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# Sanctuary Moon

## Second Howl

A Paranormal Anthology



Stray

Cassandra Gold



Stray [Sanctuary Moon: First Howl]  
*by Cassandra Gold*

**Red Rose Publishing**

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## **A Sanctuary for Wolfdogs and Captive-Bred Wolves**

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Their mission in life is to provide sanctuary for abused and refused wolfdogs and captive-bred wolves and to provide education about these misunderstood animals.

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## Chapter One

J stumbled against the brick wall of the alley, struggling to stay on his feet, a task made more difficult by the nearly swollen shut state of his left eye. "Fuck. Can't see a damned thing."

This wasn't the first time Cash had hit him. If he went back, it probably wouldn't be the last either. But who was he kidding with the 'if'? It didn't really matter whether he wanted to go back or not—he had no other choice.

Why couldn't he do anything right? If J would have brought Cash the money, Cash wouldn't have had to hit him. He sighed. *I'm such a loser.*

The urge to cry welled up, but J pushed his emotions down like he always did and kept moving. He needed to find a place to stay. Spending the night on the streets would be a good way to end up dead. Or worse. He shivered at the thought of what could happen to him out here. He'd been through it once, when he'd first come to the city, and didn't want to again.

Maybe he could find a shelter that's still open. There had to be one somewhere. He couldn't go back to Cash tonight.

A couple of days ago, Cash had told J to get him two hundred dollars by tonight. "Steal something, turn tricks, I don't care. Just get me the money," he'd said. When J asked if Cash could wait one more day so he could get his paycheck, he'd received a shove that had nearly knocked him down.

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Even though J had been secretly horrified by the idea of stealing, or worse, turning tricks, he'd really tried to get the money. After all, Cash had taken him in when he could have let J stay out on the streets. Sure, he expected J to suck him off whenever he wanted, and give him a huge chunk of his pitiful paycheck, but other than that, he hadn't asked for much in return. Sometimes he could even be nice, like the time he bought J the leather jacket he currently wore. Fear and loyalty had led him to steal a watch and blow a few guys in alleys, netting him a grand total of one hundred and twenty dollars. When he hadn't been able to get the whole two hundred, Cash had hit him and told him to get out.

Cash hadn't meant it, though. He'd let J come back. J refused to consider the alternative. The idea of not having anywhere to go scared him more than Cash's fists. *I'll do better this time. I'll make him happy and he won't have to hit me.*

Feeling a little better, he began to walk more purposefully. He thought he remembered there being a shelter around here. The place would probably be full for the night, but maybe he'd get lucky. If not, he'd find a doorway in an alley to hole up in for the night. Being vigilant had become second nature and he'd run like hell at the first sign of trouble. Six months on the streets after his dad first kicked him out had taught him several painful lessons. Speed and watchfulness were two of the big ones.

A bottle tripped him up as he rounded the corner. Before he could fully catch his balance, something big and hard

smashed into him. J staggered back into the brick wall, smacking the back of his head.

Stars from the blow clouded his already impaired vision for a moment. When his eyesight cleared, he saw what—or rather who—had run into him. A shaggy, confused-looking man in stained green scrubs stood staring at him. He rubbed the back of his head, suddenly very irritated. "Ow! Watch where you're going."

The man shook his overlong dark hair out of his face, revealing eerie eyes, which almost seemed to glow yellow in the poorly lit alley. Instead of replying, he bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

*What's wrong with this guy?* Nervous, J edged backward. The need to flee overwhelmed him. Before he could put his thoughts into action, he heard the sound of running feet and sirens in the distance. The weird guy's eyes widened, panicked. He grabbed J's arm, yanking him closer.

J yelped. "What the hell, man?"

Any further protest died as the dim light glinted off the bloody scalpel the man clutched in his right hand. *Oh, shit! The stains on his scrubs are blood! I'm going to die.*

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## Chapter Two

*They're coming.*

The words repeated over and over in Hunter's head as he ran through the winding alleys like a rat in a maze. Sounds and scents were everywhere, confusing and disorienting him. Loud sirens heralded the approach of multiple emergency vehicles, and smoke hung heavy in the air. He had no idea which way to go to reach safety, or even if there was any safety to be had here.

*I won't be taken again. I'll die first.*

Hearing footsteps behind him, Hunter doubled back and darted down yet another alley. The brick walls seemed to close in on him, trapping him. Frantic to escape, he rounded a corner and ran headlong into an unexpected obstacle.

"Ow! Watch where you're going."

The sound of a voice told Hunter what, or rather who, he'd run into. He stared at the thin, angry-looking young human he'd shoved into the wall. *Human. Enemy.* He bared his teeth.

The young human's face paled, but the boy didn't run. Hunter studied him. He didn't look like one of *them*. The sudden sound of footsteps jerked Hunter from his thoughts.

*They're coming.*

Remembering the scalpel in his hand, he grabbed the young human and yanked him close. The human started to protest, but stopped talking when he caught sight of Hunter's weapon.

