

# Shy Hunter

Ginn Hale

David didn't like doing rescue work up on Mount Kierly. The rough shale slipped beneath his feet. Dark pines cut black silhouettes against the cloud-filled night sky, and yellow eyes shone down on him from the branches.

Every rescue up here felt like a trap. This one even smelled like a trap, though the lost hiker was real enough. Her boyfriend and mother were down at the base camp, both too distraught to sleep. For all David knew, Calvin had already devoured the hiker and then left this trail to lure his dessert to him. The musk of Calvin's body drifted down from high branches and wafted off bare stones, ever-present and yet oddly stale.

Then David heard a distant but distinct noise: a high-pitched little sneeze. Then came a second and third, followed by an exhausted obscenity. David swung back to fetch Lisa and the rest of the team, wanting to tell them that he thought he'd found their errant hiker, and that she might have her hay fever to thank for it. Unfortunately, his present form didn't allow for much conversation. He gave two sharp barks. Lisa grinned and patted his thick hide.

"David's got her scent," Lisa called out to the rest of the team, then looked at David. "Get to her and keep her safe, okay?"

David nodded. He could tell Lisa was worried about Calvin as well. She didn't need to be, though; Calvin never kept his victims alive. He didn't have that kind of self-control. If the hiker was alive and sneezing, then Calvin hadn't found her.

David charged ahead, and the rest of the wilderness rescue team followed quickly behind him.

A week later, his photo was in the paper, along with an article praising working dogs. He was pictured sitting beside Lisa, wearing an orange rescue pack and a bandana that made him look like a complete fool. Lisa, on the other hand, looked cool, with her sunglasses pushed up and the Red Cross tattoo on her forearm prominently displayed.

After the article ran, Lisa had a new girlfriend every night. David received a basket of designer dog biscuits and several squeaky toys.

He tossed one of the toys—a red one shaped only remotely like a hedgehog—at the wall and caught it.

“That’s getting annoying,” Lisa commented from the bathroom. She was preparing for another night out.

“I’m bored,” David replied. He tossed the toy again and it emitted a satisfying squeal upon impact with the wall.

Lisa leaned out of the bathroom door, still threading a stud earring through her earlobe, and studied David. “Well, get changed and I’ll take you out for another walk. But this one will have to be fast. I’m supposed to pick Lilly up at seven.”

David hefted the toy back and forth between his hands, feeling the dexterity of his human fingers, the tenderness of his human palm. It was strange that the body he’d been born with could seem so foreign to him now.

“I don’t need another walk,” David said at last. “I’m bored with walks.”

“Well, maybe you need to go out. You know, as a person.” Lisa slid the earring backing into place. “You might meet someone.”

“And bring him back to my kennel?” David asked.

“You have your own room and your own real-person bed. You can be as human as you want to be.” Lisa gave him a hard, serious look. “We both know that you’ve been hiding in that dog skin of yours because Robert dumped you. It’s time you got over it. Not all men are Robert.”

“No, some of them are Calvin,” David replied, and he felt a sick twisting in his gut just hearing the name spoken aloud. Lisa’s delicate mouth flattened into a hard line.

“Granted, you’ve had some shitty luck, but you’re not going to meet anyone here in the living room. And if you don’t try to meet someone, then sooner or later you’re going to get desperate and before you know it, you’ll be waking up next to that poodle from down the block.”

“Dickie?” Davis scowled. “That’s just sick.”

“Yeah, and it might be asking a little much of your family to accept. Gay, they don’t care about. Werewolf, they seem to be dealing with. But if you turned into a dog-fucker too?” Lisa shook her head. “No way would you be invited home for Christmas.”

David laughed. His parents had been amazingly accepting. After he came out they had joined PFLAG, marched in rallies, and had taken part in more protests than David himself. They were old hippies, so political activism came to them easily.

The results of Calvin’s assault had been different, harder for all of them to accept. At first they had been happy just to have David back with them at the farmhouse and alive. But then the changes had started. His skin split as his bones went soft and shifted. Stiff hair jutted from his wounds. He had screamed and the sound came out low and animalistic.

For the first three months David had had no control of his body. Changes came without warning, prompted by strong scents, exciting television programs, even—humiliatingly—perusal of the old porn magazine he’d stashed between his mattresses years before.

David’s mom had cried almost every day. His father had spent thousands of hours researching werewolves, trying to track down cures. His little sister had told him he looked gross, but then curled up with him on his bed and hugged him.

Slowly, David had learned to manage his condition. It was excruciating when his body twisted between forms, so he learned to change quickly, like he was tearing off a band-aid. After a change, his muscles ached and a ravenous hunger filled him. If he gave into the craving he would glut himself, choking down entire raw steaks and pounds of ground meat like an animal. But if he waited, the hunger receded. Even so, David remained wary of the bestial voracity that haunted his flesh.

There were other limits, as well. He couldn't drink much and expect to remain in the right shape. He couldn't be out in the wild, with the tempting scents of rabbits and birds, deer and squirrels saturating the air. There were places that he could go as a man and others that were only safe for him to venture in his canine form.

He'd also learned a great deal about werewolf myths; particularly that they were created by people who weren't werewolves themselves and had no idea what they were talking about. The full moon was nothing to him. He could wear sterling silver and attend church with impunity. He was inclined to ignore most myths, though from time to time he did catch himself glancing in the mirror to check if his eyebrows had grown together.

"You know, being human isn't just a matter of the shape you take," Lisa said. "It has to do with interacting with other people. Getting out there and mixing it up."

"Yeah, I know," David admitted.

"So, are you going to go out tonight or not?"

"Yeah, I am," David said. "What have I got to lose at this point?"

"Exactly." Lisa looked relieved, and David could tell that she'd been expecting him to put up more of an argument. "Good. So go put on some pants and take off that dog collar. You're starting to creep me out."

