



Kelley
Armstrong

DARKEST POWERS
BONUS PACK 2



Darkest Powers Bonus Pack 2

Facing Facts

&

Belonging

by Kelley Armstrong

Table of Contents

[Darkest Powers Bonus Pack 2](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[FACING FACTS](#)

[BELONGING](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Copyright](#)

FACING FACTS

Originally published in *Enthralled*

As I lay on my back, gasping for breath, I began to suspect that Tori enjoyed our self-defense lessons a little too much.

“Come on, Chloe, get up,” she said, dancing around me.

“Actually, I think I’ll stay down here. It’s safer.”

Simon walked over. As he helped me up, he whispered, “Watch her face. She telegraphs her moves.”

He was right. By keeping an eye on her expression instead of her hands, I managed to evade her twice and bring her to her knees once. Then she flicked her fingers and I went flying into a tree.

Simon sighed. “No powers, Tori. You know the rules.”

“I don’t like the rules.”

“Surprise, surprise.”

“Seriously. We’re training for real world confrontations, right? In the real world, if we’re attacked by some Cabal goon, we’re going to use our fighting powers.”

“But Chloe doesn’t have fighting powers.”

“Sure she does. She has a poltergeist. Well, when Liz is around. And when she’s not, Chloe has the awesome power of zombies at her fingertips.” Tori waved at the woods behind our rented house. “Go raise a dead bunny. It can nip my ankles while I’m throwing you down.”

“And infect you with the bite of a rotting corpse?” I said.

“That would be bad.” Simon turned to me. “Go for it.”

As Tori flashed him the finger, I grabbed her arm and flipped her, then danced back before she could retaliate.

“Are you blind, ref?” she said to Simon. “Call that.”

“Nope. Distraction is a valid—” He glanced behind me. “Hey, Dad.”

I turned as his father—Kit—walked over.

“Sorry to interrupt your lessons, guys, but I need to speak to Tori.”

As he led Tori into the house, I stared after them. Was he about to drop the bomb that was going to explode what remained of Tori's old life? She already knew her mother was dead. Now she was about to discover that her dad wasn't her real father. Kit was.

It had been a month since the four of us—Tori, Simon, Derek and I—had been reunited with the guys' dad and my aunt Lauren. A month since I'd seen Kit look at Tori for the first time, and known, from his expression, that he'd heard the same rumor I had. But he'd said nothing. Not to her or to Simon.

I'd begun to think maybe he wasn't going to tell them. Maybe he didn't believe it. Or maybe he'd wanted to confirm with DNA first, and now he had the answer.

When they'd left, Simon walked over. "We'd better cut the lesson short. Somehow I don't think Derek would appreciate me wrestling with his girlfriend on the back lawn. As much as I hate to suggest homework, your aunt's going to expect us to have that biology project done by tomorrow."

We headed to the old farmhouse. Two weeks ago, Kit and my aunt Lauren had decided that, if the Cabal was coming after us, they weren't hurrying. Kit wasn't surprised. While the scientists who'd genetically modified us had been eager to get us back, the massive supernatural corporation that funded them—the St. Cloud Cabal—knew Kit would keep our powers in check. So, they could bide their time, which meant we could rent a place and try living like normal people for a while.

As we reached the house, I heard a vehicle and glanced over, hoping to see our van. When a truck drove past, I felt a pang of disappointment, but I told myself I could better support Tori post-bombshell if Derek wasn't around.

Derek is Simon's adopted brother and the guy I'm dating, though we have yet to go on what you'd call a real date. That's not Derek's fault. While we're on the road, we're pretending to be a blended family, with Kit and Aunt Lauren as our parents. That means I can't be seen at the movie holding hands with my supposed step-brother.

Derek grumbles that it's not like we'd be blood relatives, but Kit says it would still call attention to us. We can't take that risk. So while Derek and I can go out together, we have to keep a foot apart, like those old-fashioned dances where teachers would walk around with rulers. On the plus side, because Derek's a werewolf, we always stay in places near a forest. Derek and I spend time alone "walking" in the woods. A lot of time, actually.

When Derek did come back, he'd want to go for a walk, to relax after grocery shopping with my aunt. It'd been her idea. She'd joked that since he ate most of the food, he should help her get it. Derek had resisted. His dad had taken him aside and said he should go, show Aunt Lauren he wasn't as scary as she thought.

I could have used Derek's super-hearing right now, though. While Simon hunted for his notes upstairs, I eavesdropped on Kit's conversation with Tori, trying to hear if it was the bombshell. But I couldn't pick up more than the murmur of his voice.

Then, "No!"

"I'm sorry, Tori. I know this isn't—"

"No, okay? You're wrong. You're just ... wrong."

The door flew open. Tori barreled out, not even noticing me as she ran for the back of the house. Kit came after her, then stopped short when he noticed me.

"You told her?" I asked.

He nodded. As his gaze flitted in her direction, hurt glimmered in his eyes.

"I'll talk to her," I said.

He hesitated, like he wanted to be the one to do that, and he should be, except he didn't know her well enough yet, and right now, he was the last person she'd want to speak to. After a moment, he nodded and said, "Bring her back to talk to me, if you can."

Simon was thumping down the steps as I hurried past.

“Tori’s upset,” I said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Simon?” his dad called. “I need to talk to you, too.”

As Simon turned to follow his dad, I paused. He was about to get a shock of his own, finding out Tori was his half-sister. Should I stick around for him? No. Simon wouldn’t be thrilled, but it was Tori who’d need me.

I found Tori hidden behind a huge, old oak. She brushed her arm across her eyes and snapped, “What?” then took it down a notch and said, “Sorry, I’m not good company right now. Better go hang with Simon for a while.”

“He’s talking to his dad.”

She hesitated, then realized he’d be getting the same news she had. Her shoulders slumped and she leaned forward, clutching her knees, face resting on them, hiding her expression.

I lowered myself beside her. “I know what Kit said.”

“He told you?” She looked up, then scowled. “He shouldn’t. It’s a mistake, and if he goes around telling everyone ...” She swiped her damp cheeks. “It *is* a mistake.”

“Okay.”

“What? You think it’s true? Duh. *Obviously*, Kit is not my real father. Do I look Asian to you?”

She was right. Kit was Korean, and you could see that with Simon, even with the dark blond hair he’d inherited from his mother. With Tori, it wasn’t so obvious. Her coloring was right—skin tone, dark hair and dark eyes—but all fit for Caucasian, too, and she *looked* Caucasian. That’s why I’d dismissed the rumor when I first heard it. But that was before I met Kit. When I saw him, I knew it was true, because there’s more to “looking like” someone than race.

Should I play along? While I was tempted to, I knew what she’d want. The truth.

“The demi-demon in the lab saw what your mom did,” I said. “She didn’t have an affair with Kit, though. It was in-vitro fertilization.”

“Oh, well, that makes it so much better. She didn’t cheat on my dad. She just had another man’s baby and passed it off as his.”

“She was ... ambitious. You know that.”

“So it wasn’t enough to genetically modify her witch daughter. She had to double the dose, give me a sorcerer for a father. Not like that was liable to blow up in her face. Wait, sorry, blow up in *my* face, because whatever’s wrong with me, as far as she was concerned, it was my fault, and now she’s not even around to blame, because she’s dead.”

I thought of that. Of Diane Enright’s death. Of what happened next.

When I flinched, the look she turned on me was so fierce I almost flinched again. “Don’t think of that, Chloe.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Yes, you were. Dr. Davidoff was holding a gun to your aunt’s head, and you raised my mother’s zombie, which killed him. She killed him. Not you.”

Yes, but she had been under my command. I gave the order.

I’d started staying up late every night, reading or writing until I was so tired I fell straight to sleep, too exhausted to lie there, worrying. That didn’t stop the dreams, though. Dreams endlessly replaying that scene, showing me all the ways it could have gone differently. All the ways I could have avoided killing Tori’s mother.

Derek makes me talk about the dreams, pointing out the logical flaws in my alternate scenarios, insisting I’d done what I had to. It should help. It doesn’t, because I can’t help but think there had to be another way.

“So, apparently, my mother is dead and my dad isn’t my dad,” Tori continued. “And the guy I was crushing on? My

half-brother.” She blinked. “Oh God. Simon.” She looked like she was going to be sick. “That’s just ... That’s just ...”

“It’s not that bad,” I hurried on. “Derek says it’d be kind of natural, because you guys share the same genetics, so what you were attracted to wasn’t really Simon but, well ...”

“Myself? Oh, yeah. That’s better. “ She paused. “Derek? When did you discuss this with—? Wait, you said the demi-demon mentioned it? Back at the lab? How long have you known, Chloe?”

“I, uh ... heard rumors, but it wasn’t until the demi-demon said it was true—”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I, uh ... I didn’t think it was my place.”

“It’s your place if you’re my friend, which is what I thought.” She glowered at me and in that glower I saw genuine pain. “My mistake, huh?”

She got up and started to storm off. When I ran after her, she hit me with a knockback that send me flying into the tree, hard enough that I slid to the ground and sat there, dazed, for a moment before looking up to see her a quarter-mile down the road.

I glanced back at the house, checked my pocket for my cell phone, then ran after her.

I really needed more exercise in my life. Long walks and self-defense lessons weren’t compensating for a lifetime spent opting out of sports because I was always the smallest kid on the team. I could point out that, before embarking on my current career path to Zombie Master General, I’d planned to become a screenwriter/director, which didn’t require an active lifestyle. But then I look around at my comrades-in-genetic-modification: Derek the science whiz, Simon the artist and Tori the computer geek, all of them disgustingly athletic,

meaning I have no excuse. Also meaning that when Tori wanted to leave me in the dust, she did.

Predictably, Tori headed for town, most likely the mall on the outskirts. I was close enough to see the parking lot when my phone barked. Derek's ring tone. Not my idea—Tori set it up when she programmed my phone. I figured it's not like Derek would ever hear it and it is fitting. If he ever finds out, I'll just pretend I didn't know how to change it.

Speaking of barking ...

"Where the hell are you?" he snapped when I answered.

"You're back? Good. So how was—?"

"You're not here."

"Because I'm supposed to be waiting by the gate?"

"You know what I mean. Simon said you went to talk to Tori, but you're not on the property, so I'm really hoping you're *with* her."

I glanced at Tori's back, a half-mile away. "Kind of."

"She took off, didn't she? And you went after her, knowing you aren't supposed to leave the property unaccompanied."

"Tori needs—"

"Tori can look after herself."

"And I can't?"

A growl. He knew better than to answer. Despite my lack of defensive superpowers, I've gotten myself—and Tori—out of plenty of scrapes. Sometimes, knowing you don't have the skills to fight can be a bonus. With Tori, overconfidence equals lack of caution and, yes, as Derek would say, common sense.

"I'm just going to talk to her," I said. "I'll bring her home ___"

"No, you'll come back. Right now. That's an order."

"Well, in that case ... No."

A louder growl.

“Seriously?” I said. “An order? Has that ever worked?”

He grumbled something I couldn’t hear and probably didn’t want to.

“I’m not kidding, Chloe. Stop running, turn around and—”

“I’ll be back as soon as I catch her. ‘kay? Bye.”

I hung up and turned my phone on vibrate.

I used to think that once we started going out, Derek would change. When I admitted that to Tori, she’d nearly laughed herself into an aneurysm and gave me a lecture on the stupidity of expecting to change a guy. Maybe I didn’t have her dating experience, but I knew you don’t date someone because you think you’ll change him. That wasn’t what I meant. I liked Derek the way he was. I’d just kind of hoped getting closer would mean landing on the sharp side of his tongue less often.

I should have known better. He did the same to Simon, who was not only his brother but his best friend. Derek spent the first five years of his life in a lab. No mother; no father; nothing even remotely like a family. That does stuff to you. Stuff that’s hard to overcome.

I had to understand, like Simon did, that Derek lashed out when he was worried about us. We’re like the weaker members of his Pack, and he’s always trying to herd us back behind him, where it’s safe, growling and snapping if we wander off. That doesn’t mean I need to let him get away with it. Just follow Simon’s lead—understand he doesn’t mean anything by it, but don’t let him push me around either, and push back when he steps over the line. Like now.

Right before the turnoff into the mall parking lot, there’s an abandoned house. Once when we went to the restaurant across the road, Kit asked about it and the server told a story about how the dead owner’s son didn’t want to move back, but didn’t want his family home razed for parking spaces either.

After she left, Kit said the guy was probably holding out for more money and locked in legal battles with the developers.

When I saw Tori running through the yard of the abandoned house, my heart did a double-thump. For necromancers, that's exactly the kind of place to avoid, in case there are ghosts in residence. For a genetically modified necromancer, who can accidentally raise dead rats and bats and other beasties, it's trouble, guaranteed.

I rounded the house to see a broken window and no sign of Tori.

Please tell me you didn't climb through that window.

I called her on my cell. Voice mail picked up right away, meaning she'd turned off her phone. Great.

I made my way through the waist-high weeds.

"Tori?" I called. "You know I can't go in there."

Which is why she is in there.

"Tori?" I stepped toward the window. "Can we talk about what happened?"

A flicker of movement. I glanced over to see Tori vaulting the back fence and running into the mall parking lot. Whew.

I tore off after her.

Finding one teenage girl in a shopping mall on a Saturday was like the proverbial needle in a haystack. That day, I swore half of the teen girls had short dark hair, white T-shirts and jean shorts. I was hurrying over to a promising one, when a deep voice behind me rumbled, "If you're looking for Tori, I think she's a girl."

My target turned. "She" had a short, scruffy beard. I stopped short and sighed as Derek walked up behind me, arms sliding around my waist. I leaned back against him and relaxed.

“Thought I told you to come back,” he said, leaning down to my ear. There was no trace of anger in his voice now.

“Did you really expect me to listen?”

Now it was his turn to sigh. “Always worth a shot.”

As people passed, they glanced over, and I remembered the rules and reluctantly stepped out of Derek’s arms. He grumbled that his dad worried too much, and it wasn’t like we knew people in this town anyway. It didn’t matter. People were looking over because we caught their attention, and for us, that’s bad.

We caught their attention because, well, we kind of stand out. Derek’s a foot taller than me and twice my size. I’m hoping for a growth spurt, but I figure he’s just as likely to get one, so it won’t make much difference. I’m tiny and makeup makes my skin break out, so I look young for fifteen.

Derek’s size means people think he’s older than sixteen. He doesn’t really look it, though. His skin has cleared up a lot in the last month, since his first Change, but it’s not perfect. His lank, black hair usually looks in need of a wash, even if he showers twice a day. All this means he’s learned not to tug me into back alleys for some private time, because someone’s liable to call the cops.

“Dad said he told Tori that he’s her father,” he said as we started walking. “He saw you guys talking by the oak tree. Then when I got home, you were gone.”

“She’s upset.”

“Why? Her dad turned her over to her mother when she called him for help. I say good riddance. Now she has a real father.”

That was his way of looking at it. The best I could do was try to get him to see things from her point of view, even if he didn’t agree with it. Now wasn’t the time for that, though.

