

How to Babysit a Werewolf
(And Other Perilous Deeds I Don't Recommend)

by

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Let's get one thing straight: my sister *is not* a superhero.

Sure, she wears a costume and runs around the city at night using her abnormal strength and agility (not to mention her hella freaky senses) to chase after armed robbers and the occasional demon or psychic vampire. Sure, patients flock to the hospital where she's on the board of directors because a couple of times a month some terminally ill kid makes a miraculous recovery.

But if you ask me, she and her pack are nothing but a nuisance. All of them, living over there in that fancy mansion on the edge of town, drawing all sorts of danger and trouble to Rose Crest. Heck, I was kidnapped and used as bait by her various enemies three times—*three times*—before I was even five years old. I can't even blow out the candles on my own birthday cake without having a mild panic attack because I'm pretty sure one of those times involved me being dropped in a burning cornfield.

It's hard enough living up to being the local pastor's son, but constantly being compared by him to my sister, The Silver Wolf—Savior of Minnesota, is enough to drive any nearly sixteen year old boy to "delinquency." (A.K.A. What my mother called it when I came home with a piercing last week. Which itches like crazy, but I still refuse to take it out of my ear.)

That's why when I turn sixteen and get my license, I'm going to buy a car and drive as far away from Rose Crest, Minnesota as I can possibly get. (I hear Cancun is nice in the winter.) I already have my dream car picked out. A black 1967 Mustang that Slade, one of my sister's many acolytes, said he'd sell me for a steal at 6K—but only if I can get him the money by my birthday. Unfortunately, that's in two weeks, and I'm still shy by a good two grand. No matter how many shifts I put in as a stock boy at Day's Market, I'm never going to get that kind of money by then on my own.

Which is the one and *only* reason I took this job.

I mean, how many gigs offer a kid twenty-five-hundred bucks for one weekend's worth of work? How could I say no to that?

This is what I remind myself of now as I descend a ladder into a pit full of demons.

And all I can think is: *I should have asked for double.*

This all started when my sister summoned me—yes, *summoned*—to her loft apartment in the city with a proposition.

"Normally, I would ask someone more experienced," she had said, but April [*a.k.a. her version of Alfred*] is on her honeymoon, and mom and dad are in California visiting Charity. "If it weren't for this Challenging Ceremony coming up last minute and the chance to try to unite with the Southerlands, we wouldn't have to bring the entire pack."

"So what you're saying is I'm your last resort?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Well, that's not exactly what I meant . . ."

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t choose me for this job either. Besides, I have plans.”

“More D&D?” The Husband asked as he came down the hall with two duffle bags slung over his shoulders.

He was a big guy. Not fat big, more like he could bench-press Thor big. But he’s not a meathead, either. He’s an artist and an architect and even occasionally writes poetry. I think his size has something to do with him being a “true alpha” or whatever. But even though he’d sooner ask to draw my portrait than punch me in the face, I still feel like shrinking back every time he enters a room.

“Party,” I said—even though that party involves three of my buddies coming over to drink rootbeer floats, play D&D, and watch the latest Marvel movie I downloaded. But giving more details might hurt the bad boy image I’ve been trying to cultivate for the last few weeks.

My sister smiled like she could see right through my act. “Well, this job is no *rager*,” she said, “but we can pay you.”

And then she cut to the chase—the cold, hard cash—and with dollar signs in my eyes, I found myself agreeing to babysit my two-year-old niece for the weekend.

Which might possibly be the worst decision of my possibly soon to be very short life. If only I’d paid more attention to my sister’s instructions . . .

“ . . . there are diapers in the chest beside her crib, and Mr. Pickles—her chew toy—is in the dishwasher. It should be done in a few minutes so put it back in her crib before she wakes up. *Do not* go anywhere without Mr. Pickles,” my sister had explained while I counted out how much money I’d have leftover after buying the Mustang and new seat covers. “Actually, it’s probably best if you stay in. We left

money for food delivery in the kitchen. There's a great Thai place down the block, and Hope loves the pizza from Geno's but hates Freddy's—"

"Come on, sweetie," The Husband said, pressing the button to their private elevator that lead down to their private garage. He held a set of Porsche keys in his hand. "You wrote all this down in your instructions. Fifteen pages with illustrations, I might add." He gave her an affectionate smile. (That's one of the things that drives me crazy about my sister and The Husband—the way they look at each other. Like they're perpetually on their honeymoon even though they've been married for a few years. Old people in love are just gross, if you ask me.) "We'll miss our plane if we don't go now."