\*\*\*

*Whispers* wasn't the kind of club that David normally went to. Then again, he didn't normally go to any kind of club, unless the dog daycare that Lisa ran counted, and he doubted that it did.

The dance floor was packed with men. The smell of sweat and cologne rose on waves of body heat. Swirling light and music pounded through the tight space in synchronized throbs. The DJ scratched out sharp lines of static.

Dancing felt good. It reacquainted David with his human body. His physical awareness shifted. Acute hearing and smell gave way to the exquisite sensitivity of delicate, exposed skin. His eyes took in the shapes and colors of the men around him like intoxicants. His mind filled with half-forgotten words, while his long limbs stretched and flexed.

Hands brushed his back and men met his eyes and smiled at him, but David still felt a little shy. There was an awkwardness to his conversations. He hadn't spoken more than a few simple sentences in months. He watched the men around him and nodded when it seemed appropriate. He hoped he looked like a good listener and not just a man who was resisting the urge to sniff a crotch.

A fit man in his mid-thirties leaned close to David. He smelled like beer, and David found it pleasantly masculine. He asked David if he was here with anyone and David said no. Then something at the edge of David's sight caught his attention. His gaze slid to the other side of the dance floor.

He met the stare of a pale young man, whose shaggy black hair and drab clothes seemed less a fashion statement than a matter of insecurity. He wasn't dancing, but was instead standing at the edge of the dance floor, as if it were a fire he was warming himself in front of. David remembered looking like that once himself, desperate to meet someone, but too

nervous to do more than watch. That kind of vulnerability attracted men like Calvin.

Protective concern sparked up in David's consciousness. He remembered how easily he had accepted Calvin's offer for a ride and how eager he had been for Calvin's attention. How completely he had misinterpreted the hunger in Calvin's expression and how deeply Calvin's teeth had torn into his body. There was an instant of quiet as the DJ switched from thumping dance tunes to a slow love song.

"Sorry, but I think I see someone I know," David said to the man beside him.

David wove through the knots of dancers. The young man watched as David drew nearer, but he didn't withdraw or move closer himself. When David reached him, he smiled.

David felt at a loss for anything to do or say. A deep feeling of protectiveness had drawn him; the same feeling that surged through him when he searched for lost hikers and skiers. But now that he had reached the young man, he found that he had no rescue team to back him up.

"I'm Edgar," the pale young man said. He extended his hand to David.

"David."

They shook hands, an oddly formal exchange in the midst of so many half-naked, embracing men. Edgar's fingers felt cool against David's own warm grip.

"David?" The young man looked puzzled. "I thought... I mean... You're NightStalker from gothdate.com, aren't you?"

"NightStalker?" David raised his brows at the absurd name. "No, sorry. I'm just David from Chestnut Avenue."

Edgar looked David over, taking in his height and build. His eyes lingered on the white scar on David's shoulder, then rose back to his face. David offered him his best smile. Edgar seemed to relax, his forced, nervous grin fading to a simple curve of his lips.

“David from Chestnut Avenue seems all right,” Edgar said. “To be honest, I was a little nervous about meeting a guy from online. I’ve never done it before.”

“Neither have I,” David said. He didn’t bother to explain that he was rarely able to turn on a computer, much less surf the net. His paws were simply too large and inflexible.

The slow love song that had washed over the dance floor ended and a pounding dance rhythm burst through the air. The lights flashed and spun wildly, illuminating expanses of skin and casting strange, jerking shadows.

“You look kind of cold,” David raised his voice to carry over the music. Edgar nodded, but David wasn’t sure he’d really heard the comment.

“So, what do you do?” Edgar asked.

“I work at the Bow-House. Take care of dogs,” David said. “You?”

“I’m a freelance illustrator.” He frowned as a stocky man with a thick beard and a leather vest pushed between them. “It’s pretty loud and crowded in here.”

David nodded.

“Maybe we could go somewhere else?”

“Aren’t you going to miss your date?” David asked.

“His loss, your gain,” Edgar replied. He pushed the hair back from his bright green eyes and gave David a very inviting smile. A tight pulse of arousal shot through David’s body. He hesitated for only a moment, and then allowed desire to envelope the concern that had initially drawn him to Edgar.

“Where would you like to go?” David asked.

\*\*\*

They ended up at Edgar’s basement apartment. Several muted paintings hung on the walls. The slightly sweet, chemical smell of lemon-scented cleaners perfumed the small space. David couldn’t pull anything else out of the air, but he didn’t try too hard, either.

He watched Edgar steal shy, desiring glances at his chest and abdomen. Edgar's white skin turned rosy and David knew he was looking at the hard bulge in David's tight jeans. Edgar's fingers trembled when he took David's hand.

Edgar led him through the spartan living room and into the spotless kitchen. They stopped in front of a door. David guessed that Edgar's bedroom was behind it. Edgar stared at the door, but didn't move to open it. He seemed suddenly nervous.

"You want something to drink?" Edgar asked abruptly.

"No. I'm fine," David replied. "Do you want something?"

"A shower," Edgar said. He gave a nervous laugh. "I'm kind of sweaty from the club. I probably stink like a pig right now."

"You smell just fine to me," David told him, and it was true. Only a very faint, woody scent clung to Edgar's body. David liked it. He wished he could smell more of it, in fact.

"You could come with me." Edgar made the offer hesitantly. "Not that you're dirty, but it might be nice." His pale face flushed red and he looked down at the white tiles of his kitchen floor.

"Sure," David said.

They stripped each other in the bathroom. Edgar ran his hands over David's hard, animal muscles. He touched the jagged white scars that cut across David's shoulder, chest, and stomach, but didn't ask where they had come from.