“I screwed up,” I said. “I let it slip that I’d known for a while.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t have told her that.”

I gave him a look. “That’s not how I screwed up. I should have told her *sooner*. She considers me a friend.”

“Does she? Huh. Never thought friendship started with one girl locking the other—bound and gagged—in a crawlspace.”

“That was in Lyle House. Tori—”

“—has changed? Right. Like when she left you behind to fight a gang of girls with knives, while she escaped.”

“We’ve come a long way since then.”

“Sure. Now she only throws you around in self-defense practices. She really enjoys that quality time with you, too. Won’t practice on anyone else.”

I glowered up at him. “Yes, she’s never going to be my BFF. But what do you want me to do? Hang out with only you and Simon? Ignore her?”

“Um, yeah, because that’s exactly what she’d do to you.”

“Which doesn’t mean I should do it back. She’s been trying to fit in. You know she has. And if she doesn’t have at least one person she can talk to, she’s liable to just take off. Get captured or killed. She might not be your favorite person, but you don’t want that.”

He hesitated a second too long.

“That’s cold, Derek. Even for you, that’s cold.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Just go back to the house, okay? You obviously aren’t interested in helping Tori. Or helping me.”

“I—”

“Just go.”

When he didn’t, I did.

Evading Derek in a crowded place isn’t hard. I can slip through gaps. Derek can’t and no one moves for him ... until

he starts scowling, then they move fast, but by then, I'm long gone. Even his werewolf nose isn't that helpful in crowds. He can follow my trail, but it takes a while to tease it out.

Derek and I don't fight a lot. Okay, we do, but it's usually spirited disagreement, not real anger. The subject of Tori was the exception. He's frustrated by how quickly I've gotten over her past mistreatment. I'm frustrated by his inability to get over it. Even Simon sees she's trying and treats her like a part of the group.

Who's right? I don't know. I just know that Tori has lost more than any of us. First, her mother. Now her father. And although she tries to hide it, a big chunk of her self-confidence is gone, too. She's gone from being the popular girl to the one nobody wants around.

As I concentrated on dodging Derek, I found Tori. Typical. Stop looking for something and there it is. She was walking straight toward me, so there was no mistake. Then she saw me, and swung the other way, moving as fast as she could without breaking into a run.

I *did* run. I'm not as worried as I once was about what people think. Blame Derek. Or thank him, I guess. Being less self-conscious is a good thing. As Aunt Lauren pointed out the other day, I hardly ever stammer any more.

When Tori ducked into a back hall, I knew I finally had her. It was a dead end leading to the restrooms.

She hesitated near a service door. A group of girls came out of the bathroom and took up the whole hall. When they'd passed, Tori was gone. I reached the door, and quickly looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then I opened it and peered inside.

The room was empty.

I was about to back out when I heard a curse. I followed it to a big metal grate on the wall. No way. How would Tori even get up—?

Well, there *was* a table under the grate. But still, crawling into a vent? Wasn't that a little dramatic? Even for Tori?

Depended on how badly she wanted to get rid of me.

Or was it a test? See how far I'd go to help her?

When I climbed onto the table and peered through, I could make out a distant light. It shifted, and I saw Tori's face, illuminated by the light ball spell Kit had taught her.

I lifted the cover and crawled in. I could still see Tori ahead, stopped, glancing around as if trying to figure out where to go next.

I felt my way along. When Tori started crawling again, I instinctively picked up speed, then stopped myself. I didn't have a light ball, so it was almost completely dark. I had to take it slow and steady.

My fingers inched along the metal bottom. Then they touched down on empty air, and I pitched forward, but caught myself.

"Chloe?" Tori's voice sounded oddly weak as it echoed down the vent. "Is that you?"

She waved the light ball around and squinted.

"Yes, it's me," I said. "Just hold on."

"I ... I smell something. It's ... it's making me dizzy. I need — Oh, God, I feel sick. It's some kind of gas."

"Hold on." I reached out gingerly. I couldn't feel the floor. "There's some kind of gap."

"It dips a little. Just climb over. I ... I really feel sick."

"I know. Just wait until I—"

Fingers grasped my ankle. I jumped, and if it wasn't for that iron-grip, I'd have tumbled right into the gap.

"Careful!" Derek yanked so hard I fell flat on my face. "It drops off right in front of you."

I kicked free and glared over my shoulder at him. "I know. That's why I stopped. But thanks for almost *scaring* me over the edge."

"You're too jumpy."

“Huh. Shocking really. Between ghosts popping up and my werewolf boyfriend sneaking up, you’d think I’d have nerves of steel.” I turned back to Tori. “Sorry! We’re coming. Just hold on.”

“Who’re you talking to?” Derek asked.

“Tori.”

“What? Did she fall down that hole?”

“No, she’s right there.” I pointed.

He squinted into the tunnel. “Well, if she was, she’s gone.”

The light ball had gone out, but there was no way he shouldn’t have seen her earlier. He had a wolf’s night vision, which is how he’d noticed the gap.

“But you heard her, right?” I said. “We were talking.”

“I—” He lowered his voice. “I only heard you, Chloe.”

I started scrabbling forward. “Tori!”

Derek caught my ankles and pulled me back along the shaft. Next thing I knew, I was standing on the floor, struggling, with his arms around me.

“I need to go back,” I said. “I’ll be careful. I need to—”

His arms tightened. “She’s okay. There must be a logical explanation.”

A logical explanation for why I could see and hear Tori, and he couldn’t? Of course there was. She was a ghost.

“And it’s not that,” he said, as if reading my thoughts.

He lifted me onto the table and leaned down until his face was right in front of mine. “Nothing could have happened to her. Not that fast.”

“No?” I looked up at him. “She couldn’t have been grabbed by someone following us? Dragged into a hall and shot?”

The flash of terror on his face made me regret the words. He knew it could happen—to any of us, at any time, and there was nothing he could do about it, no matter how hard he tried to protect us.

We tell ourselves we're too valuable to kill. Then Liz pops around, and we're all reminded that she was once one of us. Another Lyle House resident. Another genetically modified supernatural. Our friend. Now a ghost. Murdered by the Edison Group.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just—" My heart thumped so hard I couldn't breathe. "If anything happened to—"

"It didn't. I ..." He wanted to say "I know it." But he couldn't. That fear-flicker again. Then he straightened. "This isn't going to help. Where did you see her last?"

"I—I'm not sure. I mean, there's no way of knowing when it was her and when it was ..." I couldn't say *her ghost*. "Not her."

"Did you see her open the door to get in here?"

Right. That's how I'd could narrow it down—when was the last time I'd seen her move something or be noticed by someone.

"No," I said. "Kids were blocking the way. The grate was closed, too. And when she was walking through the mall, she was dodging people, but no one looked at her."

"Good. What else?"

"There was nothing in the parking lot either. On the road, a car crossed over to give her room, but it was clearly her then, because she was in my sights all the way from the house to—"

I glanced up sharply. "The abandoned house. I thought she went inside. Then I saw her running across the back yard." I slid off the table. "We have to get to that house."

Outside the service room, there was a second door just past the bathrooms. An exit clearly marked "Emergency Only." Derek ushered me through it. Someone shouted behind us, but we took off running.

As we jogged, Derek kept his fingers wrapped around my upper arm. At one time, I'd have thought he was pushing me along, telling me to hurry up. I knew better now. It was part protective and part reassurance. Every time I stumbled, he'd keep me upright. Every time my breath hitched, as I thought of what might lie ahead, he'd murmur "It's okay, it's okay," and stroke my arm with his thumb.

Had I seen Tori's ghost? I knew if I asked Derek, he'd give me a bunch of other possibilities. We were supernaturals; there are always other possibilities. But I was a necromancer. When I saw and heard someone that no one else did, it was never anything *but* a ghost.

And there was no question of *who* I'd seen. She'd looked straight at me in that shaft. Looked at me and pretended she needed help, so I'd fall into some kind of hole. I wanted to say that meant it obviously wasn't Tori, but who was I kidding? She might not have done anything to hurt me lately, but what if she somehow died in that house and she blamed me for chasing her into it? Could she try to hurt me back? Absolutely.

We reached the house and I ran to the open window I figured she'd gone through. Derek caught my hands and pointed at the jagged bits of glass along the sill. There was dried blood on one.

"I-is that—?"

"It's old." He said it quickly, but not convincingly.

He led me to the back door. There, hidden by the shadows of a sagging porch roof, he snapped the lock. When I tried to push past, he grabbed my shoulder and started stepping in front of me. Then he stopped and moved aside.

"I'll be careful," I whispered.

He may have let me go first—a huge act of trust for Derek—but that only meant he settled for walking so close I could feel his breath on my hair.

I picked my way through the kitchen. There was debris everywhere, everything from broken dishes to ripped-off cupboard doors. There were empty boxes too, cereal and cookies that mice and rats had devoured, leaving their droppings dotting the floor.

“About what I said earlier,” Derek began as I headed for the hall door. “About Tori. It did sound cold. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to her. I just wish she’d treat you better. Sometimes she does, and other times, I want to shake her and tell her to smarten up. I don’t like seeing her mouthing off to you when you’ve been nothing but nice to her.”

I walked down the hall.

Derek exhaled behind me. “Okay, yeah, Simon would say that’s kind of ironic, me not liking someone else snapping at you.”

“I didn’t say a word.” I let him squirm for a second, before glancing back. “It’s different. I know that. And I know you’re trying to tone it down. Occasionally even succeeding.”

I moved into the living room. “I should have told Tori. It would have been easier if it came from me. I knew that. I just ... I chickened out. We’re getting along so much better, and I didn’t want to screw that up.”

I stopped in front of the window. “Can you get her trail from here?”

“Yeah.” He knelt, then glanced up at me. “Whatever happened, it’s not your—”

“Let’s just find her, okay?”

We could deal with my guilt later. I’d certainly had enough practice dealing with it, after killing Tori’s mother.

I didn’t say that, but he knew I was thinking it, and the look on his face—that mix of pain and anger and helplessness—reminded me why I was crazy about him. He wasn’t always

the nicest guy. He wasn't always the most romantic boyfriend. He wasn't going to be writing me poetry or bringing me flowers. But that look said more about his feelings for me than all the flowers in the world.

I crouched and kissed him, whispering, "I'll be okay. But thanks."

He mumbled something, gruff and unintelligible. I started to stand. He squeezed my knee, then bent to pick up Tori's trail.

She'd come in that window, as I thought. There wasn't any blood on the floor, though, so no sign she'd hurt herself badly crawling through. He followed her scent into the front room. As soon as I walked through the doorway, I saw the hole. Not a big one. Barely two feet wide, the rotted floor freshly cracked, bits of sawdust still scattered around. Fresh blood glistened on a jagged piece of broken wood.

I raced over. Derek grabbed the back of my shirt when I leaned over the hole. Below, I saw a pale figure, arms and legs askew.

I ripped from Derek's grasp and ran toward the kitchen, where I'd seen a basement door.

He caught me before I reached the doorway. Didn't stop me. Just grabbed a handful of my shirt again, slowing me down.

"Be careful," he said. "The floor's rotted. The stairs—"

"Will be rotted, too. I know."

Taking my time going down those basement stairs was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I kept leaning and bending and straining to try to see Tori. Finally, Derek scooped me up and lowered me over the side, then let me jump the last few feet to the floor.

"Go," he said. "Just be—"

"Careful. I know."

I ran across the room, my gaze on the floor so I wouldn't trip over anything. There wasn't much down here—vandals had stuck to the upper floors. I was almost to the front room when someone stepped in front of me.

I let out a yelp and stopped short. There stood an old woman with long, matted white hair. She was dressed in a frilly nightgown better suited to a five-year-old.

“What are you doing here?” she said, advancing on me, bony forefinger extended, yellowing nail headed for my eye. “Get out of my house.”

I stumbled back—right into Derek.

“It’s a ghost, Chloe.” He recognized my reaction, even if I no longer shrieked everytime I saw one. “That means you can go ...” He put his hands around my waist, lifted me and walked forward. “Right through it.”

The old woman let out a screech and a string of curses.

“This is my house,” she screeched. “Rebecca Walker. My name is on the deed. I still own it.”

I ignored her and raced over to where Tori lay sprawled on the floor.

“Serves her right!” Rebecca shrieked. “Kids, breaking into my house, stealing my things. Almost as bad as those developers. The floorboards didn’t rot so fast on their own, you know. Those people wanted to cause an accident. Force my poor Timmy to sell.”

I dropped beside Tori and touched the side of her neck. I thought I could feel a pulse, but my fingers were trembling so much I wasn’t sure. I glanced at Derek. He was already kneeling on her other side and checking for a heartbeat.

“Oh, she’s fine,” Rebecca said. “Well, so long as she didn’t break her neck. But if she did, it would serve her right, breaking into other people’s property. Probably meeting some boy here. That’s what they all do. Boys and girls. In my house. Upstairs, in my—”

“Would you shut up?” I said, so loud I startled Derek. I turned to him. “Is she—?”

“I said she’s alive,” the old woman said. “I’d know, wouldn’t I? I’d have seen her ghost and the only one I’ve seen is that woman who followed you here.”

I turned sharply. “Woman?”

“Oh, *now* you want to listen to me, do you? Is this how you treat ghosts, girl? Ignore them until it suits your fancy? Well, let me tell you, I don’t—”

She kept ranting. I turned back to Derek, who was on the phone, calling his dad. I shook Tori’s shoulder. Her eyelids fluttered and she groaned.

“She’s going to be okay,” Derek said. “Your aunt’s coming.” Aunt Lauren was a doctor. “What did the ghost say about a woman?”

“That one followed me here. Another ghost.”

I turned back to Rebecca Walker. A month ago, I’d have been tripping over myself to apologize for ignoring her. I credit Derek for that too—teaching me I don’t need to be so polite all the time. I still believe in being nice, but with ghosts, if they’re nasty to me, I have to give them attitude right back or they’ll take advantage.

“Do you want us to call the police, too?” I asked. “Report this accident? Or would you rather we kept it quiet so your son doesn’t get in trouble?”

She stopped ranting.

“We’ll make you a deal,” I said. “We won’t tell anyone what happened here. In fact, we’ll alert your son to what the developers did. In return, you’ll tell me everything you know about this woman.”

Now she started squawking that she didn’t know much, that it was just some lady who must have been following me because of my necromancer’s glow. She’s come in here, seen Tori fall, and taken off.

“I can’t tell you more than I saw, girl, so you’d better not hold out on me.”

There was genuine panic in her voice. That’s another thing Derek made me realize—I often feel that I’m at the mercy of ghosts, but really, it’s the other way around. They’re stuck and I’m their only chance for contact with the living world.

“We had a deal,” I said. “I’ll do my part, if you tell me what this ghost looked like.”

Rebecca jabbed a finger in Tori’s direction. “Like her. Same height. Same hair. Skinny. Blue eyes, though. And older. Maybe forty. Dressed all fancy, too, like she thought she was something special.”

