

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'm Not One of You

September 8, 1987

6:00 pm

Chris Wolffe, a beefy blonde dude in an American-flag-covered martial arts gi, sat sullenly at the dojo reception desk in a chair that was too small for either his body or ego. A painted mural of the Park family dominated the wall beside him. In the mural stood Master Yumi Park — arms crossed, ironic eyebrow raised — sandwiched between her mischievous, grinning brothers, Lorne and Pernell. Towering above the three siblings in white martial arts uniforms was their father, the black-clad, imperious Grandmaster Min-Jun Park. The school logo and slogan painted across the top read: “The Richmond County Institute of Martial Arts: Where the *Real* Karate Kids Train.” I had just arrived, dressed in my white gi and red belt, carrying a change of clothes in the black RCIMA duffel bag slung over my shoulder. “Master Park?”

Chris looked dully at me. “She’s in her office. Just knock.”

The sounds of a stapler clipping stacks of pages together came through the birch veneer door. My knock was so soft it was barely audible.

“Knock with authority!” Master Park’s voice replied brightly through the door. “I don’t respond to feeble tapping noises.” As she said this, I heard a stapler strike go wrong somehow. The soprano voice of a woman I’d seen put her fist through ten stacked cinderblocks called out, “Owie! Owie, owie, owie, owie!” Had I distracted her and caused her to staple her own hand? If only I hadn’t chosen that exact moment to knock!

Her voice rang out again. “I can feel the Catholic guilt through the door. I bet twenty dollars that’s Damien! Knock with authority!”

I put some force into my next three knocks and the door opened. A woman roughly my height, with full, curly, shoulder-length, black 1980s hair emerged wearing the same martial arts uniform she had on in the mural. She regarded me sympathetically while sucking on her own index finger. “Did you staple yourself?” I asked quietly.

She took her finger out of her mouth and stared at it as it bled

anew. Since the question was too stupid to answer, she said instead, “You need to be more assertive. It is a wonderful thing, you being a gentleman, and all. Wonderful. But if you go through life knocking on doors like that, you’re gonna get eaten alive.” As she licked some more blood off her wound, she noticed my black-and-blue face for the first time and started. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“I played by a stream some other kids see as their private spot. They threw rocks at me.”

Master Park pinched her thumb and index finger together to stop the bleeding. She lifted my head by the chin with her uninjured hand, peering at my face. “Strangers?”

“They live a block over. I know them. Kinda.”

“Bunch of jackasses?”

I shrugged. “I invaded their territory.”

“That’s a riot that you’re defending their right to stone you to death. You always defend the motives of people who attack you? What kind of terrible person would throw rocks at you?”

“I dunno.”

“You are a fundamentally likeable person. Anyone who would dislike you or mistreat you has to be a total jackass. End of story.”

I blushed. “Thank you, sir.”

Since I was not much of an athlete, I had four equally important reasons for taking Tae Kwon Do. The first was to hang out with Mitchell. The second was to lose the baby fat around my stomach. The third was the movie *The Karate Kid*. The fourth was because I had an enormous crush on Master Yumi Park. Yumi was the Valkyrie who leapt through rings of fire and fought off six men at once during free martial arts demonstrations in the courtyard of the Staten Island Mall. Her father, the Tenth Dan Black Belt Grandmaster, owned three schools and taught at the flagship location in Eltingville. Her brothers, Lorne and Pernel, handled the other satellite school in St. George, while Yumi, a Third Dan Black Belt, oversaw the Manor Road location within walking distance of Mitchell’s home near the Staten Island Armory. Mitchell had been part of the same weekend mall demonstration and invited me to cheer on his green-belt prowess. He had been trying to stoke my interest in joining for a month and

was glad I was there to watch. He calculated that, as much as I would enjoy seeing his moves, Yumi's awe-inspiring presence would motivate me to sign up immediately. Sharp guy.

"These injuries look fresh," she murmured. "When did this happen?"

"Three hours ago."

Chris Wolffe, the hulking fellow in the American flag uniform piped in, "Get some brass knuckles. Go Cobra Kai on their asses."

