

Wolf Pact: The New Order (G.L. Guy)

WOLF PACT: The New Order

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CHAPTER 1

Deadly Encounter

Stephanie Richardson never saw what hit her. Whatever it was, it struck like a rogue wave, rising from a calm sea. Her routine morning jog was violently interrupted, her free spirit stolen. Had she seen the onslaught coming, she might have been able to brace herself. Standing as she was, however, the impact was inescapable; its intent deadly.

She was at the northern edge of Prescott Estate, where gardeners and employees seldom ventured. Alone and jogging the path she followed each day, the attack startled her and sent her tumbling over a small retaining wall that separated the higher ground from a steep embankment.

The ambush took the 26-year-old's breath away. She doubled over as two ribs cracked and her backward fall began. Her calves scraped across the stone retaining wall that warned of the chasm two hundred feet below. Her cries of pain went unheard by anyone who cared.

How could this be? What was happening?

There was nothing she could do to stop the inevitable. Her fingers clawed at the air, searching for something to grab that would prevent her from catapulting down the rocky ravine.

Who would want to hurt her?

Despite her athletic training, her body was out of control. Arms and legs flailed in every direction as she fell backward. She tried to reach back with her hands to protect her head from the rocky terrain, but she was too late. The back of her skull struck something hard and her world went blank.

"Oh my," she thought as her spirit emerged from the dirt and dust to watch the spectacle unfold. The body was tossed from rock to boulder, twisting and turning like a severed branch in a violent windstorm. It came to rest against a giant oak tree at the base of the ravine. Ribs and spine were smashed when the lifeless body wrapped around the base of the massive trunk of an oak. The birds stopped

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singing and the crickets ended their relentless chant as life's last fluids stained a white running suit and turned blonde hair pink.

Stephanie was shocked and unsure of what she had witnessed. Could that be her at the bottom of the ravine? It looked like the woman was wearing her favorite all-weather windbreaker and pants outfit.

What happened?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a bright light approached from afar and a gentle voice called her name.

"Stephanie, do not be afraid," the voice said in a way that was so soft and gentle she could not ignore it. "Step into the light and you will find a new world, one without pain or sorrow. All is ready, my dear. A place has been prepared for you in the next world."

"Who are you?" Stephanie asked as she put a hand over her eyes to protect them for the bright light that was now in front of her. "I have no need for another world; my world is just fine."

"I am Miakota, Jefferson's mother," the voice said. "I have come to help my son's fiancée begin a new journey. Come. Many of your friends and family await your arrival."

"Jefferson has talked in detail about his mother, Mary," Stephanie explained. "He told me nothing of a woman named Miakota. Why should I believe you?"

"Mary was my human name; Miakota is my spiritual name. The Holy Ones allow me to travel between the human and the spiritual worlds in order to help lost spirits like you find your destination.

"Do not worry. No harm will come to you; you were chosen to be the future bride of my only son, W. Jefferson Prescott III. So, too, you are loved by me and you will forever have a place of honor at my side in the spirit world."

"What is this spirit world?" she asked.

"It is where we go when we have taken our last breath in the human world. Your grandmother, Sarah, is here. She awaits you, as do I."

"Oh, no! Are you telling me I am dead, that the body at the bottom of the ravine really is mine? It cannot be. I am to be married next month."

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“One day you will be reunited with my son, Stephanie. Not today or next month, but at a time in the future when destiny decides your time has come. Now, join me, and I will show you a world that you have never imagined.”

“Are you sure I can’t go back and be with Jefferson? He will be distraught. Let, me go back to say goodbye. It will ease his pain.”

“I am sorry, Stephanie, but you cannot go back; you must go forward.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You must!”

“Why?”

“It is in accordance with the Holy Ones’ prophecy.”

“Who are these Holy Ones you speak of so fondly?”

