and beautifully appointed, with an antique burled walnut desk, comfortable burgundy leather sofa and chairs, and several exquisite oil paintings - not to mention the most high tech of high tech phone and computer equipment. But on the gleaming surface of his desk sat only one silver-framed photograph: a picture of Anna and Mack taken at her 59th birthday party in December.

Elijah, his lover, the most important person in his life, was nowhere in sight.

Even in Sean’s suite several floors below, Elijah existed only in the bedroom, a room kept carefully locked whenever he went out, with strict instructions that the cleaning service was not to go in there unless he was present. God alone knew what they thought of this eccentricity- probably that he was
some kind of sexual deviant hiding his kinks- but he was afraid that Chris might not be above a little bribery of the staff in her efforts to discover what, if anything, Sean was up to in his private life.

Was he crazy? He wondered now. Was it absurd to go to such lengths to keep Elijah’s presence in his life a secret?

Sean pushed back his chair, wheels rolling soundlessly over the plush pile of the forest-green carpet. Then he got up and walked over to the vast picture window, and stood staring down at Central Park West with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his slacks. Far below, taillights blinked red as cars and taxicabs and trucks snarled in the usual mid-town traffic started and stopped, while their drivers leaned on the horns in frustration. Pedestrians scurried along the sidewalks, clutching at hats and scarves against the raw, windy March weather that was making urban tumbleweed of stray papers.

He imagined what would happen if Elijah’s existence was discovered, if a persistent reporter started digging into Elijah’s background, and eventually tracked down Matt-the-Fucker. “Elijah Wood? Yeah, I dated him for a while. The guy’s a total freak, man. He swore up and down that he can turn into a deer, even showed me these weird knobs on his head as proof.” Those people down there might someday pick up the Post or the Daily News from a newsstand to see a photo of the strange man from the Pine Barrens, the freak who could turn himself into a deer, staring back at them. The very thought made him sick with fear.

No, he definitely wasn’t crazy and it definitely wasn’t absurd. It was very, very necessary. Only when Sean Astin was no longer a blip on society’s radar screen would it be safe to return to the pines- and Elijah.

A tap on the door caught Sean’s attention. “Come in,” he said, turning away from the window just as Liv appeared in the doorway.

“Your meeting starts in five minutes, Sean,” she reminded him.

“I’ll be right there.” Sean grabbed his suit jacket and shrugged into it, then picked up his briefcase and the mug of coffee.

“Is everything all right?” Liv asked as he joined her, concern lacing her soft, musical voice.

If there was anyone at Clicktwice he could tell about Elijah, it was Liv Tyler, and he was sorely tempted. But it didn’t seem fair to burden her with his secret and make her partner to a conspiracy of silence.

“A friend of mine is ill,” Sean hedged. “But I think he’s going to be okay.”

He was proved right three days later when a tired but relieved Elijah called to tell him that he’d been woken from a cat nap by a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Clack’s impatient and vociferous demands for dinner. But even that best of news couldn’t quite erase Sean’s sense of guilt over his failure to be there with Elijah, where he belonged.

He wondered how he’d manage to hold onto his sanity until it was all over, and just how long ‘all over’ was going to take.

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MarketWatch

March 31, 2006
Clicktwice Shareholders’ Meeting Postponed

The board of directors of Clicktwice, Inc. (CLCK), the digital marketing technology company based in Manhattan, voted today to postpone their annual shareholders’ meeting, originally scheduled for April 30th, until June 1st. Company Chairman and CEO Sean Astin said that the date was pushed back in order to give the company more time to explore all of its strategic alternatives in their proxy fight against Google, Inc. (GOOG), leading to speculation that the internet giant is poised for victory.

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April

April 3, 2006

Elijah hit the record button on his VCR and returned to the sofa. "This is it, Maggie," he said, gathering the calico cat onto his lap and staring nervously at the TV screen. He'd felt nervous ever since Sean had told him last night that he'd be appearing on the CNBC early morning financial program the 'Squawk Box'.

"I've been on that show before, and they don't pull punches, Elijah," Sean had warned. "But don't worry, I can handle it." Although Elijah didn't like the idea of anyone giving his Sean a hard time, he knew Sean was right: he could handle it. He could handle anything, even the Devil. But still, given all the publicity surrounding Sean’s separation from Chris and now the latest news about the postponement of Clicktwice’s annual meeting, Elijah couldn’t help but be nervous.

He’d raced around like a madman that morning, feeding the animals and cleaning stalls and cages even earlier than usual so that he could be in front of the television at 6:00 a.m. when the show started. Sean couldn't tell him exactly when his interview would be aired, and predictably, Elijah had had to sit through forty-five minutes of boring financial reporting before Sean's live interview was finally announced at a commercial break by Joe Kernan, one of the show’s two hosts along with Carl Quintanilla. The men looked to be about Sean's own age, and were dressed in dark slacks, white button-downs and conservative ties.

Both their somewhat disheveled appearance- sleeves rolled up and ties askew- and the hectic appearance of the set were designed to add an element of urgency and vitality to the show, Elijah guessed. Laptops, computer printouts, notepads, pens and empty coffee cups were scattered randomly across the curved, black-topped desk behind which the men sat.

In fairness, Elijah supposed there was genuine urgency to their job, but though for Sean’s sake he’d been valiantly trying to keep up on all the news about Clicktwice and the hostile takeover attempt, there was no getting around the fact that the world of high finance just didn’t interest him. He couldn’t wait until it was all over, and Sean could return home to the far simpler, less hectic life of the pines.

When the commercial break concluded, the show’s bouncy theme music played, and Joe Kernan said, “Welcome back to the Squawk Box. Our next guest is Sean Astin, Chairman and CEO of the Manhattan-based Internet advertising company Clicktwice."

The camera slowly panned back until a giant TV screen came into view, and there was Sean, sitting on the sofa in his office at Clicktwice. Elijah’s heart gave a great leap and his eyes hungrily devoured Sean’s face. Other than the photos that Sean sometimes sent via his cell phone’s built-in camera, most of them taken by cooperative strangers at various tourist attractions on his European trip, it was the first time Elijah had ‘seen’ him since he left the pines over two months earlier.
By comparison with the Squawk Box hosts, Sean was neatly dressed in a charcoal gray suit, crisp, light blue button-down, and navy tie. He wore a suit so well, Elijah thought with pride. He looked distinguished, competent, and, in Elijah’s entirely biased opinion, sexy as hell. Sean had confessed somewhat dejectedly that he’d been having trouble losing the weight he’d gained during his time overseas, but although Elijah could objectively see that he was heavier, to his loving gaze Sean was nothing less than drop-dead gorgeous.

But there was something else that loving gaze picked up on, too.

“Oh Maggie, Sean looks so tired,” Elijah breathed, taking in Sean’s puffy lids and the shadows beneath his eyes that make-up couldn’t quite hide. Maggie flicked her tail and meowed her concern, and Rocky added his two cents. The squirrel was draped across Elijah’s shoulders, his bottlebrush tail tickling the sensitive skin beneath the young man’s jaw.

With a stab of guilt, Elijah recalled that he and Sean had been on the phone last night until one o’clock in the morning. Sean had probably had little to no sleep. Neither had Elijah, of course, but he was as much a night owl as any great horned or saw-whet in the pines. He suspected this was yet one more manifestation of his stag nature, or perhaps it was an innate response as Woodjin to the fact that the Devil couldn’t bear the light of day, but prowled the forest under cover of darkness. Whatever the reason, Elijah had never had the least difficulty pulling an all-nighter, something Hannah had complained was downright unfair when she was still in college and bleary-eyed from staying up all night to cram for a test.

But such was not true of Sean, and yet he’d sacrificed untold hours of rest over the past eleven weeks. He worked a killing schedule at Clicktwice, and then hit the books every evening for a couple of hours, trying to polish up his math and science skills before he started his post-baccalaureate studies in the fall. After that, come hell or high water, he called Elijah, and their wide-ranging conversations— from passionate discussions of movies, music and politics, to their plans for the future, to passionate discussions of a very different nature— often lasted well into the night. It was no wonder Sean looked so tired.

“Sean, welcome back to the Squawk Box,” continued Kernan, and to Elijah’s disappointment, the camera moved away from Sean.

“Thank you for inviting me, Joe,” Sean replied, and the deep tones of his voice poured through Elijah’s body like sun-warmed honey.

“But,” Joe continued, “and let’s be totally honest here, you’re a guest this morning under vastly different circumstances than last time.” Sean’s rueful, slightly lop-sided smile appeared as the camera briefly showed him before returning to the Squawk Box host. “And that’s because your company is currently the target of a hostile takeover bid by Google.”

“Yes, it is,” Sean replied calmly. “As you’re no doubt aware, our board rejected two tender offers from Google earlier in the year, and as a result they’ve chosen to engage in a proxy fight.”

“Those tender offers were both in excess of $3 billion, certainly a fair market value for the company. So why did you turn them down?” Carl Quintanilla jumped in and challenged Sean. “Wouldn’t it have been in the best interest of your shareholders to sell? Google’s stock has certainly outperformed that of Clicktwice, especially in recent weeks.”

A graphic appeared on the screen, a chart that traced Clicktwice’s common stock share prices. There was an overall definite downward trend in the zigzagging blue line that represented the company; Elijah had known that, but to see it illustrated on a national news show made his heart hurt for Sean.
“Is there a company whose stock hasn’t been outperformed by Google’s?” Sean rebutted, appearing unruffled by the attack or disturbed by the chart. “It’s true that the stock price has fluctuated lately, but that’s only natural under the circumstances. We could hardly expect anything else. But I have every confidence that Clicktwice will return to the pattern of steady growth that it’s enjoyed ever since going public.”

“If you avoid the hostile takeover attempt, and considering who you’re up against, you can’t be feeling particularly sanguine at this moment,” Joe pointed out. “It’s no secret that Google has its eye on your software patents, and they’re obviously willing to go to great lengths to secure them.”

“And that’s why I personally believe that when it comes down to a vote, our shareholders will choose to re-elect a board that has their best interests at heart, instead of those who are simply greedy to get their hands on our patents.” He spoke with an unflappable assurance that made Elijah’s heart swell with pride.

“All well and good, Sean, but I think our listeners would like to hear something more concrete about the shark repellent you plan to use, or are you looking for a white knight to save the company?” Carl asked, thrusting his head forward aggressively. “Friday’s news that you’ve pushed back the date of your annual meeting has to have raised legitimate concerns among potential investors.”

“I can tell you we aren’t putting out feelers for a white knight,” Sean replied, “But it would be premature for me to go into specifics about any poison pills, Carl. We’re still weighing our options.”

The discussion continued, but Elijah found it hard to concentrate on the arcane lingo that was as mystifying to him as the piney slang sometimes still was to Sean, for the warmth of Sean’s gold-flecked green eyes as he looked into the camera proved too great a distraction to one starved for the sight of his lover for eleven interminable weeks. Sean was speaking with animation, using his shapely hands to emphasize the points he was trying to make. The disfiguring scratches that had marred the backs were entirely gone now. The Sean whom Elijah had rescued in the pines - sad, uncertain, deeply unhappy - was nowhere in evidence. For the first time, Elijah was truly seeing Sean as the rest of the world saw him: a wealthy, successful and articulate businessman, standing confidently at the helm of a multi-billion dollar corporation.

This wealthy, successful and articulate man loved him, Elijah thought in amazement, and even more, he was prepared to give up the life of prestige and privilege that he’d earned through his own talent and hard work, and move to the pines to be with Elijah. Watching Sean now, it seemed almost incredible. Sean had told Elijah innumerable times over the past weeks that he was the luckiest man on the planet, but Elijah knew that he was the lucky one.

His attention was abruptly jerked back to the interview, however, at Joe Kernan’s next comment.

“But even if Google’s takeover attempt doesn’t succeed, what does the future hold for Clicktwice? You’ve recently separated from the company’s president, Christine Harrell, and it’s no secret that you’re intending to step down as CEO after the annual meeting.”

“My personal life isn’t relevant to the future of Clicktwice,” Sean said firmly, “and my decision to step down has nothing whatsoever to do with my relationship with Ms. Harrell. In fact, she is my choice to succeed me as CEO, and I’m confident that the board will support my recommendation and nominate her as my successor. It’s a position she is eminently qualified to assume. But I intend to continue in an advisory capacity for as long as is necessary to ensure a smooth transition.” He huffed a small laugh. “I’ve devoted a lot of years of my life to Clicktwice, Joe. I’m not going to abandon it to the wolves.”

Not by a single flicker of an eyelid did Sean betray the internal struggle he’d waged to arrive at this
decision, or the cost it was taking on him. But Elijah knew all too well, and the lump that formed in
his throat was made up of equal parts pride, love and pain.

Joe laughed. “The wolves at Google, huh? Well, we wish you and Clicktwice the very best, Sean,
and thank you for joining us this morning.”

“It’s been my pleasure. Thank you for having me on.” Sean replied.

The camera panned back from Sean and returned to the co-hosts. “That was Sean Astin, Chairman
and CEO of Clicktwice, Inc. We’ll be back after this commercial break…”

Elijah set Maggie down and bounced up from the sofa, going to the VCR to stop it. He rewound the
tape, listening to the high-pitched whine until it ceased, and then hit ‘play’. He fast-forwarded until
he reached the point in the interview that the camera zoomed in tight on Sean’s face, and then he
paused the tape and stared and stared, thinking he could never get his fill of that beloved face.

“I miss you so much,” he whispered, and Rocky curled more tightly around his neck, chattering
softly and offering what consolation he could.

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April 19, 2006

Sean was perched on the corner of Liv’s desk while he and his secretary went over his schedule for
the following week. It was a schedule crammed full of business lunches and dinners with clients who
were jittery about the situation with Google; meetings with the company’s CFO and lawyers; and
interviews with various media outlets. All this was leaving even less time than usual for Sean to
oversee the day to day running of Clicktwice. More and more, Chris was assuming total
responsibility for that end of the business, and Sean thought philosophically that at least it had the
happy effect of keeping them out of each other’s way most of the time.

It was also preparing the company’s employees for a future without Sean, and he was surprised that
the thought hurt as much as it did, considering how desperate he was to return to Elijah and begin his
medical studies. But there were good people working at Clicktwice, many of them with the company
since its inception, and he would miss them. People like Liv, his tall, elegant, stylish, model-gorgeous
and oh-so-efficient secretary who had turned down at least a dozen different lucrative job offers from
larger and more prestigious corporations, choosing to remain loyal to Clicktwice and to him.

“If we move the meeting with Peter to Thursday morning,” Liv was saying, “you can still attend that
literacy fundraiser on Tuesday afternoon.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Sean agreed, and Liv did some clicking and dragging with her mouse as
she rearranged the colorful grid on her computer screen.

They were interrupted by the phone ringing, no uncommon interruption these days, and with a sigh
of frustration, Liv picked up the handset. “Mr. Astin’s secretary,” she said, and listened intently. “Just
a moment, Ms. Boyens, and I’ll connect you to Mr. Astin.” She put the call on hold and looked
inquiringly at Sean.

His heart was suddenly pounding, and his body broke out in a light sweat. This was it, he thought.
There was only one reason Philippa could be calling him, and it was to tell him that Judge Hill had
finally ruled on Chris’s palimony suit.

He held out his hand and remained where he was, rather than go into his own office to take the call.
Somehow, he didn’t want to be alone while getting the news, and after all, Liv was aware, as was
every other employee at Clicktwice, that the decision was due any day.

“Good luck,” Liv whispered, handing Sean the phone.

Sean gave her a terse nod, and said into the receiver, “Philippa, it’s Sean. Any news?”

“The decision came down a few minutes ago. I’m afraid it’s not good for us, Sean. Judge Hill ruled in favor of hearing the palimony suit.”

Shit. Shit. Sean met Liv’s eyes and gave a slight shake of his head, and her face fell. Somehow he managed to hold onto his cool, even as the understanding of what this would mean came crashing down on him: yet more delay, more weeks, if not months, of separation from Elijah. Little to no chance of starting his post-baccalaureate studies in the fall as he’d planned. A court battle that would be conducted with the full glare of the public spotlight focused on it thus requiring an even greater degree of vigilance in protecting Elijah than before.

“I don’t have the full text of the decision yet, but as soon as I do, I’ll fax it to you. Sean, I’m so sorry,” Philippa said. “If it had been any other judge, there would have been a snowball’s chance in hell that the suit would have gone forward.”

“Guess I’m just lucky, huh?” Sean jested, but without an ounce of humor in his voice. “What’s our next step?”

“Even though we don’t have a trial date yet, Chris’s lawyers certainly aren’t going to wait to start preparing their case, and neither should we. I’d like to set up a meeting for early next week if possible.”

“As it happens, my secretary and I were just going over my schedule. I’m available Tuesday afternoon.” There goes the literacy fundraiser. Sean gave Liv a rueful look.

There was a sound of flipping pages as Philippa searched her appointment book. “That will work for me. Two o’clock?”

“Two o’clock is fine.”

“Sean, I realize what disappointing news this is, but look at it as if we’re beginning again from a level playing field. Simply because Hill agreed to hear the case doesn’t mean it’s a given that Chris will win. The burden of proof will be on her.”

“I understand.” But it’s the time it will take, Philippa, he wanted to say, no, to wail, and the potential danger to someone I love. I don’t care about the rest of it.

Sean said goodbye and returned the receiver to Liv. Dejection overcame him then, an inescapable foe, and a prickle of hot tears burned his eyes. His shaky self-control fled and he buried his head in his hands, not caring that Liv was witnessing him self-destruct right in front of her. Peripherally he was aware of her getting up from her chair, and then her arm came around his shaking shoulders and the delicate floral perfume she wore teased his nostrils.

“Whoever she is, she must be really special to you,” Liv said quietly. “Would it help to talk about her?”

Sean released a ragged breath that was half laugh, half sob. He’d been right that she suspected he was involved with someone new. This time, the urge to confide in her was too strong to resist. He desperately needed an ally at Clicktwice, now more than ever, or he thought he might go stark, raving mad.
“Him. Not her, him,” Sean corrected in a hoarse voice. “His name is Elijah, and yeah, he’s pretty special to me.” He looked at her through tear-blurred eyes. She was doing a pretty admirable job of disguising her shock at discovering her boss was in love with another man, only her slightly widened eyes giving her away. “You sure you want to hear this?”

“I’m sure,” she replied, understanding what he meant. “I’d like to help you, if I can.” Liv was careful never to voice a negative opinion about Chris, but there was no doubting whose side she was on. “So tell me about Elijah.”

She dropped her arm and resumed her seat, and Sean began to talk. He couldn’t tell her the whole truth, of course, but there was no denying it was cathartic to unburden himself of as much of the truth as he dared. Liv asked no questions, only listened, and he knew that everything he told her about Elijah would be held in trust, guarded as closely as he guarded it himself.

When he was done, Sean was wrung out like a limp dishcloth, and Liv touched his hand and said, “You should go down to your suite and take a break.”

“There’s a phone call I have to make first.” He didn’t have to say to whom. He smiled ruefully at her. “You must sometimes wish you’d taken one of those job offers, Liv. Look at what a mess you’ve become involved in, through no fault of your own.”

“You know, I don’t think you really understand how much you’re loved here,” Liv surprised him by saying. “Everyone respects Chris. She’s demanding but fair, and she never asks more of anyone than she’s willing to do herself. But the reason we’ve all stayed through thick and thin is you.” To his shock, Liv’s blue eyes slowly filled with tears. “It won’t be the same after you leave, Sean.”

“There’ll be an opening for an office manager in a few years when I get my medical practice up and running,” Sean said, blinking back more tears of his own. “If you’re interested.”

Liv dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, and laughed. “Move to the Pine Barrens? A city girl like me? You’ve got to be kidding,” she joked.

“Hey, if this city guy can move there, so can you.” Despite her words, Sean was confident that when the time came, Liv would be ready and willing to join him. That certain knowledge, that vision of a concrete future, gave him the strength to go into his office and call Elijah with the bad news.

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April 21, 2006

“It’s easy to see who Jordan takes after,” Elijah said with amusement from his spot sitting atop the paddock railing. “You were riding by the time you could walk, too, Hannah.”

His nephew was perched fearlessly on the broad brown back of Cher, his tiny fingers wound into the long strands of her coarse black mane. He seemed impatient of his father’s large hands holding him carefully in place as the mare plodded slowly around the paddock with Hannah holding the lead line clipped to her leather halter.

“Go,” Jordan said, urging Cher on, “go!”

Lawrence’s deep laughter rang out. “I think we’re going to have to get our son his own pony, Hannah, and soon.”

Hannah grinned mischievously at Elijah. “Just what you’ve been wanting, Lij, another animal to take care of.”
Elijah grinned back. “Oh, what’s one more mouth to feed?” he said. “Besides, I think it’s a great idea. I’ll start keeping my eye out for a suitable pony for him.”

Warmth filled Elijah’s heart as the three Makoares continued their slow circuit with Cher, while Sonny, Dolly and Paco watched tolerantly from the adjacent paddock. He’d thought he held it together pretty well on the phone with Hannah yesterday, when he called to tell her the news about the palimony suit, but she’d seen right through him; hence this unexpected but welcome visit. There’d been a moment when they first arrived, and Elijah scooped Jordan up into his arms and cuddled him, that he’d been hard-pressed not to break down into tears.

In some ways it would be a relief to cry, he thought, for the intolerable ache of loneliness and longing seemed sometimes more than he could bear, especially on a day like today.

The April sky was rain-washed blue from a storm the previous night, and the promise of spring was being fulfilled all around them, in the unfurling fronds of lacy ferns, the deep-throated mating calls of bullfrogs in the cedar swamps, and the chirping cries of baby birds from their nests under the barn’s eaves. These, and all the other signs of new life, were usually powerful distractions for Elijah. He sometimes spent entire spring days from sunup to sundown roaming the pines on foot or kayaking along the Batsto, making note of the locations of new burrows, dens, nests and dams, and any bridges or roads in need of repair or clearing after winter’s cold grip was released at last.

But this spring season was bittersweet, for he’d anticipated sharing these voyages of discovery with Sean. Already Sean had missed so much: the release of the red fox, and of Click and Clack, now happily playing and squabbling in a nearby stand of pitch pines where Elijah could keep a watchful eye on them as they grew to adulthood. There were new arrivals, too, for spring was a busy time for wildlife rehabilitators: a saw-whet owl with a broken wing, three baby cottontails whose mother had been killed, and a skunk with numerous cuts and contusions who had likely been rolled by a car. All were doing well, but it simply wasn’t the same telling Sean about their progress on the phone or emailing him photos. Strange how just those couple times he and Sean had worked together to care for the animals had imprinted on Elijah’s soul. It had felt so utterly right.

Being apart felt so utterly wrong, and now it appeared that their separation would go on even longer than their worst fears. The spring sunshine could not warm the sudden cold inside him, and the optimism that had always buoyed him up in times of trouble was nowhere in sight.

When the tall bay mare and her tiny rider came abreast Elijah, Hannah drew Cher to a halt. “All right, Jordan, the ride’s over. It’s time for your lunch,” she said firmly.