"We own the plane, they're not leaving without us," she said.

Oh yeah, did I mention how freakishly rich they are? Like have a wing of the hospital named after you, own ten cars, three houses, a private jet, several companies, and an entire mountain in Pennsylvania kind of rich? Apparently, it's one of the perks of being the alpha couple of the oldest werewolf clan in North America.

Not that any of the rest of us get to share in it. My dad won't take a penny from them. Not even to put my other sister, Charity, through Stanford Law. Or straight up buy me a car. Hence all the stock boy drudgery.

"Your sister has an excellent work ethic," my dad is always saying. "She doesn't *need* a job, but you don't see her sitting around playing games all day. In fact, your sister works three jobs: at the hospital, as the Silver Wolf, and most importantly, as a mother. God rewards hard work . . ." *and blah, blah, blah.*

Seriously, my eyes hurt from rolling so hard every time he brings that speech out of his repertoire.

“. . . If the silver phone rings, don't answer it," my sister was saying to me, and I realized that I'd zoned out for a second. [My second really big mistake of the night—the first being agreeing to the job in first place.] "And don't pay any heed to the alarms or the monitors," she said, pointing to a row of blank computer screens on a desk in the alcove beside their state-of-the-art kitchen.

Their loft was much smaller than their farmhouse mansion in Rose Crest, but even nicer. It was one of The Husband's first projects as a full blown architect—he designed and built a bunch of swanky loft apartments over what used to be some burned out train station. And then rented out most of them for a fraction of their price to "well intended" low income families. It had something to do with city revitalization, or whatever.

"I already told my informants to call 911 instead of me if they see anything go down. The police will just have to make do without the Silver Wolf for a weekend," my sister went on, wringing her hands. A worried look crossed her eyes and she darted over to the row of monitors as if to check something one last time.

"Hun, we might own the plane but we don't own the airport. We'll lose our spot for takeoff." The Husband beckoned my sister from the elevator where he held down the "open door" button. "Both the city and Hope will be fine without us for the weekend. James can handle her."

"I'm coming. I'm coming." She gave me a sheepish grin. It was a weird expression when you know she's part wolf. "I'm sorry to be such a worrier. We

haven't been out of town since Hope was born . . . and I just don't know . . ." she looked at The Husband. "Maybe I should stay?"

"No, no, I can handle it," I said, worried that my twenty-five-hundred dollars was about to slip through my fingers. "I can handle it. Mr. Pickles is in the dishwasher. Pizza from Geno's not Freddy's. Don't answer the silver phone."

"See, honey," The Husband said. "He's got this."

"You've got this?" my sister asked me.

"I've got this," I said.

She sighed. "We really do need a vacation, and we booked a room at this little bed and breakfast where Hope was . . ."

I held up my hand to stop her. I so didn't need to hear the end of that sentence. And I wasn't sure you could call attending a battle (often to the death) to determine who will be the new leader of a rival pack a *vacation*—but for the money I needed to get out of this town once and for all, I was happy to oblige.

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I have definitely got this," I insisted.

[My third big mistake of the evening. If only I had a time machine now. . .]

Before I could jump out of the way, my sister grabbed me in a hug. I don't think she meant to squeeze so hard, but I could barely breathe. "Thank you, Baby James."

"Please don't call me that," I croaked.

"Seriously, hun, we have to go," The Husband said, prying her away from me.

"Maybe I should kiss Hope one more time . . ."

"Nope, you already said goodbye. Let her sleep so James can start out easy."

“Yeah, easy,” I said with a little heheh. [If only I had known . . .]

“Oh, one last thing,” she said as The Husband pulled her into the elevator.

“Whatever you do, make sure Hope doesn’t bite anyone.”

“Got it,” I said. Then paused. “Wait, what? She’s not contagious is she?”

“It’s just precaution. We don’t know exactly how her powers will manifest—her being the offspring of a True Alpha and The Divine One and all. I mean, she’s already developing super strength.”

“Super whaaaaat?” I asked.

“It’s all in the instructions on the table,” The Husband said, pressing the button to take them down to the garage.

“She’s teething,” my sister said as the elevator doors started to close. “So just make sure you always have Mr. Pickles.”

“Okay, seriously, are you saying Hope might already be a werewolf?”

The doors shut between us.

