

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a wolf's face. The wolf's fur is dark and textured, with its eyes glowing a bright, eerie green. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the fur and the intensity of the eyes. The overall mood is menacing and dangerous.

Dangerous

Kelley Armstrong

Prologue

Ten Years Earlier

For the third night in a row, the boy woke to the sound of screaming. He leaped up, tangled in the sweat-soaked sheets, heart pounding so hard he gasped for breath. He looked around, but he knew he wouldn't see *her*. The visions and screams came only when he slept.

As he hovered between nightmare and waking, though, he thought he could hear the others, their grunts and growls and soft snarls as they slept.

More like puppies than little boys, the night nurse would say. She always smiled when she said it, but the boy saw only her bared teeth, and the snap in her voice said she didn't find it funny at all. She found it strange, unnatural, wrong. Like when she got angry and called them brats and savages and, her favorite insult, hissed in their ears . . .

Little beasts.

As the nightmare slid away, so did the sounds of the others. The boy looked over, squinting in the dark, windowless room, only a sliver of light coming from under the door.

He turned toward the other three beds and knew what he'd see. Empty, as they'd been for four nights now, the covers pulled tight, the boys gone, never to return, leaving him behind, alone.

He didn't mind that so much. Being alone meant there was no one to corner him in the play yard, snap at him, claw him, bite him.

The doctors and nurses never interfered. They only watched, whispering among themselves, saying words like *outcast* and *omega*, *pack* and *hierarchy*, words he didn't understand, words they jotted furiously into their notebooks.

So, no, he wasn't sad to see the others gone. What bothered him was how they left. He tried to forget, but of course he couldn't.

The Incident, the doctors and nurses called it. Another word he didn't understand, but he shivered each time he heard it.

It had started with a new nurse. A pretty, young nurse who'd snuck them candies and chocolate bars and soda pop and had gotten mad when the older one called them little beasts. He'd liked her. To the others, though, her kindness smelled like weakness, and they'd used it to get what they wanted, always smiling and holding her hand and asking for more treats.

Then the other nurse found out and put a stop to the gifts. The other boys hadn't liked that. They'd wheedled and begged, but the young nurse said no, she wasn't allowed to bring them anything.

Then, one night, she came in to see them. Just to tuck them in and kiss them good night. Only the other boys thought she'd brought them treats, and when they found out she hadn't—

The boy squeezed his eyes shut, but he still saw them, backing her into the corner, then pouncing. He still heard her screams. Still smelled the blood that had flecked the walls as they'd swarmed over her.

He might be the biggest, but he was no match for all three of them. So he'd run to the door and banged and shouted, making more noise than he ever had in his life.

The guards had rescued the nurse. Then they'd taken him out and put him in the schoolroom, gave him milk and cookies, and told him he'd done the right thing and they were proud of him.

But they hadn't sounded proud. They'd sounded scared.

It was nearly morning when the old nurse took him back to the bedroom. The other boys were gone. And they never came back.

He didn't think to ask what had happened to them. Nothing in his young life had led him to believe that question—or any other—would be answered.

He'd been born here, with the other three. Lived here all his life, five years now. He'd never been outside the front doors. He wouldn't even know where the doors were. He only went out the back ones and only into the play yard.

The yard had walls so high he could just see the tops of buildings. As for what lay beyond the walls, he wasn't really sure. He had books, and he was a good reader, but for him, the world depicted within those pages might have well been the moon for all the resemblance it bore to his life.

He read about things like mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, but he didn't really understand the concepts. There was a boy who came here sometimes. Simon. He lived outside the building, with the man he called Dad, but the boy didn't really understand what that meant, except that it sounded nice.

Simon was almost always smiling, always happy. The boy didn't understand that either, except, again, that it seemed nice.

Now, lying in bed, trying to forget the screaming, he thought about Simon. The other three hadn't liked Simon. They'd tripped him and pushed him and said he wasn't one of them, and hadn't liked it when the boy played with him. But he had anyway. They played board games, and even when Simon lost, he never flew into a rage or snarled and snapped like the others, but only grinned and said, "Wanna play again?" And they did.

So now, the boy thought about Simon and not about the others, and where they'd gone, and especially not about the voices.

He heard the voices when he was in the playroom. They came through the vent, from the office they'd moved to the other side of the wall, so they could watch him through the glass. He knew about the glass, but he ignored it, and built his cars and bridges and skyscrapers, all the wonderful structures he saw in his books. He built and he listened to the voices.

He didn't hear everything they said—just a few words that made him shiver like he did when they said “The Incident.” Words like *problem* and *mistake* and *miscalculation*. And the worst word of all, the one they said over and over as they whispered among themselves. *Dangerous*.

He knew they were talking about him. But he wasn't dangerous. He'd never done more than shove the other boys and only when they came after him or Simon. He'd never gotten in any trouble for that, no matter how much the other boys fake-cried and pretended to be hurt. And he'd never hurt any of the grown-ups, never even yelled or snarled or growled at them. He was a good boy—everyone said so.

But now, every time they glanced his way, he saw fear in their faces, heard it in their voices, saw it when they skittered out of the room. They thought he was dangerous. He knew, too, that whatever they'd done with the other boys, they were now thinking of doing the same with him, just to be sure, just to be safe.

The next morning, the boy was in the schoolroom, doing his math. He liked math. He liked the way there were always answers, if only you knew how to find them.

He was alone in the schoolroom. Ever since the incident, the teacher would come in with one of the guards, give him a short lesson, drop off his work, then leave. So when the door opened, he looked up, worried, then saw Simon's dad and relaxed.

He liked Simon's dad, who always seemed to be smiling, always had something nice to say. He worked here sometimes, but he wasn't one of the nurses or doctors or guards, so the boy didn't see him very much.

When he did come, though, he usually brought a present, something better than a candy bar or soda pop. But the boy was careful not to let his gaze fall to Simon's dad's hands. He couldn't let them think he expected anything. That was how the trouble with the nurse had started.

Even when he did notice the bag, he kept his gaze blank. He was good at that. But when Simon's dad put the bag on the boy's desk, the boy couldn't wait any longer. He opened the bag.

Inside was a box almost as big as his desktop. It said MECCANO CONSTRUCTION SET and promised over two hundred and fifty pieces that would build everything from dragsters to helicopters. The boy stared at all the nuts and bolts, his mind already racing, imagining what he could make.

"They'll run, too," Simon's dad said. "I have batteries for them."

"Thank you." He had to say it twice. Since the incident, he'd barely dared speak a word, so the first time he tried, nothing came out.

Simon's dad pulled over another chair. "I have something to ask you."

The boy nodded.

"I know things here aren't . . ." He paused, then started again. "I know you aren't happy here." He leaned forward, meeting the boy's eyes. "How would you like to come home with me, Derek?"

“Home?”

“Where I live. Away from here. With Simon. Now that the other boys are gone . . .” He paused, rubbed his throat as if the words were sticking, then cleared it. “Dr. Banks has agreed to let you come home and live with us. Would you like that?”

The boy nodded, closed his notebook, took the box, and stood, ready to leave.

One

The smell of freedom slipped through the open window, the breeze tugging at my . . . hair?

I growled under my breath and tried again.

The smell of freedom slipped through the open window, the breeze tugging at my skin. Yeah,
like that made sense.

The smell of freedom slipped through the open window, the breeze creeping across my skin.

Nah, that lost the metaphor. Or simile. Or whatever the hell it was called.

It was no use. I sucked at English. I was just going to have to get Simon to write my assignment again. I was sure he'd have math homework I could do for him.

Speaking of math . . .

"Are you listening to me, Derek?" Mr. Murrell said.

"Yes, sir."

His lips tightened at the "sir." Figures. Try to be polite and they always think I'm being sarcastic. Dad would say it's my tone. And my look. And maybe a bit of actual sarcasm.

Murrell droned on with the advanced, after-school math lessons the school had agreed to give me. I tried to pay attention, but he was so damned boring, and all I could think about was that breeze coming through the window, smelling of trees and grass and, yeah, freedom.

I liked school well enough. I just hated the building itself, spending the day locked in hot, stuffy rooms that stank of moldy books and dirty sneakers.

". . . and I see you've completed a project on Gray's Theorem—"

"Green's," I said.

His lips pursed again at the interruption. "What?"

"It's Green's Theorem."

Even as I said it, I imagined Dad sighing beside me. *Don't correct the teacher, Derek. You look like a show-off. If you have to set them straight, at least start with a qualifier, like "I think you might mean . . ."*

But I didn't *think* Murrell was wrong—I knew it—and if I was the one making stupid mistakes like that, I'd want someone to tell me.

"Do you have a problem with authority, Derek?" Murrell asked.

I thought about it. I could tell by his eyes, getting narrower by the nanosecond, that he didn't believe I should need to think about it.

I replied carefully. "I don't have a problem with the *concept* of authority."

Wrong answer. He rose. Taking the cue, I rose. I was about four inches taller than him, and when I stood, he flinched, then pulled himself straight and scowled, like I was trying to show him up. I slumped back into my chair.

"Your father seems to think you need special coursework for your *special needs*." He twisted the last words, like I needed remedial math instead of advanced placement. "I am going to suggest, however, that we work on your attitude first."

He stalked out. I slumped farther, wincing as my knees smacked against the bottom of the desk. I stayed there a few minutes, staring longingly at the window. I was pretty sure Murrell wasn't coming back, but with my luck, he'd come storming down the hall the second I made it to the exit, and accuse me of taking off partway through my special extra lesson.

I checked the clock. I was supposed to meet Simon on the ball court at four. It was already 4:10. I tugged out my cell and called him, but it went straight to voice mail. He must have been on the phone again. It was a good thing I kept sneaking him my top-up cards or Dad would carry out that threat to take his phone away, and I wasn't sure Simon would survive.

I got up, being careful not to bang my legs again. Shoot up six inches in a year and suddenly everything's too small. It was a damn good thing werewolf genes meant I healed fast or my knees would be permanently bruised.

I checked the hall. No sign of Murrell. I took a deep breath, searching for his scent. All clear. Just three girls talking at their locker, their high-pitched chatter and giggles as painful as a dog whistle.

I strode past them, making a beeline for peace and quiet and freedom—

“Hey, Darren,” one called.

I kept going. It wasn't my name.

I was close enough to see the sun streaming through the glass doors, to catch the faint whiff of wet grass sneaking in on a draft. Then the girl shot in front of me. Blond. Big teeth. A cloying layer of perfume masked her scent. She might have been in one of my classes. I could never keep track. In a few months we'd be moving again, so why bother remembering names, faces, or scents? I had better use for the brain space.

“It is Darren, isn't it?”

“No.”

She waited for me to tell her my name. I didn't see the point.

“You're Simon's stepbrother, right?”

No, his dad had unofficially adopted me, but correcting her would only prolong the conversation, so I said, “Yeah,” and tried to pass. She moved into my path.

I was tempted to keep walking, see how long it'd take her to decide it wasn't smart to block a guy twice her size, but I'd gotten in enough trouble for that sort of thing at our last school. A couple idiots had been goofing off in the hall and one had slid into me. I'd picked him up, moved

him aside, and kept going. I'd been perfectly nice about it, but I got threatened with suspension for "bullying." As Dad pointed out, it didn't help that even a guy my size shouldn't be able to pick up another kid that easily.

I wasn't risking that again, so I stopped short and said, "I gotta go. I'm meeting someone."

"Who?" The brunette behind me tittered. "Your girlfriend?"

The blonde motioned for her to cut it out. Mocking me wasn't a good way to get what they wanted.

"So, are you going to the semi-formal?" the blonde asked.

"Yes, Simon is."

"I didn't ask—"

"I was taking the shortcut. Now can I go?"

"Tracy's right. You are a jerk."

"Yep. Now . . . ?" I motioned for her to move aside.

When she didn't, I tried to pass. Again, she cut me off. I felt my hackles rise. Instinct, as the wolf in me said I was being threatened. I told it to shut up. It didn't. It never did.

"Right," I said. "I forgot the second part of your unasked question. Is Simon going *with* anyone? The last time Simon didn't take someone to a school dance was seventh grade, when his date got sick. Okay?"

"Who's he going with?"

"Some girl."

"That's a relief," her friend muttered.

"Could you be more specific?" the blonde asked.

"No, I can't, because I have no idea who he's seeing right now."

“Jealous?”

I snorted and tried, again, to pass. She slid in front of me.

“Is it Adrienne? Lily?”

“I only know he has a date, meaning he’s not available. Try the Christmas formal. I’m sure he’ll have broken up with her by then.”

When she still didn’t move, I eased back and looked at her.

“Simon’s got someone. But you asked if *I* was going. Actually, I am, and I don’t have a date yet, so if you’re interested . . .”

The girls scattered like deer hearing a shot. I smiled. Worked every time.

I pushed open the door and walked out.

Two

A blast of icy air rushed through the open door. It was a week after Christmas break, but we were having a warm spell—warm for January, anyway—and I hadn't bothered with a jacket. I drank in the smells. The exhaust fumes I could do without, but I caught the faintest tickle of better scents: fresh air and wet earth.

I gazed longingly at the empty track, toes curling in my sneakers, muscles aching to tear down there, rip around it, the silence broken only by the pound of my sneakers. After a day cooped up in school, there was nothing better than a run and today I needed one more than usual. Restlessness gnawed my gut, putting my nerves on edge.

Dad would tell me to go. My body wanted this—needed it—so I should give in. Work it out. Simon could wait.

But I wouldn't do it. The human side of me was in control, not the wolf. That's how it had to be if I was going to fit into the world.

Simon was waiting and if my body needed a workout, it would get one on the basketball court. So I headed there, to the other side of the school.

When I heard voices, I slowed. Someone must have snagged the court before Simon. So much for my workout.

Then I caught Simon's voice. So he *was* playing, just not alone. That was fine. Yeah, I'd rather it was just us, so I didn't need to worry about hiding my strength, but that's another thing I needed to work on.

I rounded the corner and even from a hundred feet away, I knew these guys weren't friends of Simon. They were seniors, the kind who spend more time in the halls than in class. Dressed in beaters and Doc Martens, they were small-town thugs who'd find out how tough they really were

if they ever actually got out of their hick town—especially if they were mouthing off the way they were now, giving Simon shit about being a “foreigner.” Simon’s half Korean, born in America, like our dad, but that didn’t matter to morons like this. That’s why I like big cities. It’s easier to be different there.

My gaze fixed on the leader—the kid right in front of Simon. As I picked up my pace, I could feel my skin prickling, muscles tensing, hands fisting. There was a part of me that said, *You should have gone on that run*, but it was a small part.

