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XIII - In a parking lot in San Francisco

Getting her things packed had only taken her about half an hour, and she had gone to bed at a reasonably early hour because of it, but Dina still felt like she had barely slept at all. With the nightmares she had suffered from, she almost wished it was the case, too. She kept revisiting a moment in the past, where she had seen the look on her father's face, as he realized he'd lost everything.

It wasn't something any child ever wanted to see.

Her earliest memories were happy. In fact, her childhood had been happy until she was five years old or so. That was when her father's depression started setting in. Then her childhood memories became increasingly awful. She didn't need to rehash them again, to herself, but she still did. Like she couldn't stop herself. She had spent years hating her father. Even her mother had told her it wasn't healthy. Her mother resented her father, but she didn't hate him. If anything, she was disappointed with him, which Dina knew was a lot worse than outright hate.

Her mother's disappointment was a powerful force of bitter, cold resentment. Something to knock the kneecaps off any male.

Dina sighed and rubbed her face, nursing her third cup of coffee.

Why was she going to Ohio?

The answer was obvious. She was going to Ohio to meet her father. But why did she want to meet him in the first place? With everything that had happened, why did she want to? Her father had torn their family apart with his drinking and self pity. And finally, he had finished the job by hitting her mother. Why did she want to go to Ohio to find this male and talk to him?

Was this a forgiveness thing?

Was this about looking him in the face to say 'I forgive you, Dad'?

No. That kind of forgiveness was only ever done for two reasons. One was a certain kind of extremely self indulgent 'look how good and forgiving I am'-feeling, which was entirely egotistical, and the other was for strictly religious reasons.

Dina considered herself about as religious as her neighbor's sneakers after a really hard practice.

Religiosity was fine if it did it for others. So long as they didn't go overboard, and so long as they didn't use it as an excuse to be spiteful, hateful little furs, then she had no problem with it at all. She simply preferred if it wasn't stuck in her face all the time. She had this life to worry about. What came afterwards she'd deal with when she got there.

She sighed and rubbed her face again.

What a night, to make her think along those lines. She had to wake up and she poured herself her fourth cup of coffee, hoping it'd help. She didn't want to be rude by going to sleep five minutes after the car started.

"Wake up, Dina...for crying out loud," she mumbled and shook her head.

She had a couple of hours to get her head on straight. It would have to do.

###

"I'm just not sure this is a good idea, Steve..."

"Mom...I thought we talked about this already..."

Steve was exasperated, and his mother was worried. The bags were packed and Steve had what little money he had saved up in cash in his pocket. He had a full tank of gas, and he was pretty much ready to go. And then his mother started suffering from a severe case of cold feet. Talking about how he shouldn't be going anyway. Of course he had tried to explain to her that if he didn't go, someone else couldn't go either, and she just didn't seem to care. She just wasn't budging and Steve could only watch as his chances of going to Ohio was rapidly dissipating.

Shaking his head, he stood up and grabbed his bags. "I'm going, Mom. We talked about this, and I told them I would come. I'm not leaving someone standing on a parking lot because you grew cold feet overnight."

"You sit down this minute, Steve Wulf, or..." his mother burst out and rose to her feet as well.

Steve sighed and looked at her. "Or what? What are you going to do, Mom? Ground me? That's a little hard when I'm not in the house!"

His mother folded her arms across her chest and set her jaw. "If you leave now, you don't need to come back. At all. You can leave, but then you stay out. I've had it with your behavior and with you doing as you please. I've tried to stay patient with you despite all the reports from school and despite all the problems you've caused. But this is it. If you leave...you leave for good."

"You've got to be joking..." Steve said. His eyes went wide and he turned to face his mother fully.

The look he got back was completely uncompromising. "Never been more serious in my life. You go upstairs and unpack those bags this instant," his mother said and bared her incisors.

Steve almost buckled. Almost. That was until he saw those fangs. Then he shook his head, slowly. He wasn't going to back down in the face of that kind of retrogressive behavior. Not after how he had behaved for years. He had to make a stand against it, even if it was against his own mother. Even then. Nonetheless, his stomach felt awful and his throat was dry. He hated arguing with his mother, but he really couldn't let her...

...Let her...