Master Park kept her eyes on my injuries. "Cobra Kai? That's not our brand. We're the good guys. Tae Kwon Do is for defense only."

Chris laughed. "Defense with a good pair of brass knuckles."

"Get an ice pack from next door, will you?" Master Park ordered, keeping her eyes on my injuries. Chris assumed an "I don't clean the latrine with a toothbrush — do you even know who my father is?" air but thought better of voicing a complaint. "Yes, sir."

"Wait. Do you want candy or ice cream, Nabi?" She sometimes called me Nabi without telling me what it meant. I've heard conflicting reports it means "butterfly" or "cute little kitten." The first time I heard what it meant, I turned into Rudolph the Red Nosed-Reindeer, leaping through the air, yelling, "She thinks I'm a cute little kitten! Or a butterfly!" I wasn't expecting her candy question but had a ready-made answer: Rocky road. She repeated my request to Chris, who bowed at her and strutted out the door.

"He didn't have to go to any trouble, sir," I said.

"Oh, yes he did. Come with me, Mr. Cavalieri." She led me into the dojo, a gymnasium with a basketball-court-like floor and the dance-studio mirror-wall feature. Against the wall facing the mirror were folded-and-stacked gymnastic mats, throwing star targets, and hanging scrolls covered in Korean writing. "While we're waiting for dessert, let's try some meditation."

"Okay." I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her and closed my eyes.

"Yes, sir," she reminded me, still standing.

Blast. "Yes, sir."

"Sijak."

Meditation required clearing one's mind and striving to attain a semblance of inner peace. Considering my usual cacophony of thoughts, inner peace was nearly impossible for me to achieve. Here again, I tried again to meditate, but the Satanic CD started up instantly, replaying the worst conversations of the last two days, accompanied by images of rocks flying at my face, girls in chorus teasing me, and mullet man pointing to the "empty set" symbol on the blackboard.

"Uh-oh! The wheels are turning in your head again!" Master Park observed teasingly.

I cleared my throat. "I'll make myself stop thinking."

"You can't *force* yourself to feel *peaceful*, stupid-head. You'll just wind up constipated."

"I'm trying."

"Have you heard the story of the man who *tried* to pick up the pencil from the floor?"

"No."

"Guess what? He picked up the pencil off the floor! Don't *try* to meditate. Just *meditate*."

I smirked. "Know who you sound like?"

"If you say Yoda, I'm going to kick you."

"Never mind." I relaxed and took the lid off my thoughts. Instead of clearing my head, calming myself, focusing, and finding my center, I tried to drive away terrible memories by thinking about one of the newest *Doctor Who* serials. It was a bloodbath called "The Caves of Androzani," in which the entire ensemble cast was slaughtered during an outer-space drug cartel war. The only two survivors were women: the innocent American botany student, Peri, and Timmon, the savvy secretary of an evil corporate mogul who exposes her boss's white-collar crimes and takes over his empire. Even the Doctor died! He heroically sacrificed one of his thirteen lives to save Peri. After mulling over "Caves of Androzani," I mentally tinkered with my half-finished fanfiction novel: *Bringer of Darkness*. What if the Daleks killed the Doctor and conquered his home planet? What if Peri had to pilot the TARDIS by herself, go back in time, and try to prevent his death? (In broad strokes, my manuscript's plot predicted the later adventures *Day of the Doctor*, *The Genocide Machine* and *Divided Loyalties*.)

Master Park threw a punch at my face, stopping it one inch from my nose. I didn't move. I couldn't see her, but imagined her face growing more satisfied with me. She followed up by kicking the air next to both my ears. Then something whizzed past my shoulder. It embedded in the wall behind me with an alarming *thunk*. "Was that a throwing star?" I asked.

"Shush! Keep your eyes closed."

I hadn't opened them. I felt oddly comfortable sitting cross-legged on a hardwood floor. Then I felt even more odd as Master Park climbed up on my crossed legs, planting her bare feet on my thighs. I smirked, but knew I wasn't supposed to ask what she was doing. "While you're not concentrating *anyway*," she said breezily. She noticed some give in my legs and began bouncing lightly up and down on them, testing out her new trampoline. "You're flexible. Interesting. Thin guy, big-boned, and flexible. Surprisingly flexible. This is kinda fun. Wheeee! I could do this all afternoon."