As usual, Simon was giving as good as he got, meeting their insults with jabs and jokes, which only pissed them off more. Had they *asked* for the court, he’d have walked away with a grin and a “Have fun.” But these guys weren’t the type to ask, and Simon wasn’t the type to give in to demands.

As I approached I could smell the three thugs—that faint stink of anger, bodies heating up, adrenaline flowing. They shifted and tensed, spoiling for a fight. Simon missed the body language, of course. I’ve tried teaching him, but he can’t read it the way I can.

The leader moved in front of Simon, posturing, saying, *I’m bigger than you, so back off*. Simon stood his ground, leaning forward, his body saying, *Yeah? Make me*, even as he kept chattering away like nothing was wrong.

The other two fidgeted, ready to jump as soon as their buddy gave them the nod. These guys weren’t looking for a fair fight. But that’s exactly what they were about to get. I broke into a jog.

They didn’t hear me coming. I never understand why people make so much noise when they walk. It’s easy enough to adjust your gait and move quietly. Or it is for me. That’s another thing Simon can’t seem to learn. Dad laughs when I try, saying teaching Simon to be quiet is like teaching a cat to bark.

I was less than thirty feet away when the leader's hand moved, fist drawing back. Simon's fingers flew up in a knock-back spell. The guy should have sailed off his feet, but the spell fizzled, and it was Simon who hit the ground, tripped by one of the others. The leader grabbed Simon by the front of his jacket and swung him up. Simon's head cracked against the wall.

I charged. I kept my gaze on the other two, despite every instinct that insisted I focus on the biggest threat, the guy now pinning Simon to the wall. As furious as I was, my head was still in charge, and it said Simon was a decent fighter and could look after himself. My job was making sure the other two didn't blow his odds.

I was veering toward them when the guy pinning Simon lifted his free hand, and I caught a flash of silver. The flash became a knife blade, heading for Simon's throat.

I grabbed the guy by the collar, swung him off Simon, and threw him. Just threw him. I didn't know where. I didn't care.

When I heard a crack, I ignored it, never even glanced over to see where he'd landed. If he'd hit the wall, fine—he'd done the same to Simon.

I turned to the other two. One got a good look at me and ran. The other came at me. I took a swing at him, but checked myself at the last second, and the blow barely brushed his jacket. It was enough, though. When he ran, I tore after him. I got halfway across the tarmac before I realized I'd left Simon behind . . . with the guy and the knife.

I turned and saw the guy crumpled at the base of the wall. Simon was leaning over him.

"He's alive," Simon said, sitting back on his haunches as I walked over.

"Course he is. I only threw him."

"You *really* threw him, Derek."

“Yeah. Because he *really* had a knife, which was *really* at your throat. You better grab it before he wakes up.”

Simon stared up at me, this weird look on his face. “I don’t think we need to worry about that.”

“He’s unconscious? Good. That’ll give us time to get out of here. If a teacher catches me, I’ll get suspended for sure.”

Simon kept staring at me, like . . . I don’t know. Like we were talking different languages.

I bent and scooped up the knife. As I did, I looked at the guy. He was lying there . . . twisted. A sick feeling settled in the pit of my gut.

Simon grabbed my arm. “You’re right. Let’s go. With your crappy grades, you can’t afford a suspension or you’ll never get into college.”

He smiled as he said it, but it was a weird smile. A desperate smile.

I looked at the kid, and the sick feeling spread.

“We gotta call nine one one,” I said.

“No way.” Simon yanked me back. “Have you forgotten we’re flying under the radar here? Fake names? Fake IDs?”

“*Perfect* fake IDs.” That wasn’t easy to do, but the supernatural community had perfected the art of forgery, and you could get stuff like that if you could afford it. “Dad always says it’s better to hand our ID over than to hide it.”

“Fine. We’ll call nine one one from a pay phone, then—”

“Run? Yeah. No one will ever know it was us. We blend in so well. The second this guy or his friends talk, I’m done. Or we’re on the run again. You want that?”

“Okay. You call Dad.”

“And you call nine one one. From your cell.”

He did. I took out my phone and hit speed dial. It picked up on the second ring, road noise buzzing through the car’s hands-free system.

“Hey, buddy. What’s up?”

“Dad? I’ve got a problem.”

Three

I knew what Dad would say. *Call 911. Stay there. Don't cover up anything.* He was on his way, and would hopefully arrive before the police did, but if he didn't, we knew the drill. Tell them only what they needed to know to treat the guy. He'd handle the rest.

The ambulance arrived first.

I gave one of the paramedics the basic story as the other tended to the guy. I said I'd found him pinning Simon to the wall, knife at his throat, so I'd thrown him off. The paramedic didn't know how strong I was, so it should seem no worse—and more justifiable—than the kid throwing Simon against the wall.

It didn't matter. As I spoke, her lips tightened and she gave me a look I knew well: disgust. I was a hulking bully throwing my weight around, picking fights with smaller guys.

She went back to her partner, who was putting the kid on a backboard. She told him what I'd said, whispering it, but werewolf hearing meant I caught every word.

“He did *this*?” the guy whispered. “By just throwing him?”

When he looked my way, I saw something I hated way more than disgust. Fear.

They were getting the guy into the ambulance when the police showed up. As soon as I saw the strobing lights, I called Dad.

He swore. “I'm stuck on the highway, bud. There must have been something going on in the legislature today. Everyone's leaving Albany at once. I'll get there—”

“As soon as you can. I know.”

“You okay?”

“Simon's pretty freaked.”

“And *you*?”

“I’m fine.”

A sigh, like he’d hoped for—but didn’t expect—a more honest answer. “Okay, just hang tight. Tell them what they need to know—”

“And nothing else until you get here.”

“You got it. Any problems, call me.”

I hung up.

“Is he almost here?” Simon asked, his face tight with worry.

“Yeah. Few minutes.”

A second cop car—unmarked—pulled into the lot. Detectives? Was it that bad?

I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to look more presentable, but the greasy film told me finger-combing wasn’t going to help. I’d had a shower before school, but that didn’t help either. By the end of the day, I looked like I hadn’t bathed in a week. And, as I lowered my arm, I realized that I smelled like it, too.

I looked around.

“What’s wrong?” Simon asked.

“My backpack.” I spotted it across the tarmac. I must have dropped it as I ran. I didn’t remember doing it. I barely remembered running or grabbing the kid or throwing—

“I’ll grab it,” Simon said.

“No.” I pulled him back. “I’ve got it.”

The cops were getting out of their car, and I’d really rather get to my deodorant before they reached me. As I jogged for the bag, though, one yelled, “Hey! Stop!”

“He’s just getting his—” Simon tried to explain.

“I don’t care. Stop right there!”

I slowed, eyeing the twenty feet to the backpack. It wasn't like he'd shoot me if I went for it. My heart slammed against my ribs, telling me I really needed that deodorant, but I knew. If I could already smell BO, then it was soaked into my shirt, and a swipe of deodorant wouldn't fix that.

It wouldn't help the rest of it either: my size, my hair, my skin. I knew exactly what kind of impression I made, and when I turned, I saw that impression in the detective's eyes—the flash of fear when he realized how big I was, disappearing after a slow once-over of distaste bordering on disgust. A punk teenager who couldn't be bothered bathing now and then.

"I was just . . ." I pointed at my backpack.

"Leave it. I have some questions for you."

"Yes, sir." I said it without sarcasm, but he still glanced over sharply, like I'd insulted him. He'd made up his mind. I was just another knuckle-dragging bully, probably threw that kid into the wall because he wouldn't lend me a smoke.

When the cop noticed Simon following us, he said, "I need to talk to him first, son. You can wait over there."

"Yes, sir." There *was* a twinge of sarcasm in that—and the eye-roll Simon tossed my way—but the cop didn't notice. Simon looked like a good kid, clean and well dressed, practically strumming with energy. Nervous energy right now, but the cop only saw a cheerful, cooperative young man.

"Dad'll be here soon," Simon called back as he walked away. "Remember that."

The cop looked from me to Simon. "Whose dad?"

"Ours." Simon said, then gave him a glare that defied him to point out that Simon and I obviously didn't share a single drop of blood.

The cop turned to me. “Foster kid?”

Simon started to shoot something back. I knew he didn’t like the guy’s tone—acting as if I was an unwanted puppy someone had to be paid to care for—but mouthing off wasn’t going to help. When I gave Simon a look, he settled for saying, “Our dad will be here soon. He’s a lawyer. A *criminal* lawyer.”

The cop sighed. “They always are.” He waved Simon off, then turned to me. “Used to having Daddy get you out of trouble, boy?”

“No.” I resisted the urge to add *sir*.

“Well, he’s not going to this time. So go ahead and tell me what happened.”

I did. When I finished, he kept watching, like he was waiting for more.

“So you just threw this kid off your brother?”

“Yeah, because he had a—”

“He *allegedly* had a knife. All right. But you’re telling me *all* you did was pull him off and toss him aside, and that put him into a coma?”

I blinked and glanced over. The paramedics were gone. “Coma? Did they say—?”

“They won’t know until they run tests, but that kid wasn’t waking up, and I don’t need tests to tell me that’s a coma.”

Sweat trickled into my eye. I blinked it away and wiped my forehead.

“You did more than toss that boy,” the cop said. “How much do you weigh?”

“Two twenty.”

He jotted that in his book, then without looking up, he said, “We’re going to need your shirt.”

“Why?”

“Evidence.”

“But there isn’t any blood. No one got shot. The only knife wasn’t used. And I’m admitting I did it. So why would you need—”

“If you want to wait for Daddy, you go ahead and do that, but refusing a simple request isn’t going to make things easier for you.”

There was no reason to take my shirt. Dad had told us enough stories that I knew exactly what this guy was doing. Power tripping. It was January, and without a shirt on, I’d be uncomfortable, maybe pay less attention to his questions, and slip up.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Simon watching. He bounced on the balls of his feet, two seconds from barreling over here, knowing from my expression that something was up. He’d only make things worse. If this cop thought a little cold would tip the balance his way, he was in for a surprise.

As I peeled off my shirt, he gave me a once-over, grunted, “Thought so,” and motioned for me to put it back on. I realized my mistake.

“You work out, boy?”

It was a stupid question. As soon as I’d taken off my baggy jersey, he knew I worked out, which was why he’d asked me to. Weight lifting was like running: a way to help the restless energy that had come with starting my change into a full-blown werewolf. It wasn’t like I spent hours a day pumping iron, but I looked like I did—a combination of werewolf genes and my natural body type, Dad said.

“You on the wrestling team?” the cop asked.

I shook my head.

“Football? Hockey?”

Another head shake.

He scowled. “What team *do* you play on, then?”

“None.” When he didn’t seem to take that for an answer, I said, “I was on the math team at my last school.”

He gave me a sour look. “I can check on that.”

“Go ahead. The only sport I do is tossing around a ball with my brother. He’s the athlete.”

“You’re in damn good shape for someone who doesn’t like sports.”

I shrugged. “Didn’t say I don’t like them. Just not really into them.”

“What do you work out for, then? Girls?”

Now it was my turn to give *him* a look. Like muscles were really going to help me in that department. Not that I cared—girls were another thing I left to Simon.

And if I *was* working out to get a girl’s attention, why would I wear baggy clothes? I dressed this way because I’d figured out that it made me look overweight, and being big and heavy meant people paid less attention to me than if I was big and muscular. The less attention I attracted, the happier I was.

“Seems you got a problem with acne there,” the cop said.

I bit back the urge to say, *No shit*, and mumbled, “Yeah.”

He looked at me for a moment. “I’m thinking that might be a sign.”

“Of what?”

“That you’re getting a little chemical boost.”

It took a second for me to figure it out. “Steroids?”

“Acne. Violent outbursts. Moodiness. That tells me you’ve got a little something extra running through your veins, giving you trouble.”

I snorted a laugh. The guy had no idea how right he was.

“You think that’s funny, boy?”

“Kinda, isn’t it? I’m not into sports. I’m not buffing up for girls. So why would I take steroids?”

It was a logical point, but he glowered at me. “You think you’re smart, don’t you?”

“I’m just saying—”

“I have no idea why you’re doping up. I don’t know how your mind works.” He leaned in, sliding onto his tiptoes to get closer to my eye level. “But I’m going to find out.”

“Now, detective,” said a voice behind me, in a deceptively pleasant tone, “I’m going to suggest you take a step back from my son. You wouldn’t want to give anyone the impression that you’re threatening him.”

I turned to see Dad walking over. He smiled at me, clapped me on the back, then told the detective we needed a few moments alone. The guy didn’t like that. Dad didn’t care. He motioned me into a private conference a dozen feet away.

“How’re you holding up?”

“Okay.”

“How’s the interview going?”

I looked out at the schoolyard a moment before answering. “Not so good. I’m trying, but . . .”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be okay.”

Simon jogged over and Dad asked if he’d been hurt.

“Nah,” he said. “Bit of a headache, but it’s Derek who’s—”

“I know.”

“The detective thinks I’m on steroids.” I paused. “Maybe I should cop to that. It’d keep them from running blood tests.”

Dad shook his head. “Admitting to steroid use won’t fix this. The only test I’m going to let them run is a urine sample and only to look for drugs.” He turned to Simon. “How about you run over to Angelo’s? Order us a couple of pizzas. I don’t think there’ll be much time for cooking tonight.”

Simon took two twenties and jogged off.

“Don’t forget salad,” Dad called after him.

Simon put his hands behind his ears, making a face like he couldn’t hear. Dad took out his cell phone and waved it. Simon rolled his eyes and motioned that he’d get salad. Then Dad turned back to me.

“Let’s get this straightened out.”

Four

We didn't get anything straightened out. The hospital called the detective to confirm that the kid was in a coma and they were checking him for spinal damage. Dad assured me it wasn't as bad as it sounded—the detective was exaggerating in hopes of guilting me into a confession. But I knew even if he wasn't, Dad would say that to make me feel better.

I wasn't charged with anything. They just sent me home and told me not to go anywhere. I suspected we'd be hitting the road before morning, maybe even needing new identities, and while I couldn't care less, Simon would, and that only made things worse.

We went home and ate the pizza. I don't think anyone tasted it. Even Simon just had one slice and didn't complain about the salad. The greens were for him—to balance out the carb-heavy pizza for his diabetes.