...bully him.

That was it, wasn't it? That was what this was all about?

"No. You know, one thing all this has taught me...is not to bow to threats and not to let myself be bullied, Mom," he said, calmly. He was tired, all of the sudden. Not physically, but emotionally exhausted. He had thought that she, of all furs, would understand why he needed to do this, and what he was trying to do. But apparently he had been wrong. So he would have to explain, wouldn't he?

His mother looked grossly offended at the implication that she was bullying him. She looked about to answer but Steve didn't give her a chance to speak up.

"I've done it to others enough to know how bad it is," he continued, "I'm going. And I'm going because I want to try to set some of the bad things I've done right. If that is wrong in your world...then you're welcome to kick me out. I'll just have to live in my car then, I guess. Maybe drop out of school and get a job. Here I am, trying to do the right thing for the first time since the fifth grade, Mom, and you're telling me to go upstairs and *unpack*? Who the Hell do you think you are, anyway??"

"Your mo..."

"*Screw you!* My mother would have been proud of me for trying to make up for even *some* all the crap I've done!"

Steve's head snapped to the side from the blow across his face. As he slowly recovered, he simply picked up his bags again and turned around, walking out. His mother was shouting at him to come back. That she didn't mean it. That she was sorry.

But suddenly, Steve was starting to see where some of his problems might have originated.

At home.

Not because his mother had ever wanted him to be a bully. She certainly hadn't. But if this was the kind of way she'd react to him trying to set things straight with someone he'd spent years tormenting, then...

No, he couldn't deal with that right now. Finally, he was making friends. Real friends who didn't care that he was a giant and who didn't treat him like a...

A freak...

He stopped in his tracks. That was a word he'd used about Kalen's family in the past. And Frances' and Charles' parents too.

It made him sick to his stomach to think of it. He really had to apologize properly for that. It was the kind of realization that made his head spin. All this time he'd tried stop others from treating him as a freak...by doing unto others what he didn't want them to do unto himself.

Was this what growing up felt like? This kind of realization?

He had to get out. He had to leave. If he didn't have a home to get back to, he'd deal with that later but for now...he couldn't stand the thought of *not* going. For his own sake as much as for Kale's or his friends' sake.

He just had to get out of there...

###

Kalen was leaning against his car. He had his sunglasses on and a bandana tied around his head. All because of his T-shirt, which his mother had made for him overnight, as a present. It was a black muscle-shirt which looked like the sleeves had been torn off. In bold letters, across the back it said:

THE SPIRIT OF JIM MCMAHON!

Somehow, he felt like he had to do that kind of present justice. He was currently on his third piece of gum since parking the car, and he was trying very hard to ignore the snickering from Frances and Nadia, who apparently thought he was a bundle of laughs.

It wasn't easy and he constantly broke into smirks himself.

Dina had just arrived. She was carrying her bags across the parking lot towards the car. Steve wasn't there yet, though.

Aunt Jean and Uncle Esteban were talking to his mothers and his father, all of whom were also present. They all looked a little excited and, Kalen noted with a crooked smile, slightly worried. He would have been concerned otherwise. Brushing a paw through his mane, he pushed himself off the hood of his car and approached Dina.

"Hey there. Let me take those bags for you," he said and smiled.

Dina grinned as she saw him. "What's with the sunglasses and the bandana...?" she started.

Kalen turned around and jabbed a thumb at the T-shirt. "Mom made it for me. I figured I'd best look the part then," he grinned.

"Jim McMahon was a lynx, Kale."

"Is. He's not dead yet. And what's a species, in matters of attitude?"

Giggling, Dina let the equine take her bags. "Well at least you can pull it off and look good at the same time. Besides, I know you well enough by now to know you have a healthy dose of self-irony. So anyway...where's our final traveling companion?"

Kalen barely heard anything Dina said after complimenting his looks. The tips of his ears were burning and he felt a dire need to clear his throat repeatedly. "Oh...erhm...Steve you mean? He hasn't arrived yet. I'll call him if he isn't here in ten minutes..."

Dina nodded, apparently not catching Kalen's momentary befuddlement. She looked to Frances, Charles and Nadia, waving and smiling. Kalen drew a sigh of relief that the squirrel hadn't noticed, before putting her bags in the trunk of his car.