“Diane Enright,” I whispered. “She’s describing Tori’s mom.”

He swore under his breath. “She used a glamour spell.”

“A what?”

“Glamour spell. It makes the spell-caster look like someone else. It only works if you’re *expecting* to see the other person.”

“Like when that other person disappears from sight, then returns. Or seems to.”

I marched from the room. Derek came after me.

“Stay with Tori,” I said. “Please. I don’t want her to wake up and hear this.”

He hesitated, but agreed, and watched me head up the stairs. I went out the back door, then I gazed around the empty yard.

I swallowed. I might have marched up those stairs, but my knees were trembling. This was Diane Enright. Tori’s mother. The woman I’d killed. Murdered.

Oh God. I couldn’t do this. Couldn’t face her. Couldn’t—No, I had to.

“Mrs—” I took a deep breath to steady my voice, then channeled Derek, putting a snap into my voice as I shouted. “Diane! I know you’re out there.”

She popped up in front of me, so fast I blanched. I crossed my arms, willed my feet to stay still and reminded myself she was just a ghost.

“Little Chloe Saunders, looking so fierce,” she said. “I suppose that’s what happens after you kill someone, isn’t it?”

I tried not to flinch, but I must have, because she laughed again. “Or not so fierce after all.”

“What do you want?”

She looked down at me, and she was still smiling, but it gave me goose bumps. “I think you know.”

I just stood there, staring up at her.

“You killed Dr. Davidoff, Chloe. You used me to do it. I’m sure you’re telling yourself you didn’t, that I fired the gun and you had nothing to do with that. A terrible misunderstanding.”

No, I’d told her to do it. I knew that. I accepted responsibility.

But did I completely believe it? Or was there part of me that wanted to pretend it was a misunderstanding? It wasn’t. Seeing Diane Enright again, I knew that. What she’d just done to Tori reminded me of everything else she’d done to Tori and threatened to do to Derek and Aunt Lauren, and in that moment, I was back in the laboratory hall, feeling what I’d felt then. Clarity. Resolution.

“No, it wasn’t a misunderstanding,” I said. “I told you to shoot him. You were a zombie. You had to obey me.”

The look she gave me then was even more chilling, because there was no anger in it. She was studying me, appraisingly, as if murdering someone was a sign of character.

“You want revenge,” I said. “You were following me on the other side of the veil, so I couldn’t see you. When Tori fell, you lured me away. You left your daughter to die. Then you tried to kill me.”

“Please, Chloe, I know you love movies, but drama doesn’t suit you. Victoria wasn’t in mortal danger and neither were you. It was simply ...” She pursed her lips. “A lesson. A small show of what I can do, if I wish.”

“Again, what do you want?”

“Nothing. Yet.” She stepped forward and I resisted the urge to back up. “I merely wish you to remain open to the

possibility that we can help one another. I find you interesting, Chloe. You know that.”

“No, you find me useful, especially now, when your options are so limited that you’re willing to work with your killer.” I looked up at her. “You told me before that we could help each other. That I was stronger than your daughter.”

“You are.”

“No, I’m not. It was never about who was smarter or stronger. It was about who you could control. You couldn’t control Tori. You thought you could control me. You still think you can. That’s what this was about. Show me what you can do—leave Tori alone and hurt, lead me into another hole, where I can lie, alone and hurt, until I’m rescued. Then I’ll do whatever you say. Only I won’t.”

I imagined giving her a mental shove. She staggered back.

“Don’t you dare, Chloe Saunders. If you banish me—”

“You’ll come back. I’m sure you will. But you won’t trick me again, and by then, I’ll have learned a way to get rid of you for good.” I stepped forward, right under her nose. “I’m not sorry you’re dead. I just feel sorry for myself because I had to do it. But if I didn’t, someone else would have had to, and that would only put the guilt on them. So I’m going to stop thinking of all the other ways we could have stopped you, because there weren’t any. And when I find a way to banish you for good, I won’t worry about where you might go. Once again, I’m just going to stop you.”

I closed my eyes and gave her a huge mental slam. She let out a howl of rage, cut short as she was knocked into another dimension. When I opened my eyes, she was gone.

I let out a shuddering sigh. Then arms went around me, solid and warm, and I leaned against Derek.

“She’s gone,” I whispered. “For a little while.”

“I know.” He kissed the top of my head.

I let myself enjoy the embrace for a moment, then remembered and pulled away. “Tori.”

“Your aunt and my dad are here. They came in the front. Tori might have a broken ankle and a concussion, but she’s okay.” He reached down, hand going under my chin. “I know how hard that was for you, confronting Tori’s mom.”

He bent, lips coming to mine and—

“Derek? Chloe?” It was Kit, opening the back door.

Derek let out a low growl.

“Never fails.” I turned to Kit. “How is she?”

“We’re going to take her back to the house now. She’s unconscious again.”

“Then we’ll walk back,” Derek said. “Give you room in the van to lay her down.”

His dad agreed and went back inside. As we walked toward the steps, I looked down at Derek’s hand, holding mine.

“No one’s around,” he said. “And we can take the back way.”

“Good,” I said, and entwined my fingers with his.

BELONGING

Prologue

As Brad watched the three Cains devour their porterhouse steaks, he realized he should have added a couple hundred bucks to the price of his information, just to cover dinner. They were at a steakhouse in Dallas. The June heat meant they had the patio to themselves, which was good for privacy, but it also meant the Cains were on their second pitcher of beer—and only two of them were old enough to drink. Seventeen-year-old Carter had already gone through a pitcher of fresh-squeezed lemonade and looked ready for a second.

Brad was waiting until they'd eaten a little more before presenting his offer. It was never wise to interfere with a werewolf and his meal, and that went double for Cains. Brad was a werewolf himself, but at five-foot-seven and a hundred and fifty pounds, even the youngest Cain dwarfed him. The older two could eat him for dinner and then go looking for dessert.

It was Carter who slowed first. He was small for a Cain, barely over six feet tall, maybe two hundred pounds. Good-looking enough that the young server had been eying him. Must take after his mother—the Cains weren't known for their looks. Or for their brains. In this regard, Carter was definitely part of the family.

“You said you've got information on some kid of Uncle Zack's. But this here”—he pointed at the scrap of paper—”says the guy's last name is Souza, not Cain.”

“He wasn't raised as a Cain,” said the boy's grandfather, Theo. “That's why Brad here is offering to help us get him back.”

Theo was the clan patriarch. Also the brightest of the bunch, which wasn't saying a lot, but it helped. Carter was the son of Theo's youngest. The thirty-something guy between them was Nate, the son of Theo's oldest. Zachary had been his middle child. Dead ten years now, when he got the damned fool idea to join an uprising against the Pack. Zack's only known son

had been killed by a rival werewolf a few years ago. The old man had taken that hard. Now Brad was offering him a replacement ... with bonuses.

“You say the boy was part of an experiment?” Theo said as he finished his steak. “Making him into some kind of super-werewolf?”

“Exactly. The St. Cloud Cabal was running a secret experiment to genetically modify supernaturals in vitro, eliminating side-effects and enhancing the powers of sorcerers, witches, necromancers, half-demons ...” Three pairs of eyes glazed over. Brad wasn’t sure if they didn’t understand or if they just didn’t care. Both were equally likely. Most werewolves took no interest in either Cabals or other supernatural types. It was only when he added, “And, of course, werewolves,” that the Cains perked up again.

“How many of these super-werewolves are there?” Theo asked.

“Your grandson is the only subject left.”

“Were the others Zack’s boys?” Theo asked.

“I don’t know. I was hired to track four escaped subjects and bring them back to the study. They only told me the absolute basics.”

“I don’t get it,” Carter said. “If you’re giving all the kids back to the scientists, how do we get Uncle Zack’s boy?”

“Brad isn’t returning them all,” Theo said. “He’s giving us the opportunity to take Zack’s boy first.”

“Oh.”

Carter still sounded confused. To be honest, Brad didn’t blame him. It was confusing and it raised lots of questions, but Brad had known better than to ask them of his employers. As far as most supernaturals were concerned, the Cains were merely representative of the entire breed—dumb brutes who couldn’t walk and chew gum at the same time. Sometimes it was better not to disabuse them of that notion.

Brad was just glad Theo didn't ask exactly what modifications they'd done to the boy. He didn't know—it hadn't seemed wise to take too much interest. Theo, though, seemed happy with “super-werewolf.”

“Are you sure he'll Change?” Theo said. “That tinkering might have screwed him up. Nothing worse than a werewolf that can't Change. Happened to a cousin of mine. Ripped him right apart.”

“He's already Changing.”

“At sixteen?” Theo looked impressed.

Carter scowled. Obviously he hadn't started shifting into a wolf yet. Sixteen wasn't unheard of, but it was early.

“He's smart, too,” Brad said. “Genius smart. Taking college math already.”

“That's just book smart,” Carter said. “Don't mean nothing.”

Only it did, and judging by Theo's expression, he knew it. His clan had muscle and they had numbers. All they needed was brains. If this kid had that—in addition to other enhancements—he could be just the ticket to make the Cains serious contenders to the Pack.

“Are you sure he's Zack's boy? I can't see my son getting mixed up in some mad science experiment.”

“He didn't realize he was. He was seduced by a subject and seems to have died without realizing he'd fathered another son.”

“So are we sure he's Zack's, then?” By Carter's tone, he really hoped the answer was no.

Brad laid a photo on the table. “This was taken a few months ago.”

Like Theo and Nate, the boy in the picture was dark-haired with green eyes. And he was big—over six feet already, with shoulders almost as broad as the doorway behind him. His hair was shaggy, hanging in his face, which wasn't such a bad thing, considering the state of his skin. If all that didn't

confirm he was a Cain, the scowl did—a perfect match for the one on Carter’s face.

“Uncle Zack had light hair,” Carter said. “I’ve seen photos.”

“He took after his mother,” Theo said. “The boy is Zack’s. He has his eyes.” The old man’s voice softened as he picked up the picture.

“You can keep that,” Brad said. “I also have some newer ones from my surveillance.” He laid those out. “I couldn’t get close enough for a good shot, even with a telephoto lens, but he’s had his hair cut and his skin is clearing, probably as his hormones settle after his Change. Still, he’s easy to spot.”

“So you know where he is? And you can guarantee he’ll still be there when we arrive?”

“If he isn’t, I’ll track him again. But he’s been living in this rented house for two months with his foster father, three other subjects and one of the doctors from the experiment.”

Brad eased back and let them look at the photos. “So, all that’s needed is a yes and a cash payment. I’ll give you the address right away. Plus a sure-fire way to catch him.”

“He’s sixteen,” Nate said. “We can catch him.”

“Don’t be so sure. He’s smart and he’s a good fighter. You know a werewolf named Liam? Runs with a guy named Ramon?”

“Heard of them,” Theo said.

“Some folks hired them to track down your grandson. That’s why the St. Clouds hired me—they knew Liam and Ramon managed it, so they figured another werewolf could do the same. And they can’t hire Liam again ... because he’s dead. Your boy killed him. His first challenge and he took down an experienced werewolf and made another one decide he didn’t want the job anymore.”

Theo practically beamed. Too bad Brad already set the price. He probably could have doubled it.

“But you know a way to catch him?” Nate said.

“I do.”

Brad slapped another photo on the table. A smiling teenage girl with blue eyes and blond hair streaked with red.

“Cute,” Carter grunted. “Let me guess—this guy has a crush on her.”

“More than just a crush. She’s his girlfriend.”

They looked surprised. The girl definitely did not seem like a romantic match for the scowling brute in the other photos. But Brad had done enough surveillance to be sure of his facts.

“She’s another subject, one who escaped with your grandson and his foster brother. She’s a necromancer.”

Carter’s face screwed up. “A what?”

“Someone who can speak to the dead,” Theo said. “Like the Alpha’s girlfriend. The one on TV.”

“She’s hot,” Nate said.

“Little young for you,” Carter said, still eying the photo.

“I meant the one on TV,” Nate said. “So the kid’s got it bad for this girl?”

“He does, and he already has a werewolf’s protective instinct. In spades. He’s the same way with his foster brother, which would be the backup plan, but the brother is a sorcerer and knows self-defense. A necromancer has no defensive powers and this one’s a tiny thing. She’s his weakness. That’s how Liam and Ramon got close enough to fight him. They made a tactical mistake, though. They settled for teasing and threatening her, which only pissed the boy off enough to fight. If you want him, take her. He’ll come running.”

The Cains paid. Didn’t haggle over the price, either. They even covered dinner. As Brad watched them struggling to calculate the tip, he felt a little sorry for Derek Souza. Being handed over to the Cains wasn’t a fate he’d wish on anyone, especially a bright kid like that. But business was business,

and family was family. A werewolf belonged with his kin,
whoever they were.

One

I swiped aside threads of spider silk as I tramped along the wooded path. I hadn't come this way in a few days and the spiders worked fast, zigzagging webs between the trees, as if that might stop me. It doesn't. As long as we're renting a house on the edge of this forest, I'll be in here every day, scouting.

We're on the run and this strip of woods is the perfect place for someone to lie in wait for us. It's my fault we need to stay so close to the forest in the first place—I can't control my Changes to wolf form yet, meaning I can't just ask Dad to give me a lift to the nearest patch of wilderness. If I'm responsible for us living near the forest, then I figure I'm responsible for keeping it safe.

Behind me, Simon slapped his neck. "Damn mosquitos. I swear, they're as big as hummingbirds out here."

"Go back inside then."

"It was an observation, Derek, not a complaint." The path widened enough for him to walk beside me. "Besides, Lauren's on a cleaning spree. If I go back, she'll make me help."

"Wouldn't kill you to pitch in."

"I'm going to tell myself that you're just cranky because Chloe's at the mall with Tori, and you weren't allowed to go. I could point out that if you did go, you'd be even crankier, and you'd make everyone miserable. Especially me."

"You wouldn't have to go."

"Sure I would. I'd need to run interference when Tori asked how a new shirt looked and you told her the truth."

"I'm honest. Honest is good."

"Not when it comes to girls and clothes. You need to gauge their reaction first. If they aren't happy with it, you suggest

they try something else, even if it looked fine. If they love it and it looks like hell, you say it's not bad and hope they try something else."

"Why do you have to make everything so complicated?"

"Because it is complicated."

I snorted and let a branch fling back at him. He was right, though—at least about the mall thing. I kept finding myself heading in that direction, as if I could just happen to extend my patrol to the mall. Then Simon and I could meet up with Chloe. For burgers or something. As long as we were there already. Accidentally.

It wasn't that I resented her spending time with a friend. Even if I didn't consider Tori a real friend. I just got anxious, knowing Chloe was there without me. Defenseless. Except she wasn't defenseless. She could look after herself, as she'd proven again and again, and every time I gave her hell for taking a few steps off the property, she gave me hell back. I knew she was right. Hovering over her was a very bad idea. Following her to the mall? Borderline stalking.