As we ate, Dad told us stories about his day in court. He was working as a public defender in Albany. Not exactly the best-paying job in law, but there was always an opening. When we'd first gone on the run, his contacts hooked him up with the iron-clad ID of a New York lawyer—a sorcerer who'd been “disappeared” by the Cabals. Still, you never wanted anyone digging too deep, just in case, so Dad took the jobs most other lawyers didn't want. Being a public defender meant he always came home with stories, and I usually liked listening, but that night I barely heard them.

I kept thinking about what I'd done. How I could have handled it better. How I could have handled the interview better.

When the phone rang and it was for Simon, Dad shooed him into our bedroom to take it, then asked me how I was doing.

“Fine.”

“Got a lot on your mind?”

“Yeah.”

“Care to share?”

I picked a burned piece of pepperoni off my half-eaten pizza slice.

“Derek?”

“I tried with that cop. I answered his questions. I cooperated. I was respectful. Maybe I got a bit snarky about the steroid stuff, but it didn’t matter by then—he’d made up his mind, and even when I behaved, it pissed him off.”

“You know that’s not your fault. You’re big for your age and that intimidates—”

“I’m not *that* big. Lots of guys are my size. It doesn’t matter. It feels like . . .”

“Like what?” he prompted when I didn’t finish.

Like they can sense what I am, I wanted to say. Like deep down they know I’m a werewolf, even if they don’t realize it.

I didn’t say that because it would only upset him, another problem he couldn’t solve for me. I hated being so much trouble. I never used to be. When we were kids, Simon was always the one mouthing off and pushing the boundaries. I was the one who did as he was told and never gave Dad any trouble.

Then I turned thirteen and everything started to change. I’d always kept to myself, not trying to make friends, but not pissing people off either. Suddenly I became “Simon’s jerk brother.” I could say that it wasn’t my fault, but a lot of times it was. People annoyed me easier. I’d go through days of feeling like shit, cranky and irritable, snapping at everyone who talked to me. The good son turned into the difficult one, the moody one. It felt as if, when I got bigger, it wasn’t just my clothing that didn’t fit anymore. The world didn’t fit me and I didn’t fit it.

I felt like I did before I came to live with Dad and Simon: like I didn't belong, like I was one step away from totally screwing up. I couldn't tell Dad that. He thought I didn't remember much about that time, and I let him think that because he wanted me to forget it.

Even Simon seemed to forget. He'd talk about when Dad brought me home, and I'd remind him he used to come play with me before that, and he'd shrug and say maybe, but he didn't remember it. I guess that could be because he was almost a year younger than me. But I got the feeling there was more to it, that Dad worked to make us forget, not just because I'd been miserable there, but—

“Derek?”

“Hmm?”

Dad smiled. “Lost you for a second there, bud. You were saying . . . ?”

“I don't remember,” I said, and bit off a chunk of pizza.

“Something about being big, how it makes you feel . . .”

“Wasn't important.”

“I think it was.”

I shook my head, swallowed my mouthful, then rose to clear the table. Dad said he'd get it, but I did it anyway.

After dinner, Simon and I played football on the Xbox while Dad worked at the kitchen table. It was almost nine when the phone rang.

“Simon!” Dad called without looking up from his work.

“Can you grab it? I'm in the middle of something.”

Dad sighed and answered. A pause. Then he said, “Speaking.”

“See?” Simon whispered. “It’s not *always* for me.”

“Who gave you this number?” Dad’s tone had us both looking over, the game forgotten.

“My son is fifteen years old,” Dad said. “If you identify him—” He stopped short, like he’d been interrupted. “Good. Just as long as we understand each other.”

He hung up.

“Reporter?” Simon asked.

Dad snorted. “If you can call her that. Just someone from the local rag.”

“Will that be a problem?” I asked.

“*That* paper?” Dad laughed, but there was a tightness to it. “Not exactly the *New York Times*. Most of the people in this town don’t even read it. I’m not worried about anyone in Buffalo picking up a copy.”

“And it wouldn’t be a problem anyway, right?” Simon said. “You’re the one who needs to be careful, not Derek.”

“That’s right.”

I kept watching Dad. He avoided my gaze. It did matter. It always had. Dad made all three of us fly under the radar. Why? That was the question.

“Did she say anything about the guy?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“The guy I threw. His condition. Did she know anything?”

“No.” Dad shuffled his papers. “Probably home right now playing *his* Xbox.”

I could tell by his voice that he didn’t believe that any more than I did. I got up from the floor.

“Hey,” Simon called. “We’re in the middle of a game. Where’re you going?”

“Shower.”

“Oh sure, when I was seconds away from kicking your ass.”

I tried to shoot back a retort but couldn't find one, and just mumbled, “Sorry,” before continuing on to the bathroom.

In the shower, I could finally be alone with my thoughts, no one trying to cheer me up, no one lying and telling me it would be okay. It wasn't okay. I was in serious trouble, and I wasn't going to feel better until I came up with a solution.

I couldn't solve this mess until I knew all the facts: how badly was the kid hurt, was I going to be charged? But what I *could* come up with was a way to make sure I never screwed up like that again, never let the wolf part take over again.

No matter how much I told myself a solution was possible, though, I just had to think back to that moment when I saw the knife, when the knife was the only thing I saw, and I knew there was no solution. In that moment, the wolf took over and there was no way the human part of me could have stepped in, because there'd been no human part of me. My brother was in danger and nothing else mattered.

I stood in the shower until it ran cold, and still I stayed in there, ignoring the icy water beating down on my back until Dad knocked and said, “Using up all our water, bud?” and I turned it off, grabbed a towel, and stepped into the hall.

“We should talk, Derek,” Dad said.

“I'm fine,” I said, then shouldered past him, strode into my room, and shut the door.

I lay awake until I heard Simon come in just before eleven. I pretended to be asleep until his snores told me *he* was. Then I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling, looking for answers I couldn't find.

It was midnight when the phone buzzed. Dad answered mid-ring on the first one, meaning he'd been waiting up for the call.

With werewolf hearing, I can eavesdrop even when I don't want to, but Dad knew that, and lowered his voice so I could only catch his murmuring, growing distant as he walked away.

I slid out of bed. There was no sign of him upstairs. When I finally realized he'd gone to the basement and I followed, he was signing off before I caught any of the conversation.

I padded down the steps and found Dad in the laundry room, rubbing his hands over his face.

"There's a problem, isn't there?" I said.

He jumped and forced a smile. "I swear I'm buying a bell for you. Preferably before you give me a heart attack."

"I heard the phone."

"Hmm?" He looked down at the receiver still clutched in his hand. "Oh. Just work."

"Yeah?" I looked around the laundry room. I didn't say anything, but he knew what I meant—he wouldn't be sneaking down here at midnight for a case.

"Confidentiality." He gave a crooked smile. "And it's not the sort of case you guys need to overhear. Definitely not one I'll be telling around the dinner table."

"Yeah?"

I met his gaze with a steady stare, but he only returned it. I wanted to push, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. It was like I was still a little kid who couldn't be trusted with the truth.

I turned and headed for the steps.

He sighed. “Derek . . .”

I kept going.

Five

I don't know if I slept that night. It didn't feel like it. When I got up, Dad asked if I wanted to stay home from school and get some sleep. He knew I didn't need it. For me, a restless night only means I'll be too tired to have a restless day. What he really meant was that I didn't have to go to school and face the other kids, the teachers, the rumors. He wasn't surprised when I said no.

Dad wanted to drive us in. Again I refused. Simon joked about turning down his chance for a ride, and I knew he was just teasing, but I snapped that *he* could take it. They left me alone after that.

It was almost a mile to school, and there were plenty of times on that walk that I really wished Simon had taken Dad up on the offer. If he wasn't trying to cheer me up, he was scuffling along, feeling bad because he couldn't.

Finally I could see the schoolyard ahead.

"There's Mark," I said, gesturing at one of his friends from the basketball team.

"Yep."

"He's looking over here. I think he wants to talk to you."

"I'm good."

I looked at the kids standing around. When I'd first spotted them, they'd been in their usual clusters, smoking, goofing, talking, avoiding going into school until the last possible moment. Now those groups had started to join, a mob shifting our way, spreading across the front of the yard.

"Go on," I said.

"I said I'm good."

“I want you to—”

“Too bad. I’m right beside you.”

When I tried to argue again, temper flared in Simon’s eyes. “Enough of this bullshit, Derek. You’ve barely said a word to me since last night. If there’s something you *want* to say, spit it out.”

“Like what?”

“Like this is my fault. Like if I hadn’t egged those guys on, none of this would have happened.”

“You didn’t do anything. They came at you. I overreacted. You were just there.”

I could tell he didn’t believe me, but it was true. What happened was my fault. Only mine.

“Fine,” I said. “If you really want to walk with me—”

“I do. So shut up and walk.”

As we drew closer, Mark called, “Simon!” and started toward us before being swallowed by the mob. They kept creeping forward, whispers snaking through the crowd.

“I heard he just went off on the guy. For no reason.”

“I heard he was so doped up, they had to tie him down.”

“I heard he’s got a record. That’s why they moved here.”

“I heard the kid’s in a coma.”

“No, he’s a vegetable.”

“No, he’s dead.”

Simon caught the last one and wheeled on the offender—one of the girls who’d cornered me in the hall yesterday. Catching Simon’s glare, she inched back.

“Dead?” he said. “Yeah, Derek killed a kid, but they’re letting him come to school today.” He turned to me and waved at the girl. “Check it out, bro. A living science experiment for you. Proof people can walk and talk without a brain.”

That was harsh, and the look on the girl’s face almost made me feel sorry for her.

“Drop it,” I mumbled to Simon, and tried to keep going, but the crowd shifted into my path, blocking me, subtly but enough to make me tense, the wolf perking up.

“You guys want to know what happened last night?” Simon said. “I’ll tell you. Three of your local redneck losers decided they wanted my ball court—and my ball. When I didn’t love the idea, they felt the need to point out that I’m not white, which was, of course, a huge shock to me. When that didn’t work, they decided to drive in their point with a blade. Derek didn’t approve of that plan. He threw the guy with the knife off me. One guy. One throw. Not a single punch pulled. If anyone has a problem with that, let me know.”

“Yeah, Simon. I have a problem with it.” Mark shouldered his way through the crowd. “That ‘redneck loser’ Derek hurt is my brother.”

“My condolences.”

Mark scowled, like he couldn’t decide if Simon was offering condolences on what happened or on having an idiot as a brother.

“Now,” Simon said. “If anyone else—”

“Enough,” I muttered.

I gave him a look. He hesitated like he had more to say—Simon always did—but finally he backed down, saying, “Let’s get inside. I don’t much like the atmosphere out here.”

Mark stepped into my path again. “You’re not going anywhere, Derek. Let’s see how tough you are when you aren’t sneaking up behind someone.”

“You wanna fight?” I asked.

He looked up at me and, for just a second, hesitated, then said, “Yeah. I do.”

“Well, I’ll save you the trouble. You win.” I raised my voice. “Everyone hear that? Mark called me out. I backed down. He wins.”

I started to go around him, but he blocked me. I turned to head back the way I’d come. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him lunge. Simon’s hand flew up in a spell, and Mark stumbled back. The crowd tittered.

“Hey!” He advanced on Simon. “You shoved me.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t touch you.” Simon turned to the crowd. “Anyone see me touch him?” Silence. “Guess he got a better look at what he was up against and jumped back in fear.”

The crowd laughed. Then someone said, “Or maybe he just got a whiff of him.”

Simon wheeled, searching the mob.

I grabbed the back of his shirt. “Let it go.”

He hesitated until I whispered, “You aren’t making this easier for me,” and that made him stop.

Mark, though, wasn’t giving up so easily, and when I tried to leave, he got in front of me again, saying, “We’re not done.”

Simon slid between us. “Well, he is, so if you really need a fight, you’re stuck with me.”

“What’s going on here?” a voice boomed from the back of the crowd.

The kids parted to let the principal, Mr. Thierry, through. He saw me in the center of the mob and said, “Oh,” then stood there a moment, like he was trying to decide if he could just walk away and leave me to my fate. Then he sighed and waved me forward.

“Come to the office, Derek. I need to speak to you.”

Six

I followed the principal, and Simon followed me until we were walking past the secretary's desk and she jumped up.

"Simon?" she said. "I don't think Mr. Thierry needs you in there. He wants to speak to Derek alone."

"Why? I was the one trying to start a fight out there."

"Now, Simon . . ." Thierry said.

"I was. Derek refused, so I said, 'Bring it on.'"

The secretary moved in to block Simon as I followed Thierry into the office. As the door closed, I heard her whisper, "I think it's very sweet, you sticking up for your brother like that."

"I'm not trying to be sweet," Simon said, raising his voice so Thierry could hear. "I'm trying to be fair. But apparently no one's interested in that."

He stalked off, shoes thumping as loud as he could make them, office door slamming.

Thierry waved me into the hot seat, a rickety folding chair in front of his desk.

"We have a problem, Derek. You assaulted another student on school property. Do you know what that means?"

"It means if you plan to expel me, you would have called my dad yesterday, which means you *can't* expel me, probably because it was after school hours and I was trying to stop a fight, not start one."

His lips tightened and I knew I should have tried harder to be respectful, but I was tired of trying. If people wanted my respect, they could earn it by not asking stupid questions.

"There is a desk in front of Ms. Smalls's," he said. "Go out and get comfortable, Derek, because that's where you're going to be until I decide what to do with you."

And so I was sentenced to spend the day on display, gawked at by every kid who came into the office or peeked through the doorway.

First period had barely started before Ms. Carter, my science teacher, came in.

“Hey, Derek. I hear you get a change of scenery today. Lucky guy. Our classroom is freezing. I swear someone left the window open.”

I mumbled something. She was trying to be nice, and I did appreciate it, I just didn’t know what to say.

“I brought your work,” she said. “I know you’ll be done it in ten minutes, so I grabbed a book out of my private stash.”

She handed me the work and the book, and I said thanks. Then she stood there, like she wanted to say more. After a moment, she wheeled and strode to Thierry’s office.

The secretary leaped up. “He’s busy on the phone—”

Ms. Carter walked into the principal’s office before the secretary could finish. She shut the door and lowered her voice, but I could hear just fine.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “That boy has never caused any trouble—”

“Apparently because he hadn’t been here long enough.”

“We have students who can’t get through the day without a trip to the office. If the paper is right—and I don’t think they’d downplay it—then what happened was an accident.”

“What he *claims* happened. The other boys haven’t confirmed it, and the police haven’t made any determination yet.”

“Have you asked Derek what happened?”

“That’s not my job.”

“No, your job is to kowtow to a local politician, apparently. I hear you spent half the night on the phone with Travis Walker. Not too happy with the situation, I take it.”