The footsteps drew closer. His heart hammered in his chest.

*They're coming.*

His pursuers were nearly as desperate as he was, which made them more dangerous. They would never let him escape, especially now that he'd destroyed their research and killed some of their comrades. The only way they could recreate their results was to capture him again and that he could never allow.

This human might know of a place he could hide. He forced himself to speak, the words coming out raspy and broken. "Must hide."

The young man's eyebrows drew together. For a moment, it seemed he might refuse to help, until Hunter raised the scalpel slightly. Eyes wide with fear, the boy jerked his head. "This way."

Hunter released the human's arm. When the young man began making his way down the alley, he followed closely. They moved silently out of the alley, up the street a short way, and along a winding, circuitous path known only to his guide. The sirens grew more distant, and the tang of smoke began to fade from the air the further they moved from his prison. Minutes flowed by and, still disoriented, he lost track of how far they'd gone.

Next, the human led him through a cut section of chain link fencing into a vacant lot. After that, they went through a narrow opening between two buildings. An emergency ladder hung on the side of one of them, and they climbed slowly up one side and down the other, the human seeming to have

some trouble but managing. Finally, they ended up in front of a small, well-lit doorway.

Looking tired, the young man went over to the door and knocked before Hunter could stop him. The door swung open almost instantly, revealing a small, wrinkled older man dressed in black. A white collar circled his neck. *A priest.* Heart racing, fearing the boy would turn him in, Hunter hid the scalpel behind his leg.

The old man looked them over. "Do you boys need a place to stay?"

The human nodded. "Yeah, Father. If you've got room."

"We've filled the beds, but you can sleep on the floor."

The young man didn't smile, but he looked grateful.

"Thank you. We really appreciate this."

A few minutes later, the priest provided Hunter and the young man with blankets and pillows, as well as some clothing for Hunter—no questions asked. He led them to a corner where they wouldn't be stepped on and promised them a hot breakfast in the morning before departing. Hunter stared after him, bewildered.

"Okay, time to go to sleep." The human made a nest of blankets on the floor and lay down. When Hunter made no move to follow, he continued. "What, you're not tired? Or are you busy trying to decide if you want to stab me first? If you're going to, hurry up. All this waiting is getting on my nerves." He gave Hunter an exasperated look made almost comical by his swollen black eye.

Startled by the young man's words, he only stared. He could hear the human's heart beating quickly, but the terror

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the man had felt earlier was gone. Confusion overwhelmed him. The horror of his escape, the kindness of the priest, this boy's apparent decision not to turn him in ... it was all too much.

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## Chapter Three

J watched the man in the scrubs warily. Rather than reacting with anger at J's flip remarks, he stood there clutching the clothing and blankets he'd been given, his face a mask of uncertainty. The threatening manner from earlier was gone. Now the guy just looked scared and confused.

*He didn't hurt me or the priest. He could have killed either of us earlier, but he didn't.* In J's experience, if people could hurt you they usually did. There had to be a reason this guy hadn't hurt him. Maybe because J had helped him? The man had said he needed to get away. The cops must be after him for some reason.

Feeling rather confused himself, J tried his usual tactic of smoothing things over. Sometimes that worked on Cash, when he wasn't too pissed off. Or drunk. "Come on, you've got to be tired. Let's sleep, huh? Things'll look better in the morning."

The guy's pale brown eyes met J's, his face so worried that J actually felt sorry for him. The man wasn't like Cash at all. If Cash got scared, he'd hurt someone. Giving the weird guy a reassuring smile, he patted the floor beside him.

With a heavy sigh, the man spread his blankets out on the floor. Rather than lay down, though, he stripped off his bloody scrub shirt. J gaped at the lightly furred, well-muscled chest the action revealed. He'd always thought Cash was in pretty good shape, but this guy was something else.



He nearly whimpered in disappointment when the guy pulled on the long-sleeved t-shirt the priest had given him. Before he could be too disappointed, the guy pushed the scrub pants down over his hips. He'd gone commando. J couldn't contain a tiny gasp at the gorgeous, uncut cock on display. Luckily, he stifled the sound before the other man noticed, and soon the man, fully dressed, was lying next to J on the floor.

He looked at J through his unruly bangs. For a long time, they were both silent. J was considering pretending to go to sleep when the man spoke, his voice still sounding rough and raspy. "Why didn't you turn me in?"

"I don't know. I guess I thought you wouldn't hurt me. You're not going to, are you?"

Those strange pale eyes, now calm, met his. "No. You helped me."

J smiled. Something about this weird guy made him *want* to help, made him want to understand. "What's your name?"

J didn't expect the man to answer, but he did. "Hunter."

"I'm J."

Those odd eyes never looked away from him. "Thank you. J." One corner of Hunter's mouth tilted up into a ghost of a smile, and J's heart lurched in his chest.

"You're welcome." Closing his eyes, J held the memory of that smile as he drifted off to sleep.

