



CHAPTER 1

Twelve-year-old Jason Walker was wearing only a pair of stained BVDs when he began his run to freedom in the tiny Wisconsin community of Deerfield. He was weak from malnutrition and cold. Despite his condition, he was determined to block out the breathtaking chill of the 30-degree morning and the sharp stones that were shredding the bottoms of his bare feet.

His stomach growled and his legs burned from exertion. Still, he forged ahead with only an autumn moon to guide his way. The oldest of two siblings, Jason clung to the tall and icy grass that grew on the shoulders of Parkman Road, a gravel road with few homes. His feet tingled with every step; thick frost numbed his toes and ankles.

Jason knew every inch of Parkman Road; he had traveled it many times in the daylight. But in a cloak of darkness, every step was uncertain. Brambles and uneven terrain slowed his progress. Over the past mile, he had fallen at least a half-dozen times. Blood oozed from cuts on the palms of both hands and his knees were a ragged mess.

He had no concept of time or distance, other than the urgency of his flight. All he knew was he had to find help; his sister's life depended upon it. He prayed Main Street, Deerfield's major thoroughfare, was not far off.

Icy snot clung to his upper lip and his cheeks felt prickly cold. Will and determination pushed him, along with an imaginary voice that urged him on. When he saw the glow of street lights in the distance, tears began to flood his cheeks.

"You're almost there, Galaxy Warrior," a voice whispered in his brain. "Be strong! Galaxy Warriors never fail! Keep the North Star at your right hand, and your path will be true."

His breathing was labored. The cold, night air burned his lungs and, when he exhaled, he could see it billowing in tiny clouds of fog. He began to shiver as he forced his legs to keep moving.

"Just a little farther," he said under his breath, wiping the mucus that seemed to flow nonstop from his nose. "Stop being a baby! Your family is depending on you!"

Jason willed his legs to move faster, ignoring the spasms that tore at his calves and thighs. Each time he stopped to regain his balance or catch his breath, he searched the darkness he had left behind. He would not let himself be spotted by a pursuing vehicle. If headlights approached, Jason dived into the deep ditch that ran parallel to the unlit road that passed in front of the home his family rented. He couldn't afford to be discovered by his captor. Not now; not before he found help.

"I'm not going back," he promised as headlights suddenly sliced through the darkness. Jason slid feet first down the embankment and buried his face in his arms to protect it from gravel cast off by speeding tires. Slivers of icy roadside fauna stung his legs and arms as he cowered below the road's surface. The terror of being detected took his breath away. His muscles coiled, ready to carry him in the opposite direction if the vehicle suddenly stopped.

With a roar, an ancient farm truck passed without stopping, and Jason breathed a sigh of relief. Tiny roadside pebbles clung to his wet back as he forced himself to stand. The glow of taillights made his skin look red. He wiped icy particles from his arms and looked in both directions before starting to run once again. Main Street wasn't far away. The closer he got, the faster he ran.

Jason never stopped when the gravel road turned into pavement. He veered left and onto the lighted thoroughfare, Main Street. All he had to do was make it through one intersection. The Deerfield Police Department was two blocks ahead on the left.

"Don't stop again, Galaxy Warrior!" the voice in his head ordered as he shook off the cold and continued running on wobbly knees. "You're almost there."

He was moving blindly, though. The brilliant street lights and illuminated businesses along Main Street made his eyes hurt. He put a hand to his forehead to block the harsh glow. It was as if he was staring into the sun. Everything was blurry except the black pavement beneath his feet. It took all of his concentration to stay within the white painted lines.

The traffic light caught his attention when the red glow turned to green. It was easier on his eyes than the harsh red of the stoplight, and it assured him he was headed in the right direction. Jason moved faster, even though each stride sent fiery tremors through the muscles of his legs.

He thought he heard a horn blow as he passed under the traffic light. The cold and harsh light was working against him; he was disoriented. He didn't stop, though. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Weak and exhausted, adrenalin drove his body onward into the blinding cacophony of Deerfield, one traffic light, a dozen shops, one gas station, a fast-food restaurant and the Deerfield Police Department.

