

# MISSING PERSON



FRANCES PAULI

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*for all my furry friends*

# MISSING PERSON

"A mile out, boys. Check your weapons." Joll Warren barked the order with one paw wrapped through the mesh lining inside of the van. The other paw reached for his gun while his hybrids followed directions. Six of Free Denver's finest police animals popped their clips and counted the rubber discs in each one. Their muzzles dropped to inspect their weapons, and Joll closed his eyes and prayed they wouldn't need them.

Even police issue non-lethals set his fangs on edge.

Sandy ears flattened against his skull. His coyote side sulked at the idea of violence. He tucked his plume tail against his legs and swallowed a whimper unvoiced. *A murder scene.* The van hit a rut and knocked him into the wall. *And here of all the blasted places, at an atypical facility.*

He closed his eyes and felt the frantic pattering of his heart. His prey side, the muskrat that only showed in the black, satiny fur on his feet and paws, wanted to panic and run.

"Report!" He half-howled the order.

"All go, boss." Hernandez yipped.

"I'm good."

"Me as well."

The unit chimed in their readiness, and Joll tucked his tail and smelled only his own distress. He reeked of it, and his crew *had* to sense it. They'd be nervous if they smelled his fear, and nervous couldn't be on the agenda today. He steeled himself, forcing his spine straight.

"All right. The caller claims our perpetrator has already fled the scene. There's no reason to believe we'll enter into conflict... but I want you ready just in case."

"Yes sir!"

Their answer came sharp and forceful enough to tell him his tone had worked. Rank gave his bluff more credence, and his team was trained to obey authority first and their noses second. *Good.* Joll smoothed the fur on the back of his neck and felt the slowing of the vehicle through the pads of his feet.

*Go time.*

The van pulled to a stop. Joll rapped a fist on the metal wall between the bay and the cab. Three beats and the engine died. The vibrations ceased traveling up and down his legs. He signaled for the rear doors to open with a jerk of his paw, closing his eyes to prepare them for the shift from dim interior to bright daylight.

They climbed out into a paved parking lot. An eight foot fence encircled this, with rolled razor wire along the top. Behind the van, a stouter coyote that reminded Joll of his elder brother pulled a wide gate shut. He wore a tan uniform and carried a short metal rod in his free paw.

Shock stick, civilian made and likely not regulated.

Joll cringed inwardly. For his team, he waved the other coyote over and forced his ears to stand at attention.

"They're waiting for you inside." The gate guard curled his upper lip, showing a sharp canine tooth. "Ugly business. "

"This is a children's facility," Hernandez barked. "They get a kid?"

"Naw." The guard shrugged off the idea. He waved his stick toward the building, a low gray collection of slabs with a wide stairway leading to one narrow door. "They'll show ya."

Joll led the way. He took the stairs with one paw on the butt of his pistol. The discs could take down even a pred-heavy criminal and had only failed to keep the peace once in all of Free Denver's history. He let his claws tap at the metal and froze on the stair when the front door opened.

A cat-rabbit female wearing a nurse's scrubs appeared in the entrance. She lashed her tail behind her, but her nose twitched and her long ears stood up when she saw Joll and his crew coming to the rescue.

"Free Denver police forces, ma'am." Joll snapped to attention and let the comfort of procedure soothe away his trepidation. "We've had an emergency call from this location."

"Yes." Her huge eyes flicked to the hybrids behind him, and her slit pupils narrowed even further. "I can show you. We haven't touched anything, but..." Her voice cracked. She inhaled a slow breath before continuing. "It's a real mess."

"The children aren't..." Joll didn't want to imagine what they were walking into, but he *really* didn't want to know the children had seen it.

"We have them secured in the dormitories," she said.

"Good." He nodded, and when she held the door open, stood aside with her and let his hybrids file into the white-tiled foyer.

The facility air carried a mixed cocktail of animal species, cafeteria food, and what smelled like old socks. Teenage musk, mingling with the antiseptic bite

of cleaning chemicals and plastic. The nurse secured the front doors, and Joll listened to his team's whispers.

"You ever seen an atypical kid?" That was Hernandez again, the mouth that didn't know when to stay shut.

"Naw."

"Skittish. All prey."

"How do you know?"

"I'm just saying, they must be crazy scared."

"Hernandez!" Joll barked and the other hybrids snapped upright.

"Sir!"

"You and Phelps stay by the doors." He turned his back on them, motioning for the nurse to lead the way again. If Hernandez had any more muttering to do, he saved it until they'd marched out of hearing.

The atypical facility sounded hollow. Each step echoed through the wide halls as if there weren't dormitories full of children present, staff and guards and whoever else filled the space on a normal day. On a day when someone hadn't been killed. Joll sniffed despite himself, followed the cat-rabbit around the next corner, and caught the first faint scent of death.

His stomach tightened. He tucked his tail tighter and lifted his muzzle toward the ceiling air refreshers.

"He's in the cafeteria." The nurse paused in a wide doorway. Both heavy metal doors had been propped open, and the room beyond revealed a sea of folding tables and uncomfortable looking chairs. "Toward the far entrance. Mr. Winston will show you."

"Of course." Joll nodded his thanks and stepped into the scene.

Someone had moved the chairs into a ring, a makeshift boundary around the body. Joll's hybrids got there ahead of him, but they hovered on the less gruesome side of the plastic seats. They waited for him, and he'd run out of reasons not to take the lead. When they parted, Joll eased forward. He dragged back the nearest chair, made a doorway, and stood stunned inside the gap.

A fat cat lay, broken, on the tiles. The angles of his neck and limbs twisted into a contortion no living body could perform. There wasn't much blood. A thin crust of darker orange clung to the fur near the neck, but no puddles. Joll thanked his luck for that while his stomach clenched and threatened to revolt. Wouldn't do to lose it in front of his team. Wouldn't help the poor bastard who'd been tossed to the tiles like an old coat.

"Get pictures." He swiped a paw over his ears and pressed his tongue against one fang to keep his focus. "All the angles, document everything. We'll need statements."

He eased back to let them through and caught the eye of the nearest facility guard. "You Winston?"

"No. *I* am." A rotund bear with a rat's tail ambled around the ring of chairs.

"How many witnesses?" Joll pulled a recording tablet from his uniform pocket and thumbed the thing into active mode.

The bear glanced at his fellow guard.

"Were there witnesses?"

"It was a kid done it," Winston mumbled.

Joll waited. He held the recorder between them, but the bear just blinked in return. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Kid went nuts." The round head nodded slowly, as if it moved through the thick sludge of the hybrid's thoughts. "Jumped the director during an assembly and just twisted his... like..."

Two gigantic paws mimed the act of twisting the director's neck. Joll watched them moving, imagining it despite himself. He almost heard the bones cracking.

"So." His stomach. *Seasons!* He was going to be sick. "There *were* witnesses."

"I guess so."

The bear exchanged another glance with the first guard. Beside them, one of the team reached for the body, rolled it enough to get a photo of the face, and sent a fresh waft of death into an eddy around the scene.

"Don't go anywhere." Joll growled it and spun, pads squeaking against the tiles. He marched back toward the cafeteria entrance and did his best to look intimidating, angry instead of terrified. To smell furious instead of sick. When the nurse approached him at the doors, Joll snapped at her. "Restroom?"