“Do not lose Mr. Pickles!” I heard my sister call as the elevator started to move. I watched the lighted numbers descend down to the garage level. I hit the call button, trying to bring the elevator back up, but it didn’t respond. It was too late. By the time I made it down to the garage, they would be gone.

I leaned my back against the elevator door and slid down until my butt hit the floor. “Maybe I don’t got this,” I said out loud. [My first sensible thought of the evening.]

As far as I had known up until that moment, the children of werewolves didn’t exhibit any signs until they hit at least eight or nine. When my sister was

pregnant, she'd said they probably wouldn't even know if their baby would have a dominant were-gene until she was school aged. She shouldn't even be contagious unless she goes through a full transition—as in, killed a human with predatory intent. Something my sister hadn't even done—hence her only being *part* werewolf ever since she was bit as a teenager. I had always thought of Hope as being your normal run of the mill, drippy nosed, jam hands, kind of toddler.

She'd seemed just fine the last time I'd seen her—but it had been over a month since then, considering I avoided my sister and her kind at all costs. Was it possible that little baby Hope with her innocent looking blond curls and eyes so blue they almost looked purple was now a full-blown, super-powered, werewolf?

Who was teething . . .

At least she's already down for the night so I'll have a few hours before I have to face her. Maybe I can keep her in her crib the whole time—is what I started to tell myself, until that thought was interrupted by a blood curdling howl, echoing from the nursery.

Without thinking, I dashed down the hall and found Hope looking wide awake, with big bulbous tears in her eyes, standing in her crib, shrieking. She raised her arms to me and wailed something that sounded like, “Up! Up!”

“As in you want me to pick you up?” I asked.

She nodded. Still crying, with her mouth gaping open so I could see her little teeth. I imagined them being razor sharp.

“Maybe that's not such a good idea.”

The sound of her responding shriek reached eardrum-piercing levels.

“Um, I’ll be right back,” I said and ran from the room.

I jogged into the kitchen and searched for some reinforcements in the drawers. Then returned to the nursery with oven mitts on my hands. I reached down and picked up the shrieking baby and held her at arms’ length. She kicked her little feet, still crying.

“I picked you up, now what do you want?”

“Ickles,” she wailed. “Ickles!”

“Ickles?” What on earth is Ickles? “Oh, you mean Mr. Pickles?”

“Ma Ickles!”

I carried Hope, extended as far away from me as possible, to the kitchen. I put her down on the ground and pulled open the still running dishwasher. Steam billowed from it, fogging my vision. After a moment, I saw what looked like a rubber cat wearing a suit and tie tucked between a row of glasses on the top rack.

“Ma Ickles!” Hope cheered. It was a better sound than the screaming.

I tried to pick up the toy but snapped my hand back from the heat.

“It’s too hot, kid. You’re going to have to wait.”

Hope shrieked and glommed down on one of my feet with her tiny jaws. Thank goodness I hadn’t taken off my shoes like my sister requested, because Hope bit right into the rubber heel of my Chucks.

“Okay, kid, okay,” I said, shaking her off my foot while grabbing a pair of tongs from a drawer. I used them to pull the toy out of dishwasher and then run it under cold water. Hope started chewing on my shoe again as if she were a teething puppy.

Which I guess she actually is.

Once the toy was cooled, I used the tongs to hand it to her. She snapped the toy up and started chewing on one of its ears.

Mr. Pickles stared up at me with a creepy, frozen smile.

I crept away from Hope and her captive until my back hit the refrigerator door.

She looked up at me and pointed at the fridge. "Eat?" she asked, her eyes wide with expectation.

So the tiny werewolf was teething *and* hungry?

"You want to eat? Maybe we can order pizza."

And maybe she'd go for the deliveryman instead of me.

I pulled a couple of brochures from the fridge door. I suddenly couldn't remember which place my sister said Hope liked. "Freddy's, right?"

"No!" Hope wailed. "No, pisa."

"No pizza," I said, dropping the menu. "Thai food?"

She shook her head. "Want that," she said and my heart skipped a beat because I was pretty sure she was pointing at my abdomen. Like she wanted to eat my guts. Werewolves do that, right?

"You can't have that," I said, trying to sidle away.

"Want that!" she said, toddling over to me with a drool dripping Mr. Pickles in her one hand and the other pointing at my stomach. Or actually to the Pancake Hacienda brochure that was stuck to the fridge right next to me.

"Oh. Heh." I pulled the brochure out from under its magnet. "This place

doesn't deliver, Hope. And we really shouldn't go out."