“They sit above and oversee all of the human and animal worlds. They are called many things — God, Jehovah, Yahweh, Allah, Great Spirit and Holy Ones. They are whichever Supreme Being you pray to; they are all things to all people.

“I watched the love grow between you and my son, but I could not stop the chain of events put in place by others. I am here only to make your final journey smooth.”

“I am an educated woman, Miakota. Why should I believe you?”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“That is easy for you to say. How can I be sure? Someone might have drugged me; all of this could be a bad dream.” Stephanie said.

“Remove the engagement ring from your finger, my child,” the spirit voice replied. “Inside it you will find a word I instructed Jefferson to place there just for this reason. Look and tell me what you see.”

Stephanie slowly slipped the engagement ring from her finger and inspected the inside edge. Unknown to her and engraved on the inside of the gold band was the letters M-I-Z-P-A-H.

“How did you know that? What does it mean?”

“The word is from your Christian Bible, my dear. It appears in the first book of Old Testament, Genesis 31:49. It means ‘May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.’”

“But’..”

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“No, Jefferson did not know what would happen on this hillside today. He put it there because he loves you so deeply that no matter where you go he wanted you to be safe. I am here to fulfill his wishes and those of the Holy Ones.

“Come with me now, my child. Jefferson’s journey begins soon. He will need to move forward carefully. Together, we can ensure his path is true.”

Stephanie raised the ring to her mouth and kissed it. When she did, she felt her anxiety vanish and a surge of contentment fill her soul.

“I love Jefferson more than anything. If I come with you will I see him again, mother?” she whispered.

“Yes! Just step into the light, daughter. My arms await you.”

As Stephanie moved faithfully forward, the light grew brighter, the air warmer and a scent of jasmine filled a gentle breeze. She felt the arms of Miakota wrap around her as she became one with the prophecy.

WHEN THE FUTURE wife of W. Jefferson Prescott III did not return to the estate for her 2 p.m. appointment with Mallory Kirby, the Midwest’s most prestigious wedding planner, the staff began to worry. Stephanie, like her fiancée, always was punctual. She would never miss an appointment. Search parties immediately were dispatched to find her. Perhaps she had been injured during her morning jog.

Her lifeless body was found at approximately 4 p.m. Although paramedics were called to the scene, there was nothing they could do. The Manitowoc County Sheriff’s Department investigated and ruled the death of Stephanie Richardson accidental. The sudden fatality shocked the social world and everyone at Prescott Estate.

The young head of Prescott Holdings Ltd., Jefferson, 29, was devastated by the news. He had lost both of his parents in a five-year span and was just beginning to embrace his new role as caretaker of Prescott Estate when he met and fell in love with the vivacious Richardson. After a whirlwind courtship, they became engaged and the couple’s pending wedding was predicted to be one of the region’s social highlights of the year.

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In fact, Jefferson had been abroad at the time of the accident, choosing Italian marble for the bathroom in the master suite of his family's massive mansion. Stephanie had hated the old-style bathroom and the facelift was an engagement gift to her. This was to be the first stop in their lifelong partnership that included transforming Prescott Estate into a more modern home for the family they both wanted and for generations to come.

His dreams were shattered on a warm August morning when she tumbled down Amanda's Ridge, so named after his great-great-grandmother, who urged her husband to build the retaining wall to warn of the dangerous ravine below.

Thomas Woodley, Property Manager of Prescott Estate, notified Jefferson by telephone the minute Stephanie was discovered missing. His boss was not concerned, though.

"She's running, Thomas," he said. "You know how she loves to run; it is not unusual for her to be gone for hours."

"Yes, but she never misses appointments. She was scheduled to meet with the wedding planner today. I'm worried, Jefferson," he replied.

"Don't be. She'll be diving into the pool to cool off before you know it. Give her a hug for me and tell her not to be so inconsiderate of others. I should be wrapping up business here today and will return tomorrow."

When Stephanie's lifeless body was discovered, Thomas' second phone call to his friend and employer was the most difficult he had ever made.