Jordan’s lower lip began to quiver ominously as his father lifted him off Cher, but experience had taught Lawrence that distraction was the key to averting childish tears. He lifted Jordan high in the air, pretended to drop him, making him squeal with laughter, and then settled him on his shoulders.

“Take Jordan back to the house, Lawrence, and get lunch started,” Hannah ordered. “I’ll help Elijah do Cher up.”

Elijah exchanged an amused look with his brother-in-law. Hannah was being managing again. But Lawrence good-naturedly did as instructed, and Elijah jumped lightly down from the fence and accompanied his sister into the barn.

Hannah put Cher on crossties in the aisleway while Elijah went to the tack room to get the grooming bucket. The mare was shedding the final remnants of her heavy winter coat and enjoyed a good grooming. He handed Hannah a black rubber currycomb, and picked up a stiff boar bristle brush for himself. Hannah efficiently wielded the curry, stopping periodically to bang the clumps of dead fur off it using the heel of her boot, and patches of shining dappled bay slowly emerged. Elijah brushed
out Cher’s long tail, carefully separating any tangles with his fingers, until the hair fell like a smooth black waterfall, not unlike that of her namesake.

They worked in companionable silence. This was a routine they’d shared hundreds of times over their lives, and the chore was both soothing and satisfying; Cher’s nodding head and drooping lower lip showed that she was finding it soothing, too. Elijah didn’t need his special ability to read her mind.

But Elijah knew there was something on Hannah’s mind, although hers he couldn’t read; he could feel her gaze on him when she thought he wouldn’t notice. But she said nothing until they were leaning side by side on the stall door watching Cher munch on a flake of alfalfa hay.

“You know, you can stop being Woodjin for five minutes, Elijah,” Hannah said, turning toward him. “I promise not to tell anyone.” She held out her arms and Elijah, tears suddenly flooding his eyes, stepped into them and buried his face in her shoulder. “What’s happening to you and Sean is so unfair,” she whispered, rocking him and stroking his hair with a gentle hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry. Elijah, I’m so sorry,” Sean said again.

“Maybe we should declare a moratorium on those words,” Elijah replied through the tightness that made his chest ache. “Or else it’s all we’re going to be saying to each other.”

“You’re right. I’m s...” Sean made that small huff that was so characteristic and so endearing. “I guess I’m running out of words. Who ever thought that day would arrive, huh?”

Elijah’s heart was breaking for Sean. “We’ll get through this, Sean,” he said, but the words lacked conviction to his own ears. They might get through it, but at that moment it was difficult to see beyond the fact that the bright and happy future they’d spent endless hours discussing seemed more and more distant and dream-like. “We’ll just have to up the phone sex to twice a day, seven days a week.”

That got a laugh out of Sean, as Elijah had hoped, but his own feelings of guilt left no room for humor. Everything Sean was suffering right now was on his account, because he was the Woodjin.

And for the next few minutes, held tightly in his sister’s loving embrace, the Woodjin vanished; Elijah was nothing more than a sad and lonely young man who wished very much that the arms around him belonged to someone else.

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May

May 8, 2006

Elijah set Maggie down, and went to the stove. He lifted the teakettle from the back burner, filled it with water at the sink, and replaced it. After lighting the burner, he walked quickly toward the end of the kitchen counter, where the answering machine’s flashing red light continued its imperative demand for attention.

Relieved as he was to know that their bond was no one-time thing, Elijah doubted that Sean was dwelling on that right now; he was probably consumed with worry. Calling him was an urgent priority, but before Elijah had time to pick up the portable phone to call Sean, it rang. He lunged forward and grabbed it before the sound of that first ring had faded.

“Oh thank god,” Sean said, sounding half-frantic. “Are you okay?”
“I’m fine, Sean,” Elijah reassured him. “Perfectly fine.”

“You’re sure? The shoulder isn’t bothering you?”

Elijah rolled his right shoulder; it moved smoothly, without a hint of restriction or pain. “My shoulder is perfect. Sean, take a deep breath and relax, okay? Nothing’s wrong. I was called, but it wasn’t anything like last time.”

“Except that I woke from a sound sleep, and I knew that you’d been called, and it scared the shit out of me. Elijah, what happened out there tonight? Why were you called?”

“To rescue a little girl who was lost in the woods.”

“A child? Oh dear god, Elijah. Is she all right?”

“Yes, she’s fine. She’s back with her parents, and she’s fine. But I better tell you the whole story so you’ll stop worrying.”

“I’ll never stop worrying about you,” Sean replied, “and before you say anything else, I need to know that you’re taking care of yourself. Have you had some herb tea and something to eat? Are you warm enough?”

“I’ve just put the kettle on to make the tea,” Elijah said. He glanced down at his bare chest and arms, pimpled with gooseflesh, for the transformations always left his body temperature lowered. “And I’m plenty warm enough,” he prevaricated.

Maggie, who had jumped up on the counter and was pacing back and forth, now paused and gave him a disapproving stare from her amber eyes. Don’t even think about it, Elijah warned her. Sean’s worried enough as it is.

He cradled the phone under his chin while he spooned the herb mixture into a teapot, and took the honey and a mug down from the cupboard. By the time the tea had done steeping and was ready to drink, Sean had heard about Megan, and about Elijah’s confrontation with the Devil.

“Thank god he backed down,” Sean said quietly when Elijah was finished. “Thank god. Elijah, you saved that child’s life. You’re totally amazing, you know that?”

Elijah flushed and sipped his tea, wishing he could blame his blushing cheeks on the tendrils of steam that rose from the mug. It wasn’t so much Sean’s words that left him at a loss as the reverence in his voice, the same reverence that crept in whenever he mentioned the white stag. Elijah had realized over the months that for Sean the stag was in some ways a being separate and apart, even though he’d seen Elijah transform before his very eyes, even though he knew they were one and the same. And yet perhaps that was how it had to be, for that sort of reverence, though it moved him to the very core of his being, was not what the human Elijah wanted or needed in his partner and lover.

“Sean, if I ever failed to save someone… I don’t know that I could handle that,” Elijah confessed. “I think I’d rather d-”

“Don’t say it,” Sean interrupted, suddenly sounding almost angry. “Elijah, don’t you dare use that word. I almost lost you once, and I can’t even… I simply can’t contemplate something happening to you again.”

Suddenly, there was a loud crash that made Elijah jump and tea slop over the rim of his mug. It sounded as if Sean had slammed his fist down hard on a table.
“Fuck. Fuck. This whole situation is fucking impossible. I don’t think I can bear much more.” Sean rarely used such language, but he seemed to have reached some breaking point. The raw agony he was experiencing came clear across the miles between them, and was like a knife to Elijah’s heart. “I made a promise, Elijah, a promise to your sister that I’d be there for you when you came home. How many more times will I have to break that promise, the way I did tonight? What if… what if you’re in real danger again, and I can’t get there in time? There wasn’t one night when I was in Europe that I didn’t wake up in a cold sweat from a dream that you were shot and I was too late to save you.”

“Sean…” Elijah tried to interrupt him.

“No, let me finish.” Sean’s voice softened but was no less distraught as he said, “Elijah, I’m scared.” Elijah didn’t make any jokes about Clint Eastwood or the Devil this time. “Sean…"

“When I first got back to the city, and for weeks afterward, nothing seemed quite real to me. It was as if I was trapped in this prolonged nightmare, and I kept thinking that I’d surely wake up and you’d be there beside me and I’d be home in the pines where I belong.” He gave a sad laugh. “But the nightmare has never ended. It simply goes on and on.”

The constricting thickness of tears clogging his throat made it impossible for Elijah to speak.

“I’m starting to worry that I’ll be trapped in this nightmare forever.” The slow, reluctant admission terrified Elijah. “It’s as if fate, or something, is working to keep us apart. You know, this morning I tried to remember how it felt to be in the pines, the smell and sound and sight of it, and I couldn’t. For the first time, I couldn’t. All I could smell was the stink of some rotting garbage in a dumpster and the diesel fumes from a bus.”

“Sean…” Elijah felt like he was the one in a nightmare now, unable to say anything but that one word, over and over.

“It’s going on five months since I’ve set eyes on you- five fucking months- and there’s not even a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. It could be another five months before I’m free at the rate things are going. There isn’t even a fucking court date for the palimony trial yet. God, Elijah, I don’t think I can bear it, and you sure as hell shouldn’t have to. I wouldn’t blame you if you got tired of waiting,” he ended bitterly.

That gave Elijah back his voice. “I’ll never get tired of waiting. Never, do you understand?” he said fiercely, but the receiver was slippery in his suddenly damp palm. He had never heard Sean sound like this before: so thoroughly dispirited, almost defeated. He had remained determinedly upbeat over the weeks of their separation, and the contrast between that Sean and this one drove home as never before the awful toll their separation was taking on him. “Sean, I think you should come home for a few days. I don’t care about the risk. All I care about is you, and what I can’t bear is for you to be so unhappy.”

There was silence, except for Sean’s uneven breathing on the other end of the line.

Finally, Sean said heavily. “Don’t tempt me. You have no idea how badly I want to give in. But we’ve made it this far, Elijah, and you’re safe from discovery, and that knowledge is what I hold onto every single day to give me strength.” He went on softly, “I shouldn’t have lost it like that and worried you. Forgive me.”

“There’s no need for forgiveness. It’s okay for you to lose it sometimes. But I still think you should consider what I said. We miss you, me and Maggie and Rocky and Fred, and I want to take care of you. You’re not getting enough rest.”
“You think I’d get any rest if I were there?” Sean asked, and a little lightness crept back into his voice.

“Well…” Elijah teased. “In between bouts of lovemaking you would.”

“Elijah, I’d give anything to come home, you know I would, but it’s simply not worth the risk.” Sean’s tone was final and sad. “I promise to be in a more positive frame of mind when I talk to you tomorrow. It was knowing you’d been called and that I couldn’t do anything but wait for you to come home that got to me.” He huffed a laugh. “I'm not sure if you’ve checked the answering machine yet, but there are five messages there.”

“Maybe I should carry my cell phone with me when I transform,” Elijah said, and realized that somewhere in the last couple of weeks he’d become the one making the jests to keep Sean’s spirits up.

“I’d like to see that,” Sean said around a yawn, and Elijah glanced at the wall clock and to his horror saw that it was shortly before 3 a.m.

“Oh gollykeepers,” he exclaimed remorsefully, “I didn’t realize it’s so late. You should be in bed, Sean.”

“Yeah, I should. I’ve got yet another meeting with the company lawyers tomorrow- today, that is- at 10 o’clock.” Sean paused, and then said emotionally, “I love you, Woodjin, and I thank god that you’re safe at home.”

“Oh Sean, I love you, too,” Elijah replied, but for once those words didn’t seem like enough.

After they disconnected, Elijah set down the phone but didn’t move. Maggie trotted across the counter to him and butted her head against his chest. He gathered her up and listened to the rumble of her purr with his cheek pressed against her silken fur. He recalled Sean holding her that first day, a lonely man who had told him that he’d always wanted a dog, a man who so clearly craved and needed physical love, but who had enjoyed it for just a few brief days before it was snatched away again.

“Oh Maggie,” Elijah whispered wretchedly. “What am I going to do?”

So Maggie, never hesitant to voice her opinion, told him.

“I can’t,” Elijah said. “You know I can’t.” He held Maggie away from him and stared at her in shock.

She only returned the stare coolly in that way she had when she thought he was making mountains out of molehills.

“No, it’s out of the question.” How could she even suggest it? Go to Sean? Leave the pines and travel to New York? It was impossible, unthinkable… He was the Woodjin; he couldn’t leave.

Elijah set Maggie down again, and walked agitatedly around the kitchen. Maggie was sitting upright with her tail curled around her paws, still as a black and rust feline statue, but her amber gaze followed Elijah’s every move.

Even as his brain rejected the very notion, his heart opened to Maggie’s suggestion. Was it really impossible and unthinkable to go to Sean? Couldn’t he leave the pines for one day?

Other than a few brief outings to Philly for birthday dinners, in the close and watchful guard of his
family, Elijah had not left the pines since his vision quest when he was eleven years old. As a small
child, his mom had taken him and Hannah and Zach on trips to the city, knowing that Elijah’s
chances to see the world outside the pines would be limited. They’d visited the Statue of Liberty and
Ellis Island, the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center. They’d ridden the Staten Island
Ferry and watched the tree lighting at Rockefeller Center.

Elijah had loved the bustle and color and noise of the city, so different from the quiet world of the
pines. To see and experience it again… to see Sean… The idea filled him with a mixture of
exhilaration, fear and dread.

*I can’t believe I’m even considering this. It’s madness.*

But day by day, week by week, the stress and pressure on Sean had been mounting, culminating
with his breakdown tonight. Things couldn’t go on this way, that much was clear, but Sean would
never come to the pines, too paralyzed by his fear for Elijah's safety.

*Should Sean be the only one willing to take risks?* the voice of his heart asked. *He’s giving up his old
life for you. He’s moving to the pines to be with you. Must every sacrifice be made by him, and none
whatever by you?*

*But my first responsibility is to the pines and to the people here.*

*Can’t you set that aside just once? Doesn’t Sean deserve that much?* He’s going to be a piney, too- if
he doesn’t change his mind out of hopelessness and desperation, that is. *How can you say you love
him, and yet be willing to risk nothing for him?*

*I have no magic outside the pines. If something were to happen…*

*Coward.*

*He’ll be furious with me.*

*He needs you.*

Elijah halted in the middle of the kitchen. His hands were clenched into tight fists at his sides. His
muscles were literally trembling, and sweat was trickling down his temples and the back of his neck
as if he’d just finished running a race. He looked at Maggie, still silently watching. 'You should
always listen to her,' Sean had told him.

“*You’re right,” he said. “I have to go to New York.”*
Those of you who love the old TV series 'Beauty and the Beast', there's a bit of tribute to one of my favorite episodes, 'Masques'. (Kudos to you if you recognize it).

May 8, 2006

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Martha asked. “It’s not too late. I can buy a ticket on the train, Elijah.”

Elijah shook his head decisively. If he was going to go to Sean, if he was going to prove to himself that he didn’t always have to be the fox, cowering fearfully in the shadows, he had to go alone. “No, that’s okay. I’ll be all right.” If you say it often enough, you might even believe it.

They were standing on the platform at Hamilton Station, waiting for Elijah’s train to arrive from Trenton. A crowd of other northbound commuters was around them, but Martha’s reassuring presence kept uneasiness at bay. Once he stepped onto the train, however, he’d be on his own. Elijah fought down the brief flare of panic that the thought brought with it.
“Don’t forget to call me the moment you get to Trump Tower,” Martha admonished him for at least the twentieth time. She was definitely nervous. Even though she was doing her best to disguise it, Elijah could practically see the worry coming off her in waves.

“I won’t forget, I promise. And Martha, thank you for doing this,” Elijah said. “I’m sorry to get you in trouble with Dr. Ian, not to mention everyone else…” He bit his lip. They were going to be upset, to put it mildly, when they found out that she’d aided and abetted him in his plan to go to New York to see Sean.

After arriving at the agonizing decision, Elijah wasn’t simply able to drop everything and rush off to the city. He’d realized right away that he had to have an ally. For one thing, he needed a ride to the train station; he might know the twisting, winding sand trails of the pines like the back of his hand, but the roads outside were a traffic congested nightmare that he simply didn’t feel prepared to deal with. For another, the animals couldn’t feed and water themselves.

Exactly who his ally should be was the critical question. It had to be someone who wouldn’t try to talk him out of going to Sean, or insist on sending a delegation of pineys along to guard him, or, even worse, call Sean and tell him what Elijah was planning. That ruled out Katie or Bill or Hannah or Dr. Ian, and Pete didn’t know how to drive.

But there was Martha, whom he believed would understand why he had to do this, because she knew the stresses and pressures of Sean’s world better than anyone. Although Elijah hated asking her to deceive Dr. Ian, there was no other recourse. The doctor would no more allow Elijah to travel to the city alone and unprotected than he’d have let Sean take him to the hospital after he was shot. Fortunately, she had understood and agreed, though with obvious misgivings, to help him.

“As long as I can reassure Ian and the others that you’ve arrived at Sean’s office in one piece, I’ll survive,” Martha now replied calmly. “After that, you’ll have Sean to take care of you, and we all know you’ll be safe in his hands.”

Safe in his hands. Sean’s hands. He’d be seeing Sean soon! The vision that had been keeping him company over the past frantic hours of preparation sprang to the forefront of his mind.

Sean was sitting at the desk in his office, his head bent while he studied the paperwork in front of him. As Elijah entered the room he glanced up, did a double take, and stared as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. With a wordless cry of joy, he jumped to his feet and rushed around his desk as Elijah ran to meet him. ‘I’ve missed you,’ Sean said in a shaky voice as they held each other tightly. ‘Oh Elijah, I’ve missed you so much.’ And then his lips were warm on Elijah’s, and they kissed… for a very, very long time.

The shrill blast of a train whistle disrupted the blissful vision before it had a chance to move along to the part that came after the kisses.

“This should be your train, Elijah,” said Martha.

About a minute later with a rattle and whoosh, a silver train with the NJ Transit logo thundered into view. The rush of wind as the engine and first cars flashed past them whipped Martha’s hair wildly around her face and sent stray papers flying. Gradually the train slowed and stopped. People moved closer to the edge of the platform, waiting for the doors to open.

This is it, Elijah thought, his heart racing. The moment of truth.

Martha smiled reassuringly at him as she tucked strands of blonde hair behind one ear. “You’re going to be fine,” she said, as if she, too, thought that by saying the words over and over they would
have to come true. “Remember, it’s the exit for 32nd Street and 7th Avenue that you want. There’s a taxi stand right outside.” There had been no question of him trying to navigate the subways alone.

Elijah nodded; his throat was suddenly too tight to speak.

“Give Sean my love,” Martha said as they hugged goodbye. “Call if you need me.”

“I will. Thanks again for everything, Martha.”

Elijah slung his backpack over his shoulder and picked up the cardboard shoebox that was resting on the ground between his feet. Hesitantly he joined the shuffling throng of people entering the train, trying not to cringe at the bodies packing close around him. He glanced back as he prepared to step across the gap between platform and train, and waved. Martha waved back, and gave him another encouraging smile. Then she was lost to view, and Elijah knew he really was on his own now.

He walked halfway up the car and selected an unoccupied row, sliding across the cracked burnt orange vinyl until he was right up against the window; he was afraid that if he couldn’t see the outside world, he might suffocate.

He set the shoebox on the empty space to his left, hoping that it would deter anyone from sitting down next to him. Thankfully, the train didn’t appear too crowded, even though it was the morning rush. But there were several stops yet to make between Hamilton and Penn Station, so it was entirely possible that the train would eventually fill up.

Elijah wasn’t sure if he could bear to have another human, a strange human, so close beside him. Already he was on sensory overload, and he’d barely begun his journey to visit Sean. How could people bear this day in and day out? He wondered. How could they stand to be enclosed in such tight quarters, be battered by so many different scents and sounds? His senses of smell, sight and hearing were unusually keen for a human, and at home in the pines that was a blessing. But not in the close confines of a train, and it was impossible to shut them off, impossible to ignore the rank smell of sweat, the stale coffee on someone’s breath, the cloying perfumes and aftershaves, and the residue of harsh cleaning chemicals that made him want to gag.

He would simply have to endure it, that was all, and pray that no one asked him to move his belongings so that they could sit in the empty seat. If it were possible, he would stand the entire way, but he couldn’t easily do that encumbered by his bulky knapsack and the shoebox.

With an ominous hiss frighteningly like that of a copperhead coiling to strike, the metal doors slid closed, trapping Elijah inside. There was no going back now. With a lurch the train pulled away from the station, quickly gaining speed. Elijah jumped like a scalded cat when a static-obscured male voice boomed nasally over the loudspeaker, “Next stop Princeton Junction.”

Elijah nervously fingered the thin paper ticket in the pocket of his tan corduroy jacket. The conductor would only randomly check tickets, Martha had told him. She’d had to help him figure out how to use the automated ticket machine to buy and validate his ticket, and he’d felt horribly embarrassed. 25 year-old guys should know about these things.

He wondered now what else he wouldn’t know about, and if he would somehow give away his otherness and make people suspicious. Resting one hand protectively on the lid of the box, Elijah turned his head to stare out the window. It wasn’t an edifying sight; they were passing through an industrial area on the outskirts of the city, and old brick factory buildings, rusted chain link fencing, and cracked asphalt parking lots dotted with pigeons and straggly weeds flashed by. But to one who had not seen such sights in more than fourteen years, it held a sort of grim fascination.
His reflection staring back at him caught his attention. An irrational fear seized him that his pedicles were visible. Everything looked fine, and he’d been extra careful when fixing his hair before leaving the house, but still… There had been that gust of wind when the train passed… He fought an urge to run his hand over his head and check that they were still hidden.

*Don’t give in to paranoia,* he warned himself. *It’s the best way to bring unwanted attention on yourself.* Instead, he groped in the same pocket that held his ticket and found the cat’s eye shell that Sean had given him. He wrapped his fingers tightly around it as if it were a talisman that would protect him from harm, and gradually regained his composure.

After a few minutes, Elijah risked a cautious glance around. Further up the car, he could see the conductor in his peaked gendarme’s cap and khaki green uniform checking a ticket. Otherwise, it appeared that the train’s occupants were settling in for the trip, closing their eyes for a nap, talking on their cell phones, listening to their mp3 players or reading the morning newspaper. No one was paying the slightest attention to Elijah.

This emboldened him to check on the contents of the shoebox, something he’d wanted to do ever since he first sat down. Carefully, he lifted the lid a few inches and peered inside the towel-lined box that held something far more precious than a pair of shoes.

“Everything okay in there, Fred?” he asked.

The box turtle’s bony prehensile head with its hooked nose was barely protruding from his carapace, and his scaled orange legs were tucked tightly away, hidden from view. While Fred had been all for the idea of visiting Sean in New York, when Elijah flipped on the bathroom light in the middle of the night and asked him if he’d like to go, the reality of leaving the pines was as unsettling for him as it was for the Woodjin. Fred had his doubts about the wisdom of this trip. Sean’s jokes about wild parties to the contrary, he simply wasn’t the adventuresome type.

But he slowly blinked his small red eyes to signify that he was fine, and Elijah smiled in relief.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. Now go back to sleep… and don’t worry.” If only he could take his own advice, he thought ruefully.

He pushed the tight-fitting lid down into place, and as he straightened, his eyes met those of the person in the seat across the aisle: a middle-aged man in a pin-striped business suit holding a copy of the *Trenton Times,* neatly folded to display the sports section.

The man was watching him over his reading glasses with what seemed a suspicious expression, and Elijah quickly looked away, his heart beating a furious tattoo.

*Idiot!* he scolded himself. *Normal people don’t talk to animals like that. Normal people don’t bring turtles on a train. It’s probably illegal. What if he says something to the conductor? Fred could be impounded and you’ll never see him again. You could be arrested and-

“Ticket?”