David tenderly exposed Edgar's delicate skin and marveled at the perfection of it. He caressed Edgar's tight pink nipples and then ran his hands down to Edgar's hips. Edgar closed his eyes and leaned closer into David's touch. David traced the length of Edgar's erection, admiring both the stiff line it presented and Edgar's beautifully rapt expression. Edgar timidly brushed his hands over David's thighs and then allowed his fingers to stroke David's penis.



It seemed like such a delicate moment that David was loathe to break it with words. But he had to. He had no idea of how many ways his condition could be transmitted. Calvin had passed it to him through the mingled blood of savage wounds and desperate defense. But for all David knew, it could be transmitted in an innocent spill of semen as well.

He kissed Edgar's soft lips gently and then pulled back just a little.

"Do you have a condom?" David asked. He had worried that the question would fluster Edgar, but instead Edgar looked a little relieved.

"In my bedroom," Edgar said. "I'll get them if you want."

"Yeah, you probably should," David said.

When Edgar returned he proved to be quite skilled at sliding a condom on a man and then making him forget that he was even wearing one. They kissed and fucked in the shower until the hot water ran out. Then they retired to Edgar's bedroom.

For all his earlier hesitation, Edgar was a voracious lover once the lights were out. He was not at all as delicate as David had first imagined. His lean body was strong and supple. He kissed, licked and sucked every inch of David's flesh. But he took an exceptional relish in riding David's thick cock, arching and bucking, urging David deeper into him with each thrust.

When exhaustion finally overcame them both, the sheets were sweat soaked and tangled into a ball in a corner of the bed. The blankets lay on the floor. Edgar curled up against David. David wrapped his arms around him, and they slept.

David woke later than he normally would have. The darkness of the basement apartment and the previous night's exertions had made him both unaware of the bright sunlight outside and unwilling to consider it. It was the obnoxious

refrain of his cell phone that finally woke him. He staggered into the bathroom, found his pants, and answered Lisa's call.

It pleased her that he'd spent the night out and that he'd met someone, even if he didn't know the guy's last name. But she wondered if he was aware that he was three hours late for work?

David apologized and promised he'd be in right away. He cleaned himself up as best he could and then peeked into the bedroom where Edgar lay sound asleep. David kissed him and Edgar smiled, but didn't wake up.

David left a note on the bedside, thanking Edgar for the great night and asking him to call. He left his phone number and signed his full name.

On his way out, David stopped in the kitchen and checked the fridge for something to eat. He found little inside the pristine refrigerator: two full catsup bottles, an egg, and a couple cans of Guinness stout. The cupboards offered him several black teas, half a jar of honey, and a plastic container of protein powder. No wonder Edgar was so skinny. David guessed that Edgar ate out a lot. He spent his walk to work wondering what Edgar's favorite restaurants were.

\*\*\*

When David arrived at the Bow-House, he found the dogs playing in the open run and Lisa on the phone. She frowned and beckoned David over.

"You know that kid who went missing in town three days ago?" Lisa asked.

David nodded.

"The police want to know if they can borrow David to try and track him down," Lisa said.

David just nodded again.

"All right, but I want to be very clear here." Lisa used her coolest, most business-like tone. "David is a tracker, not an attack dog. He's sensitive and he needs to be treated

respectfully. No leash on him when he's tracking... Yes, I'm serious!" Lisa rolled her eyes at David, then returned her attention to the phone. "And I'll have to charge you... I know, but this isn't wilderness rescue. This is city work."

David left Lisa to argue out the payment. In his room he stripped off his clothes, noting that the tang of lemons still lingered on them. He took in a deep breath, preparing himself, and then changed. His throat strained against a cry of pain as his bones and muscles burned molten and his skin tore away. He dropped to all fours, feeling as if he were melting inside. His own blood dribbled down his face and soaked through his rough hide.

All color drained from his vision and suddenly he could smell the rich, woody scent of Edgar's sweat still clinging to his skin. He could hear Lisa in the kitchen, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. He recognized each individual call of every dog outside in the run. They all smelled like hot meat. David closed his eyes and lay on the floor. Slowly, the familiar hunger passed.

He padded out of his room and Lisa sprayed the traces of skin and blood off him. She dried his dark coat with a blow-dryer and tied a ridiculous pink bandana around his neck.

"I know you don't like it, but it makes you look less like a wild animal." Lisa patted his head.

Two police officers arrived a few minutes later. They were both part of the K-9 unit, but their dogs were attack animals, not trackers. David didn't like the fact that their car smelled like another animal's territory, but he got in anyway.

He spent the remainder of the morning and most of the afternoon picking out the scent of a runaway teenage boy. He followed the trail from a sprawling middle class house, down through the Capitol Hill district, and into a reeking alley behind a strip club. When he caught a whiff of Calvin's musk, he knew he wouldn't find the boy alive. He knew he

would find bloody scraps and stripped bones. Dread gripped him and for a few moments, he couldn't make himself move. Then, he pushed himself ahead the same way he forced himself through the pain of transformation. He made it fast, knocking the dumpster lid open and howling over the broken human remains inside.

While three other police officers removed the pieces of the boy's body, a detective searched the blood soaked pockets of the boy's pants. He discovered twenty dollars and a list of bands written on the back of a print out of an e-mail. An email from a man called NightStalker.

\*\*\*

David ran for Edgar's apartment, dodging traffic and jumping fences. The police tried to follow him for a few blocks, but he was far too fast for them.

He didn't think about what he would say to Edgar or how annoyed Lisa would be. All he could concentrate on was the fact that Calvin had targeted Edgar. The afternoon was growing late and David's shadow stretched out as if racing ahead of him toward Edgar.

When he reached the brick apartment building he was panting hard. An old woman frowned at him from her yard, then picked up her cat and went inside. David scratched at the security door and then collapsed on the apartment steps.

He took in a slow breath of air. There was no hint of Calvin's presence here. Above David, a little brown bird chirped from its perch in a tree. David took in another deep breath to reassure himself that Calvin was nowhere near.

