

*Novel 1 of the Human Hybrids series*

# Coexistence

*By Clare Solomon*



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# CHAPTER ONE

September 2093

ANOTHER GUN shot rang out from close to the house – far too close – and Pal muttered, “HyCO bastards.”

He walked to the sink and washed the blood from his hands, soaping several times then drying them. When he turned round Torrin was touching the skin around the stitches on his arm – he was only fourteen and innocent of any crime but the mob had still shot him. “You’re going to be okay,” he told his packmate, patting his shoulder.

The boy gave him a shaky smile which froze when the door of the communal bathroom was shoved open. Pal tensed and stepped in front of Torrin while, out of the corner of his vision, he saw Mist grab a knife from the edge of a sink. They all waited to find out if they were going to be attacked again and if they would survive it this time.

Sara walked through the door heaving a backpack and Pal started breathing again. “Here, this is your stuff, Pal,” she said and he took the bag from her. The recent deaths had left a hollow expression in her eyes at odds with her normally upbeat character. “The rest of ours is loaded into my car. We have to leave now.”

“This is our home,” he objected, anger flaring up at the thought of letting the mob drive him away from everything he had ever known.

“It was but it isn’t any more and can’t be again,” she told him, the argument having become an old one in the last week. “The fighting’s getting closer – come on.”

His packmates’ safety was more important than this place, however much he loved it, so Pal gave in. He put the bag over his shoulder and he and Mist put an arm round Torrin who was still weak from loss of blood and woozy from the surgery. They headed down the spiral staircase of the Victorian building – it had once been some kind of boarding school but that was long ago. It had been home to his werewolf pack for two generations – ever since they’d been let out of the laboratories that created his species – and he knew every room, every panelled wall, every piece of furniture. His soul screamed out against the thought of leaving.

They got out to the driveway and another shot exploded from the trees that enclosed the building. Mist winced and said, “If I had a rifle I’d gun down every member of that sodding HyCO.”

“Then the mob would take revenge and even more of us would die,” Sara said as she walked to the waiting cars. She turned to Pal and said, “You should come with us.”

He shook his head. This was another old argument. “I’m heading for Scotland.”

“That’s the other side of the country – you’ll never get there,” Mist told him.

“I’ll be fine.”

He hugged each of his three friends, uncertain of his decision now that the moment of separation had come. He had known them since birth, been raised alongside them. They were pack: family. It didn’t seem possible that he wouldn’t see them again.

Mist touched his face, expression intense as if he was trying to memorise the way Pal

looked and felt in this moment. “Just take care...” There was a crack of noise – loud like lightning overhead - and Mist’s body jerked then he fell to the ground. His face was turned towards them, blood blossoming out over the back of his jacket. His eyes were open but lifeless.

Pal bit back a denial as he stared down at his friend, refusing the evidence of his own senses. Part of him registered as Sara pulled Torrin to the other side of their car, away from further bullets. It hit him that the two of them could be next and he dragged his gaze away from Mist. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and yelled to his two remaining packmates, “Go – I’ll contact you. Just get away from here.”

A stranger jogged round the side of the building, caught sight of them and shouted to someone behind him. He ran towards them, shotgun in his hand, and Pal called out again to his packmates to escape while they had time, unable to face losing them too. After a desperate look at him, tears pouring down her face, Sara got the car doors open. Torrin crawled into the back as Sara dropped into the driver’s seat.

The stranger raised his rifle and aimed it at the car’s windshield and Pal yelled, making the man swing round. Pal heard the car starting as he threw himself behind his own vehicle. A shot rang out over his head as he fumbled in his jacket pocket for his car keys. He pulled them free as a large shape rounded the car and stalked towards him. He pressed the keys and heard the car unlock then he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

He raised his eyes to an oddly youthful freckled face and knew he was about to die just because he’d been born a werewolf. He thought of all the things he had wanted to do in his life: the lover he would never find; all the dreams he would never achieve.

The man’s finger tensed on the gun’s trigger. Pal froze and waited for everything to end, the second stretching until he could almost see the hourglass of his life running out of sand.

With a growl of the car engine and gritty sound of its movement over gravel, Pal’s packmates’ car swung past his so close as to nearly hit it and the man leapt out of its path. Heart pounding at the narrow escape, Pal wrenched his car door open with shaking hands. He heard the other car pause and knew Sara wouldn’t leave until he was safe even if it cost Torrin’s life and her own. More of the mob who had been hounding them poured out of the trees towards the driveway and the man who had arrived first got to his feet, gun still in his hand and looking more determined than ever to kill.