It was the conductor. He was parked by Elijah’s seat with his hand outstretched and a look of bored impatience on his face; biting his lip, Elijah hastily fumbled for the paper slip in his pocket. Wasn’t it just his luck that he should be one of the random people whose ticket was checked?

“Sorry,” he said, offering an apologetic smile along with the ticket. The conductor didn’t return the smile, only took the ticket from him and scrutinized it for a few seconds. Then he scored it with a rapid fire *click click click* of his hand-held punch, and stuck it in the small metal clip on top of the seat in front of Elijah.
“Thank you,” Elijah said, smiling again, and this time, almost as if against his will, the man smiled back before moving away. He had a nice smile, Elijah thought, and wondered sadly why he couldn’t show it more.

To Elijah’s indescribable relief, the businessman across the aisle got off at Princeton Junction without causing any trouble for Elijah and Fred. But even more people boarded there and at New Brunswick and Newark, and the car started to fill up. He decided to hold Fred on his lap, fearful that someone might sit down on the box or knock it over, and substituted his backpack on the empty seat to discourage company.

When the train pulled away from Newark Airport, its final stop before arriving at Penn Station, no one had attempted to sit by him, and he was able to relax a little.

Relax, but not rest; he was too keyed up for that, although he desperately needed sleep.

Transforming into the white stag was exhilarating beyond belief, but it was also exhausting, and he was weary to his very bones. But he didn’t want to sleep through any of this experience. After all, it might well be the one and only solo journey outside the pines that he would ever take; the odds that he’d get away with a stunt like this again were slim to none. No, sleep could definitely wait.

So Elijah leaned his forehead on the window glass and stared with interest as the train rattled across the wetlands that lay between Newark and New York. The marshy landscape reminded him of some places in the pines. His experienced eye immediately picked out a snowy egret standing still as a statue on one leg among tall green reeds. There were numerous waterfowl, too— he caught glimpses of gadwalls, mallards and what he thought might be a rare pie-billed grebe— and somehow the sight of them, familiar in a way that the people around him were not, heartened him.

But then the train left the Meadowlands behind, and entered the pitch blackness of the railroad tunnel beneath the Hudson River. As darkness pressed down on him, a darkness relieved only by the harsh glare of the train’s interior lights, Elijah battled a sense of claustrophobia.

He despised himself for his panicky reaction, but he couldn’t help it; he was used to having the wide open sky above him. His fingers convulsively gripped the lid of the shoebox while he took steadying breaths and willed himself to calm. He didn’t want to freak out poor Fred. Another train flew past them going in the opposite direction, creating a disorienting, queasy sensation that the train he was on was traveling backwards. Elijah closed his eyes and conjured up an image of Sean, looking tired but so handsome on that TV show. His Sean, who needed him. I can do this, he thought. I must.

The train began to slow, and Elijah opened his eyes to see sickly yellow light illuminating soot-stained cement pillars interspersed among the numerous train tracks that converged beneath Penn Station like sandy trails at a fingerboard. They had arrived.

Elijah forced himself to wait until most of the other passengers had disembarked, instead of bolting like a terrified rabbit, and then he tucked the shoebox securely under his right arm, picked up his backpack and slid out of his seat. Outside the train there was practically a stampede, with commuters from his train and another that had arrived on an adjacent track, pushing and jostling to get onto the single narrow escalator that ascended to the main level of the station.

As he stepped onto the escalator, he was glad he’d hung back rather than risk dropping Fred in the melee. Accustomed to the measured pace of life in the pines, this frantic hustle and bustle struck him as absurd and wasteful. No wonder Sean was so frazzled. How could you not be when everyone around you was highballing it as if there were no tomorrow?

Elijah got off the escalator without disgracing himself by tripping and falling. But he immediately came to a halt, wondering what he’d gotten himself into. It was so stiflingly hot in the station that he immediately broke out in a sweat, and the cacophony of voices, ringing cell phones and
announcements over the loudspeakers was indescribable, battering his senses. And there were so many people, he thought in a panic: overwhelming numbers of them.

Something crashed into Elijah from behind, sending him staggering forward. The shoebox started to slip from his grasp; desperately, he held onto it.

“Get the hell out of the way, would you?” an impatient voice growled. “You’re blocking the escalator.”

“I’m sorry,” Elijah said, but to the empty air. Whoever it was who had run into him was already long gone.

Feeling shaken, he set out across the concourse in the direction Martha had told him to go. Now he just had to find the exit for 32nd Street, head upstairs and hail a taxi. How difficult could that be? He approached a large group of people gathered around a monitor and staring up fixedly at the screen with the coiled-spring tension of a cat stalking a mouse and waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Now boarding on Track 11, a voice boomed out from the loudspeakers as the track number appeared on the monitor, the North Jersey Coast Line to Secaucus.

Before the announcer’s voice had finished speaking, people were bolting toward the entrance to Track 11- bolting straight at Elijah. Willy-nilly, he found himself carried along by the crowd, as if he were no more than a hapless oak leaf on a gust of wind. He had kayaked on the Batsto after heavy spring rains had set the river to swirling with wicked currents, but breaking free of this human current was more difficult than paddling in quick water. Grimly, Elijah clutched the shoebox, sent mental ‘don’t worry’ messages to Fred, and tried to force his way against the flow, even as his feet were trampled on and his ribs poked by impatient elbows.

By the time he finally managed to free himself, Elijah felt battered and bruised both physically and mentally. He was totally disoriented, too, as if he’d been blindfolded and spun in circles. He looked around him in a panic, but couldn’t see any sign for 32nd Street. Spying an empty, glass-enclosed lobby filled with ATM machines, he hurried toward it and took refuge inside. He leaned, sweating and shaking, against the wall, and wondered if he’d ever have the nerve to venture outside this bolt hole.

“Oh Fred,” he said. “Whatever made me think I could handle this alone?”

Shame swept over Elijah when he recalled all the times he’d chafed at what he considered the over-protectiveness of his family and friends. The truth was, they understood what he had not: exactly how ill-equipped he was to function in the outside world after living as he had for so many years. He might have all the tools of modern society at his disposal- cell phone, iPod, Internet access- but he was, in essence, living the same old-fashioned life as his 18th century ancestor, Jordan Wood. He was a creature out of time and place. He didn’t belong here.

You’re a freak, Matt’s voice, nearly silenced in the months since meeting Sean, accused him.

A couple of passersby stared curiously at him through the glass, making him feel horribly like some hapless animal in a zoo. Was it written all over him, his otherness? What if he were caught? What would they do to him? A trickle of icy cold panic snaked down his spine.

Call Sean. The tempting idea sprang into Elijah’s mind. One brief phone call was all it would take for his magician to wave his magic wand and save Elijah. “Stay where you are, I’ll be right there,” Sean would say in his calm, reassuring voice, and Elijah wouldn’t have to leave this tiny oasis of sanity until Sean arrived.
But Sean had walked bravely into the woods at night to rescue him, even though he’d expected the Devil to be lying in wait. No, he mustn’t call Sean. He could hardly explain it to himself, the strength of his conviction that this was something he needed to do alone. He only knew that he had to.

*It’s not that hard. They’re only people.* Impatient, rude, unhelpful people, a tiny voice added. *Frazzled, busy, stressed out people,* his mind argued. *They don’t mean to be this way.*

Just then the door to the lobby swung silently inward and a young African-American woman dressed in a black suit with a turquoise blue blouse came in. She headed straight to the nearest ATM without so much as glancing toward Elijah where he huddled against the wall. As she zipped open the oversized black leather purse she was carrying and pulled out her wallet, Elijah made up his mind. He couldn’t cower here indefinitely.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” he asked politely, stepping forward before he lost his nerve.

She was tugging her ATM card free from the tight sleeve inside the wallet, using long nails done in a French manicure. She paused to look at him, and her expression was anything but encouraging. “I already gave at the office,” she said in sarcastic tones. “Besides, panhandlers aren’t allowed in here. You better beat it quick before the police see you.”

Panhandlers? She thought he was looking for a handout? Elijah was mortified. “I don’t want money.”

“Then what *do* you want?” she asked, and suspicion laced her voice and glinted in her eyes. She gripped the strap of her bag more firmly, as if she thought he meant to snatch it away from her.

“I’m wondering if you’re acquainted here,” he quickly explained.

“If I’m *what*?”

“Acquainted here,” Elijah said again.

“‘Acquainted here’?”, she repeated blankly. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

*Didn’t people use that expression outside the pines?* Anxiety gnawed at Elijah. What hope was there if he couldn’t even make himself understood to this woman? “I mean that I’m lost,” he haltingly explained. “I need to find the 32nd Street exit but I got kind of turned around.”

“Oh, I see.” She visibly relaxed at his words. “Penn Station can be pretty confusing if you’re not used to it,” she said in a kindlier voice. “But fortunately, you’re not far from the exit for 32nd Street. You just walk up that way until you get to the Starbuck’s,” she pointed in the direction he needed to take, “and then turn right. You’ll see the stairs to the street straight ahead of you.”

“Thank you.” Elijah let out a sigh of relief. “I didn’t mean to get into a state, but it’s been years since I’ve been around this many people at one time.”

“Really? Just where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“New Jersey,” Elijah said, and then he flushed. “I’m forgetting my manners. My name’s Elijah.” He offered her his hand.

“I’m Mary,” she replied, shaking it. “So you’re from Jersey, huh? You know, I never would have guessed. You don’t act like anybody I’ve ever met from there.”

Elijah tried not to look conscious. “I’m from kind of a small town. I guess we do behave a little
different.” He smiled apologetically. “I didn’t mean to confuse you before, with what I said, I mean.”

“That’s all right.” She returned his smile, and he thought how pretty she was. “You talk kind of old-fashioned. But in a nice way.” Her smile widened, warming her brown eyes. “‘Acquainted here’,” she repeated again, but thoughtfully this time, as if she was taking the measure of the words. “I like that.” Then she added, “I’m sorry if I came across as suspicious when you first spoke to me. Comes of living in a big city, I’m afraid.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Elijah reassured her. “You had no reason to trust me.”

A puzzled expression crept over Mary’s face, and she said slowly, “Maybe not, but I noticed right away that there’s something different about you. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but...”

A flicker of the sudden apprehension he was feeling must have showed, because she quickly added, “Whatever that something is, it’s good, that much I do know.”

One of the glass doors opened, letting in a young man on a wave of noise. It was jarring after the relative quiet of this unexpected oasis he’d found. It was also a reminder that he needed to be on his way. “Well, I’d better let you get back to what you were doing,” Elijah said. “I appreciate your kindness, more than I can say.”

“I was glad to help,” Mary replied, and then she added, in a very serious voice, “You take care of yourself now.”

“I will. It was a pleasure meeting you, Mary, and thanks again for the directions. Oh, and Fred says ‘thanks’, too.”

“Fred?”

Elijah raised the shoebox. “My turtle,” he explained.

“You have a turtle who can talk to you. Why am I not surprised?” She laughed and shook her head in a sort of amused disbelief as she turned back to the ATM machine.

But Elijah could feel her eyes following him as he pushed through the glass door. She probably thought he was crazy, like Elwood P. Dowd in Harvey, talking to an invisible friend. He grinned, imagining what Sean would say when he told him the story.

Buoyed by the image of Sean’s face alight with laughter and by his encounter with Mary, Elijah was able to brave the crowds again. He was almost emboldened enough to stop in the Starbucks, just to see what all the fuss was about, but time was wasting. Sean’s meeting started at 10 a.m., and there was still a taxi to find and a drive through rush hour traffic.

So Elijah gave Starbucks a miss, and in a few minutes he was bounding up the stairs to the street, taking them two at a time in his eagerness to leave the claustrophobic atmosphere of Penn Station behind. He emerged into a warm sunlit world, where the sky was pure blue and puffy cumulonimbus clouds were sailing among the towering skyscrapers on a strong southwest wind. Those clouds probably passed right over the pines on their way here, Elijah marveled.

A line of taxis idled by the curb, waiting for fares. Cooing smoke-gray rock pigeons with iridescent green and purple feathering on their necks were pecking at crumbs on the pavement. Bright yellow and blue striped Sabrett umbrellas marked the street vendors’ carts where coffee, juice, bagels and Danish were being hawked to passing commuters. A construction crew in hard hats was repairing a section of sidewalk. The blast of jackhammers tearing at concrete vied with the blare of horns from vehicles trying to get around a double-parked delivery truck and the tinkling bells sounded by
cyclists weaving in and out of the traffic. Elijah stared wide-eyed, taking it all in, not caring if he looked like the foreigner he was.

“We made it, Fred,” he whispered in wonder. “We’re really in New York.”

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The cab driver’s name was Ben Williams, according to his ID badge. He told Elijah that he was originally from Jamaica, but had moved to Brooklyn with his wife and children several years earlier, and he was working two jobs to help make ends meet while she finished nursing school. Not that Elijah found all that out immediately, of course. In fact, Ben was disinclined to talk when Elijah first climbed into the cab, only grunting when Elijah informed him that he needed to go to Trump Tower.

But he loosened up after Elijah held out his hand in a friendly fashion and introduced himself, and even more after he introduced Fred, opening the shoebox so that the cabbie could see what was inside. Ben grinned and said in his musical West Indies accent, “Man, I never had no turtle as a passenger before. Dogs, cats, even an iguana once, but no turtle.”

Since he seemed accepting of Elijah’s eccentricity, unlike the businessman on the train, Elijah lifted Fred out of the shoebox, and held him up to the window so he could see. Fred extended his scrawny stalk of a neck and pressed his hooked nose against the glass, and blinked several times.

“What does he think?” Ben asked after some minutes, and he didn’t sound sarcastic, but sincere.

“He’s not sure what to think,” Elijah replied in all seriousness. “You see, he spends most of his time in my bathroom.” Ben only nodded as if the answer made perfect sense to him.

As they drove in bumper-to-bumper traffic along the Avenue of the Americas and then Broadway, traveling north in the direction of Central Park, Elijah pressed his own nose to the window and, with ample assistance from the helpful Ben, pointed out the sights to Fred. But not even the stately majesty of the Empire State Building, which Elijah’s child’s memory had not exaggerated, or the colorful bustle of Times Square, or the innumerable dogs of every conceivable breed pulling their owners along the sidewalks, could completely hold Elijah’s attention, not when every block that passed was bringing him nearer and nearer to Sean.

Rolled up inside the spare undershirt and boxers he’d stuffed at the bottom of his hastily filled backpack was a white plastic tube; the thought of what its presence meant kindled a fire low in Elijah’s belly. He didn’t try to deceive himself that having sex with Sean wasn’t one of the reasons he was here in New York. Maybe it wasn’t the main reason, but they both needed it. Badly. Even with Sean’s husky voice in his ear, conjuring the most erotic images imaginable, his familiarity with his own hand had grown old weeks ago. It was the same for Sean. The vision that had been keeping him company flickered into life, like a paused videotape picking up where it had left off earlier on the train station platform.

They were sinking onto the leather sofa in Sean’s office now, pulling desperately at each other’s clothes, unable to wait to make love until they got down to his suite…

Elijah’s skin suddenly felt stretched taut, aching and fever-hot as if he had the ‘flu. He shifted uncomfortably on the vinyl seat. This could get embarrassing, he thought.

But then, “Here’s Trump Tower,” Ben announced, gunning the taxi into an opening at the curb before any of the other cabbies vying for the same spot could grab it. “That’ll be $11.35.”

Elijah restored Fred to his temporary accommodations, pulled out his wallet and found a $20.
Leaning forward, he handed it to Ben through the opening in the plexiglass barrier between the front and back seats. “Keep the change,” he said, hoping he’d included a large enough tip - he’d forgotten to ask Martha about that.

Judging by the wideness of Ben’s smile, he had. “You have a nice stay in the city, you and Fred,” Ben told him as he took the bill. “And take care of yourself, Elijah,” he added more seriously.

Why did everyone seem to think he needed looking after? Elijah wondered.

Elijah waved as Ben drove off, but he didn’t immediately move. For several minutes he stared up in awe at the bronze-colored glass tower soaring 58 stories above him. Between his time spent googling and his conversations with Sean, he knew so much about Trump Tower that he could easily have ached a quiz. The Clicktwice offices were housed on the 50th floor; Sean’s suite was on the 43rd. Both his office and the suite faced Central Park West- giving an unparalleled view of the park from high overhead, the sort of view that only serious money could buy. Sean had sent him photos taken from his suite at varying times of the day, but soon, very soon, Elijah would be seeing the view for himself. It seemed incredible.

His eyes unconsciously flicked up the rows of windows and he found himself counting until he reached the 50th floor. Somewhere behind those windows, right now, Sean was getting ready for his meeting, with absolutely no idea that Elijah was in New York. There was a sense of unreality about this moment, about being so near to Sean after months of only hearing his disembodied voice on the phone.

Elijah’s heart started beating fast as he walked toward the entrance, shouldering his way through the stream of pedestrians, and then he belatedly remembered his promise to call Martha the moment he arrived. He dug his cell phone out of the front pocket of his jeans, flipped it open and punched the Holm’s speed dial, while a mental image popped into his brain of a posse of determined pineys, led by Dr. Ian no doubt, storming Penn Station in search of their missing Woodjin. What a disaster that would have been!

The phone was answered on the first ring.

“Elijah! Thank god,” Ian Holm barked. “Where are you?”

Uh oh! It was Dr. Ian. Martha must have spilled the beans early, Elijah thought, and the doctor sounded grumpy as a lion with a sore tooth and a thorn in its paw.

“Hi Dr. Ian,” he said brightly. “I’m at Trump Tower and I’m calling like I promised Martha I would.” He hesitated, not sure he wanted to hear the answer to his next question. “Um, is she there?”

“She’s here,” the doctor replied tersely. “And lucky to be alive after helping you commit the most foolhardy stunt it’s been my privilege to hear about in my 67 years. When you get back, young man, we are going to have a serious talk and-”

“Ian!” Elijah could hear Martha exclaim. “You promised me you wouldn’t scold Elijah. Give me that phone.” It seemed Dr. Ian was no better than Hannah at minding such a promise.

There were a few seconds of silence, and then Martha’s voice came over the line. “How is everything, Elijah?” she asked. She sounded cool and composed, and considering how hopping mad Dr. Ian was, Elijah could only admire her.

“Everything is fine,” Elijah assured her, judging it wise not to mention his near panic attack and meltdown in Penn Station.
“Good. I knew it would be,” she said, with a bravado that Elijah knew was false; she’d been a lot more worried than she let on.

“Oh you did, did you?” Dr. Ian fairly shouted in the background. “Sending the Woodjin off to New York alone…”

“You better go, Elijah,” Martha said quickly. “Have a good time, and call and let me know when your train is due into Hamilton.”

“I will. And Martha, I’m awful sorry about Dr. Ian.”

“Don’t worry about Ian,” she replied, a trace of amusement in her voice. “He’ll get over it.”

As Elijah ended the call, the last thing he heard was Dr. Ian saying, “Get over it? I haven’t got a cold, for God’s sake.”

Elijah was grinning, albeit a little guiltily, as he pocketed his cell phone and pushed through the revolving doors into the atrium.

At any other time, he might have gawked at the seven-story high waterfall illumined by floodlights, at the miles of pink, rose and peach white-veined marble, at the mirror-lined walls and gleaming brass fixtures, at the tony shops and the cafes. But this was not any other time. He was here to see the lover from whom he’d been separated for nearly five months, and his eyes only glanced over the opulence of the massive lobby before he located the elevators on the left and veered toward them.

Elijah pushed the ‘up’ arrow and tried not to fidget as he watched the numbers over the elevators go up and down until at last there was a bright ding, and the doors to one of the elevators opened. Several people spilled out, but Elijah was the only one to get on. He selected ‘50’ from the innumerable buttons on the brushed silver panel inside, but he was too keyed up now with anticipation to feel claustrophobic when the doors closed, as he had in the train. Elijah set Fred’s shoebox down on the carpet- royal blue with the Trump logo in the center- and then rested his back against the wall. He didn’t even realize at first that the elevator had started to move, it was so smooth and soundless.

The elevator was mirrored along three sides - Donald Trump must really like mirrors, Elijah decided. As it sped swiftly upward, he nervously examined his reflection. Staring back at him was a short, slight, unassuming young man dressed in a tan corduroy jacket that was shiny with wear at the elbows, a bright blue button-down hanging open over a white tee shirt, faded jeans that were frayed at the cuffs, and scuffed boots. His too-long hair was standing up in messy tufts, his eyes bugged out, and his face was ghostly pale. What on earth did Sean find to attract him in that?

Maybe he won’t find you attractive anymore. After all, he hasn’t set eyes on you in nearly five months. What if you aren’t who he remembers you to be? What if he’s disappointed when he sees you? Which, in light of the almost embarrassingly fulsome compliments Sean paid him, was patently ridiculous. Not to mention that Sean would say, as he had once before, that they had many more important problems to worry about.

But as Elijah averted his eyes from the uninspiring sight, he couldn’t repress the fleeting, futile wish that he could transform, right here and now. There was no possibility that Sean would be disappointed then, for in his eyes the white stag was a being of surpassing beauty, a creature straight from the pages of a fairy tale, as he’d said the day they met. But what would the Clicktwice employees make of an antlered stag ambling off the elevator and into their midst, looking for their CEO’s office? Elijah had to laugh at the sheer absurdity of the image.
The elevator stopped at the 25th floor to let a large group of people on. They were all wearing tags saying ‘Hello, My Name Is’, and were obviously attending some sort of conference or meeting. Although they paid him no mind, but talked and laughed amongst themselves, that stifling sensation he’d felt on the train returned, and Elijah was relieved when they got off at the 31st floor. He spent the remainder of the ride willing the elevator not to stop again, and when it reached the 50th floor at last, he let out a sigh of relief and crouched down to pick up Fred.

Two women were standing outside waiting for the elevator, and Elijah became almost paralyzed with shock when he realized that one of them was Chris. In person she was even more stunningly attractive than she’d appeared in the photos he’d seen of her. Her makeup, her hair, her clothes, all spoke of the sort of lifestyle that few were privileged to enjoy, and she bore herself with an unselfconscious confidence. She had probably never once averted her eyes from her reflection in a mirror, Elijah thought stupidly. As he stared at her with the same helpless fascination a vole must feel, corned by a long-tailed weasel, her gaze met his, as strangers’ gazes invariably did under such circumstances; her eyes quickly flicked up and down and away, taking him in and then discarding him as of no importance.

But in the wake of her dismissive glance, it wasn’t intimidation or uncertainty that Elijah felt. It was anger: blazing, white-hot anger of a kind that he had never before experienced in his human form. It wasn’t anger on his own behalf, but on Sean’s. Anger for everything a decent and honorable man was suffering because of her. He practically shook with the titanic force of it, as if it was too vast for his body to contain, and the desire to confront her, as if she were the Devil and he the white stag, and this elevator a sandy clearing in the pines under a starlit sky, swept over him. But he couldn’t allow his stag nature to win out; it would be an act of folly, like to do more harm than good. He was here to help Sean, not hurt him.