She jerked one arm toward the hallway, and Joll jogged in that direction. He found the doors, plunging into the male's bathroom to find all of the amenities oddly miniaturized. Children's facility, and too late to worry about it now. He hunched over the shortest basin in Hybrid Nation history and evacuated lunch and likely a portion of his breakfast as well.

Leaning his forehead against the low mirror, Joll let the cool glass ease away the last spasms. He wiped his mouth on the back of one paw, then ran some cool water, splashing it over his muzzle and rubbing it behind his ears. He blinked at his reflection. He looked worse than the corpse.

Something squeaked behind him.

Joll twisted away from the mirror and dropped into a crouch. His paw hovered over his hip, but the face staring wide-eyed from an open stall posed no danger. The child hunkered beside one of the toilets with his fluffy tail wrapped



all the way around his body. He clutched it like it were a stuffed toy, a security blanket.

"Hello." Joll's throat burned from retching and the word came out too harsh. The kid curled farther into himself. Chipmunk, by the stripes and the shape of the tail. Joll guessed the boy's secondary animal was also a rodent. The big eyes and tiny round ears didn't argue for anything else. He remembered Hernandez's comment, *crazy scared*, and made his voice as soft and low as his sore throat could manage. "It's okay."

"I had a nightmare," the boy squeaked.

Joll had never met an atypical hybrid. He could only imagine what two prey animals in one body would feel like. He'd always blamed his muskrat side for his squeamish disposition, and growing up, for the ration of shit he'd taken from his siblings. *Your coyote isn't strong enough to balance it out. Lean on your predator more, Joll.*

But this kid had no predator, and he'd likely just seen a real life murder.

"It's okay." Joll made himself smaller, lowering his gaze and perking his ears into a friendly position.

"I dreamed the monkeys came to take me away." The prey-heavy boy hugged his tail tighter.

Joll sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. *The monkeys*. How many times had he crawled from his own bed, trembling, rushing to his parents' room with the same words on his lips? His brothers planted the seed at a young age, a hybrid hazing tradition. Even his parents participated. *Eat your protein, Joll, or the monkeys will come for you.*

Here in the atypical facility, twenty miles outside of Free Denver, Joll's heart squeezed for the boy without a mother to run to. He held out one paw and smiled, but his mind filled with a memory of climbing into his mother's lap, of her soft voice reassuring him. He'd stopped crying, leaned his head against her swollen belly while she chanted to him. *It's okay. it's okay, my cub.*

"Let me take you to the nurse?"

The boy sniffled. He reached a paw forward.

The memory surged to the surface again. *Her swollen belly?* Joll's hand dropped like a weight. He left the poor boy reaching for nothing, leaned his head back against the wall, and closed his eyes. *Not right. He was the youngest. How had he...*

"Is everything all right?" The nurse's voice sounded through the bathroom door. A pattering of paws answered her, the soft treads of the rodent child running for help. The door creaked open and shut, and Joll dragged himself back to his feet.

"A moment," he called. The kid was probably ratting him out for tossing his cookies, but he attempted a rushed grooming, managed to get his fur somewhat in line before returning to the hallway. Outside the cat-rabbit waited, holding the boy's paw and favoring Joll with a too sympathetic expression.

That look said she'd seen right through him.

"I think I scared him," Joll forced a gruffer edge than he felt and flicked his tail away from his legs. "Kid's had a rough night."

"Yes." She swished her tail softly, rabbit ears drooping to either side of her head. "We all have."

"I should get back." Joll straightened and sidestepped toward the cafeteria. "Secondary investigation team is due any..."

"They've just arrived." The nurse smiled and gave the boy's hand a little squeeze. "Back to bed now, Pito."

If the kid wanted to argue, he didn't show it. Her tone left no room for dissention. Not when the boy fled back down the hallways and not when she turned to Joll. "Come with me."

*When had his mother been pregnant?*

"I have something that will help your stomach."

He should have argued, should have returned to the crime scene and just sucked it up and fought his way through. Instead, he followed the nurse away from the cafeteria with his head full of questions and hazy images that made zero sense.

"I've seen this sort of thing before." The cat-rabbit led him into her nurse's station and waved for him to sit on the paper wrapped table. "It's not uncommon."

"You work with the prey-heavy," Joll said.

"Even balanced hybrids are susceptible to digestive distress, officer. What triggers it? Food?"

"Violence." The word slipped out before he could check it. Something about her profession, the implied confidentiality of a clinical room.

"That must make your job difficult." She turned her back to him and rummaged through an overhead cabinet.

"You want to know why a pacifist became a cop." Joll leaned back and eyed the magazine photos stapled to her ceiling. A sunny meadow, a field of flowers, and a rushing stream.

"It's not my business to ask those sort of questions." She thrust out her paw, offering a chalky pill shaped like a flat disc, like the ammunition in his pistol. "It's chewable."

"Thanks." Joll plucked the thing from her pads and popped it onto his

tongue. He chewed slowly, letting the memory solidify again. The haze had vanished. He couldn't begin to pretend he'd misremembered now. There had been another sibling. "I wanted to protect people."

"I'm sorry?" Her long ears jumped upright, and her nose twitched from side to side. She regarded Joll with tightly slit eyes.

"The job." He cleared his throat and remembered that he should be *doing* the job even then. "I wanted to be a cop so I could protect people from crap like this."

"It's a good reason."

"Yeah. Well, thanks again." Joll vaulted off the table and made the door before she could comment. He hurried his steps once outside, and whether she followed him or not, managed to reach the cafeteria without further interaction.

*It was possible she'd lost the baby.*

Joll Warren told himself that three times on the way back. His current surroundings argued another possibility, however, and Joll couldn't help but consider it. If *that* were the case, if the unthinkable had happened, he could have an atypical sibling somewhere. A sibling they'd never even spoken about.

Ahead of him, the murdered director lay as proof of his inadequacy, behind him lay a maze of secrets, a new sense of retro-foreboding. Joll heard the nurse's words again, *a good reason*. But if the thing he suspected were true, he hadn't managed to protect anyone.

"Your brother got another promotion." Mrs. Warren settled back into her chair and reached for a serving bowl with long fingers influenced by her rat minor. "More potatoes?"

"Sure." Joll lifted his plate, strewn with the remains of his first course, and let her spoon another mound of spuds in the center. "Everything's delicious, mom."

"He's coming to town next week, you know."

"Jayne?"

"Yes. Your sisters are plotting a reunion." The Warren family matriarch snorted, a habit that made her narrow, coyote muzzle scrunch so comically that the kids had all perfected their own imitations of the gesture, pantomimes they'd never dare perform in their mother's presence.

"Might be nice to get everyone together again." At the opposite end of the table, Joll's father spoke between bites of roast. His muskrat showed far more

than his children's. The satin black fur gleamed in the low light of the dining room. Warren senior's girth had stretched with every decade, but his eyes were still as sharp as his canine teeth. "Been awhile."

"It's nice to have you for Sundays though, dear." Mrs. Warren gave her husband a lingering and disapproving look. "Your sisters are always fiddling."