“Get the lead out, Warrior!” he cried out. “You’re almost there!”

Then, there was a loud thump and pain. Jason felt himself propelled through the cold, florescent air. His body was weightless and floating within a rainbow. He watched his fingers claw at the brilliant colors as he was lifted into the air.

“What is happening? Where am I?”

He landed hard on his back, and he felt the air squeezed from his lungs. He tried to scream, but nothing came out.

As the bright lights dimmed, a sense of doom invaded his thoughts. He wasn’t going to reach the Deerfield Police Department. He had failed. What would happen to his mother and Cindy?

“C-I-N-D-Y!” he cried out, too softly for anyone to hear.

Then, everything went black.



CHAPTER 2

Thomas Woodley, property manager and confidant to W. Jefferson Prescott III, was behind the wheel of a 2015 Lincoln Navigator when he slowed for the light at Deerfield, Wisconsin. It was 4 o'clock in the morning and the highway was deserted. He and his passengers — Prescott, Regina (Gina) Wolfe and the MacKenzies, Sebastian (Sebby) and Scheherazade (Sherry) — were returning from the gala Fall Fling in Appleton when Woodley eased off the gas and applied the brakes.

“We’ve got a problem, boss!” Woodley called out, rousing his party-weary passengers.

“What is it?” Jefferson asked as he leaned forward from the back seat to see what was happening.

“There’s a kid running down the middle of the road,” Thomas replied.

“What’s he doing out here in the middle of nowhere at this hour?” Jefferson asked.

“I have no idea. What do you want me to do?” Thomas replied.

“He’s in trouble, and he needs our help,” Gina shouted.

“I can see that, but I don’t think he sees us. He’s about to run right into us!” Thomas shouted.

“Sebby, go!” Prescott ordered.

In a fraction of a second, six-foot-five Sebastian MacKenzie exited the driver’s side rear door as the boy made contact with the Navigator’s bumper. The impact propelled his young body over the hood and into the opposite lane. With lightning-like quickness, MacKenzie dived with outstretched arms in an effort to catch the boy’s flailing body before it made impact with the pavement.

MacKenzie was too late. The boy’s body hit hard on the pavement but the agile giant was able to slip his hands beneath the boy’s head to prevent serious cranial damage. Woodley slammed the vehicle into park so his three passengers could exit and assist. They rushed to the spot where Sebby and the boy were stretched out on the asphalt.

“How is he?” Jefferson asked.

“I can’t tell,” Sebby answered. “I’m not sure, but his little heart is racing.”

“Let me see,” Gina said as she tossed her long black hair to one side and pressed her ear just above the boy’s mouth. “I think the wind is knocked out of him. He’s in trouble, though, Jefferson. He needs our help.”

“That is fairly obvious. Look at the poor thing,” Sherry injected. “He’s pencil-thin and looks like he’s been through some kind of ordeal. I’ll get a blanket. He’s been out here in the cold for some time.”

As she turned to retrieve one from the car, Thomas was at her side. He handed her the charcoal blanket she had had tucked under her chin moments earlier.

As Sherry placed the blanket over the boy’s motionless body, Gina pressed the palm of her hand against his diaphragm and her lips over his mouth. She exhaled gently and felt his lungs fill with air. She pulled back to see if a rhythm had returned to his breathing.

As her resuscitating breath raced down his windpipe and into his lungs, the young boy’s body came alive for a brief second. He jerked himself upright, eyes and mouth wide open. He inhaled deeply and then collapsed back into Gina’s arms.

Startled by his reaction, all Gina could say was, “Oh, my God!”

“What just happened there, babe?” Jefferson asked.

“Yeah, that was weird,” Sherry said.

Gina didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she grabbed the boy’s dirty hand and examined his palm. She used her own saliva to clean away dried blood and debris with her finely-manicured fingers. As the lifelines in his damaged palm became visible, her fingers traced the shape of “W” that stretched from his forefinger to his pinky. Gina’s mouth dropped open with surprise. She looked up at her three companions for explanation and saw astonishment in each of their faces.