So Elijah quickly dropped his gaze and practically vaulted out of the elevator in his haste to get away from Chris before he could do anything he’d later regret. Her well-toned legs, encased in sheer black stockings and sleek black pumps with four-inch heels, strode briskly past him. A cloud of some expensive perfume lingered after her, and made his nose itch.

When a soft hush told him that the elevator doors were closed, Elijah released the breath he hadn’t even known he’d been holding. The crisis had been avoided, if narrowly. But it shamed him deeply to have run, when every instinct had cried out for him to stay and defend his mate. He ran a trembling hand over his perspiring face and tried to compose himself. Forget about Chris; you’re here to see Sean.

Directly in front of Elijah was a gilded marble-topped table decorated with a massive floral arrangement in a Chinese export porcelain vase. A discreet, tastefully engraved sign fastened to the wall read ‘Clicktwice, Inc.’ and directed him to the right. By the time he reached the end of the hallway, where a set of clear glass double doors led to the company offices, Elijah had managed to force down the tumultuous emotions his unexpected encounter with Chris had roused. But more than ever, he needed Sean: the sight, touch and taste of him, the solid strength of his arms.

Eagerly, Elijah pushed the heavy door inward with his shoulder while he cradled the shoebox in the crook of his right arm. A waiting area to his left held a comfortable-looking sofa and several easy chairs surrounding a low table covered with neatly arranged magazines and adorned with more flowers. Ahead of him a curved silver and white reception desk was set beneath an oversized version of the Clicktwice logo. To either side and behind the desk, Elijah could see partitioned cubicles and beyond them floor to ceiling windows that gave a breathtaking view of the city and filled the office with light. The partition walls were low enough so that the floor plan remained open, and the workplace gave the impression of a beehive, seething with activity. Only these worker bees were men and women, mostly around Elijah’s age, although a few were considerably older. The
atmosphere was decidedly more casual than he’d expected, with jeans and tee shirts much more in
evidence than suits and ties.

A young woman wearing a rose pink sweater set and a gold cross on a delicate chain around her
neck was sitting behind the reception desk. Her office chair was slightly swiveled so she could work
at her computer, but her ‘incoming client’ radar was obviously highly developed, for she looked up
at once from a black flat-panel monitor as Elijah approached, and smiled at him. She had shoulder-
length red hair and a peaches and cream complexion dotted with freckles, and Elijah recognized her
at once from Sean’s descriptions.

Over the preceding months, Sean had told him about many of the almost two hundred people who
worked at the company’s New York headquarters, including the office receptionist, Bridget
O’Donnell. She was married to a New York City firefighter and they had a three year-old daughter,
Emily, who sometimes came to work with her and was, in Sean’s words, ‘cute as a bug’.

It was strange, even unsettling, to realize that the knowledge didn’t go both ways, that to Bridget,
Elijah was a complete stranger. He was now brought face to face with the stark reality that Sean had
been living every day since he returned to New York in January. Bridget and his other employees
could talk freely to him about their lives and families and concerns, but he in turn had no such
freedom. Elijah, Hannah, Jordan, Maggie, Katie, Dr. Ian… it was as if they didn’t exist. His sole
confidante was his secretary Liv, and she had been in on the secret for only a short while. No
wonder Sean had reached a breaking point last night. How could anyone bear the strain of such
intolerable pressure without eventually bowing beneath it?

“Good morning,” Bridget said in a polite, professional-sounding voice. “How can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Sean Astin,” Elijah replied. He tried to imbue his words with the sort of casual ease
that someone like Chris would use, to sound as if he belonged in this alien world.

“Do you have an appointment with Mr. Astin?” she asked, glancing down at a calendar book spread
open on the desk and frowning a little. “He has nothing listed for 9:45.”

“No, but if you wouldn’t mind telling him I’m here, I’m sure he’ll see me,” Elijah said firmly.

“May I have your name, please?”

Elijah hesitated for a fraction of a second. Mentioning his real name here, when Sean had gone to
such drastic lengths to keep it secret, was probably foolhardy. But there was really no other choice;
he couldn’t use a fake name, and if he acted too mysterious or coy, surely her suspicion would be
aroused. “Elijah Wood.”

Bridget picked up the handset of her phone, but before she set a single finger to the buttons, she was
putting it down again. “You’re in luck,” she told Elijah, smiling, “there’s Mr. Astin now.” She raised
her voice. “Sean, there’s a gentleman here to see you. A Mr. Wood.”

Elijah’s head whipped to the right. And there he was. Sean. He was wearing the same dark charcoal
gray suit he’d worn for the television interview- or one just like it- and a white button down, a black
tie with a pattern of diagonal maroon stripes inset with white dots, and shiny black loafers. His dull
gold hair was shorter than it had been when he was in the pines, and arranged with almost painful
neatness. He was deep in earnest conversation with a tall, dark-haired woman walking beside him-
she must be Liv, Elijah realized, but the thought was fleeting, for nothing else really existed except
Sean.

Time abruptly slowed to a crawl. Every sound was drowned out by the thunder of Elijah’s heart as
he waited for Sean to notice him.

After what seemed an eternity, Sean finally looked around, his attention caught by Bridget’s words. His eyes instantly met Elijah’s and widened in astonishment. He stared as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The moment must have lasted only a second or two, but to Elijah it felt like years. He wanted to run to Sean, throw himself into his arms the way he had imagined on the journey here.

But they weren’t alone in Sean’s office, safe behind a closed door. There were Liv and Bridget and so many others within ear and eyeshot. This reunion could not have taken place in a worse setting. So Elijah remained frozen in place like Lot’s wife, turned to a pillar of salt. But his lips shaped a single soundless word: Sean.

That surprised widening of his eyes was the only physical reaction that Sean allowed himself. His face remained impassive as he turned to Liv and murmured something to her. Then he was striding briskly toward Elijah, taking him perfunctorily by the elbow and steering him toward the waiting area, all without so much as a single word. When they were opposite the couch, Sean halted, released his grip and angled his body so that Elijah was effectively hidden from view.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” were Sean’s first words to him, spoken in a low, tight voice. His face was now livid, and perspiration dotted his brow. “For God’s sake, Elijah, what were you thinking? And did you have to give Bridget your real name?”

It was like a slap in the face. Elijah went cold, then hot, then cold again. He’d told Maggie that Sean would be furious with him for coming to New York, but in his heart of hearts he hadn’t really believed it. Surely when Sean saw him, he’d reasoned, gladness would overcome any other emotion, even anger. He’d pictured them as the foxes, embracing in an ecstasy of joy at their reunion. He’d been so wrong, so very, very wrong.

Sean glanced at his wristwatch. “I don’t have time to deal with this right now,” he gritted under his teeth. “I have that fucking meeting in ten minutes. Shit. Look, go down to my suite and wait for me. I shouldn’t be more than an hour and a half, two hours at most. And whatever you do, don’t talk to anyone on the way.” He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew two plastic keycards that he handed to Elijah. More loudly, he said, “Here’s my business card, Mr. Wood. Give me a call later this week and we’ll set up an appointment.”

Their fingers brushed as Elijah took the keycards from him. For a moment some powerful emotion flared to life in those gold-flecked green eyes, but it was gone too quickly for Elijah to be certain it had been there at all. Then Sean’s back was to him and he was walking away, leaving Elijah standing there, alone and adrift, trying to school his face into a semblance of normalcy, and not reveal the devastation in his heart.

He heard Sean make some kind of jest to Bridget that caused her to laugh. He was trying to distract her, Elijah realized, give him a chance to leave unnoticed. He turned and almost bolted for the door, hot tears blurring his vision as he fumbled with the handle. His chest was aching, crowded with stifled sobs as Sean’s voice replayed in his mind: You shouldn’t have come here… For God’s sake, Elijah, what were you thinking… I don’t have time to deal with this right now… Couldn’t he have spared one single word of welcome? Looked even a little happy to see him?

Holding the keycards in a grip so tight that they bit cruelly into the soft skin of his palm, Elijah
pressed the back of his left hand to his mouth. *Oh Maggie, I never should have listened to you,* he thought as he made his way blindly to the elevators.

He would go home, Elijah decided. Leave the keys to Sean’s suite at the front desk with a message, and then return to the safety and security of the pines, where he belonged. It had been a mistake to come here. A terrible, terrible mistake. One for which Sean might never forgive him. He went cold again.

The minutes that passed before an elevator finally arrived seemed somehow both the longest and the shortest of Elijah’s life. Despite himself, he kept listening for the muffled thud of running footsteps, hoping against hope that Sean would follow him. But when the elevator doors opened, he was all alone.

His finger hovered just above the button for the lobby. *Coward,* a small voice inside him said, the same voice that had challenged him to go to New York. *How can you, the Woodjin, run away? What would your father say if he knew?* Yielding to the rebuke in that voice, Elijah moved his finger up to the number ‘43’, and pressed it firmly.

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By the time Elijah reached Sean’s suite, he was so worn down with emotion and exhaustion that he had barely enough energy to figure out which of the unlabeled keycards was the correct one to use. It took several frustrating attempts before the small light turned green and the door’s handle yielded when he pushed down on it.

He found himself in a small foyer, with doors to left and right. The door on the left opened on a small but fully-equipped modern kitchen. The other was closed. This was the door to Sean’s bedroom, Elijah guessed. Directly ahead of him a short hallway led to a spacious, sunlit living room. Elijah dropped his backpack on the carpet just outside the bedroom door, then crossed into the living room and slumped down into the closest chair.

He removed the long-suffering Fred from the confinement of his shoebox and held him on his lap. He ran his thumb over the knobbly roughness of the box turtle’s carapace, tracing the complex pattern of mustard yellow swirls that decorated it. At least he had one friend here in New York, Elijah thought dejectedly. Fred craned his neck around and stared at Elijah, who scratched the soft skin under his throat and sighed.

As ever, Fred’s phlegmatic calm worked its soothing influence, and Elijah began to regain his equilibrium. From the moment he’d entered the suite, he’d sensed Sean’s presence, even though he knew that Sean was careful to keep anything truly personal locked away in his bedroom. But Elijah could smell and feel him in the very air. He didn’t need to see the stacks of DVDs - both *Harvey* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* were visible from where he sat - piled beside the high-definition TV at one end of the room, or the well-read copies of *U.S. News & World Report*, *Computerweek* and *The Economist* that shared the coffee table with Schaum’s outlines for chemistry and biology, and the Rough guides to music that Elijah had sent him.

Elijah got up and went to the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park. “Look at that, Fred,” he said, marveling at the vast sea of spring green, whose vivid palette was made up of thousands of trees and wide grassy lawns, surrounded by tall buildings whose windows shone in the morning sun. “Have you ever seen a view like that in your life?” The irony of this moment couldn’t be denied. He’d expected to be standing here with Sean’s arm around him. Instead…

“But how was Sean supposed to react when I surprised him like that,” Elijah said aloud, “grab me and kiss me, right there in front of everyone? Oh Fred, I’m such a fool.” Fred blinked. “Hey, you
don’t have to agree with me, you know.” Fred blinked again, and Elijah laughed ruefully. “That’s okay. I am a fool, but at least I know it.” He turned away from the window and looked around him. “The bathroom’s that direction, I think. How about I show you your new digs?”

Carrying a curious Fred with him, Elijah went to the closed bedroom door. Fishing the second keycard out of his pocket, he unlocked it. Immediately inside was another door, standing ajar, and he reached in and felt around until he found the light switch and pressed it.

“Gollykeeper,” he exclaimed, as the lights came on to reveal an expanse of pink and gray marble and an enormous glass-enclosed shower that looked like it could easily hold several adults. “I’m afraid you’re never going to want to come home once you’ve spent some time in this bathroom, Fred.”

He bent and set Fred down on the floor, and the turtle raised up on his clawed feet and set out with ponderous dignity to explore. His initial reaction was highly approving.

But Elijah’s gaze dwelled on the marble-encased Jacuzzi at the far end of the room that was softly illumined by recessed lighting overhead. That spark of fire sprang to life low in his belly again; he had plans for that Jacuzzi. Sean had called him from it a time or two, and complained that it was too large for one person, which had inevitably led them into a discussion about what two people could do in a Jacuzzi that size, and to Sean promising that he’d have one installed when he finally moved home.

Feeling suddenly more hopeful, Elijah left Fred to his own devices and went into Sean’s bedroom. Like the rest of the suite, it had beige carpet, pale cream-colored walls, heavy red velvet drapes, and cherry wood furniture. The easy chair was upholstered in the same red-and-gold fabric used for the sofa and chairs in the living room, and the king size mattress was covered by an opulent cream and gold satin bedspread.

But what interested Elijah wasn’t the décor, or at least not the décor provided by the Trumps. Sean had brought with him his treasured belongings from the beach house he and Chris owned, and replaced generic hotel art with photos of the Barnegat Lighthouse and the storm-tossed ocean, and the antique map of Long Beach Island that had belonged to his father. It gave Elijah a little thrill of happiness to see them now, and imagine him and Sean picking the best spots to hang them in the cabin when he came home.

His eyes next fell on a small wooden easel on top of the dresser. On it was his great-grandmother Hannah’s painting of the white stag. It was very much like meeting an old friend again after an absence, and Elijah smiled at the image of his great-grandfather, keeping guard from the shadows of the pines. “Thank you for watching over Sean,” he said, and it seemed to him almost as if the stag smiled back.

There were a number of framed photos surrounding the painting. Of most interest to Elijah was a photo of ten year-old Sean standing on the deck of a deep-sea fishing boat with his dad and Mack. Elijah picked up the photo and studied it. Sean was wearing a bulky life vest and holding a bluefish he’d caught. He looked adorable with his snub nose, freckles and overlong bangs hanging in his eyes. But even more, he looked happy, carefree, and a little mischievous. It wasn’t long after this photo had been taken that Sean’s father had been diagnosed with cancer, Elijah knew. I want to give that kind of happiness back to him, he thought fiercely as he set the photo carefully down. Next to that photo there was one of Sean’s mom Anna and his brother Mack. Elijah’s eyes flicked back and forth from one photo to the other; Sean definitely took after his mom more than his dad in looks.

There were of course photos of Elijah himself, three of them. In one, he was sitting cross-legged on the family room sofa holding Fred, with Maggie on his lap wearing a Cheshire cat smile, and Rocky, staring suspiciously into the camera, crouched on his shoulder. In another, he was holding Jordan on
his hip, while Hannah and Lawrence stood on either side of him. In a third, he was perched on the paddock railing outside the barn, surrounded by Sonny, Cher, Paco and Dolly. Scattered among the photos were a variety of small keepsakes: a bowl half-filled with weathered sea glass, seashells, pieces of driftwood and several plump acorns that Rocky had selected for Sean. Elijah’s heart felt lighter and lighter. How many men would be sentimental - not to mention plumb crazy - enough to put those acorns on display in his bedroom?

On the bedside table was the portrait of Elijah that Martha had taken. He’d had some misgivings after sending that photo to Sean as a Valentine’s present. He looked sad, Elijah thought now, and somewhat ridiculous with those silly clumps of snow sticking to his eyebrow and lashes. But Sean loved the photo, or so he’d said enough times to convince Elijah he meant it, so in the end, he supposed he’d made the right choice. Anyway, it wouldn’t have felt right to send him a photo where he was wearing a painted-on phony smile.

The table also held an alarm clock and a tall stack of books. Sean was hands down the most voracious reader Elijah had ever met, hoarding books like Rocky hoarded seeds and nuts. There were more piles next to the closed Mac laptop on the round table by the window, and still more on the floor beside the armchair in the corner.

A large, dog-eared paperback with a number of neon pink post-it notes marking pages was at the top of the pile on the nightstand. *The Joy of Gay Sex*. Elijah picked up the book and smiled a little as he leafed through it, noticing sections highlighted in yellow and notes scribbled in the margins. Sean was nothing if not thorough, and as he’d told Elijah more than once, he meant to be prepared the next time they made love.

With so much evidence of Elijah’s importance to Sean surrounding him, how could he possibly have doubted, even for one split-second, that he was deeply loved?

Elijah replaced the book and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. He reached behind him for one of the plump down-filled pillows and hugged it to him. Unable to resist, he buried his face in it and breathed deeply. The silky-soft cream Egyptian cotton smelled deliciously of Sean, and he thought he might just stay right where he was until Sean finished his meeting and came down to join him. After all, this was where they were inevitably going to end up. Elijah had no doubts now.

A knock at the outer door interrupted his plan to stay right where he was, but Elijah didn’t mind. How could he? He’d been secretly hoping that Sean would find a way to end his meeting early, and he had. Relief flooded through him. Elijah ran to the door and flung it wide, but even wider was the joyful smile that curved his lips.

“Sean, I…” he began, and then stopped. His smile was abruptly snuffed out, like a candle’s flame doused with water.

“Well, well, I was right,” said Chris. “So, you’re Sean’s little piney whore.”

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Before Elijah had time to react, Chris stepped swiftly around him and into the foyer, uninvited. Short of forcibly removing her, Elijah knew there would be no getting rid of her until she’d spoken her piece. Bowing to the inevitable, he shut the door with a soft but all too audible *snick*. As he turned to face her, Elijah willed himself to remain calm. He must not allow his stag nature to overcome him as it nearly had in the elevator, no matter how many other vile insults she threw at him. *Sticks and stones, remember?*

It was dim in the foyer, and Chris, backlit by the brightness of the sunlight streaming into the living
room, was a formidable presence in a formfitting black suit jacket that flared at the hips and a matching black skirt that ended just above her knees. Those four-inch spiked heels gave her nearly a six inch height advantage over him, and unconsciously, Elijah straightened his shoulders and stood with his head held high, refusing to allow her to intimidate him.

“I admit you’re not exactly what I was expecting,” Chris continued. “You’re not blonde, and you’re definitely not female.” Her observant gray eyes examined him from head to toe as they had in the elevator, but this time she didn’t dismiss him; she seemed to be honestly baffled by him. “In fact, I’m not quite sure what you are, or what on earth Sean sees in you, even if he has decided to bat for the other team – something that explains his deficiencies in certain areas. I suppose you must have… hidden talents.”

Elijah remained impassive, but was almost tempted to smile at her unwittingly true words. If you only knew, he thought with grim amusement.

“When Sean assured me that he wasn’t involved with another woman, it never occurred to me that he was parsing the truth – I thought it was a straightforward lie.” Her expression hardened. “Because I knew you existed, no matter what Sean said. It just took me a while to prove it. Sean has been careful, but unfortunately for him, not quite careful enough this time. He might be able to keep your phone calls untraceable, but he couldn’t exactly hide you when you showed up in person.”

Despite himself, Elijah bit his lip. He’d played right into Chris’s hands, given her ammunition to use in her palimony suit. Done exactly what Sean had striven so hard all these months to prevent.

Chris smiled, no pleasant smile, but the sort a cat wore when waiting outside a hole for an unsuspecting mouse to emerge. “Oh yes, you were observed. Sean isn’t the only one with employees loyal to him, you know. Within five minutes I received a call that a young man in a tan jacket carrying a backpack came to the reception desk and asked for Sean, who was clearly upset and concerned when he saw him. Far more upset and concerned than a simple unscheduled appointment with a Mr. Wood could account for. The same young man, it turns out, who I saw getting off the elevator.” She let out a short, distinctly unamused laugh. “Funny, at the time I didn’t make much of the way you stared at me. Most men do stare, at least those of a different persuasion. But later… it occurred to me that what I’d seen in your eyes was hostility. After that, it was easy enough to put two and two together, especially when I remembered that absurd lie Sean told me last January, about having to stay in the Pine Barrens to take care of a ‘friend’ who’d been hurt in an accident. A male friend.”

If she tried, Chris couldn’t have said anything more calculated to rouse the protective stag inside him. The memory of that night in the woods and Sean’s incalculable bravery was sacred to Elijah. How dare she call Sean a liar? he thought. How dare she.

Impatiently, he shrugged back his jacket and blue shirt and tugged down the neck of his tee shirt far enough to expose the puckered, faint pink scar on his right shoulder. “Does this look like a lie to you? Sean saved my life.”

Just for an instant, there was genuine shock in her eyes, but then Chris said with ill-disguised scorn, “I certainly don’t have to ask how you’ve been repaying him, do I? It must have seemed like manna from heaven to someone like you - Sean, with all his money, dropping into your lap that way.”

“Someone like me?” Elijah repeated. “You mean a piney?”

She made an impatient gesture, as if irritated by his question. “Everyone knows what people from the Pine Barrens are like.”
“Shiftless good-for-nothings, backward and ignorant - is that it?” Suddenly Elijah felt almost sorry for Chris, blinded by her prejudice. For all her intelligence and her accomplishments, she was really no different than the man who had shot Elijah out by the Quaker Bridge. “You can’t have much of an opinion of Sean, if you think he’d be taken in by a person like that.”

Chris’s mouth tightened. “Sean has always been too naïve for his own good.”

“Sean isn’t naïve,” Elijah said steadily. “He’s a good man with a caring heart and an open mind, a man who doesn’t believe in outdated stereotypes.”

“Oh, so your vocabulary includes multi-syllabic words, does it?” It was a cheap shot, and Chris obviously knew it. “I apologize,” she said, albeit grudgingly. “That was uncalled for.”

“The one you need to apologize to is Sean,” said Elijah. “I don’t much care what you think about me, but he deserves better from you.”

He had a moment of revelation then, like the drawing back of a curtain from a window, similar to when he gently set his hand to a wild animal’s side and could suddenly see right inside it, read its emotions, understand what it was thinking. He went on quietly, guided now by what he saw inside Chris, “Do you have to go on punishing him for never loving you the way you wanted him to? Do you think he wouldn’t have loved you like that if he could?”

If he’d harbored any doubt that he’d read her aright, it was erased by her reaction. She stiffened, and a look of absolute incredulity passed over her face. Elijah realized that Sean had been wrong. For Chris, this wasn’t about him leaving the company, or at least, the company was only a symbol for something deeper and more tragic.

“Who are you?” Chris asked, and her voice actually shook.

“My name is Elijah,” he replied.

She made another impatient gesture. “That’s not what I meant. How do you… how could you…” She stopped, and then paced in a small circle, restless as a cougar in a cage - no, Elijah decided, not a cougar, a panther. A sleek black panther wearing a bejeweled collar.

Elijah truly did feel sorry for her then, although he suspected she’d hate him for feeling pity. He could see her debating how much and what to say, and remained silent, giving her space, the way he would any trapped wild animal.

“It’s true that I loved Sean almost from the moment I met him,” Chris finally said, the words drawn from her as if against her will. “I knew when we got together that he didn’t feel the same - Sean was always upfront with me about his feelings back then - but I was willing to take the gamble, and he believed that we were starting out on the same page emotionally.” She paced in another restless circle. “It became clear pretty early on that the gamble was never going to pay off, though, and that I was always going to be the one who felt more. Sean did try, I’ll give him that. He suggested we get married and have a child, but without love, taking either of those steps would have been irresponsible, and we had the business to keep us busy.” Chris laughed. “I suppose a psychiatrist would have had a field day analyzing Sean and me, told us that we were sublimating our desire for a family by making Clicktwice into our child.” She shrugged her elegant shoulders. “That’s water under the bridge now, because the sad truth is that one-sided love doesn’t last forever. I don’t love Sean anymore. I haven’t for some time. I’ve watched him drift away, and I suppose on some level I always knew that eventually he’d decide to leave.”

