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## *XVI - Flashes*

Gabrielle hung up and rubbed her face. So the kids had been on the road for less than two days and already run into some kind of trouble. At least it sounded like they had dealt with it well. For a moment, she had pondered telling Kalen to turn around and come home, but that would have been a terrible blow to him. One she wasn't sure he'd be able to forgive her for, and what was more...a road trip like this was, in many ways, a coming of age rite. If there had been no trouble on the way, it would probably have been a little bit dull.

It had all worked out, anyway. She wasn't too worried by now. Kalen was able to take care of himself and from what he had said on the phone, Steve had actually been a deciding factor in getting them all out of there unharmed. Maybe she had misjudged the wolf. She could only hope so, anyway.

She turned around and headed into the hallway, going downstairs to the shop.

Yohni was just finishing packing up a customer's purchases. Apparently it was for a gift. Those always made Gabrielle want to laugh. Seven out of ten furs who made a purchase there would ask to have it gift-wrapped. Many would be blushing furiously while asking for it, leaving no doubt with either her or Yohni that they were buying whatever they had bought for their own needs. And Yohni was always the consummate professional about it,

smiling and wrapping up the 'gift' without showing any outwards sign of her amusement. And who knew? Sometimes those gifts might just be gifts after all.

Gabrielle knew that quite a number of customers actually asked Yohni for advice too, about what to buy. Those were usually those three out of ten furs who didn't hide that they were buying something for their own private use.

"Does this outfit look like something my wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend would like?" seemed to be one of the more common questions.

"How many rotations per minute does this one have?" was another.

And of course there was the ever-popular "Wow, can I have your autograph on this movie?"

The customer left and Yohni looked up and smiled at Gabrielle. "Hey Love..."

"Hey. Was that a blusher or a genuine gift-giver?" the bronco asked, grinning crookedly.

Yohni looked after the customer who had just left. "Blusher. I'm sure his wife will love that maid's outfit...but to be perfectly honest I'm not sure who will be wearing it."

Gabrielle nodded. "To each their own. Anyway, Kale just called."

"And from the sound of your voice, I'm inclined to think he's run into trouble already," Yohni said, sighing.

"He has, and he's also gotten out of it. Seems they ran into a bunch of bullies at a diner halfway through Nevada. Steve got them out of it, apparently."

"That's good. Well, not the bullies but that Steve stood up for Kale and the others."

Again, Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I'm hoping it's a sign of better things to come from that wolf..."

Yohni smiled and checked the cash-register. "You know...if I had days like this one every day, we'd be moving into a bigger place soon, and I'd have to hire some help."

"Oh, lots of customers?"

"Not quite sure what happened, but yes. This is the first time today I haven't had someone in here."

Gabrielle smiled widely. "You know, you have enough business in this place to hire someone already."

Yohni shrugged. "I know...but I like the contact with the customers, and there's no guarantee business will stay this way."

"You've said that for the last five or six years, Yohni. Hire some help already!"

"Okay, okay...I'll put up an ad for someone."

Gabrielle leaned over the counter and kissed her wife. "Shall I cook us dinner tonight then? Since you're so busy?"

Yohni made a content sound and nodded. "Yeah, that'd be great. Something we can eat in front of the television while covering up in blankets and snuggling up, while watching a movie."

Gabrielle nodded. They hadn't had that many chances to do that since Kalen was an infant. If they did something like that these days, he'd walk through the room, groan, roll his eyes good-naturedly and tell them to get a room.

"I'll think of something," she said and winked, heading back upstairs, swishing her tail on the way.

###

Kalen wasn't happy with the situation. They had been on the road for two days and they had already run into trouble. At least he could justifiably say he had done nothing to provoke the situation that had arisen. It didn't make it any easier to deal with, though, but thankfully, Steve had stepped up to the plate for them all and ensured they got back on the road. Nonetheless, he couldn't shake the feeling that they hadn't heard the last of this.

The road kept going in a monotone, rather dull way. There was very little to stop and see, and the atmosphere was still a little tense after what had happened. Charles was chewing on his bottom lip, which was usually a good sign that he was nervous. Nadia kept looking out the rear window to make sure no police-cars were following them.

"What an insufferable little piece of..." Kalen mumbled and shook his head.

The sound of his voice shook his friends out of their thoughts and Nadia turned to look at him. "You can say that again," she said and sighed. "What are we going to do if his dad comes after us?"