Pal put the keys in the ignition, turned them and heard the engine come to life. Sara’s car sped away and he followed, hearing a shot hit his car before he drove off, the mob fading from view as he left his home behind.

Mist was dead. Tears began to sting his eyes as he took in the fact that he had lost his closest friend. His house with a thousand memories, his thirty packmates and the sacred grove of trees were all gone. His former life had been ripped away. Mist was really dead. The shock caught up with him and he pulled his car over, spewing out the contents of his stomach.

He knew he still wasn’t safe and, as soon as his stomach stopped spasming, he was back in his car, driving out of Oxford at full speed.

Within twenty minutes two soldiers beside an army truck waved him to a halt. He didn’t know which side they were on – stopping could be a death sentence but what else could he do when there would be soldiers everywhere he went and they could put out a call to arrest him?

He braked, stopping his car beside the truck and the soldiers approached. He could see

rifles slung over their shoulders and swallowed down bile. “ID!” one of them said to him and he passed it over.

“Another werewolf,” the man said to his colleague and Pal tensed. The man turned back to him and said, “We’ve had a couple of dozen of your lot through here lately. What the hell set off that HyCO?”

“Nothing. They’re HyCO,” he answered because it was true: the name Hybrid Control Organisation said it all.

“Well, they’ve put us in a nightmare situation because we’ve got to go in and calm things down. If we kill civilians, even armed ones, we’ll get it in the neck from our bosses.”

“They started the murdering,” Pal said bitterly. “You can’t be punished for defending your life, can you?”

“Wanna bet?” his colleague asked. “Go on, you can leave.”

“Good luck,” the first soldier said and he nodded.

He thought about what the soldier had asked as he drove away. He wished he did know what had caused the HyCO to snap and lead people to attack all the werewolves and dragons. Nine days ago everything had seemed fine. Pal’s patients were mostly his own species, not because that was what he wanted but those were the people who came to him. There were quite a few dragons too and a few of the other species. No one had said anything about trouble or people being worse than usual. The HyCO had always caused their two hybrid species problems, talking of them to civilians as vermin that needed to be controlled. He stayed out of their way and tried to ignore insults in the streets. There had always been people who hadn’t wanted his species and the dragons living amongst them but he didn’t have a clue what had made that bigoted minority start murdering people. That lack of knowledge bit away at him – surely this could have been prevented.

A lot of hybrids had fled as soon as the killing started. The leaders and a few others had stayed to try to talk sense to the mob – they were dead now. Others had refused to leave their homes. Pal had stayed to tend those injured. Well, the mob had got their wish – there were no living dragons and werewolves left in Oxford. He hoped their consciences drove them mad for what they had done.

He saw another army unit ahead, sighed and halted in front of the road barrier. They checked his ID, asked about the fighting then let him leave. After that the army checks began to blend into each other. Every half hour or even fifteen minutes, if he was unlucky, he would have to produce his ID. Sometimes that was enough and at others the soldiers would insist on phoning the police in Oxford to check his identity and of course most of the police were caught up on one side or the other of the fighting so that took forever.

He stopped for the night at a B&B and lay on the single bed of the sparse room as he phoned Sara, “Did you get away safely? Is Torrin all right?”

“Yeah.” His pack-mate sounded worn out. “I got him to a hospital as soon as we got here. He’ll be fine. You could still come back: we’re your family.”

It was hard to resist the plea, especially when part of him wondered if she was right. “I know but if I have to leave my home then I want to go to somewhere I’ve always wanted to go.”

“It’s a name on a map. Della’s stories are twenty years old.”

“It’s where I want to live.” Della had been a teacher within the pack and had helped raise

him. She had been murdered two days ago. He couldn't explain it but he felt he owed it to her to go to the place where she had been happiest. "I'll call you when I get there."

By the next evening he wondered if he had been mad thinking he could travel so far. Every town had soldiers protecting them with barriers at the outskirts in case of a wendigo attack. By the next night – several thousand ID checks later – he was sure he would never get to his destination. The day after that he arrived in the town of Tairl just outside Invercade and prepared to begin a new part of his life.

\* \* \*

The first thing Pal had to do was register at the local police station so his identity could yet again be confirmed. It was something done everywhere to protect places from being infiltrated and slaughtered from within by wendigos. The visit wasn't the best of starts. "You want what?" the police officer asked, still holding his ID and looking at him as if he was a new species entirely.