“What then why won’t you let him go? Why are you dragging him through a palimony suit?”
“Because I helped him make that company into something special,” she said. “I helped him earn a fortune and a place in society that he’d never have attained on his own. Now he’s going to give all that to you?” Chris stabbed her finger at him. “Well, not without a price. He owes me.”

Elijah wondered how Chris could be so singularly blind about a man she professed once to have loved. Was it any wonder that their relationship had failed? “But Sean isn’t going to be giving me any of that. I’m sure you’ve heard from his mom that he wants to go to medical school and become a doctor.”

“What, and move to the Pine Barrens and practice medicine there?” Chris asked scornfully. “When he has connections that could score him a job at New York-Presbyterian or Mount Sinai in a heartbeat? When you can leave that place to live the sort of life you probably never dreamed was possible?”

“Not everyone aspires to live on the heights. ‘That place’ is my home, the only home I want,” Elijah replied. “But we can use another good doctor in the pines, and Sean will make a fine one, compassionate and caring.”

“You can’t be for real,” she scoffed. “What B movie did you step out of?” But her attempt to be derisive fell flat, because she was reluctantly impressed despite herself.

“Sean could have walked away from all this back in January,” Elijah said, indicating the lavishly decorated living room with its stunning view, and what it represented. “Did you know that today is the first time we’ve set eyes on each other since then? He said it wouldn’t be right for us to be together until he took care of his responsibilities here - his responsibilities to Clicktwice, and to you.” He held Chris’s gaze and tried to appeal to whatever sense of decency she possessed. “Sean cares about you, Chris, and he trusts you. He’s leaving the company in your hands. He doesn’t have to do that. He doesn’t have to wear himself to the bone trying to save Clicktwice from being sold out. He’s not doing that for him or for me. He’s doing it for you, and for all the dedicated people who work for you.” Elijah’s voice caught, and he flat out pleaded, “Please give up the lawsuit. Don’t put Sean through more than he’s already being asked to go through. Please.”

“Very eloquent,” Chris remarked softly. “Isn’t this the point at which you promise never to see him again if I do?”

“Life isn’t a movie,” Elijah said, his heart sinking at the flippancy of her response. “And no piney worth his salt would ever behave in such a nonsensical way.”

“Then what’s in it for me, Elijah? Tell me that.”

Elijah had the sense that Chris wasn’t being flippant now, but sincere. Once again, he experienced a moment of revelation, as if he was gazing through clear glass straight into her soul, and he could see the corrosive blackness eating at it like some deadly cancer.

“What’s in it for you is the peace that will come from knowing you’re being true to the person you are inside,” he said. “The one who has been telling you all along that this is the right path to take.”

There was a silence. Then Chris said again, in a strained whisper, “Who are you?”

But Elijah didn’t answer. He’d given her the only name she had a right to know.

She averted her head so that the sweep of her shining auburn hair hid her expression, but her long tapering fingers adorned with gleaming gold were clenching and unclenching at her sides, revealing the struggle within. This was the final chance, the last throw of the dice. If Chris refused, it was all
over, and she would have the means to bring everything Sean feared down on their heads - reporters in the pines, the glare of publicity and the risk of discovery for Elijah.

But however she chose, Elijah understood now why he had been compelled to come to New York alone. This opportunity would never have arisen if Martha had accompanied him, or if he’d called Sean from the station to rescue him. Surely, that had to be a good sign. Nevertheless, he held his breath as the slow seconds ticked past.

At long last, Chris slowly turned her head, brushed the hair back from her face. “Very well,” she said simply. “You win. I’ll give up the lawsuit.”

Elijah closed his eyes in the profoundness of his relief, and opened them to find Chris watching him with an expression that was strangely reminiscent of the sort of bemused wonder he sometimes found in the eyes of those he’d rescued.

“Thank you.” He wished he could say something more, but he was afraid of seeming condescending, or like he was triumphing over her - for nothing could be further from the truth. He only prayed that the decision brought her the inner peace her soul so clearly craved.

“Don’t thank me. I have a strange feeling that as soon as that door shuts behind me, I’m going to wonder what on earth came over me to agree to this.” She let out a small disbelieving laugh. “If I didn’t know it was impossible, I’d swear you’ve cast a spell on me.”

“If there’s any spell at work, it comes from the goodness in your own heart,” Elijah said seriously. “I have no magic here.”

Chris stared and then shook her head. “What is it about you? Do you know, if anyone else said something like that to me, I’d laugh myself silly. But you… coming from you it doesn’t sound like a load of New Age bullshit. It actually sounds genuine.” She hesitated. “I want you to know that I’m a woman of my word. No matter how I feel after I leave, I’ll be calling my lawyers when I get back to my office. But in return, I need you to promise me something. What I said about my feelings for Sean... I’d like for that to remain in confidence.”

“IT will, I promise,” Elijah replied. He wondered if it was true that her love for Sean was entirely gone, or if some vestiges remained of which she might not even be aware. He’d never know for sure, but he thought he could guess.

“Thank you.” She moved around him and reached for the door handle, clearly unwilling to allow Elijah to play the gentleman. On the threshold, she turned and looked back at him. “I can understand now why Sean would fall for someone like you. I won’t pretend to like it, but at least I understand.”

And then she was gone, without a word of good-bye, and only a trace of her perfume remained as proof she’d been there at all.

Elijah walked slowly into the living room and sat down. If he’d felt exhausted before, now he was simply numb. He was scarcely able to fathom what had just occurred. But the significance of it, of what Chris’s decision was going to mean to him and Sean, soon started to sink in. Without the palimony suit to hold him here, Sean could be home by the fall, in time to start school... It was as if the sunshine pouring through the windows was filling him with light, filling him until its brightness spilled forth from his every pore. Such happiness simply had to be shared, and with a loud whoop, Elijah leaped to his feet and raced into the bathroom to tell Fred the incredible news. And when he got home, he owed Maggie a heartfelt apology. For as always, she had known best.

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Sean held onto the metal railing for dear life as he bounded recklessly down the cement steps, wishing he had on sneakers rather than loafers with slippery leather soles. The sound of his pounding footfalls echoed wildly in the enclosed space of the stairwell. He’d been too keyed up and impatient to wait for the tortoise-like elevator to arrive from the lobby. Hell, it was only seven stories down to his suite, where Elijah was waiting.

Elijah was in New York. Elijah was in New York.

If he lived to be a thousand, he would never forget looking around to see Elijah standing by the reception desk, his heart in those amazing blue eyes, his mouth forming a single silent word: Sean. The tumult of emotions cascading through him had nearly torn Sean asunder. How he’d managed to hang onto his cool was still a mystery to him. His initial impulse to rush at Elijah, grab him up in his arms and runrunrunrunrun until they were miles away from everyone and everything that had kept them apart, had quickly been replaced by the most gut churning fear of his entire life, and that included the moment he confronted the Devil and figured his mortal coil was about to shuffle off forever.

It was a damned good thing he wasn’t prone to ulcers, or he’d have the mother of them all by now. What in god’s name had Elijah been thinking to come to New York? No, not just to New York but to Clicktwice, the one place on the planet Earth – hell, the one place in the entire universe – from which Sean wanted him to stay far, far away. Okay, so admittedly he’d lost it on the phone last night big time and alarmed Elijah. But to turn up like that without any warning? Shit. What if Chris had been around to observe them?

All through the seemingly endless meeting with the company’s patent attorneys, Sean had barely been able to focus or utter a coherent word. More and more questions, entirely unrelated to the new software patent they were attempting to secure before a rival company did, kept occurring to him. How had Elijah gotten to the city? Who had helped him? Had he come entirely alone? Did anyone even know he was gone? What if something had happened to him? What if something was happening to him - maybe even now, his separation from the pines was sapping the life force in him, depleted after his transformation last night…

Once again his tendency toward needless worry and his vivid imagination - as much a curse as a blessing – took over. By the time he reached the landing for the 43rd floor and yanked open the heavy metal fire door as if it was made of flimsy plywood, he was in a state of panic and fear nearly as great as that he’d felt the night he’d gone looking for Elijah, and arrived at the still, silent, dark house not knowing what he might find.

If Elijah didn’t answer his knock in less than a minute, he thought as he sprinted like a running back down the hall to his suite and hammered at the door with his fist, he’d kick the fucking thing in and gladly pay for the damages. A minute? Make that 30 seconds. No, 15 seconds. He drew his right leg back and raised it, kung fu style, just as the door flew wide and Elijah stood framed there, a joyful smile curving his lips. He was barefoot and wearing only his thin white tee shirt and jeans. Somehow the sight of this smiling, safe, apparently healthy and hale Elijah was the final straw, after the agonizing minutes he’d just passed.

Words fought each other in his throat, trying to be the first to emerge. A vein throbbed in his forehead. He realized that he was still standing in the hallway, where anyone could see him, with his leg half-raised like some hapless cartoon character about to plunge over the edge of a sheer cliff.

Oh, fuck it all… Everything but the imperative need to hold Elijah seemed irrelevant. Sean stepped inside, slammed the door behind him, and lunged, snatching the young man up into a fierce embrace. Elijah’s arms came around his neck in a stranglehold that made it impossible for him to speak, not
that it mattered - he was too choked up to utter a single word. Time lost all meaning while they held each other, tighter and tighter and tighter, and as the blessed, longed-for scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses filled his senses, deep inside Sean the pieces of his soul that had been shattered by their long separation shifted, aligned and seamlessly healed, bringing a profound sense of peace and joy. He was whole again.

Eventually they withdrew a hand’s breadth, just enough to stare into each other’s eyes. Sean cradled Elijah’s face in his palms, and as his thumbs stroked slowly along the crest of his cheekbones, discovered that the skin slipping smoothly beneath the pads was, impossibly, even softer than he remembered.

“If I wasn’t so deliriously overjoyed to see you, I’d strangle you for taking a risk like that,” he said hoarsely. “What in God’s name ever possessed you? I almost had a heart attack when I saw you.” He smiled crookedly. “After I got over the crazy urge to grab you and run, that is.”

“I wouldn’t have minded if you did.” Then the shining happiness in those fathomless blue eyes dimmed. “Our meeting didn’t turn out exactly the way I planned - it wasn’t supposed to be so public. I’m sorry, Sean.”

“No, I’m the one who needs to apologize. I kind of lost it on you, and said some things I shouldn’t have.” Sean dropped his hands to pull Elijah close again. “I was just so fucking scared, Elijah.”

“I know.” Elijah’s hand smoothed over his hair, the way it had when Sean had woken from his nightmare of the Devil chasing him through the woods and sensed instinctively that here was someone he could trust. “But I had to come; Sean, I was so worried about you. You sounded so depressed and discouraged on the phone that I couldn’t bear it.” There was a smile in his voice as he went on, “It was Maggie’s idea, and after all, you’re the one who said I should listen to her.”

“I’m going to have to have a talk with her when I get home,” Sean joked. “Although I expect I’ll end up promising her a lifetime supply of Scotch salmon this time, in gratitude.” He tightened his arms. “Elijah, Elijah, I’ve needed you so badly,” he whispered, speaking at last the words he’d held back for so many weeks. “Sometimes I thought I’d go mad with needing you.”

As if a switch had been flipped, the mood abruptly transmuted from joy and relief into the knife-sharp edge of hunger that had gone too long unsatisfied. In the next instant, their mouths were fused together in a bruising kiss, while their bodies pressed so close it seemed that they might simply merge one into the other.

Oh, but like some sailor of old lured beneath the sea by a siren’s call, Sean was drowning, drowning in the silken heat of Elijah’s mouth, in the radiant warmth of the lean hard-muscled body molded against his own, in the sharpening of the wild tang of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses, with the tantalizing hint of bayberry beneath. How, how in god’s name had he lived without this for nearly five months?

He tore his mouth away, ignoring Elijah’s wordless moan of protest, and pressed it to the pulse beating madly at the base of his throat, evidence, like the erection burning beneath taut denim against his hip, that this was no dream conjured during the long, lonely nights. Then he looked up, and breathed, “Let’s go to bed.”

It took a moment for his words to reach Elijah through the haze of arousal, but his dazed expression slowly cleared, and a secret smile took its place. “Everything’s ready,” he said, and Sean’s already erratic pulse leaped. “I kept busy while I was waiting for you.” And then unexpectedly he giggled, the sound as usual sending a jolt of arousal straight to Sean’s already aching groin. “But I have to warn you that I hid your copy of The Joy of Gay Sex. I don’t want you stopping to double check
your notes every five seconds.”

Sean grinned a little sheepishly. “I’m pretty sure I have all the relevant parts memorized now.” He reached for Elijah’s hand. “Come on.”

But Elijah avoided his grasp, and shook his head. A small but intense blue flame had sprung to life in his eyes. “Not just yet. There’s something I have to do first.” His fingers went to Sean’s throat and worked nimbly at the knot of his tie, quickly loosening it. “This isn’t my Sean,” he said, sounding almost fierce as he yanked the tie free, tossed it aside, and undid the top button of Sean’s shirt. “Neither is this,” he went on, and Sean could only stand helpless as a tailor’s dummy as Elijah, moving like one possessed, spun him out of his suit jacket and dropped it to the floor. “And neither is this.” His fingers went to Sean’s hair, and impatiently disarranged the neatly combed strands.

Only then did Elijah step back, nodding in satisfaction. “Now you’re my Sean, the Sean from the pines.” The blue flame burned hotter and deeper. “I don’t like what this world does to you, and I don’t want it anywhere around while we’re making love.” Then he took Sean’s hand, lacing their fingers together, and led him into a room that had been transformed since he left it a few hours earlier.

Sean stopped and gaped. “Shit, you weren’t kidding when you said you were busy.” The heavy red velvet drapes had been drawn, shutting out the view of the world beyond. All the lights were turned off, but Elijah had found the half-dozen storm candles Sean kept in a drawer in the kitchen, and arranged them on the dresser and tables. By their soft, flickering yellow glow, he could see that his bed was now neatly made, with the bedspread and sheets invitingly turned down, and the pillows piled up by the headboard. A large bath towel was spread over the bottom sheet. On the nightstand a white tube of K-Y jelly stood ready and waiting.

Something about the sight of these careful preparations brought tears to Sean’s eyes, so of course he had to make a joke. “You just had to rub it in that I forgot to make my bed this morning, didn’t you?” he commented, and the next second he was staggering under Elijah’s weight as the younger man half-tackled him, winding arms and legs around him and kissing him with passionate desperation. The fleeting thought crossed Sean’s mind that his lame jokes had the same effect on Elijah that his giggle had on Sean, but there was really no place for any thought except that if he didn’t get Elijah naked and on that neatly made bed within the next minute so they could rumple it up together, he might lose his mind.

Elijah clearly had the same thought at the same moment. He slid down Sean’s body like a pole dancer, drawing a long involuntary moan from him, and walking backwards, tugged Sean with him. In the candlelight, his eyes were huge and dark as midnight, and Sean was irresistibly reminded of the night they met, when their gazes locked across a starlit clearing deep in the pines, forging a bond that would endure for a lifetime and, god willing, beyond.

When Elijah’s knees met the edge of the bed, he fell onto his back, drawing Sean down on top of him. They bounced twice on the firm mattress, and laughed breathlessly, and then Sean’s hands were diving into Elijah’s hair, seeking for the raised knobs of his pedicles, even as his mouth drank the laughter from Elijah’s lips. He thumbed the yielding surface, stroking hard, and Elijah let out an agonized whimper and his hips involuntarily lifted to press the hard ridge of his cock against Sean’s, seeking relief. But between them still lay a barrier of denim and fine wool.

“Clothes,” Sean murmured, wishing he was the magician Elijah called him, and could magic them away with a spell. There would be opportunity for a slow, sensual undressing later. What ensued was a frantic, fumbling race against time as they tackled buttons and zippers with desperate haste, and not a few hysterical giggles from Elijah that didn’t help matters for Sean. Both were sweating
and shaking with suppressed desire when they finally lay naked, with Elijah cradling Sean’s lower body between slender thighs roped with firm muscle.

“Don’t move,” Sean gasped against Elijah’s neck as he struggled for control. “Whatever you do, don’t fucking move, or it’ll all be over.” Elijah let out another of those slightly hysterical sounding giggles, and Sean gritted his teeth and wished he’d warned him against giggling, too.

He lifted himself gingerly on his forearms and stared searchingly down at Elijah, a wordless question in his eyes. For answer, Elijah swiveled his torso, and stretched out his right arm to pick up the tube of K-Y from nightstand. He offered it to Sean with an expression of perfect trust. Sean had indeed memorized the relevant sections of *The Joy of Gay Sex*. He understood the mechanics of anal sex, and he and Elijah had frankly discussed the topic. But still, Sean thought, the plastic tube slippery in his sweating palm, reading about something was not the same as actually doing it. And this was Elijah’s first time. God, if he were to hurt him…

“Uh-uh, cut it out, Sean. You’re thinking way too much.” Elijah fisted his hands in Sean’s thick hair and pulled him down into a searing, open-mouthed kiss. He let out all the stops, using tongue and teeth to such devastating effect that Sean could barely recall his own name when Elijah finally released him. His hand moved down between them and circled Sean’s erection, lightly stroking it before letting go. “I want you inside me,” he said in a voice raw with need. “Please.”

Sean eased his body to one side. He popped the cap on the K-Y with an unsteady hand and squirted clear gel onto the pads of his fingers. Elijah grabbed the nearest pillow and, lifting his hips, slid it beneath them and braced his feet on the mattress. Sean couldn’t help but pause a moment to drink in the sight of Elijah’s nude body, golden in the candlelight, with the darkly flushed cock curving slightly to the right as it strained toward his soft belly. “Elijah, god, you’re perfect,” he breathed in wonder, and bending, pressed a kiss to the pulsing vein just beneath the head, tasting the salt-dampness for the first time and reveling in it.

Then he slid his fingers between Elijah’s splayed thighs, along the hair-roughened cleft until they found their goal. He used his lube-slick fingers to stretch and open Elijah, while with his other hand stroked the young man’s erection, first bringing him close to the edge and then retreating. He became so lost in the sheer erotic delight of observing Elijah’s uninhibited reaction to what he was doing, that he completely forgot to worry. There was surely no more beautiful sight in all creation than Elijah lost in pleasure, all shifting shadows and gleaming satin skin as his body writhed. Oh yes, he thought smugly, reading about something definitely was not the same as actually doing it.

“It’s gonna be beautiful, like our other first time, only better.”

And it was. It was beautiful, it was powerful, it was steam-up-the-windows hot, and in all the years he’d been with Chris, never had Sean understood, as he did now with a gut-deep certainty, that sex could be as much a joining of souls as of bodies.
He went slowly at first, pressing into the narrow opening inch by careful inch, shaking with the effort to restrain himself and wait, until Elijah’s impatient “Sean, keep going,” told him it was safe to continue. When at last he was fully inside Elijah, his cock sheathed in the mind-blowingly tight, searingly hot passage, Sean hesitated, still maintaining a rigid hold on his self-control, even while his sex-deprived body was screaming for him to stop messing around and start moving, pronto. Elijah was in full agreement with this idea.

He pressed a kiss against Sean’s sweat-streaked temple and said, “I won’t break.” Then he traced the outer rim of Sean’s ear with his tongue, and whispered hotly, “Fuck me.” A word Sean was certain Elijah had never used before in his life, for fear of Katie and her bar of soap, and its effect on Sean was electric; the tight leash he’d been keeping on his control finally snapped. He withdrew halfway and thrust, and Elijah moaned and dug his fingers painfully hard into Sean’s buttocks, urging him on.

Everything started to speed up then, as if a fast forward button had been pushed. He captured Elijah’s mouth in a fervent kiss, and his hands delved into his hair, finding and stroking the round knobs of his pedicles in time to every powerful thrust. Elijah was whimpering against Sean’s lips; he had moved one hand to his erection and was frantically stroking it. Far too soon Sean’s thrusts grew jerky and erratic, his balls tightened, and as he gave one final thrust, he felt Elijah stiffen, then cry out his name, and then he was coming with an intensity that caused starbursts of color to explode behind his eyelids, and everything else to fade to black.

Sean’s first coherent thought in the aftermath was to marvel that he was still alive and in one piece. His second was that he didn’t ever want to move, to separate, to unjoin his body from Elijah’s. Never in his adult life had he imagined it was possible to share such closeness with another. His cheek was pillowed on Elijah’s sweat-damp chest; he could hear the rapid beating of his heart gradually beginning to slow. Sean angled his head up, and tenderly kissed the scar left by the bullet that had come so close to taking Elijah from him forever, to depriving him of this amazing young man who was now his whole world.

Their eyes met. “Sean, that was…” he searched for words.


“I don’t think even we have a saying to cover this. But what about ‘fucking amazing’?” Elijah suggested.

“Elijah Wood! Katie’s going to wash your mouth out with soap if she hears you use that word,” Sean exclaimed in mock dismay. “Or maybe mine – I’m obviously a bad influence on you.”

Elijah looked absurdly guilty, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, and Sean laughed. Then he lifted his head and they kissed - a lazy, satiated kiss without any urgency. His muscles were lax and heavy, and he could have fallen asleep where he lay. But that could hardly be comfortable for Elijah, with his knees still draped over Sean’s shoulders, and Sean’s softening cock inside him. Besides, Elijah required some TLC. He was going to be sore; there was simply no way around it. Sean gently pulled out and eased Elijah’s legs down to the bed. They looked at each other with regret.

“There’ll be other times - thousands of them,” Sean said, trying not to let the shadow of yet another separation darken this moment.

“Only thousands?” Elijah said, in mock indignation. “I was hoping for millions.”

“I like the way you think.” Grinning, Sean got up from the bed on legs that felt surprisingly rubbery.
He held out his hand. “Up you get, Woodjin. We need to hit the bathroom.” The extra-large fluffy bath towel had protected the bed, more or less, but the two of them were a sticky, sweaty mess.

Elijah didn’t immediately move, however. He let his gaze roam in a leisurely fashion over Sean, who was suddenly all too conscious of the weight he’d gained and the health club membership he’d been neglecting.

“You’re so incredibly gorgeous, Sean,” Elijah said with a happy sigh. “I thought I remembered just how gorgeous,” and his dreamy gaze lingered on Sean’s cock, impressively large even when it wasn’t aroused, “but I wasn’t even close.”

“You’re crazy,” Sean said, feeling his cheeks start to burn. “Now come on, get up.”