"Want pancake!" she shrieked, baring her tiny little razor teeth at me.

"Okay, okay." But there was no way I was unleashing this kid on a restaurant.

"But how about I make them? I know how to make grandma's famous chocolate chip pancakes. Actually, they're the only thing I can make." That and a killer rootbeer float—with butterscotch ice cream and IBC.

Why am I not out with my friends tonight?

Twenty-five hundred bucks, that's why, I reminded myself.

Hope agreed to the chocolate chip pancakes—thank heavens—and settled on the middle of the kitchen floor, gnawing away at one of Mr. Pickles' arms while I set to work finding ingredients.

I was just about to crack the eggs when the sound of a phone echoed through the loft. Hope popped up and shouted, "Ring, ring. Woof, woof."

Which was weird, but whatever.

I was going to ignore the phone but suddenly remembered I hadn't told my friends that I'd made other plans. They were probably all standing on my doorstep at home, wondering what happened to our so-called party.

Only on the third ring, I realized it wasn't from the cellphone in my pocket. It was from a silver landline phone that sat on my sister's desk. Its real ring sounded similar to the digital version I'd programmed on my phone.

"Ring, ring. Woof, woof!" Hope crooned, toddling over to the phone. "Ring, ring. Woof, woof!"

My sister had said something about the silver phone . . .

“RING, RING. WOOF, WOOF!” Hope shouted insistently.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to answer that.”

Hope began to cry. Big shrieking wails.

The phone continued ringing. Like it was never going to stop. And with each ring, Hope turned more and more purple.

I was pretty sure I wouldn’t get paid if the kid passed out on my watch so I grabbed the heavy receiver. [Big fraking mistake number four!]

“Hello?” I said and Hope immediately hushed. She clung to my leg and whispered. “Woof, woof.”

“Hey, SW,” a raspy voice said from the other end of the line. “It’s Timmy. I got a line on something that’s going down right in your neck of the woods. You’re going to want to act fast. It looks like trouble coming your way.”

“Um . . .” I said. “This isn’t the Silver Wolf.”

“What?” the raspy voice said. “This is her phone, eh?”

“Yeeeeeah, but she isn’t here. She said her informants were supposed to call the police or something like that.”

“What? Timmy ain’t tangling with no Blues. Tell the Silver Wolf to get downstairs pronto. She ain’t gonna want to miss this.”

“Um, can you take care of it yourself?”

“Who is this?” the man said. “Timmy don’t fight the man. Timmy only report the man.”

“And talk in the third person,” I said.

“Whatever, Timmy out.” The line went dead.

“Well that was weird,” I said, looking down at the phone and then to Hope.

“No woof woof?” she said, looking up at me with tears in her eyes.

“No woof, woof,” I said. “Whatever that means.”

She sniffled.

I reached down and picked her up, forgetting I wasn't wearing oven mitts. A second later, a small beeping noise started emanating from one of my sister's computer terminals.

“Oh, woof, woof!” Hope said excitedly, pointing at one of the monitors that had gone live.

I peered at it, wondering if there was a dog on what seemed like a camera feed coming from somewhere in the city.

Instead, what I saw was what looked like a teenage girl being pursued down an alley by three dudes. She had a big messenger bag hanging from one of her shoulders. One of the men snatched at it, and she swung it around and tried to hit him with it.

“Looks like a mugging,” I said.

“Woof, woof,” Hope crooned.

I reached for the silver phone, thinking to call the police, but I wasn't sure where to send them.

The three men had the girl backed up against the dead end of the alley. I noticed a sign on the fence above one of the men's heads. It said, “Beware of Werewolf,” in cheery typography as if it were a joke.

I'd given my sister a sign just like that as a not-so-light-hearted gag gift for

her birthday a couple of years ago. It only took me a second more to realize that I recognized that alleyway. It was right outside. That was the alley my sister's private garage opened on to.

That girl was being mugged right outside the loft.

Just then, there was a gap in three men who huddled around her, and the girl looked right up at what must have been a security camera. She mouthed the words, "Help me."

My first thought was, *What should I do?*

And my second thought was, *Dang, that girl is hot.*

But then I went back to my first thought because I'm not a total loser.

I reached for the phone again but then realized that the police would be too late. It would take them minutes to get there when I was only seconds away. I ran for the elevator. This time it came almost immediately when I pushed the call button. I jumped inside and hit the button for the garage. The elevator was already zooming down when I fully realized I still had Hope clinging to my side.