"Look...over there. Is that Steve's car?" Nadia called out, pointing towards a vehicle pulling onto the parking lot.

Kalen looked then shook his head. "No, he drives a big car. A Ford Taurus. He's got to fit into it, after all."

"Who's that then?" Nadia asked.

"Not sure. I think that is Mr. Diazi's car...the principal, that is. Charles? Frances? Do you know?"

Charles nodded. "Yeah, that'd be him. What's he doing here?"

Frances raised an eyebrow. "I didn't even know he knew of this trip. What difference would it make to him anyway?"

Kalen closed the trunk of his car and scratched his cheek. "Well, it's possible that Coach Larsen told him about this. She knows about it from me but...oh well, I guess we're about to find out," he said and nodded to the approaching lapine form of Mr. Diazi.

"Hello Kale. How are you today?"

"Doing good, Mr. Diazi. Thanks for asking but...what're you doing here?"

Mr. Diazi looked like he would rather be somewhere else. He put his paws in his pockets and sighed, hanging his head. "Steve Wulf's mother called me, telling me that her son is running away from home and that he intends to go on this road trip with you, after she forbade him to do so."

"Forbade...??" Kalen asked, blinking. "But I thought she had allowed him to go...?"

"She said she had changed her mind last night after thinking it over. But that Steve had refused to do as she told him," Mr. Diazi explained. "Look, Kale...Steve Wulf has been a menace to you and your friends for years..."

Kalen nodded. "He has. He's working hard on proving he was wrong and that he's sorry and so far I have no reason not to believe him. He asked me if I would mind him coming along for this trip and as it was, he solved a major problem for me..."

"A problem?"

"Sir...please look at my car?"

Mr. Diazi looked at the Trans Am and nodded. "Yes...?"

"How many seats do you see, Mr. Diazi?" Kalen asked.

Mr. Diazi counted four and then looked around. There was Kalen, Charles and Frances. Those three he knew from School but there were two other young furs present. They looked ready to leave too, though. "Oh, I see..." he said and nodded. "The problem is that I have told Steve I don't want any more trouble out of him."

"Mr. Diazi..."

"No, Kale...I'm sorry but I've made my stance clear to him..."

Kalen could feel the road trip falling apart at the last moment. He looked towards the adults, feeling very much like panicking. He didn't, but he wasn't sure how to deal with this. He beckoned for his parents to come over, hoping one of them would be able to help him.

Yohni nodded to the others in the group, before heading towards her son. "What's wrong, Kale? You look upset."

"Steve's mother changed her mind and won't let him come, but he's coming anyway and Mr. Diazi is here to tell Steve to go back home when he gets here. He's run away from home or something...to come anyway."

Yohni blinked and looked at Kalen for a long moment. Then she looked at Mr. Diazi, wordlessly asking him to confirm this.

The rabbit nodded. "It's true. Sadly, I have no choice, really. I've told Steve that any more trouble out of him will result in his expulsion..."

Yohni nodded, slowly. "Well, I can't say anything to that, Mr. Diazi..." she began.

Kalen began to protest but a paw-movement from his mother instantly shut him up. Apparently, this wasn't over quite yet.

"I'm glad you see things my w..." Mr. Diazi started, but was interrupted.

"I don't see things your way, Mr. Diazi. I see things my son's way. However, you've made your stance clear towards Steve Wulf. All I have to ask you is...has he actually broken any laws by doing this?"

"Erhm...not as such, I think. It's not illegal to run away from home I suppose...?" the rabbit said.

Yohni nodded again. "Then pardon me, but this is none of your business, Mr. Diazi."

"What are you talking about, Mrs. Ryder??" Mr. Diazi asked, looking somewhat offended. "Of course this is m..."

Again he was interrupted. Yohni shook her head. "No it's not. This is a domestic affair between Steve Wulf and his mother. He hasn't done anything illegal. What he's done is just stupid, but frankly both my wife and I have come to expect that from Steve. However, it's his choice to make. And his choice is to go on a journey...in more ways than one. Which, by the way, may actually be a pretty intelligent choice, don't you agree?"