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## Chapter Four

*The bite of cold stainless steel on naked flesh brought him to awareness. He was chained to the table. They must have moved him while he slept again. He knew what would happen next. Another procedure.*

*The sound of footsteps approaching confirmed his theory. Without opening his eyes, he knew who stood there. It was the nurse. How he hated her—her cold hands, her snide, taunting remarks, her sneer. He wanted to kill her and she knew it. If they hadn't pumped him so full of drugs to stop his Change, he'd rip her to shreds.*

*"Time for another sample!" She jabbed his restrained arm with a needle, but rather than drawing blood as he'd expected, she injected him with yet another drug.*

*Time crawled by and still she stood there, doing nothing else. What was she waiting for?*

*He had nearly gone insane with the waiting when he felt a flush of heat traveling through his body. To his horror, he felt himself hardening.*

*Bile rose in his throat as the nurse gripped his erection with a rubber-gloved hand. Clenching his fists, he struggled to resist the effects of the drug as she began to pump him mercilessly.*

*"Come on, I don't have all day," she hissed.*

*Tears slid from underneath his tightly closed lids. Though he remained silent, in his head he screamed.*

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"Hunter?" Hands gripped his arm.

*No!* Hunter sat up, grabbing the wrists of the human who had dared to touch him. A smothered yelp of pain brought him to full awareness. One wide, terrified blue eye peered at him from behind tangled light brown bangs.

Confused and disoriented from his nightmare, recognition took a moment. *I know this boy. He helped me.* "J?"

"Please," the young man whimpered.

Realizing he must be hurting the smaller man, Hunter released him. J shrank back, rubbing at his slender wrists, eyes wary. Hunter watched him for a moment, recognizing the demeanor of one who has been hurt many times.

Sudden guilt assailed him. "I'm sorry. I was ... dreaming. I didn't mean to hurt you."

A quick, false smile appeared, nothing like the true smile J had given him earlier. "You didn't hurt me."

Just then, J tilted his head, his black eye catching the dim light in the room. An unfamiliar feeling rose up at the sight of the bruise. Hunter reached out and moved J's bangs out of his eyes, keeping his touch light and gentle. "Maybe I didn't, but someone did."

J looked down, hunching his shoulders as if he were trying to hide. "It's no big deal."

Hunter stared at the young man in disbelief. "No big deal? Someone hurting you is a very big deal."

J only shrugged. "Cash needed two hundred dollars, and I didn't come through for him. I asked if he could wait 'til tomorrow, because that's payday, but he couldn't. I should have done what he asked." The young man's eyes darted up to meet Hunter's, pleading. "Besides, he didn't really mean it. He'll let me come back home tomorrow."

*Home?* This "Cash" had hit J and driven him from his home over money? None of Hunter's kind would ever do such a thing. He frowned. "Who is this Cash? Did you owe him money?"

Fidgeting uncomfortably, J stared at the floor. "He's, uh, my roommate. I didn't owe him money; he needed it for something. I don't know what."

Hunter could see how unhappy the conversation was making the other man. Though he wanted to ask more questions, he felt like he understood enough. The man named Cash had obviously been abusive toward J, who for some reason seemed to feel he didn't deserve any better. Thinking of the young man being hurt upset him. Despite his own bizarre behavior, J had treated him with nothing but kindness.

Not wanting to make things worse, he changed the subject. "Tomorrow I'll be going home too."

"Where do you live?" J raised his head, his expression interested.

"I have a cabin in the woods outside the city. There's a little stream behind the house, and plenty of room to run." He

smiled, the memory of his home bringing him the first happiness he'd felt in weeks.

Eyes distant as if he were imagining it too, J sighed. "Wow. That sounds really nice."

"It's beautiful. I've missed my home."

J leaned forward, shoving his hair back from his eyes.

"How long have you been away?"

Sorrow replaced his joy. "Weeks. Long, long weeks."

J tilted his head, puzzled. "If you love your home so much, why did you leave?" His voice dropped to a near-whisper. "I'd never leave a place I loved unless I had to."

More memories bombarded him: his trip here, the trap, the terrible weeks spent in captivity. "I didn't want to leave. If I'd had a choice, I would have gone home long ago."

Looking much older and wiser than his face would indicate, J nodded. "Sometimes there isn't a choice."

Although he normally wouldn't have concerned himself, Hunter was curious about his young companion. The boy's odd combination of naiveté and wisdom both interested and disturbed him. "Where would you be, if you had a choice?"

J tilted his head, considering. "I don't know. I couldn't go home, because my dad kicked me out over a year ago. I guess I've never really been happy anywhere." Sadness flickered across his face, only to be replaced an instant later by the fake-smile mask Hunter was beginning to recognize was his disguise.

Things were slowly becoming clear. The black eye, his willingness to forgive this "Cash" for striking him, his false happy expressions—the evidence painted a grim picture of J's

life. Hunter knew what it was like to be trapped and hopeless, although his bonds had been literal, physical things. Reluctant sympathy stirred.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

The young man's quick answer didn't fool him. He raised an eyebrow.

J blushed. "All right, fine. I'm nineteen." Almost defiantly, the boy came back with, "How old are you?"