“I’m not crazy,” Elijah protested, but he took Sean’s hand and allowed him to pull him to his feet. He was walking a little gingerly as they crossed the candlelit room, but shrugged off Sean’s concern.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine. In fact, I’m better than fine. I’m so happy that skunks the world over are protesting.” He gave Sean a mischievous look. “Besides, there’s a surprise waiting for you in the bathroom.”

“Another one? I’m not sure I can survive another of your surprises,” Sean joked.

“You just wait and see what it is.” Elijah’s eyes were dancing with amusement, and Sean wondered what on earth the surprise could be. He switched on the bathroom lights and stared around, but nothing looked any different.

“Elijah, what--?” he began, but was interrupted by a familiar sound.

Scrape, scrape, thud.

Scrape, scrape, thud.

“Fred!” Sean exclaimed in amazement, and there was the box turtle, emerging from behind the toilet, and heading toward him as fast as his limited physique and innate dignity would allow. “God, am I happy to see you.”

He crouched down beside Fred, absurdly overjoyed by the sight of those small red eyes blinking at him. For once, he didn’t need Elijah to interpret for him. He could tell that Fred was as glad to see him as he was to see Fred. “I’ve missed you, buddy,” he said emotionally, scratching the turtle beneath his chin with a forefinger. Sean glanced up at Elijah, who was watching them with the hugest grin. “So that’s what was in the shoebox. Elijah, I can’t believe you brought him for a visit.”

“Oh, he wanted to come,” Elijah assured him. “And Fred isn’t just here for a visit, Sean. He’s going to stay here and keep you company until you can come home. I only wish I’d thought of the idea weeks ago,” he added regretfully.

“But I don’t know anything about taking care of box turtles,” Sean replied dubiously, although the thought of returning to the suite at the end of a long, tiring day and having Fred to commune with and talk to about Elijah, was comforting beyond belief. Fred was the perfect confidante: wise, unflappable, and immune to bribes from gossip columnists.

“Don’t worry about taking care of Fred. I’ve written down instructions for you, and he’s an easy keeper. Just make sure you don’t let him get too spoiled. This bathroom is a lot fancier than what he’s accustomed to. And no wild parties,” he teased, “even if there is a Jacuzzi.”

Afterward, Sean could never satisfactorily explain to himself why Elijah’s reference to this ongoing
lame joke caused him to start crying. But cry he did. Hot tears spurted from beneath his lids as if a faucet had been turned on, his nose stuffed up and began to run, and he sank cross-legged to the cold marble floor, buried his head in his hands and sobbed.

“Sean…” Seconds later, a pair of strong arms came around him, and Elijah cradled his head against his breast, and slowly rocked him.

“Sorry,” Sean choked out, wiping his runny nose on the back of his hand like a child. “I just… oh god, I’ve missed you so much.” The tears ran faster.

“Oh Sean, I’ve missed you, too,” Elijah said in a wobbly voice. “And it breaks my heart when I think of everything you’ve had to go through alone.”

Sean shook his head vehemently. “No, not alone, never alone. Not since I met you.”

Elijah’s hold tightened, and they remained that way for some time, while Sean’s sobs gradually lessened, and Fred rested his chin on Sean’s thigh and regarded him with a doleful, unblinking stare.

It wasn’t until Elijah unconsciously shifted that Sean realized he was kneeling on the unforgiving hardness of the marble, and it must be uncomfortable as hell. His own ass was turning numb. He pulled back with a final snuffling sigh, and said, “I could have picked a more comfortable place to have a breakdown.”

“’Sokay.” Elijah thumbed away the tears streaking Sean’s face and then leaned in to kiss him gently on the mouth. “Better?” he asked in a tender voice, and there was such understanding and love in his eyes. Whatever his quirks or flaws, and they were numerous, Sean had found the one person who would love him regardless, who would be there for him through thick and thin.

“Yeah, I’m better,” Sean said, exalted in his soul. A smile grew on his face, stretching wider and wider. “Shower or Jacuzzi?”

Elijah’s eyes sparkled. “Do you really have to ask?”

While Sean filled the tub with hot water and turned on the heater, Elijah found fresh towels and then disappeared briefly, returning with two open bottles of Sam Adams beer he’d taken from the refrigerator. He set them down on the broad marble ledge that surrounded the Jacuzzi just as Sean turned off the faucets.

“All ready,” Sean said to the unabashedly naked young man standing beside him. Elijah had red marks on his knees from the floor. There was drying come on his belly and the insides of his thighs. Sean picked out at least a dozen small bruises starting to form on that ivory skin, marks left by the intensity of their coupling. A sense of possessive pride such as he’d never known filled Sean as he watched Elijah climb stiffly into the Jacuzzi, and admired the flex of those pale rounded buttocks that concealed such treasure.

He quickly followed, settling opposite Elijah, and hit the control to turn on the jets. Immediately the water began to roil and bubble, and Elijah let out a little moan of pure undiluted bliss. Sean snagged a beer and handed it across to Elijah and then picked up his own and settled back.

Their outstretched legs drifted together, forming a comfortable tangle beneath the water, while they drank their beer and basked in the soothing massage of the jet bursts. Sean thought of the numerous questions he had for Elijah, but decided they could wait. They’d had so few moments just to relax and be, and there was such enormous pleasure to be taken in simply drinking in the sight of Elijah’s flushed face, brilliant eyes and auburn curls spangled with droplets of moisture. It gave Sean a
greater rush of warmth inside than the Sam Adams - no contest.

“We absolutely have to have one of these,” Elijah declared a while later, setting his now-empty beer bottle on the ledge beside Sean’s with a contented little belch. “Next time you call from the Jacuzzi, I’m going to be extremely jealous. I didn’t really know what I was missing.”

Sean tickled the back of Elijah’s knee with his toes, making Elijah gasp and squirm. “I’ll have Fred call you instead, how about that? Then you won’t have to be jealous.”

“Oh, so you’re going to give Fred his own cell phone, huh?” Elijah’s toes retaliated, and it was Sean’s turn to squirm.

“Absolutely, and an office upstairs with his own secretary, too. I thought I’d hire him as a consultant for our ‘targeted advertising for turtles’ campaign. In fact, I’m going take him to Barney’s tomorrow and get him fitted out with a suit and tie. Enough with that Mr. Rogers look already. He’s a city turtle now.”

By the time Sean was done, Elijah was laughing so hard that he slid right under the water, and came up spluttering and blinking moisture from his eyes. And suddenly froze, becoming stunningly aware, as Sean already was, of exactly where his right foot had ended up: firmly lodged against Sean’s groin. Wide-eyed, he moved his foot experimentally.

“Jesus,” Sean gasped, breaking out in a sweat unrelated to the warmth of the water. The wide-eyed look was replaced by one of a very different sort, compounded of equal parts mischief, lust and determination, and Sean knew he was in for it.

Sean had admired Elijah’s narrow, high-arched feet with their long, elegant toes. Now he had an entirely new reason to admire them, and while it really shouldn’t be possible at his age, within a couple of minutes there was absolutely no doubt about it - he was raring to go again. His head fell back against the padded edge of the Jacuzzi with a thump, while Elijah’s magic toes kneaded and stroked his rapidly hardening cock with devastating effect.

Sean was so adrift in liquid sensation that he didn’t even realize at first when the tormenting foot was removed. Then a sudden wave of water sloshed up over his chest, followed seconds later by the creator of said wave, Elijah, who had launched himself from the other side of the tub. He straddled Sean and wound his slippery arms around his neck, and it was clear as he settled atop Sean’s lap and their cocks brushed that he, too, was raring to go again. So much for TLC, thought Sean dazedly, as a hot demanding mouth fastened over his, and a small hand glided down in a silken caress to palm Sean’s nipple and rub it in circles, bringing it to a tight, aching peak, and sending shafts of pleasure streaking along every nerve.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” Sean repeated, as Elijah’s mouth moved lower, to plant hungry kisses along his jaw and throat, before fastening over the tender skin just above Sean’s collarbone and sucking it hard enough to leave a livid mark. Meanwhile that exploring hand moved lower, under the roiling water, and between Sean’s thighs to explore. Then Elijah started to move against Sean. The sensation of their slick cocks gliding against each other through the warm swirling water was indescribable, and he could only moan in helpless ecstasy.

In fact, Sean felt helpless to do anything except allow Elijah to have his way with him, and indeed it seemed clear that this was precisely what Elijah wanted. The young man’s mouth moved to Sean’s nipple, alternately biting at it lightly, sucking it, and then soothing it with his tongue. Between what was going on below the water and what was going on above, Sean was lost. In no time at all it seemed, he was arching up with a loud cry, and coming with explosive force, and then a panting Elijah was collapsing limply against his chest. A milky white cloud appeared in the water around
them, and then swiftly dispersed.

Sean let out a weak laugh. “That’s it. You’ve officially killed me. I’ll never be able to move again and will die a wrinkled prune in this Jacuzzi.”

“Pretty good, huh?” Elijah bragged immodestly.

“Fucking amazing, as they say in the pines,” Sean joked. “Although this wasn’t one of the ideas we talked about on the phone, I have to say you improvise brilliantly. They’re going to have to license your toes as a lethal weapon, Elijah.”

Elijah giggled, and snuggled against Sean. It didn’t seem that he was capable of moving either. Sean’s hand drifted between Elijah’s shoulder blades in slow, lazy circles, and he cherished the warm weight of the body draped across his like a silken blanket. Eventually Elijah rubbed his cheek against Sean’s chest like a tired kitten, as he’d done that first time they made love at the cabin, and yawned hugely.

“Not that I have anything against prunes,” Sean said, sitting up reluctantly, “but I’d really rather we not both resemble one. And you need some sleep.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” Elijah said, sounding sad. “I can only stay until tomorrow morning, Sean. I don’t want to miss a single minute of our time together.”

Sean ignored the stab of pain the thought of Elijah’s departure brought, and the reminders of their last difficult parting that had lasted so much longer than either had then imagined it could. “It’s less than 24 hours since you transformed, Elijah, and I’m willing to bet that you haven’t slept a wink since then.” Elijah’s non-response was answer enough. “I’ll wake you in a couple of hours, I promise.”

Elijah was clearly almost dead on his feet, and Sean had to steady him as he climbed out of the tub. But he tried valiantly to protest when Sean picked up one of the towels and started to dry him. “I can manage,” he said, around another huge yawn. “You don’t have to do that.”

But Sean, kneeling like some knight’s squire of old to wipe away the rivulets of water running down Elijah’s legs, glanced up and said simply, “Yes, I do.” He welcomed this chance to give Elijah a little of the TLC he so deserved.

When he was finished, he quickly swiped himself down, and putting an arm around Elijah, led him back to the bedroom. He picked up the soiled towel and rolled it into a ball, held back the covers so Elijah could slide underneath, and then pulled them up around him.

“There,” Sean said, straightening with a smile, “you’re all tucked in.”

Elijah didn’t smile back this time. “You won’t leave me, will you?” he asked, putting his hand on Sean’s arm. In the flickering light of the storm candle, he looked young and vulnerable, his eyes shadowed with worry. Sean could only imagine what it had cost him to make this journey and leave the safety and security of the pines behind.

He covered Elijah’s hand with his own and squeezed it reassuringly. “Of course not. I have a few phone calls to make and I want to order us in some food. But I’ll be here every second, don’t worry.”

“’Kay.” Elijah’s eyelids were starting to droop, as if he’d needed Sean’s reassurance before he would let himself give in to the pull of sleep.

“Elijah, before you’re out like a light, just tell me: how did you get to New York?”
“On the train,” he murmured sleepily. “Martha gave me a ride to the station.”

Sean nodded. He stooped and brushed the damp tendrils of hair back from his brow, then kissed Elijah softly on the forehead. “I love you,” he said. “Now go to sleep.”

“Love you, too.” The words had barely passed his lips before Elijah’s eyes were closed, and in the next instant his breathing deepened as he fell into a sound sleep.

Sean gathered up their scattered clothing - how had his black leather belt ended up draped over a lampshade - and then turned on the lamp before moving around the room and blowing out the candles. Romantic though candlelight might be, and beautiful as Elijah looked by it, it was, after all, still a fire hazard.

He got dressed, amused when he discovered his copy of *The Joy of Gay Sex* sticking out from the bottom of a pile of boxers in the underwear drawer. But his gaze kept straying to the king size bed and the young man peacefully asleep in it. There was a sense of déjà vu about the circumstances, yet never in his wildest imaginings had he expected Elijah to be here in his bed in his suite in New York.

Reluctantly, Sean left the room to make his phone calls, not wanting to disturb Elijah, even though he was reasonably certain that nothing short of a brass band marching by the bed would wake him.

It was a shock to walk into the living room and discover that it was a sunny, bright afternoon in New York City, and all around him the workday world was going on about its usual business. It truly had seemed as if he and Elijah had stepped into a separate world, timeless and apart. If only they could remain in that world, Sean thought now as he turned on the cell phone he’d retrieved from the pocket of his discarded suit jacket. He checked his messages, and saw that there was just one, from Philippa Boyens. Well, he decided, it could bloody well wait. The last thing on earth he wanted to think about while Elijah was here was the fucking palimony suit or Chris. He’d give Philippa a call tomorrow.

He checked in with Liv, whom he’d ordered to cancel all his remaining appointments for the day, and she reassured him that everything was under control. Not that he’d had any doubts - she could charm the birds from the trees if necessary. Still, he was a bit uneasy about what he might have given away in the aftermath of Elijah’s unexpected arrival. He’d done his best not to reveal the tumult of his emotions in such a public setting, but he wasn’t sure just how well he’d succeeded or what curious eyes might have been observing him.

After he hung up with Liv, Sean turned his attention to another problem: what Elijah had told him moments before he fell asleep about how he’d gotten to New York. *On the train. Martha gave me a ride to the station.* Well, Elijah might have arrived by train, but he sure as hell wasn’t going home by train. The very thought of the Woodjin traveling alone outside the pines made Sean’s skin crawl with fear. Fortunately, there were other, better ways to get him home safely. It would take a few phone calls to set it up, but it was doable. Then he’d call Martha and let her know about the changed plans. What else he might say to her, he wasn’t sure. Much as he’d like to lecture her about how incredibly irresponsible it had been to let Elijah take the train alone into the city, he suspected Elijah had really given her no choice, and after all, he had arrived safely, so in the end perhaps it was best to let it go.

Sean went to the window and stared down at the crowds hurrying along the sidewalks or strolling through the park, enjoying the late spring afternoon.

There was a larger point to consider, too. Elijah was an adult. He had made an informed decision to come to New York, an agonizing and risky one to be sure, but not one based on impulse or self-interest. He mustn’t fall into the trap of thinking that because Elijah was vulnerable to discovery, he was also a child who needed constant supervision. Like Sean, he’d been forced to grow up young, and bore the weight of responsibilities and pressures that would be inconceivable to the average
person. He risked his very life over and over without a second thought. To treat his decisions with less than the total respect they deserved was to dishonor him.

Of course, it might kill him sometimes to resist wrapping Elijah in cotton wool, Sean thought ruefully as he turned away from the window, but he had to remember that he wasn’t Elijah’s keeper - he was his lover, his partner and his friend.

Sean made his calls, and then turned off his cell phone and went to sit by Elijah. And if he felt now rather like the knight himself, standing guard over his sleeping love, well, that would remain his little secret.

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It didn’t need a brass band marching through the suite to wake Elijah, just the smell of an extra-large pizza, loaded with broccoli, peppers, mushrooms and spinach. Sean had just tipped the delivery guy and carried the cardboard box into the living room, where he’d already set out more Sam Adams, dinner plates and napkins on the round table by the window, when Elijah appeared.

“Wow, something smells fantastic,” he said, padding barefoot into the room.

“Famous Joe’s pizza, the best in the city,” Sean said. “You’re going to love it.”

Elijah had put on the jeans and tee shirt that Sean had left, neatly folded, on the end of the bed. Sean’s heart stuttered at the sight of him. His hair had even more of a kitten fur effect than usual going on, since he’d fallen asleep with it still damp, while his cheeks were flushed with sleep so that his eyes appeared almost impossibly blue. Rather than sit down at the table, Elijah walked straight up to Sean and put his arms around him. “Just making sure you’re real,” he said, and they held each other until a loud growl from Elijah’s stomach reminded them of the waiting food.

Elijah couldn’t stop staring out the window in rapt fascination while he devoured his pizza (after carefully removing every last bit of spinach, Sean noted for future reference). “Sorry,” he eventually said, a bit thickly because his mouth was full, “I’m not ignoring you. But it’s still kind of hard to believe what I’m seeing.”

“I know what you mean,” Sean replied. “I’m still having trouble believing that myself.” He detached another slice of pizza from the pie, picked out the spinach, and lifted it onto Elijah’s plate. “But if you wouldn’t mind being distracted from the view for a few minutes, I’d really like to hear about how you got here. I spoke to Martha while you were sleeping, by the way, and she was very relieved to know you were here with me and safe.”

Elijah sighed. “I felt bad about dragging her into it, but I needed someone to drive me to the train station.”

“I gather Ian isn’t too happy with her,” Sean said dryly, watching Elijah turn his beer bottle around and around in the ring of dampness it sat in.

“I just hope he isn’t too upset with me.” Elijah looked up from his contemplation of the Sam Adams label. His eyes were haunted. “I’m the Woodjin, and my duty is to stay in the pines and protect him and everyone else. Only this once,” his voice cracked, “just this once, I had to put you first, Sean. I hope they can understand and forgive me.”

(Of course they understand. Elijah, they’re only worried about you, not upset with you.” Sean spoke with calm reassurance, while inside he felt humbled, utterly unworthy of such a sacrifice. “I remember what you said to me that morning, about being the fox. And yet despite that, you came
anyway. You are without a doubt the bravest person it has ever been my privilege to know.”

Elijah flushed. “I’m not, oh Sean, I’m not. If you could have seen me this morning in Penn Station, you’d never think I was brave.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” Sean said gently. “Tell me what happened, from the time you left Martha.”

It was difficult to hold onto his vow not to wrap Elijah in cotton wool after listening to the story. Elijah was brutally honest about how difficult it had been for him to be around the unaccustomed crowds of people. When he described the moment of panic and disorientation that had driven him into the ATM room, Sean reached across the table and took his hand, as much for his own comfort as for Elijah’s. His body broke out in a sympathetic sweat while he listened; the remembered distress in Elijah’s eyes was so evident and real.

Sean soothed Elijah’s palm with calming strokes of his thumb. “You should have called me; I would have come for you.”

“I know, and I almost did call you. But…” he hesitated and gave Sean a look he couldn’t decipher. “This was something I had to do by myself, and besides, I met a really lovely woman named Mary who helped me out, and after that I was fine.” The remainder of the story made for easier listening, and Sean couldn’t help but laugh at the image of Fred with his nose stuck to the window while Elijah pointed out the sights to him.

“I wish you’d gotten Mary’s last name,” Sean remarked regretfully as Elijah picked up his second slice of now-lukewarm pizza and bit into it.

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to thank her for helping you out.” Give her a few million dollars, or raise a statue to her. “But at least I have the full name of the cabbie. ‘Ben Williams’ is a pretty common name, but it should be possible to track him down through the Taxi and Limousine Commission – they license the drivers.” Sean lightly drummed his fore and middle fingers on the table top as his brain raced. “You said his wife is in nursing school, right? Maybe I can help them out financially so he doesn’t have to keep working two jobs.”

Elijah stared at him, his pizza suspended in mid-air, a long strand of mozzarella dangling from it. “Sean, you can’t be serious. You can’t go giving that kind of money to someone simply because they were nice to me!”

“Well, it’s up to you, Sean,” Elijah commented, tonguing the strand of cheese into his mouth, and added slyly, “but I gave Ben a twenty when the fare was $11. I have a feeling I over tipped him by a lot.”
Sean had just taken a sip of his beer; he choked on his laughter and started to cough. Elijah jumped up and came around the table to pound him on the back. One thing led to another after that, and the pizza was nearly cold by the time they finally finished it.

As they gathered up the dishes and empty bottles and the pizza box, the shadows were lengthening outside and night was starting to draw in; the setting sun set the glass windows of the skyscrapers ablaze with color.

In the kitchen, after washing the plates and putting them in the stainless steel dish drainer, Sean said, “Would you like to go out? We could hit one of the clubs on the lower east side, listen to some music.” It cost him something to make the offer. His fear of encountering someone who might recognize him was like a specter hovering over him. But Elijah had taken a considerable risk for him, and how could he do any less?

Elijah shook his head, immediately and decisively. “I didn’t come here to go clubbing. I came here to be with you.” He grimaced. “And I think I’ve had enough of crowds for one day.”

“You’re sure?” Sean couldn’t quite disguise his relief as he draped the damp dishtowel over the side of the drainer.

“Positive.”

“Then what would you like to do?” he asked.

Elijah’s answer was a slow, knowing grin.

“You have a one-track mind, Elwood,” Sean laughed. “But I’m not sure my enfeebled body is quite up to what you have in mind just yet. Two orgasms in the space of a few hours is pushing the envelope for a guy my age. How about we watch a movie instead? I rented *Godfather 2* from Netflix.”

“I am so tempted to prove that your enfeebled body is capable of pushing the envelope even wider,” Elijah remarked provocatively as he went to the freezer and opened it. “But I’ve been dying to argue with you over which *Godfather* is the better movie.” He peered into the freezer. “No Tastykake ice cream?” he asked in disappointment.

Sean grinned and swatted him on the ass. “You’ll have to make do with Haagen-Dazs.”

“If I have to,” he said, “but I hope you have popcorn to go with it.”

“Of course,” Sean said, opening a cupboard and taking down a box of Orville Redenbacher. He nuked the popcorn while Elijah divided the pint of chocolate chocolate chip ice cream between two bowls. Then they returned to the living room, and Sean put *Godfather 2* in the DVD player and turned on the television.

“A flat panel television,” Elijah enthused. “I’ve never watched a movie on one of those.”

After which comment Sean immediately started wondering how soon he could get one delivered and installed in the cabin.

Elijah didn’t sit on the carpet this time, but squashed next to Sean, draping one leg over Sean’s thigh and resting his bare foot on top of Sean’s. Sean tried not to stare at those long, elegant toes that could wield such magic, but resolutely offered Elijah the popcorn bowl. Beyond, it was now dark, and the city lights were shining, and Sean wasn’t the only one having trouble concentrating on the movie.
“Sean, it’s amazing,” Elijah said, his gaze fixed on the skyline, not the TV screen. “But I can’t imagine how you get any studying done with this to distract you.”

“Oh, I manage okay,” Sean assured him. “It’s what I’m going to have distracting me when I get home that’s going to make studying difficult.”

Eventually, despite distractions, the movie’s superb acting and direction lured them in, and as they ate their ice cream and passed the popcorn bowl back and forth, they argued about the relative merits of the two Godfather movies. Fred ambled in from the bathroom to join them about halfway through, but when asked, declined to take sides.