Feel free. I wasn't sure what she was up to, but I was sure of one thing: if I wasn't meditating before, I *certainly* couldn't now. I heard Master Yumi Park speak my thoughts aloud, archly, "'How am I supposed to meditate with this crazy, tiny Korean lady bouncing on my legs? Is she gonna climb up on my shoulders next?'"

I couldn't stop myself from chuckling.

She jumped off my legs, landing softly on the hardwood floor in front of me. "You need to meditate. They're gonna keep coming at you. Wearing you down."

"Tony and his gang?"

"*Everyone*. You're a nice person, so everyone is going to try to destroy you. You can't let them, because the biggest tragedy of all will be if you let them beat the kindness out of you."

"Yeah."

"You have a big heart. Don't let them hit it with a flame-thrower and turn it to ashes."

"Okay. How do I protect myself?"

"You need to block them out. Find peace inside yourself. Remember when I punched the air in front of you and you ignored it? Kicked next to your ears? Threw the star? You only registered all that enough

to be aware of elevated threats! Exactly how I wanted you to react. Ignore the endless stream of shit that comes your way, day in and day out, like you ignored me.”

“Okay.”

“You have a sense of humor, right? You smiled when I jumped on you?”

“Yeah.”

“Use that. Something horrible happens, make a joke out of it. Be unflappable.”

“Like Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*?”

“Exactly! Besides, does anyone ever say anything of substance to you? Or is it all them pontificating? Bragging? Dragging you down into their own depression and egomania?”

“I guess I hear a lot of outrageous nonsense from people.”

“Don’t close yourself off to life or numb your emotions. Be ready to respond to a real person with something genuine to offer. Be there to help someone in need. Tune the rest of the horseshit out. Laugh at it. Ignore it. Meditate. If you don’t tune out the jackasses, they will break you. And if they break you, you will not be ready to open your heart to decent human beings when they finally make themselves known to you.”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“You have a big heart, a big brain, and a big sense of humor. Use them.”

September 9, 1987

On the second day of sixth grade, I did not wear a blue blazer. Instead, I wore beige cargo shorts and blue Hawaiian shirt, an outfit that gave my sexual harassers in chorus no end of amusement. I had hoped that it being less formal would have been a bonus, but no such luck.

“Never wear shorts again! Nobody wants to see your pasty legs!”

“And your short-sleeve shirt! Look at those wimpy arms!”

I promised myself I would never wear shorts again. I didn’t exactly keep that promise, but I pretty much only wear shorts when the temperature goes well over one-hundred degrees.

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On day three of sixth grade, I wore a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with the TARDIS on it. Since nobody in the school had heard of *Doctor Who*, this outfit was another damp squib. These days, the average teenager can recognize the TARDIS or a Funko Pop figure of a Dalek in Hot Topic and “fan girls” are a source of embarrassment to male chauvinist geeks. In the mid-eighties, I would have killed for a cute girl in 6th grade to have recognized the time machine on my shirt and gushed over it. I would *not* have given her a *Doctor Who* quiz to determine whether her fandom was “authentic.” That would have made me mean, stupid, and self-destructive.

“Why do you have a phone booth on your t-shirt?” one Italian girl asked during homeroom. She had not introduced herself, but she might have been named Michelle. She approached me as I made my own fun playing fake hopscotch on the tiled floor at the back of our homeroom. The rest of the students were milling around and talking, waiting for the first period bell to ring before heading off to classes. I tried to be casual as I stopped playing solo hopscotch. “Guess you don’t watch PBS.”

“PBS? Are you kidding?”

“Only channel worth watching! First of all, there’s nudity and cursing and violence on PBS! And no commercials! You ever see the naked African tribes? The insane male bonding scene in *A Room with a View*? You don’t get that on other channels! They’re *mad boring*!”

“PBS is an education channel.”

