


Beginnings

The background of the entire cover is a dramatic, dark sky. It features swirling clouds in shades of deep purple, magenta, and pink. In the center of the sky is a bright, glowing yellow sun or moon. Two bright yellow lightning bolts are visible on the right side of the image, one near the top and one near the bottom.

Kelley Armstrong

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Chapter One

Elena

“Your hours will be four to eight Tuesdays, nine to five Saturdays and the occasional Sunday afternoon.” Ms. Milken looked up at me, watery blue eyes swimming behind her thick glasses. “I trust that won’t be a problem.”

“Twelve hours?” I said. “I thought— But when you interviewed me you said a minimum of twenty hours a week.”

“Business needs change, Elena,” she said, enunciating slowly as if I might be too dim to understand this complex concept. “And I believe I said a *possibility* of twenty hours a week.”

“No, you—”

I clamped the tip of my tongue between my teeth and looked away. I knew she’d said twenty hours. A *minimum* of twenty hours. And damn it, I needed every one of those hours.

I pushed my chair back, hitting one of the two-foot drifts of paper that blanketed the floor. Didn’t look like business was slow. And how the hell could her ‘business needs’ have changed that much since she interviewed me two weeks ago?

As I composed myself, I glanced around the office. Blown-up copies of news articles covered the walls, struggling to convince the visitor that this was a real newspaper, instead of a weekly classified ad rag that tossed a few amateurish features among the advertisements. When I saw those articles, so proudly displayed, I knew what had happened. I’d walked in for that

interview two weeks ago, a third-year journalism student applying for a minimum wage job, and Ms. Milken had seen her chance to hire a ‘semi-pro’ reporter at a bargain-basement rate. I needed a job that offered twenty to thirty hours a week? Well, what a coincidence, that’s just what they had in mind. She’d lied. Flat out lied. And I desperately wanted to call her on it. But I didn’t dare. I needed this job . . . any job.

So I forced a shrug and half-smile and said, “Maybe I misheard. But if you do need someone to work extra hours, I can always use the money. I’ll leave a copy of my schedule. I’m free any time that I don’t have classes. Even last minute. Just give me a call.”

Ms. Milken pursed her lips, then reached over to a stack of paper and plucked a single sheet from the middle. Without even a glance to see that she had the right one, she handed it to me.

“Tips for winterizing gardens,” she said. “Turn it into an article. Ten inches. For this week’s edition.”

I took the sheet. It was indeed a list of gardening tips. I smiled my keenest cub reporter smile. “Ten inches? You got it. I’ll drop it off first thing in the morning.”

“This week’s edition goes to bed in two hours.”

“Two—” My smile collapsed. “I’d love to do it, but I have a class at three.”

She didn’t take the sheet, only met my gaze. “Is this going to be a problem, Elena?”

“Is what—?”

“I’ve hired students before, and I was reluctant to do so again. I need to know that your priorities are here. Not with boys or parties or bar-hopping or sororities.”

“I have my priorities straight,” I said, slowly and—I hoped—calmly. “My job is second only to my classes.”

“That won’t do.”

My fingernails bit into my palms, but I kept my voice even. “Maybe, after today, I can skip the occasional class, if it’s for something critical.” Like a gardening tip article. “But this is the first week of classes, and this is my first time in this particular class, so I really can’t miss it.” I met her gaze, and knew from her frown that she was already mentally thumbing through her list of applicants. “But . . . well, uh, maybe I could give it a shot. I still have an hour.”

“There’s a desk out front.”

At 2:37, I handed the article to Ms. Milken. I’d worked on it for fifty-five minutes, but she’d informed me that the company paid in fifteen minute increments, so I’d be reimbursed for forty-five minutes. Any other time, I’d have suddenly remembered that I’d forgotten to write one last line, and made up the last five minutes. But today those five minutes would make the difference between getting to class on time and walking in late. Nothing makes a worse impression than being late for your first class . . . especially one that you weren’t officially registered in. So I accepted my ten minute loss and hurried out the door.

The office was on Grosvenor Street, within easy walking distance of the University of Toronto, which had been a major factor in my accepting the job. I’d been offered a proofreading job at a small press in Pickering, and it had paid better, but the round-trip on the Go train three times a week would have seriously cut into my earnings. And a job writing articles, however crappy, would look better on my résumé than proofreading. Now, though, proofreading—as much as I hated it—didn’t sound so bad. Nor did the coffee shop job, or the clothing store job, or the couple of others that had phoned me back after I’d showered the city with my résumé.

Maybe I could call them, see whether a job was still open. Or maybe I could do what I'd done last year, work two jobs. Oh yeah, and that had worked out so well for me—stressing over scheduling, giving up all pretense of a social life, dropping off the basketball team, studying over breakfast, lunch, dinner . . . even reading while walking to class. Nearly worked my way into a breakdown . . . and nearly lost my A average, which would have cost me my partial scholarship, which would have cost me any chance of finishing my degree. Okay, forget the second job. Maybe I could apply for a bigger OSAP loan . . . and drive myself so far into debt that I'd be forced to take the first shitty post-graduation job anyone offered me.

Goddamn it! This wasn't supposed to happen. Not this year. That bitch! That officious, conniving bitch. From 'oh, of course you can expect twenty hours a week' to 'is this going to be problem, Elena?' in a heartbeat. I should have said something. I should have complained. Hell, I should have told her where to stuff her gardening tips and her twelve hour a week job and her ugly mauve polyester suit and her condescending—

I took a deep breath and rubbed my hands over my face. Switch tracks. Think of something else. Class. I was looking forward to this class. Concentrate on that.

The class I was heading to was an optional course, the only one on my schedule. Like last year, I'd chosen anthropology. Don't ask me why. It had absolutely nothing to do with journalism, and wouldn't help my future career one whit, but maybe that was why I chose it, as a mental break in a life where everything was—and had to be—focused on the end goal of a degree and a job.

In last year's anthro course I'd had to do a paper on ancient religion. Really *not* my thing. After some research, I'd decided to focus on animal symbolism in religious ritual, which sounded marginally more interesting than anything else. There I'd stumbled across a doctoral

thesis by a guy whose specialty was religious human-animal hybrids—gods that were part human and part animal. He had some really fascinating ideas, and I'd based my paper on them. A few weeks later, I'd been writing an article on staff changes for the student paper when a name jumped out at me. Clayton Danvers. The guy whose thesis I'd used in my paper. Seemed he'd participated in a lecture series the year before, and the school had invited him back to cover a partial term for a prof on sabbatical. I'd noted that in my planner, with every intention of signing up for one of his courses. Then just before registration time, my life had careened off course.

A former foster brother had tracked me down to the university. After a lifetime of dealing with maggots like this, I'd learned that most of them were cowards and taking a firm stance was often enough to scare them off . . . well, that plus a few not-so-subtle threats about police involvement. This guy was different. Short of holding a gun to his head, there was nothing I could do to make him back off. After two weeks of darting between friends' apartments and cheap motel rooms, I'd finally persuaded the cops to enforce the damned restraining order.

Then I'd gone back to school, and registration had been the last thing on my mind. When I'd finally remembered, I'd barely squeaked in under the deadline. And I soon found out that my anthropology course was full.

I'd made third on the waiting list, though, and in my two years at university, I'd learned a bit about waiting lists. Being third usually meant you were in. But sometimes it took a couple of weeks before a spot cleared. By then, you'd have missed those critical first classes. What you had to do, then, was go to class anyway, on the assumption you'd eventually get in. Most profs didn't mind. Hell, most profs didn't even notice. So that's what I planned to do: show up, sneak in and start learning.

Clayton

“An eight o’clock class,” I said, gripping the phone as I dropped into my office chair. “I only asked for one thing—one thing! No classes before ten. Probably think they’re doing me such a big favor, letting me teach at their damned school, that I shouldn’t even dare to ask for special consideration.”

“Uh-huh,” Nick said. “Well, at least—”

“What the hell am I doing here anyway? What was going through my head? Oh, sure, I’d *love* to teach in Canada. It’s only a few hundred miles from every goddamned person I know.”

“Jeremy was right. You *are* in a pissy mood.”

I swung my feet onto the desktop. “Bullshit. He’d never say that.”

“No, he said you were in a foul mood. Have been for weeks, not like I needed anyone to tell me that. Hell, I can even predict them now. Every fall, you’re this way for at least a month. Like an annual bout of PMS.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Point is, I know what you need, buddy. And if you’d stop being so damned stubborn, we could fix this little problem. Why don’t I come up this weekend, we’ll hit the town—” He paused. “Do they have bars in Toronto?”

“How the fuck should I know? But if you mean what I think you mean—”

“Hey, you’re going to need something—or someone—to keep you warm up there. How bad is it, anyway? Blizzards and stuff?”

“It’s the second week of September.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Was it snowing when you went with your dad to Minneapolis last week?”

“Course not.”

“Well, Toronto is south of that.”

He snorted. “Right. I might have failed geography, but I know where Canada is. Stop trying to change the subject.”

A tentative rap at the door.

“You gonna answer that?” Nick said.

“No.”

The door creaked open and a student popped her head in. “Professor Danvers?”

Nick’s laugh echoed down the line. “Oooh, sounds cute. You—”

I dropped the phone on the desk, got to my feet and turned on the intruder, a dark-haired girl in shorts much too short for any student who hoped to be taken seriously.

“Professor Danvers, sir? I was just wondering—”

“Was that door shut?”

“Uh, yes, but—”

“When you knock on a shut door, you’re supposed to wait for it to be opened. Isn’t that the point of knocking?”

The girl took a slow step back into the hall, cheeks reddening. “Y—yes, sir, but I wasn’t sure you heard me. I just wanted to ask about your class this afternoon. I heard it’s full—”

“It is.”

“I was hoping maybe—”

“You want a spot? That’s what waiting lists are for. If a place opens up, someone will call you.”

“Is it okay if I just sit in—”

“No.”

I slammed the door. When I picked up the phone, Nick was still there, laughing his head off.

“Oh, professor,” he said. “Nasty boy. No wonder the little coeds line up for your classes, all hot for teacher.”

“Yeah, you think it’s funny? You wouldn’t think it was funny if you were teaching classes full of those twits, taking spots away from serious students, ones who might actually care what I have to say instead of giggling with their girlfriends about me.”

“Oh, you’ve got a rough life, buddy. If I *was* teaching your classes, and having your ‘problem’ . . . let’s just say I’d be a very tired, but very happy guy.”

“Yeah? Well, thanks for taking my problems so seriously, *buddy*. Next time you get the urge to call and cheer me up? Don’t bother.”

I slammed the phone into the receiver. Ten seconds later, it rang again. I ignored it. I’d call him back tonight. Maybe. Probably. I knew Nick didn’t mean anything by it, but it pissed me off. We’d had the same damned discussion a million times since puberty, and you’d really think that by now, he’d know how I felt—or didn’t feel—about women. In Nick’s world, it wasn’t possible for a guy not to want all the women he could get. Well, there *was* one logical explanation, and five years ago he’d tricked me into an evening in a gay bar, just to check, but

when that didn't seem to be the answer, he'd returned to his quest, certain if he just kept pushing, I'd 'stop being so damned stubborn' and give in.

I slumped into my chair and stared out the window. I didn't want to be here. And I couldn't believe I was. Since the day Jeremy brought me home to Stonehaven, I'd never spent more than a week away from it or him, and balked at even being gone that long. Now here I was, voluntarily embarking on a two-month sojourn where I'd be lucky to get home every other weekend.

When the offer first came, I'd had every intention of turning it down. But then I'd made the mistake of mentioning it to Jeremy and the moment I'd seen his reaction, I'd known I was going to Toronto. He'd thought that I'd mentioned the offer because I was considering it, and he'd been so damned proud of me for that, that there'd been no way I could back down without disappointing him. This was what he'd always wanted for me—a life and a career that extended beyond the Pack. I'd kiboshed that plan before I'd even graduated from high school. Stonehaven was my home, Jeremy was my Alpha, and I wasn't going anywhere. He'd accepted that, but he still liked to see me make the occasional foray into the human world. As much as I loathed every minute away, I did it to please him. So I was here, in Toronto until November, to please him. And I sure as hell hoped this would tide him over for at least the next decade.

I knew I was overreacting. I'd survive this, much like I'd survived having Jeremy pull out the odd batch of porcupine quills when I'd been a child—grit my teeth and suffer through it. But right now, I was, as Nick said, in one of my fall moods. They'd started after my eighteenth birthday, but back then, they were mild enough that I'd passed them off as just another bout of general moodiness. By my mid-twenties, though, that annual dip in my mood had become a month-long crater. Edgy all the time, snapping at everyone, haunted by the constant gnawing

feeling that I was missing something, that I was supposed to be doing something, *looking* for something. Now, as I looked out the window, my gaze lifted to a distant line of treetops. That's where I wanted to be—not in that park, but in the woods, someplace deep and dark and silent, where I could run and lose myself for a few hours. A run wasn't the answer to whatever was bothering me. But it would help. If I ran far enough and fast enough, if I hunted and killed and fed, then the blackness would lift for a day or so.

I'd do that tonight. I'd find a place outside the city and run. Then, when I was feeling more myself, I'd call Nick back and make amends.

A good plan. If only I didn't need to get through the rest of my day to reach it. I scowled over at the stack of notes for my next class. I had three courses to teach, and this was the general level class, the one the girl had been trying to squeeze into. According to the clock, I had about five minutes before I had to leave. Might as well get it over with.

I grabbed the notes, stuffed them into my satchel, and left.

Elena

I cut through Queen's Park and zipped across Avenue. Once through the university gates, I veered toward Sidney Smith Hall, then stopped dead. I didn't have the class room number. Shit! My timetable was in my knapsack, which I'd left in my dorm room, wanting to look professional for Ms. Milken. I'd assumed I'd have plenty of time to grab it. But my dorm was on the other side of the campus, at least a ten minute walk each way. And I had seven minutes to get to class.

I hurried into University College, found a phone, dialed my room and crossed my fingers. Jenny, my roommate, picked up on the fourth ring. I directed her to my knapsack and my timetable. Now, you'd really think that someone who was in her third year at university would know how to read a timetable. But Jenny . . . Jenny was a special case. Her inability to decipher the paper probably explained why she was still in her dorm room mid-afternoon during the first week of classes. That and the fact that she'd told me on our first meeting that she was a night person, and would I mind not turning on any lights or opening the blinds before noon? Why was she even at university? Because her parents wanted her there. So she'd go, but damned if she was going to let it inconvenience her social life. Now if someone had been paying *my* tuition, I'd have been so happy— I cut the thought short. Didn't matter. With any luck, by end-of-term I'd have enough saved to move into the off-campus apartment two of my friends shared. Or so I'd thought, until Ms. Purple Polyester cut my hours. Damn it!

Jenny finally deciphered the schedule enough to give me the room number. I had three minutes to get there.

“Oh, and the bookstore called,” she said. “About some job you applied for.”

I blinked. “Oh? That’s great. Do they want—?”

“I told them you already had one. Oh, and tonight? Don’t lock the door when you go to sleep, okay? I had a bitch of a time getting it open when I came in.”

She hung up.

I let out a string of curses, all of them mental. Too many people around to be swearing out loud.

I’d really wanted that campus bookstore job. It would have been perfect. And now I was stuck with a twelve hour a week— No, hold on. What if I called the bookstore back and said my roommate was mistaken, that I didn’t already have a job? But that wasn’t right. I’d accepted this other position in good faith. Yes, and she screwed you around! Cut your hours before you even started!

I rubbed my temples. Did everyone else have these mental battles? Sometimes I felt as if I was going crazy, like I was some kind of split personality that had never properly split, two sides of my brain constantly at war, one telling me to stand up for myself, not to be afraid to get angry and show it, the other side always restraining, telling me to be nice, to be polite and self-effacing and everything else I’d been taught to be. The good-girl side usually won, much to my relief. It was easier that way.

This time, though, the fight wasn’t so easily won. I didn’t want to take the high road here—I wanted a decent job that would give me enough money to live on and maybe, just maybe, free me from a full year of hell trapped with an inconsiderate party-girl roommate. And it wasn’t as if the bookstore had *offered* me the job. They probably just wanted an interview.

No harm in that. But I couldn't silence the voice that said it wasn't right to accept a job, then leave your employer in the lurch before you'd even put in a full day's work.

By the time I reached the classroom, I was seething, mostly at myself, but more than prepared to let a little of that ire seep onto the next person who pushed the wrong button. And I didn't need to wait long. I arrived at the lecture hall less than a minute late, and the TA was already closing the door. The prof wasn't even there yet, just his teaching assistant, a blonde grad student who had the audacity to glare at me as if I'd waltzed in mid-class and did a cheer-leading routine in front of the lectern. And that did it. I might have to put up with a condescending new boss and a brain-dead new roomie, but I did not have to take this shit from a damned teaching assistant, especially one who didn't look bright enough to assist the janitor.

So when he glowered at me, mouth opening to make some sarcastic comment like 'Glad you could join us', I cut him off with a glower of my own, a 'don't you dare' glare. Our eyes met. He blinked. And closed his mouth. Before he could recover, I swept past him and stalked up the steps into the lecture hall.

"Elena!" someone hissed.

I turned to see a girl from my class last year. Tina . . . no, Trina. We'd done a term-end project together and I vaguely recalled her saying she'd signed up for this class, too. She tugged her knapsack off the seat beside her and waved me into it.

"Thanks," I whispered as I sat down.

"Seemed like it was filling up fast, and I knew you were coming. Did you get off the waiting list?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."

“Did you check out the TA? Oh my god. I heard the prof was cute, but the TA is gorgeous. Believe me, I’m already planning to have some trouble with this course.” She grinned. “I’ll need serious teaching assistance.”

I smiled and shook my head. As I did, I thought about what she was saying, and a sudden ‘oh no’ dread settled in my gut. What had I just done? A TA might not wield as much power as a professor, but he did have some clout. He graded essays. He marked tests. He helped struggling students. While I didn’t expect to have any need of the last, the first two were a given. I’d just pissed off one of the people who would be grading me in this course. Damn it! How could I be so stupid? I took a deep breath and told myself it wasn’t that bad. After all, it *was* only a TA.

When I looked up from my fretting, the teaching assistant had closed the door and returned to the lectern. Where the hell was the prof? Oh, great. Please don’t tell me he was skipping the first class. All that effort to get here on time, and the prof wasn’t even showing up.

The TA began. “If you’re here for Anthropology 258, Ritual and Religion in the Americas, you’re in the right place. If not, you have fifteen seconds to get out the door without disturbing those who know how to read a room number.”

“Oh my god,” Trina whispered as two poor souls snuck, shamefaced, out the door.

“Unbelievable, huh?” I said. “Nothing like a TA with an attitude.”

“No, I mean his accent. That is the sexiest drawl I’ve ever heard. Where do you think he’s from? Tennessee or something?”

I shrugged. The Southern drawl definitely pegged him as American, if the rudeness didn’t. Okay, that wasn’t fair. I knew plenty of Americans, and most of them were very nice people.

But occasionally, you met an asshole like this who explained the stereotype. I took out my notepad as he continued talking.

“So, now that the rest of you know where you are . . . or think you do, let’s get started. My name, in case you didn’t read the syllabus, is Clayton Danvers, your professor for this class.”

Prof—? My head whipped up so fast I nearly dropped my notebook. I looked down at the podium, and I swear he was looking straight at me.

Oh, shit.

Chapter Two

Clayton

When I ended the lecture five minutes late, half the class had already packed away their notes, not even waiting to write down the reading assignment. As the last words left my mouth, the students were vaulting from their chairs and flew for the door. And for what? There were few, if any, five o'clock classes. They just wanted to leave. I've never understood that mentality, that school was a chore to get through. If you're not there to learn, what the hell are your parents paying thousands of dollars a year for? Baby-sitting?

As the students thundered down from the lecture hall, a gaggle of girls enveloped me, questions flying.

"Is this the right textbook?"

"What are your office hours?"

"Is the final exam going to be multiple choice?"

Life-and-death questions every one of them, and every one right on the goddamned sheet that I handed out—and read through—at the beginning of class. I slammed a sheaf of these sheets onto the lectern, pointed at it, then stalked toward the door.

I wasn't leaving. But someone else was . . . the blond girl who'd glared at me coming in—and then hadn't responded to any of the names on my class list.

She'd ducked out the door without so much as a glance my way. I swung into the hall to see her disappear into a mob of students, her white-blond ponytail swinging like a beacon. In a sea of brunettes and bottle-blondes, that ponytail was as easy to follow as deer prints through mouse tracks.

"You!" I called as I strode after her.

A few students turned. One girl pointed at herself, mouthing a hopeful 'me?'. But my quarry kept moving, neither slowing nor speeding up, presuming the shout must be meant for another. I jogged right up behind her and called again, but she didn't stop, just continued weaving past the other students, giving them wide berth, careful not to jostle or even brush against anyone else. I found myself watching that, the subtle but clear buffer she kept around herself. Paid so much attention to it that I let her get a dozen steps ahead of me before I realized it. She zipped around a corner and was gone. Alarm buzzed through me. Alarm? Why—? Didn't matter. I had to talk to her, find out who she was, and why the hell she'd been in my class.

When I rounded the corner, I saw her ponytail bobbing through a small crowd. I hurried forward, called to her again, but it was clear that, unless I used a name, she wouldn't respond. So I grabbed her arm. A last resort—as physical contact with strangers always was, and I would have released my grip immediately, but she whirled before I could, wrenching her arm away, purse falling from her shoulder.

A flash of something crossed her face—pique mingled with defensive anger. I recognized that look, recognized it as well as if I'd been standing in front of a mirror, the same reaction I'd have to a stranger grabbing me from behind, even in a crowded hall.

The look vanished as she recognized me. Her shoulders slumped.

“Professor Danvers,” she said, sliding backward out of the main thoroughfare.

“You know who I am? Good. Now maybe you’ll extend me the same courtesy.”

She tilted her head, nose scrunching just barely. A smattering of freckles dotted that nose, invisible to anyone more than a few feet away. I don’t know why I noticed that, like I don’t know why, in that moment as she tried to figure out what I meant, I noticed everything else about her—that she was tall, only an inch or two shorter than me with a lean, athletic build, that she wore little or no makeup and smelled only of soap, a clean tang that I found myself committing to memory.