"Woof, woof, away!" she cheered with an excited giggle.

I contemplated taking her back upstairs, but I knew it would take too much time so we kept going down to the garage. I ran for the nearest car—a jet black Astin Martin (one of The Husband's favorites) and strapped Hope into the passenger side seat. I jumped into the driver's seat, knowing that being a couple of super-powered freaks, my sister and The Husband probably had enough hubris to always leave their keys in the car.

I was right.

What I wasn't, however, was a licensed driver. My sixteenth birthday being two weeks away and all.

"Please don't tell your mom about this," I said to Hope and turned the ignition of the car and hit the garage door opener.

My plan had been to open the garage, pull the car into the alley, and blare my horn in hopes of scarring those three thugs away from the girl. Only the Astin Martin was a stick shift—not my forte—and by the time I got it in gear, and out the garage door, the three men and the girl were gone.

Well, not exactly gone. But not in the alley. It was dark, but as we pulled out of the alleyway onto the street, I could still make out what looked like the three men shoving the girl into a white windowless van.

My first thought was to lay on the horn. But as the van pulled away, I decided that if those men were kidnapping that poor girl, someone needed to be able to tell the cops where they had taken her. Instead, I turned off my lights (breaking rule #1 of driving at night from my student driver handbook) and followed the van.

It drove slowly, obviously not realizing it had a tail, toward the outskirts of the city. I stayed a good distance back to keep my cover—and because I kept stalling out at the lights.

Hope made giddy little cooing noises next to me and I really, really hoped I wasn't going to get pulled over for not having her in a proper carseat. She alternated from chewing on Mr. Pickles' ears and playing with the straps of what looked like one of those baby carriers that derp adults strap to their chests so they never have to put their kid down. She must have found it tucked between the seats.

After about five minutes of driving, the van pulled into the parking lot of what looked like an abandoned warehouse. I waited on the street until the van pulled through a loading dock door and disappeared.

“Woof, woof,” Hope said, pointing at the warehouse.

I’d memorized the cross streets and pulled out my cellphone. Ignoring the plethora of texts from my buddies asking where I was, I dialed 911. It rang for an exceptional amount of time before someone finally picked up.

“Hello,” I said after the operator asked what my emergency was. “I’d like to report a kidnapping at 3rd and Strickland.”

“A kidnapping?” the woman on the other line said. I could hear more than a hint of incredulity in her voice. “This better not be a prank. We’ve already had three this evening. Who is this?”

“No, this isn’t a prank,” I said. “This is, this is . . .” I didn’t exactly want to tell the police my name and have them discover I was an unlicensed minor following a car through the city at night. Then an idea struck me and I made my voice sound higher. “This is the Silver Wolf. I’ve pursued a van of suspects to 3rd and Strickland . . .”

“Nice try, kid,” the woman said, cutting me off. “The Silver Wolf has her own secure line. Besides we know she’s out of town for the weekend. Find something better to do with your time than pranking 911.”

“No!” I said. “This really is the Silver Wolf. There’s been a kidnapping, or what I think is a kidnapping. I don’t know, I guess it could have been someone being dragged to a surprise party in a shady part of town . . .”

“Listen, kid. I have other calls to answer. If this really is the Silver Wolf, then take care of it yourself. Otherwise, get a life.”

The woman hung up.

I said a very unpleasant word that Hope immediately copied, cheerfully chanting it and “woof, woof” over and over again.

Great, I'm probably going to get docked money for that.

My phone started ringing in my hand. I answered it, hoping it was the police calling me back, but instead it was Iggy. My sometimes best friend.

“Where you at, bro?” he asked. “What happened to the party?”

“I’m babysitting my sister’s kid,” I said, glancing at Hope who was ferociously gnawing on Mr. Pickles’ foot. That chew toy must be made of industrial strength rubber.

“Dude, bro, your sister is hot.”

“Sick, bro. First of all, she’s my sister. Second of all, she’s like over thirty.”

“Could have fooled me. She looks like a super fine co-ed.”

Ugh, not this again.

“Anywayyyzz, we moved the party to my place. But we could really use Lord Jamroar Darkeyes tonight. Maybe we should come to you.”

“No,” I said. “Whatever you do, don’t come over here.”

I went to hang up my phone but my battery beat me to it. My phone was dead. I looked at it and then out the windshield at the warehouse. What I was I supposed to do now?

I remembered what Iggy said about needing Lord Jamroar Darkeyes tonight.