“Of course not. His son—”

“—should have been kicked out the last time he was found with a knife on school property . . . and threatened a ninth grader with it. But you can’t expel him because Daddy might withdraw his sizable financial support.”

They fought for another few minutes. Then Ms. Carter stormed out. As I pretended to read my sheets, she took a second to compose herself, pulling on a bright smile. Then she came over and offered a few words of encouragement, promised I’d be back in class in no time, and told me just to relax and take advantage of the lightened workload.

A half hour later, my phone vibrated. I answered, getting a glare from the secretary even when I mouthed, *It’s my dad*.

“Hey, bud,” he said. “I hope you’re not answering your phone in class.”

“Nah. On a break.”

“Good. I was going to leave a message, but this is even better. How are things going?”

“Okay.”

He rambled on for another minute, talking about stupid stuff like did I remember my jacket because it was going to get cold, and joking that, really, no responsible parent should let his kid walk around in January without a coat and—

“Dad?” I cut in.

“Hmm?”

“What’s up?”

A pause. A long one. Then he cleared his throat. “We need to leave, Derek. The story made the Albany paper.” He went off on a rant about a slow news day and didn’t they have anything better to cover and why should it matter if the kid’s dad was a town councillor and you’d think someone like that wouldn’t raise thugs.

When he stopped, I asked if the article had named me.

“No, but it gave details. Unexplained strength, your age, that your dad is a lawyer, and that you were allegedly defending your adopted brother against racial taunts. If the people who are looking for me see that—”

“They’ll come looking to find out if it’s us.”

“We’re going to leave the state this time. I’ll get a different job. Nothing to do with law. I always thought I was being clever, staying in New York, working as a lawyer, the last thing they’d expect. I screwed up, Derek. And, once again, you guys have to pay the price. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. Simon—”

“Simon will. I know.” He sighed. “He’s got that big game tonight, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to wait until after that, then. I’ll tidy up my cases, take the rest of the day off, and get ready. I know you guys hate packing. I’ll do all that and pick you up at five.”

“Okay.”

“And . . . don’t tell Simon. Let him have his last day.”

I think he’d want to know, have the opportunity to say, “Forget the game—we should leave.” But Dad never gave Simon credit for stuff like that, always worrying he wouldn’t understand.

“See you at five?” he said.

“Yeah.”

Seven

I spent the rest of the day playing juvenile delinquent on display. I wasn't even allowed to leave for lunch. That got Simon going, demanding Ms. Smalls call Dad, but I talked him out of that. It wasn't like I'd be welcome eating with Simon and his friends today.

Simon stayed with me for lunch, which Ms. Smalls declared "so sweet," as did all the girls who passed, whispering how great Simon was, sticking up for his loser brother. Simon missed the worst of the comments, but he caught enough to make him grumble and glower as they popped their heads in, which only made them giggle and swoon all the more.

"So, let me get this straight," he said to me. "You save my ass and you're a loser. I stick up for you because of it and I'm a hero. How does that work?"

"I don't know. But it's so sweet."

He flipped me the finger and bit into his sandwich, shaking his head.

When the day ended, no one told me I could go. The principal left for a teachers' meeting. The secretary waited until he was out the door, then grabbed her purse and coat, and took off without a glance my way.

Thierry hadn't said anything about a detention, so I figured I was free to go. But that left me with a problem. I always watched Simon's games, and I knew this one was important. On the big-city teams, Simon was always an average player. Out here, though, where football and hockey were the sports of choice, Simon was a star on the basketball court. And this was one of their last regular-season games, so I should go.

I *wanted* to—I liked watching him play. The question was whether I'd distract him more if I didn't show or, under the circumstances, if I did.

We'd stayed behind so Simon could have this game, so I really didn't want to ruin it for him. I compromised by staking out a spot away from the bleachers, where he could see me, but I wasn't near the other kids. My biggest worry was Mark, but he didn't show up.

After the game, Simon ran over, face red, hair plastered down, eyes glowing.

"Did you see that?" he said.

"Yep. You won them the game."

"I *owned* the game." He grinned and ran his hand through his hair, spiking it up, sweat spraying. "Coach says this means we're in the semis. First time they've ever made it, and you know who got them there."

I smiled. "You did."

"And you know who's going to take them to the finals?"

My smile faltered then, but he only clapped me on the back and laughed. "Kidding. I'm no Michael Jordan. I just look good compared to these guys."

One of his teammates called from the gym, waving Simon over.

"Go on," I said. "Celebrate. You earned it."

"Actually, they're heading out for Cokes at Truman's. That okay? Tell Dad I'll be home by six?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"Or if you'd rather I didn't . . ." He waved his teammate off. "That's cool. Why don't we do something tonight? I know it's a school night, but special circumstances, right? I'll see if Dad'll give us a lift into Albany so we can catch a movie."

"It's not that." I paused. "We have to go, Simon."

"Go?" He said it slowly, like he was hoping he'd misheard.

“Dad’s picking us up at five.”

He stood there a moment, and I could tell he wanted to ask if I just meant we had to go home, but he didn’t dare because he knew the answer, and right now, he didn’t want to hear it.

“Go on,” I said, waving at the team. “Dad can pick you up at Truman’s at five thirty. That’s no big deal.”

“No, if we need to go . . .” He glanced at his team, then squared his shoulders. “Then we need to go. As soon as possible. I’ll get changed and meet you around front.”

By the time Simon got out, it was almost five. We stood on the curb, not talking, until 5:10. Then I checked my cell and he checked his. No calls from Dad.

“He must be stuck in traffic,” Simon said.

I shook my head. “He was heading home after lunch. He’s just running behind.”

After another five minutes, I called. The phone rang four times, then went to voice mail. I hung up and tried again, this time leaving a message.

“He’s probably on the line,” Simon said. “If it’s a judge, Dad won’t pick up another call, and he sure won’t say he has to take off to get his kids.”

“Yeah.”

Another five minutes. Simon’s coach pulled up to the curb before leaving, asking if everything was all right, and Simon said yes, we were just waiting for our dad. The coach left and the parking lot was empty.

“He did say five, right?” Simon asked. “Not five thirty?”

“Yeah.”

Another couple of minutes, then, “We’re really leaving, aren’t we? Dad’s picking us up, and we’re taking off and not coming back.”

I didn’t want to be the one to tell him, but I couldn’t lie either, so I said, “Yeah.” Then, “I’m sorry.”

He found a smile. “Hey, it’s not like this was the best school we’ve ever been at. Bottom three, I’d say. B-ball was the only thing it had going for it. And being the best on the team? Not exactly going to give me mad new skills. I need to be challenged, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“My friends weren’t very good friends if Mark was any example.”

“Yeah.”

“And Lily? The only reason we’re still together is because it’d be shitty to dump a girl before semi. She’s really nice, but . . . clingy, you know? Last night she texted me about ten times.”

“She probably heard what happened.”

“Nope. Just the usual. What am I doing? Am I thinking of her? How the hell am I supposed to answer that? Yes, I think about you every minute of the day. Seriously? Sure I think about her. Not always in the way she means.” He grinned. “But obviously I like her or I wouldn’t be with her, so why do I have to say it ten times a day? Sometimes I think you have the right idea. Next town? No girlfriends.”

I looked at him.

“Well, not right away. I have to start getting to know them better first.”

“Like spend ten minutes talking to them before asking them out?”

“Hey, I’m usually not the one doing the asking. Anyway, I won’t regret leaving this town. I’ll feel bad about not telling Lily, though. Maybe I can text her before Dad makes us trash the phones, say something nice.”

We fell silent for a few minutes. Then Simon checked his watch.

“Five thirty. Okay, this is stupid. We know which way Dad’ll be coming, so we might as well start walking.”

Eight

When we rounded the corner to our street, we saw Dad's van parked in the drive.

"Shit," I said, picking up speed.

Simon grinned. "Hey, I'm not complaining. With any luck, this means he's changed his mind and we're staying."

"I thought you didn't like it here."

"Not particularly, but I like moving even less."

I peered through the van windows as we passed. There was just the usual crap—no bags or boxes. Simon glanced in and his smile widened, taking this as a sign.

He ran to the side door of the house, used his key, and yanked it open.

"Hey, did you forget to call?" he yelled inside. "Or did you screw up our cell numbers again?" He glanced back at me. "That's the problem with making us change them every three months, huh?"

Simon kicked off his shoes and thumped into the house. When I followed, the first thing I noticed was the quiet—no TV, no radio, no CD. Dad always has something on. He jokes that after fifteen years with Simon, silence makes him nervous. If we were gone, he had on CNN or NPR or eighties pop music crap.

Simon brushed past, calling for Dad, some hesitation in his voice now. He turned slowly, looking and listening, then strode back into the hall where I still stood. As he headed for the door, I grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Hey!" he said.

My look silenced him. I pointed at the table just outside the kitchen. Dad's keys were there. The side door had been locked, which was normal—Dad always locked it even when he was inside. But he'd never lock it, leave, and forget his keys.

I motioned for Simon to stay behind as I eased into the hall, looking around, but mostly listening and sniffing. Werewolves get better night vision, but my daytime vision is normal. As soon as my enhanced hearing and smell kicked in a couple of years ago, I'd instinctively started relying on them more.

I walked silently down the hall, inhaling as I went. Even as I kid, I'd had a slightly better sense of smell than humans, so it wasn't like I'd woken up one day to realize people had different scents. That concept was hardwired in my brain. Getting my full wolf senses only meant I could pick up those smells in the air and on the ground, too.

The only scents in the house, though, were ours and faint traces of Simon's friends from the weekend.

I glanced back at Simon, still near the door. I hesitated, then motioned him up behind me—it felt safer that way. I crept through the main rooms, but there was no trace of anyone. I returned to the side door, dropped, and inhaled deeply. Just our scents. I tried the front. Dad's—strong, like he'd gone out since this morning. To grab the mail? Or something else? No smell could tell me that.

I straightened and looked around. The small house had only two exits, and there was no sign anyone else had come in either. All the windows were shut. None were broken. No scent trails crossed any of the room doorways, meaning no one had come in. If Dad left, he left on his own.

“That's good, isn't it?” Simon said after I explained.

I supposed so, but it opened more questions than it answered. Maybe some guys would grab their wallet and head down to the corner store for a paper, forgetting to pick up their kids, but Dad wouldn't even do that on a normal day. He wasn't that kind of guy.

I circled the house again, going room to room, examining every window, including the basement ones. I even opened the hatch into the attic, in case someone snuck in that way. But no one had been here in the last few days except us.

I told Simon we could stop sneaking around—clearly we were alone. But he stayed close to me, worried and quiet. I returned to the side door and followed Dad's trail from there, tracking his path through the house.

He'd gone straight from the side door to the kitchen.

"Grabbing something to eat," Simon said, checking the dishwasher. "Yep, extra coffee cup and a plate." That was the only way to tell Dad had eaten—he never left a mess . . . unlike some people I could name.

"Speaking of snacks . . ." I said.

"I'm good."

I gave him a look.

"Fine. I'll check my blood sugar."

It was low, as I expected—a combination of exercise, stress, and getting close to dinnertime. I made him a sandwich—ignoring his grumbling—then continued through the house.

Next Dad had gone into our room. There was a suitcase on each of our beds, the closet emptied into them. Simon's top drawer was open and partly empty.

"He was packing our stuff," Simon said between bites of his sandwich. "Then he stopped."

Interrupted. But by what?

I walked into the kitchen and checked the phone. The last call had been the one the night before, from a blocked number.

Something buzzed beside me. I looked over to see Dad's phone vibrating on the counter, tucked under some mail. Simon was on his cell, calling Dad's number. We both grabbed for the phone. I won.

I checked the call log. All the recent ones were from Simon and me. Before that, there were only three calls, all from Albany numbers. Work, I guessed, people touching base after Dad left early.

I closed the cell phone and put it on the counter.

"What happened here?" Simon asked.

"I don't know."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

For the next hour, we didn't do anything. Nothing useful anyway. We tried to act like there was a perfectly logical explanation, and Dad would show up at any moment. I reheated the pizza and got out the salad. Simon struggled to do his homework, as if he thought we were heading back to school the next day. He knew better, but we just didn't know what else to do.

After dinner, I took a shower while Simon finished packing his suitcase. When I came out, he was waiting in the hall.

"We need to do something," he said.

"I know. I just—" I stopped before admitting I had no idea *what* to do. I could feel the weight of his stare, of his expectations. He was looking to me for a plan because that's how it always

worked. Simon took the lead in simple stuff, like where we'd eat lunch or what movie we'd watch, but solving problems was my department.

"You can follow his trail, right?" Simon said.

"What?"

"Dad's trail. See which door it went out and where. It's getting dark, so no one's going to see you sniffing the ground."

The dead obvious solution and I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it. Sure, it made sense to wait until after dark, but I wouldn't have cared what the neighbors thought.

I went out the side door first. There were two trails from Dad here. One came straight from the driver's side of the van. The other went out to the curb and reeked from a slug-trail of leaking garbage sludge. Dad had put out the garbage. That was one of my regular chores, but I'd forgotten it that morning, and of course he hadn't reminded me, given the circumstances. . . .

The circumstances. What I'd done. The reason Dad was missing. Because I couldn't control—

"Derek?"

I straightened. "Just to the van and a garbage run."

I went back to the front door. His trail was thicker there, like he'd gone to the door a couple of times. Once he'd just stepped out—the mail probably. But another trail continued down the front walk, then cut across the grass to the curb, then . . .

Dad's trail ended at the curb. No matter how hard I tried to find it through the stink of the road, it obviously didn't go any farther. Nor did it double back to the house.

"He got into a car, didn't he?" Simon said behind me.

"Seems like it."

“Whose car? Can you pick up his trail?”

I went back to the front door and sniffed. I did a lot of sniffing, following for at least ten minutes before finally giving up.

“There are at least a dozen trails,” I said. “People delivering mail, flyers, parcels, takeout . . .”

“Can’t you pick out the ones you don’t recognize?”

“I don’t recognize *most*.”

“Can’t you follow those? See where they lead?”

“I’m not a bloodhound.”

“We need to know what happened here.”

“No shit. But your guess is as good as mine, okay?”

We looked at each other then turned to stare out across the front yard until I caught a movement behind the window across the road. Our nosy old lady neighbor peered out.

“We should get back inside,” I said.

Simon nodded and followed me in.

“We need to go,” I said as I closed the door.

“What?”

“Dad’s missing. Vanished. We have to get out of here.”

“Why? If it was his old employer, they won’t bother us. If it wasn’t, then this is all a mix-up and he’ll be back, expecting to find us here.”