“Your name,” I said finally. “You didn’t answer roll call.”

“Oh. Right. Elena. Elena Michaels.”

In human society, an introduction is typically a jumping-off point for further conversation, at least followed by a handshake and an inane question or two. But she said it, not as an opening, but as a closing, her gaze sliding past me, hefting her purse to her shoulder, clearly expecting—or hoping—that answering that one question would secure her release.

When I made no move to step back, she gave the softest sigh, inaudible to anyone with normal hearing, then leaned back against the wall, hugging her purse to her chest.

“I’m not in your class. Not yet. I’m on the waiting list. Third.”

“Classes are for registered students only.”

One thin shoulder lifted in a shrug. “Sure, but I tried to register—”

“Not hard enough. The class didn’t fill until the end of registration period, meaning you obviously couldn’t be bothered—”

“Couldn’t be bothered?” Her eyes flashed and she opened her mouth to say more, then snapped it shut, and looked away. “Fine.”

“Fine? Fine what?”

Another blaze, doused just as quickly as the first, but lingering in a brittle clip to her words.

“Fine meaning I’ll stay out of your class until I get a spot. *If* I get a spot.”

I hesitated. This wasn’t the answer I wanted . . . wasn’t what I’d been aiming for, though I realized it only as the words left her mouth. So what had been my goal? I wasn’t sure. I suppose I’d been digging for something, some reaction. Well, I got one. Just not the one I wanted.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, jaw tight as she slipped around me.

She got two feet away before I snapped to and jumped into her path.

“Why?” I said.

“Why what?”

She snapped the reply, then tensed and winced, just barely, and I could see the thoughts running through her head, telling herself she shouldn’t snap at me, shouldn’t let me goad her. I’ve never been good at empathy, so to see someone—a human no less—react, and to understand the thought process behind that reaction so clearly was a shock, one that knocked aside the last traces of my foul mood.

“The class,” I said, softening my tone. “Why did you want to take the class? Is this your area in anthropology?”

She hesitated, eyes studying mine, wary, looking for the trick. She must not have seen one, because, after a moment, she relaxed and leaned back against the wall again. “No, I’m not in anthro. Sorry. Journalism.”

“Journalism?”

The softest laugh. “Yes, people do actually choose to become reporters. Shocking isn’t it?” She shifted her purse to her shoulder. “I take anthropology as my annual extra. Last year I did my term paper on religion. Came across your thesis, read it, thought it was interesting, and used it. Then I saw you were teaching the first half of this course. I wanted to take it, but—” Another half-shrug, gaze disconnecting from mine. “Things came up. I registered late.”

“You read my thesis?”

“Sure.” Her gaze met mine, and her tiny smile dissolved. “What? You think I’m making it up? It’s published. There’s a copy right here at—”

“Do you still have your paper?”

“You *do* think I’m making it up.”

“If you still have last term’s paper, I want to see it. Then you can sit in while you wait for an opening.”

Her eyes blazed again and this time, she had to struggle to put the fire out. I knew she wanted to tell me where to stuff my course, that she’d changed her mind. But she didn’t want to cave either, and walk away having me think she had lied. The battle warred in her eyes for longer than I’d expected. Had I made a misstep? I hoped not. I didn’t give a damn about the paper. I just wanted to— I don’t know what I wanted to do, maybe see whether I could rile her up, maybe find an excuse to continue our conversation later, over her paper. I didn’t doubt for a second that she had indeed read my thesis. Nor did I doubt that was really the reason she was in my class. No more than I doubted that I had every intention of letting her into that class.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll drop it by your office tomorrow—”

“What’s wrong with now?”

Her jaw tightened, and I knew then that I had taken that last step too far. So when she told me, though clenched teeth that she had a seven o'clock class and hoped to eat dinner before it began, I agreed to let her drop it off tomorrow at ten, after my morning class.

Elena

I strode down the quiet hall, last year's anthro paper in hand. Danvers's office was at the far end, probably a spare used for storage, then cleared out when the department had to find space for visiting lecturers.

For almost an hour last night, I'd sat in the computer lab, my paper on the screen, my fingers ready to strike the print sequence, but holding back. Twice I'd grabbed my floppy disk from the drive and left, once getting no farther than the door, once getting all the way to the coffee kiosk in the next building.

Did I still want to take this course? My gut reaction was 'no', that it was too much bother, that the prof was an arrogant jerk, and I didn't need this class—or his grief. But just because I wasn't impressed with the teacher didn't mean I wouldn't be impressed with his teaching. Plenty of professorial assholes made brilliant instructors—if they weren't, they would have lost their position years ago. Yet, knowing how recent Danvers's thesis was, this was almost certainly his first teaching position, so the 'well, he must be good if he's still here' theory didn't hold. And yet . . . well, the truth was that the more hurdles he made me jump to get into this class, the more I wanted to get in. Sheer pigheadedness, I guess.

As for ‘proving’ that I’d read his thesis, that just got my blood boiling all the more. Really, who did this guy think he was? Judging by Trina’s reaction the day before, there might be a girl or two on this campus who’d sneak into his class for the eye-candy, but did that give him the right to assume that all female students were interested in *him* rather than his lectures? How insulting. And enraging. So I’d struggled with my decision, and continued struggling until the lab closed, and I printed out the paper just in case. I’d only made up my mind that morning, after the campus bookstore called me back.

I’d phoned the bookstore the day before, right after escaping Danvers. My anger had spilled over to my job situation, and I’d decided, buoyed by a good dose of righteous fury, that I wasn’t letting Ms. Milken take advantage of me like that. If I could get another, better job, I would, without guilt. What did I have to feel guilty about? She’d lied. Deception doesn’t deserve courtesy. So I’d called the bookstore and left a message for the manager, who’d phoned back this morning to set up an interview for ten-thirty. And I’d decided, since I was passing Sidney Smith Hall anyway, that I might as well make that ten o’clock drop-off for Professor Danvers. Whether I still wanted to take the class didn’t matter—at this point, it would be enough to say “Look, I did read your thesis, so there”. Immature, maybe, but some people just bring that out in me.

I brushed past two students trying to decipher a professor’s handwritten office hours chart. The next door was Danvers’s. I didn’t even get a chance to raise my hand to knock before he yanked it open. He must have been just about to leave. Damn. Five minutes later and I’d have had an excuse for leaving my paper in the department secretary’s office instead.

“Uh, just dropping this off,” I said, stepping out of his way.

“Come in.”

“That’s okay. You were heading out, so I’ll—”

He frowned. “I wasn’t heading out.”

Had he heard me coming? He must have, though I’d have thought the conversation outside the next office would have drowned out my footsteps.

I held out my paper. “Here it is.”

“Come in.”

He turned without waiting for an answer. The door shut behind him. Seemed like a good chance to escape. If only I wasn’t still holding the damned term paper. I opened the door. Danvers was taking his seat behind the desk. That desk, and two chairs, were the only furnishings in the cubbyhole office. On the bookcase sat two opened boxes of books. The desk was littered in papers, books and professional journals.

“If you’re busy unpacking—” I said, waving at the mess.

“Unpacking?” He frowned and looked around.

“Uh, right. So, here’s that paper.” I started to lay it on the desk, then thought better of it and put it on an empty bookshelf instead. “My phone number is inside the cover. If I don’t hear from you by Friday, I’ll assume it’s okay to show up in class.”

“Sit.”

“What?”

He waved at the chair across the desk. “Sit.”

I resisted the urge to bark. Resisted the urge to say anything at all, and answered by not answering . . . and not sitting either.

“Suit yourself. Pass me that paper.”

I did. He opened it. I waited, expecting him to flip through it. Instead he opened it to page one, leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk, paper crumpling beneath his loafers, and began to read. When he finished the first page, he turned to the second. I checked my watch.

“I, uh, thought I was just dropping that off,” I said. “I have an appointment in twenty minutes.”

He glanced at the clock. “I’ll keep you for fifteen then.”

“It’s way over in the Koffler Center. At the bookstore.”

“The bookstore? They’re open all day, aren’t they? You can buy your texts later.”

“I already *have* my texts. This is for a job interview.”

He lowered the paper. “What the hell do you need a job for?”

“Excuse me?” I regretted my tone as soon as I said it—well, kind of regretted it. Okay, not really.

He slapped the paper onto the desk. “College is for learning, not working. If you work during school, sure, maybe you’ll be able to afford a few extra drinks at the pub every week, but your grades will suffer. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course, I know that,” I said, prying my jaw open enough to speak. “And, while I do appreciate your concern, *sir*, I’m afraid I don’t have much choice. If I don’t work, I don’t go to school.”

“Your parents won’t pay for it?”

“My parents are dead.”

Now that I *did* regret. The moment the words left my mouth, I wished I could suck them back in. I braced for the inevitable ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘that’s too bad’. Instead, he just nodded.

“Well, I guess you would need to work, then.”

“So, may I leave?”

“Come back when you’re done.”

The interview did not go well. I couldn’t even blame it on Professor Danvers. By the time I’d walked across campus, my initial outrage had worn off and I realized he probably didn’t mean to be rude. Some people just say whatever comes to mind, bypassing the propriety filter. As much as I wanted to find further proof that the guy was an arrogant jerk whose class I didn’t want to take anyway, as I replayed the conversation, I saw no malice in it. I’m sure that attitude and that forthrightness didn’t win the guy many popularity contests, but I certainly wasn’t in any position to fault someone for poor social skills. My own could be a bit wobbly at the best of times.

The problem with the interview had nothing to do with my mood or my lack of interviewing competence. Rather it was my lack of skills in another area, namely retail trade. I knew my way around books, and I could be as courteous and helpful as any nervous first-year student could want, but when it came to experience in sales and cash handling, my resume boasted only a single summer job at a ballpark concession stand. I could tell by the manager’s expression that this wasn’t enough.

I wondered why he’d even called me in for an interview—had he misunderstood another of my past job descriptions, maybe hoped I had experience I hadn’t listed? Anyway, I did my best. I didn’t exaggerate my experience or downplay my lack of it, instead acknowledging that I hadn’t done this kind of work before, but emphasizing my transferable skills and my willingness and ability to learn. I left convinced that I’d get a ‘thanks but no thanks’ call tomorrow.

So was it back to Ms. Purple Polyester and her gardening tips? For a while . . . but not for long. After calling back the bookstore yesterday, I'd felt rather silly for having struggled with the decision so much. Now I resolved to work for that classified ad rag only until something better came along . . . and actively pursue that 'something better' in the meantime.

This time when I arrived at Danvers's office, I had a chance to knock. As my knuckles grazed the wood, the door creaked open. I called a 'hello', waited, then peeked inside. The office was empty. Not very safe, leaving the door unlocked and ajar, though I suppose that until he gave a test or assignment, there was nothing in the office worth stealing, not unless there was a thriving black market in dog-eared, coffee-stained copies of Anthropological Quarterly.

From the door I could see my paper on a stack of papers. There was a note on it. I slipped inside and picked up the note.

Two words. 'Elena' and 'wait'.

"Woof," I said.

At least he didn't say 'stay'. I looked at the so-called note again. At the bottom was a scribble. Oh, hold on, not a scribble, a letter. C. What did C stand for? It took me a moment, but then I remembered his given name. Clayton. Okay, that's fine, C for Clayton, but wasn't that an odd way to sign a note for a student? I reminded myself that this was likely his first teaching gig. At this stage, he probably wasn't used to calling himself 'Professor Danvers' or 'Doctor Danvers'. As for the initial instead of his name, it might seem overly familiar, but for a guy who considered a single word command an appropriate mode of correspondence, signing with a single letter was probably more a matter of economics.

The real question, though, was: would I do as he'd asked—or demanded? My first reaction was to get my back up, same as I would for anyone giving me such a curt order. Yet when I thought it through, I simmered down. This wasn't a personal slight. I knew that. Rude, yes. Condescending, maybe. Yet, from what I'd seen in the classroom, no more rude or condescending than he'd be to anyone else.

Maybe, to his mind, that was the way people—or, at least students—should be treated. Didn't mean I agreed with it. But it didn't mean I had to go storming off in a huff, either. If I'd had someplace I needed to be, I'd have left, but my next class wasn't until after lunch. No reason why I couldn't pull out a textbook and study here for ten, fifteen minutes. If he didn't show up by then, I'd leave a note and go.

I'd only read two pages when the door banged open, hitting the wall so loudly I jumped.

"Good," he grunted, seeing me there. He walked in and tossed an armful of books onto the desk, sending an avalanche of paper to the floor. "You get the job?"

"It was just an interview."

He gave me a look, as if this didn't answer his question. Not much experience with the job market, I guess.

"I don't know yet," I said. "They'll call."

His eyes studied mine. "But you don't think you got it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not. Now, about—"

"Forget the bookstore," he said, thumping down into his desk chair. "I have a job for you."

I hesitated, not sure I'd heard right. "Uh, that's . . . very nice. Thank you, but—"

"I need a TA."

I stopped, mouth still open. TA? That had always been my dream job—good pay, no need to leave campus, usually flexible hours. In the midst of racing through those excited thoughts, my brain slammed up a big stop sign. A teaching assistant? In Anthro? I was a journalism major. And an undergrad at that. Those positions typically went to grad students, and always within the prof's own discipline. So why would this guy offer one?

Maybe I'm too suspicious . . . maybe I'm downright paranoid, but after years of dealing with creepy foster daddies and brothers, I think I've earned the right to be. When a guy offers me something that doesn't sound kosher, my brain automatically jumps to one conclusion: he wants sex. In this case, though, I dismissed it without a second thought, even felt a little silly for thinking it. Clayton Danvers wasn't some fifty-year-old overweight professor. If he wanted sex, he certainly didn't need to offer teaching positions to get it. From the way he'd brushed off those girls yesterday, bedding coeds was *not* on his agenda. He probably had a girlfriend or fiancé at home, some gorgeous neurosurgeon or physicist who modeled for Victoria's Secret in her spare time. Probably even had a picture of her all ready to go up on his desk . . . once he found it under that blanket of papers.

"I'm not an Anthropology student," I said slowly, in case he'd forgotten.

"So?"

"I need to be in this discipline to be a teaching assistant. Isn't that a requirement?"

He brushed my words aside with a wave. "Doesn't matter. The school wouldn't be hiring you. I would. I'm a temp, so that's how it works. They hire me, and I hire an assistant if I need one."

Can't say I'd ever heard of that rule, but it sounded logical enough . . . I guess.

“What about grading papers? I’m not qualified for that. And I sure can’t teach your classes if you’re off sick.”

Another wave. “I never get sick. And you won’t need to grade essays or tests. I’ll just give you the multiple choice parts to do. Easy enough. So you can do that and . . . uh, administrative work.”

“What kind of administrative work?”

“You know . . . departmental . . . stuff. Whatever I need done.”

I cast a pointed look at his desk. “Like filing?”

“Sure. You can do the filing. More importantly, though, I need research—”

A tentative knock at the door cut him short. His nostrils flared, then his mouth set in a hard line. He made no move to stand, just started fidgeting with a pen on his desk. Another rap. I arched my brows. He shook his head. We stayed quiet until footsteps tapped away down the hall.

“There,” he said, jabbing the pen at the door. “That’s another thing you can do. Handle my office hours. Talk to students.”

“Uh, I don’t think . . . well, they probably want to speak to you, don’t they? Especially if they’re having problems with the course.”

“Oh . . . right.”

He looked so darned disappointed that a glimmer of empathy ran through me. “Well, I suppose I could screen student visits. If it’s something I can handle, like taking papers or answering easy questions, I will. If not, I could have them make appointments, maybe . . . discourage the ones that don’t seem too serious.”

He smiled then. Not a big smile, not even much of a smile at all, just a twist of the lips, but his eyes lit up like a kid's. "That'd be great."

My cheeks heated. "Uh, and research, you were saying something—"

"Right. That's really what I need. I'm working on a paper and I need someone to do the legwork for me, track down articles, print them up, maybe do some extra digging. You cover all that in journalism, right? Researching?"

"Right up my alley."

"Good. We're all set then. You can start—"

"Wait," I said. "Can I think about it? I should hear what the bookstore says first."

This clearly wasn't the answer he wanted. He rapped the pen against the edge of the desk, then leveled it at me.

"What's the pay?" he said.

"Huh?"

"The bookstore. What are they offering to pay you?"

"Uh, minimum . . . well, slightly above."

From his expression I knew that didn't answer his question.

"Five dollars an hour," I said.

"How the hell do you live on that? I'll pay you eight."

"That's . . . very generous. But wages aren't the only thing I need to consider. Hours are another factor, and you might only need me for five, six hours a week—"

"Hours are negotiable," he said. "I need help with this paper, and I want to work on another one after that. How many hours would you need?"

I calculated quickly. “Fifteen to twenty, if you’re paying eight dollars. That would leave me plenty of time to study.”

“Fifteen to twenty it is then. When you’re busy with school, take less. When things are slow, take more. I’m not running a nine-to-five business. As long as the work gets done, I’m in no hurry.”

And that sounded damn close to the most perfect school job I could imagine . . . which, of course, had me wondering what the catch was. Well, I suppose the catch was that I had to work with *him*, but that didn’t seem so bad. An abrasive boss, I could handle. If things got bad, I’d be no worse off than I was now. There were other jobs out there. I’d just polish up my resume and hit the streets again any time.

Next question: why me? He could hire a hundred students who were better qualified. Maybe part of that was just dumb luck. I’d mentioned that I needed work, and that had reminded him that he needed a TA, so he offered me the job. Impulsive, yes, but maybe that’s the kind of guy he was . . . or, as I suspected, it’s the kind of guy he could be, under the right circumstances.

As a future employee, I wasn’t *that* bad of a choice. I clearly wanted to work—a quality that could be hard to come by in students. Plus, I really would work, not sit and moon over him, and I suspected that was major qualification. As he’d said, anyone could grade multiple choice tests, file his papers and shield him from students. And if he needed a researcher, a journalism student was a good fit. Why me? Why *not* me?

“Does this mean my paper passed muster?” I said. “I get to sit in your class until I get a spot?”

“Huh?” He frowned. “Oh, right. The class. Hell, yeah. You’re in.”

I smiled. “Good. About the job, then . . . when can I start?”

Chapter Three

Clayton

Elena was due to arrive for work in five minutes, and I still had no idea what *work* I was going to ask her to do. I didn't need a TA. Didn't want one. Now, here I was, having volunteered not only to spend at least fifteen hours each week cooped up in this tiny office with a human, but paying her for the privilege.

I blamed temporary insanity, maybe some new symptom of my fall moods. I could tell myself that I'd offered her a job because I'd been flattered that she'd picked my thesis for her term paper. Or that I was grateful to have a female student who was actually interested in learning what I had to teach. Or that I'd been struck by a sudden wave of generosity, compelled to help a stranger in need. And if any of those three explanations was right, I was in serious trouble—my fall moods weren't just making me moody, they were fucking up my entire personality. So I was sticking with the temporary insanity theory.

I had no idea why I'd offered her the job. I knew only that the moment she'd said her interview hadn't gone well, the idea had jumped into my brain and out my mouth before I could stop it. And I hadn't wanted to stop it. Instead, every hurdle she'd raised had only made me more determined—even desperate—to win her agreement. When I had, it felt like pulling down a buck single-handedly, a thrill of victory that had lasted right up until ten minutes ago, when I'd arrived at my office to wait for her . . . and fully comprehended what I'd done.

Maybe I could tell her I'd made a mistake, that I'd reevaluated my workload and decided I didn't need a TA after all. Even as I considered that, a lick of shame ran through me. She hadn't asked for the job, hadn't tricked me into offering it. I've always prided myself on being fair in my dealings with humans. Sure, my idea of fairness and theirs may not always coincide, but I was never intentionally cruel to anyone who hadn't—in my opinion—earned it. And Elena had done nothing to earn it. I'd hired her, so I'd have to find work for her to do . . . preferably someplace else. I'd mentioned research help. She could do that in the library or—

Footsteps sounded in the hall. The soft slap of sneakers, the steps determined but light. Hers. I inhaled and caught the faintest touch of her scent coming through the half-open door. My pulse revved up, as if I'd scented an intruder . . . and yet not like that at all.

She paused outside the door. Hesitating? Why was she hesitating? Had she changed— A knock. A *tentative* knock, as if hoping it wouldn't be answered. She *had* changed her mind about the job. Shit! No, that's what I wanted, wasn't it? Maybe. Maybe not. Shit!

I yanked open the door to see her turning away. I reached for her shoulder, then stopped.

"Elena!"

She jumped, and spun. I mentally kicked myself. What'd you yell for? She's two feet away. Are you *trying* to scare her off?

"Come in," I said. "We have a lot to do."

She nodded, stepped inside, shucked off her backpack and looked around for a place to put it.

"Just toss it wherever," I said.

Another nod, and she tucked it into the corner, under the empty coat-rack. My heart was galloping like a spooked stag. Something was wrong. She was too quiet. Not that she was

usually noisy, but this was . . . too quiet, her body giving off palpable waves of distraction, as if she really didn't want to be here. She was going to quit. I was sure of it. The bookstore had called and offered her the job, and she felt guilty, but she still didn't quite trust my offer and—

“Is this okay?” she said, tugging at her short-sleeved blouse to straighten it. “I wasn't sure if there was, you know, a dress code or something—”

“There isn't. Wear what you like.”

She looked around. When her gaze skated past mine, I noticed purplish half-moons under her eyes. She'd slept poorly. Nightmares? Anxiety? Was something bothering her?

My gaze slid to a faint reddish blotch, the size of a fingerprint, on the side of her throat. A bruise? A lover's kiss? My gut clenched. She had a lover? A boyfriend? Why the hell wouldn't she? She was young, pretty, of course she had someone. My gut started to roil. What the hell was the matter with me?

“Do you, uh, want me to start filing?” she asked.