"I want to join the local werewolf pack," Pal repeated. "If you could just tell me where they are?"

"We don't have packs around here. People all live together."

"Oh. Well, that's good." He was fairly sure it was good. After all, the isolation of the species had been part of what started the trouble in Oxford. So what should he do without a pack to support him? The idea was unnerving but he focused on the logistics of living up here. "I'll need to find somewhere to rent then."

"Speak to the Council. You can probably get emergency accommodation for a few weeks until you can find somewhere permanent."

"I will. Thanks very much."

He got this arranged and dumped his backpack in the small flat. It had bars on the windows and enough locks to resemble a prison as it was for use in a wendigo attack. The inside was pretty shabby too. Still, this was just temporary and it was better than having to pay out for B&B accommodation while he looked for somewhere to rent or buy. And finding a job. And getting to know his new home. He sat down and thought about Mist and the other members of his pack who were dead for no reason.

The next day he cleaned the flat, bought groceries and spent several hours out walking. He met a couple of werewolves and tried to talk to them but they seemed oddly wary and he returned to the stark flat disappointed then spent the evening on the phone to his Oxford packmates.

The day after this he began looking for a job – without success. Then it was his night for transforming so he drove out of town, looking for a large, open space where he could run about. There was plenty of choice and it was so beautiful here, different entirely from the flat Oxford landscape with its bright greens and familiar English plants. Here there were vast dark forests, knotty gorse and velvet heather with a wealth of vegetation he had yet to learn about. There were lochs surrounded by mountains and golden beaches. It touched something in his soul. It was the right decision, he told himself. As soon as he found some people he could connect with he would be happy here.

He got out of his car and began to undress, the cool autumn evening shocking and stimulating his skin like a cold shower. He locked his clothes in the car and placed the key

beneath the front left wheel. Naked, he trod from road to grass which squelched muddily beneath his feet. He walked on the gorse-covered land for several minutes then sat down on a log to wait.

By coincidence it was almost a full moon tonight – it made no difference to his transformation as his species was just named after the mythical werewolves. They and dragons had been created in laboratories, the experimentation originally intended to create soldiers, but everything changed when journalists found out about them and they were suddenly free. There were five hybrid races but werewolves and dragons had as little in common with vampires and sensers – who'd been created within society and never faced the same constant prejudice – as they had with the cannibal wendigoes that the world was at war with.

The mossy log felt damp and flaky beneath him. He breathed in the scents of heather and Scots pine trees, eyes closing. Yes, this place was what he needed and he felt excited at the thought of soon being in the proper form to explore it.

His skin tingled. He breathed carefully in and out, accepting and controlling the pain until all at once it was over. He shook his fur-covered body and pounced on a stick, sending it flying through the air while he darted back and forth before catching it in his teeth. He was about to repeat the game when he caught a whiff of something that made uncertainty ripple through him. He rose up to full height on his back legs and sniffed the air, his werewolf nose picking up a range of scents that as a human he would never have known existed. Beneath animals, plants and pungent soil he detected the faint odour of a creature like himself. He loped off towards it even as the tiny human voice in his altered brain warned against a meeting in this new environment. He needed packmates, longed with body and soul for a companion, and that instinct overrode concern over the potential danger.

Several miles away he stopped as he found a moving shape on the dark moor. The werewolf turned towards him, claws scraping on a rock, and Pal froze. The creature was enormous and smelt male which always increased the chance of confrontation.

The creature sniffed at him, a sign of curiosity to get to know him, so Pal flattened his ears and lowered his eyes to show he wasn't a threat and stepped closer. The creature rose up on two legs and growled and Pal stopped again, worried. He didn't want to fight and since he was new here with no pack status he decided that the only thing to do was to accept the other creature's higher dominant status. He rolled onto his back in surrender and gave a high-pitched whine.

Instead of walking forward to examine him and accept him as a new pack member, the creature hesitated. He could smell waves of puzzlement and aggression from the werewolf and it hit him that the creature wasn't trying to start a fight: it simply didn't know how to communicate with him.

After a long pause the werewolf slowly paced forward then leaned down to sniff him and he smelt a need for companionship as strong as his own. He lifted a paw and gently batted the werewolf's nose and he jumped backwards, startled. Pal opened his mouth wide in a grin and the creature finally seemed to understand his intent and relaxed.