Then the terrible thought came to him that Calvin didn't need to be physically close. All he needed to do was make a date online and his prey would come tottering to him. Edgar could be making the arrangements right now, for all David knew. David's exquisitely sensitive nose wouldn't tell him a thing about it.

He cursed himself for being an idiot and not getting Edgar's phone number. He glared at the security door and the small intercom beside it.

He needed pants.

He found a pair, as well as a t-shirt, on a nearby clothesline. The pants were yellow plaid and loose, but David was glad to have them. After he changed, he wiped his body down using the bandanna Lisa had given him, then dressed.

He pushed the button with Edgar's apartment number on it and after a brief greeting, Edgar buzzed him in. David hurried down the stairs to the basement level and rushed to Edgar's apartment.

Edgar glanced up at him from where he sat at his drafting table. He held a cup of steaming tea in one hand and a pen in the other. A small ink drawing lay on the table in front of him.

"You have to stay away from that NightStalker guy," David blurted out.

Edgar smiled and David realized that the demand made him sound like a jealous idiot.

"He's a murderer," David explained. "We—the police—just found the body of a boy he killed."

Edgar's smile dropped. "When?" he asked.

"An hour ago, maybe," David replied. "I mean, that's when they found him. They used one of our dogs to track the boy. He was probably killed two or three days ago."

Edgar capped his pen and set it aside very deliberately. Then he stood, went to David, and hugged him. David didn't know what prompted the embrace, but his entire body responded. He clung to Edgar, filling with relief as he felt Edgar's slim body.

"I was so worried," David whispered.

Edgar closed his eyes and pressed closer to David.

"You know, I really thought you were him last night,"

Edgar said. "I thought you were pretending not to be because you were embarrassed."

"No, I'm not him. I'm nothing like him."

"Obviously." Edgar gently pulled back from David's embrace. "Do you want a cup of tea? Or would a beer be better?"

"Tea's fine," David said. He normally would have asked for the beer, but he didn't trust himself to hold his form after everything that had happened today. He sat down on Edgar's clean, beige couch and listened as Edgar heated up the water in the microwave, then tossed in a teabag.

"Honey?" Edgar offered from the kitchen.

"No thanks, but could I use your phone?"

"Of course," Edgar brought him the cup of hot tea and then fished a sleek cell phone from his pocket. "I have to get this drawing finished. It shouldn't take me more than an hour. Do you think you'll want to go out and get some dinner then, or something?"

David nodded and Edgar returned to his drafting table. David took the phone into the bathroom and called Lisa.

"Do you think he's resorting to this because of us?" Lisa asked, once David had explained everything. "We've rescued a lot of people who would otherwise have ended up as his dinner."

"Maybe," David said. "But it's just as likely that we've gotten so many people down the mountain alive because Calvin wasn't there anymore."

"You think he's moved into town?"

David's stomach knotted.

"Yeah. He'll have staked out a lair somewhere isolated, like the old warehouse district or by the tracks. It'll be somewhere he can enjoy himself without the screams attracting attention."

There was a long moment of quiet on the other end of the phone.

“Are you going to be okay?” Lisa asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I just don’t want to leave Edgar right now.”

He gave Lisa Edgar’s address and she agreed to bring him his clothes.

\*\*\*

Edgar took David out to an Ethiopian restaurant called *Axum*. It occupied an old brick building only five blocks from Edgar’s apartment. The moment David stepped inside the warmly lit space he was overwhelmed with heady, rich, and foreign scents. The waiter recognized Edgar and inquired cordially about his latest commission. Edgar said he’d just finished it and introduced David as a good friend.

The menu was incomprehensible to David. He didn’t recognize a single dish on it, and when he read the descriptions, he found that he couldn’t even identify most of the basic ingredients.

“What are you having?” David asked Edgar.

“Either the kitfo or the gored gored,” Edgar replied. David nodded as if he knew what either was. The menu described them both as rare meat, ground or cubed and seasoned with strong spices—cardamom, garlic, ginger and chilies. The thought of ground meat brought the memory of the runaway boy’s savaged face rushing back to David. He turned the menu over and read about the restaurant’s traditional Ethiopian coffee, which was served with copal incense.

“I think I’ll just have the vegetarian platter,” David said.

Edgar looked surprised. “You’re a vegetarian?”

“No. I just don’t feel like being a carnivore today.”

Edgar smiled and David noticed that the soft amber light of the lamps lent his pale skin a golden luster, making him look less boyish than he had the night before.

They ordered their meals. Edgar settled on the kitfo and promised David a traditional coffee service after their meal.

"I noticed you reading about it," Edgar commented.

"It sounds interesting. Coffee and incense."

When the dishes came, David was relieved to find that his own food was plentiful and richly flavored. He even enjoyed the spongy bread it was served on. Edgar's meal looked disturbingly raw, but it smelled of butter and the same woody, warm spices that David already associated with Edgar's skin and sweat.

"Do you like your dinner?" Edgar asked.

"Yeah. I wasn't sure that I would, but this is all really tasty. How's yours?"

"Perfect," Edgar replied, though he seemed somehow embarrassed by the admission.

"So, are you originally from around here?" David carefully scooped up a spicy assortment of lentils with his bread.

"No. I moved here from the east coast about a month ago."

"Do you have family out here?"

Edgar paused for a few moments before answering.

"I might, but I haven't concerned myself with my family for a long time." He shrugged and took another bite of his vivid red kitfo. "What about you?"

"My parents own a small organic farm out in the county. I visit them pretty often," David said.

"Sounds nice."

"It is." David wondered if Edgar's family had rejected him because he was gay. The way Edgar had dismissed them made him think so.

"You're lucky," Edgar said in an admiring tone.

"I know," David admitted. "I'm luckier than I deserve to be."