She turned toward the desk, and the light illuminated the mark on her throat. Not a bruise, or a kiss, but a birthmark or an old, long-healed burn. I hadn't seen it before. Why hadn't I seen it before? Had I forgotten it? The thought that I'd missed something about her, that I'd failed to commit something as tiny as a faded birthmark to memory burned through me, followed by a mental smack upside the head. Who cared—?

“Filing?” she said again. “Should I start—”

“No. Not today. Today we have to talk.”

Her blue eyes clouded. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no. We just need to talk about—” About you. Tell me about yourself. Do you have a boyfriend? What kept you up last night? Is something bothering you? Is it me? “—your paper. We didn’t get time to discuss that yesterday, so I wanted to spend a few minutes on it today.”

“Sure.” She moved the spare chair over to the desk, sat down, then looked up at me with a faint smile. “So, how badly did I mangle your theory?”

Elena had only been scheduled to work for two hours that day, and we spent the whole time talking, first about her paper, then shifting into the more general area of my work, my interests, theories, past and current projects. As happy as I was with that, and as happy as I’d have been to resume the conversation the next time . . . and maybe segue that next discussion into her own life and learn more about her, I knew I wouldn’t get away with it.

Any other student would have been overjoyed at the chance to sit and chat with a prof. Well, they would if they were being paid eight bucks an hour to do it. But Elena expected to work. That was obvious when her shift ended and she thanked me, not for the stimulating conversation, but for the “background”. That’s what she saw it as, I guess, me talking about my work to prepare her for the job. And that’s what she was comfortable with—talking to me as a teacher and an employer, not as a person. Still, it was a start . . . even if it did mean I’d have to find actual work for her to do.

When Elena came the next day, I let her file. Can’t say I really understood why this seemed so important to her, but no one has ever accused me of being intolerant of other people’s

eccentricities. So I let her take my stacks of paper and put them into neatly labeled folders. Of course, since my handwriting was somewhat indecipherable, I had to stick close by, and explain each page to her so she could file it properly. Just being helpful.

When she finished, I had a file drawer every bit as beautifully organized as the file cabinet at Stonehaven. Not that I'd seen the inside of the one at Stonehaven lately—it'd been locked for years, ever since Jeremy made the mistake of asking me to retrieve the property tax records, and spent nearly a week re-filing the mess. I'd be more careful with this one. First, though, I'd have to figure out where she'd put everything. But the desktop looked so neat and clean, with the pencils and pens in a mug, the stapler and desk calendar arranged just so. Jeremy would have been very impressed. Well, actually, he'd probably have a heart attack, but he made it a rule never to visit me during one of my human world sojourns, so I didn't need to worry about him seeing it.

We then had thirty minutes of Elena's shift left, so I spent it making a semi-permanent schedule for her. I took into consideration her course load, extracurricular activities and study habits, giving her a flexible schedule with short shifts, sometimes two per day to reach her goal of over fifteen hours a week.

"Wow, that's great," she said, reading it over. "This will work out perfectly. That's very thoughtful." She smiled up at me. "Thanks."

I'd have enjoyed that smile more if I hadn't known that my "thoughtfulness" now guaranteed that I'd see her at least once every weekday . . . and had provided me with more personal information about her than I'd gleaned in all the rest of our time combined—what courses she was taking, what sports and activities she enjoyed, etcetera. Not that I'd been entirely motivated by self-interest. Well, mostly . . . but I'd do better next time.

Before our “next time” arrived, I ran into a problem that suggested my ingenious “teaching assistant job” plan was not as foolproof as I’d thought.

I was heading for the cafeteria to grab my second dinner, my thoughts occupied with other things, when a hand thudded onto my shoulder. I wheeled, jerking away as I turned.

“Professor Danvers.” My assailant—a stocky man with shiny skin—flashed a greasy smile. “Just the man I wanted to see.”

When he sidled closer, I stepped back and crossed my arms. He only nodded and stepped closer still, checking over his shoulder for students, as if thinking I was moving to get out of their path. As body-language illiterate as most humans. Elena would have understood—not that I’d ever backed off from her, but if I did, she’d have stepped away, not come closer. I shook off the thought. I’d been doing that a lot lately, thinking of what she’d do in a situation, what she’d say, how she’d react, as if testing my own understanding of her, seeing where the holes lay.

I forced my attention back to the man. Middle-aged. Dressed in corduroy pants and a tweed jacket that wouldn’t have buttoned over his gut no matter how hard he sucked it in. A professor. Had I met him yet? Maybe, but obviously not someone I’d deemed important enough—or interesting enough—to remember.

“I hear you have a new teaching assistant,” he said.

I arched my brows.

He laughed. “Rumors travel fast. One of my students mentioned it. It seems she went by your office yesterday to see whether you needed a TA and you told her you already had one. A

student of yours.” His fleshy features twisted into a mock frown. “Which seems very . . . odd, considering the department has no record of such a position being offered.”

“It wasn’t. I hired her myself. I’ll be paying her myself.”

“How . . . generous of you, Doctor—may I call you Clayton?”

I fought the urge to say no and settled for a shrug he could interpret as he liked.

He continued, “While we appreciate you funding your own TA, surely you can see where that might raise certain . . . questions.”

“Of what?”

He gave me a look, as if to say the answer should be obvious. I stood my ground, saying nothing, just meeting his gaze with a level stare. He broke first, a few beads of sweat popping out across his broad forehead. I took a slow step forward, closing the narrow gap between us.

“Of what . . . sir?” I said.

Now it was his turn to step back. His gaze flicked to mine, then skittered away. Confusion fluttered behind his eyes, instinct warning him to back down, human reason wondering why. I eased back before he realized he had nothing to fear here.

“I hired her myself because she’ll be working for me,” I said. “As a research assistant for studies unconnected to the school. That seemed the fairest way of handling it.”

“Yes, well . . .” The man blinked, struggling to recoup his composure. “That’s all very sensible, I suppose, but there’s another problem. She’s taking one of your classes. If she was to be grading papers for her own class—”

“She won’t.”

“Perhaps if she dropped out of your class—”

“No,” I said, sharper than I intended. “That isn’t necessary. She won’t mark or grade papers . . . or do any other teaching assistant duties.” Shit! Did that mean she couldn’t handle my office hours? “She’ll stick to research. That’s why I hired her anyway.”

A slow, reluctant nod. “I suppose that would be acceptable.” His gaze met mine. “But . . . take care. We must always take care when dealing with students, particularly attractive young women.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

He clapped me on the back. “Of course it won’t. I just thought I should mention it. Eyes will be watching. Eyes are always watching. And minds are always thinking—usually the worst. Don’t forget that.”

The next day I told Elena about the new job classification. When I finished, she busied herself arranging her knapsack in the corner.

“Okay,” she said. “That makes sense. I guess I should have known that . . .”

“I should have known it,” I said, boosting myself onto the edge of my desk. “I’m sorry.”

A brief smile, one that almost met her eyes. “Not your fault. You’re as new at this as I am. So, uh, I guess we’ll need to rework that schedule. How many fewer hours—?”

“Your hours won’t change. I’ll just give you more research work.”

The smile grew a quarter-inch, still hesitant. “Really? I mean, you don’t need to—”

“More time for research means the more research I can do. Publish or perish, that’s the law of academics. We’ll stick to the original schedule, and if you need more hours, just ask.”

Her smile flashed full-strength then, so brilliant my breath caught.

“Thank you,” she said. “Oh, and what about your student drop-ins? Can I still field those for you? That’s more reception work than teaching assistance, right?”

I grinned. “Absolutely.”

“We’re all set then. So—”

Someone rapped at the door. I inhaled and scowled. Student. One who’d been here before, on business no more pressing than a sudden need to have me confirm, in person, the test schedule I’d handed out on the first day.

Elena pointed at herself, then the door. Did I want her to answer it? My nod was so emphatic she choked back a laugh. Then she arched her brows and pointed to a spot behind the door, mouthing ‘Wanna hide?’, lips twitching in a teasing grin. When I hopped off the desk and ducked behind the door, a small laugh finally escaped her. She shook her head, tossed me one last breathtaking smile, then answered the door.

Over the next week, our working relationship hit a comfortable stride, as we relaxed into a routine. When it came to any type of personal relationship, though, the ramparts stayed firmly in place. The moment I worked a conversation even close to something personal, her body language cues were strong enough for a blind man to read, and they screamed ‘back off . . . please’. So I did.

But that left me with a quandary. I didn’t just *want* to get to know her better—I needed to, a need that gnawed at my gut worse than hunger, that woke me up in the middle of the night, overwhelmed by a sudden need to know the answers to life-or-death questions like “What’s her favorite food?” or “Why does she want to be a journalist?”

As for why I wanted to know so much about her, I tried not to think about that. It made me . . . nervous. A weak word, but there's no better way to describe it. Trying to understand my interest only brought on a strange feeling of apprehension, as if the answer would take me someplace I wasn't ready to go. So I settled for accepting the need at face value—that I found her an intriguing person, and I was alone in Toronto, lonely, missing my Pack, and in need of companionship.

Yet it soon became obvious that she wasn't letting our relationship deepen until I'd earned her trust. And that, I suspected would take a while, at least as long as it would take me to learn to trust a human stranger. But the need to know more was so overwhelming that, within a week, it took me to a place I'd rather not have gone. I started following her.

I'm not proud of that. Studying her when she was in my office or classroom was one thing, but I crossed a line when I started to stalk her. I told myself it wasn't stalking—not in the way humans stalk. I didn't want to hurt her or scare her. I just wanted to learn more about her . . . and spend more time near her.

Despite my best justifications, I hated the way following her made me feel, and after only a few evenings of it, I vowed to quit. Whether I would have stuck with that vow is questionable, but on that final night, fortune favored me with an alternative.

That evening, I spent an hour in the Laidlaw Library, sitting in a carrel, pretending to study some book I'd grabbed off the shelf. My real object of study, though, sat at a table twenty feet away. Elena, working on an essay, driven from her dorm room yet again by her roommate, a selfish brat who deserved—but that wasn't my concern. I couldn't let it be. Instead, I could only use such problems in Elena's life as a window into her mind, seeing how she reacted, how she handled them.

Now I was watching her write, which should have been boring as hell, but it wasn't, because every move she made, every twitch, every sigh, was a peek inside her head. And a test. A test of how well I was getting to know her. Tonight, something was bothering her again, something that kept her from concentrating on her work. It could have been her roommate, but Elena didn't normally let the brat upset her like this.

The writing was going badly, a sentence stroked out for every two written, the strokes becoming harsher, angrier, each time. Any second now she'd give up and . . . And then what? I know what I'd do, how I'd work off my frustration, but how would she?

I peeked over my book. She leaned back, pen in hand, staring at the paper. Then she shoved the pages into her knapsack, threw it over her shoulder and strode out of the study area. I counted to ten, and followed.

When Elena returned to her dorm, I felt a trickle of disappointment. Was that how she resolved her frustration? Give up and go home? That didn't fit my image of her. Was that my mistake, reading things into her behavior that didn't exist? Or maybe she'd gone upstairs to blast her roommate, tell the brat that this was her room too and she wasn't being run off. That's what I would have done, but I suspected Elena wasn't ready for that. She might want to do it, but she wouldn't. Not yet.

If I was in that situation, frustrated and unable—or unwilling—to vent that anger on a deserving target, I know what I'd do. Change and run. Work it off that way. Easy for me . . . impossible for someone who wasn't a werewolf.

I'd just started back toward my apartment when I caught Elena's scent on the breeze. I turned to see her hurrying across the dorm lawn, knapsack over her shoulder, but carried higher, as if she'd emptied out that heavy load of books. She crossed to the sidewalk, jaw set, gaze forward, ponytail bouncing with each firm, deliberate stride, moving fast into the gathering darkness. I waited until she vanished around a building, then followed.

Elena cut through the campus up to Bloor Street, then headed west. Although many of the small stores had closed, the nightlife was heating up, as people spilled from restaurants and wandered the streets looking for entertainment, not yet ready to hit the bars.

Elena had already eaten. Was she heading to a bar? A date maybe? The question brought a now familiar tightening in my gut. Of all the questions I had about Elena, this topic obsessed me more than most. Did she have a boyfriend? Was she dating? I was pretty sure there was no steady boyfriend at school. In my more successful efforts to uncover details about her personal life, I'd managed a few casual questions about Friday and Saturday night plans, and usually found that they entailed hanging out with friends, maybe friends of both sexes, but certainly nothing that sounded like dates. And I never smelled a man on her. Did that mean there wasn't one? Or did it just mean he wasn't here, in Toronto? Maybe he was going to school elsewhere, or was working back at home . . . wherever Elena's home was. The answer to that seemingly simple question had proved one of the most elusive. Although her parents were dead, she had to have someone who'd raised her, someplace she called home. Whenever I broached the topic, though, she fended it off with a shrug and a quick change of subject.

Elena passed through the bar and restaurant district without slowing. As the crowds waned, I had to pull farther and farther back, until I was following her by scent, catching glimpses of her distant form only when she passed under a streetlight. Dusk had deepened to dark now, yet she

kept walking. At least two miles passed before she turned off. And when I saw where she turned off, my heart did a double-flip. A park. A large park, with trees stretching for acres.

As I followed her trail inside, I had to check my pace. I kept speeding up, anxious to see where she was going, hoping that I knew . . . but afraid to believe that I did. I told myself I had to be wrong. Surely there was another good reason why she'd be here. And to that my brain screamed back: like what? Nighttime lawn bowling league? Moonlight skinny-dipping? I knew where she was going. Knew it in my gut. When she ducked behind a building, I thought, for one endless moment, that I was wrong, seeing only what I wanted to see. But then she stepped out again, the jeans and long-sleeved jersey gone, replaced by shorts and a T-shirt. She looked around the dark, empty park, then headed for the hiking trail.

Near the head of the trail, she stopped. Another scan of her surroundings, more careful this time, head tilting to listen. She took something from her knapsack, and tucked the bag beneath some undergrowth. When she straightened, she gave another long, careful look around. Then she held out the small dark cylinder she'd removed from the bag and pressed a button. A blade shot out. A nod of satisfaction, and she snapped it shut again, cupped it in her palm, walked to the head of the trail and began her warm-up exercises.

I knew what I wanted to do then. But I didn't. I had to wait, to be sure, still half certain I was mistaken. When she finally stopped her stretches, she looked around one last time, then faced the trail, took a deep breath and vaulted forward, off and running.

For a moment, I stood there, hidden in the trees, grinning, not quite able to believe what I was seeing. Only when she disappeared around a corner did I snap from my reverie, and hurry off to find a changing place of my own.

Chapter Four

Clayton

I Changed in a small clearing, as deep in the strip of woods as I could get. When I finished, I stretched, front paws sliding out as far as I could reach, hind quarters in the air. Then I shook myself, growling softly. My skin itched, like clothes kept in the closet too long, dusty and stale. More than any other, I hated this part of being away from home—Changing in the shadows, furtive, always on alert. A dangerous undertaking, meaning it couldn't be undertaken any more than necessary. Not like at Stonehaven, where I could Change any time the urge struck.

I rubbed against a nearby tree, but it was too young, the bark still smooth, trunk so thin it swayed against the pressure, branches rustling against its neighbor. With a grunt, I dropped and rolled on the grass, twisting to scratch my back. When the itching became bearable, I sprang to my feet and ran back to the path.

I'd been gone ten minutes, long enough for Elena to get a good head start. Luckily, she was running upwind, meaning I could catch traces of her scent on the breeze. Even that faint smell was enough to set my heart tripping, and I had to keep checking my speed, or I'd race right up behind her before I knew it. With each yard, her scent became stronger, and I breathed it in, inhaling so deeply the cold air scorched a path to my lungs. When I was in human form, Elena's scent teased me, intriguing me with unformed thoughts and vague urges. Now there was no vagueness or uncertainty. Her scent blasted through the night air like a drug, and I raced after it, as blind to my surroundings as if I'd been running on a treadmill.

Finally, she was there, just ahead of me, ponytail bobbing in the darkness. It took everything I had to stop there. I threw my front paws out, nails digging into the path, forcing the rest of my body to a skidding halt.

I should have slid into the woods, then, approached hidden along the side, and run with her from there, but the tree cover was so far from the path's edge here . . . so far from her. Over there, I'd be lucky to even smell Elena, let alone see her. I could get closer. Just a little closer, then I'd cut to the shadows.

I broke into a lope, strides consuming the gap between us. When I was close enough to hear the chuff of her breathing, I knew I should stop. But it was so dark, with only a sliver moon illuminating the path. She'd never see me. I could get closer.

She was sweating now, dripping scent. I drank in the smell, eyes narrowing to slits as I inhaled. I slipped off the path to run along the grassy edge, where I'd make less noise. Just a little closer, and then I'd—

Elena stopped, so fast she stumbled, nearly falling. As she recovered, I wheeled and raced for the tree cover. I stopped just inside the edge and hunkered down, holding myself still, not even daring to peek over my shoulder. I could hear Elena's breathing, but she didn't call out, didn't move. After a moment, I turned to look. She was still there, where she'd stopped, peering around, squinting to see in the near darkness. She held her switchblade out, finger over the trigger, but the blade still sheathed. Her gaze traveled over both sides of the path, searching the shadows. She cocked her head, listening. Then, with a soft sigh and a slow shake of her head, she tucked the knife back into her palm, checked her watch, then sighed again. After one longing look down the path, she turned around, and started running back the way she'd come.

I ran with her, this time staying in the woods. As much as I wanted to be closer, I wouldn't risk frightening her again. She didn't need that. So I ran alongside her, far enough away to keep silent, but close enough that I could hear the pound of her feet on the path, and if I glanced over, see her pale form against the night.

Partway back, she slowed. I could tell from her breathing she was far from exhausted. Had she heard something? Not me, I was sure of that. I'd been running silently, skirting dead leaves and undergrowth and anything else that would give me away. I listened and sniffed the air, but detected nothing I wouldn't expect.

Elena looked around, a casual sweep of the forest. She checked her watch. Her nose scrunched up, head tilted, as if considering something. A pause. Then a quick "why not" shrug, and she strode off the path, heading to my side. I stayed absolutely still. A few feet from the tree line, she lowered herself onto the ground beside a boulder. I waited a moment, then slunk closer and peered out. She was there, sitting on the grass, leaning back against the rock. After another minute, her eyelids began to flag. They closed halfway, then stopped, and she sat there, a tiny smile on her lips, relaxing in the quiet night.

I hunkered down to my belly and crept forward, until my muzzle poked out into the clearing. I inhaled her scent, filling myself with it. Sweat trickled down her cheek. I watched it fall, wondered what it would taste like, imagined it, tangy and salty, imagined the feel of her cheek under my tongue. A shudder ran through me and I closed my eyes, picturing what it would be like to—

Something tickled my tail. My eyes flew open. A chipmunk scampered along my side. I stared at it, marveling at its stupidity. Probably thought I was a dog, and didn't even know enough to sniff and be sure, too intent on its quarry, the human a few feet away. Around here,

humans meant food, not danger. It'd probably smelled her and woken up hoping for a late night snack. As it raced toward Elena, I curled back my lips and let out the softest growl. The chipmunk barely glanced at me, just kept scampering along toward Elena, determined to intrude on her solitude.

I slapped down my paw, pinning it. The chipmunk let out a tiny shriek and twisted in panic, but I held it. I stretched forward, bringing my jaws a hairsbreadth from its head, and growled silently. When I was sure it got the message, I lifted my paw, and it tore back into the woods. I looked over at Elena. She was still resting, undisturbed. I stretched out, lowered my muzzle to my forelegs, and watched her.

So the way to get to know Elena better was now obvious. She liked to run; I liked to run. Maybe not in the same way, but I could be flexible. The important thing was that this was a common interest that could get us out of that damned office, into an environment where she'd have a chance to see me as a person, where I could be myself. Well, not really myself, but that wasn't important. My goal right now was just to get to know her better, and running would be the key to achieving it.

The problem was how to work it into conversation. Not only that, but how to formulate it into a request. I didn't have much experience with that—making requests. I never asked for things. I told people what I wanted and whether they chose to give it to me was their concern. To not only make a request, but a request that, I hoped would initiate a personal relationship, was alien territory, and I had no idea how to proceed.

I'd had friendships with humans before. Well, maybe friendships is stretching it, but I'd had acquaintances. I never initiated the relationship, though. Even with something as inconsequential as partnering up for a school project, I'd always sat back and waited for someone to come to me, and eventually someone would, a classmate who'd learned to overlook my rudeness, or one who wanted my brains badly enough that he didn't care how unfriendly I was. Even with Nick, I never said "Hey, do you want to catch a movie tonight?" I told him I wanted to see a show, and he knew me well enough to know that the matter was open for negotiation . . . at least in theory.

Yet I knew there was no way in hell I could go up to Elena and tell her to take me along on her next run. Even if I did manage to come up with some rational story to explain how I knew she *did* run, I strongly suspected the demand-and-wait-for-results approach would leave me waiting for a very long time . . . probably on the opposite side of a slammed door. This would take finesse. Finesse and patience. And had I possessed either, I'm sure things would have gone much smoother.

When Elena came to work the next day, it was obvious that her run had done its job, clearing her head and her mood. But if I'd hoped that maybe, somehow, our shared experience that night had gone both ways, I was soon cured of that fantasy. Elena came in, and did her work, as pleasant as could be, but the moment I tried turning the conversation away from the paper she was researching for me, she steered it right back on track. Even a desperate "so, what did you do last night?" only earned me a murmured "Not much." So much for doing things the easy way.

I decided that the next time she asked me a research question, I'd work conversation in the right direction. I had no idea how I'd segue from prehistoric bear cults to jogging, but I would find a way. So she continued skimming through the stack of books, making notes, while I graded quizzes. Went really well for the first ten minutes. Then I got tired of waiting, and slapped the stack of quizzes down on the desk.

"Do you run?" I said.

From the look she gave me, you'd think I'd just asked whether she wore men's underwear.

"Do I what?" she said after several long seconds of silence.

"Run. You know, jog, run, whatever."

She continued to stare at me. I probably should have worked it into the conversation better . . . or started a conversation first, so I'd have one to work it into. So now I had to think up one on the fly, which would have been a whole lot easier if she wasn't sitting there, nose scrunched, waiting for me to say something profound.