"Somehow I doubt he will..." Charles said and shrugged. "The only thing wounded was Trey's pride."

Kalen nodded, but he could tell from Charles' voice that he wasn't nearly as certain as he tried to sound.

"We'll just keep driving until we need to stop for dinner. The hydrogen cell in this thing will keep us going through Nevada and Utah, and Steve's got a full tank. There's no need to stop until then. We'll get some distance between us and Trey..." he said, looking over his shoulder to Nadia in the back seat. "Are you okay back there?"

Nadia nodded and sighed. "Yeah, that was just a pretty nasty experience. Why is it that some boys think getting violent and threatening gives them moral superiority?"

Charles leaned his head back against the neck-rest. "I don't think they think as far as morality," he said and closed his eyes. "Thank God that Steve was there...I wouldn't have liked to fight that bunch."

Kalen chuckled and looked back to the road. "A month or so ago, could you imagine either of us ever saying something like that?"

"What, about Steve you mean? No chance."

"Yeah...me neither. I guess all he needed was a chance..."

Nadia waited a moment before chiming in again. "Erhm...on a different note altogether guys..."

Charles opened his eyes and half turned in his seat to look at the girl behind him. "Yeah?"

"When we get to Utah...are we going to go via the northern route or the southern one?" she asked.

Charles didn't know the answer and looked to Kalen with a questioning expression on his face. He'd like to know that, himself, but he hadn't asked yet. He kept forgetting to.

"I think we'll talk about that tonight when we stop to eat, actually," Kalen said, thoughtfully. "I'll be honest and say I'd like to go the northern one. If the rest of you

disagree we'll go by Cedar City, Bryce Canyon and Escalante, but I'd prefer to go via Salt Lake City, then to Orem and Arches and then into Colorado."

The other two nodded, but said nothing. Once again, silence descended in the Trans Am...

###

Trey looked at his paw, wrapped up in a plaster cast. This was starting to be more trouble than it was worth, but his dad had told him what to do and that was what he *would* do. Still, having a paw in plaster was annoying. He needed to get it shaved before it was wrapped up, or it'd be impossible to get the plaster back off later.

It seemed a lot of work just to get even, but then again, he wasn't going to let those city slickers get away with humiliating him.

He was waiting for his dad to call him back. Those rich kids were going to regret having made fool of him, indeed. When they got pulled over by some highway patrol and their cars got impounded, they'd wish they had let him have his way. Yes indeed.

The plaster cast was worth that.

His cell-phone rang and he flicked it open with his off-paw. "It's Trey. Hey Dad...yeah, I got it done, just like you said I should. What's next then?"

He listened to his father's explanation and smiled wider. "Yeah, that's okay. So they'll definitely get pulled over? Great! Thanks! Okay, I'll go wait for you to call about that then. See ya tonight..."

Then he hung up and grinned again.

###

Charles had just checked the clock on the dashboard. It said two thirty, and the group had just passed through another small town when he saw it. What he had dreaded all along. A highway patrol, waving them over.

He looked at Kalen and sighed. "So much for hoping we'd get out of Nevada without hearing more about Trey and his ilk, I guess," he said and sighed wearily.

Kalen nodded. "Yeah..." he said and pulled over, shutting down the engine and rolling down the window.

A large canid, looking like he could have invented the term 'mongrel' walked up to the driver's side and leaned on the car-roof. He smacked his lips a couple of times and grabbed a firm hold of his belt-buckle, lifting his entire girth in the process.

"Yer in two-hunnerd kines o'truble, son," he said and looked at Kalen. "Lemme see that license o'yours fer a start..."

Kalen nodded and held out his drivers license for the cop to take. The canid checked it...taking his dear sweet time about it, before giving it back to the equine.

"A'right...getcher sorry ass out here, son. Yer unner arrest fer assault an' causin' bodily harm..." he said.

Kalen knew better than to start arguing the point but his eyes went wide nonetheless. He got out of the car but shook his head in disbelief nonetheless. "Say what, officer? I admit I got into an argument back a ways...at a small town diner. But I never laid a finger on anyone. And I've got five witnesses to back that up."