It was the first carefree evening Sean had spent since leaving the pines in January, and he thanked god from the bottom of his heart for Elijah’s courage and resolve that had made it possible. There were some risks worth taking, and this was one. He realized that his belief in the magical and fantastical, a childhood dream that his meeting with the white stag had given back to him, had been slowly but surely dying under the sordid weight of lawsuits and hostile takeovers. Well, the magical and fantastical was in this room with him, right here and right now, pressed solid and warm against his side, and every inhalation of Sean’s breath brought with it the beloved scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses. He had the memory of this magical day to sustain him; he could walk around the suite and see Elijah in every room. He wouldn’t lose faith again.

When the movie was over, they were still at an impasse. Elijah stating categorically that Godfather 2 was definitely superior, but Sean clinging stubbornly to his preference for the original movie. “Well, it would be boring if we agreed on everything,” Elijah said cheerfully.

One thing they did agree on was that it was time to retire to bed, not that they had any intention of going to sleep. Sean’s claim of bodily enfeeblement hadn’t held much water after sitting with Elijah plastered against him for several hours. Elijah knew it, too, the tease, and his apology after dropping that piece of popcorn between Sean’s thighs and fishing around down there to find it, was blatantly insincere and hadn’t fooled him in the least. But he’d gotten his own back, letting his hand casually toy with one of Elijah’s pedicles until Elijah glared and accused him of not playing fair. Sean just laughed, tilted his head back and tossed a piece of popcorn in his mouth.

The bedroom was in darkness when they entered. Elijah went to the windows and pulled back the drapes. A spectacular three-quarter moon was rising above the rooftops; by its light and that from the windows of the buildings around them, they undressed. There was time now for the slow, sensual undressing that hadn’t possible earlier, for lingering touches interspersed with slow burning kisses.

They stood at last naked, face to face, their quickened breathing loud in the silent room. Sean was about to take Elijah’s arm and pull him toward the bed, when the young man said unexpectedly, “In case you’ve been wondering, I haven’t forgotten, Sean.”

“How I was going to thank you when I saw you again.” To Sean’s shock and undeniable excitement, for he couldn’t even count the number of times he’d imagined this scene, Elijah dropped to his knees in front of him. He looked up at Sean with a hint of vulnerability and uncertainty in his eyes. “I hope this’ll be good for you. I don’t have much experience, and it’s not exactly the same as pretending to do it over the phone.”

“Elijah, you could kneel there and read the phonebook to me and I’d enjoy it. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.” Then he let out a loud gasp as Elijah, with a determined expression, took a firm hold of him and bent his head.
It wasn’t the first blowjob Sean had received, and it wasn’t the most expert. But what Elijah lacked in experience, he more than made up for in enthusiasm, and the sight of those full, perfectly shaped lips closing around him was one Sean would never forget. Elijah’s tiny hums of satisfaction as he lost himself in pleasuring his lover vibrated straight through Sean’s body from head to toe - and everywhere in between. Sean wasn’t sure which was more arousing - what Elijah was doing with his silken hot mouth and his roaming hands, or how beautifully abandoned he looked as he was doing it.

That he managed to stay on his feet for the duration was a miracle, all things considered. When the crucial moment neared, Sean did his incoherent best to warn Elijah in time to pull back if he wanted; he didn’t want, only dug his fingers bruisingly hard into Sean’s buttocks and held on. He didn’t release Sean until the final spasm faded; only then did he sit back on his heels, and look up at Sean, licking at his lips curiously, but with no evidence of distaste on his face that Sean could detect.

“Was it okay?” Elijah asked anxiously, when Sean didn’t say anything.

“Okay? If it was any more okay, Elijah, I’d be a pile of smoldering ashes on the carpet,” Sean said in a weak voice. His legs were wobbling like Jell-o and there was a buzzing sensation in his head, which at one point had threatened to explode. “God help me if you actually get better at this.”

Elijah beamed, but the beam turned to a look of alarm as Sean’s knees buckled slightly. “Maybe you better lie down, Sean,” he said, scrambling to his feet and putting an arm around Sean’s waist.

“Maybe I better,” agreed Sean. “Turnabout’s fair play, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to take yours horizontally.”

Elijah’s arm tightened convulsively. “Are - are you sure?” he asked, but his voice trembled with hope and anticipation.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure.” That single brief taste of Elijah’s salt-dampness that he’d had earlier lingered on his tongue. He wanted more, a lot more. He got it, and later a blissed-out Elijah reassured him with great fervor that, despite his even greater lack of experience, Sean had done just fine.

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May 9, 2006

A faint uneasiness woke Sean from a deep sleep. He reached out, but the spot at his side was empty, and he quickly sat up. Only unlike the last time this had happened, he didn’t have to worry long or look far to find his missing lover. Elijah was standing at the window, gazing out at the quiet city and the fading stars. The sky was beginning to show the faintest hint of the approaching dawn. Sean checked the alarm clock. It was just before 5:30.

He threw back the covers and got up, his body setting up a vigorous protest as he straightened. His muscles were stiff and sore; even his cock ached - no big surprise considering the unaccustomed gymnastics it had been put through during the previous day - but Sean reveled in each and every twinge of pain.

He walked up close behind Elijah and slid his arms around him, burying his face in the soft auburn hair with a murmur of content. Elijah leaned back against him with a sigh. “I hope I didn’t wake you,” he said.

“No, you didn’t wake me,” Sean replied, although it wasn’t strictly true.

They stood for some minutes without speaking, and watched as the sky slowly turned from black to gray and the shapes of the buildings and the trees began to take on form and substance. Then Elijah
said, “You’re going to miss this, aren’t you?”

“A little,” Sean admitted. “After all, New York was my home for a lot of years. But it’s not as if I can’t come back for a visit from time to time if I feel the urge.”

“There are no sunrises like this in the pines,” Elijah remarked sadly.

Sean tightened his hold. “You are every sunrise I ever hope to see, Elijah. I don’t need any other.”

Elijah turned in Sean’s arms and pressed his face into his shoulder. “Sean…”

“What’s wrong?” Sean asked, and the answer to his own question came to him in the coolness of the naked body he held against him, a body whose normal temperature was several degrees higher than the average person. His heart clenched with sudden fear, and the faint uneasiness that had awakened him was explained. “Elijah, tell me what’s happening to you. Please.”

“I’m not sure exactly,” Elijah admitted, “because I’ve never been away from the pines for this long since I became Woodjin, and my dad never was either.”

“Are you in pain?” Sean demanded. “Do you need to leave right now?” His mind frantically ran over the plans he’d made to get Elijah home, and how he could rearrange them at such short notice.

“No, no.” Elijah touched his face reassuringly. “I’m not in pain, Sean. It’s not like that. It’s more…”

He thought for a minute. “Did they ever make you read that book *Jane Eyre* when you were in school?” he asked unexpectedly.

Sean was confused by the seeming non sequitur, but he shook his head. “It wasn’t required reading in my school. I did see that old movie with Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine once. Jane Eyre was an orphan, right? Went to be a governess for some rich guy and they fell in love?”

“Mr. Rochester. Yeah, that’s the story.”

“I’m not really following you here, Elijah. Are you comparing yourself to Jane Eyre?” In which case he was the wealthy Mr. Rochester who, as Sean recalled, had a mad wife in the attic and ended up going blind. Not exactly a pleasant comparison.

“No, I’m not comparing myself to her, although I’ve always been able to sympathize with her to a certain extent. Her life was pretty hedged around, and she wanted to see the wide world but couldn’t.” Elijah smiled ruefully. “Too bad she couldn’t transform, huh? Her life would have been amazing then. But actually, it’s Mr. Rochester I’m thinking about. You see, he tells Jane Eyre that he’s going to send her away to be governess for a family in Ireland. And he says that it’s like there’s this cord tied inside him and the other end is tied inside her, and if she goes too far away from him, the cord will break and he’ll start to bleed.”

“Elijah.” Sean understood now what he meant, and it terrified him. “Are you telling me that you’re… that you’re dying?”

“No, Elijah said vehemently, “I’m not telling you that. Like I said, I’m not even in any pain. The cord isn’t broken, Sean. It’s more like a gentle tug right now, a sort of warning sign to tell me that I shouldn’t stay away too much longer.” He cupped his hands around Sean’s face and looked deep into his eyes. “Please, stop worrying. We don’t have to rush off this second. Relax.”

“I’m not sure I can. You’ve scared the shit out of me, Elijah.” Sean let out a shaky laugh. “But I’ll try not to wig out on you, if you’re sure it’s safe for you to stay a few more hours.”
“I’m sure,” Elijah said steadily, and leaned in to give him a reassuring kiss. “Sean, could we go for a walk? It’s so early, I’m sure no one will see us. Not even that gossip columnist lady could be lurking around this early.” He turned his head to look out at the waking city. “I’d like to take a walk with you once in your world. And there’s something I need to tell you before I leave.”

Sean swallowed hard against a constriction in his throat. “Another surprise?”

“Yeah, another surprise.”

“Let me guess: you’re pregnant,” Sean joked, a feeble attempt even for him.

But Elijah giggled and hugged him, and Sean thought that if Elijah could still giggle, then maybe he really was telling the truth when he said he wasn’t dying.

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They rode the freight elevator down in the company of a couple of empty laundry carts, and went out a side entrance. Possibly unnecessary precautions, but Sean was relieved that he didn’t encounter anyone he needed to worry about seeing them together.

They set out side by side on the sidewalk along Central Park West, and then struck into a path that meandered through the park. It was still relatively dark out, although behind the buildings to the east, the sky was becoming suffused with a rainbow of pastel colors. The usual contingent of dedicated rise-with-the-sun joggers, bicyclists, dog walkers and roller skaters was in evidence, and the birds were setting up a ruckus in the trees as they welcomed the arrival of a new day. Elijah listened intently with his head cocked to one side and identified the different songs for Sean with an effortless ease that he could only marvel at.

He surreptitiously studied Elijah for signs of weakness, but the young man was walking with his characteristic lightness, every step buoyant, and his shining eyes were everywhere, taking it all in. He looked at Sean and grinned. “This is so amazing,” he said happily, and Sean relaxed.

It was amazing to be out in public with Elijah, strolling along together like any other couple in love. Sean supposed he should be more fearful of discovery, but he wouldn’t allow himself to spoil the occasion with his paranoia. They were walking so near to each other that their hands brushed, and it was Sean who finally made the move to link them together. Elijah’s startled gaze flew to his face, and then he broke into a radiant smile that was more than sufficient payment for taking the risk.

Sean was beginning to wonder when or even if Elijah was going to bring up the subject of his mysterious surprise, when he said, “Sean, about what I need to tell you…”

He looked somber now, and Sean couldn’t tell if it was going to be a good surprise or a bad one, but he had a hunch it wasn’t good.

“I probably should have told you this straight off,” Elijah continued, “but I didn’t want it to interfere with our time together.”

A bad surprise then, Sean thought, his heart sinking. Why did their magical time in New York have to end on a down note?

“You see, while I was waiting for you in the suite, I had a visitor.”

“A visitor?” Sean was suddenly very apprehensive.

“Yeah. Chris.”
It was as if every single drop of blood instantly drained from Sean’s body. Black dots danced behind his eyelids. Bad surprise? It wasn’t a bad surprise – it was a sheer, unmitigated disaster of a surprise.

*Chris had met Elijah.*

“Oh dear god.” He halted and dropped Elijah’s hand, and for a moment he really thought he might be physically sick. “Elijah, how can you speak so calmly? Don’t you understand what this means?” His voice started rise with panic, as a host of horrible images swarmed like locusts into his brain.

Elijah put a hand on his arm. “Sean, please calm down. Just listen, okay? I need you to listen, and not panic.”

Listen? How could he listen when their entire fragile house of cards had just come crashing down? But Elijah had started talking, and he owed it to him to listen, and besides, he needed to know exactly what threats Chris had made against them.

So with dread in his heart Sean listened to Elijah’s account of his meeting with Chris. Listened until the dread was gradually replaced by astonishment, disbelief, and at last wonder.

When Elijah was finished talking, Sean could only stare at him in dumbfounded amazement. “Chris dropped the palimony suit?” he repeated in a daze. “She actually dropped the palimony suit?” Then he remembered the message from Philippa, and realized that she must have been calling to tell him the good news. “I don’t believe it. I just fucking don’t believe it.”

Elijah was smiling so wide his cheeks must be hurting. “Believe it, it’s true. She dropped the palimony suit, Sean.”

The early morning sun was rising over the city, and it seemed to Sean as if it rose not only on a new day but an entirely new world.

Suddenly, he let out a whoop so loud that a dozen pigeons scattered in a panic, and passers-by stopped to stare. Sean didn’t care. He picked Elijah up in his arms and twirled him around jubilantly, around and around and around, until the sky was tilting crazily overhead and they were both breathless and dizzy and laughing with giddy joy.

“You call me a magician,” Sean said, tears pricking in his eyes. “But you’re the one who is magic.”

And there, right there in the middle of Central Park, in the morning sunshine and without a thought for who might be watching, Sean kissed him.

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“I’ve never been in a helicopter before,” Elijah said as they got out of the taxi. His eyes were alight with interest as he took in the helipad right on the East River at 34th Street, and the red helicopter parked on it, ready and waiting to fly him back to New Jersey.

“Yeah, well, it’s minimally less terrifying to me than the thought of you taking the train again,” Sean replied. “And I know the pilot. He used to fly Jacques Cousteau into some pretty hair-raising locations. He’s the best in the business.”

“Jacques Cousteau? Really? Wow. He’s one of my idols.”

“Then you’ll have something to talk to him about during the flight.” Sean hoped that would prove a distraction to Elijah. They were both of them dreading the next few minutes, and it would help to know that Elijah had something to take his mind off the pain of yet another separation.
Elijah hefted his backpack, and together they walked down the steps to the helipad. Sean gave a signal to the pilot, and seconds later with a loud *whop whop whop whop*, the giant rotor atop the helicopter sprang into life and began to spin faster and faster. The noise was indescribable, and the wind raised by the blades as they spun made them stagger a little until they braced their feet.

“Call me as soon as you get into Lakewood.” Sean leaned in close so Elijah could hear him, although he’d already told him the same thing twice during the cab ride from Trump Tower. He knew he was being overprotective again, but he couldn’t help himself. “Martha and Ian should arrive well before you do, so you don’t need to worry that they won’t be there to meet you.”

“I’m not worried. Sean, thank you for doing this,” Elijah said. “It doesn’t seem right that you should always be arranging to fly my family places.”

“You know you don’t have to thank me. I need to be sure you make it home safe and sound, and whatever it takes to ensure that, I’ll do.”

“My magician.” Elijah leaned into him, and Sean’s arms automatically moved to encircle him; Elijah was trembling. “I wish I didn’t have to leave,” he said, burying his face in Sean’s chest.

Sean held him tightly, thinking of that invisible, fragile cord that bound Elijah to the pines. Having him here in New York had been a dream of unimagined bliss, but he wouldn’t rest now until he knew Elijah was back where he belonged and the danger of that cord tearing or snapping, and the awful consequences, were gone.

“I’d give just about anything if you could stay, but remember, I’ll be home a lot sooner now, thanks to you – speaking of magicians.” Sean did his best to be upbeat, but he was frankly dreading a return to a suite empty of Elijah’s vibrant presence. At least he had one consolation. “And thank you for bringing Fred to keep me company. I promise to take the very best care of him.”

Elijah choked out a laugh. “Just don’t forget what I said about those wild parties, okay?”

“I won’t.” They were clinging to each other, but Sean had strain to hear Elijah’s whispered words over the noise of the helicopter, almost the same words he’d said at their last parting. “My blessing on you, Sean, today and every day until you come home to me. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Sean whispered back, and reluctantly released him. They stared at each other, and Sean imprinted on his memory this one last image of Elijah, with the river and city skyline as a backdrop, to add to the others that would serve as mental proof that Elijah really had been here in New York with him. Elijah gave him one final, fierce hug and ran to the helicopter, ducking low beneath the whirling blades, and climbing inside.

Sean watched as Elijah fastened himself into his seat beside the pilot, and then the helicopter was lifting off. Elijah waved frantically to him from the window, and Sean lifted his hand in farewell. The helicopter rose higher and higher, and then took off like an arrow straight down the river before dipping sharply to the right, and speeding west toward New Jersey. Sean stood unmoving as the bright speck of red dwindled into the distance and finally disappeared. Only then did he turn and with heavy footsteps make his way back to the waiting taxi.

But even as he went, he was unclipping his cell phone from his belt and opening it to call Philippa. After he spoke to her, he thought, he would call Chris. It was time - past time - to reestablish a connection with her, and he owed her one of the most profound thank-yous of his entire life.
A WOMAN’S PREROGATIVE
May 11, 2006

An end has come to one of the more delicious scandals of the spring. Chris Harrell has called it quits, putting the kibosh on her palimony suit against former partner Sean Astin. Color me shocked, gentle readers. As recently as a week ago, Chris seemed dead set on taking Sean to the cleaners, and now the once battling duo have been seen lunching together at Jean-Georges and looking for all the world as if they are now the best of friends. Is a reconciliation in the works? Sean and Chris both insist there’s not, but when I caught up with Chris and asked her why she dropped the lawsuit, all she would say is that it’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind.

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June
June 15, 2006

“For goodness’ sake, Elijah, settle down. You’re jumpy as a cat on a hot stove,” Katie chided.

From her spot draped over the arm of the sofa, Maggie swished her tail and voiced her objection to the metaphor.

“I’m sorry, Katie, but Sean should be calling any time now. He said the meeting would likely be over by noon.” Elijah paced restlessly around the family room, unable to do as Katie asked. He was so nervous, so anxious for Sean. Even though, win or lose, Sean would no longer be CEO of Clicktwice after today, it mattered so deeply to him that the company not be lost to the hostile takeover, that he leave it intact and in Chris’s capable hands.

“Let the Woodjin be, Katie,” Bill said.

Hannah was sprawled on the rug with Jordan, helping him put together an animal puzzle that Elijah had bought for him. “I swear I’m almost as nervous as you are, Lij. I wish Sean would call already.”

“He’s likely to have a number of media interviews,” Martha reminded them. “It might not be that easy to get away.”

“He’ll manage it,” Elijah said positively. “Sean promised me he’d call the minute it’s over, and he will.” He was aware that his family and friends were exchanging amused glances, but Elijah didn’t mind. Dr. Ian liked to grumble that Elijah seemed to think Sean walked on water, which wasn’t quite true, but there wasn’t much his magician couldn’t do if he put his mind to it. And Elijah wasn’t about to apologize for thinking that, either.

When the phone rang a few minutes later, Elijah snatched it up and said breathlessly, “Sean?”

In the background he could hear a buzzing as if a great number of people were all talking excitedly at once. Over it a jubilant Sean crowed, “We did it! We won. Elijah, we won! The shareholders came through, like I knew they would. It’s over, can you believe it? It’s finally over.”

“Sean, oh my god Sean, that’s the best news ever,” Elijah exclaimed, wanting to dance around the room with joy. Selfishly it wasn’t of the company he was thinking at that moment, or of Chris or the other employees, but of himself and Sean. Sean could come home now. He was free at last.

Elijah made a thumbs-up sign and Hannah pumped her fist and yelled, “Yes!” and Jordan, sensing
the excitement even if he wasn’t quite sure what it was all about, got up and ran to throw his arms exuberantly around his uncle’s leg.

There was quite a commotion then, as everyone crowded around Elijah and Jordan, eager to take their turn with the phone so they could congratulate Sean. “Hang on, Sean, there are some people here who want to talk to you,” Elijah said, laughing. “I love you.”

He offered the phone to Hannah, who practically snatched it from him. “Sean? It’s Hannah. Congratulations! God, I’m so happy for you.”

Elijah stooped to pick up Jordan, and holding his nephew on his hip, listened as the phone was passed from piney to piney. Soon Sean would be here to accept their well wishes in person. It seemed hard to believe after the rollercoaster ride of the past months. “Monkey, Uncle Sean’s gonna be coming home soon,” he said jubilantly, holding his nephew up in the air and twirling him round.

As he lowered a giggling Jordan, his gaze fell on Maggie. The calico cat was watching him intently. You always knew it would end exactly this way, didn’t you Maggie? he asked her.

Her great amber eyes held a definite trace of amusement as she smugly replied, Of course.

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Businesswire
June 16, 2006

Clicktwice Shareholders Reject Takeover Bid

In a stunning development, the hostile takeover bid by Google, Inc. to acquire the Internet advertising company Clicktwice, Inc., was rejected yesterday. At the Clicktwice annual shareholders’ meeting held in New York, the proposed slate of directors, headed by former Clicktwice President and new CEO Christine Harrell, was elected by a near unanimous vote, despite an attempt by Google to install its own slate of candidates via proxy votes. Outgoing CEO and company founder Sean Astin said that it was a vote of confidence for a management that had always kept the best interests of the company first and foremost. “I had faith that our shareholders would do the right thing,” he said. During the meeting, an emotional Astin announced that he is leaving the company to pursue a medical degree. “I’ll miss Clicktwice and the terrific and talented people who work here, but I know that the company will be in the very best of hands with Chris Harrell, and I intend to work with her to ensure a smooth transition.”

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August

August 21, 2006

Sean wasn’t anxious to get a speeding ticket, but he simply couldn’t stop himself from pressing down harder on the accelerator pedal. He was nearly there. Just a few more miles to go. It almost seemed as if the Beemer was floating above the ground, gliding along on a cloud made of pure undiluted joy, past rows of pitch pine trees and scrub oaks under a sky of intense cloudless late summer blue.

He and Elijah had been over-optimistic about how long it would take for him to wrap up his life in the city, but that had actually turned out to be somewhat of a blessing in disguise. In the intervening weeks, several juicy new scandals had come along to occupy Cindy Adams and the other gossip columnists. Sean, who had stopped attending society functions, had fallen completely off their radar screens, exactly as he’d hoped.
He’d stayed on at Clicktwice for some weeks in an advisory capacity, to help ease the transition to the new CEO, but the company was now running like a well-oiled machine under Chris’s command. He had absolutely no fears for its future.

Even with the palimony suit no longer an issue, there had still been lawyers to deal with as he and Chris divided up their assets - amicably. She got the apartment on Central Park West, while he got the shore house on Long Beach Island. The house was already on the market, as Sean had no intention of keeping it, although he thought he might buy a smaller place if Elijah agreed - a cottage near the lighthouse like he’d always wanted. Elijah should be able to get away for a day trip every now and again, and it would be there for Hannah and Lawrence to use if they liked. Jordan ought to grow up loving the island, Sean thought, just like his two uncles did.

Sean wasn’t bringing much with him, and that was fine by him. He’d donated a lot of his clothes to a charity, not needing a closet filled with expensive suits any longer. He had his books, of course, and his computers and other electronic equipment, but office furniture for the study Elijah had set up for him was going to be delivered in a few days. Most of the space on the back seat was taken up with personal possessions, like the painting of the white stag. Elijah had reserved a spot for that on the bedroom wall - the new bedroom, the one that had been his parents’ and now would be theirs.

They were discussing putting an addition on the house. It was going to be cramped when they had more than a visitor or two, and Jordan would need his own bedroom soon. He would be spending more and more time with them as he grew older and his uncle began giving him the serious training he would need to become the Woodjin some day.