"Running is good," I said. "A good hobby—sport. A good sport. Good for you."

Her lips twitched. "Uh-huh."

"Well, it is, right? Gets you outside, in the fresh air, exercising. All good."

The phone rang, a sound I have never been so grateful to hear. As I lifted the receiver, though, that lip twitch broke into a grin. She shook her head, still smiling, and I knew my fumble hadn't been fatal, but more of a pratfall, the kind of thing she was getting used to. Now all I had to do was ask again, and this time she'd answer.

"Hello?" a woman's voice said on the other end of the line.

I started to hang up, but she called again, louder. Elena motioned at the phone, as if maybe I'd thought there was no one there. Damn.

I lifted the phone to my ear. “What?”

Elena smiled and rolled her eyes.

“Is Elena Michaels there?” the woman asked.

My gaze shot to Elena, then back. “No.”

“Her roommate said she was there. She gave me this number and . . .”

The woman droned on, but I didn’t hear. As tempting as it was to stand my ground, this person was obviously intent on tracking down Elena, which meant it could be urgent. Even I couldn’t argue that talking to me about running was a more important than a sick relative . . . not a close relative anyway.

So I passed the phone to Elena. She hesitated, brows knitting, then took it with a cautious “hello?” No sooner did I hear the woman respond than Elena’s eyes went wide with dismay, and I knew I’d made a mistake.

“This isn’t—” Elena began. “No, I’m at work. I can’t talk about this now. I—”

The woman’s voice cut in, loud enough for me to catch a few words, none that made any sense out of context. But the next one required no context at all. And when I heard it, I reached over to slam down the plunger. Before I could, Elena caught my eye, and her cheeks went scarlet as she realized I was listening. She grabbed the phone from under my hand and twisted around, back to me, moving as far from the desk as the cord would allow.

“I can’t—” she whispered. “Look, whatever he said I didn’t—”

The woman continued to rant. This time, though, when she called Elena a bitch, Elena’s back went rigid.

“This is not my problem,” she said, voice icing over. “No—no, *you* listen to *me*. I have never done anything—” The woman yelled something and Elena’s back went so tight it looked ready to snap. “He’s the one with the problem, not me, and I’m not going to—”

The line went dead. Elena stood there, fingers white around the receiver. After a moment she lowered her arm stiffly, and replaced the receiver in the cradle.

“I am so sorry,” she said as she turned to me.

“Sorry? Don’t be sorry. What the hell does that woman think—”

“I am sorry and it won’t happen again.”

Elena enunciated each word with care, and as her gaze met mine, my own words died in my throat. There was a lot I could say, a lot I wanted to say, but one look in those eyes, and I knew if I did, I’d be crossing a line that wasn’t ready to be crossed.

“I don’t know how she got this number,” Elena said. “I didn’t—”

“Your roommate gave it to her.”

Anger sparked in her eyes. “Then I’ll have a talk with her. I’m sorry.”

She turned, still stiff, and looked around the room, as if trying to remember what she’d been doing before the phone rang. Her gaze lit on the stack of books. She nodded, and reached for the open one.

“Running,” I said.

She stopped, lips pursing in a frown, then cracking into a tiny smile. “Ah, right. Running. It’s good.”

I hoisted myself onto the desktop. “It is, and the reason I was asking is that I run, but I can’t seem to find a decent course around here. So I thought, maybe if you don’t run, you might know someone who does, and you could recommend a spot to me.”

Elena took her seat. “Well, I do. Run, that is. There are a few good places around here. It depends on whether you like the street or the beach or—”

“Where do you run?”

“Uh, well, that depends. Usually in a park—”

“Good. I’ll go with you, then.”

For a moment, she just looked at me, as if replaying my words, making sure she’d heard right. Then she pulled back in her chair.

“I’m, uh, not sure that’s such a . . .”

She let the sentence trail off and her gaze searched mine, wary, almost reluctant as if looking for something she didn’t really expect to find, but had to be sure all the same.

“You like to run alone?” I said. “That’s fine. Me, I like company. Back at home, no problem, but here . . .?” I shrugged. “Not a lot of running buddies to pick from.”

She smiled. “Oh, I’m sure I could find one for you. I’ll make an announcement at next class and—”

“Uh-uh. I want someone to run with, not from.”

She laughed.

I continued, “Now, this park you mentioned. Maybe you can show it to me sometime, or draw me a map or something.”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “I don’t mind company, I guess. I’m just used to running alone. But sure, I’ll take you there, show you the trails. I usually run at night, but—”

“Night’s fine.”

“The park’s actually closed after dark, though. That’s one reason I go there. It’s very quiet, and I usually have the whole place to myself. Technically, of course, I am trespassing, but I’ve never had any trouble with that.”

“We hear sirens, we run faster.”

She grinned. “Exactly.”

“I’ll go with you next time, then. So when’s that? Tonight? This weekend?”

A laugh. “Eager to get back to it? Well, you should have plenty of running buddies this weekend. You won’t need me for that . . . and it’d be a long way to come for a jog.”

“Huh?”

“You *are* going home this weekend, aren’t you? That’s what you said on Monday. Going home for Thanksgiving. Well, not *your* Thanksgiving—that’s in November. For you, this is just a long weekend.”

“Uh, right. That’s right. I’m going home.”

Any other time, the reminder would have made my heart soar. Right then, though, I couldn’t help wondering whether there was some way I could get out of it.

“So we’ll do it next week,” she said. “And this weekend, you can run with your regular partners . . . well, assuming you’ll see them.”

“I will. It’s a Meet . . . ing. Bunch of buddies coming over.”

“Sounds like fun.” She settled back into her seat. “You have trails near your place?”

“At our place.”

Her brows went up.

“Big backyard,” I said. “Really big. A few hundred acres.”

“Oh, wow. Woods?”

I nodded. “Mostly forest, some field. Got a pond, a couple of streams. Lots of trails.”

“Now that’s the kind of place I’d like to have. Not that I’ve ever lived in the country. I’m probably one of those people who’d get out there and start missing the city life.” She paused.

“You’re in New York, right? The state, not the city.”

“Definitely not the city. We’re up by Syracuse. Nearest neighbor is at least a half-mile . . .”

We spent the rest of Elena’s shift talking. Okay, I did most of the talking, but she listened, and she was interested, and every now and then, she’d let a little of herself slide into the conversation. For now, that was good enough.

Early the next morning, I was heading home. I can’t say I was as excited about it as I normally was, but there wouldn’t have been much use in staying behind. As Elena said, it was the Canadian Thanksgiving, so she was almost certainly going home herself. I’d tried asking about her plans but, as usual, she’d ducked the question. I’d try again when I came back.

And, if I could, I’d broach the topic of that phone call again. That bugged me, someone tracking Elena down just to tell her off. I was sure Elena had done nothing to warrant that kind of treatment, so what the hell was this woman doing . . . I shook off the thought. More on that later. In the meantime, I had a meet to attend. With my long weekend home, Jeremy had decided to hold a Pack gathering, so everyone would be there, and unlike the past few fall Meets, this time, I was in the mood to enjoy it.

Chapter Five

Clayton

By the time the plane touched down in Syracuse, any urge to skip the Meet had passed, and I could hardly believe I'd ever considered it.

No one met me at the terminal and I hadn't expected it. I'd come in on the redeye flight, which I preferred, since it usually meant I didn't need to sit next to anyone. It made sense, then, for someone to drop off my car the day before, rather than get up at four AM to come and get me. Of course, it would have made even more sense for me to take a cab, but no one dared suggest that. Airplanes were bad enough.

At just past seven, I reached Stonehaven. As I drove down the long tree-lined drive, the road vanished behind me. A moment later, the stone walls of Stonehaven appeared. The upper windows were black rectangles. Everyone was still in bed, probably sleeping off a late night. On the bottom floor, strips of light glowed around the drawn dining room blinds, borrowed illumination from another room, probably the study.

As I passed the cars flanking the drive, a light came on in the farthest upstairs room. Jeremy's bedroom. I hit the garage door opener, then pulled into my spot beside his truck, left my bag on the seat and bounded for the house. When I threw open the door, I stifled the urge to shout "I'm home!", and wake everyone. Better to wait for Jeremy to come down and have some time with him before the others got up.

Walking down the hall, I saw that my earlier guess had been right. Someone was in the study. The door was ajar, light seeping out into the semi-dark hall. I peered around the doorway.

Logan sat in the armchair—Jeremy’s armchair. Being still fairly new to the Pack, Logan didn’t fully understand the protocol, so he always chose the chair he liked best . . . which just happened to be Jeremy’s. He meant no disrespect, but still, whenever I saw him there, my hackles rose. No matter how many times I booted him out of it—with a snarl or a good-natured chair-tipping, depending on my mood—he kept sitting there.

Logan was studying, hunched forward over his textbook, highlighter in hand, braids hanging in a short curtain around his face. No . . . not braids. What did they call them? Dreadlocks. A fitting name—they did look pretty damned dreadful. Apparently, then, Logan still wasn’t over his “search for cultural identity” phase. Made no sense to me. Who cared who your parents were, what their racial or cultural background was? I didn’t give a shit about mine. As Jeremy explained though—and explained often—my own attitude toward this, and most other things, was not the best ruler by which to measure others. I should be supportive of Logan’s identity quest, and if I couldn’t be supportive, at least I could keep silent, and if I couldn’t *voluntarily* keep silent, then I would do so under direct order. So I was forbidden to comment on the dreadlocks. Which was fine . . . Logan and I found enough to argue about as it was.

Logan had been with the Pack for three years. Although he was a hereditary werewolf, he’d grown up as a human, the product of an affair that ended after his conception. A few months before his first Change, when he’d been grappling with the initial physical and sensory changes, he’d received a letter. Signed only “your father”, it directed him to 13876 Wilton Grove Lane,

near Bear Valley, New York, where he'd find answers to his questions. And so he arrived on our doorstep.

To me, this was the height of parental neglect. First you leave your kid with his human mother, who has no clue about her son's true nature, and therefore risked exposure with every childhood trip to the doctor. Then, you let him go half-crazy wondering what's wrong with him when his werewolf secondary powers kick in. And finally, when you *do* decide to intervene, you foist him off on strangers. That's not how Jeremy sees it. Or, if it is, it's certainly not how he sees it when Logan is around to overhear.

According to Jeremy, Logan's father probably either hadn't been sure he *was* the boy's father, or hadn't known about Logan until it was too late. Then he'd sent him to the Pack to give him a chance at a better, fuller werewolf life, knowing Logan's youth would earn him a "no questions asked" membership.

The identity of Logan's father was still a mystery. Logan's relationship with his mother was strained—he'd grown up with his grandparents. Whenever he asked his mother about his father, his questions were met with silence or bitter curses, depending on how much she'd had to drink. He assumed his father was black. His mother refused to confirm it, but considering she came from a line of blond-haired, blue-eyed Norwegians, and Logan had deep brown eyes, a perpetual dark tan, and kinked light brown hair, he figured it was a pretty good guess. With that to go on, Jeremy had been helping to narrow down the paternal possibilities. His most recent theory was that Logan's father was not African-American, but Caribbean. Hence the dreadlocks. As for why Logan would even want to know his father, a mutt who'd abandoned him, that was beyond me. But, apparently, no one cared to hear my thoughts on the matter.

I snuck up behind Logan and loomed over the chair, casting a shadow on his book. He jumped, streaking highlighter across the page.

“Jesus fucking—!” He twisted and saw me. “Goddamn it, Clayton. Do you have to do that?”

I grinned. “Honing your senses. A duty and a pleasure.” I grabbed the text, swung over to the sofa and dropped onto my back. “Business Law: Ethical and Economic Considerations. No wonder you were drifting off.”

He stood. “There, I’m off the sacred chair. Now can I have my book back?”

“Sit down. Jeremy’s shower’s still running.”

I flipped the page, keeping my finger in at his spot. When he didn’t say anything, I lowered the book. He stood next to the chair, hovering there like a dragonfly looking for a place to land.

“Well, sit down,” I said, reaching out and kicking the chair.

“It’s a test, right?”

“Huh?”

“I sit down and you’re going to pounce.”

“That wasn’t the plan, but if it’s what you expect, I’d hate to disappoint you. Better yet, I could yank the chair out from under you.” I looked up at him and smiled. “Let’s test those reflexes. See if you can sit before I can pounce.”

Logan snorted. “Yeah, like I’m stupid enough to—”

He jumped backward, dropping toward the chair, but not before I kicked it away from him. He hit the floor.

“Damn,” he muttered, then peered up at me. “That was cheating. You said *yank*, not kick.”

“Misdirection,” I said. “A good try at it yourself, but you gave yourself away by glancing over to see how far back the chair was.”

I reached out and helped him off the floor.

“Sit,” I said, and waved at Jeremy’s chair.

He hesitated a moment, then cautiously lowered himself onto it.

“So how’s school going?” I said. “You get all your courses okay?”

He shrugged and relaxed back into his chair. “Most of them. I missed out on an optional I wanted, but squeezed it next term. How about you?” He slid a sly smile my way. “Maybe Jeremy should send you away every fall. That seems to cure your moods. Torture you with teaching for a month, and you’ll be so glad to come home you’ll be bouncing off the walls.”

I shrugged. “It’s not *that* bad.”

He arched his brows. “Come again?”

“The teaching. It’s going okay.” I tossed his book onto his lap. “Not that I’m not happy to come home and torment you and Nick for a couple of days, but it isn’t nearly as bad as I thought.”

“Uh-huh.” He leaned back in his chair and studied me. “You have anything to drink on the plane?”

I laughed. “No, I’m not drunk. Had water. Same as always. Alcohol dehydrates and, on a plane, I don’t need that—even if it might make sitting in a sardine can full of humans more bearable.”

“Water, huh. Did you leave it unattended? Close your eyes for a few minutes? Cause I’m pretty sure someone slipped something into it.”

“Very funny. I’m—”

At a noise from the hall, I shot off the couch and bounded to the door as Jeremy walked through. Behind me, Logan slid over to the sofa.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m home.”

Jeremy’s lips curved in a half-smile. “So I heard. As did everyone else, I think. You seem to be in a very good mood. I’m glad to see it.”

I glanced back at Logan. “Well, at least someone is.”

“I’m glad to see it too,” Logan said. “Just exercising a healthy dose of caution. We’ve all been bracing for the storm, and I’m not quite ready to unleash myself from the mast.”

Jeremy shook his head. “I told them you seemed better on the phone, and Nick agreed. A change of scenery was what you needed. I suspected that might be it. Seasonal restlessness.”

“I was voting hormones,” Logan said. “One of those weird wolf things you’re so attuned to. Of course, that could still be it.” He grinned at me. “Things getting a little steamy up in the frozen north? Taking Nick’s advice when he’s not around to gloat over it?”

“No, and if you want me to stay in a good mood, you’ll leave Nick’s advice where it belongs—with Nick.”

“Speaking of whom, I believe I heard him stirring,” Jeremy said. “And, if not, I’m sure you can fix that. I’ll start breakfast—”

“Why don’t we let Nick sleep in,” I said. “I’m sure he could use it. I’ll make breakfast.” I turned to Logan. “Come and give me a hand.”

He groaned.

“Fine, I’ll go bug Nick then, and Jeremy can make breakfast—”

Logan leapt up. “I’ll start the bacon.”

“Good. You do bacon and sausages. I’ll take the eggs and toast.”

“And I’ll try not to take this personally,” Jeremy said, crossing his arms.

“Nah, it’s not about you,” I said, grinning as squeezed past him. “It’s about me. I’m hungry and I want food I can eat.”

I ducked his lethal glare and herded Logan toward the kitchen.

As the weekend slipped past, I found myself, for once, able to relax and enjoy it, not anxiously watching the clock, wishing I could slow it down, stretch my time at home into infinity. I wasn’t eager to return to Toronto, but nor was I dreading going back.

The Meet officially ended Sunday, but I had Monday as well, with the long weekend. Nick had hoped to stay, but I’d wanted the time alone with Jeremy, so I’d cut a deal with Nick, that he’d leave with his father Sunday night, then come back to Stonehaven in two weeks and spend the weekend with me. That also meant I was committing to returning home in two weeks but that prospect didn’t bother me any more than the prospect of returning to Toronto on Monday night.

Nick, Logan and I began Sunday afternoon with a workout. Within an hour, though, it was down to me, pumping iron in the basement, alone. Nick worked out for two reasons: fighting strength and physical appearance. With Nick, though, the second consideration always came first, and by the thirty-minute mark, he usually figured he’d done all the body-polishing he needed, but he’d

always stick around for another half-hour, lounging on the benches and talking to me before wandering off in search of more interesting diversions.

Logan's dedication to improving his fighting strength far outweighed Nick's. It had to. As the newest and youngest Pack member, he was the one most likely to be targeted on by mutts looking to challenge a Pack wolf. He went to Northwestern, in Illinois, which was outside Pack territory, so mutts considered him fair game. I'd tried to help with that, but he'd have none of it and insisted on defending himself.

It was that streak of independence that usually had him fleeing the exercise room first. When Logan had joined the Pack, Jeremy put me in charge of his physical training. Logan had gone along with it, as he went along with everything Jeremy asked, but the moment he'd considered himself trained, he'd dumped his trainer. Now, when we worked out together, I tried to give him tips and pointers, but he always acted as if I was criticizing him. Usually by the half-hour mark, he was stomping back upstairs, muttering that he'd catch up on his workouts back at school. That afternoon, though, he did a full workout, accepting what few tidbits of advice I offered with a nod and the barest roll of his eyes.

I kept on for another half-hour. At school, my workouts were barely adequate—I had to pick times when no one was around to see how much I was bench-pressing, then quit if someone interrupted my session. While I would have liked to go for another hour that afternoon, I hated spending that much time by myself, knowing I'd soon be back in Toronto and spending too *much* time by myself. So after a few more reps, I grabbed my towel. When I finished wiping my eyes, I lowered the towel to see Antonio in the doorway.

"You gonna work out?" I asked. "I'll wipe down the machines."

He shook his head, walked in and took a seat on the leg press bench.

“What’s up?” I said.

A half-shrug, but the look in his eyes belied that nonchalance, boring into mine as if they could see clear through to the other side.

“So . . . how are you doing?” he asked.

“Fine.” I grinned. “Better than fine. Great. Damned near perfect.”

“Uh-huh.”

I whipped the towel at him. “Not you, too. Come on. Am I not allowed to be in a good mood without everyone wondering what’s wrong? Logan’s been joking about spiked drinks all weekend. Nick keeps giving me funny looks. Peter took me aside yesterday for a little heart-to-heart on how lonely it can be living away from the Pack, and how tempting it can be to start taking something to make things easier. The only person who seems happy to see me happy is Jeremy.”

“I don’t think there’s anything *wrong*, Clay.”

“Good.”

He started to say something, then leaned over, grabbed a dumbbell and started doing arm curls. Then he grinned up at me.

“Still at ninety pounds?”

“Yeah, yeah. And I’m not going any higher for that one. I’m not built the same as you.”

His grin grew. “Good excuse. So . . . I hear the teaching is going very well.”

“Very well would be stretching it, but it’s going fine. Not nearly as unbearable as I expected.”

He nodded, attention fixed on the weight. “Meeting new people, I suppose.”

“Uh-huh.”

He did a few more reps, then cleared his throat. “If there’s ever anything you want to talk about, Clay, anything you don’t feel you can discuss with Jeremy, or you don’t think he’d understand—” He looked up, meeting my eyes. “I’m always here. You know that. Just because Jeremy’s my best friend doesn’t mean I tell him everything. And, being his best friend, I know better than anyone that there are some things Jeremy doesn’t understand, *can’t* understand. That’s no slight to him. Everyone has different life experiences, and if you haven’t experienced a thing, you don’t know much about it. Like I wouldn’t know how to paint a picture and he wouldn’t know how to run a business.”

I nodded. After a moment’s hesitation, I glanced at the door, then looked overhead.

“Jeremy’s outside, Clay,” Antonio said, laying down the weight. “He can’t hear us.”

“Well, there is something,” I said slowly.

“Yes?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to discuss it with Jeremy. I just—I don’t feel I can.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Like you said, he just doesn’t *get* some things. I know he wants what’s best for me, and I know he worries about me but . . .”

Antonio shifted to the edge of his seat. “Go on.”

“I need your advice. You have some experience in this area.”

Something flashed behind his eyes, but he blinked it back. “Yes, I probably do.”

“It’s about motorcycles.”

“Motor—” He blinked again, then straightened. “Motorcycles?”

“You had one, remember? Until you wiped out, and Dominic didn’t want you getting another one, went on and on about your responsibilities as a father—”

“Yes, yes.” He rolled his eyes. “I can still hear him every time I take my car up over a hundred.”

I laughed and grabbed a fresh towel. “I’ve been thinking of getting a motorcycle for Toronto. I know Jeremy doesn’t want me taking my car up there, and I know why—because he thinks using public transit is good for me, that the more I do it, the more comfortable I’ll get with it.” I looked at Antonio. “It’s not working.”

His lips twitched. “And exactly how many times have you taken public transit in the month you’ve been there?”

“Once or twice, but that’s not the point. I need my freedom. My own transportation. I could afford a motorcycle. Buy it there, ride it until I’m done, then bring it home. Jeremy said no cars but he never said no bikes.”

The smile broke through. “Then why not just tell him—”

“Too complicated. Point is, a motorcycle would be perfect. Nick and I rode dirt bikes in Arizona last summer. Easy enough.”

“You need a license and—”

I waved him off. “I can fake it. If I get pulled over, I’ll play ignorant foreigner—‘damn, I didn’t know you needed a separate license for these things up here.’ No problem. But I’d need some help picking the right size of bike, the right type and all that. If I decide that’s what I want to do, can I call you?”

He paused, then gave a slow nod. “A motorcycle might be just what you need. A car—well—” He looked over at me. “It’s not as if you need room for more than one, right?”

I shrugged. “One or two. I can always buy an extra helmet, just in case. But mostly it would just be me—”

Nick barreled through the doorway. “You still down here?” He looked at his father and grinned. “Giving Clay workout tips? Hey, Logan! Come quick. Clay’s getting told how to lift weights.”