“Dad always said—”

“I don’t care what Dad always said. I’m sick of hearing what Dad always said.” His voice cracked with panic. He looked away and I knew he was scared—for us and for Dad—and I

wanted to tell him it was okay, that I'd caused this problem and I'd fix it, but I had no idea where even to begin.

"Why'd he have to do it?" Simon said, still turned away. "Why couldn't he just—"

"Help his bosses screw over other supernaturals so his kids could lead normal lives?"

"No, course not. I don't mean—" He bit the words off, then turned back to me, chin lifted.

"Yes. You know what? That's exactly what I mean. He helped other supernaturals. Big whoop. You don't see them helping us now, do you? They've all gone back to their normal lives and we're the ones on the run. Don't give me that shit about principles either. I don't give a damn about principles. All I care about is—"

"Dad."

He didn't say anything, just stood there, then tore his gaze away, stomped into his room, and slammed the door.

I wandered through the house for a while. I'd like to say I was searching for clues, but I wasn't. I was just moving, trying to trick my mind into thinking I was taking action. It wasn't fooled.

I ended up at our bedroom door. I leaned against it.

"I know you're—" I began.

"I'm not leaving. Not until I'm sure he's gone."

"We'll have our phones. If Dad comes back, he'll call. We really need to get out of here before—"

"Before what?" He yanked open the door so fast I stumbled. "Why would we be in danger if they took Dad?"

"I don't know."

“Don’t you?” He lifted his gaze to mine, eyes hard. “Are you sure?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I get the feeling Dad told you something he didn’t tell me.”

“He didn’t.”

He studied me a moment before backing down. “Fine, but unless you’ve got some reason to think we’re in danger, I’m not leaving until morning, when I’m sure he’s gone.”

He closed the door. I lowered myself to the floor and settled in for a long night.

Nine

It was almost ten that night when the phone rang. Inside our room, I heard Simon jump up, then grunt and drop back onto the bed. I walked into the kitchen and checked caller ID. The local police station. I answered, in case it was about Dad. It was Detective Fulbright.

“Can I speak to your father?” he asked.

“He’s not here,” I said. “He had to run back to work for a file. You can try his cell.”

“No, that’s fine. Have him call me in the morning.”

Before he could hang up, I blurted, “Is he okay?”

He paused. The line crackled. “What’s that?”

“The guy I threw. Is he okay?”

A longer pause now, and maybe I was imagining it, but there seemed to be some sympathy in his voice when he said, “No, son. He’s not.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think I should speak to your father about that.”

“I’d like to know.”

“There’s . . . some injury to the spine.”

I waited for more details. When he didn’t give them, I said, “Is it serious?”

“I really should speak to your father, son.”

I gripped the phone so hard my hand ached and I wanted to say “I’m sorry,” but instead I mumbled, “I’ll have him call when he gets in,” and hung up.

I stood there, still holding the receiver, and stared out the window. A full moon lit the yard. Dad says werewolves don’t Change with the moon cycles, but tonight I felt the urge, not to

change into a wolf and howl at the stars, but just run, let the full moon light my way as I got as far from here as I could, before I did any more damage.

I should have gone last night. Slipped away as soon as I realized I'd hurt that kid, before everything went to hell, before Dad disappeared. But the thought hadn't crossed my mind, and even if it had, I don't think I'd have acted on it. I didn't *want* to run away. I wanted to stay with Dad and Simon.

I couldn't think like that anymore. I was a werewolf, and if the day came when being a werewolf put them in danger, then I should leave. They'd already spent ten years on the run because of me. Deep down I'd always known that. I just hadn't let myself believe it.

When I was little, I didn't have werewolf hearing, but like my sense of smell, it must have been better than average, because I heard the arguments Dad had on the phone before we left. Later, when we were old enough to understand, he said his company wanted him to blackmail ex-employees. Instead he'd warned his former colleagues, taken us, and run. But his company wouldn't let him get away that easily. He knew too much. So they hunted him.

It was a good story. There was only one problem. During those fights, I'd caught one word used over and over. A word my ears were particularly attuned to: my name.

Later, when he'd explained about the blackmail, I'd told myself that they'd discussed me because I was part of the argument: "Hey, don't forget we gave you Derek, so you'd better do as we say or we'll take him." Only I never quite believed that. We'd run because those people had wanted me again. They'd decided I was too dangerous to be out in the world.

Now I'd put a kid in a coma, maybe broken his back.

"What are you doing?"

I started from my thoughts to feel cold metal under my fingers. I was at the side door, hand on the knob.

“I asked what you’re doing.” Simon strode over, getting between me and the door.

“Checking to make sure it’s locked.”

“You need shoes for that?”

“Shoes?” I glanced down. I was wearing my sneakers.

“You need your wallet?” He waved at my back pocket. “Cell phone?”

I stood there, not knowing what to say. I didn’t remember grabbing my wallet and phone. Or putting on my shoes. Or coming to the side door. It was like my subconscious had taken over—I was thinking about running away, and without realizing it, I’d started doing exactly that.

“I wasn’t going to—” I began.

“You’d better not. Dad disappears and you think you’ll do the same?”

“No, I wouldn’t—”

He cut me off with a wave, still blocking the door, like I might make a run for it. I pulled off my sneakers and laid them on the mat. Simon looked at them, and I knew he was thinking of the last time.

We’d been in first grade. Simon had cut in front of me in line at school. I’d given him a shove. Just goofing around, both of us. I hadn’t been that big for my age, but Simon was almost a year younger and the smallest guy in class, so when I pushed, he’d fallen against the fountain and gotten a bloody nose.

Simon hadn’t cared about that. He’d just felt bad for getting me in trouble. I’d freaked out, though, certain this was proof that I was dangerous and Dad would send me back before I really hurt Simon. So I’d tried to run away.

Simon caught me and took away my shoes. The next day, he'd refused to tell Dad where he put them, so I'd had to wear rubber boots to school. Realizing his plan wasn't foolproof, Simon had returned my sneakers that night and made me promise never to run away again.

I picked up my shoes from the mat. "You can take them if you want. They smell a whole lot worse now, though."

I was trying to make him smile, but he only scowled, like this wasn't something he wanted to joke about.

"It's not your fault Dad's gone," he said. "If you want someone to blame, look at the guy who didn't have the brains to walk away from three redneck seniors."

"You didn't—"

"I couldn't let it go. I had to be a smart-ass. How many times has Dad warned that my mouth was going to get us in trouble? Well, it did. So how about we make a deal? You stop brooding—"

"I'm not—"

"Oh yes, you are. You stop brooding and blaming yourself. I'll stop sulking and blaming myself, and we'll actually try to do something about the situation. Deal?"

I only dimly caught the last bit, my attention fixed on the front window as a police car drove past.

"Derek. Hello? I'm—" He followed my gaze and saw the car. "Oh."

He moved toward the window. I grabbed for his arm, but he shot me a look, telling me he wasn't going to do anything stupid, and sidestepped into the shadow of the curtain. Then he leaned around for a better look as the cop car rolled by.

When it kept going, I said, “You’re right. We need to do something. What about that spell Dad taught you?”

“For locating him?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think I was doing in our room? I’ve been casting that spell, trying to get a fix on him. I couldn’t.”

I wasn’t surprised. Having just turned fifteen meant Simon had only begun spell-casting practice a couple of years ago. He hadn’t mastered the locator spell, which wasn’t surprising either.

A friend of Dad’s had found the spell in an old grimoire. Most lost spells, though, are lost for a reason. Some just aren’t very useful anymore, like ones to light candles. Others are so tricky to use that they’re practically useless. The locator spell was one of those. Even Dad could only get it working under the right conditions.

Simon stared out the window. “You still want to go, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

We emptied our school backpacks. I made a basic overnight bag. Simon packed that plus his diabetic gear. While he gathered his stuff, a police car rolled past again, going the other way. When Simon found me, I was at the window, as close as I dared get, watching the taillights disappear around the corner.

“Cops again?” he said.

I nodded.

“Should we still go?” He lifted a hand before I could say anything. “I’m not looking for an excuse to stay. I’m just not sure taking off at night is the best idea. In this town, if the cops see us, they’ll stop. Hell, if *anyone* sees us, they’ll call the cops before we go on a wild rampage soaping windows.”

“You’re right.” I pulled back from the window. “We’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

Ten

I didn't sleep. Simon drifted off a few times. The first two times he woke up, he said, "Did Dad call?" After that, he didn't ask.

We got up at dawn. I made breakfast. Simon didn't want any. I said we couldn't have him get low on the road, and that made him eat. It was too early to leave anyway.

While Simon paced around, waiting for the word to go, I packed food. I knew we wouldn't get good choices on the road, and I really needed to make sure Simon's blood sugar stayed stable. If it went too low, he'd get tired. Too high, and he'd get irritable. He was getting better at managing it himself, but his attention was somewhere else right now, so it was up to me to keep him on track.

At eight, I was digging through the closet, checking carb counts on food, when the doorbell rang. Simon's footsteps thudded from the bedroom, then slowed as he realized Dad wouldn't be ringing the bell. I glanced through into the living room and saw a car in the drive—a big dark blue sedan, like an unmarked cop car.

"Simon!" I hissed, trying to get his attention, tell him not to answer.

He waved me back. I hesitated, but he was right. If it was the cops, then it would be worse if we didn't answer. Besides, they could be coming to tell us something about Dad. As he opened the door, I eased back to watch from the next room. The angle was wrong, but I could make out two uniformed cops.

"Is your father home?" one asked.

"Sure." Simon turned and bellowed, "Dad!"

"He's in the shower," I called, withdrawing so the cops wouldn't see me.

"Huh," Simon said. "Just a sec. I'll get him."

He slammed the door then very carefully locked it. He ran down the hall, thumping as loud as he could, yelling, “Dad! There’s a couple police officers here to see you!”

He slowed, quieting his footsteps, and slipped into the kitchen, whispering. “Now what?”

It wouldn’t be long before the cops figured out Dad wasn’t coming. If they were here with a warrant for my arrest, then I was pretty sure they could break in to find me, especially since they’d already heard my voice. We had to get out.

The house didn’t have a back door or a garage. Sneaking out the side wouldn’t be safe. So Simon grabbed our bags and jackets as I took out the screen on the big dining room window. I waved Simon through. It was a tight squeeze for me, but I made it.

As we crossed the backyard, heading for the tool shed, I could hear the cops talking on the porch. It was just small talk at first, then one said, “Ring it again.”

“I just did,” the other replied. “And it’s gotten very quiet in there.”

“Shit. Better call it in.”

I waved Simon behind the shed. When he went for the rear fence, I shook my head and whispered that I was listening to the cops.

“We’re stuck outside the house,” one said to his supervisor. He explained what had happened so far then said, “How long do you want us to wait before going in?” He paused. “I know.” Pause. “I know. But considering what we’re dealing with, a little caution is in order, don’t you think?”

The hair on my neck rose. I shook it off. No reason to freak out. They meant they were dealing with a kid with a history of violence and possible steroid use.

“Fine, we’ll go in. But we want backup on the way. Got it?” Pause. “No, right now or I don’t budge from this spot.” He hung up.

“What’d she say?” his partner asked.

“She wants you to go around and cover the back in case they bolt.”

I backed up behind the shed fast. The gate squeaked as one cop came into the backyard.

Simon frowned at me.

“They’re afraid we’ll bolt,” I whispered.

His frown grew. I knew what he was thinking. If these guys had come to arrest me or ask Dad to bring me into the station to be charged, then while that was serious, it wasn’t the kind of thing that would make a normal man—especially a lawyer—grab his kids and go on the run.

Was I sure these were really cops? The uniforms said so, but I couldn’t get close enough to see how real they looked. And the unmarked car with uniformed officers seemed a little weird.

They hadn’t said a word about Dad specifically. Did they know he wasn’t here . . . because they were with the people who’d taken him, now coming back for us?

And they’d waited all night to return? They might if they didn’t want to make a scene late at night. But wouldn’t night be safer? Grabbing us now, when people were heading out to work, seemed even more dangerous.

If they were the ones who’d grabbed Dad and they wanted us, too, wouldn’t they be worried we’d have reported him missing? Maybe we’d have taken off last night?

“Derek?” Simon whispered.

I ran my hand through my hair. Too many damned questions. My brain doesn’t deal well with ambiguity.

“Did you get a good look at those cops?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Was their uniform right? For the local police?”

“Huh? I guess so. . . .”

It had been a long shot—I wouldn’t have known myself, but being an artist, Simon pays more attention to detail. He’d have noticed if they were state cops, but I doubted he’d seen the local ones enough to say, “Hey, that badge isn’t right.”

I looked around. The chain-link fence Simon had started climbing earlier was our best way out of the yard. I peered at the house behind us. The windows were dark. Did that mean the neighbors were gone already? Or not up yet? I had no idea—our rear neighbors could be a family with kids or old people and I wouldn’t know. Never paid any attention. I should have. I really should have.

I listened. Everything seemed quiet in the house behind ours—whether they were away or asleep, we’d be safe as long as we were careful. I waved for Simon to go as I stood watch. I followed, then we snuck along to the street.

Eleven

“Now what?” Simon murmured as we reached the sidewalk.

“Act normal, like we’re heading into school early for a practice.”

I took out my cell.

“Who’re you calling?” he asked.

I motioned for him to wait, then dialed information. When I asked for the local police, they put me right through. Growing up fast means I don’t sound like a kid a few weeks from his sixteenth birthday, so when I asked for Detective Fulbright, the dispatcher connected me without question. It rang three times, then voice mail answered.

“That didn’t do any good,” I muttered as I hung up.

Simon arched his brows.

“I was trying to find out if the detective sent those guys,” I said.

“You don’t think they’re real cops?”

I shrugged. “They probably are.”

We walked a half block, then Simon said, “You know who we *should* call? Andrew. Dad said if we were ever in trouble—”

“If you thought that still applied, we’d have had this discussion last night.”

“I know we haven’t seen Andrew in a couple years—”

“After he and Dad had a big fight.”

“But they’re still in touch,” Simon said. “And Dad never said we should stop using him as an emergency contact.”

“Maybe it was implied.”

Simon fell silent. I knew that didn't mean he was giving up, just that he wasn't sure of his position on the matter. Neither was I. When we were little, Andrew Carson was Dad's best friend. He was another sorcerer who used to work with Dad, so Dad said if we were ever in trouble, that's who we should go to. But a couple of years ago, they had a falling-out. They still talked and Andrew sent us birthday and Christmas gifts. We just didn't visit anymore.