That was my favorite D&D character. A fearless ranger who had survived five campaigns. What would he do in this situation? Gather his strength, storm the castle, and rescue the princess, that's what.

Only playing the hero sounded a lot easier than actually being the hero.

"Woof, woof," Hope said (in-between a couple of swearwords) and pointed at the glove compartment. She was being insistent again, so this time I didn't wait for her to start screaming.

I popped open the glove compartment and found a silver hooded mask (complete with wolf ears) and one of my sister's utility belts (complete with a collection of bedazzled stakes that April makes for her).

"You've been saying 'wolf, wolf' this whole time, haven't you?" I asked Hope.

She nodded, pointing from the mask to me. "Woof, woof."

"You want *me* to be the Silver Wolf?"

Hope grinned and clapped her hands.

That's what Lord Darkeyes would do, I thought—and then got the worst idea in the history of ideas.

A few minutes later, I found myself on a fire escape outside one of the second floor windows of the warehouse. I was wearing the silver hooded mask over my head, had the utility belt around my waist, and Hope strapped, facing out, into the baby carrier on my chest. [What? I wasn't going to leave a baby in the car during the winter in Minnesota.]

My idea was to break into the building, make a threatening, "I am the Silver Wolf, there will be no survivors!" appearance on the balcony, hopefully scaring

those dudes away, and then make a break for it—after freeing the girl, of course.

Or better yet, I hoped this was all just a big misunderstanding and really was a surprise party after all, and I could pretend to be the entertainment, do a few dance moves, and then high tail it out of there.

I pushed on the window. It didn't budge. "Rats, it's locked, kid. Guess we should go home."

Hope blew a raspberry at me. Which was kind of gruesome because she had Mr. Pickles's nose in her mouth when she did it. Then she reached out and pushed on the window. I heard a snap, like a lock breaking, and then the window popped open.

"You're parent's weren't lying about the super strength, were they?"

Hope giggled, still gnawing on Mr. Pickles.

"Shhh," I said, and then climbed through the window onto a large metal balcony that overlooked the floor of an empty warehouse.

Well, empty except for the three dudes who were circling around a girl who sat in a metal chair in the middle of the floor.

"Tell me where he is," the girl said, her voice echoing through the warehouse. "And maybe I'll tell you what you want to know." She spoke with a lot of command in her voice for someone who was currently tied to a chair with a blindfold over her eyes.

Hot and confident, said the part of my brain that spent too much time hanging out with Iggy. *The girl's looks have nothing to do with the situation at the moment*, I told my brain—though it was hard not to notice beyond the blindfold that she had

long, curling, dark hair and a heart shaped face. Or how even restrained in a chair, you could tell she worked out. Maybe she was a cheerleader or a dancer . . . *Shut up, brain, so not important right now.*

What is important was figuring out how to get those three big, hulking, scary looking, ginormous, possibly rabid . . . okay, I'm getting carried away . . . dudes away from her. If only I had a holocaust cloak and candle . . .

My brain was too busy coming up with ridiculous scenarios Lord Darkeyes might use, that it took me a full minute of staring from where I crouched on the balcony to fully register what was wrong with the scene in front of me. It wasn't that the guys were big and hulking, it was the way they moved, hovering over the girl, that reminded me of wild animals. And, you know, the fact that they didn't have fingernails—they had claws. Sharp, clacking, claws.

Those weren't dudes. They were demons.

"New plan, kid," I whispered to Hope and took a step back from the balcony. I needed to get out of here as fast as possible, find a new phone, and call the cops. Or better yet, make a personal appearance as the Silver Wolf at the police station.

This definitely wasn't a situation that fit into the babysitter job description.

One of the demons screeched and the girl screamed—it sounded more like it was out of anger than fear. The demons started screeching.

I took another step back.

"Ma Ickles," Hope said, her voice sounding forlorn—almost on the verge of tears. I looked down at her. She had her empty hands stretched out toward the balcony railing. "Ma Ickles!"

Mr. Pickles was gone.

I leaned over the balcony and saw it laying on the warehouse floor below us.

The demons were still screeching, which is the only reason they didn't hear Hope begin to cry. "Ma Ickles!"

"Shhh, shhh, shhh, kid," I said, bouncing her in the carrier. "You want to get us killed? We gotta get out of here."

Hope looked up at me with those big purple-blue eyes of hers, imploring.

"We gotta go."

Then those big eyes of hers narrowed into a look of pure determination. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth—as if preparing to scream one of her blood curdling howls.