"What's wrong now, Thomas? Did Stephanie scold you for tipping me off about missing that appointment?" Jefferson jibed.

"No, sir, she didn't." Thomas replied soberly.

"Why are you calling me then? What else could be wrong, Thomas?"

"I have unfortunate news, Jefferson," Thomas replied.

"What could possibly be wrong? I just purchased the marble for the bathroom. Stephanie will be overjoyed."

"I am sorry to inform you, Jefferson, there has been an accident."

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“Is she okay? How badly was she hurt?”

“It appears Stephanie lost her balance along the trail on the north end of the property and tumbled down Amanda’s Ridge.”

“Oh, no! Is she okay, Thomas?”

“No, she is not, Jefferson.”

“How bad is it? I’ll be home immediately.”

“I think that is wise, sir.”

“Can I talk to her? Where is she? Put her on the telephone, Thomas!”

“I am afraid I cannot do that, sir.”

“Why? Damn it! Spit it out, Thomas!”

“Stephanie did not survive the fall, Jefferson.”

“What?” Jefferson asked, falling into a nearby chair.

“I am so sorry I have to tell you this. By the time we located her, it was too late. She had passed away from her injuries. I am so sorry, Jefferson.”

“No-o-o-o-!” he screamed at the top of his lungs and the telephone connection went dead.

JEFFERSON RUSHED back to Wisconsin on a private jet. Thomas was waiting for him when he stepped off the plane at just after midnight. Neither of the men said a word as Jefferson climbed into the back seat of a Lincoln Navigator and Thomas collected his bags. As they sped off, Jefferson’s only instruction was: “Take me to her!”

In his boss’s absence, Thomas had handled all details pertaining to Stephanie’s remains. As with, Jefferson’s father and mother, the Porter Funeral Home collected the body and prepared it for a private showing. Thomas called ahead to inform the caretaker his boss was en route.

Jason Porter Jr. was waiting at the door of the funeral home when the Navigator arrived. He ushered Thomas and Jefferson to a small room at the back of the spacious funeral home. A tiny card opened the door and Jefferson entered without a word or a nod to the longtime family friend.

Four hours later, Jason and Thomas were standing outside the door when it opened without a sound and Jefferson exited, stoic and morose.

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His eyes were swollen and red, his complexion pale and his shoulders slumped from more than 40 hours without sleep.

“Thank you, Jason,” he said. “I leave her in your trusted care.”

As the Lincoln Navigator pulled out into afternoon traffic, Thomas broke the silence. “Are you okay, Jefferson?” he asked.

“No, I’m not okay! I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay, Thomas!” he replied, staring aimlessly out the SUV’s side window.

CHAPTER 2

Butterflies and mist

In the days that followed, Jefferson secluded himself at Prescott Estate. He spoke only briefly to Thomas and the staff, preferring to spend long hours alone in his study. It was there that the pewter urn containing Stephanie's cremated remains was placed for safe keeping next to his mother and father. The turmoil raged inside of him as he tried to understand his fiancée's senseless death. The same questions danced through his mind hour after hour, day after day.

Why had this happened? How could he continue without her?

He sought peace on long walks on the massive grounds of his family's estate. On this day, he wandered aimlessly for hours, eventually finding himself at the deepest and darkest expanse of the acreage he so loved. Many of the trees around him were more than one hundred years old. Their roots stretched in all directions; their branches provided a canopy of shaded solitude.

Despite his depressed state of mind, he marveled at the sheer beauty of the dense forest. Everywhere he looked, nature was in bloom. Wildflowers popped up everywhere, and the brambles were straining with a bounty of assorted berries. He spotted a stack of rocks that cropped up out of nowhere, an ideal place to rest. He knew immediately his search had ended; this was the place where his misery would end.