So why was I even thinking of going? Because I couldn't help it. Even if we hadn't seen anyone from the St. Clouds in months, they could hunt her down at any moment, and if I wasn't there to save her ... Well, if I wasn't there, she'd probably save herself. Even if I was there, I wasn't much protection against their tranq guns. But while my brain could work it out logically, my gut told me I needed to be with her, to watch over her, to take care of her.

"So," Simon said as we stepped over a stream. "Have you come up with a gift idea for your three-month anniversary?"

"Three months?"

"Sure, it's coming up on—"

"I know when it is."

That was a lie. I knew the date when Chloe first kissed me. Hell, I knew the hour. But is that what you use to mark the start of a relationship? Or was it our second kiss, when we knew we were really starting something. Or was it our first

actual date, a week later. Which one did she consider the right one? That was the important thing. I wanted to ask, but it seemed like I should know.

I bent to check a footprint. The neighbor walking his dog. I straightened. “What I mean is, why is three months important? Why not one month?”

“Because you missed the one-month anniversary.”

I scowled at him. “I didn’t miss it. You’re the one who mentioned it when it was already too late, and Chloe never said anything.”

“She wouldn’t. It’s up to you to remember and since you missed one month, and one week, too—”

“One week? We’re supposed to celebrate—?”

“You celebrate everything. That’s the rule.”

Rules. I hated them. Well, no. In general, I was good with rules. I understood them and they made life easier. But with dating, there’s no book to study. No pattern to follow. It’s just an endless minefield of places to screw up. At least it is according to Simon. Which may explain why he’s never even gotten to three months with a girl.

“But I’ve gotten close a lot of times,” he said when I pointed this out.

“I don’t think that counts.”

“I could have gotten to three months if I wanted. I didn’t want to. You do. And I’m guessing you want to make it to six months?”

“Course.” I paused. “So that’s the next milestone? We skip four and five?”

“Yes. You can’t celebrate too many anniversaries or you seem clingy. Remember Brandi in ninth grade? She expected me to remember the anniversary of the minute I asked her out—every single day. Sulked if I forgot. We didn’t even make it to two weeks.”

A scent wafted past. I paused to catch it. Just a deer. “Okay, so on anniversaries, I need to give her something. An incentive.”

Simon almost walked into a tree. “What?”

“An incentive. Like in third grade, when Mrs. Nestor gave me a cookie every day that I didn’t read during class and promised me a candy bar if I didn’t read all week.”

“You never got that candy bar.”

“Because it wasn’t worth listening to her yammer about stuff I already knew. But this anniversary gift thing is like that, right? An incentive for Chloe to keep going out with me.”

He sighed. “No ... It’s just a gift.”

“To thank her for going out with me?”

A deeper sigh. I kinda liked the incentive idea. It might be the only thing that got me to six months. Not that anything was going wrong between Chloe and me. It was great actually. Which was the problem. For every action, there must be an equal and opposite reaction. It applies in physics and in life. Any day now, I expected Chloe to tell me it wasn’t working out, that she’d made a mistake, that I was just too cranky, too protective, too overbearing, too ... not what she wanted in a boyfriend. Not long-term anyway.

“You okay, bro?”

“Yeah.”

I shook it off and stopped walking. I took a good look around. Inhaled deeply. Listened. Reminded myself that this was what I was supposed to be doing—scouting.

As usual, there was nothing. Dad was right—the St. Clouds were lying low and regrouping. Giving us time to get comfortable. Then we’d pop up like prairie dogs for a peek around and they’d swoop down and snatch us up. As long as we stayed in our hole, we’d be fine.

“Anything?” Simon said after a minute.

“Nah.”

“Feel better? Everyone’s safe and sound, so you can rest?”

“Yeah. After I get something to eat.” I looked east. “We’re close to the mall—”

“No.”

“We won’t look for them. We’ll just—”

“No.”

“Straight to the food court. That’s it. I just want—”

“Oh, I know what you want.” He caught my arm and tugged me back toward the house. “The answer is no. There’s food at the house, and she’ll be back soon.”

I cast one last look east. Then I sighed and followed him.

Two

We went back to our rented place—a big old farmhouse a mile from town. I like it well enough. There's room for all six of us, which is a lot better than when we started out, sharing two motel rooms. Being on the edge of a forest is good. Being in the country is good, too. I'm not a city person—too many scents, too much noise, too many people.

When I was a kid, I used to dream of the day when we'd stop running and get a place like this. I should be happy. Except we hadn't stopped running. If anything, we were in even more danger than we'd been after Dad left the Edison Group. I've told him we should get moving again. He tells me not to worry.

We went in. As the back door slapped shut behind us, Lauren's voice called from deep inside.

“Boys? Is that you? I could use some help up here.”

Simon motioned to keep quiet and sneak into the TV room. I couldn't. I've spent three months trying to convince Chloe's aunt that I'm not the big, bad wolf. Which means I need to go out of my way to be nice. Which is becoming a major pain in the ass.

“Just me,” I called back as I waved Simon to the TV room. “What do you need?”

Simon hesitated, but I motioned for him to go. No need for both of us to suffer. I walked to the bottom of the steps. Lauren appeared at the top.

I'm not sure how I feel about Chloe's aunt. She was part of the Edison Group—the people who experimented on us. So was Dad, but he had the sense to get out years ago.

Lauren stayed. She was responsible for putting Chloe in Lyle House, the group home where we'd met. When Chloe escaped and went to her aunt for help, Lauren handed her back to the group. She eventually helped her escape again, but I

don't think that balances the books. I know Lauren thought she was helping Chloe and then realized she wasn't. If Dad's okay with that, I guess I am, too. I just wish it didn't mean I needed to suck up to her. Chloe says I don't—and gives me hell when I do—but like most supernaturals, her aunt thinks werewolves are monsters. I need to convince her otherwise or she'll cause problems with me and Chloe, and I won't let that happen.

So when she asked me to come upstairs and fold laundry, I did. But I won't pretend I wasn't grateful when my cell phone rang, giving me an excuse to stop.

It was Chloe. I moved away from the clothing-piled bed and answered as casually as I could.

“Hey,” I said. “How's it going?”

“Tori has clothing. Thankfully.”

“Yeah, she'd be kind of scary without it.”

Chloe laughed. “You know what I mean. We have accomplished the task of getting her a summer wardrobe that fit her budget, which was like shoving a camel through the eye of a needle. But it is done and I have survived.”

“That's important.”

“It is. So we're off to the food court and we were wondering if you guys wanted—”

“We'll be right there.”

A pause. “I was going to ask if you wanted us to bring you home something.”

“Oh.”

Another laugh. “I'm kidding. Grab Simon and come on over. We'll be in the food court.”

I yelled to Lauren that I was going to meet Chloe at the mall. As I flew down the hall, she stepped from a room.

“I think Chloe wanted to be alone with Tori for a bit,” she said.

No. They just wanted to shop without “the guys” tagging along. There was a difference. I bit my tongue and said, “She called and asked Simon and me to meet them in the food court.”

“Are you sure?”

No. I hallucinated it. But that’s not what you’re really asking, is it? You think I’m lying. You think we spend too much time together—despite the fact that we live in the same damn house and would need to actively avoid one another to spend less time together.

I held out my phone and kept my tone and expression neutral. “She just called. You can check or call her back ...”

“No, of course not.” An abashed smile. “I’m sorry if that came out wrong, Derek. Go on.”

“Thanks. I’ll finish the folding later.”

I was halfway across the yard when I remembered Simon. I paused, looking at the house, and then at the road, as if going back would make me late and Chloe might ... I don’t know, spontaneously combust. Or Tori might get tired of waiting and drag her to another store.

There was only a second of hesitation, though, before I jogged back to get him. In the beginning, it was kind of awkward, hanging out with Simon and Chloe, knowing he’d liked her and I got her. But he’d been cool with it. Really cool, as if he was just glad that she was happy and I was happy. If it had been the other way around, I’m not sure I could have done that. I’m just really glad I didn’t have to.

The mall is right on the edge of town. Less than a mile walk down our road and we’re there. While I like living in the

country, being home-schooled means we can go a little stir-crazy. Having a mall so close is a bonus, even if it does mean Chloe doesn't have an excuse when Tori wants to drag her out shopping.

As much as Chloe complains, I don't think she minds that much. She needs girlfriends and Tori, unfortunately, is her only option. Despite what everyone thinks, I'm okay with that. Well, not as okay with Tori as her friend—I still haven't forgiven her for what she did to Chloe at Lyle House. But I get that Chloe needs time with another girl, like I spend time with Simon. I don't want to dog her every step. I just ... I just like to be closer when she's out like that, in a public place, where some goon from the St. Clouds could walk by in the crowd and stick a tranquilizer dart in her arm and all the self-defense skills in the world wouldn't help her.

We circled the parking lot to the entrance nearest the food court. That meant going all the way around to the back. It would have been shorter cutting through the mall, but Simon didn't suggest it. The place was packed on Saturdays, and if I could avoid walking through crowds I would.

I pulled open the doors and stepped into the food court.

"Ow," Simon said behind me.

I glanced back to see him rubbing his shoulder where the door must have hit him.

"Sorry," I said.

"Yeah, yeah. Just get in there and find her."

It was long past lunchtime, but there were people at nearly every table, more milling around with trays. I stayed back just inside the door and scanned the sea of faces.

Beside me, Simon murmured. "One, two, three—"

"There," I grunted and strode toward Chloe's table.

"Damn," he said as he jogged to keep up. "Three seconds. That's a record."

I scowled at him.

“What?” he said. “It’s cute.”

My scowl deepened.

“So cute,” he said, grinning. “Incredibly, adorably cute.”

I flipped him off and walked faster. Then I stopped so abruptly that he plowed into my back.

From the doorway, I’d only seen Chloe, eating fries at a table. Presumably, Tori sat across from her, but there’d been someone standing in the way, blocking my view. Now I saw that the “someone” wasn’t just standing there. He was talking to them.

“Chill,” Simon murmured as he followed my gaze. “It’s just a kid.”

The “kid” was at least a year older than me. Simon meant he wasn’t likely to be a Cabal assassin. Just a guy. A college-aged guy. Talking to Chloe.

I watched him bend over the table, hands planted on it, his gaze fixed on Chloe, his lips parting in a smile as he said something to her. A slow burn started in my gut, and before I could stop myself, I was barreling down on them, Simon’s protests fading behind me.

Three

Simon grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked hard enough that I staggered. And hard enough that people looked over, which stopped me like a bucket of ice water. The cardinal rule of being on the run: don't call attention to yourself.

Across the food court, the guy was still talking to Chloe. I could see now that Tori wasn't there. Just Chloe. And a stranger.

"Chloe is not flirting with that guy," Simon said.

"Course not."

"I mean it. She's—"

I glanced back at him. "I'm not blind. She's only paying enough attention to him to be polite. He's the one flirting, which is bugging her, and that's why I'm pissed off. She's trying to eat her fries and he's interrupting."

Simon chuckled. It did sound kind of stupid, as rationalizations went. I worry what will happen when we stop running. When we go back to school. When Chloe meets other guys. Guys who don't argue and snap at her. Boys who don't obsessively worry about her. Guys who could take her to a movie and stay right until the end, not have to leave halfway through because they start turning into wolves.

But even then she wouldn't pick up some random guy in the mall.

So why was I overreacting? I don't know. I saw the guy and a flash-fire ignited in my brain, burning away reason and common sense. If Simon hadn't stopped me, I'd have made an idiot of myself and called attention to us. Worse, I'd have embarrassed Chloe. I was too protective as it was. Frothing at the mouth because a guy talked to her? Really not going help us get to that next anniversary.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. "Thanks."

“No problem. Just keep it cool. And remember, in public, you’re not her boyfriend.”

I let out a noise that sounded a little too much like a growl.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “It’s a bitch. Especially at a time like this. But that’s the rule.”

It was a stupid rule. I’d been fighting it since we moved here. We were pretending to be a blended family—Lauren and my dad posing as a couple with their assorted kids. I’ve argued that it’s not a blood relationship, but apparently, dating my step-sister would be one of those “call attention to ourselves” things we need to avoid.

“So just ... be cool,” Simon said. “Let me do the talking.”

When I was within about ten feet, Chloe turned, as if she’d sensed me there. She shot me a huge smile. Then she rolled her eyes toward the guy beside the table and mouthed to me, “Don’t ask.”

I rolled my eyes back, managing a slight smile that made her eyes fill with relief.

“Good,” Simon murmured beside me. “Very good.”

I glowered at him.

“What?” he said.

“You sound like you’re going to give me a dog biscuit.”

“If the shoe fits ...”

I shook my head. As we walked over, a wave of scent hit me. A musky, chemical scent, like someone spilled cologne. I had to switch to breathing through my mouth.

Chloe motioned me to the seat beside her. When I sat, she laid her hand on my arm, “Finally. I thought you guys were never going to show. Tori took off a few minutes ago. Apparently, she didn’t have a belt to match her new shirts.” Another roll of her eyes. Then, with her fingers still lightly resting on my forearm, she turned to the guy. “Carter, this is Derek and Simon. Derek, Simon ... Carter. He’s shopping with his grandfather.”

Simon smirked. I tried not to. There was nothing wrong with shopping with your grandfather. It just made flirting with girls in the food court seem a little pathetic.

And I now knew what smelled so bad. Carter seemed to have showered in aftershave. Which made “hitting on girls while shopping with Gramps” even more pathetic.

“I bet you’re starving,” Chloe said, jumping up, fingers brushing along my arm. “Let’s go grab you guys some food while Simon holds the table.” She turned to Carter and flashed a bright smile. “It was nice meeting you.”

I stood.

“Actually, I’d like to talk to you,” the guy—Carter—said.

My head whipped around a little faster than I intended. I thought he meant Chloe, but he was looking at me.

“You go to college here?” Carter asked.

“High school,” I grunted and took a step after Chloe, who was walking away, glancing back.

“Oh? I’d have guessed college. I hear they have a good football team. You must be planning to try out for it. I’m enrolling and I’d love any tips.”

“I don’t play—”

I stopped as I caught Simon giving me a look that said I was being rude. I wasn’t—I don’t go to college and I don’t know a damned thing about their football team—but I guess I sounded churlish. Which was fine by me. But Simon motioned that he’d go with Chloe instead, and when she didn’t argue, I was stuck.

I told the guy that I didn’t play football or know much about the college team, but I tried to be nice about it, saying I hadn’t been in town long and I was home-schooled. All that effort to be polite, and the guy seemed to tune me out after the first sentence, impatiently waiting for me to finish.

When I did, he said, “About Chloe. Has she got a boyfriend?”

I stiffened and managed to grunt, “Dunno.”

“She’s cute, huh?” He gazed after her with a look that made my gut twist. Not the normal look a guy gives a cute girl. A hungry one that had my hackles rising.

“She’s fifteen,” I said, my voice taking on a growl.

“So?”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” He grinned. It was an all-teeth grin that set off something in my brain and I fought the urge to curl my lip in a snarl.

“Girls her age like older guys,” Carter continued. “We know our way around, if you know what I mean.”