“And it is very educational! You get to see penises waving in the air! You’ll love it!”

“Gross.”

Why does this tactic never, ever work? I try to convince people education is sexy and they never bite. Or they think I’m a pervert. But education is mad sexy!

Michelle-maybe chewed her gum thoughtfully as she looked me up and down. “Are you working hard to look bad? You need to spike your hair and swap out Velcro sneakers for Reebok high tops. And get yourself some Cavaricis and a leather jacket and change your glasses for contact lenses. Then you would be okay-looking.”

"I don't want spiked hair. I like Billy Idol. I don't want his hair."

Michelle-maybe threw her hands up in the air theatrically. "Jesus! I'm just trying to help you here, snappahead! You don't want to spike your hair, throw some gel in it. Comb it back."

"Comb it back? What's that?"

"You take some fucking gel and put it in your fucking hair and then you take a fucking comb and you use it to comb your fucking hair back."

I held my hands up defensively. "Alright, alright, alright!"

"I know you're supposed to be Italian, but you look like a comic store nerd the way you dress. If you clean up okay, maybe I'll try making out with you. I gotta see what you look like after a makeover. Right now, you might be good-looking, but you dress like shit."

I sneered at her. "Don't do me no favors."

"Fine! Be that way." Michelle-maybe flipped me off before joining a circle of her friends a few yards away.

I shouldn't have said that. She looks like she'd be fun to make out with. Me and my damn pride. I tried to cheer myself up by resuming my game on the imaginary hopscotch court.

"Mr. Cavalieri!" my homeroom teacher, Mr. Figliozi, called out unexpectedly, surprising me into stopping. "There's a fine line between genius and insanity. A fine line."

I smiled crookedly. "Thanks for the warning."

On the following morning, I showered and attempted to comb my hair back with gel. I had to admit, it looked better. Michelle-maybe was probably also right about the Velcro sneakers and the general badness of yesterday's outfit. I was a little scared of getting contacts. Putting stuff right on my eyes sounded gross. I'd probably do it wrong and blind myself. And for what? A school chock of people who yell "fag" at me? They weren't worth it. Still, I was willing to make a few concessions as long as I could stay my essential self. I just wanted to avoid morphing into a carbon copy of every other Staten Island teenager. I stood in front of my bedroom closet, at a total loss for what

kind of outfit to put on. *Wow, I have no clue. How do I look Italian without looking like I'm doing an impersonation of an Italian? Or like an extra in Saturday Night Fever? There's more to Italian men than gangsters and pizza Guidos. So, how do I prove that? Is there a different kind of Italian I can dress like?*

Two weeks later, inspiration struck. I asked Mom to take me clothes shopping. It was a cruel thing to do, asking a woman who grew up in extreme poverty in a Brooklyn immigrant community to drop the kind of coin I was asking her to drop, but we needed to go at least a little upscale. Mom was flexible, but only so flexible; she was willing to buy two outfits that would get the Michelle-maybe seal of approval, but no more than two, since those two sets of shirts and pants cost what six complete K-Mart outfits would have. Also, the one new pair of high-top sneakers cost the same amount as three sets of K-Mart shoes. At the beginning of the trip, I was worried I'd sold out my principles by even listening to Michelle. By the end, I was so happy with the clothes I got that I wasn't mad at myself or Michelle anymore. She had been trying to help me. That was obvious, now. The Monday following our fateful shopping trip, I returned to school with my hair combed back, wearing John Lennon glasses; black Cavaricci; a white, buttoned down, long-sleeve shirt; white Reebok hightop sneakers; and a rumpled gray raincoat like the one worn by Lieutenant Columbo on television.

I am Columbo! And who is Columbo? As Peter Falk said, "a guy with a mind like Einstein who sounds like the box boy at Food Giant!" That's me, world! Worship me or get out of my way! The students glanced at me with tired half-interest, determining that enough of the ensemble was inoffensive that they would overlook the raincoat. The first time I wore this ensemble in homeroom, I caught Michelle-maybe's attention. She nodded at me and offered me a sober thumbs up. I replied with two thumbs up. The good news was I was far less frequently accosted in the hallways thanks to my new "Italian American Man" superhero costume. The bad news was that this outfit did little to discourage the broads who flanked me in chorus from snickering constantly while imagining out loud what my penis looked like.