As Jefferson leaned against the cool, dark rocks, the lightweight Taurus .44 Magnum revolver slipped from his pocket. The stainless-steel handgun weighed only 27 ounces and he barely felt it when it was in his pocket, let alone when it tumbled to the forest floor. He surrendered to his exhaustion, wrapped his arms around his raised knees and lowered his head. His mind was consumed with the sadness that filled his heart.

Again, the unknown haunted him: Why had Stephanie been taken from him? Why was he not with her on the afternoon she slipped and fell?

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Thoughts of suicide had flashed through his brain in the weeks since her death; they had wafted through his brain in search of affirmation. Growing from a tiny seed, nourished by his depression, they sought refuge in his confused thoughts. He hated the emptiness he felt and the darkness that surrounded him. Could this be the perfect time and place for his surrender, for his lonely journey to end? Could he pull the trigger?

He raised his head and looked up, hoping the answers he sought would be found in the great beyond. Suddenly, though, something diverted his attention. A beam of light seemed to manifest itself between two ancient oak trees on the far side of the clearing. The sudden flash not only startled his senses and triggered his curiosity. How could this be? From where was the light emanating? Certainly, the sun could not penetrate the dense canopy overhead. The light flickered between dim and bright, and from within it something began to move. Jefferson rubbed his eyes and looked closer.

Butterflies suddenly were everywhere. They swarmed like bees from between the towering, vine-wrapped oaks. Scores of them sought refuge in the foliage around him, leaving behind a gossamer image from which a mist appeared. Fanned by the frenzied flight of the butterflies, the haze shimmered and took form.

Jefferson blinked and ground his knuckles into his eyes. When he again opened his eyes, fear overwhelmed him. Inside the mist, a wolf appeared. It didn't move but chose to stay within the security of the vapor. Then, it stretched its neck skyward and howled soulfully, shattering the silence of the forest.

When the howling stopped, the wolf turned its head toward him. Chills raced the length of Jefferson's spine. Like a special effect for a 3-D movie, the dark and fearsome creature stepped from between the oaks and onto the forest floor just 12 feet from where he sat paralyzed. When the animal snapped its jaws at one of the butterflies, Jefferson scrambled to safety atop the rocky encampment.

The creature then began its sultry advance, slowly stalking him and walking in circles as it left the mist behind. Jefferson had seen wolves in the forest before but never one so large, so beautiful or so brave. He

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could reach out and touch it. The animal was majestic and easily the ruler of this domain.

The wolf moved deliberately but did not attack. It circled, cautious of its prey. Was it as fearful as he? Jefferson couldn't take his eyes off the sleek, black beast. Out of fear and desperation, he addressed it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If this is your territory, I didn't mean to intrude. Give me a few minutes and I'll gladly move on."

The wolf cocked its head and looked up at the stranger, almost as if it understood his words. So, Jefferson talked more and began to descend from his rocky perch.

"That's it," he said. "I mean you no harm. I'll just be on my way, if you don't mind. I'm going to move very slowly, too. I don't want to scare you. God knows, I'm frightened to death. You wouldn't bite me, would you?"

Jefferson quickly realized the wolf was female, assuring him he was in less danger than if it had been a male out foraging for food. He was struck by the wolf's odd coloring. Its lush fur coat was marked by a streak of gray that stretched from between its ears to its hindquarters. How odd, he thought? Was it a birthmark or the result of an injury? Why did it seem familiar?

The wolf neither attacked nor retreated. Her pacing stopped, and she stood tall before him. The wolf seemed to be listening to his every word. Daylight sent a sparkle through the wolf's dark eyes as its fierce jaws appeared to smile up at him.

As he stepped onto the forest floor, Jefferson reached into his pocket for the Taurus and the protection it promised. He was shocked it was not there. Searching the area where he had been seated, he noticed its shiny barrel sticking out at the base of the rocks.

"Damn it!" he said softly to himself. "I wasn't going to use it anyway, not on you. Believe it or not, I came here to shoot myself. I'm glad I didn't, though. The thought of you chewing on my bones doesn't agree with me."