His grin grew, but his gaze was fixed on me now. His brown eyes glittered as I gripped the edge of the table, temper flaring.

Baiting me. He knew I was dating Chloe—or at least that I really liked her—and he was being a jerk about it.

I took a deep breath. No threat here. Chloe was safe. Chloe wasn’t interested. Chloe was with me.

“Don’t you have someplace to go?” I said. “Your grandpa’s probably looking for you.”

He didn’t rise to my bait, just kept smiling, his gaze swiveling back to Chloe. “I think I’ll wait and say goodbye. She’s really cute. I’d like to get to know her better.” That grin swung back to me. “I’d really like to get to know her better.”

I leapt to my feet.

“Whoa,” Carter said. “Something wrong, Derek?”

“Back off,” I growled.

His gaze hardened, but he kept smiling. “Is that a warning? It sounded like—”

“Carter!”

We both looked over to see a man standing by the McDonald’s counter. He didn’t look old enough to be Carter’s grandfather—maybe fifty. And he didn’t look like Carter,

either. He was huge, at least my height, with broad shoulders, graying dark hair and a broad, bulldog face.

The man looked at me and I felt a jolt, like recognition. I didn't know him, but he stared at me for at least five seconds before turning his gaze to Carter and waving for him.

"Better run along," I murmured. "Gramps is calling."

Carter scowled at me and hesitated, but his grandfather called again, his voice harsh enough to make people look. Carter muttered something and stalked off.

His grandfather stayed where he was, feet planted, fixing Carter with a glower as he walked over to join him. When Carter was close enough, the man grabbed his upper arm, leading him away like a five-year-old who'd run off.

"You eating my fries?" a voice asked behind me.

I turned to see Chloe approaching, tray in hand. She put it in front of me.

"Got your own," she said. "Fries, burger, milkshake." A blaze of a grin. "Good enough for an afternoon snack?"

"Perfect. Thanks."

As she sat down, she whispered. "Everything okay?"

I nodded and reached for her french fry container. She laughed and slapped my hand away, and I smiled and relaxed. When I looked over again, Carter and his grandfather were gone.

Four

We didn't spend much time at the mall. Chloe seemed eager to get going and I wasn't keen on staying. Chloe suggested we take the forest route back while Simon and Tori went by road. I sure as hell wasn't arguing. Before we started dating, I'd gotten the impression—from movies and stuff—that the guy was usually the one suggesting things like a private walk in the woods, and the girl might want to sometimes, but not as often as the guy did. But half the time, Chloe was the one suggesting it, which was nice. Really nice.

When Chloe told them we'd take the forest route, Tori rolled her eyes. Simon grinned and shot me a thumbs up, which had Chloe rolling her eyes. In the beginning, she'd get embarrassed about stuff like that, and she'd change her mind, but I'd put a stop to that fast. We were going out; no one expected us to just walk around holding hands. No one other than her aunt, that is.

Once we got to the forest, we did hold hands, Chloe sliding hers into mine, twining our fingers, and if there was any knot still left in my gut, it slid away. When we're alone like this, I know everything's okay and I feel like a moron for worrying.

"Straight home then?" she asked as we walked along the path.

I snorted.

She looked over. "Ah, so you have other plans. I bet I know what they are, too."

"I bet you do."

"Yep. A long, peaceful walk in the forest. Fresh air. Exercise. What more could you ask for?"

"I can think of a few things."

Her brows lifted. "Like what?"

"What you brought me into the forest for. This."

I grabbed her by the waist and swung her around to face me. As I bent, I closed my eyes ... and kissed air as she ducked out of my grasp. I opened my eyes to see her dancing backward along the path.

I made a noise in my throat.

“Don’t growl,” she said. “Aren’t you always complaining that you don’t get enough exercise?”

I lunged. She backed away.

I let out another growl and crossed my arms. “Better watch out. I might decide the prize isn’t worth the effort.”

She grinned, blue eyes sparkling. “Oh, you know it is. And you know it’s never as sweet as when you have to work for it.”

She wheeled and ran. As I went after her, adrenaline pumped through me like liquid fire. There was nothing quite like a chase, and one that ended with this reward was the best chase of all. Chloe knew that. I was part wolf—an idea I was finally starting to accept. Running and chasing wore off the restless gnawing in my gut. I don’t hunt animals yet. I will. I can feel the urge, when I cross their trails in wolf form, but I’m not ready for that. These mock-hunts with Chloe do the trick for now.

A month ago, my dad caught us goofing around, Chloe running and hiding, while I chased and stalked. He took me aside for a talk and said he worried we might be tempting instincts we weren’t ready to handle. He meant sex, of course, but something else, too.

“Chasing humans is dangerous, Derek,” he said. “That’s one of the challenges a werewolf faces. When you chase, you chase to hunt. To kill.”

Except I didn’t. There was no doubt, no question, no concern. I never chased Chloe and thought of her as prey. I thought of other things, sure—that was part of the fun of it—but I had that under control. We both knew we weren’t ready for sex. But Dad’s other concern was groundless.

Project Genesis was about removing drawbacks to supernatural powers. For werewolves, the urge to kill a fleeing

human would be one of those drawbacks, and it was one they'd obviously fixed. I didn't tell Dad that, though, or he'd worry I was being overly confident. I wasn't. When I chased Chloe, I saw only Chloe.

And so I chased her now.

Being a wolf, you'd really think I'd have the advantage in the forest. Except this was dense forest, and I'm a big guy, and Chloe's small and fast. She quickly learned that if she leaves the path, she can get away faster. So she does. Which leaves me relying on my only real advantage out here—my senses.

Sense of smell is the easiest. I can pick up her scent on the wind ... if she stays upwind, which she knows better than to do. I can follow her trail on the ground, but I haven't quite mastered that in human form. It's better to rely on my hearing, which would work a whole lot better if she didn't know I could detect a twig cracking a quarter-mile away. So she sticks to thick woods, stays downwind and moves quietly. Which only makes it more fun, more challenging. A welcome chance to hone my skills.

I didn't even bother trying to follow her into the brush. I ran along the paths, chasing her scent on the wind until she circled back to get downwind. Which I knew she'd do, so I was ready for it. I leaped into her path. She let out a stifled shriek. I lunged. She spun and ran. I jumped back on the path and raced along it, hearing the soft huff of her breathing and the crackle of undergrowth as she tore through the forest alongside me. I kicked it up a notch, watched for a clear spot, and then darted into the woods to cut her off again.

This time, she didn't shriek. She cursed, as she realized she'd fallen for the same stunt twice. Then she turned and ran the other way, deeper into the forest, and it was my turn to curse as I realized I'd unintentionally sent her downwind.

Now she'd figured out my scheme and was staying far from the path. She wasn't bothering to stay quiet, either, knowing the forest there was too thick for me to catch up. I ran along the trail, mentally mapping the system of paths, figuring out

which would bring me closest to her, as I tracked the sounds of her escape.

Then the forest went silent. She'd stopped running. Found a place and holed up and wasn't giving me any more clues.

This was when the real challenge began. I grinned and broke into a jog.

There was a decent breeze, so my best plan was to get downwind of her hiding spot and catch her scent. As I ran, I did some more mental mapping, this time trying to figure out where she might have stopped. There was a bike path farther down. Had she gone past it? I didn't think so.

As I jogged, an odor rushed past on the breeze. While I'm quick to recognize the scent of someone I know well, I'm also quick to recognize a smell that my brain has filed under "potential threat." But there's a split-second lapse between my brain saying "I know that smell" and identifying it. So when this scent passed, the first thing I realized was that I knew it, and I started to grin, jumping to the conclusion it was Chloe. Then, as I veered that way, my brain finished processing and I stopped in my tracks.

Cologne. I was smelling cologne. The same cologne that had washed over me in the food court.

Carter.

I spun. No one was there, of course. The scent was a distant one. But I could definitely smell it. Carter was in these woods. He'd followed us from the mall.

I remembered seeing his grandfather across the food court. I'd felt a jolt of recognition, but I'd brushed it off because he didn't look like someone I'd forget. But what if I had? What if I'd spotted him in the chaos at the Edison Group lab—just a split-second glimpse of a face that I hadn't consciously registered. What if Carter had been there, too? Two Edison Group employees. Or an employee and a subject.

That would explain the cologne—if they thought I'd recognize their scent, that would hide it. The older man had

been careful to stay back, to be extra cautious. Carter hadn't, which could be why he'd caught shit from the older man.

It'd been a setup. The Edison Group had found us and they'd sent Carter over to lure Chloe away. That hadn't worked. So now they were here, where they could hunt both of us down.

I lunged forward, Chloe's name on my lips. I clamped my jaw shut before it escaped. I couldn't let them know I was on to them. Couldn't let them know she was alone. So I kept my mouth closed and barreled into the woods.

It seemed to take forever to catch her scent. In truth, it took about twenty running paces. I stopped short and inhaled. Her smell was thick enough that I knew she was close. I followed it, head down, until I practically ran into a tree trunk. Then I looked up to see her stretched out on a limb.

"Hello," she said, grinning. "You're getting better at ..."

Her words and her smile died as she caught my expression. She scrambled from the tree. Before she reached the ground, I caught her arm. She paused and peeled my fingers away. She didn't say a word. Didn't give me a look. Didn't even wince. But I let go fast, murmuring an apology. Most times, I remember how strong I am, but when I get stressed, I forget, which is a problem we're working on ... before I leave her arms permanently bruised.

I leaned down and told her what I'd smelled, and how I interpreted it.

"I could be wrong," I whispered. Now that she was here, safe, that first jolt of panic had ebbed. "Maybe he was just cutting through the woods with his grandfather."

"Maybe, but you aren't the only one who thought that whole food court thing was weird. If he's here, we should check it out."

My gut clenched, instinct telling me to say no, absolutely not, she had to get back to the house, safe with Dad, while I scouted. But these days, the gap between instinct and logic is getting smaller, meaning I rarely blurt out something like that,

which is good, because she really doesn't appreciate it. She was right. If Carter and his "grandfather" were here now, the best defense was a good offense. Go after them. Get a better look. Get proof that we were in trouble before I ran back to Dad with my story.

When we set out, though, the smell of cologne was gone. Thinking back, I hadn't detected it since that first whiff. We did a full and thorough loop of the outer trails, but there was no sign—or scent—of either guy. Finally, after about thirty minutes of searching, I found Carter's cologne trail. He'd only gone a few hundred feet into the forest, avoiding the paths. Then he'd backtracked out again.

What did that mean? I had no idea ... except that it reeked of trouble. It was time to convince Dad we'd stayed in one place long enough. We needed to hit the road again.

Five

It seemed simple enough. We were on the run. We'd met some guy who seemed way too interested in Chloe and me, and then he'd followed us into the forest. Obviously it was time to hit the road. Or so I thought.

We took Dad into the living room. Lauren came along. We hadn't invited her, but she seemed to have a sixth sense for whenever something important was happening. Simon and Tori figured if the four of us were talking, it must be a family meeting, so they joined in.

I let Chloe tell the story. When she finished, Dad looked at me, and I could tell he was thinking it over. I could also tell that what he was thinking over wasn't whether we should leave—it was how to tell us that we weren't.

"Chloe's right, Dad," I said. "There was definitely something weird about this guy."

"Because he hit on Chloe?" Lauren said. "I'm sure you didn't like that, Derek, but—"

"I'm the one who said it seemed strange," Chloe said.

Lauren sighed. "There's nothing strange about a boy hitting on you, Chloe. You're a very pretty girl. It's your lack of self-confidence that makes you think it seems—"

"My self-confidence is fine," Chloe cut in. I swore I heard a soft growl in her voice. "I'm saying guys don't do that, especially college-age guys. I'm not a fifteen-year-old who can pass for eighteen."

"She's right," Tori said. "It's got nothing to do with being pretty. It's all about the vibe. The only older guys who are going to hit on Chloe are pervs."

"But you said this boy was seventeen," Lauren said. "That's not really older."

Chloe sighed. “I’m not arguing about whether or not a seventeen-year-old would ever hit on me. I’m saying that it felt wrong. He walked up and asked me where I got my fries and I told him, quickly and politely, discouraging conversation. Then he asked me another question. Same thing—I gave the shortest possible answer, but he just kept talking. There were girls all around us, checking him out, but he insisted on bugging me.” She looked from my dad to her aunt. “He singled me out. I know he did.”

“And he did the same with me,” I said. “He made a point of getting me to stay when Chloe and Simon left. He started by asking stupid questions. Then, out of nowhere, he starts baiting me, making cracks about Chloe.”

Lauren shook her head. “He’s new to town, talking about football with a young man who looks as if he’d play it. Those aren’t ‘stupid questions,’ Derek. As for baiting you, I suspect you brought it on by being rude to him. And I think this proves, as I’ve said before, that you and Chloe aren’t doing a very good job of keeping your relationship a secret. You know that’s important—”

“This is important,” I said. “Strangers, in our town. Singling us out. Stalking us.”

“Don’t interrupt me, Derek.”

“You both have a point,” Dad said. “I think Derek and Chloe unintentionally tipped this boy off about their relationship. I’m not concerned about it, but I do believe it explains the situation. He had his eye on Chloe, and when Derek showed up, the boy challenged him. Derek isn’t accustomed to that, so he misinterpreted, as did Chloe.”

“And following us into the woods?” I said.

“He’s interested in Chloe and he wanted to see where she lived. When you two didn’t head back to the house right away, he got tired of waiting and left.”

I looked at him. Then I got up and turned to leave.

Dad sighed. “Hold on, Derek. Could everyone please give us a moment alone?”

I dropped back into my chair. When the others were gone, Dad sat across from me.

“I know you don’t agree with me,” he said.

“You think I’m paranoid.”

“No. I think staying in one place is making you very uncomfortable, and I think your discomfort is making Chloe uncomfortable.”

My head shot up. “If you’re implying we made this up—”

“No, I’m not. But I think your eagerness to move on is coloring your interpretations of the situation. I know staying here is hard on you. I know it’s also hard having to publicly pretend you aren’t involved with Chloe. When Lauren suggested that, it seemed reasonable, but now I see that it’s putting extra pressure on you. I also know the situation with Lauren, while improved, is not ideal.”

I snorted.

He leaned forward. “I’m sorry about that, Derek. She’s come to understand that you’re not a danger, but ...”

“Just because she believes I’m not going to rip out her throat while she sleeps doesn’t mean she wants me dating her niece.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“It is, Dad, and we both know it.”

“Perhaps, but we also both know that her influence over Chloe isn’t what it used to be. There’s no danger of Lauren turning Chloe against you. You understand that, right?”

I muttered something like agreement.

“You don’t worry about Lauren,” Dad said. “Don’t worry about the rest, either. Now that I understand how much all of this is bothering you, I’m going to start making plans to move. We’ll find a new place to stay and you’ll be allowed to openly date Chloe. In the meantime, we’ll just keep a closer watch on things.”