"I love our Sundays," Joll set down his spoon and looked between them. How long had they kept the secret? How could they sit there, easily discussing their children as if one of them weren't missing? "But having the *entire* family together sounds good, too."

"How's work?" His father leaned forward, squashing his belly against the table's edge. "They keeping you busy?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm working a murder case."

"Oh no!" His mother gasped, but Joll's dad's expression lit up. He nodded as if a murder case was just the thing, as if Joll's job was his own personal sporting event.

"Interesting." Mr. Warren scratched the spot between his overlarge fox ears. "Tough nut?"

"Happened at the FDIA." Joll watched their reactions, first one and then the other.

His father's ears went flat to his skull. Mrs. Warren dropped her nose toward her lap. She fidgeted with the tablecloth and spoke softer than a sigh. "How sad."

"I thought those places were supposed to be safe." Joll's dad flicked a glance toward the far end of the table. His eyes narrowed, dimmed.

"It wasn't a kid." Joll tightened his grip on the spoon and felt the air in the room as if it were ice water.

"Well that's good," his father grunted. "You staying for the game?"

"I might." Joll shrugged his shoulders and scooped at his potatoes. He felt his mother's gaze, his father's tension, and he smelled both of their nerves. Even over the scent of the roast. "Want me to grab the beer?"

"Smarty pants." Joll's father grunted again, sat back in his chair, and scratched the dent he'd pressed in his belly. He yawned, showing his odd combination of rodent front teeth and sharp canines. "I'll turn on the TV."

The table rocked when Mr. Warren rose and trundled toward the living room. Joll leaned back in his chair, remembering holiday dinners where he and Jayne had hidden beneath the family table planning imaginary hunts under the tablecloth long after the family had wandered into other rooms to gossip, argue, and continue nibbling at the leftovers.

He watched his mother pick at the tidbits left on her plate, swirling her spoon absently through a trail of dark gravy. Did she think about it? While her

children were romping through their formative years, had she wondered about the one that was missing?

But he was getting ahead of things. He'd come to dinner this week with an investigation in mind, and a good cop didn't decide who was guilty before he'd even taken a statement.

"Let me help you clean up." He stood, gathered his father's plate, and stacked it on top of his own.

"How do you do it?" His mother spoke so softly it might have been a stray thought.

Joll's ears swiveled in her direction, trained on her in case he missed the next one. "Do what, mom?"

"The job. You and violent things don't mix, honey."

"Most days it's pretty routine." Joll reached for the roast platter and lowered his voice to match hers. "The facility though, that was hard."

His mother's long fingers tapped at the tablecloth. She kept her claws sharp, painted to match her outfits. Her coyote side showed in her face and ears, but her long tail was bald and owned by her rodent minor. At the moment, it curled around the base of her chair, and Joll couldn't read her mood there, nor in the stoic expression on her face.

"I'll start the dishes," he offered.

"What was it like?"

"The crime or the facility?" Joll froze, half in the dining room and halfway through the open arch leading to the kitchen.

She didn't twitch a whisker, didn't give him any outward indication what the subject may or may not have cost her. "The facility."

"Like a prison." He regretted it when she flinched. A stab of guilt pressed him to amend the statement. "Like a school, too. A bit of both."

"I'll get the dishes. You go watch with your father." She rubbed her hands together in a brisk, very rodent-like gesture and stood, pushing her chair back and untangling her tail.

"I remember you being pregnant." He blurted it, and she flinched again.

"Well, I have four children..." It trailed away as she remembered which one she spoke to. "I'll do the dishes."

"Mom."

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice snapped now, and Joll heard the coyote, the predator coming through. "What do you want me to..."

"Was it atypical?"

"Yes." Both paws lifted to cover her eyes. She sagged against her chair back, ears drooping to the sides. "She was."

"I have another sister somewhere." The plates in his paws rattled. He leaned against the archway and closed his eyes. Real. The whole thing, the memory, the baby, a sister somewhere, it was all suddenly real.

"They tell you it's for their own good, that they're safe in there. And you believe it, Joll. You *have* to believe it." She spoke fast, as if the words had been waiting to come out all those long years, as if she couldn't hold them inside any longer. "They tell you not to think about it, that you'll forget. Forget? No. You can never do that."

"She was muskrat-rat?"

"Yes." Her head shook from side to side, back and forth, over and over. Her paws jerked together, as if they were busy at something he couldn't see. When she looked at him, however, her eyes were sharp and flinty black. "Joll, what is this about?"

"What is it about? Seriously? I wanted to know. I wanted to—"

"You're not looking? You can't. Oh, honey, you can't go poking into this."

"Why not?"

"I won't have it." She stamped one foot and curled her upper lip.

The sight of his mother's teeth always gave him a stomach ache. The plates threatened to tumble from his grip, but Joll clenched against the nausea and shook his head just as fiercely. "Just tell me her name. Oh god. Did you even give her a name?"

His mother's muzzle fell open. She let go of her chair, and for a breath, Joll thought she meant to slap him. He'd seen that look enough, surely, and knew when he'd crossed a line with her. Despite the fact that she hadn't struck him in more than fifteen years, he felt his spine curling, the cowering that he couldn't control in the face of her alpha.

"Of course we did!" She spat the words, pulling herself to her full height. Not as tall as it used to be, but still formidable. "Shame on you! Haven't we given you, taught you... Haven't we..."

Joll huddled in the doorway, the plates held in front of his body like a shield. His dinner squirmed in his belly, suddenly noxious, and his thoughts railed at his own stupidity. He was a grown man. He was not a cub.

His mother's rage died as quickly as it spawned. She sank back into her chair, shaking, staring at her lap. "Haven't we? But not for Miranda. No. Of course not. It's no good. No good can come of it."

"Mom?"

Her head snapped up. Her words stabbed like daggers, one after the other. "I won't have it, Joll. You'll leave it alone. Do you hear me? I forbid you to do this, and I'm not saying another word on the matter."

He tried to stare back at her, to hold that gaze. It never worked. When he looked away, she began to snifle, soft, ragged sounds that would have moved him to obedience any other time. "I'll do the dishes."

He backed into the kitchen and settled the plates beside their sink. This time, he *couldn't* obey. He had a name, Miranda. She'd be about twenty three, a muskrat-rat lost somewhere in the system. He couldn't forget it now, and even when he fetched the rest of the dishes, when he heard his mother's soft chanting, *leave it alone, leave it, leave it...* Joll knew he'd do anything in his power to find her.

What might happen after that, however, he couldn't begin to guess.

The medical report on the director of the atypical facility presented a whole different problem. The neck bones had been crushed, squeezed with enough force to crumble bone. No kid had killed the cat, and that meant they had no idea who might have.

Joll stared at the open folder as if it were a snake. The staff had all confirmed the story. Every statement said the same thing. *The kid went crazy.*

"They lied to us." He eyed Hernandez across his desk and shook his head. "Every last one of them."

"Seems like it." Hernandez shrugged his wide shoulders. Black fur poked out around the collar of his uniform, and he shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "About the scene..."

"You got something worse for me?"

"Naw. They're still running the samples. I just wanted to apologize about, you know, that crap with Phelps and I."