The wolf's haunting grin seemed to widen as its sparkling eyes continued to follow each move Jefferson made. The eyes were amazing; they pierced his psyche and somehow relieved the tension in the air.

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Instantly, he knew the beast intended him no harm, validated by a voice in his head.

“This wolf is friend, not foe,” the voice said.

As he picked up the revolver and slid it back into his jacket pocket, the wolf moved toward him. She walked so close her fur brushed against his pant leg, as a wily cat might do. When she circled behind him, he lost sight of the four-legged beast.

Jefferson looked left and right, then back to the two oaks where the mist was back, and the butterflies were flying again. There was a scent of jasmine in the air.

“What the hell?” he muttered to himself.

From between the oaks, a woman appeared. She stood tall and confident. Again, he was startled. What had happened to the wolf and from where had this lovely woman come? Again, he was paralyzed. She circled, as the beast had, and stopped in front of him.

She was tall – almost as tall as he – and muscular. She was clad in animal skins that hung on her loosely, barely covering the pulsating curves of her sun-darkened body. She had high cheekbones, ruby lips and hauntingly dark eyes. Her hair was jet black and fell below her waist. She smiled when a butterfly landed on her fingertip and then disappeared into the mist.

When her eyes returned to his, Jefferson immediately were drawn to the streak of gray hair that stretched from her right temple and across her shoulder. It was stunning, like a streak of lightning flashing across a dark and stormy sky. Could it be? Had the wolf transformed itself into a woman?

No, he had to be dreaming.

Without pause, he raised his hand, his fingers searching to verify the dream was real. His fingers sought the gray streak in her beautiful hair, but she shunned his touch. With lightning quickness, her hand halted his advance.

He gasped. She was real.

Who or what was this woman? From where had she come? What did she want?

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Her grip was gentle but firm. She smiled and stepped closer, pulling his outstretched arm across her shoulders. When she buried her face in his neck to absorb his scent, he didn't flinch. He did when her tongue darted out to trace his cheek as a lover might during a passionate moment. He knew there was no passion in the gesture, though. This wolf-woman was testing him. Her tongue felt coarse and her nose cold as it grazed his ear lobe. He felt her soft lips traced the curve of his neck, moving but saying nothing. As she slowly found her voice, deep and sensual, the forest grew quiet as she whispered in his ear.

"Your name is Jefferson, right?" she said boldly. "Jefferson Prescott, I believe."

"Ah, yes! How did you know that?" he replied.

Suddenly, as if ordered by a voice he did not hear, she knelt before him and said, "Master, I have waited so long for you to call me from the mist. I am here to serve you, to be your guardian, your partner and friend. Tell me what it is you wish of me."

Jefferson was speechless; words escaped him even though waves of questions filled his brain. What is happening to me? Who is this beautiful creature? Why is she kneeling before me and pledging her loyalty? He reached down, placed his hands on her broad shoulders and lifted her to her feet.

"You have no reason to kneel before me, woman," he softly whispered. "Are you a princess of some sort, a nymph who guards this section of the forest? Am I dreaming? What happened to the wolf I saw?"

"I am neither nymph nor princess, and you are not dreaming," she said as the pitch of her voice reached a higher octave. "I reside in many worlds, though. I stand before you as a human because it is what was required. I have come to save you from your despair. Do you not remember me? You summoned me to your side once before. I have waited a very long time for your call to come again. I thought you might never need me."

Her voice was soft, gentle and familiar. When she was not speaking, she lowered her eyes from his in a sign of respect. He searched his memory, hoping to discover where he had met her before. He knew of

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no reason why she would feel inferior to him. He placed his hand under her chin and raised her face to his. Her smile filled him with a serenity he had experienced only once or twice in his life. Her presence brought him comfort.

“Do I scare you?” he asked.