Mr. Diazi fell silent. Then he looked at Kalen and scratched the base of his left ear. His nose twitched slightly, as Kalen knew it often did for lapines when they were thinking hard. Finally, the principal nodded slowly.

"Very well, I'll leave this issue alone on one condition..." he said.

"What's that?" Kalen asked, hoping it'd be something he could easily meet.

Mr. Diazi looked straight at the young equine, reaching out and removing Kalen's sunglasses to be able to look him directly in the eyes. "I want you to tell me, to my face, that this is what you want to do and that you're sure that you can cope with having Steve along."

Kalen sighed and reached out, taking his sunglasses back. He didn't put them back on just yet, though, as he met Mr. Diazi's gaze evenly. "What I really want is for everyone to start believing that Steve can change and that he means it when he says he'll try to make up for his mistakes. He and I spent over an hour practicing snaps right over there, just yesterday evening in fact. There wasn't anyone there but him and me. If he wanted to harm me, he couldn't ask for a better chance. He could've had a dozen of his old buddies waiting there and he didn't. I believe him. No...no correct that," he said and set his jaw, squarely. "I believe *in* him."

Yohni, standing behind Mr. Diazi smiled crookedly and nodded approvingly at Kalen. There was real fire in his voice and in his eyes. He was getting angry. Not for himself, but for Steve, and she was proud of him for it. Not many kids his age would be willing to stick up for someone who had bullied them for years. But Kalen would...and did.

Mr. Diazi looked a little taken aback, as much by Kalen simply reclaiming his sunglasses as anything else. He looked about to answer when the equine put the sunglasses back on his muzzle and started turning around.

"Oh, and I'll tell you what I told my mother, Mr. Diazi," he said, looking over his shoulder. "I want you to consider what Steve's life has been like. I want you to imagine having to go to school in the fifth grade, being taller than two thirds of the teaching staff. I want you to consider what it must've felt like for him to have to sit on the sidelines when his classmates played flag-football, because the teacher thought he was so big his sheer size would pretty much ensure someone got hurt. How it felt to be the kid all the others were afraid of, even before he gave them a reason to. I want you to consider the *humiliation*. And then I'd like you to stop condemning him and give him a fucking chance, Mr. Diazi. He's not asking for more than that!"

"There's no need to use that kind of language, Kalen..." Mr. Diazi protested.

Kale scoffed and continued towards his car. "I could use far harsher language than that, Mr. Diazi. When will all you adults realize that what Steve did, he did primarily to *me*...and yet, despite all of that, *I* can find it in me to forgive him and move on. Could you get off all your damned high moral horses and let me try to befriend this guy,

without all of you waving your banners of vengeance around on my behalf? It's not helping!"

Mr. Diazzi blinked and looked at Yohni once Kalen had thusly terminated the conversation. "Well...I think that confidently and concisely showed us our place," he said and adjusted his tie a little. "I knew most equines were hot-blooded but I have to admit I can't remember the last time I've been lectured like that by a sixteen year old."

Gabrielle smiled widely. "That's Kalen for you," she said. "An equine through and through."

A red Ford Taurus turned around the corner, heading towards the parking lot.

###

"How are you doing today, Mrs. Leon?" the guard asked, smiling what he probably hoped was his most friendly and ingratiating smile.

Lizzy was less than impressed. This was the same guard who had given her the full checkup when she arrived to talk to Martin Hunter the first time, and who had consistently spoken ill of the panther ever since. She didn't know what had made him come around, but she had seen it before and frankly, she had learned it usually had something to do with her.

Such as her tail or her markings, or her oh-so-deep brown eyes, or something similarly idiotic.

She wasn't in the mood for that kind of nonsense and she simply spared the guard a single nod to let him know she was ready to enter the interview room.

Entering, she sat down and opened her briefcase. The door closed behind her as she realized she'd forgotten this week's assignments at the office. Which pretty much meant Mr. Hunter would have to wait a week before getting something else to do.

She felt like kicking herself.

"Hello Mrs. Leon. You look annoyed, and I haven't even shown you my work yet!" the voice of Martin Hunter said from the door. It sounded cheerful.

Lizzy looked towards him and chuckled. "It's not you, Mr. Hunter. It's myself. I forgot this week's assignments for you, back at the office."