Three days passed with no sign of Carter, his “grandfather” or anyone else. I checked the woods twice a day. I patrolled the property four times a day. Once I even had Chloe walk alone to the mall, with me following from inside the forest. Still nothing. As much as I hated to admit it, Dad seemed to be right. An ordinary jerk had hit on Chloe and I’d overreacted.

On the fourth evening after the food court incident, I was in the study, doing homework at the desk. Chloe was reading a textbook while curled up on the recliner. Simon lay on the throw rug, supposedly studying, but when he started to snore, I looked over to see him on his back, textbook open on his chest. Chloe caught my gaze and laughed softly. Neither of us suggested kicking him out, though. If Simon wasn’t with us, it was a sure bet that Lauren would say “homework is not a social activity,” and shoo Chloe and me off to separate rooms.

It didn’t matter that we were actually studying. Or that Simon and I had always studied together and I actually found it harder to concentrate when I was alone. Or that she’d never walked in and caught us doing anything else. To Lauren, it would be just another example of Chloe and me spending too much time together.

Simon only dozed for a few minutes before he woke, stretching and blinking at the big front window.

“Almost dark,” he said to Chloe. “You still taking him for his house-breaking lesson tonight?”

I flicked an eraser at him. He ducked it and threw me a grin.

While I was getting my Changes under control, we’d decided I should try once a week. Simon was joking about house-breaking, but that’s kind of what it was like—take me outside regularly, where I’d attempt to perform a bodily function, and hopefully train my body to do it on command. So far, I felt like a month-old puppy, struggling to control my bladder before it was ready. Sometimes I did Change, but it seemed more luck than purpose.

I could say we'd skip it tonight. Only I didn't want to skip it—as frustrated as I was with my slow progress, it was progress. Besides, if I said no, it would sound like I was still paranoid about someone finding us.

“You up to it?” I asked Chloe.

She stretched and nodded. “I could use the fresh air. I think that put my brain to sleep.”

She pointed at the text as if it was a piece of rotten meat.

“Physics?” I said. “You must need a more advanced text.”

“No, it's just boring.”

I picked the book up and double-checked the title, to make sure I hadn't misidentified the subject.

“Boring?” I said. “How can physics be ...?”

I looked up to see she'd already left the room. Simon pointed at the text, grinned and faked a yawn.

“Hold on,” I said, striding after her. “Physics is not boring. Maybe you just need me to explain it better. Chloe? Chloe!”

We were in the woods. In our spot. Sitting on our fallen tree, Chloe straddling my lap as we kissed, my hands on her hips, hers around my neck, the heat of her keeping away the evening chill, the smell of her making my head swim.

When she broke the kiss, I tried to chase it, lips brushing hers, but she pulled back and straightened.

“Relaxed enough to try Changing?” she murmured.

“Almost. Not quite.”

“Good,” she said and leaned in to kiss me again.

Six

Once Chloe decided that any more “relaxing time” was going to make me too tired to Change, we moved to the thicket we usually used. As I undressed, Chloe sat with her back to me, talking and making sure I stayed relaxed and distracted until I got into position on all fours. Then she leaned back, arms braced behind her, and I kept one hand over hers, that touch reassuring me as I began.

The worst part about trying to Change is knowing that if I succeed, I’m going to reach that point, mid-transformation, where I’ll feel like I’m going to die. Where the pain is so incredible that I almost wouldn’t mind if I did. That will pass and once I’m done, I’ll say “it’s worth it.” But when it’s actually happening, I wonder why the hell I’d ever intentionally try to do this.

At least I wasn’t throwing up anymore. I remember the first time I started to Change, when Chloe was with me behind Lyle House, and I was puking in the bushes, racked by the pain of the Change. She’d stayed with me. She’d reassured me. She’d looked after me. And that, I think, is when things started to change. That’s when I saw more than a damsel-in-distress I could use to get my brother out of Lyle House.

I’d seen signs of it before, but I’d told myself I was wrong. That night, though, when she stayed with me, although she hadn’t known I was a werewolf—hadn’t even known werewolves existed—that’s when I looked at her and saw real strength. And I saw the first person, other than Simon, I could ever imagine as a friend.

Thinking back to that first night seemed to relax me and make me focus on the process. That did the trick. I Changed. I didn’t get to skip the “I’m going to die” moment. But it seemed to pass a little faster, and almost before I knew it, I was lying on the grass, in wolf form, panting.

That's when Chloe turned around. She crawled over to sit beside me and gave my shoulder muscles a light massage while I recuperated. When I was ready, I pushed to my feet and nudged her.

"So what's it to be tonight?" she asked. "Tag? Hide and seek? Fetch?"

I gave a soft growl at the last one and she laughed.

"Someday, I'm going to teach you to fetch," she said. "I really am."

Another growl and I bumped her legs. She laid her hand on my head, and I leaned against her, eyes closing as I rested there a moment. I've Changed forms with others around, but even with Simon, it's never this comfortable.

I can sense that bit of tension Simon tries to hide when I Change. Dad, too. They know a werewolf can't always be trusted in wolf form. Chloe was told that, but she never believed it, even the first time, when I'd told her to get out of the way if I finished the transformation. I know now that there's no reason to worry—I feel like myself, no matter what form I'm in. She's the only one who really gets that and treats me the same.

"Are you still tired? Or are you ready to play?"

I stepped away from her.

"Play, I take it. Tag? Or hide and seek?"

I dipped my muzzle twice.

She laughed. "Hide and seek it is, then. Who goes first?"

In answer, I raced off. She started counting.

I tore around a bit before finding a spot. I could say I was trying to confuse her by making lots of noise and racing in circles, but really, I was just enjoying myself. There's a restlessness that builds up between Changes. Our usual games of chase help, but this is what I really need—just to run. Even after I heard Chloe coming after me, I kept running. Then, as she drew close, I dove behind a bush and hunkered down.

She found me easily, sighing, “You don’t even try to hide, do you?”

I growled and bumped her legs.

“Yes, yes, I’m going. Why do you insist on taking turns when all you want to do is the seeking part?”

I gave another growl and retreated behind the bush to count. She was right. I really preferred hunting, not surprisingly. I gave her lots of time, too, so she could find the best spot and make it a real challenge.

As I waited, I stretched out in a patch of moonlight and closed my eyes. If I were in human form, I’d have been smiling. It felt so damned good lying in the grass, the night breeze ruffling my fur, Chloe’s scent wafting around me, her laugh still echoing in my ears. Life wasn’t perfect, but Dad was back and Simon was safe and I was Changing and Chloe was with me and that was all good.

So I lay there, feeling pleased with myself, until I realized I’d given her more than enough time to hide. The last time I did that, I’d found her asleep in a thicket. Not wanting to wake her, I’d curled up with her. Except when I woke up, somehow I wasn’t in wolf form anymore, which meant I was naked ... and it was morning, and Simon and Dad were out in the forest, yelling for us.

I’d had to streak back to my clothing, while Chloe headed them off and kept them distracted until I got back, dressed.

We’d still caught serious shit for that one. Dad had insisted on taking Chloe’s place for my next two Change attempts, which was probably the biggest punishment he could have come up with, even if he didn’t mean it as one. Without Chloe there, I didn’t Change, which made me cranky and irritable and restless, until Chloe convinced Dad that his punishment was doing more harm than good. Dad had agreed, but said if we ever spent the night in the woods again, I was going to have to learn to Change without Chloe around.

So I didn’t goof around this time. I followed her trail as best I could, winding through the forest after it. She’d tried to trick

me—climbing a tree and jumping down at the end of a branch—but that only stalled me for a minute or two, then I found where she'd carried on. I kept going, nose to the ground until ...

Another scent drifted past. Cologne.

I stopped, fur bristling, a growl bubbling up. Then I swallowed it and gave my head a sharp shake.

I was imagining things. I had to be. Or picking up an old scent.

I sniffed the air. No. I wasn't imagining anything. Carter's cologne was thick on the breeze. And it was coming from the same direction as Chloe's trail.

Seven

When I smelled Carter's scent threading through Chloe's, I wanted to tear over there, take him down and save her. I'm sure that's what Simon would tell me to do. Play the hero. Save the girl. Win her undying love. Except racing through the forest meant Carter might hear me and grab her as a hostage, which would be a whole lot less romantic. Even if I did manage to take him down, I was in wolf form. That would be kinda hard to explain. Worse, I could hurt him, like I had that kid in Buffalo. Time to calm down and proceed with caution.

While I worked this out, I loped through the forest, getting to Chloe as quickly and quietly as I could. Soon I was close enough to tease both scents from the air and realize they weren't actually together. They were just coming from the same direction. Carter was a lot closer to me.

I slowed and crept through the undergrowth until I could see him. He was standing behind a bush, peering over. I could tell by Chloe's smell that she was about a hundred feet away—in the direction he was looking.

He was watching her. Spying on her. Stalking her. I fought a surge of rage by telling myself that Chloe was safe. I could get to her before he could. As I worked on a plan, something kept distracting me. His scent. I could still smell cologne, but now, when I was in wolf form, I picked up more of his natural smell. It seemed ... familiar.

The other day I'd wondered if there was a reason Carter was wearing so much cologne. If he was covering his scent, that might mean he was connected to the Edison Group. Someone I might have smelled at the lab. I had decided I was being paranoid, but now I knew better. I recognized his scent.

Except I didn't. It smelled familiar and yet it didn't. How was that possible?

I could work that out later. For now, I just needed to get this guy away from Chloe. While my gut urged me to take him

down—jump him, pin him, let Chloe escape—my brain said that wasn't necessary. I could sneak around and warn Chloe, and we could get away together.

We'd go back to the house and I'd tell Dad. Then we could go after Carter together as I tracked his scent. I'd let Dad handle him. It was the smart thing to do. When Dad realized I'd walked away from a confrontation, he'd understand that I was still me in wolf form, capable of rational thought. More capable of rational thought than I'd been when I'd attacked that kid in Buffalo.

I started around Carter, making a wide circle so he wouldn't catch a glimpse of me. That shouldn't be hard, considering I'm a black wolf and it was night. Still, I stayed close enough to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't go after Chloe.

I passed parallel to him, maybe fifty feet away. As I did, I heard him inhale sharply. I stopped and turned to peer at him. He was still behind the bush, but he wasn't looking in Chloe's direction. He was looking in mine.

I eased behind a low bush. Carter wasn't looking right at me. Just in my direction. Had he heard a twig crack? I didn't think I'd made any noise. So what had—?

He tilted his head and his nostrils flared. Sniffing? No, that wasn't poss— It hit me then. What I'd smelled in his scent. What made it familiar. The underlying scent of a werewolf.

I'd smelled it once before, with two guys who'd come after me. I'd figured out fast what they were. With Carter, even after I detected his real scent the cologne tainted it. But now there was no doubt. Carter was a werewolf.

He sniffed again and his lips parted in a, "Shit." He peered into the darkness. Then he looked toward Chloe. Back at me. More cursing.

I knew then what I had to do. Get him away from Chloe. Chase him away from her. And when she was safe, I had to take Carter down and hold him until she could bring my dad. If a werewolf had found us, we were in real trouble, and I

couldn't let him escape until we knew what the hell was going on.

I continued toward Chloe. Then I cut on a diagonal, heading for Carter's position, creeping along silently until I was about thirty feet away. I paused, hunkered down. Then I shot from the brush and barreled straight for him, making all the noise I could.

He stumbled away and seemed ready to run for Chloe. But he was too far away. And I was between him and her. One last regretful look her way, before he turned and ran.

I let out a snarl. Chloe scrambled from her hiding place. I glanced back and caught a glimpse of her. I didn't stop. She could see I was running the other way. Hopefully, she could see who I was chasing. She'd get to safety and bring help. I continued after Carter.

It wasn't a fair race. He was fast, but in the forest, having four feet and running lower to the ground gave me the advantage. He kept having to duck low-hanging branches. The gap between us closed with each stride.

When I heard the undergrowth crackle ahead, I thought it was a deer. There were some out here and they'd race off in a panic when they smelled me coming. So I ignored the sound ... until a dark shape leapt between me and Carter.

It was a wolf. A grizzled black wolf. Huge—at least as big as me.

Carter's grandfather.

I skidded to a stop. I'd faced adult werewolves before. Two of them. Neither had been anywhere near this one's size, and I'd still been outclassed. Dad said that werewolves protect themselves by gaining a reputation that warns off others. They gain that reputation through fighting. That means even the smallest adult werewolf was more than a match for me. So when I saw Carter's grandfather, I had the sense to turn in my tracks. But as soon as I veered to race back the other way, I found my path blocked by another werewolf, one nearly as big as Carter's grandfather.

I dove into the bushes. As I plowed through them, I could hear the two wolves flanking me, angling in to cut me off. I hunkered down, eyes slitted, ears back, protecting myself against the branches and brambles. I kept going, ignoring the crashing of the wolves on either side of me until the sounds of one faded. Still running, I swiveled my ears to be sure. The wolf on my left—Carter’s grandfather—was gone. He must have fallen back, too old to keep up, leaving me to the younger one. If I could just find a clearer path ...

Slightly to my left the undergrowth cleared up enough for me to get ahead. I just needed to steer that way— A black shape shot from the trees in front of me. Carter’s grandfather. I tried to stop, but he was too close and as I skidded, he pounced. He hit me hard, knocking my legs from under me as I went down. I tried to scramble up, but his jaws clamped on the back of my neck. He pinned me as the other wolf ran over.

A moment later, I heard a voice.

“I thought they said you were smart.”

Carter. I tried to twist to see him, but his grandfather kept my head pinned to the ground. I felt a prick in the back of my neck. A rush of cold. I blinked. Blinked again, as the forest seemed to wobble. Then it went dark.

Eight

I woke up feeling groggy and coughing.

“There’s soda there,” said a voice. “Coke and 7-UP. I wasn’t sure which one you liked.”

I followed the voice to a man. He was older than Dad, with some gray in a mane of dark hair that fell to his shoulders. I’d seen his face before and I blinked again, trying to clear my fuzzy brain, but the answer wouldn’t come.

I turned my gaze to the pop bottles. I imagined taking a gulp and made a face. The syrupy drink wasn’t going to clear my throat or my head.

“I sent Nate out for burgers,” the man said. “Do you like burgers?”

I looked around. I was in a bedroom with no windows. The only exit was a door—behind the man. I sized him up. He looked bigger than me and something about his smell told my foggy brain I shouldn’t even try getting by him.

Damn it, I knew this man. I knew why I was here. Think, think ...

“You like chicken instead? Or tacos?” he said. “I can call Nate, tell him to grab some fried chicken or tacos.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Sure you are.”

The man laughed, but it was a weird laugh, kind of nervous. I pulled the covers back. As I sat up, I stared down at myself. I was wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt, but they weren’t mine. They didn’t smell like mine. They smelled like ... What did they smell like?

The man pushed the pop bottles at me. “Go on. Have some. They haven’t been opened.”

Why would he say that?

I looked around the windowless room again. I opened my mouth. My lips stuck together, gummy, and my mouth felt like I'd eaten cotton.

“Do you have water?” I asked.

He looked confused.

“Never mind. I'm not thirs ...”