"Forget it." Joll tapped the papers with one paw. "Medical examiner puts our murderer at about three-hundred plus. You think an atypical teenager could get that massive?"

"Depends on species, but I can't see it. Even if they *were* that big, bulk isn't the same as strength."

"And they're not aggressive." Joll growled in the back of his throat. "We're gonna have to go back there. Lean on them. Someone's bound to crack."

"Count me out," Hernandez said. He had the decency to lower his tail and shoulders when Joll glared at him. "Sorry, boss. It's just they give me the creeps. The idea of it, you know. Martins in recording and his wife had an atypical kid last year. It was horrible for them."

*For them.*

Joll let his claws rake across the mat under his chair. "They give it up?"

"What else could they do?"

"I read somewhere that every once in awhile a couple will try to raise it like a normal cub." He'd read it that morning, in fact, on a website for the atypical facility he was investigating both for a murder and in an attempt to find his sister.

"Don't you think that'd just make it harder when the time came?"

"That's what it said, yeah." Joll set the folder on his desk, amidst the dirty coffee cups and the tower of phone messages on little pink slips of paper. "Just seems kinda heartless."

"Come on, boss. You know as well as anyone what the world's like. It's a zoo out there. Even balanced hybrids have their aggressive side. Factor in the pred-heavy and it's just impossible. There's no safe place for the prey-heavy."

"And you think the facilities are safe? Even after..." He tapped the folder for emphasis. "This."

"The kids didn't get hurt."

"They easily might have." Joll heaved a sigh fueled by all the worry he'd been stockpiling since learning about Miranda. "The next time it could be a kid. Hell, it's bad enough that they witnessed this one go down. But if we don't have a clue who did this..."

"Then we don't have any way to keep it from happening again?"

"Exactly."

Hernandez stared across the desk. His wolf ears flopped to the sides, relaxed, but his eyes darkened, and he nodded thoughtfully. "You want me to put a priority on those samples, boss?"

"I want you to light a fire under their tails," Joll answered.

"You got it."

Joll waited for the wolf to vacate his office before turning back to his computer screen. He brushed the papers aside enough to allow the projected keyboard to appear on the desk's surface, then he pinched the keys to resize them. His big digits hovered over the glowing lines, and he squinted at the list of names he'd pulled up in an earlier search.

Miranda did not appear in the FDIA history anywhere. She wasn't listed in any local adult facility, nor did her name trigger anything at all in a general population search. He'd found two Mirandas in the atypical joint's history, but neither of them were the correct species.

*Maybe they change their names?*

He shook his head and let the gesture drift down his spine to the point



where his fluffy tail threaded through the gap in his seat back. As far as he could tell, they scrubbed the kids' last names at intake, but the first name should have been the same. His paws hovered over the keys, and his brow wrinkled. He could try searching by species. How many muskrat-rats could the atypical population hold? His fingers tapped quickly, modifying the local search, and a new list scrolled onto the screen.

More than he'd hoped. Joll swallowed a growl and re-sorted the list by gender. Six muskrat-rat girls had been abandoned at the Free Denver facility in the history of its operation. Four of those were old enough to be his grandmother. The other two were far too young to be his sister.

He glared at the screen with his tail beating an irritated staccato against the chair's legs. His luck had run out in more ways than one. They'd have to go back to the scene of the murder. They'd have to interrogate the adults, and possibly, if no one would cooperate, he'd have to interview the children.

Joll pinched his keyboard closed and growled at his messages, his files, and the rest of the mess. His sister had vanished, swallowed in her entirety by the atypical sinkhole. As much as he hated the idea of facing those children again, part of him leaned into the idea, as if going back to the FDIA, making contact with the prey-heavy would somehow bring him closer to Miranda. As if solving the murder would even begin to pay off the debt his family owed their missing daughter.

*Who was he kidding?*

The only way to help Miranda was to find her. The only way to find her was to keep looking. To never give up. Joll snatched one of the filthy cups and marched with it toward the station's kitchenette. He shouldn't have expected it to be easy. Nothing important ever was.

As he rinsed and refilled the mug, his resolve hardened. He set his jaw tight and lifted his tail into a proper, dominant set. It didn't matter how long it took, how many late nights, dead ends, cold trails.

His sister was out there somewhere, and Joll Warren meant to find her.

"You still smoke?" Jayne leaned against the deck railing, a silhouette with the outline of a svelte fox except for the round rat ears and a sharper point to his muzzle that gave away his minor animal.

"Quit two years ago." Joll leaned over the rail and watched the public garden below. The Warren home, he'd always said, had the best view in town.

Acres of natural and nearly natural landscape in which the Warren children had romped like wild things for most of their lives.

All but one Warren child.

"You think Dad'll have a light?" Jayne turned his back on the view and peered back into the house. "He's quite rotund these days, isn't he?"

"Healthy though." Joll's defensiveness prickled. He smoothed his ears with one paw. His older brother triggered his urge to argue over just about anything. "But yes, fat. And likely he's got a light stashed somewhere. Thinks mom doesn't know about the cigars."

"Mom knows all."

Joll snorted, and his brother's ears twisted in his direction. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

"You suck at lying." Jayne pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and began patting himself down as if he might produce the forgotten lighter by magic. "What's going on, little brother? What'd I miss?"

Joll sighed. He'd promised himself not to drag his siblings into this, but maybe Jayne and the girls had a right to know. If he were the one in the dark, he'd definitely want them to tell him. "Do you remember mom being pregnant *after* me?"

"Shit. I didn't think *you* did." Jayne stopped his ineffective searching and turned, leveling a stare on Joll that said he definitely hadn't been in the dark. "You were so young, we figured you'd never remember."

"You know?" Joll's breath slid out between his teeth. He flattened his ears and pressed his claws into the wood of the railing. "You know about Miranda?"

Jayne flinched at the name. He hung his head in a posture he'd never willingly have adopted, submissive, guilty as hell. He didn't say shit, and that spoke a lot louder than any words could have.

"Seasons. Does everyone know but me?"

"I'm not sure about Maryl. She was young, too. Mo does. Sure she does. She was almost old enough to have her own when Mir- when the baby was born."

All of them had known, and none of them had said a word. Joll dug trenches in the railing and growled. How had they done it? All these years of nonchalance, of not a word spoken?

"Don't be too hard on them, Joll. They meant to spare you," Jayne continued. "It was hard enough for those of us that remembered her."

"*Spare me.*" Joll choked out a laugh. "*Hard on them.* But no one is worrying about *her.*"

"Those places are safe. They're built to meet the needs of the—"

"Have you ever been to one?"

"No. But I'm sure they... what?" One of Jayne's paws settled on Joll's shoulder. He pulled, and Joll had no choice but to face him. To glare his accusations straight into his brother's face. Jayne's eyes widened. His ears swiveled back. "Have you?"

"I have." Joll pulled out of the grip. "I've seen the inside of one. Not exactly a vacation paradise. Not exactly a romp through the garden down there."

"But safe."

"Well, except for the murder."

"Joll, be reasonable. Mom and Dad are no different than any parent who has to make that choice. You *know* their motives were good. You know them."