Then there was Sean’s family. Mack was already making noises about coming for a visit soon. He was dying to meet Elijah, and he wanted to bring Anna with him when he came. Anna was having a difficult time accepting the radical changes in her oldest son’s life. Bad enough Sean was giving up his privileged lifestyle in New York to become a doctor, but the news that he was moving to the New Jersey Pine Barrens to live with his gay partner had left her stunned and far from pleased. Sean was confident that once she met Elijah her attitude would change, however. Hell, if Elijah could work his magic on Chris, then Anna would be a piece of cake. Sean smiled to himself as he imagined that meeting, and watching Anna fall under Elijah’s spell.

With those and other, even happier, imaginings to occupy his mind, in no time at all it seemed, a familiar mailbox came into view. Sean choked up at the sight of it, and thought ruefully that he was never going to make it through the next half-hour without turning into a blubbering wreck.

“We’re here, Fred,” he announced, slowing to turn into the driveway. Fred was traveling in his towel-lined shoebox on the passenger seat. He stretched out his long neck until his head was above the rim, took a look, and quickly retreated again. Sean suspected, although he wasn’t positive, that the turtle was sulking a little over having to leave his fancy digs in Trump Tower.

“Trust me, Fred,” Sean remarked, “you’re a lot better off here in the…” But he never finished the sentence. He slammed on the brakes, and stared in awe. He definitely hadn’t been expecting this.

Right smack in the center of the driveway stood a magnificent white stag. His coat gleamed in the sun with the luster of a pearl, his antlered head was held proudly high, and his blue eyes, brilliant as stars, were fixed on Sean where he sat behind the wheel with hot tears raining down his cheeks. The stag tossed his head, moved to the side, and began to trot up the drive. Taking the hint, Sean let off the brake and followed. He never removed his enraptured gaze from the stag, who was pacing the car now, cantering effortlessly alongside it. Sean couldn’t stop the flow of tears, even while he was filled with a joy so boundless that it could have encompassed the entire universe - with room to spare.
Halfway up the drive, the stag suddenly lowered his head and sped up. He peeled off into the woods, vaulting agilely over a fallen tree, and rapidly disappeared from view - taking Sean’s heart with him. But Sean was smiling as he continued slowly up the drive, for he knew where the stag had gone, and why.

Sean’s emotions when he rounded the final curve in the driveway and the house came into view at last, were beyond any capacity he had to describe them. The small blue Toyota pickup truck was parked out front, and he pulled up beside it and shut off the engine. He sat for a moment, taking it all in: the cabin, the paddock behind it where he could see the tall equine forms of Sonny and Cher, the barn, and the woods that framed it all in living beauty. The last time he’d been here it had been winter. He’d never imagined, then, that spring and most of the summer would pass before he could return again.

But he was here at last.

Sean lifted Fred out of the shoebox and got out of the car. He paused to take a deep, rejuvenating breath of the pine-scented air before walking swiftly up the flower-lined stone path and climbing the steps to the front door, which was standing slightly ajar, as if inviting him to come in. It was, Sean thought with a catch of his heart, very much like being inside a fairy tale.

He pushed the door open, and with a child-like sense of wonder, stepped across the threshold. He bent to set Fred down, and even as he did, a loud ululating *meow* and an excited spate of indecipherable chatter caught his attention. It was Maggie and Rocky, who were tearing down the hall at full speed to greet him and Fred.

“Hey,” Sean said in a husky voice, kneeling down and gathering them in. He was instantly a mess, just as he’d predicted, sobbing and laughing as he hugged them, and said, “Oh god, I’ve missed you both so much.”

Then he heard the sound of running footsteps and quickly stood. Elijah, with his tee shirt on inside out and his jeans half-buttoned, was flying toward him. His face was flushed, his hair was wild, and his eyes were blazing, bluer than the summer sky outside. He didn’t even hesitate, but with a sob flung himself into Sean’s arms.

The scents of pinesap, woodsmoke and dried grasses swirled around Sean as he held Elijah close, and he heard the two words that like some magic spell brought his weary exile to an end.

“Welcome home,” the Woodjin said.
“I hate being vertically challenged,” Elijah complained, balancing on his tiptoes in a mostly vain attempt to see over the heads of the people in front of him.

“Tell me about it,” sighed Hannah, standing at his elbow. “Of course, it doesn’t help that Sean is vertically challenged, too.”

“I’m afraid I’m the one to blame for that,” Anna Astin said. She was, though stouter, even shorter than Hannah. “Sean didn’t get his height from his father.”

Mack put a consoling arm around his mother. “But I did, Mom. I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“Ha,” said Jordan smugly, from his perch atop his father’s broad shoulders. “I’m taller than any of you. I bet I see Uncle Sean first.”

Elijah laughed. “Maybe I should ask Lawrence to put you down and pick me up instead.”

“No way,” Jordan said. “Don’t you do it, Daddy.” He clung tighter to his father. Then he let out a yelp. “There he is! Uncle Sean! Uncle Sean!” He started waving his arms like a semaphore.

“Where? Where?” Elijah demanded, jumping up and down and craning his neck.

“Over there, Elijah,” Lawrence said, pointing to their right.

“Where… oh, oh my god, I see him.” Hannah’s arm came around his waist as Elijah put the back of his hand to his mouth and tried without success to stop his eyes from filling with tears.

A river of students in black caps and gowns was streaming past, marching in ragged formation to the recorded processional music: the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine graduating class of 2011. Out of that sea of soon-to-be-doctors, one face captured Elijah’s attention. Sean. He was smiling broadly under his black cap with the silk tassel hanging down the right side, and his eyes were crinkling in that devastating way that set Elijah’s heart to pounding. He wasn’t close enough for even Elijah’s keen sight to pick out the individual laugh lines, but Elijah didn’t have to - he knew all six on the left and seven on the right intimately.

With Elijah on the very tips of his toes, their eyes connected across the crowd, and Sean waved exuberantly then gave him an enthusiastic two thumbs up, the overlong black sleeves of his rented gown with their three bars of black velvet, falling back to show the white dress shirt he wore underneath. His happiness was almost palpable, and why not? Today Sean’s rekindled dream was coming true, years later than he had once thought it might, but the occasion was all the more blessed and rewarding for that.

In the pocket of his robe, Sean was carrying a small photo of John Astin. Elijah knew that Sean’s father, who had impressed on him the importance of getting the education he himself had never had the opportunity to, was with him in spirit this day.

“Mackenzie Astin! What on earth-” Anna suddenly exclaimed, and Elijah looked around to see a grinning Mack lifting his mother in her elegant cream-colored pants suit and paisley silk scarf bodily in the air so she could see Sean. Jordan seemed to think this was the funniest thing ever, and burst into hysterical giggles. But Elijah, although he felt like giggling himself, had already returned his
gaze to Sean, unwilling to miss a single glimpse of him on this, the second most important day of his life - the first most important, of course (as Sean constantly reminded Elijah) being the day they met.

Sean mouthed ‘Hi mom’ and waved at his mother, and then made a face at Jordan, who giggled even harder. There was absolutely no doubt about it, Elijah thought ruefully, Jordan had definitely inherited the Wood family giggle.

To his left, Elijah could hear the rapid fire click of the shutter of Martha’s camera as she took photo after photo, until Sean moved past, down toward the front of the concert hall, and filed into the front row of seats facing the stage.

Hannah sighed in disappointment. “I missed him, darn it. But I didn’t want to disturb Kate with too much jumping around.” The chubby cheeked, four month-old Katherine Deborah Makoare was cradled in a Snuggly against her mother’s chest, and was sound asleep with a pacifier between her pursed lips.

“Don’t worry, Hannah,” Martha said, “I got a lot of good close ups, including some that Sean will probably wish I hadn’t,” she added drolly.

“Sean looks very distinguished,” Anna said in an emotional voice. She dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex she pulled from the cuff of her sleeve. “John would have been so proud.”

Elijah and Mack exchanged a glance. Both were remembering her initial vocal and stubborn resistance to Sean’s decision to quit his job as CEO of Clicktwice to return to school. She’d come an awful long way in five years, and while Sean insisted it was entirely due to Elijah’s influence, it could only be Sean himself who was responsible for her about face. For what mother could possibly fail to be proud of a son like Sean, or to accept him for what he was - a man of decency, integrity, compassion and honor? And maybe, just maybe, he had a little to do with it, too, Elijah thought, remembering Anna’s first visit to the pines and how, as she had hugged him and said goodbye, she confessed that she hadn’t Sean so happy since he was a young child.

The ragged procession continued, until all 156 students from Abbott to Zink were seated and the music ended. Only then did Elijah and the others pick up their commencement programs and sit down in the red plush seats. Kate was still blessedly sound asleep, and Jordan, ensconced in Lawrence’s lap now, was gravely studying the program, his lips moving as he tried to sound out the unfamiliar words. Jordan bid fair to be as voracious a reader as his adopted uncle, who showered him with books.

The dean of the medical school, the professors and various other university dignitaries and alumni, had already filed up the steps to the stage and were sitting in several rows of chairs facing the audience. Among them was the vigorous, upright form of Ian Holm, Class of ‘72. The doctor had his cap set at a defiantly rakish angle on his still thick full white hair, and was wearing his black robe open over a tweed sport jacket and khaki slacks. He looked surprisingly mellow, Elijah decided, considering how he’d been grumbling before the ceremony about the exorbitant rental fee for his hood, cap and gown.

When everyone was settled and quiet reigned, save for a random cough or two, the Dean, Dr. Arthur Rubinstein, rose and went to the podium to welcome everyone and give the opening remarks. Dr. Rubenstein bestowed on the graduating class the benefit of his wisdom, reminding them, among other things, of the ethical and moral values to which they must adhere over the course of their medical careers. Sean no doubt was listening intently and taking to heart each and every word – possibly even taking notes, Elijah thought with tender humor. After five years of assisting Sean with his studies, Elijah was convinced that his partner was the world’s all-time champion note taker – and not just in the area of gay sex.
The dean finished speaking to a warm round of applause, and a tall, very distinguished-looking Indian man stepped to the podium to give the graduation address. He was an eminent cancer specialist, Sean had told him, and a graduate of the medical school. But try though he might, Elijah’s mind drifted during the doctor’s no doubt inspiring and memorable speech.

He couldn’t help, so near to the fulfillment of Sean’s cherished dream, but think of all that had happened since that magical night they met. And even more, he couldn’t help but recall what his life had been like before the call came that led him to a sandy clearing in the woods and a man who could see Elijah for what he truly was without fear of his otherness. Then, he had resigned himself to a life without a mate, a life without love, and now… well, his life was full to overflowing with love and joy. The difficult times, when Sean had to wait at home while Elijah was called, or when Sean left the pines for places Elijah couldn’t follow, only made them appreciate the priceless gift they’d been given all the more.

Elijah jumped when on either side of him Hannah and Martha began clapping enthusiastically. A little guiltily, Elijah joined in.

“Wasn’t he marvelous?” Martha enthused. “Such an inspirational speech.”

“Um, yeah, it really was,” he replied, squirming a little for the tiny falsehood and fidgeting with his silver ring - a dead giveaway, Sean would have said, and added with a teasing grin that Elijah was, hands down, the worst liar in history. But he’d held Elijah and tried to ease his tearing grief after being forced to use his magic to protect himself, by hiding someone’s memory of meeting him. That, too, was a gift Elijah had never allowed himself to believe he would be granted - no longer to suffer alone and in silence.

“This is it,” Hannah said. Her hand reached out and gripped Elijah’s. The eminent cancer specialist had returned to his seat, and the first row of students, including Sean, was rising and moving toward the side of the stage. “I’m so glad Sean’s last name starts with ‘A’ and not ‘W,’” she added. “I’m not sure if I could survive the wait.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Elijah agreed. Three people, two women and a man, were ahead of Sean in line, and as Jennifer Elizabeth Abbott was called on stage to be hooded and receive her diploma, the audience and the waiting students erupted into applause. Elijah’s gaze was, of course, fastened on Sean, who was whooping and clapping enthusiastically and exchanging high fives with his classmates on line.

Next came Kyran Nihal Adani, and then Rachel Suzanne Andrews. Sean began to mount the steps.

“Sean Patrick Astin, Student Government President,” intoned Dean Rubinstein, and amidst tumultuous applause, Sean strode across the stage to where Dr. Ian was waiting. In his hands Ian Holm held a hood identical to the one he wore himself: lined in red with blue chevrons, and bordered in green velvet, the symbol of a graduate of the medical school. As an alumnus, he had requested and been given the honor of hooding Sean.

Even as Elijah cheered and clapped and stamped his feet the tears were streaming down his cheeks. He could hear Martha’s camera snapping away, and she said, “I don’t believe it - Ian’s crying, Elijah. I never thought I’d see the day. He’s always insisted he wanted Sean to go to Penn because it was the best school in the area, but I think it was because he was so looking forward to this moment. Damn,” she added with a watery sounding laugh, “I’m fogging up the viewfinder.” The shutter’s click paused and then started up again.

Sean had turned and crouched down a little so that Dr. Ian could place the hood around his neck. The doctor carefully draped it over his head and arranged it down his back. When he was finished,
his hands gripped Sean’s shoulders hard for a few seconds, and then the two men embraced. Elijah furiously blinked back the tears. Sean had truly become like the son Dr. Ian had never had, and there was no gauging the depths of what this moment meant to the crusty old piney with the heart of gold.

Sean stepped back, wiped his cheeks on his sleeve, and continued on to the podium to receive his diploma and a congratulatory handshake from the smiling Dean Rubinstein.

After he accepted the parchment in its maroon and gold holder, Sean didn’t immediately move, but closed his eyes, and briefly lifted his face heavenward. Elijah didn’t need any special powers to know that Sean was sending a private message to his dad.

Then, holding his diploma high in the air, Sean pumped his arms, let out a jubilant ‘Yes!’ and fairly danced across the stage. It wasn’t Elijah’s imagination that the applause was louder and more deafening than ever. Sean liked to joke that he was the grand old man of his class, the geezer, and that’s why they’d elected him student government president. But the truth was that he had been a constant source of inspiration to the younger students, many of whom had been flabbergasted to discover that their hard-working classmate had turned his back on a job as CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation to attend medical school.

Along the way, in addition to moral support and guidance, Sean had offered unobtrusive financial succor to his classmates in need. Elijah had lost count of the number of times Sean had quietly paid for textbooks or lab supplies, neither expecting nor asking for thanks or repayment. “I know what it’s like to start out in life with a huge financial burden,” he’d said to Elijah on several occasions. “Anything I can do to help alleviate that burden, I will.”

As he returned to his seat, Sean was hugged, back slapped and high-fived by everyone who could reach him, and Elijah was hoarse and his palms were pink and tingling by the time Sean was sitting down again.

There was quite a long wait after that, as the rest of the class mounted the stage one by one to be hooded and awarded their diplomas. But for every student, not just for Sean, this was a monumental accomplishment, and each deserved the same level of respect and recognition. When they reached the ‘T’s Kate finally woke up and started whimpering in a ‘I need my diaper changed and something to eat’ fashion, and as Jordan was getting antsy, too, the Makoares quietly decamped and said they’d wait outside until the ceremony was over.

When the final student in the final row had received the final diploma and returned to his seat, Dean Rubenstein raised his hands and the class stood for the final part of the ceremony. It was probably just his imagination, but as the 156 students recited the words of the Hippocratic Oath after their dean, Elijah was certain that he could distinguish among them Sean’s voice: strong, intense and determined.

I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:

I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.

I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.

I will not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of
another are needed for a patient's recovery.

I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God.

I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.

I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.

I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.

If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.

The last word faded into the rafters of the theater; there was a respectful silence. And then Dean Rubinstein said, “Congratulations, Doctors!” and 156 black caps went flying wildly into the air, and mayhem ensued.

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In the melee after the recessional, as students and families tried to connect, Elijah was too keyed up with excitement to feel oppressed by the bodies crowding around him. He jittered from foot to foot, not wanting to stand still, but knowing it would be easier for Sean to find them if he did - the burly Lawrence, at six foot four inches tall, was hard to miss, even in a crowd this huge.

“Elijah!” Elijah whirled around, his heart leaping, and there was Sean, shouldering his way past a small group of faculty members.

The rest of the family hung back, understanding that this moment between Elijah and Sean was sacrosanct. Not that Elijah noticed, of course. The world had narrowed to a pair of gold-flecked green eyes and a crooked, lethal, oh-so-sexy smile.

“Sean!” Like bog iron to a magnet, Elijah hurtled toward Sean and threw himself into his arms. “You did it,” he breathed, hugging him so hard it had to hurt. “Oh Sean, you did it. Dr. Astin. I’m so proud of you. So proud.”

“No, I didn’t do it,” Sean replied in a steady voice. “We did.”

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The old house had never known a night like this. Music and light and laughter poured from the windows. The floorboards shook under the pounding of feet dancing a jig to a lively tune from Bill’s fiddle. The tables were groaning under the weight of a piney feast, and faces were flushed not just from exertion, but the effects of the applejack in the brown stoneware jug being passed surreptitiously around the family room.

The party had been going for several hours now, and showed no signs of flagging, even though the crescent moon rode high in the sky. No one noticed when the guest of honor and his partner slipped
away and disappeared. No one but Maggie, that is, but she could be relied on not to tell tales.

“I’ve seen some bizarre sights in my time,” Sean remarked as he and Elijah set out hand in hand across the yard toward the woods. “But Chris dancing a jig with Pete has to rank right up there, just ahead of my mother giving fashion advice to Crystal.”

Elijah giggled. “Chris really let her hair down, didn’t she? Although, I suspect Bill’s applejack might have something to do with it. Someone probably should have warned her.”

“If I ever needed proof that that stuff is lethal, it’s the effect on Chris. She used to be able to drink me under the table. Well, I have a feeling she and quite a few others are going to be nursing major hangovers tomorrow,” Sean laughed. “And by the way, did I overhear her trying to buy the rug from you again?”

“Yes, but I told her absolutely no way. If she asked me for it, I’d probably give it to her, but I won’t sell it to her.”

“Very wise. But you can be sure I won’t inform her of the fact. The first time we ever made love was on that rug. I’m sentimentally attached to it.”

“So am I.” Elijah leaned in and bumped shoulders, and then slipped his left hand into the back pocket of Sean’s jeans. “What a day,” he sighed, resting his cheek against Sean’s arm. “I’ll never forget it.”

“Neither will I.” Sean slid his arm around Elijah’s waist. “The only bad part was not seeing enough of you.”

They walked on in silence, entering the pines by a well-trodden sandy path where once they had watched a fox reunited with his injured mate. The woods were quiet, muffling the remaining sounds of the music from the house. The air was fragrant, crisp and clean and pine-scented. It was like breathing wine, Sean thought, and he could never get enough of it, or of the man at his side.

“Everything okay?” Sean asked a little while later.

Elijah closed his eyes briefly and concentrated, a faint line appearing between his brows. Then he nodded decisively. “Not even a whisper of uneasiness.”

“Good.” They exchanged a look and a spark of excitement arced between them. Not yet, Sean thought. It wasn’t the right time or place quite yet.

“I still can’t believe it,” Elijah said. “Sean Patrick Astin, MD. Oh Sean, I’m so proud of you.”

“Oh-oh, here we go with the waterworks,” Sean joked as those amazing blue eyes filled with tears, even though it was all he could do not to join the sobfest. “What did I tell you I was going to do to you if you started crying on me again?”

“You wouldn’t!” Elijah quickly stepped back.

“Oh, yes I would. I got an A in a special elective course on tickling anatomy.”

“No, no!” Elijah shrieked, giggling and batting at Sean’s hands as they reached for his ribs. But it was too late, and the only answer was to retaliate.

Their giddy laughter rang through the woods as they playfully tussled. A saw-whet owl perched in a nearby bull pine hooted loudly, but didn’t take flight. It was the Woodjin and his mate, after all, and
there was nothing to be alarmed about in that.

There was no victor in the tickling battle, or perhaps, Sean decided, they had both won; breathless and with their sides aching, they fell together and not surprisingly their mouths met in a fervent kiss.

“Come on,” Elijah said, when they separated at last. His eyes looked huge and almost black. He took Sean’s hand and pulled him along, walking at a faster clip now. Sean went with him willingly. He’d follow wherever Elijah led.

Eventually they emerged into a sandy clearing littered with pine needles, and there they stopped. It looked like any of dozens of other such clearings in the pines. To everyone, that is, except Sean and Elijah, for it was here, just over five years’ earlier, that they had first met.

Elijah dropped Sean’s hand, and holding his eyes, but without speaking a word, began to undress. Sean made no move to help him, only watched as that slender, whippet-lean torso was bared to the nighttime sky in all its beauty. The past five years had honed Elijah’s body, removing any last lingering vestiges of boyhood. To Sean’s sorrow, those years had also added new scars to the ones that had existed before.

But he wouldn’t think of that tonight. Tonight was for joy, and for the two of them alone.

Still without a word Elijah moved away several paces. His eyes never left Sean’s, and into them crept a hint of wildness, and the pines scent around him sharpened and grew stronger. His eyelids slowly closed and his head fell back and the faint line between his brows appeared again, deeper now, as he focused all his energy…

…and the air moved, melting and shifting above and around Elijah’s body, distorting Sean’s view, as if he was looking at him in a funhouse mirror. The air crackled and hummed, not with sound, but with energy. A light sprang up, dazzlingly bright, as if a million fireflies had suddenly congregated in the clearing. Sean shielded his eyes with his hand, but the light continued to grow in intensity, burning brighter and brighter until he was forced to close his eyelids. He’d witnessed this transformation any number of times now, but always, always he missed the exact moment when man turned to stag or back again.

But perhaps it was meant to be that way, he thought as he waited for the brilliant glow to dim and the hum of energy to fade, so that when he opened his eyes, as he did now, he would experience the same stunning catch of his heart at the wonder and miracle of what he saw as he had the first time.

The white stag stood waiting, his great dark eyes glimmering in the starlight. For a long moment they stared at each other, as they had long ago, the bond between them forged and forged anew. Then Sean nodded, and the stag bent his legs and carefully lowered himself to the sand. Almost trembling with anticipation, Sean walked up and slid his right leg across the stag’s broad back and settled into place. The comforting warmth of the stag’s velvet fur seeped through the legs of his jeans and Sean rested his hands palm down on either side of his proud neck. He no longer needed to hold on for dear life. He knew the stag would never let him fall.

The stag turned his antlered head to look at him, a question in his eyes. “I’m ready,” Sean said. The stag gathered his hindquarters beneath him and surged to his feet in one smooth, powerful motion. He set out across the clearing and into the woods at a rapid walk that gradually became a trot, and then with a great joyous bound, a gallop. Sean’s heart picked up the pace of the stag’s flying footfalls, while the wind streamed in his face and exhilaration filled his soul and he wished that they might never stop…

The constellations wheeled overhead and the moon sank slowly behind the trees. But still the white
stag ran, tireless and swift, on and on through the starlit night.

~end~

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