"Sorry, but ah couldn't care less if ya'll had God himself come da'hn from above, sayin' ye's innocent. I got me an APB on an equine, drivin' a pretty li'l number jes like that one...sayin' yer guilty o'hurtin' a cop's kid, breakin' 'is paw an' threatenin' t'kill'im..."

"WHAT???"

Kalen sighed and shook his head. "Charles, calm down. We're not going to fix this by starting a shouting contest. This officer is just doing his job. We've got witnesses to say we did nothing wrong, and that Trey was threatening us before Steve helped us get out of there."

"Who's Steve?" the canid cop asked.

Kalen pointed to Steve's car as it parked behind them. "The wolf behind that wheel is Steve," he said. "He applied non-lethal force to get us out of a potentially messy situation, but he never broke anyone's paw and none of us threatened to kill anyone."

"Ya'll gonna have to take that up with a lawyer. I'm unner orders t'take ya'll back an' hand ya'll over to the officer who put out that APB. Ya'll got a few days o'waitin' to look forward to...in a holdin' cell."

"What's this all about?" Dina asked. "Officer, what's going on here?"

The cop turned around and touched the brim of his hat. "Hullo Miss...well, s'just so happens that ahm'a takin' ya'll back to where ya'll assaulted that kid. His dad wants t'have a serious word with ya'll."

Dina nodded. "Very well. It's what...a two hour drive or so?"

"Thereabout."

"Well, I'm sure we'll all come peacefully then?"

Kalen looked at the squirrel with some confusion on his face, but he nodded. "Yeah, I wasn't going to put up a fight or anything. But he's saying Trey's paw is broken, and that we threatened to kill him...and that allegedly I'm the one who did it all..."

"That's bullshit!" Steve burst in. "I'm the one who grabbed Trey, not Kalen. If anyone's to blame it's me, but none of us threatened anyone. In fact, THEY were threatening us!"

The cop put up his paws and chuckled. "Look, all this explainin' aint gonna change a thing. Ya'll gonna have to come with me, an' we can do it the easy way or the hard way. Since ya'll seem to be reasonable kids, why don't we all jes' get back inna cars an' get goin', hmm?"

Dina held out the keys for Steve to take. "Sure," she said and looked at the canid officer. "Look...both my parents are cops, and I am not going to make a run for it. We can't all be in your car, officer. How about we drive back in our own cars, and you follow behind us? If we make a run for it, we'll just prove ourselves guilty, and since we're not...well...we *want* to clear ourselves of this."

The officer thought about it for a moment. He clearly wasn't too keen on the idea. Kalen's car would easily outrun his. Steve's probably wouldn't though. In the end, he nodded.

"Fair enough. But you drive that one then," he said and pointed to the Trans Am. "And I'll take the wolf and the equine with me in my car."

"Sir...only three of us have a driver's license. We can't drive both cars back if you take two of the drivers with you," Dina said, matter-of-factly. "I'll drive this one, Steve drives his own vehicle and Kalen goes with you. None of us would leave him behind for all the tea in China."

Again the cop pondered that for a moment, before nodding. "Alright, but the first time I see one of you speed up, I'm calling in the reinforcements."

"Won't happen, Sir..." Dina said and walked over to Kalen with a smile, holding out her paw to get the keys.

Kalen gave them to her and raised an eyebrow, as if to ask what the squirrel was playing at. Dina didn't answer. Instead she leaned forward and gave Kalen a kiss on his cheek. He blinked for a moment, as if taken totally aback, before returning the gesture. Then he held out his paws to get cuffed, before he got into the police-car. The door was closed behind him and the canid got into the driver's seat.

Dina looked at the others and gestured for them to get into the cars and get ready to go. She hurried over to the driver's side of Kalen's car, getting in. Frances got in on the passenger's seat, Charles and Nadia joined Steve.

"We're in so much trouble..." Frances whimpered. She looked awfully nervous.

Dina just smiled and shook her head. "Oh no. We'll be juuuuuust fine. Don't you worry about a thing..." she said, enigmatically, and started up the engine.

Frances just looked at her in complete confusion.

###

Zig Zag closed the case folder and got up. She was in no mood to waste any more time on this meeting. If anything, she was in a mood to tear the fur across the table a few new ones. Wasting her time was one thing, and bad enough at that...but to try to bully her by making constant references to her past career was completely out of line.

"I think, Mr. Kildare, that you may want to look elsewhere for a production company for your...movie," she said with every sign of distaste as she left the room.