"I hope that was a subtle declaration of how fortunate you feel to have met me." Edgar smiled.



David had no idea how Edgar could be so relaxed after coming so close to being Calvin's next meal. But then, Edgar hadn't seen the body in the dumpster. He probably hadn't really considered how easily the same thing could have happened to him.

"I think we were both lucky to have left that dance club when we did last night. If we had stayed much longer—" David wanted to believe that if Calvin had walked in, he would have tried to stop him from taking Edgar. But a sick uncertainty haunted him. His entire body ached with the memory of Calvin's jaws ripping into his flesh. He had fought Calvin for his own life, but he didn't know if he was brave enough to fight for someone else's.

Either way, David suspected that Calvin would have taken Edgar if he'd wanted him, and there was little doubt that Calvin would have wanted him.

The moment David had first seen Edgar, he'd been aware of how such a shy, young man would stir Calvin's appetite. David had sensed the same attraction in himself. He'd felt hunger and fascination when he'd seen Edgar, and it had drawn him. The thought made David sick with himself.

"Is something bothering you?" Edgar asked.

David looked up and realized that he'd been staring at his plate in silence for several moments.

"I just don't have much of an appetite, I guess," David said.

"Were you there?" Edgar asked. "When the police found the body?"

David nodded.

Edgar considered this quietly for a moment. David could almost see him trying to imagine what the scene must have been like: the gutted death that he had so narrowly missed himself.

"Was it... bad?"

"Yeah, it was," David said. He pushed his food aside. It didn't matter how hungry he was. He couldn't eat.

"The police will catch him," Edgar said.

"Sure," David said, but he didn't believe it. He'd outrun a squad car himself just this afternoon. They wouldn't stop Calvin. David had driven a hunting knife into his stomach and Calvin had pulled it out and tossed it aside with a laugh.

"You don't want to be out right now, do you?" Edgar asked.

David thought of lying, but he knew he wasn't good at it.

"Not really," David admitted.

"Why don't we take a rain check on the coffee?" Edgar asked. "You want to go back to my place?"

David did. They paid and Edgar left an extravagant tip. He smiled, seeing David trying to work out the percentage.

"I just finished a commission, and I'm working on another one. I can afford to be generous. Anyway I've heard flashing your wallet is a good way to impress a date."

\*\*\*

In the quiet of the basement apartment, Edgar drew David in. The scent of him, the delicate pink blush of his pale skin. David pulled him into his arms, kissed him.

Edgar showed him his drawings and paintings. Most were minutely detailed diagrams of animals, plants, and machines. There was a cool perfection to them that David couldn't imagine achieving.

"What's this one?" David glanced at a sketch on Edgar's table. It was unlike any of the other pictures, full of rough lines and hard eraser marks. Gray, ghostly masses seemed to float up between wild black strokes and the paper's white surface. David thought he could make out a face—contorted and half-animal. The longer he stared at the page, the more solid the faint image seemed to become. It disturbed him, because he suspected that what he saw wasn't what Edgar had drawn, but an image that lurked in his own thoughts.

“That’s an ongoing project. I’m trying to build a better mousetrap, as it were.”

“Mousetrap?” David asked.

“It’s a figure of speech. You know, find a better way to do something,” Edgar replied. He put a CD into his computer and the wireless speakers hummed to life with classical music. Edgar caught David’s hand.

“Would you care to dance?” he asked. David smiled at the formality of the question.

“Yeah,” David said, and then added, “it would be a pleasure.”

They danced. The closeness of their bodies stirred a deep, slow arousal in David. He let go of his worry, holding Edgar against him. Before the CD ended they were on the couch, entwined, pressing and kissing. Edgar had two condoms left and they used them both. It wasn’t the exhausting sex of the night before, but something more comforting and caring.

Edgar seemed to sense that David didn’t want animal lust, nor to feel his own strength overwhelm Edgar’s. Edgar held him in his arms and stroked his hair. He kissed David’s shoulders and they lay quietly together. The apartment was warm and it was easy to lie across the couch only half-dressed, drifting in and out of sleep.

Edgar’s cell phone chirped quietly and he answered it. He patted David’s shoulder gently and rose from the couch. David closed his eyes, half-listening.

“Yes. You were right. It’s difficult,” Edgar said. He sounded a little more clipped than usual. “Two or three months.” He listened to the person on the other end of the line. “No, difficult doesn’t mean I’m giving up. You can tell Linda that I’ll have it done before her birthday.”

There was another pause, or perhaps David drifted off. The next thing he heard was Edgar saying, “Goodbye,” and snapping his phone closed.

David cracked his eyes open. Edgar was standing in the kitchen, heating a cup of water in the microwave.

“Pushy customer?” David asked.

“It’s a private commission, so the work is pretty personal to the man who’s hired me.”

“Still, it’s almost 10:00. A little late for business calls.”

“He’s not in the country,” Edgar replied. “But I’d expect as much even if he were. People get worried when they care about something.” Edgar smiled at David through the doorway, then turned back to the microwave and removed the cup. “When there’s so much emotion involved, people can be demanding. At the same time, it feels good to know that I’m doing something that’s important to someone.” Edgar dunked a teabag in his water, added two spoonfuls of honey, and stirred it. He glanced back over his shoulder at David. “You want that beer now?”

“Sure,” David said.

Edgar brought it to him. David only drank a little before laying his head down on Edgar’s lap, Edgar stroking his hair. David thought he ought to get up, but before he could, he drifted to sleep.

\*\*\*

Over the next two months David spent more and more of his time with Edgar. He grew accustomed to Edgar’s largely nocturnal lifestyle. He discovered that he enjoyed the quiet afternoons spent reading while Edgar painted. He spent days on end in his human form rediscovering its limits and pleasures.