He smiled despite himself. "I'm thirty."

"Really? You don't look that old. I mean, not like thirty is old or anything. Oh, you know what I mean!" J's face reddened, and he ducked his head.

The sound of his own laughter startled him. He hadn't laughed in weeks, maybe months. "Yes, I know."

His laughter stopped as he remembered the men pursuing him. He needed to get to his truck and get home before they found him again. Thinking how late it must be, and wanting to get an early start in the morning, Hunter lay back onto the blankets once more.

J wriggled back into his nest of covers. "You going to be okay now?"

"I'll be fine. Good night." He was grateful the boy hadn't asked him anything more. He couldn't tell J about his nightmare without giving away more than he could afford to.

"G'night, Hunter." Giving him a drowsy smile, the young man closed his eyes and went right to sleep.

Exhaustion tugged at him, but he didn't go back to sleep right away. The nightmare, and his resulting reaction to J,

had made him jumpy. His mind wanted to go back over the painful and humiliating weeks he'd spent in captivity.

Even now, he wasn't sure exactly how he'd been captured, or why. Somehow, they'd known the meeting he'd been in the city to attend had been a werewolf gathering, but they hadn't known his name or where he came from. He also knew the scientists had wanted to know what caused his enhanced werewolf abilities.

The experiments they'd performed would doubtless haunt his nightmares for years. The way he'd escaped would also haunt him. After the first week or so, he'd stopped resisting when they came for him and they'd grown complacent. Earlier tonight, he'd seen his chance and he'd taken it.

The nurse had been about to take a skin sample with her scalpel. Pretending to be more drugged than he was, he'd not moved until she was close enough to grab, and then he'd acted. Taking the scalpel from her and forcing her to release him had been easier than he expected. Forcing her to help him had not. He'd had to fight his way out, killing her and several of the guards. Then he'd smashed as many of the computers as he could find and burned the place to the ground. Research like theirs could be deadly to the werewolf community and he would have rather died destroying it than allow it to remain.

At least the scientists didn't know his name. They wouldn't be able to track him. He'd already removed the little transmitter they'd placed under his skin when he escaped their facility. The only thing keeping him sane was the knowledge that he could leave the city and go home.

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A snuffling sound brought his attention back to the present. J had turned over, folding his hands beneath his cheek. The sight of him, so small and defenseless in slumber, filled Hunter with an unfamiliar warmth. The anxiety began to recede as he watched the young man sleep peacefully.

Closing his eyes, he let himself relax.

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## Chapter Five

Weak, early-morning sunlight greeted J when he awoke. He opened his eyes, wincing at the pain in his still-swollen left eye. For a minute, he didn't remember where he was, but a quick look around the room reminded him.

*Oh yeah. Cash kicked me out last night and I ended up here.*

He looked over at Hunter, who still slept nearby. Even in sleep, the guy frowned. Wondering if he would be grumpy in the morning, J reached over and nudged him gently, yanking back quickly. He didn't want a repeat of last night.

Eyes opening instantly, Hunter turned toward him.

He gave Hunter a tentative smile. "It's morning."

Hunter sat up, scanning the room as if he were looking for something. Apparently not finding anything suspicious, he stretched and stood. "I smell bacon."

J sniffed the air, detecting a very faint odor of bacon frying. "Hm, guess you're right. Wow, that's some nose you have."

Giving him a strange, weak smile, Hunter replied, "I'm just very hungry."

*Whatever. This guy is so weird.* Standing, J jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen area. "Food's this way."

Hunter began to walk toward the kitchen, and J noticed his bare feet. "And maybe we can get you some shoes, too."

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A few minutes later, they had scored a pair of shoes for Hunter. They sat next to each other on the bench of a cafeteria-style table as Hunter put on the black socks and worn but still serviceable black boots the priest had given him. Once again, Hunter had seemed completely baffled by the priest's kindness, which made J feel sad.

What kind of world did they live in, where people were shocked when someone was nice to them? He thought of his own situation with Cash. That only depressed him more. They'd been living together for over a year and how many times had Cash been kind to him? Not very many. He treated J like his own personal piggy bank and whore. Why did he put up with it?

Unfortunately, he knew why he put up with it. What else could a high school dropout who'd been kicked out by his dad expect? After his father had thrown him out when he was seventeen, he'd spent a terrifying six months trying to survive on the streets. Since they'd just moved to the city, he hadn't had any friends to rely on. His dad hadn't even given him a chance to pack. The second he'd discovered J was gay, he'd tossed him out with only the clothes on his back and the things in his pockets. What little money he'd had in his wallet had gone quickly, as had the money he'd made selling his iPod and cell phone. Continuing school had been impossible. His primary concern was survival.

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When Cash found him six months later, he'd been so grateful he would have put up with damned near anything. And now, with his crappy job, he still couldn't make it on his own. He hated having to come to shelters or rely on Cash.

His odd companion spoke, interrupting his unhappy thoughts. "We can eat now."