I didn't finish the word, just left it hanging there as the gears of my brain finally started to turn. I remembered who the man was and exactly what I was doing here.

I leaped from the bed, landing on him and knocking his chair over backward. I ran to the door and yanked it open to see Carter. I pulled back my fist, but his grandfather was already on his feet and had the back of my shirt. He yanked, and I stumbled. His arm went around my neck in a headlock and when I tried to fight, I couldn't breathe.

“Just stop fighting, Derek. I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Chloe,” I rasped. “Where's Chloe? The girl I was with. What did you—?”

“We didn't touch your girlfriend. She's fine. Gone home.”

I heaved for breath. The man's arm loosened around my neck.

“You better lay back down,” he said. “Have a soda. Food is coming. You'll feel better once you've eaten.”

No, I'll feel better once you let me out of here.

I didn't say that, just nodded. He released his grip. I backed onto the bed.

“Might help if we gave him another shot,” Carter said from the doorway.

“No,” his grandfather said. “Seems like he got too much the first time.” A look toward Carter. “More than I measured out.” He turned to me before Carter could answer. “Do you know who I am, Derek?”

“You’re supposed to be his”—I nodded at Carter —”grandfather. Or that’s what you were pretending to be at the mall.”

“I am.”

“Okay.”

Silence. He kept studying me, like he was waiting for more.

“You know what I am, though, don’t you?”

“A werewolf. Like him.” Another nod at Carter.

“Anything else?”

I shook my head. He looked disappointed.

“My name is Theodore. Theo.”

“Okay.”

“Theo Cain.”

I stiffened. I didn’t mean to, but I remembered the other werewolves—Liam and Ramon—talking about me.

He’s a Cain.

“You know that name, don’t you, Derek?” The old man’s rough voice had softened. “Cain?”

“Someone told me ...”

I swallowed and took another look at Theo. When I’d first seen him, I’d thought he looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember ever seeing him before. Then I thought Carter’s scent was familiar, but I figured it was just the werewolf smell. It wasn’t. I looked at Theo Cain—his dark hair, his square face, his big build—and I knew why I’d recognized him. Because he looked like someone I saw in the mirror every day.

“I heard ...” I began. “I met two werewolves. Liam and Ramon. They said I’m a Cain and I’m guessing they told you. They must have thought I was related to you because I kind of look like you. But I’m not.”

“Did those scientists say your daddy was someone else?”

“No. I ... They never mentioned my parents.”

“Then how do you know my boy, Zack, wasn't your daddy?”

Because I don't want him to be. Because I look at you and I look at Carter over there and I don't want you to be my family. I don't want anyone to be my family except my family. Dad and Simon.

“It wasn't those two who told me,” Theo said. “I know who Liam and Ramon are, but I haven't run into them in years. Someone else who knows those scientists said they tricked Zack. Or had some girl trick him. She got pregnant and he never knew it, because if he did, he wouldn't have left you there. He would have come for you. We all would have come for you.”

I knew those words were supposed to mean something. That I was supposed to feel something. The little boy, locked up in a lab, dreaming of his family coming to his rescue and giving him a normal life should have felt something.

But I hadn't known enough about normal life to even understand the concept of family. Or that I should or could be rescued from that life. Then I had been rescued. By my dad. Even if we didn't share a strand of DNA, Kit Bae was my father. He'd saved me and he'd given me a family and the closest thing to a normal life as possible.

If these Cains were my biological family, then maybe I should feel something. A few months ago, I would have been happy for the chance to speak to another werewolf, but Dad had already found someone I could talk to—a guy who knew a lot about them. So now all I thought was that they could supply me with a family medical history, which could be useful. And probably not the response they hoped for.

“Okay,” I said after a moment.

Theo watched me, then said, “Okay what?”

I shrugged. “If you say I'm Zack Cain's son, then I guess I am.”

“I'm your grandpa, Derek.”

“Okay.”

I felt bad then, seeing his disappointment. There wasn't anything more I could say, though. I couldn't pretend I was thrilled to have a "real" family. The best I could do was nod at Carter and say, "And he's my ..."

"Cousin. First cousin. So is Nate. You'll meet him soon."

"He was the other wolf that attacked me."

Theo winced. "We didn't mean—"

"Whatever. And Zach. Your son. The one you think is my father. He's dead, right? Killed by the Pack?"

Grief flashed across the old man's face. I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying another casual, "Okay." I tried to look like I was sad about Zack being dead, but the truth is that I didn't feel much of anything, except maybe a little sorry for this stranger's loss. I hadn't known my father.

"So now what?" I asked.

Theo looked confused. "Now what?"

"What happens now?" I looked around. "You kidnapped me and brought me here to tell me this. So now what?"

The confusion deepened. "You'll come with us. You're a Cain."

"No," I said slowly. "I mean, biologically, I am, but ..." I wanted to say I already had a family, but my gut warned me it might not be in my best interests to bring that up. I shrugged. "I don't know you."

"You will. You'll come and live with us. We'll take care of you. You'll stay with me." He moved closer. "Don't worry, Derek. We're going to make this real easy. You can even go to school."

"College?"

He gave the same confused look as when I'd asked for water. "No. High school. Cain boys are home-schooled, because we move around a lot. But we know an education is important to you, so I'll make sure you go to a real school as often as you can. You don't need to worry about college. You

won't need that. You're already smart." He smiled. "Don't need a piece of paper to prove it."

I wanted to say, "Are you sure we're related? Really sure?" but again, it didn't seem wise. I remembered what else those werewolves said about the Cains.

Three things every Cain has in common. Big as a house. Ugly as a mud fence. Dumb as a brick.

I didn't much appreciate the second part, but I knew I wouldn't be trying out for a modeling job anytime soon. As for the last, I knew that was wrong. At least for me. But if "not too bright" was the hallmark of a Cain, and these guys were Cains ...

I evaluated the situation as I pretended to consider Theo's words. I was trapped in a windowless bedroom. Guarded by one werewolf who could take me out and another who probably had a syringe of sedative in his back pocket. Then there was a third one—bigger than Carter and younger than Theo—who'd be back any moment.

I wasn't getting out of here by brute force.

I reached for the Coke, twisted off the top and gulped it. Then I looked at Theo. "You said burgers?"

He smiled and relaxed. "Yep. Burgers, fries, even onion rings if Nate can find them. We'll keep you well fed, son. You don't need to worry about that."

I finished the bottle, set it aside and stared at it, again feigning deep contemplation.

"It would be nice to be with my own kind," I said finally.

"Course it would."

"Mr. Bae is a nice guy and all, but ... he's not a werewolf."

"Course he isn't."

"He doesn't really understand me, you know?"

Theo smiled. "Course he doesn't. He can't. Not his fault. I'm sure he tried. But he's not a werewolf."

I nodded. Then I scratched my head and made a face. “You think I could go have a shower before those burgers show up?”

Theo chuckled. “Is that what you want, Derek? A shower? Or are you hoping there’s a window you can climb out?”

“Huh? No. I just wanted—”

He leaned forward. “You’re a smart boy. I’ve been warned about that. I might not have much of an education, but I know a few things about us. About werewolves. We need family. We need a pack. You’ve got that. You’ve got a daddy and a brother and now you’ve got yourself a real cute girlfriend, and you’re going to do your damndest to get back to them. So if you want that shower, I’ll take you, but you’d barely get your head out of the tiny window. Even if you did, there’s no one around to call for help.”

He pushed to his feet. “It’s gonna take time for you to come around. I know that. And you’re not going to be too happy with me for a while. Soon you’ll see that I did the right thing and you’ll thank me for it. But for now, I’m keeping a real close eye on you, Derek. So—” He met my gaze. “Do you still want that shower?”

I looked at Carter, snickering behind Theo, and I slumped back.

Nine

When the food arrived, I ate. It seemed the right response, one that might convince Theo I was prepared to deal with this maturely and reasonably. Nate joined us for the meal. He seemed okay. Bigger and, yeah, uglier than Carter. Not as bright as Theo. In other words, when it came to being a Cain, he didn't get a pass on any of the three criteria. But he was nice to me, which was more than I could say for Carter.

While the rest of the family could only change into wolves, Carter got a bonus shape-shifting ability: He was also an ass. As Theo tried to regale me with the wonderful life I'd have as a Cain, Carter kept finding ways to take jabs. About my looks. About my skin. About my size. Even about my intelligence—if I asked a question about werewolf life, it only proved that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. And if I was dating Chloe, it was only because she was scared of the Edison Group and wanted protection, because really, what other reason would she have for dating me? An ass, like I said. Finally, Theo snarled and sent him away, and that only pissed Carter off more, as he mouthed behind Theo's back that we'd settle this later.

Settle what? I hadn't done anything to him. Yet somehow, I had. I just didn't know what.

After Theo finished his spiel, I began mine. Earlier, I'd been reluctant to tell him how attached I was to my family. Now, I realized that was exactly what I needed to do. Whatever misguided ideas he had about me, he clearly understood the value of family. So the goal was to explain the situation in a way he'd understand.

I said that I totally understood his position. I appreciated that he'd come looking for me. But I already had a family. I had a father and a brother, and I had a girlfriend, and I wanted to stay with them. I'd like to keep in touch with him. I just didn't need—or want—a new family.

It was a rational, respectful response. Dad would have been proud of me. Theo didn't care. He wasn't angry or insulted—he just let me talk and then ignored everything I said. I was a kid; I wasn't old enough to make decisions like this. So he'd make them for me.

I argued. I got mad. I got sarcastic. I didn't mean to, but it was like beating my head against a brick wall, trying to make him understand. Still Theo didn't get angry with me. He just put me on a time-out, like a misbehaving puppy.

He left and Nate left, and I sat there. As I did, I tried to figure out how I'd escape. The answer seemed obvious—let them take me back to wherever they came from and then run away at the first opportunity. They couldn't watch me forever. But where would I go when I ran? Once Dad realized I'd been kidnapped, he'd come looking for me, but he wasn't a werewolf—he couldn't track me. After a couple of days, he'd pack up the others and move. He had to; he couldn't risk having whoever took me go after Simon or Chloe or Tori. He had to protect them.

How would I find them? I wasn't even sure I could return—Theo was bright enough to know I'd head to where he found me. And if I got back before Dad moved the others? Theo and Nate and Carter would be right on my heels, and they'd probably have called in others to help. I'd be putting my family at risk. I'd never do that.

But I'd never go with them either. I couldn't. Even the thought of it made my heart thump so hard I couldn't breathe.

Maybe I could—

Something click-clicked to my left. I looked over to see a pencil rolling under the door. I stared, as if expecting it to explode. Of course it didn't. I slid off the bed and padded over to pick it up.

Just an ordinary pencil. How did—?

A faint noise sounded outside the door. Then a piece of paper sailed underneath and across the floor.

“What the—?”

The pencil was plucked from my fingers so fast I didn't even notice until I saw it levitating and looked down at my empty hand. I walked over to the paper and bent as the pencil began scribbling across it.

You look OK. Are you OK?

“Liz?” A stupid question. Liz was the only poltergeist I knew. But if she was here that meant ... “Chloe?” My heart started thudding again. “Where’s Chloe. Did they—?”

She’s outside.

I took a deep breath. “Good. Okay. My dad’s there, too?”

I watched the paper. Nothing happened.

“Liz? My dad is with her, right? She called him, didn’t she?”

Couldn’t.

“What do you mean she couldn’t? She has her cell—” No, she didn’t. We hadn’t taken our phones into the forest. If Chloe had managed to follow me straight from there ...

I swore. “Tell her to get to a pay phone. Call collect. Get my dad and—”

No time. They’re packing the van.

“Then you ride with me. You can find out where we go and return, and Chloe—”

We’re getting you out.

“What? No. Absolutely not. Tell Chloe—”

Girls rule :)

I scowled, imagining her laugh. “That’s not funny, Liz. You tell Chloe that this is too dangerous. I absolutely forbid—” I swallowed the demand and tried again. “I’m asking her not to do this.”

The paper and pencil rose and moved toward the bed. Liz folded the paper and threw it under the bed.

“Hey!” I said. “We’re not done here. You have to—”

The door opened and I stopped short as Theo walked in. He looked around.

“I thought I heard you talking,” he said.

I cleared my throat. “I was, uh, calling for someone. I need to use the bathroom.”

He smiled. “Good timing. I was just going to suggest that. We have a long drive ahead of us and we’re almost ready to go.” He turned and called for Nate to take me.

We were in a house. It had some furniture, but not much. Maybe a rental? I couldn’t tell. I only know that I had apparently been in a basement bedroom, in the middle of the house, which is why it didn’t have a window. Same went for the bathroom he took me to. Window-free. Even that wasn’t good enough for Nate, who left the door open and stood with his back to me. I didn’t really have to go, so I just stood there.

“Shy bladder?” Nate said with a laugh.

“Kinda. Could I get a minute? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sorry. Orders are orders. I’m not supposed to let you out of my sight. At least I’m turning my back.”

Great. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if he did leave me alone, but I would have liked the chance.

“You’ll get used to it,” Nate went on. “Not a lot of privacy in a werewolf pack. That’s what we are—the Cains. Our own pack. You’ll like it.”

“Uh-huh.”

A chuckle. “You don’t sound so sure. Can’t blame you. This must all be real confusing. But you will like it. Most of us are spread all over the place, but that’s kind of nice, traveling all the time, meeting up with cousins and uncles and nephews, hanging out, hunting. You like to hunt?”

“Never tried it.”

“Well, you will. Soon. I’ll tell Theo to set one up for you. It’s like a family reunion. Everyone gets together, parties, goes for a hunt.”

“Deer?”

“Usually. We went elk hunting last year. Moose a few years ago. Course, the best hunts are the other ones.”

“Other ones?”

“You know.”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder. “You mean ...?”

He grinned. “Two-legged deer.”

My gorge rose. “You— You hunt—?”

“Oh, not like that. We don’t just pick some random person. If you do that, the Pack comes after you. We need to be careful. Find someone no one will miss. Someone that deserves it. And we don’t eat them or anything. Just kill them.”

I stared at him, certain I was hearing wrong.

He walked over and clapped me on the back. “Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. And you won’t try it for a while. Theo won’t allow it until you’re older. Now, zip up and come on.”

Ten

I took my time washing my hands.

Where was Chloe? What did she have in mind? Liz telling me that Chloe was planning a rescue wasn't really useful—now I could make some move like stalling and screw up her plans.

Damn it, Liz.

“You scrubbing for surgery?” Nate said.

“Sorry, I—”

Something hit the floor with a crack. Nate turned and looked down to see his cell phone. He patted his back pockets, as if to be sure his wasn't where it should be. Then he swore and reached down. The phone slid across the floor.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

It slid faster, scraping and bumping along.

“Carter!” Nate growled. “This is not the time for pranks.”

As he took off after the phone, I looked out the bathroom door to see the device rise a foot off the ground, then fall with a crack.

Nate swore and picked up speed, loping down the hall, muttering. “If you break it, Carter, you're buying me a new one.”