“Of course not, Master,” she replied. “I know you as well as I know my own brother and sister. It has been a very long time since we have spoken, though.”

“You must be mistaken,” Jefferson replied. “I don’t remember meeting you, and I would remember someone as beautiful as you.”

When she reached out and pulled his hand into hers, his stomach turned like a young boy in love for the first time. She placed her other hand over his left shoulder, where her fingers found the scar tissue that was hidden beneath his shirt. As her forefinger pressed gently against the scar, she said, “You must remember, Master. Close your eyes and recall your youth. You will find me in the dark corners of your memory.”

He followed her instruction and closed his eyes. An image materialized.

“Yes! Oh, yes! I remember now,” he said. “I was a boy, playing in these woods. A gunshot rang out. When I turned, it struck me in the left shoulder. I thought I was going to die.”

“I also was afraid for you, Master.” she said, “I am so glad you remember. I was young then, too. I had to call on my brother and sister to help me with you. You were too heavy for me to move by myself.”

W. Jefferson Prescott, the only son of Jefferson and Mary Prescott, flashed back in time to a winter day nearly twenty years prior. At the tender age of ten, he lay crying in the snow. The pain in his shoulder was more than he could bear. He called for help, but none came, not human help. As he lost consciousness, he remembered a young girl at his side. Soon, she was surrounded by a frenzied pack of wolves. She was talking to them, ordering them about ...

“He has lost a lot of blood,” the young girl said to the wolves. “You must help me. I am afraid he will die.”

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Just before losing consciousness, he remembered being lifted by the six hands, and the young girl saying, “We must hurry!”

When he next opened his eyes, it was his mother’s voice he awakened to. She was chanting over his hospital bed, repeating over and over, “You are safe now/Fear not my son/Your journey’s begun/Wind and soil/Slow to boil/Life is saved/From an early grave ...”

“I remember, but I thought you were part of a dream,” he said. “When I told my father a pack of wolves had come to my rescue, he laughed at me. My father said wolves never could have drug me to safety. Despite tracks all around where I was found, he said my imagination had played tricks on me because I had lost so much blood.”

“What did your mother tell you, Master?”

“She never really said anything. She only smiled whenever I mentioned it,” he said. “We talked about it once, just before she passed away. I’ll never forget her words: She said, ‘Sometimes strange things happen deep in the forest when man and beast become one.’”

“She was right, Jefferson! It was no dream,” the woman said. “We brought you back from the edge so you could live and learn the ways of the humans. We did it for your mother, Miakota, who once walked between your world and ours.”

“My mother’s name was Mary, not Miakota. And what do you mean ‘walked between worlds?’” Jefferson asked.

“Miakota was the name your mother was given when she was with our people. It is a very beautiful name and means ‘power of the moon.’ I know this must be hard for you, Master. Trust what your eyes have seen. Did you not see the wolf walk out of the mist?”

“Yes, but I don’t know where it went.”

“And now you see and hear me. You have felt my touch. Your fingers have touched my flesh. What is not to understand?”

“Lots!”

“Did your mother not tell you of our people?”

“No! What people do you speak of?”

“Oh, Master, I am so sorry. I was not aware you knew nothing of the Cossibye. We are your family, a large clan. We are both wolf and human. The mist gives us the power to walk between both worlds.”

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“Right! And on December 25th I deliver presents to children around the world,” he said sarcastically.

“Oh, I do not think so, Master. You are not Santa Claus!”

“I know! And you cannot be a wolf!”

“But I am,” she said before calmly turning her face to the sky and letting out the most blood-chilling howl he had ever heard a human make.

Wide-eyed, Jefferson’s mouth dropped open and he again found himself speechless. The collision of fact and fantasy was too much for him to comprehend.

She turned his hand so the palm was facing up. Then, she took her forefinger and traced the lifelines that stretched from his thumb to his little finger. They formed a large “W.”