She hadn't given Mr. Kildare a chance to answer, and she couldn't care less about what he had to say. She could take a joke, but for someone to lean over the table and calmly...and rather smugly...explain to her that she would be ill advised to pass on a contract since former porn-actresses didn't get many breaks in life, was out of line.

So severely out of line, in fact, that one would need military-issue binoculars to see the line on the horizon.

If she hadn't put some restraint on herself, she'd have punched the idiot.

She turned a corner and nearly bumped into one of ZZ Studio's actresses. Smiling, she nodded to the gray rabbit and felt her ire seep out of her rapidly. "Sorry Kiska, I didn't see you," she said and stopped walking.

"It is alright. No problem," the rabbit answered. She had a thick Russian accent, which Zig Zag knew she did nothing to lose. It was a trademark...

ZZ Productions and ZZ Studios were located in two different buildings in different parts of Columbus, so Kiska was no doubt there for a reason. Marvin ran ZZ Studios as well as she could've wanted from anyone, but he still did need to clear certain expenses with her. He was her business-partner, but she still held the final say when it came to the budget. Marvin didn't mind that, either. He had always been a practical type, rather than a number-cruncher.

Kiska held out a case-cover for Zig Zag and smiled. "The figures for the next two movies, Boss," she said, without blinking.

Zig Zag smirked. "Figures eh?" she said and took a look. It all seemed to be perfectly in order. Marvin very rarely went over budget and when he did, it was usually not something he could help. He was quite prudent with the money he got, but then again, Zig Zag never skimped on his funds.

"You look angry, Boss," Kiska said, canting her head and putting her paws behind her back.

Zig Zag raised an eyebrow. That particular bunny looked like a 'come-on' even when she wasn't trying. "I do?" she asked, then shrugged, "Well, I am. I'm tired of still having to justify what I did when I was younger towards some furs. I shouldn't justify it in the first place, to anyone...ever."

"Of course not. But who still asks you to?"

"Oh, quite a few furs, actually. Usually other movie-types. Most of Hollywood still won't go near me, mostly because I still keep ZZ Studios going."

Kiska nodded. "It is vierd, is it not? In our day and age, furs still seem to think that sex is something to be ashamed of and to hide."

Zig Zag chuckled and nodded. "Yeah, and then they look terribly uncomfortable if one points out to them that they are all the direct result of it. Sad but true. Anyway, these...figures...are all in order," she said and gave Kiska back the case-folder.

The rabbit nodded and winked. "Stress down a little, Boss...don't let them get to you."

Zig Zag nodded. Well, she'd either be stressing down when the visitors came, or she'd be going through the roof. Having six teenagers drop by could result in either of the two.

"I'll try," she said and smiled. "Could you tell Marvin that I will be by later this week?"

Kiska nodded and winked as she headed off. Zig Zag dropped by the Studios as often as she could spare the time. It kept her in touch with her roots, she said. Most of those working there knew she missed it a bit from time to time. Not the acting, but the atmosphere. Still, she had a great thing going with her production company, and she obviously didn't want to go back to just running ZZ Studios. It was just a bit of recurring nostalgia.

Behind her, Mr. Kildare strode out of the offices with an insulted look on his face.

###

By the time the three cars reached the small town near Winnemucca, Kalen was getting thoroughly tired of the situation. He was alone in the car with Mr. Hillbilly Cop-from-Hell, and he had spent the last two hours listening to a string of lectures about the immorality of young furs with too much money on their paws.

Every time he had tried answering, he'd been cut off. He hadn't even managed to catch the cop's name yet through it all and he felt like his brain was about to ooze out through his ears.

Frankly, it was a relief to get out of the car in front of the sheriff's office.

He was taken inside, along with his friends, and then put in an interrogation room. He was still pawcuffed and frankly he was starting to consider legal ramifications. Not against him, but what he could do to sue the socks off whoever was behind all this. He was not a happy camper, and it probably showed on his face to anyone looking in on him from the outside. It didn't make things better that he was then made to wait another 20 minutes for the officer who was going to conduct the interview.

When he finally did arrive, Kalen could immediately see the family resemblance. This looked like Trey with another 30 years of fast food to make an impact. The feline who entered was no doubt built squarely from nature, but he had added bulk to go from 'square' to 'cubic'...while his eyes stayed the same size, which meant that by now they looked very small and hostile.