The phone jumped again, and shot into the room where they'd held me. Nate followed it. The door slammed shut. There was an outside lock and I ran for it. Then I heard a click as Liz turned the bolt. I raced the other way, praying it was the right way.

Behind me, Nate pounded on the door. The hinges squealed. They wouldn't hold long, not against a full-grown werewolf. I ran faster.

The hall ended in what looked like a TV room, though just a few pieces of furniture remained, as if someone had begun clearing it out. On the other side were the stairs heading up. I started for them. As I did, I heard voices at the top. Theo and Carter. Coming down.

I looked around. There were a few windows. Typical small basement windows, which meant there was no way in hell I was squeezing out one. I ran for the couch—the only piece of furniture big enough for me to hide behind.

Even as I dove, I knew it wasn't going to work. The sofa was clear across the room. Too far to run for the stairs once they passed. And they'd know it was the only place I could—As I dropped behind the sofa, something caught my ankle. I looked down to see Chloe hiding behind a table—as best anyone, even her size, could hide behind a table. When she tried to tug me down, I shook my head. Then I realized the spot she was squeezed in was too small even for her. Her legs were inside some kind of hole.

There was a cubby in the wall. A crawlspace for extra storage. Seeing it, I remembered the last crawlspace we'd been in, complete with buried bodies that she'd accidentally resurrected. I hesitated, but her fingers gripped my pantleg as she retreated into the cubby. I dropped down and backed in.

Once I got past the opening, the storage space was bigger than I expected. Not huge—but large enough for me to crouch in.

I'd barely gotten the hatch shut when I heard heavy footfalls on the steps and a crash from the back hall.

Nate came running. “Did you catch him?”

“What?” It was Theo.

Nate explained what happened. Unfortunately, he stayed in the TV room while he talked, leaving us no chance to escape.

I twisted to look at Chloe. “You shouldn't have—”

“Too late.”

I glowered at her. She glowered back. I could have laughed at that. Or kissed her. Which was completely the wrong reaction, but I couldn't help it. I looked at her, crouched in that storage space, her face lit by a penlight, dirt smudged on her cheek, doing her best to glower at me, and I wanted to reach over and kiss her. Really kiss her. Feel the heat of her lips and pull her against me and drink in her smell and— “Derek?”

I blinked.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

I nodded. “But you shouldn't have—”

She leaned over and pressed her lips to mine and I forgot what I was going to say. It didn't last more than a second, though, before she pulled back and whispered in my ear, “Are they still there? I can't hear them.”

I turned to listen. “Nate's looking for me. Theo's staying by the stairs. I don't hear Carter.”

I realized the names would mean nothing to her. But there was no time to explain and she didn't ask.

“You should have called my dad,” I said.

“I did.”

“What?” I was too loud and she clapped her hand to my mouth.

“I'm not stupid. I called collect from a pay phone. But Liz couldn't find the address of this place. It's just a house in the country. It's for sale, though, so I gave him all the information from the sign.”

“Oh.”

“Did you really think—?” She sighed and shook her head. “He's coming, but we didn't have time to wait. When I got back, they were already packing a van.” She looked at the door again. “What are they doing now?”

I strained to listen. Their voices had moved away and it took a moment for me to realize they were heading upstairs. Nate had checked the basement and reported it was empty. They

figured I'd slipped past and made a run for it. If it was me, I would have followed my trail and seen where I went. I guess they'd do that after, when they couldn't find me.

When I turned to tell Chloe they were gone, she was looking off to the side.

"Liz says they're going outside to look for you," she whispered.

I didn't say I'd already heard that—I just nodded. We waited. A screen door squeaked shut upstairs. Then Liz came back to say they were all outside. I eased open the hatch door. We crawled out.

I made my way to the stairs, straining to listen for any sound above. None came. I whispered for Chloe to hang a few steps behind me as we went up. She agreed.

There was a side door at the top of the stairs. The interior door was open; the storm door was closed. I listened carefully as I slid toward it.

"Liz says it's clear," Chloe whispered, so low I almost didn't hear her.

I stopped on the landing and peered out the door. As I reached for the handle, Chloe touched my arm.

"Wait," she whispered. "Let Liz check again."

It seemed to take forever for Liz to come back and I rocked on the balls of my feet, staring out at the forest less than a hundred feet away. We just had to cross that stretch. I didn't hear anyone. We should just— "The keys are in the van," Chloe said.

I turned to her.

"Liz says they're close by, but the van is open and the keys are in the ignition. That's our best bet."

I hesitated and looked out again at the forest.

"I know you'd prefer the woods. But I bet they would, too."

She was right. My instinct said to run for the forest, but I had no advantage over them there. In fact, if one of them could

Change fast enough, I'd be at a disadvantage. Plus I had Chloe to think about.

"I'll drive," I said.

She managed a smile. "That's what I was hoping, 'cause I can't." She pushed open the door. "Something tells me it would be a good skill to have, though."

"I'll teach you." I motioned her back and leaned out the door.

"Liz says it's fine. She can see both—"

Chloe let out a yelp and wheeled. As she did, I caught Carter's scent. I turned to see him swinging out of a doorway right behind Chloe. I lunged for her and she lunged for me, but it was too late—he had her by the shirt. One yank and she flew off her feet. Before I could move, he had her pulled back against him, arm around her throat.

He looked at me and smiled, showing his teeth. "Going somewhere, little cousin?"

Eleven

I eased forward, my gaze fixed on Carter's.

"Uh-uh," he said, tightening his grip on Chloe. "You do know how easy it would be to snap her neck, don't you? Just because I'm not Changing yet doesn't mean I don't have my full strength."

He was right. I hadn't had my first Change until months after I'd thrown that kid against the wall. I took a deep breath to slow my pounding heart. I tried to catch Chloe's eye to reassure her, but she seemed a lot calmer than I was, just glancing from side to side. Looking for Liz.

Where the hell was Liz? Why hadn't she spotted Carter before he grabbed Chloe?

Because she'd been focused on Theo and Nate. I should have been watching for Carter. I should have been watching for all of them.

Was Liz off finding a weapon? Probably. But I couldn't rely on her to fix this.

"Let Chloe go," I said. "I'll stay."

"Stay?" Carter laughed. "Why the hell would I want you to stay?"

I replayed his words. Even then, all I could process was the sight of him with his arm around Chloe's neck.

"You want Derek gone," Chloe said. "This is your pack. He's an interloper, even if he is family."

So she'd figured out that we were related? Of course she had. If she'd gotten even a glimpse of Theo or Nate, she wouldn't be wondering why Carter called me "cousin."

"Yeah, I want him gone." Carter met my gaze. "For good."

"You want me dead," I said.

He sputtered a laugh. “Dead? You’ve been hearing too many big-bad-wolf stories, cuz. I mean I want you out of here. Away from us. You don’t belong. You know that. I know that. It’s Theo who can’t seem to figure it out.”

Chloe tugged his arm down a little. “And it’s Theo who’s going to return any second to make sure Derek does stay. So if you want him gone, let us leave.”

“Mmm, soon. It’ll take them a while to search the forest. Before you go, though, I want to make sure your boyfriend doesn’t have any crazy ideas about keeping in touch.”

“What?” I said.

“You might not want to live with us, but I’m thinking you might decide to make contact. You know ... a phone call on Christmas, a card on our birthdays.”

“I don’t know your birthdays.”

Carter’s gaze hardened. “You know what I mean. We’re werewolves; you’re a werewolf. We’d be a good resource. Someone to call when you have questions. And maybe, in a few years, you’ll start thinking you want to visit. Get to know us better. After all, we are family.”

“And you don’t want that. You want me out of your life for good.”

“I do. So this ...” He pulled Chloe back, arm tightening. When I rocked forward, though, he released his grip. “This is a warning. You come after us, I’ll come after her. Or your so-called brother and father.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” He held my gaze. “Do you really?”

I bristled under that stare. I wanted to tell him to go to hell, that I’d never had any intention of making contact. But that would be a lie. I wouldn’t be in any hurry to find them again, but maybe someday, when I was older and Theo couldn’t just expect to scoop me up and take me, I’d want to get in touch.

Carter was right. I would have questions, about my family and about being a werewolf. While I was sure I’d never be

spending Thanksgiving with them, I might want contact at some point. But from Carter's glare, I knew that wouldn't be an option. Not until I was prepared to deal with him.

"Fine," I said.

He tightened his grip on Chloe. "Are you sure? Because—"

Chloe elbowed him in the stomach, hard enough to make him gasp. He loosened his grip. She ducked out from under his arm. I lunged and slammed him back into the wall, just as a plate hit him over the head. He staggered and stared down at broken pieces of it on the floor.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"Apparently, someone had trouble finding a proper weapon," Chloe muttered.

She was behind me now. I blocked her, tensed for action, but Carter was just rubbing his head and trying to figure out where the plate came from. If he turned around, he'd see a big shard of it hovering in the air. Liz, also poised for action, with an actual weapon now. But when he didn't move, we didn't either.

I could turn this into a fight. Teach Carter that I wasn't someone to mess with. And if I did that, Theo and Nate would hear the commotion and come running.

Was I sure I could "teach him" anyway? He was a werewolf. I couldn't trounce him the way I could a human. I might only piss him off more and make him more determined to go after Chloe if I ever initiated contact. So I'd win nothing.

"We're leaving now," I said. "I'll go away and I'll stay away."

"Good. I'll give you a five-minute head start. Then I'll tell them I saw you driving in the opposite direction."

I could thank him for that. Maybe I should. But he wasn't doing it for me. He was just eliminating a threat to his position in his pack and with his grandfather.

So I just nodded and grunted. Then I ushered Chloe out to the waiting van.

We met my dad a mile down the road. Chloe spotted our van, and jumped out as I pulled over. Dad almost drove by. But he saw her—or heard me shouting—and put it in reverse. We climbed in, left the other van by the roadside and took off ... after Dad pulled out a few wires under the hood and disabled their ride.

“So, can we move now?” I said as he pulled away.

He looked at me through the rearview mirror. “I’m sorry, Derek. I’m really—”

“We’re moving, right?”

“Yes, we’re moving.”

I explained everything on the way back. Dad apologized some more. I let him. It wasn’t completely his fault. I did have a tendency to get a little paranoid. Plus Lauren hadn’t helped. But if I let him off the hook, he might not be so quick to act the next time. So I kept my mouth shut. And when we got home, we started to pack.

“I know we’ve moved,” Chloe said two weeks later, as we walked behind our new house. “But it doesn’t really seem like it.” She gestured around us. “Old farmhouse in the country, a mile from the nearest neighbor, borders on a forest ...”

“Seem to be a lot of them for rent.”

She laughed. “Luckily for us. And this one comes with an added bonus. A convenient escape route. Not a lot of those on the market, I bet.”

There weren’t, obviously. Dad got lucky, though I suppose that luck had come with a lot of work, finding a place we could easily get out of if the Cains returned. This one wasn’t exactly advertised as coming with an escape route, but it had a

passage connecting the separate garage to the house—back from the days when the “garage” had been a barn, and they’d had a dumbwaiter for lowering supplies into the cold cellar below.

The fact that my dad found this place so fast showed how stressed out he was over the Cains. I’d forgiven him for not moving when I asked, but it was still weighing heavily on his mind. He wasn’t just worried about them finding us—he was worried about how I was dealing with finding them. Discovering my family, and losing them, all within a few hours.

How did I feel about that? Confused, I guess. There was no part of me that wanted to go live with the Cains. I wasn’t even sure I’d ever want to make contact. I kept thinking about what Nate said about hunting humans.

But Dad said I was looking at it the wrong way. Not that I should be okay with my family killing humans, but that I had to see if from a werewolf perspective, where restricting themselves to rare hunts of criminals actually meant they had developed a system for dealing with their impulses. It wasn’t the system I’d choose, but at least they weren’t man-eaters. Kind of depressing to realize that was the standard for judging my own kind—did they eat people? Maybe that’s what bothered me the most. In the last few months, I’d come to realize—through the Edison Group and Lauren—just how low a regard supernaturals had for werewolves. Dad could tell me it was just prejudice, but now I saw a little of where it came from, and what I’d have to deal with for the rest of my life.

“Do you want to talk?” Chloe said, looking up at me as we walked.

“Already done enough of that.” I had, too, until I’m sure she was sick of hearing about it.

“It’s never enough if it’s still bothering you.”

It was going to bother me for a while. And no amount of talking would cure that. Just time. I wasn’t telling her that, though. She’d just feel bad that she couldn’t help. So I said,

“Later,” and tugged her over to a tree where I’d left a bag earlier.

“Got something for you,” I said.

“Oh?”

“It’s our three-month anniversary.”

Her eyes widened in panic. “Today? I thought ... I was counting three months from—”

“Doesn’t matter.” I paused. “Or I guess it does or we’ll keep getting confused. Can we use today—three months back, I mean?”

She smiled. “We can ... if you don’t mind getting your gift late.”

“I don’t care if I get one at all. Just as long as I keep getting anniversaries.”

She blushed and lifted on her tiptoes to kiss me. “You will. For as long as you want them.”

Which was pretty much the best present she could give me, and I stood there, forgetting what I was doing until her gaze traveled down to the bag behind me.

“Oh, right,” I said. “The gift.”

I opened the bag and pulled out a small box of chocolates. “Happy anniversary.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She flashed me a huge smile that would have looked totally real ... if I didn’t know her better.

“Simon said that’s what I should get you. That or flowers. So you like it?”

“Sure.”

“Liar.”

Her face went bright red as she stammered, “N-no, really. It’s great. It’s—”

“Completely and totally impersonal. Like something you buy in bulk for all your teachers.”

“No, I like this kind. You know I do and—”

She stopped as I held out the bag.

“Your real gift,” I said.

She looked in. Grinning, she pulled out a penlight, a Swiss army knife and a purse-sized can of mace.

She sputtered a laugh. “This is ...”

“Practical?” I said.

“In my life, it is definitely practical. But I was going to say thoughtful.” She smiled up at me. “The most thoughtful gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“And the most completely unromantic? Simon almost had a heart attack when I showed him. He made me get the chocolates, as a backup.”

“I’m sure he did. Which I suppose explains why I ended up with you instead.” She rose on tiptoes again and put her arms around my neck. “Because buying me gifts to keep me safe? That’s my idea of romantic.”

I bent and kissed her, lifting her up, then lowering her to the grass behind the tree.

“Chloe!” Tori shouted from near the house. “Chloe!”

I glanced over. “Think it’s urgent?”

“Only if saving Tori from boredom is a life-or-death situation. She was trying to get me to go shopping with her before we ducked out. I say we make a break for the forest.” She pointed to the bag. “We have survival gear. And chocolate. We can stay out there for a while.”

I grinned, scooped up the bag, and we raced off to explore our new forest. Or something like that.

Copyright

Copyright © 2012 by Kelley Armstrong

This Traverse Press edition published in 2012

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without the prior written consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Armstrong, Kelley

Darkest Powers Bonus Pack 2

ISBN 978-0-9877031-6-3