“You have the sign, Master. We are of the same clan,” she said, turning her palm up to him so he could see the matching lifelines. “Do you mean to tell me your mother did not tell you of this either?”

Her eyes looked quizzically into his as she pulled him closer, trying desperately to determine if he was telling the truth. Again, she nuzzled his neck and let her lips brush his cheek to comfort him. He felt her exhale softly, her fruity breath tickling his nose as he inhaled.

“I know,” she said. “Your mother died suddenly. She must not have had time to reveal to you who you are and your proud lineage.”

Jefferson was overwhelmed by the revelation. He looked hard at her, almost menacingly, and then began to laugh.

“I have no idea what you are talking about or what you know about my mother. I was very close to my mother. We had no secrets,” he proclaimed. Then, he paused to search deeper into his memory.

“I do remember that sign, the one you just made on my hand. Mother made the same tracing three times on my hand just before she took her last breath. She was very weak. I did not know what it meant. Can you tell me more?”

“Oh, no! Humans can only learn such things from the Elders of the clan,” she replied and wrapped her fingers in his. “But I can take you to them if you wish to learn more.”

“And exactly who are these Elders?” Jefferson asked.

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“They are the emissaries of the Holy Ones, the creative and most powerful forces in the universe. We revere the Holy Ones — Father Sky and Mother Earth — much as you cherish the supreme powers of your world.”

Jefferson considered her words. His mother *was* secretive. What had she concealed from him? She never once hinted of a secret family. He found nothing that would link his mother and this beautiful woman. Never did she mention anything about these Holy Ones or Elders. He found the unknown both intriguing and consuming. He had so many questions. Why had she never talked of her own mother or father? Where and how was she raised? What was this clan he knew nothing about?

The need for answers assured him of one certainty: He needed to learn more about his mother if any of this was to make sense. This woman and the Elders knew things he did not. Could searching deeper into his mother’s past reveal his own future?

“I think I’d like to meet these Elders,” Jefferson finally replied.

As the words left his mouth he exhaled and felt the long months of hopelessness leave his body. It was replaced by the excitement of this woman’s promised journey. He stared at her in wonderment, letting his eyes explore every inch of her face. He quickly realized within this woman’s wondrous aura resided the calm he sought. Her fresh innocence warmed his soul; she refreshed him and made him feel alive again. He did not doubt a word she spoke. Wolf or human, this woman belonged at his side. How or why, he did not know.

“Can you take me to them?” he asked.

“They are preparing a Gathering for you three days from now,” she replied. “The encampment is many miles from here, though. We will have to run very fast in order to be there in time. I don’t know if you will be able to make it.”

“I am in very good shape,” he replied. “I should be able to keep up with you. I will be surprised if I cannot.”

“We shall see, Master! Follow me,” she said, about to leap forward at full speed.

“Wait!” Jefferson called out.

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“What is it, Master?” she asked with a puzzled look on her face.

“I don’t know your name,” he said. “What do I call you?”

“I am called Aponi,” she said with a warm smile.

“What does that mean?” Jefferson asked.

“Butterflies, silly man! I travel with the butterflies,” she said, pointing to an army of gossamer-winged insects that covered every branch that surrounded them.

“Aponi, huh? I like it,” he replied. “Okay, take me to these great leaders of yours.”

Aponi smiled broadly but did not say a word. She nodded her head and squeezed his hand tightly before running off with W. Jefferson Prescott in tow. The tingle of excitement and the warmth of new friendship felt good. He was being transformed.

She smiled and raised her hand to his left shoulder. Again, her fingers brushed the spot where a bullet had entered many years ago.

“You have healed well, Master. Now, we will see how fast you can run.”

Fingers locked in his, Aponi leaped forward over a fallen tree, pulling the lone heir of massive Prescott Estate behind her. Together they ran north for the deepest and darkest part of the Wisconsin forest, neither knowing for certain what was in store for them along their path.