Martin raised an eyebrow and sat down. "That's a bit like forgetting to put on your clothes in the morning, innit? I mean, it's pretty much why you come here?"

He still sounded cheerful, which Lizzy was grateful for. This was the first time in her career she'd forgotten the assignments. She rubbed her face and nodded. "Yeah, it is. Look, I do know something you can do for me until next week, though. We'll call that the assignment for this week."

Martin nodded, smiling and leaning back in his seat. "Sure, what would you like me to do then?"

"Go to the prison library, pick out a book...one you can read in three or four days, and then write a book review about it. Five pages, but I want it to be your own thoughts about the book in question. I want you to explain why you picked that book and what it made you think and how it made you feel..."

"Will do, Mrs. Leon. But can I ask you a question?"

"Sure..."

Martin scratched his cheek. He was trying to let his sideburns grow, but he was too young for them to really show yet. "You look...and seem...a bit ill at ease. And pardon me for saying so, you're giving off half a dozen different "I'm nervous"-scents. I am not even trying to pick them up...but they are overpowering right now. I hope I'm not the reason. I mean...I don't think I've done anything to deserve that."

Normally, Lizzy would've been offended at the scent-comment but she did know that the olfactory senses of felines were very good, and frankly, Martin had a very valid point. She didn't want him to think it was he who had caused this. She needed him to trust her, and if he thought she was afraid of him, that would drastically change their working relationship. Perhaps even ruin it.

"No, it's not you," she said and tried to smile.

"Mind if I ask what it is then?" Martin inquired, straightening in the seat.

Lizzy contemplated her answer. She could tell Martin that it was none of his business, but that wasn't going to help with the trust-issue. Besides, he both sounded and looked quite honestly concerned. "My daughter is going on a road trip, since you ask...with some friends. She's visiting these friends out of state, and now they are going to do a cross-country trip."

"First time she's out on her own like that?"

"Yeah. I think any mother would be worried."

Martin smiled and nodded. "Any good mother, certainly. But you know, Mrs. Leon...I think it speaks very highly of you that you have raised a daughter you would trust this much. And that you've raised a girl who's worthy of that kind of trust. I think you're a good parent for placing some faith in her. Parents should...you know..."

"Oh and you're an expert...?" Lizzy asked, with a crooked smile.

Martin's smile turned a little sad. "Yeah...I guess you could say I am. The thing is I took that freedom. I never *earned* it."

"You're making some real progress. Let's see how well you do on your book review, next, though..."

"I know what book to pick up, Mrs. Leon..."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. "Oh? A favorite of yours maybe?"

"In a way," Martin said and shrugged. "It's an old Steven King novel...s'called 'Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption'. I saw the movie once...a few years ago. I used to think the guy who tried to get his diploma was such a sissy..."

"And now look at you..."

"You know, Mrs. Leon, I'm never going to be book-smart. I'm never going to be this big scholar or anything. I'm a practical kinda guy. Paws-on sorta deal, y'know..."

Lizzy nodded. "I know. That's fine. The world wouldn't be moving if everyone in it was a scholar. That I have a university degree doesn't make me a better fur than those who don't. If you continue to make this kind of progress, Mr. Hunter, I'm sure we'll find some kind of work for you after you get out of here, which you will enjoy."

Martin nodded. "Well then...shall we look at the things I've done for this week?"

Lizzy smiled again and grabbed the papers on the table, taking a closer look. "Yeah, let's do that..."

###

Steve closed the trunk of his car and took a deep breath. Mr. Diaz had left. Kalen's parents were still there. All three of them. So were Charles' and Frances' parents. He needed to do something but it wasn't going to be easy.

These days, nothing seemed to be easy. Perhaps except looking at his reflection in the mirror. That was gradually getting easier.

It looked like the adults were getting ready to leave. They were clearly saying their bon voyage's to their kids. Straightening up, Steve cleared his throat and let his mind run over what he was going to say one more time. He'd practiced this, last night, in front of the mirror in the bathroom. It didn't seem nearly as complicated at the time.

It was a lot harder now, standing there.