Did that mean we shouldn't call him? I wasn't sure, and I suspected the reason I hadn't suggested it already was that I wasn't all that comfortable with the idea of running to Andrew.

Simon had always been closer to Andrew than I was, and sometimes I felt like . . . I don't know. I guess I'm touchy about that, especially with a guy who knows I'm a werewolf. I can't help jumping to the conclusion *that's* what makes him hold back, when the truth is that Simon's just a whole lot easier to like.

So I said we should call Andrew.

"No, you're right," Simon said. "We will if we need to, but I think we should keep that as the backup plan. There's that guy in Albany we can try first. The one who got Dad the job. He knows about us. We can see if he knows anything. Before we do that, though, we should find out if those guys at the house are really cops. Because if they aren't, then they must be the ones who took Dad, so we should follow them."

"How? Run after the car really, really fast?"

He gave me a look. "*Drive* obviously. We have Dad's keys. You look old enough that no one's going to pull you over. Sure, it's illegal, but under the circumstances? Not really an issue."

He had a point.

"Let me call the department again," I said. "I'll—"

I stopped as a cop car rolled around the corner—a real one, complete with decals. I grabbed Simon's arm, but it was too late to get away before they saw us. If we ran, they'd come after us, whether they'd been looking for us or not.

I tried to keep walking, calmly, as the car approached. The officers looked our way, then the car rolled past.

Simon let out an exaggerated sigh of relief, cut short by a quick intake of breath. I followed his gaze to the car's brake lights, flashing red. A chirp as the car stopped on the wet road.

"Run?" Simon whispered.

I shook my head. The car turned around and came back. The officer rolled down his window.

"Derek Brown?"

My last name was Souza, but Brown was the one on my ID, and I'd been using it so long I probably wouldn't even answer to Souza.

"Detective Fulbright has been trying to get hold of your dad," the cop said after I nodded.

"He should be at home."

I held my breath, waiting for him to say a car had already been there. When he didn't, Simon leaned forward and said, "We saw a car heading over there. Looked like an unmarked cruiser. We figured they were going to talk to him."

The cop frowned and Simon elbowed me, but that didn't prove anything. These guys were just cruising by, saw me, and remembered hearing that Detective Fulbright wanted to talk to my dad.

When the cop said he didn't know anything about that, Simon grinned. "Good, because we thought maybe they were coming to arrest Derek. Just our luck, they'd come roaring up once we got to school. So I guess he's safe for now?"

The cop assured him they wouldn't do anything like that. "If they decided to charge him, your dad can bring him in."

"No handcuffs and sirens? Damn."

The cop laughed and talked with Simon for a minute. He was a good enough guy. Dad said most cops were—it was just the bad ones you remembered.

Simon promised we'd phone Dad and remind him about calling the detective, and the cop asked Simon about the game last night, having heard he was on the team, and I tried not to get impatient, knowing Simon was doing the right thing, chatting the guy up, not acting the least bit suspicious, but I couldn't help looking around, wanting to get going.

As I was staring down the empty road, a dark blue sedan crossed the intersection, the windows so dark I couldn't see who was in it, but I knew anyway: the so-called cops from the house. They stopped halfway through the intersection, like they'd seen us.

Simon was still yapping with the cop. I walked behind him and reached for the back door handle, as if the cop had told me to get in, and the other sedan sped off.

"We should get going," I said. "I'm in enough trouble at school without being late."

Simon checked his watch and swore. The officer offered us a lift, but Simon said having me dropped off by the cops was probably not a good idea, and the guy agreed, saying he was sure everything would work out. Then he left.

We jogged to the end of the road. I told Simon about the sedan, but there was no sign of it.

"We should get the van," Simon said.

"And do what? Drive around aimlessly, hope we see the car again?"

"Why not? If those weren't cops, they have Dad."

I wasn't sure I agreed, but the set of Simon's mouth said he wasn't giving in on this. He needed those guys to be the ones who had Dad. It was the only solid lead we had.

So I said okay, and we walked back as fast as we dared. When we got close to our house, we could see the driveway. It was empty.

"No," Simon whispered. He jogged forward, getting a better look, just in case, murmuring, "No, no, no," under his breath.

The minivan was gone.

When we got to the side door, it was still locked. Simon unlocked it while I peered through the windows, looking for signs of anyone inside. Simon glanced at me and I nodded, so he opened the door. I strode past him into the house. I checked the table where Dad had left the car keys. They were gone.

Simon brushed past me into the kitchen.

"They took his cell phone, too."

I headed to the bedroom. The half-packed suitcases we'd left on the floor were gone.

"Who is this?" Simon said from the kitchen.

I raced in there so fast I almost tripped. I should have searched the house—the whole house.

Simon stood in the kitchen . . . on his cell phone. "I know someone's there," he said.

I took the phone from him and punched the End button.

"Hey!" He grabbed for it. "I was—"

"Calling Dad's number to see who answered."

"And someone did. They didn't say anything, but they were there."

"Keeping you on the line while they traced the call."

He blinked, and I knew he hadn't thought of that, but he only lifted his chin, defiant. "So I let them know where we are? Good. Having them come here is easier than chasing them down.

We'll hide and—"

"And hope they don't have spells to sniff us out? Hope they really are the guys who took Dad?"

"Of course they are."

"Yeah? Then why come this morning and not last night? Why ask for Dad if they knew he was gone?"

Simon glowered and strode past me.

"What? It makes sense, doesn't it?" I said.

"Sure. It's obvious, and I'm a moron for not figuring it out on my own."

"I never said that."

"You don't need to, Derek. You never need to."

He opened the front door.

I raced into the hall. "Don't—"

"—walk out the front door? You really think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

Leaving the door ajar, he walked to the basement and flipped on the light, then headed back toward the rear.

"Are you coming?" he called. "Or waiting until they show up?"

I looked from the front door to the basement. "Oh, you want to make them think we're hiding in the basement. That should slow them down enough for us to get away. It's a good—"

"Don't say it."

"I was just—"

“Going to pat me on the head for having a bright idea. It’s condescending, Derek. Normally I let it slide, but today I’m just not in the mood.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You never do. Now come on or we’ll still be bickering when the bad guys show up.”

Twelve

We escaped the same way we had before. Next stop: Albany, to track down the sorcerer who'd helped Dad get his job. The only problem? Getting to Albany. The last time I'd thought of running away from home had been when Simon took my shoes, so I'd never realized that, when it came to getting away, there were some serious disadvantages to living in a small town, namely the lack of public transportation options.

The only way out was by bus, meaning it would be the first place anyone would look for us. Even if we managed to get on without being stopped, we were recognizable enough that the staff would remember where we'd gone.

The minivan would have been perfect. Without that, we were screwed. Even if we knew how to steal a car, we wouldn't. And hitchhiking was too dangerous. I might have superhuman strength, but it wouldn't help us if a guy pulled a gun. Even more likely, we'd get some Good Samaritan who insisted on taking us back home.

So we were stuck with the simplest option: walking the twenty miles to Albany.

There was a secondary two-lane highway Dad took when we weren't in a hurry. We headed for that, backpacks over our shoulders, pockets stuffed with money we'd grabbed from the stash Dad kept, more from an ATM at the strip mall near our place.

Simon had barely said a word to me since we'd left. He's good at holding a grudge. Most people are, which is something I don't understand myself. It's like when I fight with Dad. I'll blow up over something, say stuff I shouldn't, but I don't mean it and he knows I don't. When I cool down—and I always cool down fast—I'll try to talk to him about his day or get him to play a video game with me, and he won't. He says you can't just explode at someone and bounce back, expect everything to be okay. I didn't see why not. I wasn't mad anymore. He knew I got

moody and didn't mean to blow up, so I should be able to say sorry and go back to normal.

Apparently no one else sees it that way. Not Dad, at least. And not Simon.

"Did you text, uh . . ." I searched for the name but came up blank. "Your girlfriend."

"Lily."

"Right. She, uh, seemed nice."

He gave me a look that said I was full of shit and he was insulted if I expected him to believe I remembered anything about Lily. I never paid much attention to Simon's girlfriends. Mutual avoidance, I guess. They avoided me except when they wanted to score brownie points by being nice to Simon's loser brother. I don't play that game, so I stay away when they're around.

"Did you text her?" I asked again.

"No."

"You wanted to do that."

He said nothing.

"I think you should," I continued. "It'd be nice."

Simon snorted.

"What?"

He shook his head.

I looked up into the blazing sun, then pointed to a tree past the ditch. "We should take a break, get out of the sun for a while. And you should eat something."

"Get out of the sun? It's barely above freezing, and that tree has no leaves, meaning no shade. I just had a banana five minutes ago, so I shouldn't eat again until lunch."

"You could text Lily."

He looked at me for a moment, struggling to stay serious, before breaking into a laugh and smacking me on the back, shaking his head.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing, bro. Fine. We’ll sit. I’ll text. You eat. We’ll stop fighting, and that’s the point, isn’t it?”

Simon and I are both in good shape, but that walk was more than either of us were used to. Dad always said it was twenty miles, but I think he was rounding down. Between breaks to sit and eat and check Simon’s blood sugar, it took all day to get to Albany. To the edge of Albany.

By then, Simon was wiped out. He needed a long rest and good food so, ignoring his insistence that we could grab something from a convenience store, I found a cheap-looking family-style sit-down place. We had money, but we had no idea how long we’d need to make it last, so we had to be careful.

As we ate, we dredged our memories for anything we could recall about Dad’s local sorcerer friend. Considering we’d just spent a full day hiking, you’d think we’d have done that on the way. But I think we both realized how little we knew and didn’t dare discuss it for fear we’d realize we had no reason to go to Albany . . . and no idea what we could do instead.

We had a first name. Paul. Not very helpful. I thought his last name was Khan. Simon was sure it was Khanna. Indian, we knew that. And Simon thought his first name might actually be Pallav, using Paul as an Americanized nickname.

Paul/Pallav Khan/Khanna was a former Cabal sorcerer that Dad had helped out years ago. The problem with Cabals, though, is that once you’ve pissed them off, they don’t forget it. You

might slide off their hit list, but you're always going to be on their watch list, so Paul would be living under the radar, probably with an assumed name. Really not helpful.

While we ate, Simon called directory assistance. He managed to get a live operator. She spent at least ten minutes trying to help him, even checking unlisted numbers.

Simon's good at getting strangers to bend the rules for him. He says he learned it from Dad, but I think it must be inherited, because no matter how carefully I study the way they talk to people, I can't do it myself. Can't really bring myself to try all that hard either, though.

Anyway, Simon spouted some story about being at the bus station, supposed to call this cousin of his mom's, only he'd lost the paper with the number and he couldn't get hold of his mom, and he was stuck there, and it was getting late. . . .

The operator totally bought it. It didn't help, though. No listing for a Khan or Khanna, first name Paul or Pallav.

"We know he works for the government," Simon said after hanging up. "Which doesn't really narrow it down in Albany. I think Dad said it was city government, though, not state. So I can make some calls in the morning. For now . . . Hey, didn't we go to Paul's place once? When Dad had to drop stuff off?"

"Yeah. But Dad just pulled up outside and ran in. All I remember is that it was an apartment building on a street with a lot of apartment buildings."

"Well, that's a start. I think it was downtown, too. Or close to downtown. I remember there was a used game store nearby. We'd just gotten the Xbox and Dad let us pick out a few games. We'll look up stores in the core, then just walk around, see if anything . . ." He glanced out the window. It was pitch black. Had been for the last two hours.

“We’ll wait until morning,” I said. “It’ll be Saturday, so we won’t attract any attention, wandering around.”

“So, I guess for now we—”

“Find a place to sleep.”

“Right.”

We looked out into the night. Rain had begun to drizzle down.

“Maybe I should get dessert,” Simon said. “To keep my blood sugar up tonight.”

“Good idea,” I said.

We stalled at the diner for as long as we could, then headed out into the night. The sun was long gone, taking any heat with it, and the drizzling rain had turned to slush. My plan was to find an abandoned building, but we soon realized we were in the wrong part of town for that. It was mainly residential, and a growing residential area, meaning we had no hope of finding what I wanted.

After trudging along for an hour, searching for an empty place I could break into, we gave up. I found a field where a building had been razed to make way for houses. The foundation of the old place was still there, and there wasn’t any construction equipment or material on the lot yet, so it wasn’t guarded. I led Simon to a spot out of the wind. It sucked, but it was the best I could do.

It didn’t take long to realize my best wasn’t good enough. The wind still whipped in. The ground was ice-cold and damp. And the temperature was finally plummeting to normal January temperatures. I don’t get cold easily, but I was shivering. Simon was bundled up in three sweatshirts and a jacket, and his teeth wouldn’t stop chattering, no matter how hard he tried to

hide it. He pretended to sleep, but I knew he didn't. We huddled there all night, cold and miserable, waiting for dawn.

As soon as we saw a hint of gray in the sky, we set out. We didn't go far—it was still too dark to be wandering the streets. We found a coffee shop and hung out there until the morning rush hit and the manager told us to move on. Simon tried pulling out his usual charm, but he was too tired to muster any.

We snuck into the bathroom and got another twenty minutes of warmth as we cleaned up. Or tried to. I needed more than a bathroom sink to do the job. My scalp itched, greasy hanks of hair tickled my face, and I stunk. Washing my armpits and slathering on deodorant didn't change that. Doubling up my shirts hadn't been my smartest idea ever—now I had only one clean sweatshirt to change into, so I was saving it for later. For now, my jacket would stifle most of the smell.

Simon called the city bus department next and got a route that would take us downtown. It was slow—we had to transfer twice—but cheaper than a cab. We found a library, and I searched online for used video game stores. None within a three-mile radius. I tried just “video games” instead and got two.

We photocopied area maps and headed out. We took a bus to the first store and found it in a mall, which we knew wasn't right. By then it was lunchtime, which meant another stop. On then to store number two, which was out of business . . . and not the right one either.

So we walked. And walked and walked. Simon cast the spell Dad taught him as we went.

“How long can we do this before you start bitching?” Simon said as we turned down another street of apartment buildings.

“What?”

“We’ve been walking for two days now, and you haven’t complained once. It’s damned annoying, you know.”

I looked at him.

“If you don’t complain, then I can’t complain,” he said. “Not without sounding like a whiny little snot.”

“My shoes are soaked,” I said. “I can’t feel my toes anymore.”

“Thank you. I lost feeling in my feet before lunch. I think even my brain froze hours ago, because I swear I wouldn’t recognize Paul’s apartment if we walked right past it. We’re not really doing anything out here, Derek. We’re just walking around because if we stop, we’re going to have to admit we’re totally lost and completely screwed.”