Edgar always seemed a little surprised and flattered when David asked him out. They went to see two of the bands that Lisa’s new girlfriend played bass for. They took in midnight movies and made out in the velvet seats of the old Pickford Theatre. Edgar delighted in the activities as if they were new discoveries and his reserve steadily faded. David even managed to cajole him into drag for Lisa’s birthday party.

The nights he slept alone, David was restless, so he found excuses to do it as little as possible. He began to keep spare clothes at Edgar's apartment, as well as his razor and shampoo. He was touched when he dropped by one late afternoon to find that Edgar had bought cereal and milk for him. After that, Edgar's bare kitchen shelves and empty refrigerator quickly filled with food.

The sterile quality of the apartment faded in the face of David's habitation. One of David's dropped socks lay beside the bedroom door. A tangled blanket remained on the couch after a late night of watching television together. The sharp smell of lemon cleaners vanished beneath the warm, mingled scents of their bodies. A deep happiness pervaded David when he was with Edgar and he sensed that Edgar, as quiet and reticent as he was, felt the same.

At the same time, David's awareness of Calvin's presence grew. At first he caught only a hint of Calvin's musk, and it was miles from Edgar's apartment. But as weeks passed, Calvin moved closer. David smelled him in the aisles of grocery stores and in coffee shops. More than once, David caught sight of a tall blonde man and a sick terror gripped him.

Just before summer break, a twelve year old girl from Edgar's apartment went missing. The police contacted Lisa and this time, David wore a leash.

He found the little girl's body behind Edgar's favorite restaurant, her neck crushed and her limbs broken. The contents of her school bag lay crushed and strewn in wild arcs around her body. David imagined Calvin hurling her, like a rag doll, again and again against the concrete wall. The flesh of her face and chest had been chewed and spat out in sticky globs, as if she were somehow unworthy of even eating. She had not been the prey Calvin hungered for, only a toy he had vented his frustration against.

David knew exactly who Calvin wanted. His voice shook when he called Edgar. He begged him not to leave his apartment, not to allow anyone in but him. He could hear the sleepy confusion in Edgar's agreement, and it made him even more afraid.

"I have to go," David told Lisa.

"Go," she said, then caught his hand. "Be careful."

When David reached Edgar's apartment, Edgar failed to answer when David called to him over the intercom. In a panic, David hurled himself at the door. The metal bit into his shoulder and groaned under the force of his body. David stepped back for a second try, but then Edgar's sleepy voice greeted him from the small speaker. A moment later, David was in the building and sprinting down the stairs.

"What's happened?" Edgar asked. His black hair hung around his face in utter disarray.

"He killed another kid," David said. "The girl from Jefferson Elementary. Her family lives on the third floor of this building. We found her body under the dumpster behind *Axum*."

Edgar frowned and sat down on the couch.

"Do the police have any suspects?" Edgar asked.

"They have shit," David replied. "He walks right past them and eats people's kids! He was probably the guy who crapped in the police station parking lot just to show them what a joke they are to him. The cops don't even know how to look for a guy like Calvin! They keep thinking he has to fit a profile, have a mother complex, walk on two legs, die when he gets shot—"

Edgar gazed at David with a look of quiet concern, and David realized that he wasn't making much sense.

"I know him," David said at last. "He's a monster. Really, a monster—" A tremor broke David's voice. He hated to think of what Calvin was and what he had made David into.

He looked away from Edgar, trying to hide the self-loathing that roiled through him. He didn't want Edgar to know.

"He's the man who left those scars on you, isn't he?" Edgar asked softly.

David nodded.

"Come here. Sit down with me," Edgar said. David came to him. "Do you think he's trying to find you again?" Edgar asked.

"No." David's throat tightened and he had to wait a moment before he could speak again. "He wants *you*. That's why he came down from the mountain. There's something about you that he's drawn to. That's why he's hunting in this neighborhood. He's at your coffee shop and behind your favorite restaurant. I keep seeing him in shop windows and I smell him everywhere. He's here and he won't give up until he finds you."

Edgar was quiet for several moments. David listened to his slow, even breathing.

"Have you told any of this to the police?" Edgar asked.

"I called in an anonymous description of him," David said, then shook his head. "But I know I sound crazy. I know. And Lisa thinks that if I went to the police they would end up suspecting me of the crimes."

"Probably," Edgar said. He sounded so sure that it frightened David.

"It isn't me," David said.

"I know," Edgar assured, and he smiled slightly. "I've known a few rotten men in my life, David, and you aren't even close to being one. You're certainly not a murderer." Edgar squeezed David's thigh in an almost paternal manner. He stood, but didn't step away from David.

"I need a cup of tea. You want something?"

"I want to get out of here," David gripped Edgar's leg, hard. "I want you to come with me."

Edgar sighed heavily. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"My parents farm, maybe, or somewhere farther away. Somewhere Calvin will never look for us," David said.

"He really hurt you, didn't he?" Edgar asked. He stroked David's hair.

"It's not just me—"

"I know," Edgar cut in. His voice was soft but very firm. "I'm not going to move to Borneo, but if it makes you feel better, we can spend the night at your place."

"You don't understand!" David glared up at Edgar. "He's a fucking monster!"

"I do understand." Edgar stared into David's eyes. There was a hardness in Edgar's expression that David had never seen before. "I've had my own encounters with monsters. The one thing I've learned is that you can't outrun them. Sooner or later they find you, and you have to face them."

David shook his head. "Calvin isn't some metaphor or life lesson—"

"I believe you, and I've already agreed to leave for the night," Edgar said. "Let's leave it at that for now, all right?"

David didn't want to, but he also knew he was too upset to offer any kind of intelligent argument. At least Edgar had agreed to come away with him tonight.

"All right," David agreed. Edgar looked relieved.

"I guess I'd better get an overnight bag packed," Edgar said. He frowned at his drafting table and then looked at David. "While I'm getting dressed and packed, do you think you could run to the mail drop and get that illustration mailed for me?"