Pasting his fake smile back on, he stood. They both made their way over to the food line, where a couple of volunteers and a nun were dishing out breakfast. He didn't even pay attention to the food, only took it without complaint or comment. Within a few minutes, they were back at the table, now crowded with other people.

Hunter began to eat right away, shoveling eggs and bacon into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten in months. Not feeling very hungry himself, J picked at his food. He ate the toast and bacon, but when Hunter finished he pushed his eggs and sausage onto Hunter's plate.

"Thank you," Hunter mumbled before devouring J's food too.

The priest came by their table at that moment. Although J wanted to duck his head and hide like he always did, he met the man's eyes. "Thank you for letting us stay last night."

He smiled. "You're welcome, son. Do you both have somewhere to go tonight?"

Wanting to allay the priest's concern, J ratcheted his smile up a notch and jerked a thumb toward Hunter. "He's going home today and I'm going to pick up my paycheck. We'll be okay. Really."

"I'm very glad, but should you ever need us again please come, day or night." Giving them a final smile, the old man headed off to the next table.

With a mental sigh, J turned his attention back to his plan for the day. He needed to get his paycheck and go cash it. What to do afterward wasn't quite so clear-cut. He didn't want to go beg Cash to let him come home, but he couldn't live on the streets either. What else could he do?

"Are you ready to go?"

J nearly jumped. He'd almost forgotten Hunter was sitting next to him. "Yeah. I've got to go get my check."

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Bright sunlight streamed down on the two of them as they made their way to the small Italian restaurant where J worked. Hunter had decided to accompany him, since it was on his way. J smiled at the taller man's effort to match his steps with his shorter stride. Walking with someone who didn't rush off and expect him to run to keep up was nice.

They didn't talk much as they walked, but J didn't mind the quiet. Unlike with most other people he'd been around, silence with Hunter wasn't awkward or oppressive, and he needed to think anyway.

When they reached Antonio's, J left Hunter at the front and went around to the back door. He rapped on it lightly. His boss, Michael, peered out for a moment before grinning.

"Hey, J. I was wondering when you'd turn up. You're awfully early, aren't you?"

Not wanting to admit he'd spent the night in a shelter, J hedged, "Yeah, well, I had some stuff to take care of. I was already out this morning anyway."

"Early bird gets the worm, eh? Hold on a sec." Michael disappeared for a moment, returning with J's check. "Here you go. Don't spend it all in one place."

Rolling his eyes at the old joke, J took the check. "Thanks, Michael. I'll see you later."

He rejoined Hunter and they continued on to the bank. J cashed his check while Hunter withdrew some money from the next teller over. Neither of them took long, so only a few minutes later they left the bank. Hunter turned right and J did the same.

Suddenly curious and oddly reluctant to see his strange, silent companion go, J tried to think of something to say. "Where will you go now?" "My truck is parked in a private garage not far from here. Luckily, I left everything I needed in it. As soon as I get there I can go home." A faraway look entered Hunter's eyes, and J knew he was already envisioning himself home.

A pang of envy struck. How often had he wished he had a home like that, someplace where he'd always feel welcome, and happy? He frowned to himself. *Don't be a jackass. You need to think about reality, not some dumb fantasy!*

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Not wanting to lose Hunter's company just yet, J searched for a reason to keep walking with him. Before he could think of something, the sound of a car screeching to a stop along the street just ahead of them made him look up. His stomach clenched at the sight of a familiar, beat-up 1970s Mustang. *Cash.*

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## Chapter Six

Hunter was involved in thinking about home when a car pulled over to the curb ahead of them. He wouldn't have thought anything of the vehicle if J hadn't tensed beside him. The young man's face paled as a big, red-faced man opened the car door and jumped out.

"Where the fuck've you been?" The man stomped toward them, his voice loud and angry.

He looked over at J to gauge the boy's response. The transformation was almost instant. A fake smile couldn't hide the way J's fists clenched. He was scared, and Hunter found he didn't like that. His eyes narrowed, he glared at the newcomer.

Quiet, hesitant, J spoke. "You told me to get out, Cash. I figured you meant it."

Cash's eyes darted to Hunter. "Who the hell is this guy?" Face reddening still more, voice rising, Cash moved closer to J. "You been fucking around on me? Huh?"

The little color J's face still had leached away. His shoulders hunched. "No! This is Hunter. I, um, met him last night at the shelter."

Cash jabbed a finger into J's chest, hard. "You better not be fucking around. I know I told you to turn some tricks, but I didn't tell you to hook up with someone for real!"

*He told J to turn tricks?* Anger surged through Hunter as he recalled their discussion about Cash needing money. Thinking of J turning tricks to get money for this cruel,

manipulative man made him sick. And then to get a black eye for his trouble ... Cash had hurt him last night and probably many times before that. Hunter would not let such a thing happen again while he was here to stop it.

"I didn't, I swear," J was pleading desperately. His eyes shifted toward Hunter, his misery and embarrassment obvious. "Can't we talk about this somewhere else? Please?"