The werewolf moved forward once more and, when he leaned over him, Pal licked the brown furred face. He slowly turned, not wanting his actions to be misunderstood, and stood up on all fours then rubbed against his companion and sniffed him so he would always recognise his companion's scent from now on. The other werewolf seemed bemused by all this but didn't resist his actions. Pal head-butted his companion then danced backwards. After a moment the other werewolf paced towards him so he gave a short bark, turned and took off,

ears telling him that his companion was right behind.

They passed the rest of the night gambolling and chasing each other. Pal began to get to know his companion who had a sadness that clung to him, although the creature was willing to go along with Pal's games, revealing a humorous side of his own. Pal felt he had made his first Scottish friend and that thought strengthened his belief that he had found himself a home in this exotic landscape.

When they had succeeded in exhausting themselves running about, Pal and his companion fell asleep curled around each other on the damp grass.

The pre-dawn change back into human form awoke Pal but, as he changed, he caught an odd smell in the air. He waited until the pain faded and opened his eyes.

The other werewolf was now a human male with a compactly muscular body and bright green eyes and Pal felt a spark of interest. The man was crouched next to him but something made him raise his head and look about with a frown. "Did you smell blood?"

"Yes. An animal?"

"It must be but we'd better check. My name's Brand Akins, by the way."

Pal smiled and shook the man's hand, amused by this formal greeting after a night spent rolling about in the mud together and playing tag. "Jaspal Khatri but people usually call me Pal. I think the smell was from that direction." He pointed left towards a wooded area.

"Yes. That seems right."

"Inadequate human senses," Pal joked.

Brand returned the offered smile as they headed towards the tall pines. Pal noticed that there seemed to be fewer birds around than usual, as if something had scared them away from the area. After about ten minutes' walk the grass gave way to earth covered in a layer of pine needles that pricked his bare feet.

The friendly mood between the men had changed to unease as they got closer to the area and the expectation of finding one animal killed by another vanished. The faint smell of blood they had detected while still werewolves was replaced by the stench of charred meat.

What were they walking into? Perhaps he was over-reacting thinking there was something sinister here. After Oxford his nerves were still raw but he had the worrying thought that this could be a trap. His companion's presence beside him was the one thing that reassured him.

They kept moving, Pal braced for what they would find. It was taking longer than it should have. He had been right in criticising human senses – in werewolf form they could have found the source of that unnerving odour in minutes. They rounded a large pine and both of their footsteps faltered then came to a halt.

Pal stared at the grisly sight in front of them. Although badly burnt the object on the ground was still recognisable as a human body.



## CHAPTER TWO

“BETWEEN THE rain and the natural conflagration properties of the vampire body I sincerely doubt that we’ll get any forensic evidence against the killer,” Alan Jefferson, leader of the police forensics team said to the detectives and the HyCO team. “It’ll be hard enough to identify the corpse: fingerprints, hair and nails burnt to dust and eyeballs melted.”

Brand was still muddy from his night in werewolf form but at least he was no longer naked, even if he felt self-conscious. His werewolf side was something private, something he hated and tried to keep separate from his colleagues. He tried to focus on what was being said and grimaced at Jefferson’s enthusiasm which reminded him of children who relished stories of death and maiming, the grislier the better.

“Difficult but not impossible?” DI Waite suggested. He had just arrived to take charge of the investigation. He was a blond, bearded man in old-fashioned clothes, his lined face further wrinkled by a frown.

“We’ve photographed the victim’s teeth,” Jefferson said with satisfaction. “My computer’s compared them with the records in every dental surgery in the Highlands and found a match. Donna’s checking the name against police ID records. Och, here we are.” He gestured towards the tiny woman approaching them.

Donna had joined the forensics team around the time Brand had joined the HyCO so he tended to bracket her with the HyCO team in his mind, as a colleague. She still looked little more than twenty and was dressed, like Jefferson, in a white overall and gloves. She smiled in greeting to the HyCO people then said to the assembled group, “The name of the corpse was Calvin McConnell. There are four people with that name in Scotland but this one lived in Allersey with his parents.”

“The family certainly won’t be able to identify the body,” DI Waite said. “I don’t want our entire ID based on records in a dental surgery where it’s possible that a mistake could’ve been made and the wrong name put on the dental chart.”

“I did fax a holo-photo to the dental office and they recognised it and confirmed it as McConnell,” Donna said with her usual efficiency.

“Good, but I’d still prefer a second form of forensics ID. See what you can do, would you?”

The two forensics officers exchanged long-suffering glances then headed back through the mud and grass, churned up by numerous pairs of feet, towards the blackened form of the corpse.