"Well well, Mr. Ryder-Twain..." the sheriff said and placed his badge on the table, before taking a seat on the chair opposite from Kalen, "put your paws on the table so I can see them."

Kalen shrugged and put his cuffed paws on the table without complaint. It wasn't as if he was holding a lethal weapon after all. "Certainly, Sheriff. I expect I'm here to be charged with something?"

"Of course you are. You know yourself what you did, so there's no point in dragging this out, I assume? My son has a broken paw and he's a sobbing wreck from the threats you leveled against him," the sheriff said, matter-of-factly. "You're in a lot of trouble, Mr. Ryder-Twain. You could be looking at a few years in the shade in fact."

"It's Twain-Ryder, Sir...and I have five witnesses to say that your son was doing just fine when we left the scene. Or are they all being charged with breaking your son's paw as well? I know Trey isn't the smallest cat out there, but we couldn't all have found room on his paw..."

The sheriff growled and his whiskers bristled as he leaned forwards over the table. Or tried to. His stomach got in the way. "You should be careful about insulting my family. You're in enough trouble as it is!"

"Sheriff...I did literally nothing wrong. Your son gave me and my friends a very hard time when we came out from the diner, and we only barely got away without it turning violent. Three of my traveling companions are female. Are you saying your son was beaten up by a bunch of girls?"

"SHUT UP!" the sheriff roared, "I don't care about your...traveling companions. I care about the fact that YOU beat up my son, broke his paw and traumatized him with your threats! And you'll be facing a judge about that, let me assure you, and I can tell you that the evidence against you is overwhe..."

"I'm sure it is, Sheriff. I'm sure it is," Kalen responded. He was getting angry again. He looked straight at the fat feline and didn't flinch. "But I still have five witnesses, and you yourself just said you didn't care about them...which will be on the recording of this interview. So I'm pretty sure you're not charging them with anything."

The sheriff got up and smiled. If Kalen had ever seen the definition of an 'evil smile', then the expression on the Sheriff's face had to fit the bill. He actually felt himself shudder. While he was trying to seem confident, this was unpleasant, and he *was* a little

nervous. The only thing that kept him from shaking all over was probably the fact that he was angry about the injustice of the situation.

A moment later he was alone in the interview room again.

He shook his head and closed his eyes, trying to remember how it had felt when Dina kissed his cheek. It had only lasted a moment...while she whispered something in his ear. It was only just that he had managed to concentrate enough to do as she asked.

"Did he read you your rights? Kiss me back if not," she had whispered.

Dina hadn't heard the start of the conversation of course, since Steve had been pulling over and parking the car by then.

His rights.

Her scent.

Her fur.

Her lips.

Her hair...like amber glistening on a sandy beach...

There he went again with the bad poetry. Groaning, he slammed his forehead into the table and tried to think of something apart from Dina Spermophilus, but somehow, she seemed to pop up in his mind no matter what he was thinking about. Even football.

And here he was, sitting in a sheriff's interview room in Hicksville, Nevada, probably looking at a delay of at least a day, maybe two.

What a start to this road trip...

###

"Well, Miss Spermophilus, I must say you've been real reasonable about all this," the sheriff's deputy said and scratched his cheek.

Dina smiled and tried not to think of the fact that the possum both looked and smelled like a small cloud of flies could assemble over his head at any time. He had been quite polite and helpful, and when he had found out that Dina's parents were both cops, he had been quite willing to take down a statement from her. The sheriff had walked through the

front office, looking like a bloated Spanish treasure galleon under full sails, and Dina had noticed the deputy's facial expression after his boss had passed him by.

Quiet resignation.

The deputy looked like he was in his early fifties, and the sheriff was only marginally older. Judging from the more or less faded photographs on the walls, the present sheriff had only occupied the position for seven or eight years. The deputy may well have been here for a lot longer.

She looked at the table and saw a few letters. Reading the name upside down, she looked up at the possum again. "Mr. Pauci, I think it's pretty obvious what this is all about," she said, shrugging.

The possum raised an eyebrow and used his tongue to lick his nose at the same time. "Oh?" he asked, sounding like he would really like this whole situation to be over and dealt with.