"Okay, okay," I whispered frantically. "I'll get Mr. Pickles."

Hope quieted, big tears still falling from her eyes, and I contemplated making a break for the window instead—but the demons had stopped screeching and they would for sure hear Hope screaming before we could escape. And demons move fast—I knew that much from listening to my sister yammer on about her various adventures.

The girl was talking again—arguing—with the demons who held her captive. Their backs were to us, so I took the opportunity to sidle over to a metal ladder that dropped down to the warehouse floor. If the girl kept them distracted, I might be able to get down, grab Mr. Pickles, and make my escape without them knowing I was ever here.

And *that* is how I found myself now, descending into a pit of demons.

Okay, so it isn't a pit, necessarily. And there are only three demons. But three is enough to make me wish I'd demanded double the money for this so-called babysitting job. No, make that triple.

As I climb down the ladder, Hope starts to whimper. She's chewing on her own fist. I grab the first thing I can find from the utility belt—one of the bedazzled stakes—and hand it to her as a stand-in chew toy until I can save Mr. Pickles. Hopefully, all those rhinestones aren't a choking hazard.

The ladder doesn't reach all the way to the floor, so we have to drop the last three feet. I try to land all catlike, as I imagine Lord Darkeyes (or I guess the Silver Wolf) would. I pull off the landing rather soundlessly—or at least not noisy enough to alert the demons from their argument with the girl—and sneak over to where Mr. Pickles sits in a pool of drool on the warehouse floor.

It takes ten achingly slow, quiet, paces to reach Mr. Pickles. But I do it. I am so quiet, I would impress a grimlock. I lean over, holding Hope to my chest, and snatch up the toy. The demons didn't even know I was here.

Yes, I am awesome! I throw my hand up while clenching Mr. Pickles in a victory fist pump. Only to discover that the little rubber cat is a squeaky toy.

The “waaaah-weeee” sound echoes through the warehouse as if it were a cannon blast. The arguing from behind me breaks into complete silence.

I turn just in time to see the three demons look up and turn their glowing eyes toward me. They clack their claws.

“The Silver Wolf,” one of them says in a screechy voice. He doesn't sound scared. More like he's delighted. But not in a good, “Hey it's the Silver Wolf, let's pull

up a couple of rootbeers and play some D&D,” sort of way. More like a “Hey, it’s the Silver Wolf on our turf and I’ve been looking forward to a good wolfy meal” sort of way.

I think I’m going to puke.

Hope laughs, snatching Mr. Pickles from my fallen hand. Now she’s chewing on it *and* the wooden stake.

The demons charge.

I run five paces and then dive for the ladder. I miss, and as I fall to the ground, I roll onto my back so I won’t squash Hope.

One of the demons lunges on top of us—only to land on the stake that Hope thrusts at him. The wood spike impels the beast in the chest.

I scramble backwards, towards the ladder, and the stake stays in Hope’s hand. It’s dripping with some sort of black ooze.

The demon she inadvertently (?!) stabbed begins to shake and quiver while clutching at its chest. I remember something my sister told me once—okay like a thousand times because she never shuts up about being the Silver Wolf—is that this kind of clawed demon does something strange when it dies: It explodes into acid.

I jump for the ladder, grabbing onto it. A second demon lunges for me. It misses and falls on top of the first demon just as it explodes. The second demon screeches and shrieks, and a moment later, it also explodes.

I scramble up the rungs of the ladder. Hope laughs and laughs, still holding the dripping stake.

“Get rid of that!” I shout, meaning the stake, as the third demon scurries up

the ladder behind us. Hope flings the acid covered stake away—and it hits the demon square between the eyes, sinking into its skull. If I didn't know she was only two years old, I would have thought she'd been aiming for the monster on purpose.

“Let's really never tell your mother about this,” I say as I watch the third demon fall from the ladder. It lands in the mess left by the other two deceased demons. A few seconds later, it's gone as well.

I sigh with relief, almost wanting to pass out. My hands are so sweaty I can barely hold on to the ladder rungs. Luckily, Hope is holding on for me. Mr. Pickles is clenched tightly between her jaws.

“Hey!” the blindfolded girl in the chair shouts. “What's going on out there?”

“Um . . . We saved you. I mean, I saved you,” I call in a deep voice like Lord Darkeyes.

“Who's there?”

I suddenly remember that I'm not supposed to be Lord Jamroar Darkeyes the Ranger. I make my voice higher instead. “The . . . um . . . Silver Wolf.”