“Yeah, but is he listening?” Logan said as he walked in. He paused and looked from me to Antonio, then back again, smile dimming. “I think we’re interrupting something, Nick. How about we—”

“Interrupting?” Nick said, dropping down beside me. “We’re not interrupting. We’re rescuing. Time to get Clay out of here before my father tells him all the things he’s been doing wrong and shatters his delusions of perfection.”

I snapped the towel at him and got to my feet. “We’re done. So what’s up? You guys ready for more?”

Nick snorted. “Not more of this. We have—” He made a show of checking his watch. “—exactly six hours left before we need to drive Logan to the airport. The question is, how to make the most of those hours. I say—”

“I say we let Clay pick something,” Logan said.

“Like he’s not going to do that anyway,” Nick said. “At least let me make a suggestion before we let him shoot it down.”

“Yes, but letting him pick and letting him bully us into letting him pick are two different things.” Logan looked at me. “We were thinking of heading into Syracuse. What’ll it be? Dinner? A movie?”

“Dinner and a movie. Then dinner again.”

Logan laughed. “Sure, why not. My last chance to pig out before school. Nick? Pick a movie.”

“Are we going to see it?” Nick said. “Or just pretend to think about it?”

“You pick the movie,” I said. “I’ll pick the first restaurant. Logan can pick the later one.”

“Whoa,” Logan said. “That sounds almost democratic. I’m switching my theory to alien possession. This has gone too far for spiked drinks.”

I tried to swat him, but he dodged past me and we raced up the steps, leaving Antonio in the exercise room.

Chapter Six

Elena

As I walked through the doors of Sidney Smith Hall, I quickened my pace and surveyed the rapidly filling corridor. The chances of running into Clayton out here were next to nil, but I looked anyway. More significantly, I let myself look. Part of me still rebelled, urged my legs to slow down, not to get to the class early. God forbid I might let him know I'd been looking forward to seeing him. What bullshit. I wasn't giving in to that. Not today.

I spent too much of my life worrying about how things look, how they might be interpreted, never wanting to seem too enthusiastic about anything, to let anyone know I gave a damn. Part of that was justified. I'd been burned. But it was hard work, maintaining those defenses, and some days I wanted to tear them down, act as I pleased, and not care what anyone thought. I knew I wouldn't go that far. Didn't dare. But lately, I'd begun to feel that maybe, with Clayton, I could. He would never talk about me behind my back, telling others I was acting strangely. When it came to acting strangely, I was pretty sure I couldn't outdo him. He didn't care what anyone thought of him, so he wasn't likely to judge me. And, even if he did, he was leaving in another month or so, and I'd probably never see him again.

Was it only another month? His stint was done in mid-November, wasn't it? Alarm raced through me, but I chased it back. I had other things to worry about.

At least the weekend was over. Any holiday that revolved around family—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day—saw me sitting in my dorm room alone, keenly aware of the empty halls, afraid to even turn on the television, knowing I’d see be confronted with images of the holiday, even the commercials leaping out to remind me that normal people were home with their families. And if I didn’t have a family, well, whose fault was that? Being an orphan wasn’t an excuse. I’d had plenty of foster families to make my own and, if I hadn’t, that said something about me, didn’t it?

I hated dwelling on this, but never seemed to be able to get past it. On Sunday, just when I’d been ready to head out and shoot some hoops by myself, the phone had rung. My one bit of “family” contact that weekend—a former foster mother phoning, not to invite me to Thanksgiving dinner or even to ask how I was doing, but to accuse me, yet again, of ruining her son’s life. As if it was my fault—

“Elena!”

A dark-haired young woman pushed past a group loitering outside an open classroom door.

“Hey, Jody,” I said, stopping.

“Hey, yourself. You didn’t call when you got in last night. I was hoping we could grab coffee.”

“Sorry, I got back late.”

“So how was your weekend?”

“Good. And yours?”

“I survived.” She stepped closer, moving out of the lane of foot traffic. “So, what’d you do? Visiting lots of relatives? Eat lots of turkey? Pray you don’t have to see either again until Christmas?”

I forced a smile. “Something like that. You joining us for dinner?”

“Of course. Share some holiday war stories before my night class. Get your best one ready, ‘cause I think I’ve got everyone beat this time.”

We chatted for another couple of minutes. Though I kept trying to steer conversation away from the weekend, Jody kept swinging it back there. I hated lying to my friends. Hated myself for doing it. But the alternative was worse. Admit you have no place to go for the holiday, and they’ll do what any good friend would do—invite you to share their family celebrations. While I appreciated the sentiment, the only thing worse than sitting alone in my dorm was sitting with strangers who were all trying very hard to make me feel like family, and only reminding me all the more that I wasn’t.

That was one reason I was looking forward to seeing Clayton. Sure, he’d ask how my weekend went, but that’d be it. No details required or expected. I got the sense that, if I cared to provide those details, he’d be interested enough in hearing them. Yet he felt no obligation to drag them out of me. Too often people seemed to interpret silence as a sign that you really wanted to say more, but needed prompting, like a sinner in the confessional, ready to unburden yourself as soon as someone took an interest.

After talking to Jody, I was no longer early for class. By the time I swung through the door, the room was nearly full. Clayton was at the front, bent over the table, sorting papers. I paused, expecting him to look up. He always did, with that weird sixth sense of his, seeming to know when someone was heading to the office even before I heard footsteps. He kept working, though. I swung past the desk, certain he’d glance up then, and I think he did, lifting his head just barely, but he didn’t bother to meet my gaze, let alone sneak me his usual smile.

I climbed to my seat, disappointment mingling with reproach. So he didn't notice you? Big deal. You're his TA. What do you expect? A hug? I bit back a laugh at the thought.

As I took my seat, he began the lecture. He didn't look my way, and I tried not to worry about that. Of course, I *did* worry. Had he talked to someone at home who'd convinced him that a friendship with a student—especially a female student—wasn't such a good idea for a young professor? Or, worse yet, convinced him that I might interpret his interest as something other than friendship?

He stopped talking and began passing out papers, handing them down the rows. When he reached my row, he handed me my paper, then passed the rest to the person beside me, his gaze never dropping within a foot of my head. Okay, something *had* happened. Disappointing, but not unexpected.

I took my sheet. Instructions for an assignment. I started to read the first line, then something farther down snagged my attention, a handwritten line, dark against the faded type-copy.

How was your weekend?

I looked up just as he was heading back down the middle row. As he passed me, he glanced over, lips twitching in a smile. I grinned, and his smile broke through before he turned away.

A second page followed the first, this one a list of possible topics. Again, mine came with an extra note.

Run tonight?

I laughed, startling my neighbor, and quickly stuffed the pages into my binder. As Clayton stepped up to the lectern, his gaze shot my way, brows arched, expecting an answer to his query.

I bit back a smile and pretended not to notice . . . just as I pretended not to notice the glower that followed when he realized I wasn't going to respond.

When class ended, I took a few minutes to tidy my notes, waiting for the room to empty. By now students rarely lingered to ask more than a quick question, having learned that anything else only earned them a scowl and an abrupt leave-taking.

As the last students filed out, I slipped from my seat. Clayton had his back to me, gathering his papers from the table.

"So?" he said, without turning.

I smiled. "Passing notes in class? Isn't that a no-no?"

"Only for students. Doesn't count with teachers."

"Still, you'd better be careful," I said as he turned. "Hand that to the wrong person and you'll get yourself in trouble."

"Which is why I handed it directly to you." He leaned against the lectern. "So?"

"What?"

A mock-glower. "You know what. An answer to my question. Can you run tonight?"

"Hmmm, no. I'm afraid not. But I could pencil you in for three weeks from Thursday."

"Watch it or you'll find yourself with a very open schedule . . . and no job."

"There are laws against that."

"Yeah. So?"

I swung my knapsack onto my shoulder. “Tonight is fine. I’m meeting friends for dinner, but I should be done by seven, seven-thirty. How about I meet you in front of the ROM at eight?”

He agreed, and I left.

It was a cold night for October, single digit temperatures with a wicked north wind blowing in, reminding the unwary that it wasn’t too soon for a blast of early snow. With daylight savings time over, the sun was long gone by eight, taking any hope of heat with it. When I arrived at the museum, I was ready to head back to my dorm and dig up my winter coat, but once we started walking, and talking, I forgot the cold.

“Change facilities are a problem,” I said as we entered the park. “The washrooms are locked, so I usually slip into the woods. Hardly decorous but—”

“Whatever works. I never see what the big deal is anyway. Someone sees a flash of bare skin, what are they going to do, run away screaming?”

I laughed. “I’d hope not, but it probably depends on the person doing the flashing. And if the flashing involves certain sections of skin, they’ll run screaming to the nearest cop. On a night like tonight, though, I’d be more worried about frostbite than unintentional flashing.”

“You want me to break into a bathroom for you?”

I looked at him, wondering if he was joking, but pretty sure he wasn’t. When he just looked back at me expectantly, I smiled and shook my head.

“Thanks but no thanks. I run year-round, so I’ve learned the art of speed-changing. If we head around that pavilion, we should be out of the wind.”

So we did, each finding a place in the woods to change into our running clothes. Had I been with anyone else, this is the point where I would have gotten nervous, undressing in the forest a few meters from a near-stranger. But one key advantage to being with a guy as good-looking as Clayton is that I was sure he didn't need to lure girls into the forest to get them out of their clothes.

When I stepped out of the woods, he was already there, and I quickly realized one key *disadvantage* to being with a guy as good-looking as Clayton. The gape factor. In the last few weeks, I'd become less aware of his looks. As Shaw said, "Beauty is all very well at first sight; but whoever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?" But so far I'd only seen him in his professorial clothes—usually a jersey or pullover and equally loose-fitting casual pants. For running, though, he wore a tank top and shorts. And, stepping out that forest, I became keenly aware that, as nice as the picture had been with those baggy clothes, I'd been missing half of it. Let's just say it was obvious Clayton wasn't the kind of guy whose only form of exercise was the occasional jog around the block. I tried not to look. Failing that, I settled for trying not to stare.

"Damn, it *is* cold," he said, rubbing his arms.

"Having second thoughts?" I asked as I stretched my hamstrings.

"No, but if you are . . ."

"Never. I was just going to say that if you were, the university is back that way." I grinned and launched into run, calling over my shoulder. "And if you weren't, the trail is over this way."

He laughed and ran after me.

As much as I like the solitude of running alone, there's something to be said for having company of the right sort. Preferably someone who can keep up a light chatter, and keep up the pace.

Clayton managed both easily, and we were back where we started before I knew it.

"—hadn't seen it, so I ended up watching Die Hard again," he said as we slowed to a walk.

"Is that the kind of movie you like?" I asked.

"Pretty much. Action and adventure flicks, mostly, though comedy's fine, sometimes horror. A few months ago, we went to see the new Crocodile Dundee one, but it was sold out, so we saw . . . now what was it? Something about a baby. We're Having a Baby, I think. Now that *wasn't* my kind of movie."

"A chick flick."

"Huh?"

"A film aimed at the female portion of the movie-going public," I said.

"Oh." He peered over at me. "So, you like those kind of movies?"

"No, I'm saying that's who they're made for, *not* that every woman likes them. No more than every guy likes movies where stuff blows up."

"So what kind do you like?"

I grinned. "The ones where stuff blows up."

"We should go to a movie, then."

I glanced over at him, but already knew what I'd see. Nothing. No hint that this was anything other than the friendly suggestion it sounded like. I smiled to myself. Like the invitation to run together, he blurted out such things as if he was completely unaware of how they might be interpreted, with a guileless innocence that couldn't help but put me at ease.

"Sure," I said. "We should do that someday."

“How about Friday?”

I laughed. “I said *someday*.” A pause, then I glanced over at him. “Maybe Saturday.”

He grinned. “Good. Any idea what’s—”

He stopped. I took another step, then felt his fingertips brush my arm, and looked back to see him still standing a few feet back. He motioned for me to stop and scanned the grassy hill leading to the pavilion.

“Someone’s here,” he murmured.

“Oh?” I squinted into the darkness. “Where?”

“Over by the parking lot. I can just barely make out a shape.”

“Probably kids.”

He nodded. “Probably. You go get changed. I’ll wait.”

“Stand guard?” I said. “I’m sure that’s not necessary.” I pulled my switchblade from my pocket and held it up. “Besides, I come armed.”

“Aren’t there laws against those things?”

I grinned. “Yeah. So?”

He gave a soft laugh and shook his head. “That’s fine, but humor me and get dressed while I wait here. Then you can guard me.”

“Fair enough,” I said, and headed back to my clothes.

When I came out, he was standing by the pavilion, watching the distant parking lot.

“Still there?” I asked.

“There *again*. He left a couple times, but keeps coming back. Like he’s waiting for someone.”

“Probably is. Go on and dress then. I’ll stay here.”

After about a minute of squinting in the direction of the parking lot, I saw that Clayton wasn’t imagining things. There was someone there. A cold night for a tryst, but I suppose that never stops anyone who’s determined enough.

A minute or so passed before I realized the figure was getting more distinct. Coming closer. I ducked behind the pavilion wall. No need to advertise my presence.

A moment later, a man appeared, walking along the path beside the pavilion. He didn’t see me, and I couldn’t get a very good look at him, just a glimpse of his back as he passed. A tall, young man, maybe my age, maybe a bit older. Something in his stride made my heart jump into my throat, but I shook it off. Couldn’t be. Not out here.

He reached the end of the path, then headed back. As he turned, my gut went cold. It wasn’t possible. No one knew I was here . . . no one except my roommate. Damn it! I quickstepped back into the shadows, but not before he saw me.

“Elena!” he called, grinning as he broke into a jog. “There you are. You’re a hard girl to find.”

Apparently not hard enough.

Chapter Seven

Elena

“What are you doing here, Jason?” I asked, shooting a quick look over my shoulder and praying Clayton didn’t pick that moment to step from the shadows.

“I should be asking you that.” He walked over to me. “Jesus, Elena, what are you thinking? Jogging in a park at night? When your roommate told me where you were, I thought she was putting me on. Who the hell does crazy stuff like this? It’s not—”

“Normal?” I said.

“I didn’t mean it like that. You know I didn’t.”

He stepped forward, hand rising to brush a stray wisp of hair off my cheek. I backpedaled out of his reach. His gaze dropped, that wounded look that set my gut on fire, as if he was the victim here, the poor besotted guy under the spell of the evil ice bitch.

“I’m not canceling the restraining order,” I said. “So you can tell your mother to stop calling me.”

“Ah, shit. Is she—?” He smacked his palm against the pavilion wall. “Goddamn her! Why does she always do this to me? I told her I didn’t care about the job. You were right to get that restraining order—”

“Don’t.”

“No, I deserved it. I got carried away. I couldn’t help myself. You weren’t returning my calls. You wouldn’t see me. I got confused—”

“Confused?” I said, nails biting into my palms. “What the hell is confusing about the word ‘no’?”

The wounded look again. “You don’t have to swear, baby.”

“I am not your *baby*.” I dug my nails in harder, struggling against the rage. “I have never been your *baby*. I have never been your *anything*. No, wait . . . I was your something. Your foster sister.”

“I know that. But I couldn’t help it. You were so—”

“Available,” I snarled. “Available and trapped. I couldn’t just slam the door in your face and walk away, because there was no place for me to walk to. You were there, all the time, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. Complain to your mother, and she tells me I’m overreacting. You’re a seventeen year old boy; I’m a seventeen year old girl. What do I expect? I should be flattered. Well, I’m not seventeen anymore. I wasn’t flattered then. I’m not flattered now. And I want you to get the hell out of my life before I do something that is really *not normal*.”

“You’re upset, baby. I understand that. My mother pisses me off, too, so I don’t blame you one bit.”

I wanted to slug him. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to haul off and deck him. If I was a man, I could do it, and no one would judge me as anything more than a guy with a temper.

But there was no one here to judge me. Just him, and I didn’t give a damn what he thought—the worse the better. The problem was, not that I couldn’t hit him, but that it wouldn’t

help. I could clock Jason, knock him clean off his feet and he'd just look up at me with those big, hurt eyes and say, "I understand why you did that, baby."

With a growl, I turned on my heel and strode away. Got about ten feet before his hand closed on my shoulder.

"Let me go," I said, voice low, back still to him.

"No, Elena. Not until you've calmed down."

I jerked forward, but his grip only tightened, fingers digging into my shoulder. I wheeled and flung his hand off. His jaw set. I stood my ground. He stepped forward, closing the gap between us.

"You don't want to do that," drawled a voice to our left.

I looked to see Clayton standing in the shadow of a pine tree, arms crossed, as if he'd been there for a while.

"I can handle this."

My words came out clipped, sharper than I intended. I glanced over at him and lifted a finger, managing a weak smile. He nodded, and stayed where he was.

"Go home, Jason," I said. "Or I'm walking to the nearest phone booth, dialing 911 and seeing how well that restraining order works."

The perfect threat—calm yet clear— and I'd have been very proud of myself . . . had Jason heard a single word of it. Before I was half finished, he already had his back to me.

"Who the hell are you?" he said, striding toward Clayton.

Clayton smiled, a humorless teeth-bearing smile. "An interested party."

"Interested in what?" Jason swung to face me. "Is this guy with you, Elena?"

“Could be,” Clayton answered before I could say anything. “Or I could be just a fellow nighttime jogger, heard the ruckus and came over to see if I could help. Or maybe I’m not a jogger at all. Maybe I just like hanging out in empty parks, see what kind of sludge crawls out of the pond after dark—” He grinned, teeth flashing. “—see what kind of trouble I can get into.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Not a damn thing. Now, I think Elena was talking to you, and I think you’d better start listening.”

Jason stalked over to Clayton, and pulled himself up, eye to eye. “Or what?”

Clayton only shrugged. “You’d have to ask her that.”

Jason looked from Clayton to me, face scrunched up in confusion. “What the hell is going on here, Elena? Who is this guy?”

“An interested party,” Clayton said.

Jason’s finger shot up, pointing in Clayton’s face. “Don’t you start—”

Clayton grabbed his finger. I tensed, but he only held Jason’s finger for a second, then pushed it slowly down.

“Lift that hand to me again, and you’d better be prepared to use it. Now go on back to Elena. This is her fight, and I’m not making it mine unless you insist.”

Jason looked over at me, then back at Clayton. He paused for a moment, then stalked off, calling over his shoulder a promise that he’d talk to me later. I wanted to run after him, grab him by the shoulder, the way he’d done to me, swing him around and set him straight—tell him he *wasn’t* going to talk to me later and why. But I was too happy to see him go. Happy and relieved, and dead-set against doing anything that might interfere with his leaving. So I settled for glowering after him.

“You want to go get something?”

I wheeled to see Clayton at my shoulder. I hadn’t seen him move from his place by the trees, but my attention had been riveted on Jason, and he’d crept up, silent as always.

“Hmm?” I said.

“You want to go get something? I’m sure I can find a place on the way back.”

I shook my head. “No. Thanks, but I’m really not . . .” I shrugged.

“Not hungry?”

I blinked. “Oh, you meant something to eat? I thought you meant a drink.”

I should have known he didn’t mean the obvious. He never did.

“We could get a drink, if that’s what you’d like,” he said.

“Definitely not. Doesn’t do a thing for me except put me to sleep. But something to eat would be good.” I forced a smile. “Vent my frustration on a hapless burger.”

“Good. Grab your knapsack and we’ll go.”

We walked down out of the park in silence. Comfortable silence, not that dead weight silence that comes from not having anything to say or, worse yet, from waiting for me to talk about what had happened. He didn’t mention it, and I appreciated that. Like I appreciated the invitation to a late-night snack—something, anything, to keep my mind off Jason and to give me an excuse not to head back to my dorm room, where he’d probably be lying in wait.

Clayton found an all-night diner a block from the park. We couldn’t see it from Bloor Street—not even the sign—so I assumed he’d been there before, but when we got inside, he looked around, orienting himself the same as I did.

He started toward a table in the back corner, then glanced over his shoulder.

“There okay?” he said, jerking his chin toward the table.

“Perfect.”

We settled into our seats. He took the one facing the wall. When we’d grabbed coffees at the university, I noticed he always did that, took the table as far from others as possible, then selected the chair that faced the wall or the window or whatever barrier was there, putting his back to everyone else in the cafeteria.

“Burgers page three,” he said.

“On second thought, I may change my mind. I see they serve all-day breakfast.” I skimmed through the grease-spattered paper menu. “I think I might go for pancakes. Weird I know, but—”

“Have what you like.”

I smiled. “Comfort food. Does the trick better than alcohol.”

He started to say something, but the server arrived, coffee pot in hand.

“No thanks,” I said, covering my cup. “Too late for caffeine. I think I’ll have . . .” I flipped to the back of the menu, then smiled. “Root beer floats. Haven’t had those in years. I’ll take one.”

“And pancakes, right?” Clayton asked.

“Sure, if you’re ready to order. I’ll take the pancakes and ham steak.”

The server peered over her half-glasses. “With a root beer float?”

I hesitated. Kicked myself for doing it, for letting a server make me rethink the “appropriateness” of my order, but I did it nonetheless.

“Same here,” Clayton said, smacking down his menu. “Pancakes, ham and a root beer float.”

The server said nothing, just rolled her eyes, and left mumbling about college kids.

“You like root beer floats?” I asked.

“Never had one.”

I stifled a laugh. “Well, I’m not sure how well it’ll go with maple syrup, but we’re about to find out.” I glanced around the diner. The smattering of other customers was all across the room. “I should have said it earlier, but thanks for trying to help back there. At the park. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“You wanted to handle it yourself. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Hmmm, well, as you doubtless noticed, handling it myself doesn’t seem to be—” I bit off the sentence and looked away. “Anyway, thanks.” I glanced back at him and grinned. “You confused him, and that’s probably the best way to get rid of Jason.”

“Not too bright, is he?”

I laughed and eased back in the booth. “No, not too bright, though I’m pretty sure he can’t be as dense as he acts. It’s just a convenient excuse. You know, pretend he honestly misinterpreted our relationship—or lack of relationship.”

“So you and him never . . .”