The big man sneered. "Why? You don't want this guy to see what a fucking *loser* you are? You were a nothing on the streets when I found you, and you'll be a nothing on the streets again if I don't take you back."

At that, J's anger seemed to overwhelm his fear. Shoulders straightening, he looked the larger man in the eye. "I'm not a loser!"

Cash's fist flew out so quickly J didn't have time to dodge. The blow knocked him backward and he stumbled over his feet. He ended up sitting on the ground, one hand cupping a split, bleeding lip. For a long moment, he sat there, looking down at the blood pooling in his hand. Then he looked up at Cash, his eyes filled with betrayal, pain, humiliation, and a terrible, bitter resignation.

Seeing those lovely, lively blue eyes dim triggered something fierce and protective. Hunter whirled on Cash, snarling. The sound startled the man, who'd been sneering down at J. His head whipped toward Hunter, who gave him a toothy smile.

"Don't ever touch him again," he gritted out from between clenched teeth.



Though he looked a bit nervous, Cash kept up the cocky act. "Or what? This is none of your business. I want to beat the shit out of my boy, I can."

A deep, inhuman growl rose in his throat. The world went black and white—his eyes had shifted, something that hadn't happened since his capture. He rejoiced in the sign that his abilities were returning. Cash paled, and his cocky grin faltered.

Stalking toward the frightened man, he spoke very slowly to make his point. "You will never touch him again, or I'll kill you." The rumbling growl his voice had become obviously convinced the man he meant business. Giving him a terrified look, Cash turned and fled.

Hunter watched the man run, fighting the urge to give chase. *Cowardly bastard*. Cash would beat up on a smaller, younger man who was too scared to fight back, but up against someone his own size, he ran.

A tiny sound drew his attention back down to J, who still sat on the ground. The young man's wide eyes fixated on his face. "Your eyes," J whispered, rocking slightly as if he couldn't decide whether to stay or flee.

That fearful look was the last thing he wanted to see. He hated the idea of J being scared of him. Deliberately, he took a deep breath to calm himself, willing his eyes to return to normal. The smells of blood and fear in the air made calming down more difficult than it should have been, but even so, color leached into the black and white.

J continued to watch him with suspicion. "Your eyes, your voice. What the hell was that?"

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For the first time ever, Hunter wanted to tell a human the truth. After what he'd been through in the past few weeks, though, he was afraid. He knew J wasn't one of *them*, those scientists who'd taken him, but he couldn't help the wave of anxiety that washed over him. A tug-of-war seemed to have broken out inside him. *Tell him*, urged his heart, while his mind screamed *Leave! Remember what they did to you*. He swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat.

When he didn't answer, J looked down at the ground. Wiping his bloody hand on a scraggly patch of grass and weeds next to the sidewalk, he muttered, "Never mind. Just ... just go. Go get your truck, and go home. Where you belong."

Hunter stood paralyzed, torn between the known safety of home and something else. Something he couldn't identify. He wanted to say something, to do something, but he couldn't make himself move or speak.

J raised his head and glared at Hunter, eyes glittering with unshed tears. "Fucking go already! Get away from me."

Hurt by J's vehement tone, he backed away. If J wanted him to go, he would. The young man probably thought he was some kind of monster after his eyes had changed. He met J's eyes, hoping the other man could read what he felt. *Take care of yourself. Don't let Cash or anyone else hurt you again*.

Chest tight with sadness now rather than fear, Hunter turned and began walking toward the garage where he'd parked his truck when he came into the city. He was grateful once again for his foresight in leaving his ID and other

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important things hidden in the truck. Leaving the city and returning to his life would be easier with those things.

He would have kept walking if he hadn't heard the tiny sounds behind him. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed J's huddled form, shoulders shaking. Although the young man was nearly silent, Hunter could easily hear his sobs.

The earlier protectiveness he'd felt rose up again, even more strongly this time. He couldn't just leave him.

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## Chapter Seven

*I can't believe everything's fallen apart like this.* J rested his head on his knees, trying not to let out the sobs building in his chest. The second he'd seen Cash get out of his car, he'd known things would be bad. He'd expected Cash to be pissed, and he'd been right.

He hadn't expected Cash to think he was fucking around with Hunter. He hadn't even expected to get punched in the face, although he probably should have seen that one coming. The biggest shock had been Hunter's reaction to Cash. He still wasn't sure what to think about the way Hunter's voice had gone all deep and growly. When the guy's eyes had gone all yellow and glowing, though? Now *that* had freaked him out. It had freaked Cash out too, so he didn't have to worry about getting the crap beat out of him.

What he did have to worry about was being officially homeless. No way in hell was he going back to Cash now. Not only would the man be even more furious after Hunter had humiliated him, but he knew nothing he did would ever make Cash happy. Only tearing others down made Cash happy. The throbbing pain in his split lower lip was a good reminder of that.

Cash was wrong. He wasn't a loser. Cash had been the one who made him feel like a loser, and he wasn't going to take that anymore.

He would figure something out.