“The Silver Wolf?” she asks, her voice full of some emotion I can't place.

“Really?”

“Um . . . yeah. I came to rescue you.”

“Well, are you going to untie me then?” she says “Or are you waiting for another day?”

“Oh, yeah.” I climb down the ladder with Hope and carefully pick my way across the floor, not wanting to step in the demon acid that is eating through the concrete floor. I kneel by the girl and work at the knots at her wrists. They're

trickier than they look and I wonder if maybe I should attend Scouts every once in a while like my dad is always wanting me to.

“You okay out there?” the girl asks.

“Um yeah. It’s just a hard knots life,” I say, then immediately regret the pun. Bad boys don’t watch musicals. Not that she knew I was a boy with the mask and hood and high-pitched voice.

“How about take my blindfold off first and then maybe I can give you some pointers.”

Oh, yeah, the blindfold.

That one is easy to untie. I pull it off her face.

“Dang, you really *are* hot,” I say, looking into her deep, crystal blue eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just hot in here,” I say, my breath making puffs in the cold air. I turn back to the knots.

“This is interesting,” she says, casting her perfect blue eyes over me and Hope.

“Long story.” I pull a knife from the utility belt—*duh!*—and start sawing away at her bindings. Trying really hard to keep my focus on the rope and not her face.

“You got them all?” she says, indicating the three acid stains on the warehouse floor.

“Yeah, I’m good like that,” I say, forgetting to mention that Hope was *technically* the one who killed all three of them. (I did help.) I cut one of her wrists free.

“You even got the fourth guy?”

“What fourth guy?” I say, straightening up.

Her eyes widen. “That fourth guy!”

I spin around and flinch just as a fourth demon lunges from the shadows—and lands right on the knife I hold outstretched in my hand. I let go of it and gape as the demon stumbles backwards, quivering. *Did I really do that?*

“Watch out!” the girl shouts.

I turn around to protect Hope, practically climbing on top of the girl in the chair, and shield them both from the burst of acid. The demon was about three feet too far away for it to have actually hurt us—but whatever. Stabbing the demon may have been an accident, but it was still exhilarating. Blood is pumping through my veins, and I would’ve used my body to save Hope and the girl if needed—that’s what counts. I can finally see why my sister does what she does.

Maybe I shouldn’t give her such a hard time about it.

“You really are a superhero,” the girl says, throwing her arms around my neck. “I’ve always wanted to meet the Silver Wolf.”

Her face is so close to mine.

Hope laughs. “Woof, woof!”

And I get the best idea of the evening. I yank the silver hood from my head and smile down at the girl with my coolest “bad boy with a heart of gold” impersonation. “I’m happy to make your acquaintance,” I say in my deepest voice.

The girl startles and pushes me away with a hard shove.

Not the reaction I was expecting.

“You’re not the Silver Wolf!” she says, her voice dripping with disappointment. Or maybe it’s anger. She pulls her other hand free from its binding with a single yank. “You’re just some stupid kid.”

“So are you,” I say, taking a step back.

“I’ll be sixteen in a month, thank you very much.”

“Well, I’ll be sixteen in two weeks,” I say like that gives me lording rights.

“Whatever,” she says with an angry snarl. “I need the Silver Wolf and you’re not her, and that’s what matters.”

“Um, I still saved you. *That’s* what matters.” I hitch Hope up in her baby carrier and turn to go. This girl may be hot but she is exasperating. “You’re welcome by the way.”

“Whatever,” she snaps back at me.

I take two steps and then hear her snuffle. I turn back and see her snarl has turned to a frown.

“Why do you *need* the Silver Wolf?”

She bites her lip and her eyes fill with tears. “My family has a problem and I need her help. I *let* those demons grab me because I was hoping she would come save me. I don’t know what I’m going to do now. But it’s not your problem so why don’t you take the kid and go.” The girl rubs her wrists and turns to leave.

I look down at Hope. She grins up at me with Mr. Pickles’ foot in her mouth. “Woof, woof, eat,” she says. “Pancake?”

“Listen,” I say to the girl. “I promised this kid some pancakes so why don’t you come with us? You can tell us about your problem over some waffles or

something.”

She stops walking.

“If anyone can get you close to the Silver Wolf, it’s me. Let me help you.”

The girl turns toward me, a curious glint in her eyes. “Who *are* you?”

“I’m the Babysitter,” I say.

And I better get paid double for this weekend.