"But it doesn't change what happened to her, does it? Does she know their motives were good? Do you think she'd give a shit?"

A breeze swirled up from the foliage below, bringing the scent of dirt and growing things. They both stared out for a handful of breaths, musing, collecting their thoughts. When Jayne spoke again, his voice was low and flat, toneless.

"They did their best."

"Would you have?" Joll tapped his claws against the railing. Maybe he had it wrong. Maybe it wasn't a shit-ass thing to do to a cub. The world *was* full of predators, balanced or not, but he wanted to think it was a *good* world. "If one of yours had been atypical..."

"Don't you think we worried about exactly that?" Jayne's voice trembled now. He gripped the railing in both paws and his tail slashed from one side to the other. "Don't you think every time Alis was pregnant, it was *all* I could think about."

"You were lucky." Joll sighed. His siblings had six kids between the three of them. All healthy, balanced combinations of their parents' predator-prey compositions. Jayne's cubs both had fox majors, one with his dad's rat and the other his mother's goat. "You were all lucky."

"Hey, is that what this is about?" Jayne's paw landed on his arm again, this time gently. His voice shifted toward sympathy. "You finally thinking about a family?"

"I've no interest in breeding." Joll shrugged. It was just one more thing that set him apart from them, that pushed him to the outside. This one, however, he'd had years to adjust to. "You know I never have."

"Maybe that's why you're so..." Jayne trailed off, clearing his throat and shrugging. In the low light, he might have had any expression.

Still, Joll knew exactly what he meant, and it lifted his hackles, made his rear teeth grind together.

"You boys want dessert or not?" Mrs. Warren's voice carried over the sound of their breathing, drowning the moment in ordinary parental interference, in the normality of it all. Two brothers digging at one another, opening old wounds and pretending it meant nothing. Two hybrids standing side by side in the dark and miles away from one another.

"What'd she make?" Jayne spoke first, already heading for the sliding glass doors.

"Pie." Joll took a step with him, then paused.

"We're coming, mom!" Jayne blocked the doorway and turned, tail and ears upright and eager. His voice, however, whispered, carrying the edge of an order to it. "Listen, Joll. I'm sorry. Okay? But you're not helping anyone digging this up. You'll just hurt mom and torture yourself."

"And Miranda?"

"What are you gonna do if you find her? Invite her home?"

"I don't know." Joll's tail brushed the deck. His ears turned heavy, sagging at the mention of his own worries. He'd thought about this enough, but he'd never managed to come up with a good answer.

"You're gonna march up and say, 'Hi there. I'm your brother,' and she'll be glad to see you? It's not like you can offer her anything, Joll. She can't leave and you can't fix this. You can't be the hero this time. All you're liable to do is make it harder for her, make things worse."

"For who?"

"For everyone." Jayne's teeth came together in a snap. His hackles prickled, making his silhouette look fierce and imposing.

Joll tasted bile. He stepped in reverse, a giving of ground that Jayne would definitely take as victory. Every nerve in his body wanted to argue. His pelt tried to stand on end, to make himself big enough to face his big brother despite his stomach. He heard Jayne's voice in his memory. *Lean on your coyote.*

"Just leave it." Jayne cut him off before he could even start. "If nothing else, for *her* sake."

He slipped into the house, tail wagging, and Joll hesitated to follow. The bits of truth in his brother's argument gnawed at him. What could he promise? Would it really be worse for Miranda, knowing about him, about them all?

His family's pleas for their own benefit failed to move him. Theirs was not the side of justice. In his mind, they'd done an unforgivable thing. And yet, what else did he imagine they might have done? He'd spent too long scouring the websites, reading the propaganda and the testimonies.

No one kept an atypical child for long. Eventually, they all gave in. But that stuck in his throat like a sideways bone. Was there really any sense to it? The

streets were not so dangerous at that, were they? And if they were, what was the point of his job at all? He was supposed to be protecting hybrids everywhere.

If the streets were safer, why couldn't the atypical come home again? Why couldn't they stay home? He rubbed his face with both paws and growled low in his throat. Why wasn't anyone else thinking about this? Most likely, because the advice, the websites and the government all cautioned the same thing. *Don't* think about it.

And if nothing else, that moved him. He might not be able to offer Miranda anything, might not be able to be the hero, but it Joll Warren knew anything it was when the whole world told you not to do something, there was a damn good reason to find out why.

"Hey, Warren!" The captain stood in his office doorway, one big hoof-tipped paw on the door frame and the other waving for attention.

"Yeah?" Joll paused mid-step. The files on the facility murder were tucked under one of his arms, and his selected crew already waited for him in the garage.

"A moment." The boss waved once more, and then the lion-oryx backed into his office.

"Scat!" Joll cursed and changed his trajectory. The lab reports had already set him on edge. He needed to get moving before the panic swelled any further. Stopping to chat with the boss would delay action, and after he'd read the reports, action was the only thing on his mind.

He marched into the captain's office with his tail lashing and his ears up.

"Have a seat," the boss's face spoke more to his minor than his lion. Only the huge mane gave that away, and it was subdued somehow by the twin horns poking out above the hybrid's ears. "Need to talk to you."

Joll eyed the chairs in the room skeptically. "I'm halfway out the door. Can it wait?"

"Where are you going?"

"Taking a small team back to the FDIA. New evidence threw a wrench in the statements we took."

"Leave it." The captain heaved a sigh that stretched the buttons on his uniform. He tapped his hoofed fingers against the top of his desk. "Sit, Warren. We need to talk."

"Leave it?" Joll sulked to the nearest chair, pulled it closer to the captain's desk, and dropped into it too fast, sitting on his tail and forcing himself to stand

briefly again to extract it. "We found prime hair at the crime scene, captain. There was a monkey involved in this, and we both know—"

"We know nothing."

"That's a damn lie." Joll thumped his file onto the desk and made a show of opening it. The prime hair had freaked him out, yes. Not only because a prime had no damn business inside the Hybrid Nation, let alone at an atypical facility. No, he'd been hearing that little boy's voice in his head all morning.

*I dreamed the monkeys came to take me away.*

He'd been blind the whole time. Maybe his own childhood nightmares had colored the comment innocently, or maybe no sane hybrid would believe a prime had snuck across the border, invaded a place the whole nation trusted to guard its weakest children.

"We're off this case. No." The captain's paw came up faster than Joll could react. It blocked his unspoken protest. "No argument. I got the call this morning, Warren. From a representative on the council of alphas. This is way, way over my head."

"They can't bury this, cap. This is too big."

"I imagine that's exactly why they'll bury it, Joll."

"They can't." He tightened his grip on the evidence, as if clinging to it could change anything. As if he didn't know the outcome of this conversation.

"They already have." The captain reached for his file, reached right across the desk for it. When Joll jerked it away, the lion came to the surface, growled and showed a remarkably leonine dentition inside a mouth that screamed herbivore. "We're to turn everything over to Hunting and Security."

"Feds." Joll spat it and failed to relinquish the folder. "The council's watchdogs. Do you seriously believe they'll do anything aside from brush this under the rug?"

"No." The boss sat back and crossed his arms over his broad chest. "As a matter of fact, I don't. But there's not a damn thing we can do about it. You'll hand that over, and you'll drop it. As far as we're concerned, this investigation is over."