“Absolutely not. When you’re a foster kid, you can’t get into that.” I paused, realizing I’d let slip something I preferred to keep to myself. But if he’d overheard any of my conversation with Jason, he already knew I’d been in foster care. So I continued. “I tried it once—nothing big, just a little hand-holding kind of thing with another foster brother when I was twelve—but that taught me my lesson. Any relationship Jason thinks we had took place only in his head.”

“But he keeps following you? What’s it been now? Three, four years?”

“Three. And two since I turned eighteen and got the hell away from him and his screwed-up family. As for Jason, I don’t know what his problem is. He’s a good-looking guy—he certainly can’t have problems getting dates with willing girls. So why me?”

“Probably because he can get dates with willing girls . . . and you’re not willing. Buddy of mine is like that. Not like *that*—stalking and shit. But if you put him at a party with ten girls, and nine of them are falling over him, he’ll make a beeline for number ten, spend the night trying to charm her.”

“The thrill of the hunt.”

“I guess so. Doesn’t make sense to me—to go after someone who’s not interested, and only *because* she’s not interested—but he likes the challenge. ’Course, if she tells him to get lost, he does.”

“Most guys do. A chase is fine, but if she fights when cornered, they back off.”

Our floats arrived. Clayton waited until the server left.

“Has he ever hurt you?” he asked.

I started to shake my head, then shrugged. “Not really. He sometimes grabs me, like he did in the park. Leaves bruises, that kind of thing, but not the ‘fear for my life’ kind of hurting. Nothing that bad.”

Clayton’s jaw worked, and he dropped his gaze, but not before I saw a flash of rage there, so intense it startled me. It should have scared me—I know that. But it didn’t.

“That’s bad enough,” he said. “You can’t let him do that or it’ll only get worse.”

My head jerked up. “You think I’m *letting* him—”

“No.” He reached out and, for a second, I thought he was going to put his hand on mine. At the last moment, he veered off and plucked a napkin from the dispenser. “I didn’t mean it like that. The problem is, the harder you fight, the harder he’s going to pursue. You can’t give in, obviously. But you can’t fight back either. So you’re stuck.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

He crumpled the napkin. Then he looked at me. “I could fix this for you. Make sure he doesn’t come back. Not kill him—if he isn’t threatening *your* life, then that isn’t necessary. Not yet. But I could make damn sure he never wants to see your face again.”

Again, I should have been shocked. Again, I knew that, and yet I wasn’t. I didn’t know what he was offering to do, but I knew it didn’t involve giving Jason a stern talking-to. And the casual mention of killing him, as if this was an obvious option I should keep in mind? That should have scared the crap out of me, should have sent me stumbling to my feet with a mumbled apology as I bolted for the door. Instead, I only shook my head and said,

“Thanks, but I still want to try handling it on my own.”

“If you change your mind, you let me know.”

“I will.”

Clayton walked me back to my dorm, but it wasn’t necessary. Jason wasn’t there. Nor did he make good on his “promise” to talk to me later. Maybe he was still trying to figure out what Clayton had been threatening in the park. Or maybe he’d looked at him, and seen something in his eyes, the same thing I’d seen later at the restaurant, and decided he didn’t want to find out what he’d been threatening. Either way, I was glad for the respite.

Clayton and I did go to see a movie that weekend. Had a good time, too, though by now I'd come to expect that. Over the next few weeks, we saw a couple more movies, went out for a few more meals, and jogged together almost every other day. I knew I should have been concerned about getting him in trouble, socializing with a student, but he was careful and I was careful and, the selfish truth was that I didn't want to worry about it, didn't want *him* worrying about it, not if it meant we'd spend less time together.

After that night in the diner, I started opening up. From our conversation about Jason, he already knew the worst of it, that I had no family, that I'd been through multiple foster homes, each experience ending badly, so there wasn't much sense continuing to hold back. Not that I spent our time together pouring out my guts at his feet—I just didn't change the topic when conversation turned personal. And he gave as good as he got. Before that night in the diner ended, I'd found out that Clayton understood my situation better than I could have imagined, having been orphaned himself when he was only a couple of years older than I'd been. Like me, he had no biological family . . . or none that he knew of. Unlike me, though, he'd found a home, with a guardian that sounded like everything I'd ever dreamed a foster parent could be, plus a close extended family. I suppose I could have felt jealous about that, but instead it reaffirmed my own hopes, that just because you didn't have blood relatives didn't mean you couldn't, someday, have a normal life with a normal family.

As October drew to a close, I became increasingly aware of the calendar—and Clayton's imminent return to New York. We hadn't discussed that. Maybe there was nothing to discuss. Maybe his term would come to an end, he'd hand me my final paycheck with a "Nice to have met you" and that'd be it. And maybe, if I expected otherwise, that was my mistake.

I held out as long as I could, until exactly two weeks before he was due to leave. Then I asked whether I could use his office computer to rework my *résumé*. He mumbled something but, when I tried to get an intelligible answer, he changed the topic. So that, I suppose, was that.

Two days later, I showed up at work to find the office empty. With no note. For a few seconds, I stood by the desk in shock, half certain he was already gone. Silly, I know, but he was always there when I arrived for my shift and if he couldn't be, even for something as trivial as running out to use the washroom, he left a note, telling me he was gone—as if I couldn't see that for myself—and telling me to wait—as if I might take his absence as an opportunity to snag a day off. So when there was no note, I kind of panicked. Then I saw that his books were still on the shelf. He might leave papers and old journals scattered all over the office when he finally did vacate it, but he'd never abandon his books.

I sat down and started to work. Less than ten minutes later, the door banged open.

"I hope that's not your *résumé* you're typing," he said as he tossed a file folder onto the desk.

"Not without your permission."

"Good, 'cause I don't give it. You may not revise your *résumé*."

I rolled my eyes. "I meant, your permission to use your computer and printer, not to write the *résumé*. That I don't need."

“And you need it to use my printer? Why? I might complain about you using up the ribbon? Hell, I have a box of them.” He dropped into his chair and spun it to face me. “But, back to the original subject, you do not have my permission to revise your résumé. I expressly forbid it.”

“Uh-huh. Well, that’s very nice but I do need a job—”

“You have one.”

“After you leave.”

A grin peeked through. “Not leaving.”

“What?”

“Is that disappointment I hear?” He bounced off the chair and scooted his rear onto the desk, looming over me. “Too bad, ’cause I’m not leaving. The university likes the research paper we’re working on, and they want me to finish it here, so they can slap their name on it. Plus Doctor Fromme wants me to keep teaching his fourth year class. Meaning you’re stuck with me until the end of the term.”

“Damn.”

“Damn?”

“Well, see there’s this other job. A much better job. Better working conditions. Less demanding boss—”

A mock-sowl. “You’d better be kidding, because I just went through a helluva lot of work to make sure you kept your job.”

“Oh, so you did it for *me*.”

“Of course. You need a job and, considerate guy that I am, I had to oblige.” He jumped off the desk and headed for the door. “So get back to work and earn your keep. I have to run off to

meet with Fromme. It might take a while, but I'll be back by lunch, so wait for me." He threw a grin over his shoulder. "You're buying, too. A token of appreciation for your continued employment."

He zipped out the door before I could answer. I sat there for a minute, smiling, then turned back to the keyboard.

At ten, I took a break to get a coffee. I had my hand on the door when it flew open, nearly sending me into the wall.

"Thanks a helluva—" I began, then stopped, cheeks heating.

In the doorway stood, not Clay, but one of his students. A guy about my age with short dreadlocks and an easy grin.

"Sorry about that," he said.

He reached out a hand to help me steady myself, but I waved it off with a murmured "I'm okay" and stepped backward into the office.

"Is Clay—Professor Danvers here?" He looked at me, smile faltering. "Uh, this is his office, right?" A glance over at the paper-littered desk and the grin returned full wattage. "Oh, yeah. This is definitely his office."

"You must be in his fourth year class," I said. "I'm Elena—his TA."

His brows arched. "TA?"

"Well, TA, receptionist, typist, research assistant. All 'round girl Friday, pretty much." I waved at the office. "Housekeeping not included."

As he laughed, I unearthed a pen.

“Professor Danvers has office hours tomorrow, but you can leave a note for him, if you’d like, or I can pencil you in for an appointment.”

“Ah, you can pencil me in for an appointment, but will he keep the appointment? That is the question.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Yes, he *does* keep his appointments. I make sure of that. So can I schedule—?”

“Actually, I’m not a student. I’m a friend of his.”

“Oh?”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Yes, he has friends. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“No?” He met my gaze, still grinning. “Oh, come on. There was a little shock in that response. Admit it. Friends and Clayton are not words that go together.”

I smiled. “Okay, a little shock. Not that I didn’t know he had friends. I just haven’t met any of them. And, now that you mention it, I’m going to hazard a guess that you’re Logan.”

The grin fell away and he blinked. “Uh, yeah. He’s mentioned me?”

“Now you’re the one who sounds shocked.”

“I am. Not that I’m not perfectly mentionable, but Clay doesn’t usually talk about his . . . home life. Huh. Well—” He looked around. “So what kind of—Oh, wait, you were going somewhere when I rudely barged in, weren’t you?”

“Just to grab a coffee.”

“Perfect. I could use one . . . and I have no clue where to find it here. Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure. Or I could bring you back one—”

“I’ve just spent six hours in the car. Please don’t ask me to sit down and wait.”

I smiled. “I won’t then. Come on.”

After we got our coffees, Logan persuaded me to sit in the cafeteria. Normally, I would have pulled the “gee, I’d love to, but I really have to get back to work” routine. I’m not antisocial, but nor do I go out of my way to have coffee with strangers. Yet Logan was one of those people with the gift for making you feel, almost from the first word, that you’ve known them for years. So we sat and talked, mostly about school. He was also in his third year, at Northwestern, which gave us plenty of common ground.

“You live on campus or off?” he asked halfway through our coffees.

“On. Though I’m hoping to change that next term.”

“Same here. And I bet I know the reason. D.M.F.H., right?”

“Hmm?”

“D.M.F.H. Dorm mate from hell.” A wry smile. “There’s gotta be a better acronym, but that’s the best I could come up with on the fly. So how bad’s yours?”

“Oh, she’s not too bad . . .”

“And the Sahara Desert isn’t *too* hot.”

I laughed.

“She had to be bad,” he said. “Because that’s the rule.”

“The rule?”

“You’re a serious student, right? Obviously, if you’re a TA. I’ll bet you’re like me, you work your ass off because that’s what college is for—learning and getting a job, not an all-expense paid four-year party tour.”

I shook my head. "Sometimes I wish it was."

"But it isn't. Especially if you're paying your own way. You are, I'll bet. Otherwise, you sure as hell wouldn't take a job with Clay."

I laughed. "Yes, I'm paying my way."

"Me, too. Well, someone's helping me, but I have every intention of paying him back, whether he wants me to or not. Point is that we've paid for this education, and we're damned well going to get the most out of it. So we're guaranteed to get dorm mates who don't give a shit, who stay up all night, expect us to get up quietly in the morning, blast music while we're trying to study, give their friends the room key . . ." He shook his head. "It's a given. Happens to me every year."

"Same here."

"See, that's because it's the rule. Someone's doing it on purpose. I think it's the baby boomers."

I sputtered a laugh. "The baby-boomers?"

"Well, we're studying to take their jobs, right? What better way to keep us out of the work force than to make sure we have a rough time at college, and either drop out or get a transcript filled with Ds. Pair us up with the worst party animals and hope we fold. It's a conspiracy."

I grinned. "Or it could be a psych experiment."

"A psych experiment funded by the baby-boomers. That's gotta be it."

A flash of motion across the cafeteria caught my eye. I looked to see Clayton barreling toward us, eyes blazing, mouth set in a grim line.

"Looks like Clay got my note," I said. "But I don't think his meeting went very well."

Logan glanced over and grimaced. “No, I do believe that scowl is intended for me.” He looked around. “Think it’s too late for a speedy escape?”

“Fraid so.”

“Damn. Hold on, then. I think I’m about to get blasted.”

Chapter Eight

Clayton

I stood at the back of the cafeteria and watched Logan with Elena. He'd pulled his chair as close to the table as it could get, and was leaning forward as if he could cross those few remaining feet between them. My hands clenched. There was a rule about Pack brothers visiting me when I was here. A rule *against* it. Jeremy's rule. It was bad enough that Logan didn't respect my authority. But to disobey Jeremy? That went too far.

Elena laughed at something Logan said, and she leaned forward, hands moving as she responded. Her back was to me, but I could imagine her face, eyes sparkling with animation, her full attention on him, not slightly off to the side as it often was. How long had it taken for me to see that spark, to get her to look me in the face every time? She'd known Logan for an hour. Probably less.

I started toward them, looping around the cafeteria. The moment I passed into Elena's field of vision, she looked up, almost instinctively. I braced myself, expecting to see consternation flash through her eyes. Instead, she grinned and lifted her hand in a little "Here I am" wave.

My stride caught. I tried to smile back, but my lips didn't move fast enough, and she saw my scowl. Her smile faded, eyes clouding. She turned and said something to Logan. He glanced up at me, eyes widening in feigned horror, and he said something to Elena. My fury

returned full-force. It was bad enough he was sitting there, where he shouldn't have been sitting; I was damned if he was going to mock me about it, too.

I strode to the table.

"Clayton," Logan said, smiling up at me. "About time you—"

"I want to talk to you."

"Well, then, you're in luck, because that's what we were doing. Talking." With his foot, he pushed out a chair—the one on the far side of the table. "Elena and I were just about to swap roommate horror stories. Did you ever get a bad one?"

Elena grinned up at me. "Or were you the bad one?"

My anger started to fizzle under the blaze of that smile. A glance over at Logan, smiling away, and I rallied it back.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "In private."

"Oh, right." Elena pushed her chair back. "You guys don't need me hanging around. I should get back to work—"

"No," I said, touching her elbow as she started standing. "You stay. Finish your coffee. I just want to talk to Logan for a minute."

She hesitated. Logan shot me a "don't be a jerk" look, one I'd seen often enough to recognize. As much as I wanted to snarl something back at him, I couldn't help noticing Elena's discomfort, and feeling like maybe, this time, Logan's warning was warranted.

"Stay," I said. "I can talk to Logan later."

She hesitated another moment, studying my face, then offered a tiny smile, sat down and pulled out the chair beside hers. I took it.

We spent the next hour talking. Logan did most of the talking. Typical. More than once, I got the impression he was steering the discussion in directions he hoped I couldn't follow. Yet Elena always managed to bring it back to a three-way conversation.

When Elena talked to Logan, I watched her expression. It wasn't the same as I'd imagined. She seemed less guarded than she usually was with others, and more animated, but not nearly as much as I'd envisioned. Her gaze tripped to the side now and then, and I was pretty sure there was extra wattage in the smiles she tossed my way. Pretty sure, but not certain.

As for Logan, I knew him well enough to pick up his signs of interest. When Nick, Logan and I went out, Nick never made the return trip home with me. That was a given. Put him in a bar with more than one woman, and he could always find someone suitable. It took a lot of looking for Logan to find someone he liked, and even when he did, more often he went home with a phone number rather than the girl herself. When he did find something that sparked his interest, it was obvious—and, sitting at that table, watching him with Elena, I saw all the signs. I told myself it was just Logan being Logan, always finding a way under my skin, always challenging me. But I wasn't sure that was it.

After the first half-hour, I started watching the clock. At 11:45, I cut Logan short.

"Lunch," I said. "We have to get lunch or you'll be late for your next class. Logan? There's food here, food out on Bloor Street just north of campus, and food back in my apartment. I'll meet up with you at my office later." I took my keys from my pocket. "You want these?"

Elena looked at me, brows knitting, and I knew I'd committed some social misdemeanor. I glanced at Logan for a clue, but he rubbed at a smile and avoided my gaze.

“I’m, uh, sure you want to eat with Logan,” Elena said.

“Not really.”

Logan choked on a laugh. “And you wonder why you’ve never met any of his friends before?”

I glared over at him. “Had you called, or otherwise told me you were coming, I’d have left lunch free. But I have plans. With Elena. I’m buying her lunch to celebrate her continued employment.”

“I thought you said I was buying lunch,” she said.

“I was kidding.”

“Good,” Logan said. “Cause you’d put the poor girl in hock. She’d need a second job to pay for it. Have you seen how much he eats?”

Elena grinned. “I have. Which is why I planned to take him to McDonald’s.”

“Well, consider yourself saved from that fate, ’cause I’m buying,” Logan said. “You’re the townie, Elena, so you pick the place. Someplace good. My mom sent me a check this week, which is how I could afford the gas money to get up here. Every few months she surfaces from her stupor, remembers she has a son, and sends guilt money, which I promptly blow on the most frivolous, unnecessary expenses I can find. That way, neither of us feels guilty about it.”

Elena laughed. I shook my head. I never knew how Logan did that, tossing out the most private tidbits of his life as if they were nothing more intimate than his name or phone number.

“Shall we go?” he said, grabbing Elena’s empty coffee cup. “What time’s your class?”

“One-thirty.”

“Lots of time then. Is it journalism?”

She nodded. “Advanced interviewing techniques.”

“Oooh, could use some of those in my pre-law course. I’ll sit in on it with you.”

“You can’t do that,” I said. “It’s against the rules.”

Both Logan and Elena laughed.

“Words we never thought we’d hear Clayton Danvers say,” Logan said. “Profs don’t care if you sit in—not if you ask them first and ask nicely. If I get in shit, I promise not to mention your name. Now come on. I have fifty bucks burning a hole in my pocket, and I intend to have it gone by one-thirty—with no alcoholic purchases involved.” He grinned over at me. “Think you’re up to the challenge?”

I shrugged and headed for the door.

After her class, Elena returned to finish her shift. Not that she got much work done, between answering Logan’s endless questions about our project and arguing with me over the interpretation of data. This was an ongoing debate, a spirited disagreement over two ways to interpret our research findings. Her interpretation was wrong, of course, but I liked challenging her about it, if only to see her temper flash. Yet I had no interest in renewing a personal debate in front of Logan. When she got to that part of the explanation, though, there was no way around mentioning our disagreement, if only in passing. Logan jumped on it and had to hear both our arguments. Then he promptly declared that Elena’s interpretation made more sense. This from a guy who has never taken an anthropology course in his life, has never read any of the articles we cited, and hadn’t even heard ten percent of the facts. But he knew Elena was right. I tried to tell myself he was only baiting me, but I couldn’t shake the suspicion that taking her side had

nothing to do with me. If he was trying to impress her, it didn't work . . . or, at least, I didn't think it did.

At five-thirty, Elena left for dinner. Logan tried to persuade her to join us, but she insisted she had enough homework to last her through the dinner hour and into the night, and besides, we must want time alone together. From the look on Logan's face as she left, this was the last thing he wanted.

He closed the door behind her, then slowly turned to me.

"Okay," he said. "Blast away."

I leaned back against my desk, crossed my arms and said nothing.

After a minute, he sighed. "Okay, I know I shouldn't be here. Jeremy—"

"Jeremy forbade it. This is a direct violation of his authority."

Logan lifted a finger. "Uh-uh. He said he doesn't think we should visit while you're here. He never said we couldn't."

"You knew what he meant."

"But it's what he actually *says* that counts as law, not our interpretation of it."

"Who the hell told you that?"

"You."

I pushed off the desk. "I never said—"

"Not in words, maybe, but certainly by example."

I growled and leaned back again. "The point is—"

"The point is that I came because I was concerned. Obviously something was up, and I wanted to know what it was. One Pack brother looking out for another."

I met his gaze and held it. After a moment, he sighed again.

“Okay, more curiosity than concern, but only because I know you’re capable of looking after yourself. As a friend, I was curious. I wanted to know what was going on. Now I do.”

“And what are you going to do about it?”

“Do?” He laughed. “You like a girl. Hardly cause for emergency intervention. If you don’t want to tell the Pack, that’s your choice and, frankly, I don’t blame you. That ‘no long-term relationships’ rule?” He shook his head. “Most Laws, I can understand, but that one goes way overboard. Couples keep secrets from one another all the time. What’s the big deal? Hell, there’s no reason a werewolf couldn’t *marry* if he was careful.”

I could only stare at him.

“What?” he said.

“What kind of relationship—how could you keep that—?” I bit the words off, turned and grabbed my jacket. “I’m hungry.”

“After that lunch? Shit, I couldn’t even look at food.”

“Well, I’m going to, so if you want to come, get your coat.”

He slid a look my way. “I was right then?”

“About what?”

He rolled his eyes.

“If you mean the Pack Law, no, you’re not right,” I said. “And the reason you’re not right should be so obvious the question doesn’t need to be asked.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Well, what then?”

He searched my face, then shook his head. “If you didn’t argue the point when I made it, I guess that means there’s nothing to argue. You like her.”

I threw him his jacket.

“More than like, I suppose,” he continued. “If Nick’s right and you haven’t shown a passing interest in a woman since puberty, you’re not going to start now—with just a passing interest, that is. You’re serious.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Oh, so you’re not interested? Good, then you won’t mind me asking her out—”

I turned on him.

“Down, boy,” he said, lifting his hands. “I was kidding. Well, not that I wouldn’t mind asking her out, but I know I’d get turned down. Doesn’t matter how many other guys are in the room, the only one that girl sees is you.”

I grabbed my keys from the desk. “Elena isn’t like that. I don’t even think she notices what I look like. She sure as hell doesn’t care about it.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean you’re the only one she sees—the only guy she—.” He caught my blank look and waved his hand. “Never mind. You’ll figure it out eventually.”

Logan left after dinner the next night. He accompanied Elena to both her classes, including mine. I tried not to read anything into it, but couldn’t help being relieved when he finally left.

That night, Elena and I went for a run. Afterward, we found a grassy spot overlooking the water and ate the subs and sodas we’d brought along.

“So . . . you like Logan?” I asked finally.

“Sure. He’s a nice guy.” She smiled. “Easy to get along with, you know? I envy that in people.”

“So you like him.”

“Didn’t I just say—?” She caught my expression and choked on a mouthful of sandwich.

“Not like *that*. Is that what it seemed like? I hope he didn’t think—”

“He didn’t.”