“Look at that!” Sherry said.

“What do you think, sister?” Sebby asked. “He has the same markings on his palm that identifies each of us as members of the Cossibye clan. Could he be like us?”

The four adults made up the Cossibye clan’s New Order, a secret society of humans with extraordinary powers. Each of them, as well as other members of their species, could alter their genetic makeup to walk as wolves on all fours. Their ability to comfortably saunter between human and animal worlds was sustained by clinging to old customs and performing good deeds. One year ago, members of the clan stepped out of the dense forests of coastal Wisconsin, where they had roamed in packs for generations, to live as humans outside of Manitowoc, Wisconsin at the home of Prescott. Prescott was a wealthy entrepreneur whose rise to clan

leadership was predestined by his royal lineage and confirmed by the unique “W” formed by the creases in the palm of his human hand. His three companions had been bound to him during a unification ceremony that declared the foursome the “New Order” or building blocks of a new and unique genre of the ancient shape-shifting species.

“Let’s not jump to any conclusion here,” the Cossibye leader said. “The only thing we can be certain of is this boy is in trouble; he needs medical attention.”

“Yes, of course. Thank goodness Sebby was able to save him from real injury. But I think he’s going to be fine,” Gina said as she lifted the boy in her arms and smiled warmly at her concerned companions. As her muscular arms pulled the lean 12-year-old closer to her body, color began to return to the young boy’s cheeks.

“I got lucky,” Sebby said.

“I don’t know how you move so fast, brother,” Sherry said, wrapping her arm around his broad shoulders.

“I can’t explain it either,” Sebby said. “Instinct and adrenaline take over. I was moving before Jefferson said anything.”

“The kid’s lucky were passing through,” Jefferson said. “Let’s get him into the car where it’s warm.”

“Luck is a good thing, but I always seem to get the worst of it,” Sebby said, looking down at his tuxedo pants and vest. Two buttons were missing from his soiled vest, and torn cloth hung from his trousers at both knees.

“No problem, big guy,” Thomas said. “That monkey suit can easily be replaced. What you did to break this kid’s fall was amazing.”

“What do you think he was doing out here at this hour?” Sebby asked as they walked back to the parked Navigator.

“Let’s get him out of this cold and see what we can find out,” Jefferson replied.

“Shall I carry him for you, Gina?” Sebby asked.

She smiled but didn’t respond as the group returned to the Navigator that was still running. Thomas opened the door and assisted her inside. Again she refused to relinquish her grip on the young boy. Gina lowered her six-foot-one frame into the back seat. Sherry slid in beside her and handed her a bottle of water.

Gina’s comforting grasp, the warmth of the Navigator and refreshing water slowly brought Jason back to consciousness. He was startled at first, not knowing what had happened or where he was. He struggled briefly to free himself.

“Calm down, little man,” Gina said softly. “We’re here to help you.”

“I need to go,” he fired back.

“Where? Where do you need to go at this hour?”

“Police! Need help!” Jason said.

“Police? What do you need the police for?” Sherry asked.

“Mom and Cindy are in trouble. He might hurt them.”

“Where are they? Who might hurt them?” Jefferson asked.

Tears began to roll down Jason’s red cheeks. He tried to free himself from Gina’s arms so he could continue his flight. He was too weak, though. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, his eyes closed and again he fell quiet.

Astonished, Gina looked at Jefferson with longing eyes. “We’d better get him some medical attention, Jefferson,” she said. “He looks weak and exhausted. There is no telling if he has some internal injuries from the collision. We certainly can’t help his family until he can tell us where they are. Right now a thorough examination is more important than anything else.”

“There’s a walk-in clinic within a mile from here,” Jefferson said. “Thomas, do you recall where it is located?”

“I sure do. Do you mean Jim Bates’ place?”

“Call him and tell him it’s an emergency. He’ll meet you there; he makes his home in the back of the clinic. So, he should be there.”

“I’m dialing now,” Thomas replied. “Where are you going?”

“Sebby and I are going to shift and find out where this kid came from. Do you think you can find his trail, Sebby?” Jefferson asked.

