David Kinnick’s bakery welcomed me from the bitter cold like an old friend. It remained one of the few businesses besides bars to remain open at such a late hour. An hour until the clock would strike twelve o’ clock, the bells would beautifully chime, the fireworks would be released into the sky, and millions of humans and Furren across the Eastern United States would welcome not just another new year, but a new century ahead.

Meanwhile, I had been scurrying out of my adoptive human family’s tenement apartment, kicking down the street, tasked by my adoptive mother for a quick task. In all honesty, I gladly took the errand on account my new job had been preventing me from enjoying the remnants of Christmastime lingering around Manhattan. Such as the smell of holly remaining on a doorway, yuletide garlands and Christmas trees not yet discarded into the alleyways, or perhaps a newsie humming carols despite the holiday having already passed. Whatever they were, I’d been keeping a merry eye and trimmed ear out.

The long hours and time spent being Peter Gray-Lawton no longer meant I had as much freer hours to galivant around New York City like I used to. Time spent sleeping in or exploring newly constructed buildings like a proper urchin were now spent all day on an assembly line.

Still, it seemed more suitable for me and the Lawtons as opposed to making up for lost time in my schooling. The apprenticeship money I earned alongside Henry’s salary helped, especially when it came to purchasing groceries from the marketplaces. No matter how many times I tried ignoring it, hearing Laura say she was proud of me did make my tail wag.

“Evenin’, Peter!” David chirped happily from behind the counter. “What’re you doing out here this late? I thought you and the apartment block were attending a party.”

To be more specific, Mr. and Mrs. Masson were hosting the New Year’s Eve party, with Elizabeth helping her mother and father provide food and speaking about what they planned to do for their resolutions. Mine involved finding the chance to speak to the beautiful teenaged vixen that evening. I yearned to tell a joke and hear her laughter, maybe even learn more about her life before migrating to the coast.

“Well, we got word that the hosts already ran outta bread for the party’s soup bowl,” I explained whilst warming my paws from the biting cold from earlier. My new clothes, shirt, suspenders, and discounted winter coat did little to bring warmth back to the joints in my fingers and frozen tail, yet I still felt it wagging for heat within the closed-off shop. “Laura asked me to go get some for Mrs. Masson! Lance and his brothers were also having a snowball fight before I left, and convinced James to join in before they all went upstairs for the party. How ‘bout you?”

I momentarily reached into my left pocket to give a small list to the wolfish baker, who glanced down only once and immediately understood her handwriting without much effort.

“The wife’s playing with Johnny and Pete upstairs,” he spoke midway through preparing the sudden order. “Rosie wanted to bring them out to see the fireworks in Longacre, but the cold made us choose otherwise.”

The scent of fresh biscuits appearing from under the counter, covered in a protective cloth, made my stomach growl. As well as my tempted maw water for a taste of the cinnamon buns already cooking in the oven for another client’s order.

“Give Rosie and them toddlers my regards then,” I tipped my cap and sat down in the chair, waiting as David went about gathering the bread from either the oven or the displays. “So how was Christmas Day for you? I never got the chance to visit last week.”

“Why is that?” He asked with amusement engrained in his voice. “Is the factory already working you to the tailbone?”

“They sure are,” I groaned, leaning back as my tail curled around one of the lone chair’s legs. “Henry told me his boss could be a tough one, but I thought he’d been exaggerating!”

“Hard work builds character, Peter.” He spoke up.

“Then I got all the character I’d ever need for living, David!” I retorted with another groan, placing the trip of the bushy, ice-prickly tail behind me between my fingers. “If Annabelle’s pulling and sudden door slams don’t make this thing fall off by next year, my new job will…”

David cackled, already wrapping one of the packages together.

“Welcome to society, my boy!” He boasted with a small, delighted smirk on his muzzle, which I couldn’t help but reflect back, “In society, you must work for fresh food, better clothes, and that roof over your head. Trust me when I say it is better than napping in an empty barrel.”

A nostalgic memory came to mind; me a year earlier to be exact, falling vast asleep inside an actual empty barrel not a block away from Mr. Kinnick’s wholesome shop. It caused the mirroring smirk to switch into a sad, sentimental smile, then back into a grin reflective of how far my life had gone in a single year. Not only was I no longer homeless, but James and Annabelle were now my stepsiblings, and their parents my loving mother and father. I no longer went days without food, let alone spend the holidays all alone.

“Amen to that!” My laughter caused a cloud of breath to dance from my muzzle. “I don’t know about you, but I’m really excited for tonight. It’ll be 1900! A new century, Dave!”

“And a new life for you too,” David helpfully reminded me. As he handed me the packaged bread across the countertop, and started to count the coins I’d given from my pocket, the older wolf suddenly asked, “How are you doing?”

He really meant, “Are you loving your new family, Peter?”

David Kinnick and I held a special kind of relationship. It felt no different than my friends Hansel and Edward, currently forging a new life out west in the Great Plains. It was the sort of relationship had been considered fatherly until my unofficial adoption. Besides the fox and mouse Furren, the old wolf Furren knew me more than any other throughout New York. In fact, despite the need for a tight budget with his own family to feed, he rarely went out of his way to enforce the bread tab he’d given me. Sure, David would be more than eager to remind me of the tab if I ever stepped on a footpaw or two, but he respected enough of my burning independence until…until the incident after Thanksgiving.

That week alone scared all of us, especially me. It reminded me how much the Lawtons did mean to me. James and I were the brothers neither of us ever had, Annabelle being the sister I never knew I wanted, while both Laura and Henry welcomed me into their homes. They loved me. They practically called me own at some point or another.

“Honestly?” I mused aloud, looking up to see the earnest expression lingering on the graying wolf Furren’s face, then smiled the most genuine of all I’d ever formed. “It still feels weird, but having a family, a human family like them no less…I wouldn’t trade it for all the bread in this shop.”

Without a word, David stared at me. He then lifted up the countertop door to squeeze out and walk over to me at the table. At first, I figured my big maw said something I shouldn’t’ve, until I felt his burly arms wrap themselves around my shoulder. I let him kneel beside me to momentarily hug my trembling shoulder, and for some unknown reason, I hugged the big wolf back. Yeah, I could be sentimental. So what? Could you blame me, when he smelled of cinnamon and his furry arms felt so warm against the freezing cold?

“That is good to hear,” he joked as we parted from the hug, patting my back and chuckling, “because you’d be getting a higher tab than before if you did.”

I groaned once more, “You would not dare…”

He shrugged, “Maybe, or maybe not. Now, I better keep going on that bread, or else you’ll miss the new year.”

“And Mom will tan my hide for dawdling,” I joked, “then tan your hide for giving me incorrect change.”

David half-heartedly pointed an angry finger in my direction, “You take that back, Peter!” then laughed. He went straight to work, muttering, “Little brat…never change…”

David and I conversed very little as he prepared the small package of bread for me, then sent me on my way. I could practically feel the bread’s warmth leak through the packaging, up my arm and into my chest, the memory of our talk still resonating in my wolfish skull. As my tail joyously, eagerly wagged on our way to my new family’s street, as my legs carried me up the flight of stairs into the tenement party, teenaged enthusiasm and child-like wonder for the incoming year felt stronger than before. A new century with new family and a new outlook on life? What wasn’t there to be excited about?