That about summed it up.

“Call Andrew.” I stopped walking and looked off into the distance. “I don’t know what else—” I stopped, then pointed to a strip mall. “Isn’t that where the video game store was? It’s not there now, but that looks like—”

“It is.” Simon grinned. “I remember the pizza place next door. You snuck in and grabbed a slice while I was picking out games.”

I’d forgotten that, but now that he’d mentioned it, I remembered.

“Paul’s place was down there,” I said, pointing. “One of those buildings. It had a broken fountain in front.”

“Let’s hope it still does.”

Thirteen

We found the building, complete with fountain, still broken, now turned into a raised garden . . . or what would be a garden in spring. Right now, the only thing blooming in it was broken beer bottles.

I'd been kicking myself for not remembering the pizza place. Now I kept kicking myself for not remembering more about the apartment. I needed to pay attention to stuff like that. If I had, I'd have remembered what I thought the last time I saw this place: *At least we don't need to live like this.*

Dad always made sure we stayed in good places. Sure, when kids at school found out he was a lawyer, they'd make cracks about how he must not be a very good one, since we didn't live in a big, fancy house. But it was always a decent home in a good neighborhood. This building, though, was a dump. Even I'd think twice about coming in late at night. It was late Saturday afternoon, and a trio of punks had already staked out territory on the fountain, a six-pack of beer at their feet, though they weren't much older than us.

Whatever government job Paul held, I was sure it paid him enough for a better place. Was he in so much trouble with the Cabal that he had to hide *this* deep? I couldn't remember what he'd done, only that Dad said it was a stupid mistake. Really stupid.

We walked past the losers on the fountain. They saw Simon first—he was hurrying ahead, paying no attention as usual—and one slid off his perch, gaze locked on Simon like a hawk spotting a scurrying mouse.

“Hold up,” I said.

Simon stopped. The guy gave me a once-over, then shoved his hands into his pockets and backed on to the fountain again. He couldn't resist a parting insult—something about my skin,

my hair, whatever, mumbled under his breath for the benefit of his friends. I heard, of course. Ignored it. Grabbed the door as Simon opened it. Went inside.

Paul wasn't listed on the directory. Most residents weren't. When a girl about twelve came out, though, Simon asked if she knew him. She did. Apartment 512, down the hall from hers.

We found it. Knocked. No answer. Knocked again. Nothing. There was a sheet of paper stuck under the door. I checked both ways, making sure no one was around, then bent and pulled it out. A note from a neighbor, reminding Paul that he'd promised to buy cookies from her daughter. His order was in, and she needed the money Friday—yesterday.

Simon knocked on the next door. An old woman answered.

“Hi, my name's Brent.” Simon extended a hand and a blazing smile.

“Don't want any,” she said, and started closing the door.

“Oh, I'm not selling anything. Not now anyway.” He grinned. She scowled. He went on. “My mom works with your neighbor Paul. He bought four chocolate bars from me for my school trip fund-raiser. Only he wasn't at work yesterday, so Mom drove me over to collect. I need the money by Monday or I won't have enough for the trip. He's not answering, though. Have you seen him?”

“No.”

She slammed her door and shot the bolt. Undaunted, Simon moved to the neighbor on the opposite side. This time he amended the pitch from a school fund-raiser to a charity raising money to help a dying five-year-old girl whose parents couldn't afford a dialysis machine. A bit over the top, I thought, but it worked. Managed to squeeze a tear from the guy at the door, who tried to shell out twenty bucks for the cause. That made Simon hesitate—we could use the

money—but after a glance my way, he gave it back and said he'd return later with the official donation forms.

“Have you seen Paul, though?” he pressed. “Mom thought it was weird, him not being at work then not at home today. He isn't that kind of guy.”

“Don't know him that well,” the man said. “Keeps to himself and so do I. We usually leave at the same time in the morning, though. Say hi, talk about hockey. He's an Islanders fan, and I was going to razz him after their wipeout Thursday night, but I didn't see him yesterday morning. Didn't hear the TV on Thursday either. Not that he cranks it up, but with these walls, you can hear a sneeze. Last time I saw him, then, would have been Thursday morning.”

The same morning the article on my incident had appeared in the Albany newspaper. Was that a coincidence? I hoped so.

Simon thanked the guy. We walked away. When the neighbor's door closed, Simon tugged my sleeve, stopping me. He nodded to Paul's door.

“Can you open it?” he whispered.

“I'll try.”

While Simon stood watch, I grasped Paul's door handle. I snapped the lock with a solid twist. It was bolted, though. I was putting my shoulder to the door, ready to shove it open, when the elevator dinged.

I nudged Simon toward the stairs. He took off. I followed at a lope, slowing as the elevator doors sounded. A woman's shoe clicked against the hall floor just as the stairwell door swung shut behind me.

“Wait until they're in an apartment,” I whispered.

Simon nodded.

I cracked open the door and heard a firm rapping. No answer. A minute passed. A second knock. Still no answer. Simon frowned up at me. I lifted a finger, telling him to wait.

A third knock. This time a door opened and an old woman's raspy voice barked, "What?"

"I'm looking for Paul Khan," a woman said. "Your neighbor? He—"

"He's not here and I don't know where he is, so stop pestering folks. Do I look like a private eye? Call the cops if he's missing."

"Has someone else been asking about him?"

It was a man speaking this time, and the hair on my neck rose, telling me I knew that voice. I couldn't place it, though.

"Couple kids," the neighbor said. "Not ten minutes ago. Banging on his door, then banging on mine, interrupting my movie. I don't have one of those fancy movie machines, you know. I can't pause it to answer the door. Just regular old TV for me. You're lucky it's a commercial now."

"You said kids?"

"Boys. Raising money." She sniffed. "Dressed like they go to some fancy school, asking for money from the likes of me. And for what? A trip. Probably to some amusement park. When I was in school, we were lucky if we got to walk over to the field to study the butterflies. That didn't cost anything, though. These days . . ."

She rambled on for another minute before the man cut her off. "They asked you for money?"

"Well, no. They were looking for Paul. Said he'd bought chocolate bars from them. They were going to ask me next, though, I'm sure."

"You said they were boys? Can you describe them?"

“Chinese kid with dark blond hair. Dyed, I bet. In my day, boys would never do a thing like that. They—”

“Was he alone?”

“Not, but he did all the talking, so I didn’t get a good look at the other one. Big, though. Dark hair. Kept his mouth shut and his head down, the way he should. These days, kids don’t know nothing about respect. Look at those ones out front. Did you see them?”

She continued to rant. I cracked open the door another half inch, pressing my face to the opening, trying to see the people asking about Paul. The angle was off and I couldn’t see much, just enough to know they were dressed like they were out on business. Process servers? Coworkers?

They kept asking about us, though. What had we said? Where had we gone? Finally the woman got tired of answering and slammed the door. A pause. Murmured voices, too low for even me to hear. Then footsteps . . . coming our way.

Simon heard and started down the stairs. I caught him and pulled him in the other direction. He understood and we zipped up one flight before the door below creaked open. We stopped, backs to the wall.

The door closed. No footsteps, though, meaning they were standing there, looking around.

“How long did she say they’d been gone?” the man asked.

“Ten minutes.”

“Long enough to get out of the building. Not long enough to get far. They aren’t going to find a cab around here.”

Footsteps now, hurrying down the stairs. When the door closed behind them, Simon turned to me.

“Are they looking for us? I mean, obviously that’s who they’re after. But *us*? Or just the kids who were asking about Paul?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should we still check out his apartment?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should we take off?”

“I don’t know.”

Simon rubbed his temple, like he was getting a headache. For about a minute, he said nothing, then he lifted his head and met my gaze. “You don’t have to *know*, Derek. I’m asking for your *opinion*. I don’t need you to make all the decisions here. Tell me what you *think*.”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

Panic jumped and whirled in the pit of my stomach. How could I form an opinion when I didn’t have facts? I needed to take a minute, think it through, and come up with an answer. There’s always an answer. You can’t make decisions like this based on an opinion.

When I tried to focus, though, all I could think about was that man’s voice. I thought I knew it. But I couldn’t place it, couldn’t even be sure I recognized it, and it didn’t just sound like that of someone I knew. Damn it, I needed to know. I needed—

“Okay,” Simon said slowly. “How about I tell you what I think, and if you disagree, fine. Otherwise . . .”

I nodded.

“I think we can’t leave right now because those guys are looking for us. So we might as well break into the apartment. Any sign of trouble, though, we take off and we don’t come back here. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Let’s go, then.”

Fourteen

I busted open Paul's apartment door and got hit by a blast of ice-cold air.

"Does he not bother with heat?" Simon whispered behind me.

It was more than a lack of heat. There was a window open—I could smell the stink of the city. I could smell something else, too. Something that made me stop in the doorway. When Simon tried to push past, I blocked him.

"Wait here. Guard the door."

"From the hall?"

"You can't hear from inside."

"Yeah, and I *can't* be seen from inside, so—"

"You hear anyone coming, call me." I pushed him out and closed the door, then waited a second, making sure he wasn't coming in.

I took a deep breath. Not intentionally sniffing, just trying to prepare. The scent was faint, and I told myself I was probably wrong. Just an odor coming from outside. As I moved into the apartment, I followed that smell, though, and with every step I took, it got stronger.

I found Paul in the bedroom. Sitting on the floor beside the bed. Eyes open. A red crater through his temple. Gun still clenched in his hand.

I could imagine him sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling the trigger, then sliding off to the floor. Left sitting there. Dead eyes staring at the door. Staring at me.

I swallowed. Clenched my fists. Stared back at Paul and tried to focus, but all I could see were his eyes, all I could feel was his accusation.

You did this. You couldn't control it, and now look what's happened. A kid in the hospital. Your dad gone. Simon on the run. And now Paul, dead. Killed himself before they found him. Saw that article, knew what was coming, and ended his life.

I shook my head hard. I had no reason to think that article in the paper had anything to do with this.

No, it's just a coincidence. You screw up. You get in the papers. A guy your dad helped—a guy hiding from the Cabals—kills himself the same day, and it has nothing to do with you. Bullshit.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

Paul didn’t answer. Just kept staring, his dead eyes telling me to figure it out. I was the whiz kid. Think, damn it.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find a perfect solution. It was like being given a jigsaw with half the pieces missing. I could jam some of them together, but there were always a few left. I knew they fit; I just didn’t know where.

Had Paul been involved with the people Dad worked for? The ones who’d raised me? Or was it a Cabal? That made sense for Paul but didn’t explain what had happened to Dad. Or did it? What had Dad been involved in? How exactly had he been connected to Paul?

Why would Paul shoot himself? Why not run? *Had* he shot himself? Or was this staged, the window left open to keep the smell of decomposition away until the killer’s trail was cold? Or until it was too late for the news of Paul’s death to reach someone else . . . Dad?

I growled and rubbed my head. Too many pieces missing. I had to find the rest.

Find them how? I couldn’t even manage to find a warm place to stay the night. I needed—

“Derek?”

I lunged out of the room, closing the door behind me. Simon was still in the hall. When he saw me, he lifted his hands.

“I’m not sounding the alarm,” he said. “I just slipped in because some kids were coming up the stairs, making a racket. They went to the next floor.” He leaned through the doorway, looking around. “Find anything?”

“No.”

“Did he pack up and run?”

“I don’t know.”

Simon studied my face. I struggled to keep it neutral.

“You’re stressed, bro. Too much going on. Too little sleep. You stand guard—you’re the one with the super-hearing anyway. I can take a look, see if I can find luggage, keys, cell phone—”

“*No*. I mean, no, there’s none of that. No keys. No cell or wallet. No luggage, but the drawers are full, so I can’t tell if he packed anything. All I know is that he left.”

“Or was taken.”

“Maybe, but it’s not like Dad—his stuff is gone, so it looks like he went on his own. Maybe Dad called and told him to lie low for a few days. All I know is he’s not here and there’s no sign of where he went.”

“Okay, then. Better take off before we’re found.”

I should have told him the truth. How many times had I complained that Dad didn’t give Simon credit, treated him like a kid? Now I was doing the same thing.

I needed someone I could talk to, bounce ideas off, get opinions from. That someone should have been Simon. But every time I considered it, a mental wall shot up, telling me not to worry

him, not to scare him. I'd done enough damage already, and my job now was to get him through this as smoothly as possible.

If I'd told him about Paul back at the apartment, he'd have wanted to see for himself. If I tried to stop him, he'd get mad, tell me he could handle it, and I was sure he could, but why should he have to? If I couldn't stop seeing that blood-spattered wall, it would be even worse for Simon. I processed things logically; he processed them visually. I didn't want to put that image in his head.

But I couldn't tell him after we left either, because then I'd have to admit I'd lied to him in the apartment. So one lie spun into more. I hated lying. We did a lot of it—had to—and that bugged me more than I let on. I'd always justified it, though, by telling myself at least I was honest with Simon. Now I couldn't even say that.

"Do you want to talk?" Simon asked as we trudged down the road, leaning into the wind. Winter was hitting full force now, gales whipping around us, ice pelting our faces.

When I didn't answer, he asked again, "Do you want to talk?"

Yes. Yes, I do. But I can't. I know you'd hate me for it, but I need to work this out on my own. You've got enough to worry about.

"I'm good," I said.

"Well, I'd like to talk." He ran his hand through his hair, shoving off wet snow. "Can we do that?"

"Course. Should get someplace warm anyway. You need—"

He turned into my path. "I don't need anything, okay? Stop doing that. I know you're hungry. I know you want to talk. I know you're cold. Don't make it all about me. I'm not five, Derek."

I was glad for the snow then, coming down too hard for him to see my expression.

“Sorry,” I said. “Yeah, I’d like something to eat.”

“Good. Now let’s . . .”

He trailed off. I followed his gaze to a black SUV that had just passed us and slowed to a crawl, brake lights flashing. Given the weather, slowing down made sense. Only it hadn’t been going slow before. And we were the only thing on this empty road that could make it slow down.

“Pick up the pace,” I said. “Don’t run. Take the side street there.”

As we turned the corner, I snuck a glance back at the SUV. It was turning around.

“Faster,” I whispered. “See that building up there? With an alley beside it?”

“Got it.”

We zipped into the narrow walkway just as the SUV roared around the corner, sliding on the slush. A squeal of tires. A horn blast, someone coming the other way. We broke into a jog.