"Yeah, this is about Trey wanting Kalen's car. I have four friends in the next room, worrying themselves sick and I have another friend in the interview room who has the football match of his life to attend in Canton, Ohio, in less than two weeks. So...what say you we fix this nice and easy?" Dina said, leaning forward against the table.

"I'd do anythin' for this to be 'nahs an' easy', Miss," Deputy Pauci said with a truly weary expression on his face. "Nothin' e'er is around here anymore."

Dina nodded sympathetically. "Well, first of all, am I, or any of the four furs in the next room getting charged with any kind of crime or misdemeanor?"

"Fleedin' from the scene of a crahm might be one, but Sheriff Stockton said not to bother. He just wanted that there equahn..." the possum said.

"So nothing against me or my four friends in there?"

"Nope."

Dina nodded. "Then I point your attention to the part of my statement where I explain that Kalen claims not to have had his rights read to him. I can't verify this, because the car I was in hadn't been parked yet. But two of the four furs in there can attest that the canid officer did make an arrest, and under United States Law, that means he was obligated to read Kalen's rights to him. That didn't happen. Any judge in the land would have to let this case drop already on that, Mr. Pauci..."

The possum nodded, making a grimace. "Tha's true. An' it means more paperwork..." he said and shook his head.

"I think I can save you some paperwork, though...in fact I'm one hundred percent convinced I can..." Dina said with a crooked smile.

"Then *please*, for God's sake, I'm all ears..." Deputy Pauci said and perked up a little.

"Call Trey down here. The Sheriff's son."

"You wha'?? You're serious, Miss? He's the one who wants..."

Dina smiled again. "Indeed, I think that's exactly what he wants..." she said and took Kalen's car-keys out of her pocket, "So what do you say we get him down here...hmm?"

Mr. Pauci couldn't remember the last time a girl as lovely as the squirrel in front of him had sent him that kind of smile. He blinked repeatedly and quietly reminded himself that he was an extremely married possum, before nodding.

"Well...if you're sure, Miss Spermophilus?" he asked.

Dina couldn't quite help being amazed that the possum, despite being a complete stranger, could pronounce her last name without smirking stupidly. Most furs, particularly males, couldn't. It seemed pretty obvious to her that Mr. Pauci was a nice enough fur, perhaps not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but a basically honest fur who was simply doing his job, sadly cursed by the fact that he answered to someone who was anything *but* honest.

She waited while Mr. Pauci made a phonecall. After a very brief conversation he hung up. "The sheriff could go an' give me a real hard tahn about this, Miss...but you seem to know wha's what and wha's not..."

"I'm not trying to get you in trouble. I'm trying to get us *out* of some," Dina said and smiled as she got to her feet. She didn't expect that she had to wait for long and she had to ask Nadia to do her a small favor first.

###

When Dina had explained what she wanted, Nadia had a hard time not giggling. She understood completely, but she had to keep a straight face. Steve looked like someone had hit him with a two-by-four. Completely dazed and unable to grasp what was going on around him. He was clearly scared half to death of the fact that he was in a sheriff's

office. Charles and Frances were both clearly uneasy too, but mostly just confused and upset.

Through the window, she could see Trey and his cronies park their mopeds, before entering. She got all that, too. So Trey had a broken paw, did he? He drove his moped well enough it seemed, and Nadia had caught all of it.

She smiled to the others and waved them along as she went into the front office. Just in time, as it turned out, as the door was almost blown out of its hinges by an exuberant Trey, declaring at the top of his lungs that he was there to get what he'd been promised.

Nadia discreetly held up her cell-phone, as if checking a message. In any case she was by the door and Trey had only one destination.

Dina.

Before he could cross the floor, she casually lobbed the keys in her paw towards him. She didn't even say a word.

Trey caught the keys...using both paws, hooting and howling to his friends that they were going to go for a ride.

"Just a minit, before ya'll leave, Trey..." the deputy called out, incredulously.

"Aww come on, Mr. Pauci...don't make me talk to my dad to get permission. You're just going to end up looking like an idiot. Well, of course you *are* an idiot, so that's no change," Trey grinned. His friends started laughing.

The possum ignored the laughter and walked around the table. "You catch somethin' awfully well for someone what's got a broken paw. And now you intend to drive a high falutin' sports-car, with one paw wrapped in fresh plaster? How long is it been since that paw was broken? Three hours? Four?"