Right then he could feel Hunter finally turning and leaving. The sound of footsteps walking away stabbed at him, crumbling the false confidence he'd been trying to build up. No matter how strange the man had been, there was something about him. J had felt safe with him, for the first time in years. He suddenly wanted Hunter to stay more than anything, but he knew it couldn't happen. The pressure in his chest increased. Fighting became too much to bear and he let the tears come.

Moments later, a gentle hand touched his shoulder. "J. Please don't."

Though he wanted to hide, he raised his head. Hunter crouched beside him, concern and something else in his odd light eyes. At first, neither of them spoke. They just stared at each other.

After a minute or two, Hunter reached out and rubbed his arm with the awkwardness of someone who wasn't used to touching other people very often. It was unpracticed and clumsy, but he could tell it was heartfelt. No one had tried to make him feel better in so long he almost didn't know what to do. The sheer magnitude of what had happened in the last couple of days made the decision for him. With a sigh, J moved into the loose circle of Hunter's arm and let himself be comforted.

Taking the hint, Hunter drew him in closer. "It'll be okay," Hunter murmured, obviously not sure what else to say.

How it would be okay was beyond J at the moment, but his tears slowed anyway. He tried to smile. "I know."

A couple more minutes passed as they sat in companionable silence, Hunter continuing to rub his arm almost absently. Like all good things, though, it couldn't last.

"What will you do now? You won't go back to him, will you?"

The concern in the other man's voice was genuine. Too bad J didn't know how to answer him. Ignoring the first part of the question, he said, "No, I won't go back to Cash."

Removing his arm and sitting back on his heels, Hunter watched him. "Where will you go?"

He wiped away the remnants of his tears. His busted lip hurt, but he pasted on his best smile, determined not to ruin this moment. "I'll figure something out."

Hunter held out a hand to him then. "I only met you last night, and neither of us is in the best of circumstances, but I can't leave you here like this."

Refusing to hope, J didn't take the offered hand. Good things didn't happen to him. He shook his head. "You have better things to do than rescue pitiful strays like me. Go home. I know how much that means to you."

Those strange eyes met his, intent. Hunter's hand didn't waver. "Come with me."

J's mouth dropped open. Common sense told him this was a stupid idea. Go with him? They'd only met last night! He started to say *no, are you crazy*, but the words felt wrong. Deep down, in his heart, he wanted to go. He wanted to see the little house in the woods where a person could be safe and free, and he wanted to see it with Hunter.

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The realization should have scared him, but somehow he felt comforted instead. He didn't care if Hunter was weird and had freaky eyes. J trusted him. The man had stayed with him this morning when he could have easily gone his own way. He'd stood up to Cash and let J cry on him. Simple kindnesses, offered without strings.

For once, J shrugged off his fear of the unknown. Tossing caution and common sense to the wind, he reached out and took Hunter's hand. The large, strong hand curled around his with surprising gentleness.

He knew he'd made the right decision when Hunter smiled. The expression transformed his new friend's solemn features.

"Come, then. Let's go." Standing, Hunter pulled him to his feet. He began to stride down the sidewalk, and J walked beside him, hope bubbling up with each step.

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About ten minutes later, they entered a small private parking garage. Hunter led the way up to the third floor, where a big, new-ish black truck waited. Quickly locating a hidden key, Hunter unlocked the doors. When they were inside, J watched with interest as he rifled through the glove compartment and pulled out a wallet.

"Wow. This has been here for weeks? I can't believe nobody stole your truck, or at least your wallet."

Hunter shrugged. "I chose this garage for a reason. It's very secure."

Not sure what to say in response, J kept quiet. Now that they were in the truck, Hunter seemed somehow nervous, edgy. A silence settled over them, but this one was awkward. He twisted his hands together in his lap, wondering if the edginess was due to second thoughts about taking him.

The silence soon became too much to bear. Words slipped out before he could stop them. "You don't have to take me with you. I'll understand if you've changed your mind." J was used to people not wanting him.

Hunter reached over and stilled his restless hands. "I haven't changed my mind, but you might after you hear what I have to say."

Frowning, J met Hunter's eyes. "What do you mean?"

At first, the only response he got was a sigh. He was beginning to wonder if he'd get a real answer when Hunter finally spoke. "I should have told you this earlier. You'll probably think I'm crazy. Or a liar."

J wanted to protest, but Hunter continued before he could. Hunter told him of coming to the city for a meeting, and his attack and capture. He also spoke of being held at the warehouse for weeks, voice faltering as he talked of experiments and his bloody, fiery escape.

Once again, J had no idea how to feel or what to say. Strangely, he didn't think Hunter was crazy. Instead, he found himself believing the story. It all left him with one burning question, however. "Why would they do that to you?"



"Because ... I'm a werewolf." Hunter looked away, his expression clearly saying he expected disbelief.

Jaw dropping, J stared. Hunter was right. The idea was ridiculous. Werewolves didn't exist.