“No problem,” he replied as he began to remove his cufflinks and unbutton his shirt.

“Drive around behind this restaurant so we are out of the sight of any prying eyes,” Jefferson ordered, pointing to a fast-foot establishment on the right-hand side of Main Street.

“What do you want us to do,” Sherry asked.

“Stay with the boy and make sure he gets the best emergency care Dr. Bates has available. We’ll let you know what we find out and meet you at the clinic. Thomas, you wait for us by the car, just in case we need your help.

“You’ve got it, boss.”

DR. JIM BATES answered his phone on the third ring, and told the driver to come to the clinic immediately. “We’ll be there in a matter of minutes,” Thomas said as he steered the Navigator behind a vacant fast food restaurant.

Sebby and Jefferson had stripped off all of their clothing and handed them to Sherry who was folding them and placing them neatly on the seat.

“I wish I was going along with you two,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“We need you to stay behind this time for the boy’s sake,” Jefferson said. “You and

Gina should be careful and stay alert. Whatever or whomever he was fleeing, might be in pursuit. You’ll be somewhat vulnerable at the clinic. We need you to stay alert while Gina sees to the boy’s medical treatment.”

“I understand. You guys be careful.”

As the back doors of the Navigator swung open, both men shifted and leaped out on all fours, their human bodies transformed magically into magnificent black wolves.

Jefferson, known as Sakima to his Cossibye followers, looked back as the Navigator pulled out from behind the restaurant, throwing gravel in its wake. It was a beautiful mode of transportation, ever a reminder of the contrast between the human and animal worlds he had become so comfortable with since ascending to clan leadership. He loved the riches his human world provided, but it was the splendor of standing on all fours that filled his soul with joy. The majesty of shifting from human to wolf never ceased to amaze him. He loved feeling his animal senses come alive, and he took a moment to savor them. He was one with nature again. He felt the cold pavement under his paws and the chilling aroma of the fall morning in his nostrils. The sounds around him were magnified and vibrant.

It was Sebby – known as Skilah by the Cossibye clan – who jarred him back to reality and the urgency of discovering from where the boy had come before his scent dissipated.

“Are you coming?” Skilah asked telepathically.

“Of course,” Sakima replied. “Lead the way, my friend.”

They took advantage of the high grass that grew alongside the main thoroughfare. Although it was early in the morning, neither of them wanted to be spotted by a passerby or someone out for a morning jog. They stopped directly across from the lighted intersection where they had first made contact with the boy.

“We must be very cautious from here on out,” Skilah said. “As you know, it is always dangerous for us to expose ourselves to the human world. Humans fear us and there is no time to waste. We must be wary because we do not know who might be watching from afar, a hunter with a

rifle and scope, speeding vehicles or stray dogs. We don't want to draw any attention."

"What's the plan?" Sakima asked.

"Because I held the boy in my hands, his scent is still strong but it comes from the other side of the highway. We'll watch for when there is no traffic and run as fast as we can. I'll meet you in the high grass on the other side. Just follow me."

Simultaneously, the pair ran through the intersection without being noticed. A semi blew its air horn just as they reached the high grass on the north side of the highway.

"We saw you too, big guy. Why do you think we ran so swiftly," Sakima said as if the driver of the big rig could hear his telepathic voice.

"Truckers always worry me," Skilah said. "Most of them carry handguns, and they aren't afraid to fire a couple rounds at animals they spot along their routes."

"Not very sporting is it?" Sakima replied.

"It is not, but truckers generally aren't very good marksmen. Still, I'm still not excited about meeting one. Let's keep moving in case he decides to come back."

The two trotted about three hundred yards along Main Street and the trail turned right onto an unpaved road.

"He came from this direction," Skilah said, looking down Parkman Road. "There won't be much traffic on this country road. Only the farmers will be up at this hour."

"I think you're right," Sakima replied. "Let's see if we can find where his mother and this Cindy are before the sun comes up. I have an ominous feeling about what lies ahead. I don't think this day is going to have a happy ending."