Joll stood, shoving his chair away as he did. He leaned over the captain's desk, and for a breath, considered refusing. His eyes flicked up to the points of the oryx horns. Razor sharp. Joll imagined them highlighted with fresh blood. He imagined the chipmunk boy too, though. Huddled beside a toilet because the monkeys were coming.

Maybe coming back.

"Warren?"

"Fine." Joll slammed the folder down and released it. He tucked his tail,

stormed to the door, and then turned back. Halfway, speaking over his shoulder. Maybe to the captain, and maybe to himself. "But what are we doing, then? What the hell good are we, if we can't even protect a bunch of prey-heavy children?"

He stalked out, crossing to the elevators to slam a claw against the down arrow. Phelps and Whitlock stood in the car when the doors opened. They looked a question at him, and Joll waved it off until he'd climbed in and they were descending.

"The investigation is closed," he said. "You two get back to your own cases."

They gaped at him like he'd grown the boss's horns. Exactly like he deserved to be stared at. When the lift opened on the parking garage, Joll stared at the gray cement. *What good are we?* He stepped out.

"Get back to work. Tell Hernandez and the others." He kept his back to them, waited until he heard the car moving again to turn. The air stank of fuel and grease. The concrete tunnels made black maws to all sides. *Shadows and secrets.*

Joll breathed in the fumes, the stink of his own failure, the reek of bureaucracy that once again had reached a dirty claw into his business and snuffed out justice. An engine complained in the distance, echoing like a demon through the garage.

He didn't know where to go next.

With a sigh, Joll turned his back on the garage, deciding on the side door which led to the basement offices and stairwell. He intended to punish himself by taking the stairs back up, but three paces into the musty hallway, he spotted the sign for records.

*Martins in records had an atypical kid.*

Joll veered through the side door and headed down a dimly lit corridor. He stamped past two dark offices before reaching the door to records. Inside, the lights were only slightly brighter than the hall. The foyer smelled of old paper and soft musk. Not an unpleasant odor, and a welcome relief from the unnatural stink of the parking garage.

A short counter stood between the doors and a maze of file cabinets and shelving. Joll approached it, intent on ringing the brass bell setting on top. Before he could reach for it, however, a hybrid popped into view. No doubt the records keeper had been napping behind the counter. When he saw Joll, he rubbed furry paws over his near-hairless face and snorted through a flat snout.

"Hello?" Joll tried not to stare. The swine minor seemed to be waging a war with the guy's major. He guessed that to be some sort of weasel, more from the

way the little paws moved than anything visible. "I'm looking for Martins."

"S'me." The snort came again, and the hybrid climbed onto a stool so that Joll could see more of his overlong body. "What can I do for you?"

"I had some questions." Joll scrubbed a paw through the fur between his ears. "Difficult questions, I'm afraid. But I was hoping you could help me."

"I can do my best." The weasel came through in Martins's tone, a high-pitched squeaking that didn't quite fit his snout.

"I'm looking for a missing hybrid," Joll said. It wasn't inaccurate, but it was definitely a dodge.

"Something I can look up for you?"

"Not exactly." Joll paused again, felt his face growing hot beneath his fur. "She's atypical, prey-heavy."

The piggy face tightened. Martins's sharp eyes darkened. "Difficult. You weren't kidding."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But I've run myself inside-out trying to find her, and I'm pulling nothing. To be honest, I'm desperate and..."

"And Hernandez blabbed."

"Something like that," Joll muttered.

"You're looking for that kid who offed the director, right?"

"No." He answered without thinking it through and saw the confusion in Martins's wrinkled brow. "Um. It's a related case."

"I'd think the facility would cooperate," Martins said. "They keep good records."

"Yes but she's not in their files anywhere." Joll heard the frustration leaking through his words.

He placed his paws on the counter edge, gripped it firmly and let his tail lash out the rest of his temper. Keeping his voice calm, he added. "Her parents are local, but she doesn't show up in the Free Denver—"

"She wouldn't then."

"How's that?" Joll's heart stalled. He leaned forward and his ears reached for the weasel-pig's next words.

"They discourage you from using a local facility. For everyone's sake." Martins lowered his gaze, stared at a space below the counter. His voice thinned, as if his breath had run out. "It's supposed to make it easier."

More excuses, more justification for abandoning cubs. Joll wanted to rail against it, but in the face of Martins's obvious grief, he couldn't even bring himself to blame the hybrid. Maybe because he didn't have a stake in the weasel-pig's child, and maybe because their excuses were beginning to sound like a familiar song, played over and over.



Either way, he had his answer. Miranda wouldn't be in Free Denver. He'd have to widen his search and — Joll suffered the barest flash of guilt — he could run up his parents, check their travel history.

Twenty three years ago, the Warrens had taken a trip. Their reasons had been the same as Martins's. He had no doubt they'd believed they'd done it for Miranda's own good. It didn't change Joll's mind. It didn't change what he knew. The atypical facilities were *not* safe. He'd seen a broken body that proved it. He'd heard a terrified boy whisper.

*The monkeys.*

No excuses could erase that. Nor could his empathy for Martins, his wife, or even Joll's parents dim the sudden feeling that gripped him. He was sure of it, almost certain that his sister was in danger. She needed him, and Joll knew exactly how to find her now.

The Chigako Gardens work-program for atypical adults nestled in the curve of a gentle hillside. Joll drove up the driveway in a rented auto. He'd taken the train from Free Denver, and spent the two day journey alternating between fits of doubt and a creeping excitement that made his fur stand on end and inadvertently terrified his fellow passengers.

The trip gave him time to ruminate. When not obsessing over Miranda, he processed the inadequacy of the Free Denver police department when pitted head to head with their governing body. The media had been silenced on the subject of the FDIA murder. The manhunt had been called off.

There would be no justice.

He gazed out the window at a distant grid of greenhouses. They grew things here, not the food produced by the atypical farming facilities. Not the goods manufactured to distribute to the inmates — and he couldn't think of them as anything else — at the atypical joints. Here they grew flowers, potted plants, topiaries. Joll had found a catalog on the website, a long list of beautiful things to be sold to hybrids who'd never think once about where they'd come from.

He shook his head, smoothing his ears while the auto slowed and chimed an alert that meant they neared their destination. No matter how he looked at things, a bitter taste had lodged in his throat. His thoughts had darkened, and Joll had no idea if the light would ever return.

Behind the greenhouses, a building perched on a terrace surrounded by rockeries. The car parked itself at the base of this, and Joll climbed out, staring

up at the facility with his ears forward and his stomach twisting into knots.

There was no fence here, no roll of wire to keep the atypical in. He'd have liked that before knowing about the FDIA murder. He'd have liked the green hills, the leisurely winding walkway, if he could stop imagining monkeys marching along it.

The entrance had been framed in red brick, a nice touch that distracted the eye from the concrete and made the glass doors look welcoming. As he approached them, they opened and a tall hybrid emerged. She wore a prim suit over her ivory pelt, had the physique of a greyhound and the face, tail and coloring of some variety of deer.