"That raincoat is hot," Viola whispered in his ear. "You can button

it up and I can slip under it. I can suck you off underneath it. Nobody would know what was going on.”

To me, raincoats meant Columbo, not pervert or pedophile or nut with a sawed-off shotgun, but these two wasted no time educating me on the various shady connotations of the clothing article. The images Viola conjured in my head had a certain appeal, but she was still laughing out of the side of her face. No matter how much fleeting enjoyment some of her dirty talk afforded me, it was only a matter of seconds before shame struck me down. I was sick of this teasing but had no clue how to stop it. Three months into the term, they were still mocking me. I asked them to “please stop.” My voice squeaked. Aurora and Viola opened their mouths wide, miming a silent, booming laugh. (Mrs. Laird had been telling them to shush a lot lately, so they didn’t want to be too loud.) “Somebody’s hitting *puberty*,” Aurora cooed.

“If you get hair on your dick, show us,” Viola purred into my ear.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I grumbled. “Whatever.”

“No, please. If you don’t show me, I’ll *die of disappointment*.” Viola feigned wilting like a flower starved of sunlight. “I need your cock like a plant needs the sun!”

The next day, Mitchell found me in the hallway between classes and asked me about rumors he’d heard that I was being sexually harassed in chorus. I turned redder than marinara sauce. “Why would anyone object to two pretty girls flirting with them? Be serious.”

“What’s that? A Watergate-era non-denial denial? I hear they’re mocking you non-stop.”

“It’s all in good fun.” Why should Mitchell have to get involved? If I couldn’t make it clear that I was not enjoying this treatment, I was probably culpable.

“Let me know if you need help,” Mitchell said. “I’m here when you want to talk.” He changed the subject when he saw I was about to cry but not about to talk. “Hey, listen: K-Rock did a countdown of the hundred best rock songs of all time. Guess what number one was?”

I leaned against the hallway wall, watching streams of students who had been ignoring or bullying me flow past. Hated him. Hated her. Didn’t know him. Didn’t know her. Those five guys? Wanted them dropped in boiling acid. Anyway, I tried to figure it out. “Runaround Sue?”

"Think more edgy and 1970s," Mitchell suggested sympathetically. "Remember, this is K-Rock, not 101.1 CBS-FM."

"'Why Don't We Do It in the Road'? 'Another Brick in the Wall?'"

"No and no."

"'People are Strange'? 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction'?" I was running out of 1970s songs famous enough to have been included on the soundtrack of a movie I knew.

"Want to hear the answer?"

I sighed. "Let's have it."

"'Stairway to Heaven.'"

My jaw dropped. *What a stupid choice!* "That's crazy!"

Mitchell was surprised by how aghast I was. "Don't you like the song?"

I laughed. "I like Neil Sedaka as much as the next guy, but picking *that* as the best song?"

Mitchell had never heard of Neil Sedaka. "Who? What song are you talking about?"

"I'll build a stairway to heaven, 'Cause heaven is where you are," I sang.

Mitchell smirked. "Yeah, that's not the same song. You've heard the Neil Sedaka song 'Stairway to Heaven,' but not Led Zeppelin's?"

"Is Led Zeppelin the band that sings 'Love Bites?'"

"You don't know the difference between Led Zeppelin and Def Leppard?"

"Um . . ."

January 12, 1988

"Whip it out." Viola's tongue flickered on my earlobe.

My wet earlobe was the inducement I needed to act. "Okay." I unzipped my pants. The blue of my boxer shorts was visible through the open fly. One strand of pubic hair peaked out through the fly hole. My penis couldn't figure out if it was excited enough by the ear lick to emerge from hiding or invested enough in its own self-preservation to stay tucked in its foxhole. It trembled in place, fixed at its current

height, awaiting further instructions.