"Dunno how long. Doesn't matter now, does it? I have the car and these city jerks got what's coming to them. Don't piss on my dad. I tried telling them that he called the shots around here and that they should do what I told them, but they wouldn't listen!"

Nadia smiled and put her cell-phone down. "Thank you. That's about all I need I think," she said and nodded to Dina.

Trey's facial expression revealed nothing but confusion. "Huh?" he said and looked at the young hybrid. "What do you mean?"

"We got everything you just said on Nadia's cell-phone camera. Every word. I think it's about time you give me those keys back and we get Kalen out of that interview-room," Dina said and looked at Mr. Pauci.

The possum just chuckled. "I'd sure hate playin' poker with you, Miss..." he said and headed to the interview room.

Trey's eyes narrowed and his face contorted in a mask of rage and hatred as he turned to face Nadia. "You fucking four-eye halfbreed piece of shit," he growled. "I'm gonna rearrange your face so hard even your parents can't recognize you!"

He started running across the room, his paw coming out in a swing. Nadia swallowed and tried backing away in fright, half ducking, half crouching to avoid the incoming blow.

She closed her eyes so she wouldn't see it coming, either.

A moment later she heard a feral snarl and the sound of someone getting hit. Strangely, she wasn't hurting, though. She dared to open her eyes, to see Trey flat on his face on the floor with Steve standing astride him.

"Don't you ever...*ever* talk to her like that again," he growled. All his hackles were standing and his long incisors were clearly showing as his lips had curled back. One paw was balled up in a tight fist and the other was reaching for Trey's already limp form. He looked terrifying, but Nadia wasn't afraid of him. Right then and there, she couldn't remember having ever seen anyone look as comforting and reassuring as Steve did.

Inches before grabbing a hold of the downed feline, Steve stopped, though, and stepped back. He shook his head and looked at Nadia with concern on his face, as if to ask if she was alright.

All she could do was nod.

Trey wasn't moving.

Mr. Pauci picked out a pack of cigarettes from his chest pocket and lit one up. "Might nahs right hook, Kid. He's had that comin' to him a loooooong time. Don't worry, I saw what happened, an' you just defended the little lady here. Now let's get your friend back out."

"NOT so fast, Deputy!" the sheriff's voice boomed out. He reentered the room. He saw Steve standing near his son, flat on the floor and he immediately began to unholster his gun.

"I wouldn't do that, Sheriff. These kids have plenty o'evidence to back'em up. Let'em go...your son's a bully an' he got what he deserved this time. Speakin' along those general lines, Sheriff...you're a bully too. Or you wouldn't have pulled this stunt. You do know that if your son had actually managed to grab tha' car...he'd have made himself guilty o'grand theft auto...an' you would've been an accomplice?" the deputy said and blew smoke into the air.

Sheriff Stockton narrowed his eyes and looked at everyone in the room. "He's knocked out my boy! I'll be damned if I let them walk out of here!"

"Suit yerself, Sheriff. S'not my job on the line. But I think if this goes to court, you'll be lookin' for a new one. Can't say I'd be sorry..."

Trey groaned on the floor and started coming to. He whimpered and spat a bit of blood and a tooth out on the floor.

Steve didn't even look at him. He simply made a low growl at the back of his throat while keeping his eyes on the sheriff.

Trey scrambled for the door as the Sheriff's mouth opened and closed a few times.

"You haven't heard the last of me!" he finally roared, feebly, before running for his office.

"Oh I think we have," Dina said, dismissively. "Hey Kale...are you okay?"

The equine looked at everyone in the room with a confused expression on his face. "Yeah, I'm fine. What's going on out here? It sounds like World War III is breaking out..."

Charles sighed. "Trey called Nadia a..." he began, then stopped.

"A four-eyed halfbreed piece of shit," the hybrid filled in, smiling crookedly.

"So now my knuckles are hurting a bit," Steve said, shrugging.

Kalen nodded. "Good. I'd hate to break my throwing paw on Trey's thick skull..." he said.

"I think we've had enough of the whole broken paw thing for one day, thankyouverymuch!" Frances burst in. "Can we get out of here now?"

Dina went over to where Trey had fallen, picking up Kalen's car-keys, then she went back to the equine and put them in his paw.

He was about to say something when she leaned over and kissed his cheek again.

And for the next two hours, Kalen couldn't remember how to say *anything*.