"Officer Warren?" She paused at the top of the stairs and eyed him skeptically.

His plain clothes did little to confirm his identity, but he'd come here without official backing, and his story had to ride a fine line if he meant to keep his job afterwards. "Yes. You're the facility director, Ms. Lao?"

"I am." Her smile relaxed. "Welcome to the CGAF."

"Thank you." Joll climbed the last few stairs and smoothed his shirt front with both paws. "I thought out of uniform would be best, keep everyone at ease."

"I see." Her eyes narrowed. One ear twitched as if to dislodge something unpleasant. "You'll have to excuse me, officer. We've never had a security inspection before, nor any reason for one."

He'd expected defensiveness. Their email conversation had been tinged with hints of it. Joll had done his best to keep his comments generic, conciliatory, but he still feared Lao might go over his head any second. If she contacted his captain, game over. Joll had spent a good week working out what to say next.

"I was working on the FDIA case." And exactly what not to say so that he wouldn't need to lie at all. "And felt that a few random security checks would benefit everyone involved."

"So you'll be looking into multiple facilities?"

"This is my first stop."

"I assure you we run firmly by the books."

"I'm glad to hear it." Joll's smile stretched now, touched by genuine relief. Ms. Lao had a sincerity to her, a softness that let him hope, just for the moment, that she told the truth. "I'd love to write you a glowing commendation."

She laughed and Joll knew he'd won her over. Her neck softened, and her tail gave a merry flick. "It was a horrible shock, to hear about the FDIA director."

"It was." Joll nodded, gazing out over the greenhouses. He could see the

shadows of atypical hybrids working inside, a few individuals drifting between them with wheelbarrows or trays of plants. "I want to make sure it never happens again. To keep you all safe."

"Well, we're at your service, officer. Where would you like to begin?"

"You don't have a perimeter fence." He pulled his recording pad from the back pocket of his slacks. "Do you mind?"

"We have nothing to hide." For a moment, her expression tightened, but it relaxed faster this time. He'd already crossed the largest hurdle, convinced her they were on the same side. "We have motion activated cameras at the boundaries, but no one has tried to leave in several decades."

"What about people coming in?" He let his ears fall back, felt his tail lowering, flirting with the back of his legs.

"How do you mean?"

"What's to keep anyone from just wandering in?" A criminal, a van full of monkeys, an unauthorized sibling posing as an on-duty cop.

"No one comes here, Officer Warren." The director's voice shifted, and he thought there might be an edge of bitterness there. "No one visits them."

"I thought the families were discouraged from maintaining contact?"

"Discouraged, yes." Lao sniffed and pulled herself taller. She shrugged, but there was a deeper meaning behind her words now. "The official opinion is that it would cause more harm than good."

"But you disagree?" He'd never expected that, never seen a trace of evidence that someone else might side with him.

"My personal opinions are irrelevant. It's my job to follow protocol."

"Off the record?" Joll thumbed the recorder off and lowered it. For a moment she said nothing. Her ear twitched again, and he feared she'd clammed up on him.

Lao took a long breath, released it even more slowly. "I work with some truly incredible individuals, officer, and I'm not talking about the staff. I've been here for fifteen years, and some days it just seems like such a waste."

They were both choosing their words carefully, it seemed. Joll nodded and let her off the hook. He liked this director, and he hoped her facility had the same compassion she obviously possessed. He lifted the device again, resumed recording.

"I don't see many guards."

"We could use more." Lao sighed and shrugged. "It's not easy to keep the good ones, and way too many apply for the wrong reasons."

"Being understaffed is not a crime, Ms. Lao. What would help?"

"Being able to offer a better wage, perhaps. But..."

"Yes?"

"There's a stigma that still might keep the truly qualified away. Culturally our beliefs about the atypical are skewed. Personal opinion again, of course. It might just as easily be the remote location."

Joll looked to the hills, the green, and the clear sky. He couldn't imagine anything lovelier.

"Well then." Ms. Lao clapped her paws together and the hoofed tips of her fingers clattered softly. "You'll like a tour and those interviews you requested. I've pulled everyone on your list from duty today except one."

His throat tightened. All this way, risking everything. If he couldn't see Miranda, what would he do next? The fur on the back of his neck prickled. Joll swallowed hard, cleared his throat. "Which one was that?"

"Peter." Lao shook her head. "Had a bout of stomach trouble and I'm not convinced it's not contagious. If you have to see him..."

"It's fine." Joll breathed again, willing his heartbeat to normalize. "The list was primarily selected at random."

He danced a fine line, and director Lao went right along with him.

"The rest are waiting in the library. There's a meeting room you can use."

"Thank you." Joll turned with her, and they headed toward the doors. "I'll make sure to note how helpful you've been."

"Officer?" Lao opened the door and held it, but she paused there, mouth working on something, both ears twitching as if she were plagued with flies.

"It's okay," Joll said.

"I just hope you understand that some of our residents... well, you can imagine what it's like for them."

Joll's smile stretched wide. "Director, you have nothing to worry about. I intend to take everything into account. Not that I imagine they'll have anything critical to say about you."

Ms. Lao laughed. The chuckle shook her slim shoulders. She put up one paw while catching her breath. She shook her head. "I'm not worried, Officer Warren. At least, not about me."

He looked the question at her, tilting his head to one side and matching her ears twitch for twitch.

"I'm trying to prepare you," she said. "You're about to find out that the atypical reputation is a lie, officer."

"A lie?" Joll met her gaze. They shared a breath, a look that went beyond the surface and the dance. It told him everything he wanted to know. It told him exactly how Ms. Lao felt about families who abandoned their atypical cubs.

Her muzzle crinkled into a smile, and she settled one heavy paw against his

shoulder. Like friends. Like a fellow soldier motivating him for battle. When she spoke, Joll heard both humor and tragedy in her words.

"The prey-heavy, you'll find, are quite a bit feistier than the world believes."

The CGAF had a better library than his college in Free Denver. The stacks stretched from floor to ceiling, and there were reading tables, cozy couches, and six atypical hybrids waiting for his phony interviews.

Joll took less than a second to identify Miranda. She had their father's fur, satin black with a sheen that would turn her to chocolate in the sunlight. Their mother's rat was behind the ears swiveling on top of Miranda's head, and her long tail had a familiar color, a texture that Joll had known since birth. She was a Warren from nose to tail-tip, and his paws shook at the first sight of her.

She'd stretched out on one of the couches, on her back with her tail slung snakelike across the floor. The other interviewees gathered around her, leaning against the arms of chairs, or sitting on them while a burly dog-ram guard stood watch. Joll nodded to him, forced his gaze to drift quickly over the others, and bit his tongue until he tasted blood.

Director Lao led him past, quickly, as if she feared lingering or maybe just so he didn't have to face them all at once. She settled him into the meeting room and, once he'd seated himself behind the square table, propped open the door with a flimsy wastebasket.

"Regulations require we keep the door open and a guard present, I'm afraid. In particular with the females."

"My regulations as well. It's all good." Joll set the recorder down on the tabletop and stared at the patterns in the wood grain.

"Who do you want first?" Lao's voice held no accusation, no suspicion at all.

