

# 1

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

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

The moment of uncertainty elongated as the car inched closer.

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

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

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

partner? He'd be worse off if they had to chase him down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Walking down the side of road in the dark isn't safe. Other people don't got Shifter eyes like you. It'd be real easy to get run over." Simpson put the empty cup back in its holder and lit up his cigar. Tom wrinkled his nose against the rank pungency of cheap tobacco and sneezed. Simpson

cracked his window a polite quarter inch. “You’re pretty far from home.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where were you heading tonight?”

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

“Really? Have you got your transportation papers on you?”

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

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

“But I’ve got urban skills,” Tom said. “I’m a playwright. I wrote *playwright* down on the form.”

“You don’t say?” Officer Simpson puffed his cigar thoughtfully. “And they denied you anyway?”

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

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

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

“I still want to go.” Tom leaned his head against the

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

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

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

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

"Why don't you see what's on the radio," Simpson suggested.

"The police radio?" Tom asked.

Simpson smirked. "The FM radio."

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Tom spent the next hour twisting the radio dial, trying to find something good to listen to while Simpson green-lighted or vetoed songs with no detectable pattern. A casual closeness developed between them.

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

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

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

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

"Will you be using your unique skills?"

"Acting?"

"Shifter skills."

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

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

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

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

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

"Where will it be, then?"

“At my friend Angela’s trailer,” Tom said.

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

They both knew which cop Simpson was talking about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure.”

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

Though he didn’t need it to see, Tom turned on the

overhead light. The faceted fixture cast yellow shadows throughout the room, which helped him feel less lonely. He tuned his radio to the station he'd been listening to in Simpson's car, picked up his costume, a needle, and thread, and started sewing purple rickrack on the left cuff.

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

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

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

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

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

Tom fell asleep on the brown and orange plaid couch, listening to the radio signal gradually diminishing to static

and endlessly reliving the moment Simpson smiled at him. When he woke up, he discovered he'd lost his needle.



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

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

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

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

"Nothing much."

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

"Don't worry about Simpson."

"He pays too much attention to you. I think he likes you. He's going to ask you for a date. He's going to say, 'Let me take you away from the onion field and give you a new life...' And then you'll get to go live in his big cop house and

watch his big cop TV all day.” Angela leaned in, making smooching noises. Tom hung his head until Angela relented. “Just kidding. I think he wants to kick your fuzzy ass.”

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

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

“I’m still putting the show on.”

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

Tom had included Cathy mainly to make Angela happy.

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

*Love Among the Cabbages* was Tom’s seventh play. The first three were serious studies of the life of agricultural workers, which Tom thought were brilliant, but they received a lukewarm reception from his audience. After

working in the fields all day, the last thing Angela and his mom had wanted to think about were their own hard lives.

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

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

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

“You did.”

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

“What people?” Tom asked.

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

“What about Shorty?”

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

“My wife?”

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

“Yeah, but—“

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

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

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

## 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Does everything fit all right?" he asked.

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

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

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Tom turned back to the mirror and pushed out a thick black mustache on Burt's face. Angela clapped, then grabbed her nail scissors and trimmed the hairs along his lip. She fussed with Tom's hair, applying shiny pomade to Burt's hair and fixing Ermaline's braid with a cloud of hairspray.

Shorty banged on the door.

"Ten minutes till curtain," Shorty hollered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Break a leg, man," Shorty said.

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

“Okay, everybody settle down now, the play’s starting!” Angela flipped off the porch lights and stepped back inside. Tom walked out onto the darkened porch. His eyes dilated wide to see the crowd sprawled on blankets and lawn chairs. Close to a hundred of his coworkers and their families had shown up. The turbulent night sky seethed behind them. Hot, twisting currents breezed across Tom’s denuded skin. The air didn’t smell like rain, just Shorty’s menthol cigarettes. A wave of terrible nervousness rippled through Tom’s guts. He clenched his hands tightly together in prayer.

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

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

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

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

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

“Would this one do?” Burt inquired raffishly.

Tom pivoted again, to show Ermaline.

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

“I’m Burt Butte.” Burt whipped a plastic rose from his sleeve. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

And the play began. Lines rolled out of Tom’s mouth. His body knew the motions. For ninety minutes Tom became a conduit for the story. Burt and Ermaline’s love blossomed. Tragedy struck when authorities discovered Burt’s migrant work permit had expired and deported him, but at the last moment a cyclone lifted Burt up and carried him straight back to Ermaline’s cabbage patch, miraculously leaving the cabbages intact.

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

“That it is, Sweet Ermaline,” Burt assured her.

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

“Daddy’s home!” Burt proclaimed.

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

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

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

Tom loped the fifty yards to his own trailer, pelted by hail and huge raindrops the size of grapes. He burst into

his kitchen, soaking wet and stinging. Apart from the hail, he thought the show went pretty well. People laughed when they were supposed to laugh, clapped when they were meant to. Maybe after the storm let up, he could go back and meet his public.

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

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

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

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

Tom blinked. "You can see me."

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

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

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

“Are you really Officer Simpson?” Tom searched the other man’s face.

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

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

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

“What do you want?”

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

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

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

“Show you what?”

“Your alpha form.”

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

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

Simpson’s mouth lifted up at the corner.

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

“This your bedroom?”

“How did you know?”

“Smells like you. May I?”

“Go ahead.”

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

Tom had never seen another man shift before. Simpson's eyes elongated and slanted, changing from blue to bright orange, the color of ripe pumpkins. His ears grew up into points as his jaw shifted forward, thick and heavy and muzzle-like. His teeth lengthened. Simpson's spine decompressed until he was slightly taller than Tom. Simpson stood there, lithe and beautiful and Shifter, like him.

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

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

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

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

Tom felt electrified, yet ashamed. He had forced Simpson to reveal himself, yet he still wore a costume, his strangely bisected body. For a moment he thought of

showing Simpson his cinammon-skinned alpha form, but he couldn't. His caution ran too deep. The rain thinned to a gentle hiss as Tom unwound into his black-furred shape. Tom's skin darkened as velvety fur erupted from beneath it. He pushed Ermaline's long braid off and it fell to the floor like a discarded wig.

Tom's narrow twin bed barely accommodated him; Simpson didn't fit. So he dragged the mattress onto the floor and motioned Tom down beside him. Because Simpson couldn't speak any language Tom could understand, Tom didn't ask any questions. He followed Simpson's lead, mimicking Simpson's touch, his motions—even the rough Shifter words he didn't understand until ecstasy overcame him.

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

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

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

"Will you come back?"

"Tonight?"

"Ever."

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

The envelope contained transportation papers, which would allow Tom to move freely within the state. Under

occupation, the papers said *actor*. A melancholy sting undercut Tom's delight.

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

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

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

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

"I will do."

Angela knocked loudly, causing Simpson to withdraw.

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

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

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

He thought maybe the hero should be blonde.