“Good.” She leaned back against a tree trunk. “That’s the problem sometimes. You meet a guy, and you like him, but you need to worry about how that will be interpreted. Sometimes I’m interested because I’m, well, interested. Most times, though, it’s just because I think he’s a nice guy.”

I looked across the water, then over at her. “And what about me?”

I heard the thought coming from my mouth and tried to bite back the words, but it was too late.

“Do I think *you’re* a nice guy?” she said.

Her lips twitched, then her gaze met mine. She blushed and, in her eyes, I saw what Logan had been talking about.

“Yes,” she said softly. “In your own way, I think you’re a pretty nice guy.”

I leaned over, and my mouth found hers before I even realized what I was doing. The moment our lips touched, jolt of understanding ripped through me, like I’d finally got it, and even if my brain still didn’t quite understand what “it” was, my body did. My lips parted hers. I shivered at the feel of her, the smell and taste of her, and my hormones kicked into overdrive, like when I’d been sixteen, finally hitting puberty, feeling everything and not having a damned clue what to do about it. Now I knew. And now I’d finally found—

Shit. Was she kissing me back? I could feel her lips moving. Or was I moving them with mine? A sudden image shot into my brain: Elena's face, frozen in horror, too shocked to push me away.

What if she wasn't kissing me back. What if I'd misinterpreted her look. It was Logan's fault. Damn him! He'd tricked— Was I still kissing her?

I pulled back. "Shit, I'm sorry."

She blinked, eyes sleepy, as if waking up. "S—sorry?"

"I didn't mean—if this isn't what you want—"

She smiled, leaned over and kissed me, her arms going around my neck. For a second, I just sat there, stunned. Then I kissed her back.

A few minutes later, she eased out of my arms and smiled. "And that, I hope, clears up any confusion."

I grinned. "It does."

Another smile. "It does, doesn't it? I wasn't sure myself but—" She looked up at me. "I think I've figured it out now."

Someone laughed and we both jumped. I inhaled and caught the scents of perfume and booze.

"Kids coming," I said. "You wanna go someplace else? Maybe head back to my apartment?"

She blinked. Panic darted behind her eyes. What was wrong? She'd come to my apartment before, to eat or study. As I replayed my words, I heard a possible interpretation that wouldn't have been there ten minutes ago.

“No, not for sex,” I said. “I just want—” I shrugged. “You know, to spend more time with you.”

“Me, too. I mean with you, not with me. I like spending time—I’d like to spend time—” She pulled a face. “Blah. I think my tongue’s gone on vacation.”

“Is that a yes, then? Head back to my apartment and hang out there a while? No strings attached. I’d tell you if there were.”

She grinned. “Like ‘hey, do you want to go back to my apartment for sex?’”

“Exactly.”

She laughed. “You probably would, too.”

For a moment, she just looked at me, then she broke my gaze, her face reddening. She pushed to her feet and brushed herself off. I balled up my sub wrapper, grabbed my soda can, and followed her to the path.

Chapter Nine

Elena

And so, again our relationship changed, a sudden veer that didn't seem sudden at all, as if we'd been curving in this direction from the start, but only saw the signposts when they were upon us. From teacher to employer to friend to boyfriend, the signs drifted past, evoking no more reaction than a raised eyebrow and a halfhearted "Hmmm, wonder how that happened?" I knew eventually there would be another sign: lover, but I wasn't going to crane my neck over the horizon trying to see it. Like the others, it would come when it was time.

As for how I got to each stage, I didn't care. I could sit around and analyze it, try to find the exact moment when I'd realized I'd wanted Clay as more than a teacher, more than a boss, more than a friend, but I doubted there had been defining moments for any of them.

I could have asked myself "why," too. Why now? Why this guy? And maybe, more importantly, why me for him? But again, I didn't see the sense of tearing it apart to see how it worked. For once, I refused to analyze, to fret and worry. When you grow up learning to distrust, to read ulterior motives and hidden meanings in every kind word, every intimate

gesture, and you meet someone you instinctively trust, someone who has no reason in the world to hurt you, then there's no need to second-guess.

The next month spun past like a carousel ride. New emotions, new sensations, new thoughts, everything so blindingly new, a merry-go-round of first love, all bright colors and laughter and music and, occasionally, a slightly queasy feeling, as if it was all just a little too much to take.

It wasn't perfect. That was fine with me. The flaws kept it real. Of course, that didn't keep me from worrying about them. If I wasn't going to analyze why I'd fallen for him, and him for me, then my hyper-anxious brain was going to find something else to fret about.

First, Clay was possessive. No, maybe that's not the right word. More like he was jealous of my time. He liked being together. A lot. Pretty much always. If I wasn't in class or in my dorm sleeping, he wanted to be with me. Not that he clung to me or demanded my attention. He was content to be in the same room, each doing our own thing, sometimes a whole afternoon passing with scarcely an exchanged word.

I didn't mind spending so much time together. There was some sense of comfort in having him there, reading across the room as I did my homework. But my brain told me I *should* mind. Such behavior was one of the four danger signs of an unhealthy relationship—a list that had been drilled into my head in a twelfth grade health module.

Another sign was not wanting you to spend time with your friends. While Clay didn't complain about me going out with friends, I could tell he was biting his tongue. But I suspected that was just part of his desire to spend time together, so that would make it only one danger sign, not two. One quarter of the list, not half. Or maybe I was rationalizing away something I didn't want to see.

Equally troubling was that Clay kept our relationship a secret from his family and friends. Again, maybe I'm overstating the matter. Maybe he wasn't keeping it a secret at all, but that was certainly the impression I got. I knew he called his guardian, Jeremy, daily and yet, no matter how much time we spent together, I was never around when he made that call. I couldn't help feeling that was deliberate.

At least once a week, I was at Clay's apartment when his friend Nick called, and Clay would always make a quick promise to call back, then hang up. When I'd tell him to go ahead, take the call—I'd even step out to give him privacy, he always refused, saying he had plenty of time to talk to Nick later, this was his time with me. Maybe that was it—like not wanting to hang out with my friends, he didn't want his friends encroaching on our time together.

And yet . . . well, it was almost enough to make me wonder whether he had a girlfriend at home. I couldn't imagine that—my gut told me it was unlikely to the point of impossible; he just wasn't that kind of guy. The only thing that kept my brain from overriding my gut on this was Logan. He'd come up to Toronto again a few weeks after his first visit, and whenever he called Clay, and I was around, he and I did more talking than him and Clay. From Logan, I knew there was no other girl. He'd laughed when I'd tiptoed past the subject. Laughed his head off, and assured me there was no one else in Clay's life, no girlfriend, no boyfriend, no lover he'd agreed to part ways with while he was in Toronto, no past lover he was still pining for, absolutely no cause for concern on that front.

So why the secrecy? When I broached that subject with Logan, hinting about whether Jeremy knew I existed, he brushed it off with a shrug, a crack about Clay's eccentricities, and a quick change of subject. So the answer, I assumed, was "no." So what, right? Clay was a grown man, not a boy who needed his parent's approval. Maybe he just didn't think this was a

“meet the parents” kind of relationship yet. Or maybe he was concerned about the whole teacher-student dynamic . . . although he’d stopped being my teacher a week after we’d started dating.

It didn’t help matters that our first rough spot hit right after his next trip home. We’d been together for three weeks by then, deeply immersed in a fast-moving relationship. He’d called me five times that weekend. The first time, from the airport in Syracuse, he’d sounded fine, bitching about the flight, telling me he missed me, all normal Clay stuff. The next two calls had been furtive and short. I could picture him in some back room, gaze on the door, whispering for fear of being overheard, and I’d started getting angry, wondering why he’d bothered calling at all if he had to do that.

The next call was clipped, almost angry, as if I’d done something to piss him off. I’d blasted him for that. I didn’t mean to, surprised myself by doing it, but I couldn’t help it. I told him he was under no obligation to call me when he was away and he’d known that when he left, and if this was how he was going to act when he did call, I’d rather he didn’t. Then I hung up.

Two hours later he’d called back, from a pay-phone judging by the background street noise. He’d talked then, talked and talked, as if desperate to keep me on the line. None of it made any sense and by the time he returned, my gut was twisting, my brain feeding me all those little warnings I tried so hard not to hear, telling me something was wrong, wrong with us and wrong with him, and why the hell wasn’t I taking the hint.

I didn't sleep much Sunday night, and barely heard a word the prof said in my first class the next day. I spent the whole period glancing at my watch, waiting for it to end. When it did, I was second out the door, and only because I'd taken a seat too far back to be first.

I zipped over to Clay's office. Only when I could see his door did I slow down. It was cracked open, as it always was when he was expecting me. See? Nothing had changed. A bad weekend, that was all. Everyone has them. Going home can be stressful . . . or so my friends always told me.

Everything would be back to normal now. He'd hear me coming, as he always did, and he'd be there, sitting on the edge of the desk or lurking behind the door waiting to pounce, depending on what kind of mood he was in. I'd walk through that door and—

I stepped inside and he was across the room, leaning over the printer, fiddling with the buttons. Even with I closed the door with a loud click, he didn't turn.

"Jamming up on you again?" I said, forcing the disappointment from my voice. "Here, let me—"

"I got in last night," he said, still bent over the machine.

I stopped. "Well, that's good. That's when you were supposed to get in, wasn't it?"

"I thought you'd come to see me."

"When? Last night? Your flight didn't get in until two."

He said nothing, just kept playing with the printer. I gripped my backpack, knuckles whitening as the trepidation in my gut hardened into anger.

"I had an eight o'clock class," I said. "You expected me to meet your plane at two AM, when I had a class six hours later?"

He turned and rubbed his mouth. "Shit, I forgot. Yeah, I guess not. I'm sor—"

“And even if I didn’t have an early class, how the hell would I get to the airport? Pay twenty bucks for a cab? I can’t just hop in my car or on my motorcycle—”

“I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

He stepped toward me, but I backpedalled, lifting my knapsack to my chest. He looked down at it, then up at me.

“I didn’t expect you to meet me at the airport. I just—I wanted to see you. If I didn’t make plans for that, like meeting you for breakfast, then that’s my fault.”

I let the knapsack slide down. He crossed the few feet between us, arms going around me.

“I missed you,” he said.

I lifted my mouth to his. The moment our lips touched, it was like a dam breaking and he grabbed me, kissing me hard, pushing me back against the bookcase. When I tensed, he pulled back, breathing ragged, gaze searching mine.

“I missed you, too,” I said.

I lifted my hands to the back of his head and kissed him. This time when he grabbed me, I didn’t flinch, just kept kissing him, letting his kiss shove back all my doubts. There was an air of desperation in his passion, like when he’d talked to me on the phone the day before, like if he stopped talking or stopped kissing me, I’d disappear. After a minute or two, that frantic edge ebbed and, after another couple of minutes, we pulled back to catch our breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This weekend. It was just . . . I don’t know.”

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“No. It’s . . . I had a rough time. I wanted to be there, but I wanted to be here, too.”

I took his hand and walked to the desk, and backed my rear onto it. He did the same, then shifted against me, forearm resting on my leg, hand on my knee.

“You’ve never been away this long, have you?” I said. “From home, I mean.”

“I guess that’s part of it. I’m happy here, but when I go back, I’m reminded of that I miss being there, and at the same time I miss you. So I want to be with you, but I don’t want to leave and I just wish—” He stopped, then shook his head. “It’ll work out. I’m doing okay. Better than usual. When I was away at college, I hated it. Loved the education part, the classes and all that, but once my day was over, I’d just pace in my dorm room, going nuts wishing I was home.”

I smiled. “See? You were the dorm mate from hell.”

He smiled back. “Nah, I never had roommates. Not for very long anyway.”

I laughed and leaned against his shoulder. “Did you go home every weekend? Or is that a stupid question?”

“Left the minute my last class ended and didn’t come back until my first one. It was better in my undergrad years, when I was still living at home and I could pick my optional courses according to scheduling. I could usually wrangle an extra day or two at home each week if I did it right.”

“So you took whatever courses gave you days off? No matter what they were?”

“Well, within reason. Usually I could get something I wanted. In my last year, though, the only thing I could find to fit my schedule was a course in Women’s Studies.”

I sputtered a laugh. “So what’d you do?”

“Took it, of course. Nothing wrong with Women’s Studies. I think I got off on the wrong foot with the prof the first day, though, when I asked why there weren’t any men’s studies courses.”

I grinned. “What’d she say?”

“Nothing. Just gave me a look, like I shouldn’t even be asking. But we got along okay after that. She even mailed me a congratulations card when I got my doctorate, said I was still the only guy who’d ever earned an A in her course and she hoped that I’d live by the lessons I learned there.”

“What lessons were those?”

“I have no idea.”

I laughed, and hopped off the desk. “We should get to work. Mind if I go grab something to eat first? I skipped breakfast.”

“I’ll go with you.” He glanced over at me. “So we’re okay, then?”

I smiled. “We’re fine.”

We were “fine” for another couple of weeks. Then we hit our next rough patch and, again, it blind-sided me. One day everything was great, and the next, things just started getting . . . strange.

Clay had to make a presentation to the department on our paper, and he was stressed. I’d never seen him stressed, never imagined he could be stressed, but he was, working at it relentlessly and driving me almost as hard, snapping over details, getting frustrated over every setback.

When the printer jammed for the umpteenth time, he threw it against the wall. Smashed it to pieces. I could only stand there and stare. He snapped out of it right away, and apologized for losing his temper but still . . . well, it knocked me off balance. When you’re trying very hard to

pretend you don't see things in someone, it never helps to have them thrown in your face . . . or at the wall beside your face.

I could understand a young academic getting stressed over the initial presentation of his first big paper. Or, I would understand it, if that young academic was anyone but Clay. His attitude toward his career was laissez-faire at best, that almost arrogant casual air of someone who knows he's brilliant and doesn't give a shit if anyone else agrees. To see him flipping out over this made no sense.

The presentation came, and seemed to go fine. So I wanted to surprise him with a celebratory night. I made reservations at a place down in the theater district. Then we'd see whether I could scoop half-priced last-minute tickets to a show. And then . . . well, I wasn't sure about the rest of the night, but if things went well, maybe, just maybe, we'd be passing that next sign on the road. I didn't quite feel ready to take that step yet, but I really wanted this to be a big night, to shift our relationship back on track.

I bought a new outfit. A black wool dress. I never wore dresses, or even skirts, and I wasn't sure whether Clay would like it any more than my normal jeans-and-shirt routine, but I was willing to give it a shot. This time, I was the one teetering on the border of desperation, but I couldn't help it.

So I left a note on his desk telling him I'd come round to his apartment with dinner. Then I hurried to my dorm, showered, dressed, put on makeup, fussed with my hair, strapped on a new pair of heels, and scurried the two blocks to his apartment, trying hard not to fall in the heels.

I used my key, went up to his apartment, and knocked. Then I waited. Knocked again. Waited some more. I had a key for this door, too, but I wanted that moment when he opened the door and saw me dressed up for the first time.

Finally, after five minutes of waiting, I unlocked the door and walked in.

“Clay?”

“In here.”

I went into the bedroom, where he was pulling on a sweatshirt. I waited. He straightened and ran his hands through his curls.

“I gotta go,” he said, grabbing his motorcycle keys from the night-stand. “Wait here for me.”

“Clay?”

“What?”

He snapped the word, his back still to me. I stood there a moment longer, teetering on my heels, my stomach lurching and twisting, waiting for him to turn around and see me. He snatched his helmet from beside the bed, and brushed past me without even looking.

“I gotta go,” he mumbled. “Wait here. I’ll be back in an hour.”

Three long strides, and he was out the door. I stood there for at least five minutes, too stunned and hurt to think. Then I brushed back the first prick of tears, whipped his keys across the room, and marched out the door.

I lay on my dorm bed, staring up at the dirt-speckled ceiling. Had I done something wrong? No. I wasn’t wasting one second worrying that I had because I knew better. I wasn’t the perfect girlfriend. I had my moods too. But I’d been nothing but cheerful and supportive these last few days— nauseatingly cheerful and supportive, and undeservedly so considering how he’d been

acting. He should have been the one taking me out for a special night, a reward for putting up with him.

The roar of a motorcycle sounded outside my window. His motorcycle. My heart skipped, recognizing the sound before my brain did. I rolled over, trying hard not to listen for the next sign, but straining just the same, then exhaling a small puff of relief when it came: the tinkle of stones at my second-floor window.

I forced myself to wait for the third pebble shower before I deigned to respond. Even then I just walked to my window, not opening it or bending down to peer out. He was probably just here to give me shit for not “waiting” like he commanded. At the thought, I clenched my fists. I shouldn’t have thrown away his keys. I should have kept them, so I could throw them at him now, see his reaction.

I stood at the window and looked down. He was there, between the back hedge and the wall, blond hair pale in the moonlight. He lifted something. Something white. A Styrofoam box. He opened it and pointed inside, mouthing something. I shaded my eyes to see better, then bit back a laugh. It was a takeout box stuffed full of pancakes. He mouthed something again. This time I could make it out: “Please.” I hesitated, then lifted a finger and pulled the curtains to dress.

Chapter Ten

Clayton

When I was younger, I often tried to figure out the thought processes of animals, predator and prey, convinced that if I knew what was going on in their heads, I'd be a better hunter and a better fighter. Same with humans. If I knew how their brains worked, I'd know how to alter my behavior just enough to fit in, and not one iota more.

What eluded me most was the mental lives of prey animals. They consistently fell for the same tricks that wolves had been using for eons. At first, I thought that this was because they never got the opportunity to learn from their mistakes or to pass that knowledge on to the next generation. Run into a wolf pack ambush once, and you won't live to do it again.

I'd tested this theory. I persuaded Jeremy to chase a young deer into my ambush position, then I pounced, and let it escape with only a torn flank. A few weeks later, we found the same yearling, and did the same thing. And he fell for it and, this time, paid with his life.

So I asked myself, what was going through that deer's head when he saw the same scenario playing out? He couldn't have forgotten the first time. It was too soon; his wound had barely healed. He couldn't fail to see the repetition. Animals aren't that stupid. Did he just think

“Huh, this again? It didn’t work last time. What stupid wolves, trying it again.” Or did he see what was happening, and not know how to stop it? When Jeremy jumped out behind him, and he started to run, did his heart start thumping with blind panic, knowing exactly what was about to happen, but seeing no way to avoid his fate, unable to do anything but barrel headlong toward it?

Now I was that deer. I was racing headlong into danger with both Elena and the Pack. I saw it. And, rack my brain as I might, I seemed unable to do anything about it.

I was breaking Pack Law. Having an affair was fine, having a casual girlfriend was fine, but long-term relationships were forbidden. I could tell myself that six weeks was hardly long-term, but I knew there wasn’t anything casual about what I felt for Elena. This was it for me. When I’d hit puberty, my wolf-brain had made itself very clear: I needed a mate. A lifelong mate. Now that part of my brain was finally at rest, having found what it wanted . . . and abandoning the rest of me to flounder about trying to figure out how to make it happen.

Logan had said he saw no reason why we couldn’t have girlfriends, or even wives, and never tell them our secret. The thought of that—well, it baffled me, I couldn’t even consider it. Of course, Elena would eventually have to know I was a werewolf. Even now my gut twisted every time I had to lie or misdirect her.

I saw no reason why she couldn’t know, why any werewolf couldn’t take a human mate if he chose carefully. Yes, there was a risk that if the relationship broke down, she might betray her mate. I couldn’t imagine such a thing with Elena, but in general, it had to be a consideration. Yet what sane woman would reveal such a thing, knowing that the Pack would be forced to kill her to protect itself, that it had killed for vaguer threats of exposure.

Yet none of that applied to Elena. I knew it didn’t. No matter how angry she might get with me, she’d never betray me like that. It wasn’t in her nature. With Elena, the true danger was

that she would hear what I was, and run the other way, never to return. What I had to do, then, was bide my time and wait for the right moment to tell her. Wait until she loved me enough, and trusted me enough, to hear the words and stay.

Now if I could only get that far before I found another way to scare her off for good. That was proving increasingly difficult. Like the deer, I was already hurtling toward peril, sealing my fate with every stride.

First, the catastrophic trip to Stonehaven. Talking to Jeremy by phone was one thing. Having him there, so delighted by my happiness, and so clueless about the cause, made me miserable. Then there was Nick. He knew something was up, and he'd be hurt when he learned the truth, especially when he discovered that Logan had known almost from the start. The longer I waited before telling him, the more hurt he'd be, but I couldn't take the risk yet.

Even just being at Stonehaven, out for runs and hunts, had been painful, reminding me that this double life was betraying two more people: Elena, by not telling her that this was what I was, and, myself, by pretending that this wasn't what I was. For the first time in my life, there were moments when I wished I was human. They didn't last long, but the fact of them shamed me. In Toronto, runs were no longer the highlight of my week—they were a chore to be squeezed in quickly so I could get back to spending time with Elena. I was Changing only as often as I had to, pushing it off as much as possible. Then, in the last week, I'd pushed too hard.

I needed to stay in Toronto. That was a given—our relationship wasn't strong enough yet for me to head back to Stonehaven after Christmas. To stay, I needed an excuse. As I'd been scrambling to create one, a fresh opportunity landed in my lap. A new professor who was supposed to start in the winter term had accepted a job offer from a more prestigious American college, and the department had to find someone to take over his classes next term, while they

searched for a permanent replacement. This time there was another interested party, a semi-retired prof, and the department quickly made it clear that there was only one way I was getting the job: with my research paper. I had to show them that my paper was publishable, and that I had ideas for a follow-up. They'd give me the chance to prove this in my presentation . . . due in four days.

For those four days I worked my ass off, and worked Elena's off, too. I couldn't tell her why this was so important. My need to be with her was already making her nervous. I could do little about that—it was a need, not a want—but I could avoid making it worse by not announcing how badly I wanted this excuse to stay in Toronto.

So we'd worked on the paper, and I'd put off Changing. By that time, I was already past due for a Change, but I thought four days would make no difference, that I was strong enough to hold out. I wasn't. My temper frayed, and by the end of it, I could feel my skin pulsing, the wolf clawing at my insides.