Remembering the way Hunter's eyes had seemed to glow earlier, though, and the way he'd growled at Cash, J felt his disbelief melting away. Maybe he was the crazy one, for believing Hunter was a werewolf and not running like hell, but the man had never hurt him. Even when he could've.

Though J felt a little nervous, he wasn't really scared. After everything else he'd been through lately, this somehow didn't seem all that frightening. "Okay."

Now it was Hunter's turn to stare. "What?"

"Okay." He buckled his seatbelt. "Let's go, huh? I'm tired of this city."

Giving him a confused look, Hunter started the truck and backed out of the spot. Within a few minutes, he'd paid his parking fee at a machine and they were on the road. Hunter seemed lost in his thoughts, but J didn't mind. He spent the time wondering about their destination. Would it really be as wonderful as Hunter had described? Did he really care? After all, it couldn't be much worse than what he was leaving behind. Each mile they put between him and his past made him feel lighter.

"What's your real name?" Hunter asked abruptly, startling him.

J cleared his throat. "Kevin. Kevin Jordan. The J comes from my last name, not my first." He hadn't gone by his real name in such a long time the words sounded foreign to him.

"Can I call you Kevin?"

"Yeah." A smile came to his face, unbidden, as he thought of being someone new. He could leave his old life behind completely and become someone else. Someone maybe ... happy. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Hunter drove on.

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## Epilogue

"Hunter!"

Smiling at the incredible racket Kevin made, he called, "I'm on the deck."

It was funny what a difference a few months made. When they'd first left the city, Kevin had tiptoed around him as if walking on eggshells. Weeks had passed before Kevin stopped flinching every time Hunter made a sudden move. Now that he realized Hunter would never hit him, even if they disagreed or he did something wrong, he had become more opinionated and energetic.

Moments later, Kevin flew through the house, shoved the sliding door open, and stood before him. "Look!"

Puzzled, he took the paper Kevin thrust at him and read it. *We are pleased to inform you ...* A smile spread across his face before he even finished reading. "You got in."

Grinning, Kevin nodded. "You're looking at a college man."

Not bad for a self-described 'pitiful stray.' Pride and happiness welled up. In the six months Kevin had lived with him, the young man had worked hard. He'd studied for and passed his GED test, and now he would be attending a local college. Hunter couldn't have been happier for him.

Still, he felt a little sad. Now that he would be going to college, Kevin would meet people his own age, and learn so many new things. Everything was as it should be, but in the process, Kevin would probably grow apart from him.

Over the past months, the protectiveness and sense of connection he'd felt toward his unexpected roommate had grown into love. He'd never pressed the issue, though, because he didn't want to make Kevin feel like he had to do anything to earn his home as he had before in the city. He hadn't wanted to create a new cage that would stifle the burgeoning happiness and creativity he saw emerging. Kevin ought to be spending time with humans his own age, instead of a grumpy werewolf over a decade his senior. Kevin was finally going to live the life he was meant to live. Hunter knew he should be honored to have been a brief stop in it.

Shaking off his wistful thoughts, Hunter picked his spatula up and turned his attention back to the steaks he had been cooking on the grill. They were almost done. "Good thing I decided to make steaks. We can celebrate."

"I like steak, but that's not exactly the celebration I had in mind."

Something in Kevin's voice made him pause. He turned slowly. "What did you have in mind?"

Reaching out, Kevin took the spatula from his nerveless fingers and set it aside. "I was thinking of something more like this."

Before he could say another word, the younger man stood on tiptoe and pressed his lips to Hunter's.

For months he'd dreamed of Kevin kissing him just like this. Despite the longing flooding him, he drew back. "Kevin, you don't have to—"

With a soft smile, Kevin put a finger to his lips, silencing him. "I know. You've been giving me time and space to make

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my own life, and my own choices. No one's ever done that for me before and I appreciate it. Don't you know I made my choice when I came here with you six months ago?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Every day I fall a little bit more in love with you, and I think you feel the same way. Quit being so noble and kiss me."

Kevin loved him. Stifling his urge to howl in triumph, he smiled instead. "When you put it that way..."

If the man he loved wanted a kiss, it was his job to give it to him.

So he did.

The End

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### Author Bio

Like a superhero, Cassandra Gold is the alter-ego of a relatively mild-mannered middle school teacher. By day, Cassandra tries to get 6th and 7th graders to read. On nights and weekends and over the summer, she dreams up stories of men falling in love. Currently, she writes gay erotic romance, both contemporary and paranormal. Some day she hopes to write a romantic suspense or historical, if she ever grows any patience. When she's not writing or reading, Cassandra can usually be found spending too much time on the internet, pretending to do housework, or playing video games with her hubby.

*Red Rose Publishing*

*Fantasies: New Year's Eve,*

*Fantasies: Independence Day,*

*Fantasies: Thanksgiving,*

*Fool for Love*

*Cobblestone Press*

*In a Wolf's Eyes, Double or Nothing*

*Torquere Press*

*Alpha, Omega (with Beth Wylde),*

*Hit by Love*

*Freya's Bower*

*Special Delivery*

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