Viola recoiled. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“How about you put your money where your mouth is?” I tried to talk and sneer like Clint Eastwood, but my face wore an “I’ve just tasted castor oil” expression instead.

Viola’s pretense of friendliness and flirtation vanished. “Fuck off and die, kid.”

Darting a glance at her friend, Aurora, I gestured invitingly at my crotch. “How about it?”

Aurora’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t suck Tic-Tacs.”

“Suit yourself.” I zipped back up and feigned interest in the lesson.

“Are you gonna just pretend you didn’t do that?” Viola whispered to me. “Because we ain’t ever gonna forget.”

I nodded. “Good. I was hoping you’d get the message.”

Teachers and security guards are never around when you need them. At 2:40, I hurried out of the school building, sprinting towards the yellow school bus parked by the playground, running right into the waiting arms of my favorite people: Tony Nocerino, his Merry Men, and the loves of my life, Viola and Aurora. I belted out a grotesquely cheery, “Hello! I believe you’re here to kill me?” and mimicked Arsenio Hall’s “Woof! Woof! Woof!” welcome chant and circular fist pump. My enemies responded by circling me. I was an important supporting character at the end of a George A. Romero zombie film, about to be given the gift of an extended, uber-violent death. In moments, the zombies would tear open my stomach, unfurl my intestines, and bite into them as my eyes rolled back up into my head. Well, it wasn’t as bad as that. They didn’t feast upon my flesh but contented themselves with kicking the shit out of me.

I don’t know who punched me first, but a powerful blow landed at the base of my skull. I dropped to the ground. Then Tony Nocerino and the Merry Men (minus Bobby Mammolito) rained punches and kicks down upon me. I wondered stupidly where Bobby was as Tony screamed: “Fuckin’ Jew flasher! That’s so disgusting! A flasher! Don’t you dare expose yourself to these nice Italian girls! Don’t you even *look* at an Italian girl! Dirty! Fuckin’! Jew!” Tony kicked me to emphasize each word. He finished up by stomping down hard on my left wrist.

I either felt something crack or imagined I did.

Viola's cigarette-smoking face appeared over mine. Her newly lit cigarette burned brightly. She blew smoke in my face, stinging my eyes. As I tried to blink the burning sensation away, she plucked the cigarette out of her mouth and put it out on my chest, burning a hole through my shirt, scorching the flesh above my heart. I screamed.

Bobby Mammolito leaned against the brick façade of the school building and consulted his watch. He whistled. "We're gonna miss the bus, assholes!" The beating continued another twenty seconds. His second whistle was ear-piercing. "Dunno if it matters, but he's Neapolitan!"

Wincing from the whistle, Tony stopped punching me. "No way! He's Italian?"

Bobby's eyes widened. "What are you, Mr. Burns?"

"Vaffanculo!" I yelled.

Tony massaged his chin, thoughtfully. "I forgot he's Italian. I keep forgetting that."

"That doesn't matter!" Viola yelled. "He unzipped his pants in front of me!"

"So what?" Tony asked. "I unzipped my pants in front of you. If he ain't a Jew, it's okay."

"Oh, fuck you, Tony!" Viola yelled.

"A guy's gotta try, amirite?" Bobby called out.

"And fuck you, too, Bobby!" Viola yelled.

"I'm just sayin' I don't think he's done anything to warrant this beatdown, you know?" Bobby yelled again. "Weren't the girls the ones messing with him for, like . . . months and shit?"

The Merry Men looked down on my bleeding figure. I looked dumbly back up at them. I was numb and in shock. Naturally, as soon as I got home, laid down in bed, and my heart rate abated, I would feel the full force of every punch, kick, and cigarette burn. For now, though, I imagined I had a comical and confused look on my face, underneath the blood, snot, spit, sweat, and heavy bruising. My vision was blurry, adding to my overall sense of confusion. I didn't know where my glasses were. On the concrete path somewhere? On a nearby patch of grass? These morons thought "Never hit a man with

glasses” meant it was okay to punch a nearsighted kid if you swatted his glasses off first. One of the blurry Italians leaned closer to me. His features almost became discernable as he asked, apologetically, “Are you really one of us?”