The walkway ended at a road. I paused to get my bearings, but Simon was already running for a store across the road. I followed. A lane beside the building led to a parking lot behind it—a big lot, shared by a bunch of businesses. It was getting late now, the stores closed, only staff remaining. The lot was dotted with cars covered in snow . . . and one that wasn’t. A cop car idled in the corner, driver hunched over paperwork.

I grabbed for Simon’s arm, but he’d already thrown on the brakes. The cop looked up. His partner was pointing at us.

Simon jostled me hard and I spun, ready to snarl, but he was grinning. He ran a few steps, scooped up snow, and whipped a slushy ball at me.

“Play along,” he whispered.

Good idea. I charged, pretending to try tripping him. He slid out of the way and grabbed a handful of snow off a car.

“Head left,” I murmured. “Take that lane out of the lot.”

We kept at it, throwing snowballs, sliding on the sleet-covered parking lot, paying no attention to the cops as we made our way to the other lane.

A crunch of snow under tires. The cop car rolled toward us.

“Keep it cool,” Simon whispered.

He darted to the side, heading back the way we’d come. I whipped a snowball. He pretended to slip, arms windmilling. I charged and hit him in the side, pushing him farther away from the rolling cop car.

It turned and headed toward us. The window rolled down. Simon ran over, motioning for me to stay back. He’d handle this.

“Private property, right? Sorry.” He flashed a grin. “First snow in a month. Couldn’t help ourselves.”

“Are you Simon Kim?”

That was the fake name Simon had been using. My gut froze.

Simon’s smile didn’t falter. “Um, no, and something tells me I don’t want to be, huh?”

The officer ignored him and looked over at me. “Derek Brown?”

Simon approached the car. Behind his back, he motioned for me to go.

“What’d you say the name was again?” he asked.

He cast a fog spell. It whirled up, mingling with the falling snow, the perfect cover for me to take off. Run. Escape. I knew that’s what he wanted. And maybe I should have. I was the one in

trouble. Without me, they'd have no reason to hold Simon. He could call Andrew to come get him, and I could meet up with them later.

Only he didn't know Paul was dead, and we couldn't call Andrew, couldn't put his life in danger like that. I told myself that's why I needed to stay. It was bullshit. I needed to stay because there was no way I could run and leave Simon behind. No way I could even consider it.

I walked up behind Simon, passing through the fog curtain.

"I'm Derek Brown," I said. "We're looking for our dad."

Fifteen

Simon was annoyed with me. Not angry. To get angry would mean he'd actually thought I might take advantage of the diversion and run. He might have hoped I would, but he knew better. So all I got was a glower and a muttered, "You should have," as we got in the cop car. Then he took over the explaining.

As Simon told our story, he skated the edge of reality as close as he dared. Dad had called and said he was picking us up after Simon's game. He'd been leaving work early, around noon, and that was the last we'd heard of him. When he didn't show, we walked home. Dad wasn't there. Neither were his keys, wallet, cell phone. There was no sign he'd come home at all.

The cops didn't ask about the van. I wasn't sure how we'd answer that. If those guys at our door yesterday morning had been real police officers, they'd have seen the van there. Now it was gone. And that added a whole new level of complication to the story. Best to let on we'd thought Dad hadn't come home from work at all.

We'd called his office and cell. When we didn't get an answer, we were worried but figured he'd been called back to work. Sometimes he didn't come home until after we'd gone to bed. A lie, but it worked.

So we'd gone to bed. When we woke up and he was still gone, we got worried. After my trouble with the cops, we were understandably nervous about going to the police, so we'd hitchhiked to Albany. Walking sounded too desperate.

Our story had lots of holes, but it was good enough for these guys, who only wanted to drop us off at the station and get a pat on the back for finding us.

The police station parking lot was a mess. It was snowing even more now. We got soaked on the walk to a rear door, only to find it wouldn't open.

“Frozen,” one of the officers said. “Figures.”

It didn't seem cold enough to freeze—not if the snow was so wet—but I could never judge temperature. All I knew was that we had to go around the front, and the whole walk there, I kept looking for a chance to run. Stupid, I knew. How far would we get from a building full of cops?

I thought about it even more when I heard the chaos inside. The weather was causing problems everywhere. It reminded me of what Dad said after every snail's crawl home from Albany when snow hit. “It's New York, people. It's winter. We get snow. If you aren't prepared to deal with it, move to Miami.”

On that walk around the building, two sets of cops coming out stopped to tell our guys to hustle us inside so they could head back out on the road. Accidents everywhere. A pileup on each of two major roads. “Welcome to winter,” one said. “When fifty percent of drivers should have their licenses temporarily suspended.”

As we drew closer to the front doors, the chaos inside got louder. Cops trying to get back out on the road. Operators taking calls. Superior officers barking orders. And regular people trying to get regular stuff done—lodging complaints or whatever—arguing and bitching about the wait.

When we stepped inside and the full force of that chaos hit, I knew escape was a possibility. The front room was jam-packed.irate citizens. Stressed-out desk clerks. Cops yelling about the other doors being frozen shut, everyone spilling into the front room.

Dad would tell us to stay. If Paul was dead and people were looking for us, then we were better off taking refuge with humans. They were the least of our worries right now. They'd take care of us. That was their law. Whoever was chasing us played by a very different set of rules.

As we waited, the front doors flew open, cold air cutting through the heat inside.

“Who the hell do I talk to about filing a charge?” a voice boomed over the din.

“Oh no, you don’t,” said a second voice. “We had a deal, Cooper. Get back outside.”

“Yeah, who’s going to make me?”

“Me . . . and my two buddies here.”

I strained to see over the crowd. I’m tall; I’m not so tall I can just look over everyone’s head. The two guys facing off were easy to spot, though. Huge, bald biker guys, with two more behind, only slightly smaller.

Every cop in the place started edging that way, fighting through the crowd.

“Shit,” one of our officers said to the other. “Watch these two.”

He waded into the mob. One of the guys threw a punch. The fight started, spreading fast, bystanders getting jostled and shoved, then joining in, already-short tempers exploding. Even people on the edges were getting knocked down . . . when there wasn’t anyone within touching distance.

Knock-back spells.

I looked at Simon, but he was bouncing on his toes, trying to see.

“What’s going on?” he whispered.

Obviously he wasn’t the one casting the spells. Knock-back spells . . . Doors that wouldn’t open . . . A spontaneous brawl making a chaotic situation even worse . . .

When someone else leaped into the fray, I caught a glimpse of two faces I’d seen only a couple of hours ago. The couple looking for Paul.

I turned back to Simon just as our officer shouldered into the crowd.

“He said to wait here.” Simon grinned. “I don’t think I heard him, though. Did you?”

He turned to go.

I caught his arm. “We can’t. The people who were looking for Paul. They’re here. It’s—”

“Simon? Derek?”

Two women pushed through the crowd. They were middle-aged, wearing suits that looked ten years old. Government workers.

“Where’s Officer Walker?” one said, frowning at us as she double-checked a paper.

“In there, I’ll bet,” the other said, pointing at the crowd.

They led us off to the side. People made way for them—one look and you knew they weren’t part of the brawl.

“Lena Morris,” the first woman said, extending her hand. “Child services. The station notified us that the officers were bringing you in. We—”

Someone flew from the crowd, knocking Ms. Morris back a step.

“We need to get them out of here,” her partner said. “I’ll go talk to the officers that brought them in.” She turned to us. “That’s Officer Walker there, isn’t it?”

Simon said it was. She made her way to him as he snapped cuffs on one of the instigators. He tried to wave her aside, but she pressed until finally he glanced our way, nodded, and replied. They spoke for a minute. Then she came back.

“We can take them out of here until this gets sorted.” She smiled at us. “Could we interest you boys in dinner?”

Simon glanced at me. I said sure. As we made our way to the front doors, the couple from Paul’s building noticed. Looking alarmed, they conferred. They followed us, the woman from Paul’s building now on her cell phone, talking fast. I could catch snatches of the conversation, enough to know that we had indeed been their target . . . and now we were slipping from their grasp again. Whoever was on the other end must have said to pull back for now, because they stopped at the edge of the building and watched us go.

The women drove a typical government vehicle: a plain mid-sized car with parking stickers for child services. When Simon saw those, he relaxed.

“It’s okay,” I murmured to him as they opened the doors. “The guys who’re after us?” I gestured to the corner of the building. “Back there.”

As we drove from the lot, we watched the couple, who watched us, the woman still on the phone, the man discreetly checking the license number.

“I’m actually not that hungry,” I said. “Can we just go to your office or whatever?”

“Of course.” Ms Morris—in the passenger seat—smiled back at me. “We’ll order pizza while we get this—”

Her phone rang. She talked for a minute. I could hear both ends of the conversation this time. It was her office telling her that the Albany police had handed us off permanently. We were to be taken back to where we’d started and turned over to Detective Fulbright.

“Do you want to stop to eat first?” she asked us after she explained the new plan.

“Can we grab something back home?” Simon said. “There’s a great pizza place just when you drive into town.”

She said that was fine, and her partner turned on to the road leading to the highway. I watched out the back window, but there was no sign of a black SUV or anyone following us. They’d backed off for now, probably figuring they knew where we were going—to the child services offices in Albany. We’d be safe . . . for a little while.

Sixteen

Ms. Morris asked us to tell our story again. Simon stuck to what he'd said to the cops in Albany, in case they'd check. Ms. Morris promised they'd make sure a missing person's case was launched through our local department.

She called and asked for Detective Fulbright, but he was out with the rest of the force, on accident duty. And, while she was on the line, they told her not to bother bringing us in. The boy's parents had decided not to file charges. The police would look after the missing person's report, but we were now the responsibility of child services.

"Nice if they'd told us that before we headed out in this weather," she said as she explained to us and her partner. "As long as we're almost there, though, we should stop by the house. You boys can pack bags and we'll take a look around, see if we can't figure out what happened to your dad."

She said she was sure it was just a misunderstanding, and we'd be back with Dad in no time, but I could tell she didn't believe that. I'm sure she'd seen single parents disappear before when they'd decided it was all too much for them.

"If we don't figure this out tonight, is there anyone else we can call?" she asked. "I know Derek's parents aren't in the picture, and Simon, I'm guessing your mother . . ." She waited for him to fill in the blank.

"Took off when I was about two," Simon said. "I don't remember her and we don't have any contact with her. My dad doesn't have any family around either. It's just us."

He glanced at me and mouthed *Andrew?* but I shook my head. After what had happened to Paul, I wasn't getting Andrew involved in this.

"That's fine," Ms. Morris said. "We'll take care of you until we find your dad."

Our house had been ransacked. The child services women didn't notice, because whoever had gone through our stuff had tried to cover his tracks. Being on the run, though, Dad had taught us to notice things that weren't quite the way we left them.

We didn't tell the women, though. We just looked around and made note of what had been touched. Mainly stuff in Dad's office. They'd checked out the desk in our room, too, maybe thinking we'd be less careful. What did they expect to find? *Dear Diary, Dad gave me a list of places to hide in case he ever disappears. Here they are so I don't forget them. . . .*

The women had us pack some stuff. They said they didn't expect we'd be gone long, but we should take as much as we wanted so we'd be comfortable in the group home. That's where we were going, as they'd already explained. They expected this to be temporary, so they weren't looking into foster care, presuming we'd be happier in a group home, since it meant we'd be together. We'd said yes—we didn't care where we went, just as long as we weren't split up.

We were almost finished packing when Ms. Morris got a call. I didn't hear much, just a word that made my gut freeze.

"What's up?" Simon whispered, seeing my expression.

I repeated the word I'd heard. *Buffalo*.

"Shit." Simon took a deep breath. "Okay, let me handle—"

"Boys?" Ms. Morris came into our room, looking confused and concerned. "I just got a call from our main office. They were checking your file and pulled up one with similar names. For boys exactly your ages. Simon Bae and Derek Souza."

"What?" Simon's face screwed up. "That's weird."

"They lived in Buffalo ten years ago." She paused. "The department thinks it's you two."

“Buffalo?” He frowned. “We’ve lived a lot of places, but I don’t remember Buffalo. Don’t remember those names either. If it was ten years ago, though . . .”

“You’d have been quite young.”

“So if that’s us . . .” He burst into a grin and elbowed me. “Maybe we’re part of the witness protection program. That’d be cool, wouldn’t—?”

He stopped. His expression changed to worry. I kept my face blank. My acting skills were nowhere near his, so I always let him take center stage.

He turned to Ms. Morris. “If we were in the witness protection program, would that mean Dad . . .” He swallowed. “Is Dad in trouble? He’s a lawyer and I know he sometimes has nasty clients. . . .”

Ms. Morris put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with your dad. It could just be a clerical error. We’ll investigate. In the meantime, though, they want us to take you to a group home in Buffalo, so they can sort all this out.” She managed a weak smile. “It’s going to be a long night, boys. We won’t have time to stop and eat, but we’ll pick up dinner on the way, okay?”

We said it was. What else could we say? We finished packing and got ready to leave, heading back to the city we’d left ten years ago. Buffalo.

Simon slept for a couple of hours after we ate. I didn’t. I kept thinking about whether this was the right thing to do, just let them take us to a group home. Should I have tried harder to get away? The more I thought about it, the more I agreed with what Dad would have said. Take refuge with humans until he found us.

And if he didn't find us? I wouldn't think about that yet. For now, a group home was the safest place for Simon. And, maybe, the safest place for me. They'd have counselors there. I couldn't tell them how I'd hurt that kid, but maybe they could help me make sure it never happened again.

When we got to Buffalo, it was past midnight. Ms. Morris had taken a bunch of calls from her supervisor, trying to find a place for us. Finally, when we were in the city, she gave her partner an address.

We went about another fifteen minutes, then headed into an older area of town. Finally we turned into the driveway of a big two-story house. White with yellow trim. A light blazed in the front window. The porch lights flicked on and the front door opened.

Ms. Morris twisted to face us. Simon was up now, quiet, just looking around.

"We have a shortage of spaces in Buffalo," she said. "Keeping you two together is important, I know. This is a new home, one that hasn't even officially opened yet. You'll have it all to yourselves, at least for a while. Sound good?"

Simon nodded.

A woman stepped onto the front porch. Short, gray-haired, chubby. She looked like someone's grandmother.

"And there's Mrs. Talbot," Ms. Morris said. "All ready for you. Let's get you boys out and in the house. I'm sure you're exhausted."

We grabbed our bags from the trunk and trudged to the front door. Another woman appeared behind the first— younger, thinner, watching us carefully.

Mrs. Talbot greeted us with a huge smile.

"Welcome to Lyle House, boys," she said, and ushered us inside.