Joll shrank into his chair. He cleared his throat... twice. The plan had been to put her in the middle somewhere, but would that look more or less natural than saving her for last? His skin crept below his fur, and his tongue dried up.

"How about Miranda?" It sounded less than casual, obvious and desperate, but the director only nodded and left the room. He'd lost his mind, would lose his job if the captain knew he was here, if *anyone* knew *why* he was here.

Panic seized him. His ears fused to his skull and his tail went rigid. His claws stretched and pinched the edge of the table. Joll stared at his recorder. *I only wanted to see her. I only needed to know she was safe, healthy. Safe.*

"Go on in," Ms. Lao's voice sounded too chipper, too ordinary. "Officer Warren just wants to ask you some questions."

*All lies.*

Joll held his breath. Soft steps tread into the office, and the chair opposite his scraped away from the table. He reached into his jacket and withdrew his much-abused notepad. His paws fumbled it. He had to catch it as it fell, and barely managed that. He'd written what he hoped sounded like a generic interview, and he thanked his foresight for it now. It would help, if he could manage to read it.

The wood of her chair creaked as she leaned back. Joll laid the pad on the table, flipping open to his notes with careful fingers. The tabletop jumped, and he looked up on reflex.

She'd thrown her feet up, leaned back, and crossed her velvet black arms behind her head. Miranda glared at him, and Joll felt his spine cringing away from that look. He lowered his eyes, and his sister snorted exactly like Jayne would have.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he read. "I'm officer Warren of the FDPD, and I'm here for your benefit..."

The snort sounded more like a guffaw the second time. He had to look up. She wore the same, green mesh jumpsuit they all wore, but instead of boots, her feet were wrapped in makeshift sandals woven from other scraps of fabric. Rat claws tipped her long toes. They slid back to the floor while he stared at them. Miranda leaned forward, and the glare intensified.

"I'm here to offer you a voice, miss... Miranda."

"We don't get last names."

"I understand. I need you to—"

"We're not important enough, *Officer* Warren. We don't matter, right? So why do you suppose the FDPD suddenly needs to go snooping around up here?"

"We're, um." Joll scanned his notes. He tried to reset, but the room had turned warm, and his guts were tightening in a characteristic way. "I'd like to give you an opportunity to voice any complaints."

"Ha!" She slapped one paw on the table and leaned way forward. Her nose twitched. She sniffed loudly. "You smell familiar, officer."

"M-muskrat." Joll held up his paws.

"Like me."

"Right." Joll tapped his notepad and nodded. He'd interviewed enough difficult subjects. He knew these tactics. All he had to do was keep a straight line. "Do you feel like your needs are being met here?"

"Sure."

"And the facility is providing for you?"

"Yeah."

"The security measures taken are adequate?"

"Why not?"

"I don't get the impression you're taking my questions seriously" He should have looked up. His instincts told him a show of dominance was imperative just at that moment. Instead, Joll stared at the pad where he'd placed little checkmarks beside each question as if they'd somehow validate the process.

"Actually, I'm not taking *you* seriously," she said.

Joll raised his muzzle. He looked at her nose, not quite making eye contact, not quite sick to his stomach. "Do the guards and staff treat you with respect?"

"You want me to make something up?" She grinned, showing flattened, razor sharp front teeth. "Should I say the guards are handsy, the food's rotten? Maybe they hit us... or worse?"

"I just want you to tell me the truth."

"Sorry to disappoint you, officer. I got no complaints. I'm quite *comfortable* here."

Joll made a check beside each of the remaining items on his list. He nodded, inhaled. "Last question."

"Shoot."

"In your time here have you ever seen an ape, monkey or other primate on the premises?"

"Is this supposed to help me take you seriously?"

"Is that a no?"

"It's a hell no."

He made a note, actually wrote, *hell no*.

"Are we done here, officer Warren?"

"Unless there's anything else you want to tell me? Any complaints at all?" He looked up, and her expression snagged him, held him hostage.

She stood, took one step around the table, and leaned way down. Miranda brought her face close, inches from his, and Joll's ears drooped. His tail sagged. He bit back a whimper. She sniffed again, closed her eyes and shook her head so slowly he could see the individual hairs in her pelt rippling.

"Sorry, officer. I've got nothing to say. Nothing, for *you*."

Joll held his breath until she'd left the room. He watched her tail follow her out, one bald inch at a time. So like his mother, and yet. So different. She was beautiful, furious, stronger than he'd ever been. *Feisty*, Lao had said. Much fiercer than the world suspects.

Joll understood it, but it told him nothing. She'd given him nothing, had

never meant to. It might be true or a lie; he wasn't allowed to know. Miranda had made that perfectly clear. He was supposed to walk away like everyone else had.

He pictured the dead cat, orange and broken on the cafeteria tiles. He imagined the boy in the bathroom, the terrified whisper, but this time he heard it in his sister's voice. *The monkeys are coming.*

Lao poked her head back in the doorway, smiling for no good reason. "Who's next?"

"Bernie." Joll said a name. It didn't matter which one. He'd come here to find out about his sister, and no matter what the other hybrids told him, he'd already learned the most important thing. He'd had his answer, loud and clear.

Miranda wasn't safe, and *he* wasn't a very good cop.

His uniform was too tight. Joll tugged at the collar and sighed. He adjusted the seat of his pants until his tail stopped pinching, and then shut his locker and stared at his name on the outside.

Beside him, the mink-zebra called Frizzle smoothed his fur with both paws. "You ready to go?"

"Yep." Joll tapped the keys clipped to his belt and nodded. "All good."

"I'm supposed to show you the ropes." Frizzle moved like a snake with hooves, a bizarre undulating motion that also clopped noisily against the tiles. "C'mon new guy."

He led the way out of the locker room and Joll followed. Outside, director Lao leaned against the hallway wall. "Looks good on you, Warren."

"Thank you." Joll swallowed hard enough to strain the buttons on his collar. "I think it suits me."

"Really?" Her head tilted to the side. She narrowed her eyes, but gave a slow nod. "The pay cut or the relocation?"

"Worth it," Joll said. When her eyes widened, he added quickly, "You know how it is. Less stress, less city. More wide open spaces."

"We made quite the impression." Lao smiled. Her eyes softened. "Well, we can definitely use you."

"Sure can," Frizzle added.

"I'll let you get to work." Ms. Lao left them in the hallway.

The striped weasel snickered and led Joll on his first day's patrol. As facility guards, they watched the hallways. They watched the greenhouses and all the spaces in between. They watched over the atypical, and Joll would watch over *them* too. He'd keep his eye on the perimeter. He'd keep the monkeys at bay.



Maybe he could never be her brother, but he could damn sure keep an eye on her. He could keep her safe. Because the websites had been right about one thing, seeing Miranda had made things worse. It had made him *feel* worse. They'd all been right about that, and in the end, it had cost him everything. As it turned out, that was a cost he had no problem paying.

*Unlike* the rest of them, Joll Warren would never abandon her.

# About the Author

Frances Pauli is a hybrid author of over twenty novels. She favors speculative fiction, romance, and anthropomorphic fiction and is not a fan of genre boxes. Frances lives in Washington state with her family, four dogs, two cats and a variety of tarantulas.

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