I propped myself up on my elbows. A trickle of blood slid down the corner of my mouth and dripped onto my Columbo raincoat. “I . . . am . . . NOT . . . one . . . of . . . YOU!!!”

Tony chuckled and shook his head. “This is the piece of shit you want to defend, Bobby? He don’t got no pride in being Italian!” More kicks followed, striking me up and down my body. I didn’t know what part of me to defend.

Bobby whistled again. “The bus is gonna fucking leave! I’m going now, because I don’t wanna miss it. To hell with you lunatics.” And yet, Bobby kept rubbernecking.

Tony kicked me in the solar plexus, sending a shockwave of pain through my body. I hadn’t seen it coming and was too slow to curl up into a ball and blunt the force of the blow. Tony walked off to the idling bus. Viola spat in my face and followed him. Aurora looked down on me with tears in her eyes. She mouthed the words “I’m sorry” and left with the others. Bobby lingered, looked down at me, and shook his head. “They worked you over worse than I expected.” He waited for me to acknowledge the half-apology, but I couldn’t move a muscle.

“You okay?” Bobby asked.

“Suffering Sappho,” I muttered, plagiarizing Wonder Woman’s oddest exclamation.

“Ah, you’re okay. Good to know.” Bobby left me, a bleeding heap on the sidewalk. I could hear him humming “The Best is Yet to Come” as he disappeared into the bus. The door closed behind him and the bus pulled away.

I lost consciousness, slipping into a fever dream.

I was a werewolf with dark brown fur, sprinting on four legs through the Bavarian forest, desperate to escape my pursuing kinsmen. They ran after me on their hind legs, upright; their gorgeous, silver fur

glowed in the light of the full moon. There were ten of them and one of me, and they were gaining. In a moment, they would be upon me. I would not survive the battle. These were *The Howling* werewolves, tall and menacing, eager to hunt me down and kill me for my lack of blood purity. I was the less human, less decorous werewolf: the doglike breed from *An American Werewolf in London*. I was a mangy mutt. I deserved to die.

Dr. Stephanie Greenberg turned my purple wrist gently over in her hand. “Believe it or not, the swelling will go down faster if you fractured it. I’ll order an x-ray. What happened?”

“Some Pizza Guido stomped on it.” I was in the examination room of a convenient care clinic in Heartland Village in Staten Island, which we went to every time I was sick or injured. I didn’t have a general practitioner and saw a different doctor or nurse each time we came here. There was also, invariably, a four-hour wait whenever I came to this office, even if no one else was in the waiting room. During these trips to the doctor, I got to see some entertaining shows I didn’t watch normally, like *The Price is Right*, *Love Connection*, and syndicated reruns of *Match Game* and *Hill Street Blues*. Thankfully, after today’s epic wait in an empty waiting room, I was being examined by yet another doctor I had never seen before. This young doctor wore her black hair up in a bun, the standard white doctor’s coat, and a stethoscope around her neck. I tried not to notice her full lips and nut-brown eyes. Of course, Dad was going to say something inappropriate in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . .

Dad leaned conspiratorially forward, whispering to Dr. Greenberg. “My son flirted with the wrong girl. You ever flirt with the wrong person, doctor?”

Dr. Greenberg continued to examine my injuries. “Luckily, a lot of these injuries look worse than they are. Still, you are going to want to wash the cigarette burn regularly. Keep it covered in ointment until it heals.”

“You ever hear that you’re too pretty to be a doctor?” Dad asked.

Dr. Greenberg looked me in the eyes without acknowledging Dad with her peripheral vision. “You’ve been through a traumatic experience. I’m writing down a name and number for you. A counselor who specializes in teenagers.” She jotted down the information on the back of one of her business cards for me. “I’m going to arrange for that x-ray now.” Dr. Greenberg left.

I whirled on Dad. “What the heck was that? She’s a doctor, Dad! She’s been to medical school! She’s a serious woman!”

“With some serious breasts. Did you get a load of them? Hot damn.”

I dropped my head in my hands.

Dad looked at me, puzzled. “What?”