It still had to be done though. It wasn't just for his sake either. The furs over there...the adults...were no doubt going to be worried sick and he felt pretty sure some of them would worry that he was coming along. If he could ease their minds a little, then it'd probably make the trip go easier. Fewer nervous phone-calls from concerned parents, at least.

"Excuse me..." he said and approached the group. He was met with a few nods and some suspicious looks from several of the adults. Charles' and Frances' mother backed away from him.

That hurt. At least...it hurt for a moment, until he realized it wasn't his size but his reputation she was backing away from. He looked at Mrs. Lopez and tried to smile reassuringly. So this was the fur he had referred to as a freak. This was the fur he had labeled a pervert and thought the worst about.

Shame washed over him. She looked pretty much like any other gray vixen out there. He had heard the stories of course. They circulated around school fast enough but...this was someone who was smart enough to teach at USC. Who was he? A teenager in serious danger of becoming a High School-dropout?

It kinda put some things into perspective, looking at it that way.

"Excuse me," he said again. "Before we leave...there's something I'd really like to say."

None of the adults actually answered him. Mr. Lopez nodded at him. So did Kalen's dad. That was about it, though. He tried to concentrate on what he had said to his reflection the night before, and none of it seemed to come back to him. He rubbed his jaw and took another deep breath. He felt a little faint from nerves.

And he felt like cringing at the realization. He'd seen kids who clearly felt that way when he pushed them around. Now he was facing these adults...and he was the one who was scared.

"I'm...trying to think of how to put this," he said, weakly. "It's not easy. I've never really been good with words..."

"Just your fists?" Kalen's father said, in an acidic tone of voice.

"DAAAD!"

"No, Kale...stop...he's got every right to be pissed off at me. Don't defend me right now. I'm trying to apologize, but I don't think there's a lot of things I can say that can make you forgive and forget. I don't think there's *anything* I can say to do that, in fact. But I really am sorry. I've been such an idiot. Kale's been really decent to give me a chance, because I didn't deserve one. I just...don't want any of you to be worried about me on this trip. I'll do everything I can to help the others and make this work. I promise...for what that's worth."

There were some sporadic nods. Kalen looked at the adults, clearly hoping they'd come around but Steve just continued.

"I've got one last chance and I'm not going to blow it. Kale's the first fur I've wanted to call my friend since before I started shooting upwards. I've had 'buddies' or 'homies' since then. But I haven't had a friend for years. I'm sorry for the hurt I've caused you and...I'm very sorry for the bad things I've said about you all. I had no right. No right at all. I hope you'll be able to forgive me for that. It's not...easy...being a...fr...a fre..." he tried and sighed.

Mrs. Lopez shook her head. "Please...don't use that word around me, Mr. Wulf," she said. Her voice was tired, rather than angry. "I've had to listen to it all my life and I'm fed up with it. You're not one. You're just very tall. Most wolves are. Hell, look at my husband. He's practically a midget and he still dwarfs me."

Steve nodded. "When I grew so much over the summer holidays between the fourth and fifth grades, everyone was scared of me when I got back to school. My old friends ran away from me and called me names. It hurt a lot. But that doesn't make what I did afterwards any more right, Mrs. Lopez. And I shouldn't have picked on Kale...or on your family. I guess I tried to point out everyone else who was different...to make myself seem normal. It was wrong of me. I'm sorry."

His voice was barely a whisper and it was quite hoarse. Jean had seen a lot of crocodile tears in the past, but she felt fairly certain that this was genuine.

She reached out and gave Steve's paw a little squeeze. "It's not too late to change, at least," she said.

Gabrielle nodded at her, before looking at Steve with a crooked smile. "You said you tried to make yourself seem normal by pointing out everyone else who was different in some way..."

Steve just nodded, not sure where this was going.

"I didn't raise my son to be normal," Gabrielle said and chuckled, putting an arm around her wife to one side and Kale's father on the other. "And I know for a fact that neither did these two. Normal is boring. Who wants to be normal anyway? Let's all be different! The world is a lot more fun, and there's a lot more conversation-topics that way."

Smiling again, Steve nodded. That seemed a pretty solid argument to him.

"Thanks Mrs. Ryder..." he said, feeling relieved.

Maybe these adults would give him a chance too.