David picked up the padded manila envelope. The nearest mailbox was two blocks away. He didn't want to go, but he also knew that he had to get a grip on himself. He couldn't start acting like a paranoid, possessive madman and expect Edgar to take anything he said seriously.



“Promise you won’t let anyone in but me,” David said.

Edgar nodded. He wandered into the bathroom, then laughed. “My God, my hair looks like a bird’s nest.” He leaned out of the bathroom door. “Has it been this bad all this time?”

David smiled weakly and nodded.

“Great,” Edgar sighed. “I guess I’ll wash my hair at your house. We’re taking my car. Hopefully the tinted windows will hide my shame.”

“Sure,” David agreed. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here,” Edgar said. “I promise.”

David ran all the way to the mailbox. He dropped the slim envelope in and turned back. A few feet away from him a man was talking loudly on his cell phone, inquiring fearfully about the little girl. He was on his way to pick his son up from soccer right now.

David hurried down the street. A mother gripped her little daughter’s hand tightly as David came up beside them at the crosswalk. David kept his gaze pointedly averted from them. He studied the chestnut trees across the street. When the walk signal flashed he let the mother and child go ahead of him. As they reached the other side of the street, David glanced past them to the entry of Edgar’s apartment building. Calvin stood in front of the thick glass security door, running his tanned hand over the intercom keys.

Then he lifted a silver key with a tattered bit of red yarn hanging from it. He unlocked the door and easily pulled it open.

An animalistic roar burst up from David’s throat and he sprinted forward. His muscles screamed and his bones felt like fire, but he didn’t care. He tore past the woman and her child, hardly noticing the woman’s surprised squeal.

Hearing David, Calvin held the door open with one hand and turned back. For an instant, surprise registered on his handsome face; then he smiled.

Fury surged through David and he sprang, slamming into Calvin and pitching them both into the apartment building. Calvin's back cracked against the handrail of the staircase. David fell on top of him, sinking his long teeth deep into the meat of Calvin's shoulder.

He felt Calvin's muscles flex and twist and suddenly, Calvin's huge haunches were under him. Calvin kicked into David's chest with a brutal strength and David hurtled into the air, flipping like a piece of rag. He crashed against the stairs and tumbled down, the cement steps hammering both muscle and bone. Dizzy sickness welled in him as he hit the basement floor. He sprawled against the concrete. Calvin bounded past him.

David forced himself up, his body shifting and twisting into any shape that would allow him to follow Calvin. Twice he caught Calvin and tore into his thick flesh. The first time, Calvin pounded David's face with large human fists, and threw David against the concrete floor.

David tasted his own blood and felt his ribs spearing into his lung. He growled Calvin's name and lurched forward. He sank his clawed fingers into Calvin's right calf and ripped the muscle from the bone.

At last Calvin gasped in pain, but almost instantly the muscle writhed back up his leg. Calvin spun and kicked David against the wall, again and again. Shocks of blinding pain ripped through David. He felt his hipbones split, his vertebra crack. His vision blurred, and all he could smell was his own blood. A keening, involuntary whimper escaped him and to his utter horror, Edgar's door opened.

"David?" Edgar leaned out, and his curious expression instantly melted into horror. "Oh god, David," he whispered.

Calvin drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with Edgar's scent. His entire body rippled with excitement. He grinned and David glimpsed his blood red tongue dart over the tips of his long teeth. Calvin turned on Edgar.

Edgar stepped back into his apartment. Calvin surged after him. David dragged himself forward on all fours.

The door fell open under his weight, but he didn't have the strength to do more than lay there, bleeding on the white tile floor, and watch Calvin slowly stalk closer to where Edgar stood beside the couch. Edgar gripped a pitifully small penknife in his hand.

"You." Calvin's voice was husky and on the edge of arousal. He leaned closer to Edgar. "You are going to die slow, Baby."

Edgar looked past Calvin to David. His eyes shone as if he were on the verge of tears. Every fiber of David's being wanted to stand, to go to Edgar. He felt his muscles tugging at his bones, but he couldn't rise.

Calvin glanced over his shoulder, saw David, and snorted.

"You think that piece of shit pup is gonna save you?" Calvin demanded. He sounded both angry and amused. "Ain't nothing gonna save you, Baby. I'm gonna eat you alive and then I'm gonna finish what I started with your boyfriend."

"No, you won't. You won't touch him." Edgar raised his gaze to meet Calvin's. His expression was so calm that it seemed to unsettle Calvin.

David prayed that somehow Edgar could keep Calvin talking. He just needed a little more time. A furious heat poured through the marrow of his bones and David felt them melting back together. It was agony, and yet he welcomed it. His ribs slowly rose from their collapsed splinters. He drew in a full breath. He pushed himself up to his knees.

"I'm gonna do a lot more than touch him, Baby." Calvin growled at Edgar. "And I'm gonna eat you both." He reached for Edgar, and Edgar lifted his hand, catching Calvin's thick wrist between his fingers.

"No," Edgar said softly, and a ripple of darkness pulsed through the room. The table lamp and the overhead light

went black. David's pupils dilated, drinking in the faint light from the hallway. The black air surrounding him suddenly felt too thick. A single breath seemed to extend for minutes. His heartbeat was a leaden throb.

In the weird darkness, Calvin stood strangely still, his mouth open, his arm extended. Edgar lifted his hand to Calvin's jaw as if stroking his cheek.

David saw the silver flash of the fine blade.

Edgar's hand dropped fluidly to Calvin's shoulder, then his elbow and wrist. Edgar traced the blade through ligaments and tendons, cutting with cool precision. And, very slowly, David saw blood begin to rise across Calvin's skin. Calvin's jaw drooped and then fell from his skull like a stone sinking through water. His arms went limp. His fingers dropped, one after another, to the tiles. A look of utter terror came into Calvin's eyes, but he remained motionlessly suspended in the darkness.