Brand was not used to a body being so difficult to ID. Usually the identification could be made within seconds by the records on various police programs. As he watched the forensics officers duck under the police tape sealing off the crime scene, he said to his colleagues, “The murderer was either lucky or planned carefully so as not to leave any evidence.” He wondered what the killer’s next move would be and whether this would be the only victim.

\* \* \*

A dead hybrid, Pal thought, and momentarily forgot how to breathe. Was the same thing happening here that had made him leave Oxford? He thought he had left the killing behind – this place was supposed to be safe, his fresh start. He couldn't even cling to the hope of having a friend to look out for him – Brand, the person he had already started to think of as a packmate, was HyCO. It made no sense but two different police officers had confirmed it. He rubbed his tired eyes. Too much had happened these last two weeks: he couldn't cope with much more.

He was waiting to give a statement at a police station in the city of Invercade about finding the corpse. Brand had remained behind with two people who had arrived – two more members of the local HyCO apparently. His stomach clenched at the thought, mind replaying taunts over the years by HyCO members and the way they had incited civilians to join their killing spree. The whole purpose of the organisations was anti-hybrid – why would someone as seemingly intelligent as Brand possibly want to be involved with them?

He sat on a wooden chair in a cold old-fashioned room, a police officer at the door. It occurred to him belatedly that he was being treated like a criminal but before he could dwell on what that meant the door opened and two officers in suits entered.

"My name's DS Lara Shaw and this is DC Kent," the woman said. The man didn't so much as glance at Pal as this was said and the two of them pulled back wooden chairs which scraped against the floor then sat opposite him, just a table with a number of scratch marks on it between him and them.

"Hello," Pal said warily. "I'm Jaspal Khatri."

"Just a moment." Shaw held up a hand to stop him and reached into the pocket of her navy one-piece suit for a thumb-sized digital recorder. She switched it on and placed it on the table as she read him his rights. "Now could you just repeat your name for the tape."

He did so, a sick feeling rising in him. He didn't feel as if they considered him a witness. This was more like the way a suspect would be treated. He told himself he was being ridiculous and tried to shake off his nerves. It had been a difficult few weeks and he was in shock; that was all.

"What were you doing at the crime scene?" Shaw asked.

"I'm a werewolf. It was just a convenient open space to change form. I met Brand Akins within minutes of changing and we were together the whole night. We found the body together in the morning."

"Did you know the deceased person?"

Pal thought of the body with a shudder but managed to keep his voice dispassionate. "The corpse was entirely burnt – obviously a vampire. I couldn't tell if the person was male or female let alone if I'd ever met them. It's almost impossible that I have, though, as I only arrived in the Highlands yesterday."

The other officer looked suspiciously at him. "From where?"

"Oxford."

The two of them stared at him then Shaw said, "Why would you undertake such a dangerous journey?"

*Because I'm an idiot*, Pal decided. Nowhere was safe. That was obvious now. He'd been pursuing a dream of finding somewhere where his people weren't hated. He thought with a pang of Brand who had been the first person up here he'd felt a connection with. Part of it was their shared werewolf nature but the man wasn't like any of the werewolves he had met before. He didn't seem to know normal werewolf behaviour, which Pal found inexplicable. And now the two of them were caught up in a suspicious looking death and Brand, apparently, worked for an organisation that hated hybrids. His dream of finding a home had become a dangerous waking-nightmare.

He explained DS Shaw, "I was born in Oxford in a werewolf pack but it wasn't safe to live there anymore. Members of the local HyCO went nuts and led a mob in attacks on any hybrid they could find."

Shaw asked him more questions about the discovery of the body then turned off the small recorder and stood up. He followed suit, relieved that the interview was finally over. "Jaspal Khatri," she said, "I'm arresting you for the murder of the as yet unknown vampire found in Rackle Woods. You do not have to say anything ..."

She continued reading his rights but his mind was numb. He was innocent – how could they accuse him of murder? An officer led him to a desk where his phone, watch and the PC wrapped round his arm were taken away and listed on a computer file. His finger prints were taken then he was asked if he wanted to make a phone call. It hit him then that he was in this unknown place amongst strangers and there was no one to help him. He turned down the phone call and was taken to a cell and left there.

He lay on the single bunk. They actually thought he was a killer. There must be some way to prove it wasn't true. Forensics – surely they would lead to the real murderer. But it had been raining on and off during the night, he remembered. Perhaps there would be no evidence left of anyone else. Maybe he really was going to be put on trial for murder.

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