Edgar circled him. Calvin's knees gave out and he fell to the floor in a slow spill. Lazy, dark rivulets of blood poured from his body. Shadows within the surrounding darkness seemed to lap up the pooling blood.

Edgar knelt beside Calvin.

"Before I kill you," Edgar's voice was low and soft, "I've been hired to tell you that Annie Mueller's family loved her and they miss her and they will never forgive you for taking her from them." Edgar placed the edge of his small blade against Calvin's neck. "I also want you to know that I'm doing this for David. You will never touch him again."

Edgar leaned forward, and the blade sank through Calvin's throat. Calvin started to make a sound, but only dark bubbles rose from the deep wound in his throat. Then his head rolled from his body.

Edgar turned and gazed at David. He looked exhausted and hollow. David tried to speak, but his throat felt like it was full of water.

“Don’t look at me, David,” Edgar said. “Close your eyes. You need to rest.”

Then another wave of darkness engulfed the room, and David saw nothing more.

\*\*\*

David woke up feeling like he’d lost a wrestling match with a bus. He rolled over and discovered that he was alone in Edgar’s bed. The sharp smell of lemon scented cleaner wafted over him, blotting out all other scents. He tried to call Edgar’s name, but it came out as a whisper. Still, that was enough.

Edgar stepped into the doorway. The uncertainty in his face seemed strange to David after witnessing him kill so coldly. Edgar cupped a mug of tea in his pale hands.

“This is for you.” Edgar brought him the tea and David accepted it, though his fingers felt weak and clumsy. He drank slowly.

Edgar sat on the edge of the bed. He gazed down at his own bare, white feet, and then at the wall.

“Your friend Lisa called,” he said. “I told her you’d come down with the stomach flu. She didn’t seem to believe me.”

“I don’t get sick.” David was pleased that his voice came a little more firmly now.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Edgar said. “It would take something extraordinary to injure a body like yours. Not that you didn’t manage it anyway.” Edgar looked at David, both tenderness and annoyance playing in his features. “You are the single stupidest, bravest man I’ve even known. That Calvin could have killed you.”

“But he didn’t.” David let the memory come back to him. “You killed him.” He searched Edgar’s delicate face, wishing he could find better words for the question he needed to ask. “What are you?”

Edgar flinched at the question.

"I'm like you," Edgar said. "Someone who fell prey to a monster, fought him, and survived. Your monster was a werewolf. Mine was a Creature of Darkness." Edgar frowned. "I suppose you would have called him a vampire."

"A vampire?" David couldn't help the disbelief in his voice. "You're a vampire?"

"Yes, more or less." Edgar's pale cheeks flushed.

"You love garlic," David protested. "You have a reflection and—"

"I can't endure sunlight," Edgar broke in. "I can drink the life from a man and live on nothing but a little protein for months if I have to. And I'm... old."

"Old?" David asked.

"I'm a little over ninety." Edgar looked incredibly embarrassed, but somehow it reassured David. For all the cold composure Edgar had displayed when he had killed Calvin, sitting here now, he was exactly the same man David had fallen in love with.

"You cradle robber," David teased. "I'm only twenty-five, you know."

"Yes, I know." Edgar reached out and shyly placed his hand against David's thigh. "I didn't mean to seduce you. I just set a lure to draw a werewolf to me. I thought it would be Calvin, but then you came—"

"And you came, as well," David said just to see Edgar flush pink. David drained the last of his tea. He studied Edgar, knowing there was more he should ask. "So, you're what? A bounty hunter?"

"Not so much now," Edgar said. "I really do make most of my living as an illustrator. But the Muellers are friends of mine, so I took their offer." Edgar cocked his head slightly and studied David. "Do you actually work at a dog kennel?"

"Yes, I really spend my days exercising and grooming dogs, though I also volunteer for the Wilderness Search and Rescue."

“But in your other form?”

“Yeah,” David admitted, and this time it was him feeling a little shy. “Did you know all along? I mean, about my condition?”

Edgar nodded.

“I knew, but you weren’t anything like what I expected,” Edgar said. “You are so... good. That may not sound like much of a compliment, but among our kind—creatures with so much darkness in them—you shine like a star. I should have told you what I was, what I was doing. But compared to you, I felt so cruel and so ugly.” Edgar sighed heavily. “I didn’t want you to see me for what I really am. But, of course, you did.”

“I did,” David said. Edgar looked away. David caught Edgar’s hand. Edgar looked up at him, and David could see that he was both surprised and relieved.

“You aren’t cruel, and you aren’t ugly. You did what had to be done. And honestly, I’m glad you were there. I’m even happier that you’re here now.” David squeezed Edgar’s hand. “You did what I could never do.” As David spoke, he felt the truth of his words. He hadn’t killed Calvin, and not because he lacked strength or courage, but because killing was not in his nature. He had fought to bring Calvin down, to stop him, but not to kill him. Strangely, that knowledge reassured David. He’d spent so much time being afraid of the creature within him, thinking that he could so easily become another Calvin. But now he knew that wasn’t true, and his fear seemed to melt away.

“You know,” David leaned closer to Edgar and kissed his ear, “I need some one like you in my life.”

“I need you, too,” Edgar replied.

David grinned. “Well, luckily, I happen to be right here.”

“I know.” Edgar looked at him, and David could see the desire in his eyes. Edgar glanced down at his own hands. “I shouldn’t take advantage of you while you’re weak.”

“When is there a better time to take advantage of me?” David teased.

“After you’ve got a condom on,” Edgar replied slyly.

David laughed and quickly found the condoms in the nightstand drawer. He pulled Edgar close to him and Edgar relaxed into his arms. David drew him back into the warmth of the bed and they remained there until well after nightfall.

The End.