When Elena told me she was bringing dinner over that night, I should have said no. But I couldn't. I couldn't give up the chance to make up for all the crap I'd put her through that week. So I told myself I'd leave her a note, hurry out to the ravine, Change and get back to her. Then she showed up before I could get away.

I hadn't dared look at her. From the confusion in her voice, I knew I was only making things worse, but I didn't dare look, fearing she'd see something, a twitch of my skin, a look in my eye. Better to get the hell out of there, hurry back, and make it up to her then. Only, when I got back, pancakes in hand, I found my apartment empty, the keys thrown across the room, and I knew I'd gone too far.

When Elena came out from the dorm that night, I'd planned to take her back to my apartment, where we could eat and talk in private—and out of the bitter November wind. But the moment I saw her face, I knew I'd be lucky if I could get her to step out of the parking lot. Getting someplace warm was out of the question, so I settled for a secluded spot behind a north-facing wall that blocked the worst of the wind.

She let me lead her there without a word of protest . . . without a word of any kind. I kept sneaking looks at her, trying to read her body language, but she kept her gaze down and her body still, retreating behind that wall I'd worked so hard to break through.

As she looked around for a place to sit, I tugged off my jacket, but she sat on the grass before I could offer it. When I tried to hand it to her anyway, she fussed with her own coat, adjusting the zipper and pretending not to see me holding out mine for her.

"I found your shoes," I said.

She stopped fidgeting. "My shoes?"

"The ones you left in the parking lot at my building. Beside the trash bin "

Her frown deepened. "How'd you know they were mine?"

Shit. I thought fast. "They aren't? I thought—they weren't there when I left, and they were there when I got back, and I just figured . . . Well, if they aren't yours, I'll put them back."

"They're mine. New shoes. They were pinching my feet, so I took them off by the Dumpster. I guess I was distracted and just left them there."

Her gaze shifted from mine as she explained, confirming what I already knew, that she'd thrown them away, probably as hard as she could, like she'd whipped the keys across my

apartment. If I hadn't smelled her scent on the shoes when I'd followed her trail from the apartment, I'd never have guessed they were hers. They didn't look like anything Elena wore, which had made my mind flip back to the scent lingering in my apartment, the one I'd been too busy to notice when she'd first come in: the smell of soap and shampoo, with the faintest touch of perfume. There was no reason for Elena to shower before coming over with a takeout dinner, and certainly no reason to wear new perfume and new dress shoes . . . which told me I'd made a bigger mistake than I'd thought.

"You had something planned," I said. "For tonight. Something special."

A half-shrug. "Not special really. Just . . . I knew you were worried about the presentation and, now that it's over, I wanted to . . . I don't know, celebrate, kick back and relax, something. But when you plan a surprise, you take a risk. The other person might have different plans, might not be in the mood, might not like what you have in mind. All that's a possibility. I accept that." She looked up, her gaze meeting mine. "What I don't accept is how you reacted."

"I—"

"I didn't show up unannounced. I asked if I could bring over dinner, and you said yes, so you knew I was coming. I didn't barge into your apartment without warning. I knocked. You've told me a hundred times not to knock, just use my keys and come in. I didn't ask for keys. I wasn't even sure I wanted keys. But you insisted. You wanted me to be able to use the apartment to study when you're not there, and to let myself in when you are there. It was your idea, not mine."

I nodded. Logan had exploded when he'd found out I'd given Elena keys to my apartment, but I knew what I was doing. There was nothing in my apartment that Elena couldn't see, no

chance that she'd walk in on something she shouldn't see. I had to keep one secret from her, but the rest of my life was open for her inspection, and I needed her to know that.

"And that still stands, right?" she said. "You didn't change the key-ownership rules in the last twenty-four hours and neglect to inform me?"

"Of course not."

"Well, you sure as hell acted like you had. I put up with your shit all week, Clay, your moods, your temper, your demands. And when it was over, I felt like I should treat you to an evening out, 'cause god knows, you deserved it. I told you I was coming over, I knocked on the door, I finally let myself in . . . and you snarled at me and stalked out without a word of explanation."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know."

Her eyes bore into mine. Fury blazed just below the surface. Her face was taut as she struggled to keep it down, to keep it under control. A tendril of that heat licked through me, sharp and white-hot, and my hands clenched the ground as I fought the urge to reach for her. I wanted to kiss her, to taste that anger, to feel it coursing through her, feel it release as she—

"I owe you an explanation," I said quickly, forcing the image back.

"No," she said. "You don't. You never owe me an explanation for anything you do, Clay. If I haven't made that clear already, let me state it, for the record, right now. I only demand two things of you. One, that you treat me with respect. Two, that you're honest with me—that you be yourself. If you're doing that, respecting me and being personally honest with me, then I don't need to know what you're doing, where you're going, where you've been, and I'll never demand to know."

“Like me, you mean. Like I do.”

She blinked, then shook it off. “No, that wasn’t a jab, and I didn’t mean for it to sound like one.”

“I don’t demand those things from you, Elena. I ask because I like to know what happened in your day. If I can’t be there, I want to hear about it. If you don’t want to tell me, you can just say so.”

“And sound like I have something to hide.” She opened her mouth to continue then, again, shook it off. “Let’s just . . .” She picked up the box of pancakes and opened it. “They’re cold, but I could probably pop them in the toaster or something. Just hold on and I’ll—”

I grabbed her arm as she jumped up. When she stiffened, I let go fast.

“Just a sec, okay,” I said. “I *do* want to explain.”

She hesitated, then lowered herself back to the grass.

Of course, I couldn’t explain, not really. Maybe it would have been better to keep my mouth shut but, like giving her the keys to my apartment, I needed for her to know as much as I could tell her, to hide as little as necessary.

“You’re right, about the presentation. I kept thinking, when it was over, I’d be fine, but then it ended, and I still wasn’t sure how well it had gone, whether they were impressed enough to . . . to let me finish it. I came back to the apartment, and I was just . . . I don’t know how to describe it. Frustrated. Restless. More than restless. Ready to jump out of my skin. And ready to jump on the next person I saw and rip his—or her—head off, vent my frustration on the nearest target. I knew I had to get out of there and work it off before you came over. I thought I had time for a run, or that at least I could be gone before you arrived, so you didn’t see me like that.”

“Then I showed up.”

“I knew I’d already screwed things up this week. And I knew that if I hung around, I’d snap. Even just stopping long enough to give a proper explanation . . . You didn’t need to see me like that. I shouldn’t have been like that in the first place, shouldn’t have let the frustration build up that high.”

She paused, then glanced up at me, eyes hooded. “And now you’re going to tell me that it was a mistake and it’ll never happen again.”

I hesitated, weighed my options, and wished, really wished I could tell her that. But my conscience wouldn’t let my lips form the words.

“I can’t promise,” I said finally. “I can tell you that I’ll try not to let it build up like that. I can tell you that I’ll try to warn you if it does. I can ask you to tell me if you see it starting and I’ll do my damndest to stop it. But I can’t promise that it’ll never happen again.”

She pushed up onto her knees and I knew I’d blown it, that she was leaving. Goddamn it, why hadn’t I lied, just told her what she wanted to hear and—

She leaned over and kissed me.

“Thank you,” she said as she moved back. “For being honest. That’s all I ask.”

She moved forward again, lips going to mine. For a moment, I hesitated, just sat there and let her kiss me as my gut twisted, knowing I didn’t deserve this kiss, this reward for being something I clearly was not. I wanted to be honest with her. I had to be. Not just for her sake, but for mine. She had to know everything.

And so she will, whispered a voice in the back of my brain. When she’s ready, you’ll tell her, and everything will be fine. You can’t rush it, or you’ll lose her. Until then, just be as honest as you can be. That’s enough.

My arms went around her and I kissed her hard enough to make a laugh ripple through her. I eased down onto my back and pulled her along with me. In the beginning, she'd tensed every time I moved her into any position approaching horizontal, but she'd soon learned it meant nothing. I'd told her from the start that I'd let her set the pace, and I'd followed through in action, following her lead and never assuming she might be ready for something new until she took my hand and showed me that she was. Patience was never one of my virtues, but in this case, it wasn't an issue. I'd waited more than ten years to find a lover, and now that I had my mate, there was no rush to get to the finish line . . . and it wasn't like she was leaving me at the starting gate every night anyway.

As Elena stretched out on top of me, her hands slid under my shirt, fingers tugging it out of my jeans, palms running over my stomach, skin hot against the rising chill of the night air. She pulled back, kissing me lighter as her fingers tickled over my sides, pushing my shirt up. Then she paused.

"Too cold?" she whispered.

"Never."

I pushed my shirt off over my head and tossed it into a nearby bush. Elena laughed. As I lifted my head to kiss her, I unzipped her coat. Then I pulled her shirt out from her waistband and unbuttoned it. She wasn't wearing a bra. My hands slid up to her breasts, covering them, nipples squeezed between my thumbs and forefingers.

"Too cold?" I asked.

She grinned. "Never."

Her tongue slid between her lips as my mouth moved to her breast. She wriggled up to meet me, her bare stomach pressed against mine. Her knees slid down over my thighs, and she

straddled me. She wriggled again, up then down, sliding until she found just the right spot, then she moaned softly as she pressed into me. I moved my hips up, rubbing against her, and felt her heart race. Her fingers dug into my sides as she moved against me.

I teased her nipple with my teeth for a moment, then moved my hands down to her waistband, undid her jeans, eased one hand inside, and squeezed it between us. I slid my middle finger into her. She gasped, head arching back, breast pressing against my mouth. As my finger moved in her, the back of my hand rubbed over my crotch and I pushed against it, swallowing a growl.

I could feel the wet heat of her, smell it, and the scent permeated my brain, scattering every other thought. I moved my mouth up to hers and kissed her hard. She returned the kiss full-force, arms going around my neck. I ground against my hand and imagined that I was inside her. When I thrust up, she nipped my lip, just hard enough to draw blood. I felt her tense as she tasted the damage, but I only kissed her harder, tongue flicking against hers. She started to relax, then tensed again, this time the muscles around my finger tensing with them.

I pushed into her, thrusting my hips against her and her breathing accelerated, my own racing to meet it. Her fingers dug into my shoulders and I pulled back from the kiss to watch her as she climaxed. Her lips parted, eyes rolling up. A soft growl rolled up from her throat, and I lost it, thrusting against her, barely able to see her through the haze of my own climax.

A few moments later, her grip on my shoulders relaxed, and she pulled back, exhaling in a long sigh. Then she paused, and wiped something from my shoulder. I caught the scent of blood on her fingers.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “I didn’t mean to dig in that—”

“Hear me complaining?”

A soft laugh. “No.”

“Then don’t apologize.”

She rolled off me, shivered, then slid her hands to my waistband. “Now, your turn.”

“I’m good.”

“Hmmm?” She looked into my eyes, then blushed. “Ah, okay, then.” Another chuckle. “I get you next time.”

I reached up and pulled her onto me again. She started to lie down with me, then stopped and looked around.

“What’s wrong?” I asked through a yawn.

“Uh, just realizing that we’re lying on the ground, half-naked, about twenty feet from my dorm building.”

“See anyone around?”

“No.”

“Then don’t worry about it. If I sm—see anyone, I’ll tell you.” I yawned, gulping fresh air to wake my brain before I slipped again. “And you’re not half-naked. Just me.” I straightened her coat over her shoulders. “There. Lie down on me again, and no one will see anything.”

“Except me lying on the ground in the middle of November, on top of a professor.”

“Yeah, but I’m not *your* professor. And if we’re crazy enough to lie on the ground in mid-November, that’s our problem. Now stop worrying. I won’t let anyone see you.”

She grinned down at me. “You’ll protect me?”

“Always.”

As she looked into my eyes, her cheeks reddened slightly, and she ducked her gaze, almost shyly. Then she kissed my chin, snuggled up, and relaxed against me.

November turned to December before the university told me I had the teaching position. By then, though, I'd already come up with an alternate plan, that I'd stay and work on that second proposed paper, whether the university chose to support me in it or not. Two days before my monthly trip home, when I'd planned to tell Jeremy I was staying, the department gave me the news. If my decision to accept surprised Jeremy, he gave no sign of it, just smiled and told me he was proud of me. And that made me feel just about as good as when Elena had thanked me for my honesty. I tried not to think about that. Instead, I reminded myself that I was on the road to truth, and I'd just have to earn forgiveness once I got there.

The next week, as Elena and I headed to High Park for a run, a light snow started to fall and we decided to forgo jogging and enjoy the mild winter night. We'd been out for about an hour when we passed a huge evergreen on a corner. As we walked by, the tree suddenly lit up in a blaze of colored lights.

Elena jumped back, then shook her head and smiled. "Must be on a timer."

I nodded and walked a couple more steps before I realized she was no longer beside me. I looked back to see her still in front of the evergreen, looking up at it. When she glanced my way, her eyes shone brighter than the tree lights.

"Do you like Christmas?" she asked.

I blinked. "Um, sure. I guess."

She laughed. “Not big on the holidays, huh?” She caught up with me and resumed walking. “I can see that. Christmas can be stressful. All that pressure—buy the right gifts, spend too much money, hang out with relatives . . . not that I ever—well, I’ve *heard* it can be stressful.”

“It isn’t. Not for me, anyway. We’re pretty laid back about the holidays. And I do like Christmas, I just never considered the question before. How about you?”

I asked on reflex, then immediately wished I hadn’t. From the look she’d given the tree, I knew Christmas meant something special to her. Yet I also knew that if it brought back any happy memories, they’d be bittersweet, the vague remembrances of those few years before her parents had died. Since then she’d have spent the holidays alone, maybe with foster families, but still alone in every way that counted.

She turned to look out at the street, and let the shadows swallow her expression. Before I could say anything, she looked back at me, eyes bright again.

“When do you go home?” she asked.

“Go—?”

“For the holidays. I was just thinking, maybe we could do a little Christmas of our own, before you leave or after you come back. Nothing big, maybe presents and a nice dinner. Just . . . something. If that’s okay with you.”

I looked at her, then made a decision. “I’m not going home.”

“But—”

“I need to have that paper done by the end of the year, remember? So I’ll stay here, have Christmas with you, and go home for the first week of the new year.”

“You’re almost done the paper. You should spend Christmas with—”

“They’ll wait.”

A smile tickled the corners of her mouth. “Just like that?”

“Sure. Why not? Everyone usually comes down for a couple of weeks anyway, and they don’t care exactly when we celebrate it. If someone can’t make it, everyone else waits.”

Her smile turned wistful. “That must be nice.” She looked at me. “But it would be nice to have you here, too, if it’s really okay—”

“It is.”

I put my arm around her waist and started walking again.

I’d call Jeremy tomorrow. As I’d said, it would be no big deal—we’d rescheduled Christmas for others before, and the holidays weren’t really a big deal for the Pack, just another excuse to get together. For Elena, though, Christmas obviously *was* a big deal. Or it would be this year. I’d make sure of that.

Chapter Eleven

Clayton

What I knew about Christmas could be summed up in three words: holiday, presents and food. For the Pack, that's what it was, an excuse to take two weeks off work, hang out together and eat. The gift exchange was the only thing that differentiated it from an extended summer Meet.

As for the customs, traditions and spiritual significance of Christmas, I had only a passing familiarity with all three. The last I probably understood best, having studied the religious aspects of Christmas in relation to non-Christian midwinter celebrations. Yet I doubted that Elena's idea of a perfect Christmas meant listening to me expound on Christianity's adaptations of Mithraic and winter solstice celebrations . . . though I could always fall back on that if things went wrong.

What Elena wanted was something closer to the Pack's interpretation of the holiday: a celebration of family. To her, though, that meant more than food and gifts and time together. As I'd seen in her face when she'd looked at that tree, she wanted trappings, all the things that, to a human child, meant Christmas. And I'd give them to her . . . as soon as I figured out what they were.

For me, unlocking the mysteries of a Christmas was a problem no different from unlocking the mysteries of Sumerian funeral rites. It was a ritual of human civilization, therefore I could approach it in the same way I'd been deciphering human traditions throughout my academic career: crack the books and get to work.

"First we need a tree," I said.

Elena stopped drying a plate and looked at me, nose scrunching. We were in my tiny apartment kitchen, doing the dinner dishes.

"A tree . . ." she said slowly.

"That's where I thought we'd start."

"With a . . . tree . . .?"

"Right. Or should we buy the decorations first?"

"Decor—" She laughed. "Oh, you mean a Christmas tree. Context, Clay. You must learn the fine art of conversational context." She slid the plate onto the shelf. "A tree would be nice. Very nice. Is it too soon?" She leaned over the counter to squint at the dining room calendar. Her lips moved as she counted. "Just over three weeks—it should last that long. Sure, then. When do you want to get it?"

"Tomorrow. We'll stop by the hardware store for an axe, then head out to the ravines."

"The . . . ravines."

"To get the tree. You want Christmas, you need a tree."

“And to get that tree, you need to go where the trees are, and chop one down.” Her cheeks twitched as she bit back a laugh. “Highly illegal, but perfectly sensible, and that’s what matters in Clay’s world.”

Before I could answer, she leaned toward me, chest brushing mine, thumbs hooking my belt loops. Her lips moved to my ear.

“Did you notice the trees in the parking lot at the grocery store? Hint: they didn’t grow there overnight. That’s where we get Christmas trees from in our world.”

“Yeah, half-dead ones, cut down in October. Damn things would be naked by Christmas. And I’d have a new brown carpet.”

“True.”

She sobered and started to move away, but I put my hand against the small of her back, keeping her close.

“I suppose that’s what you do at home, isn’t it?” she said. “Grab an axe, walk out to the back forty and chop down a tree. That’d be nice.”

A wistful look, then she brightened. “Oh, wait a sec. There are tree farms—outside the city—where you can cut your own tree—”

She stopped, gaze skipping to the side, forcing a small smile to hide a flare of disappointment. “On second thought, maybe not. They’re probably packed with people—crying kids, crowded wagons—definitely not your idea of a good time.”

“I’d survive.”

“No, we can—”

“Find a place and we’ll go tomorrow.”

The tree cutting trip did hit an obstacle, but it wasn't the one Elena had anticipated. Yes, the farm was packed, and the hay wagon trip from the parking lot to the bush was hellish—log-jammed onto a trailer full of grumpy adults, overtired kids, straw that smelled like it'd been recycled from a horse barn, and two lapdogs dressed in knitted pink sweaters, which spent the whole trip yapping at me.

But I survived. Better than that—aside from the wagon ride—I had a great time. We stayed on the trailer until the last stop, after everyone else had impatiently tumbled out right at the start. So we found ourselves alone in the bush, tramping along the rows of trees as dusk turned to moonlight, our footsteps crackling over the frozen ground, the silence broken only by the distant shouts and laughs of children and Elena's equally excited chirps of "oh, this one . . . no, wait, there's one over there."

We were in no rush, so we wandered, bickered, and teased, all the while pretending to search for the perfect tree, but really just enjoying the clear winter night. When we did choose one, I chopped it down. Then we celebrated the victorious hunt with powdered doughnuts and a thermos of hot chocolate, and when that didn't warm us up enough, we moved on to other heat-producing activities.

We caught the last wagon back, paid for our tree . . . and hit the roadblock. You can't strap a Christmas tree to a motorcycle. We had debated taking the bike, but only because we knew how cold it would get when we left the insulation of the city. We'd decided that, having seen no snow in days, riding the motorcycle would be cold, but better than the hassle of taking a cab. The motorcycle limitations as a method of transport had somehow failed to occur to either of us.

So we had to arrange delivery . . . after explaining our oversight to the tree farmer who, on hearing my accent, took twenty minutes to kindly explain to the young Southerner that Canada really didn't have a winter climate suitable for motorcycles, and to recommend places where I could pick up a cheap winter beater. Elena's stifled wheezes of laughter then got the farmer's wife scrambling for cough drops and we spent another ten minutes waiting while Elena dutifully copied down her herbal cold remedy recipes. Finally, we escaped, and headed home, our tree to follow the next day.

The next day we put up the tree and decorated it. Only one thing was missing: the presents to go underneath. At home, I did most of my shopping by catalogue, as did Jeremy. We suffered through an annual New York gift-buying excursion with Nick and Antonio, but always scheduled it for early November, to beat that Thanksgiving to Christmas rush.

Just picking out decorations at the department store had been enough seasonal shopping for me, but it was getting late for catalogue shopping, and I wasn't sure whether the process worked the same up here, so I resigned myself to a Saturday in shopping mall hell. And if I was going to put myself through that torture, I might as well get a second duty over with, and please Elena at the same time, by inviting Logan to join us.

For a few weeks now, Logan had been making noises about paying a visit. Had it been just me, I'd have welcomed the company. But I knew it wasn't me he wanted to see. His growing friendship with Elena baffled me and, in baffling me, worried me, too. I couldn't help but think he had an ulterior motive. The most obvious answer was that he didn't want me to forget that he

knew my secret. A blackmail card he could use against me at any time. Yet I didn't get the impression that's what he was doing.

Logan's interest in Elena seemed genuine. Too genuine for my liking. I pictured him circling over our relationship like a vulture, waiting for it to die so he could swoop in and take my leavings. Only Elena, and my concern for her happiness, kept me from thwarting their relationship. That and the comforting knowledge that she saw him only as a friend. Even if something had gone wrong between us, I knew she'd never move on to Logan. So, as much as his attentions rankled, I bit my tongue and said nothing. I even played the gracious host and invited him up for a Christmas shopping weekend.

I stood in a store corner, wedged behind a rack of clothes, the only place I could stand without being jostled and bumped. I breathed through my mouth. The smell of the mall still found its way into my nose, and my brain spun, trying to sort out and categorize all the scents despite my best efforts to ignore them. I could hear my breath coming in short, shallow gasps, almost hyperventilating. My heart raced, gaze darting about the store, trying to map escape routes as frantically and needlessly as my brain kept trying to organize the scents, sorting them into predator and prey, threats and food.

I squeezed my eyes shut and choked back a growl of frustration. I should be able to control my instincts better than this. Most times, I could, but when the stimuli became overwhelming, my brain dropped into survival mode, knowing only that I was surrounded, trapped in an enclosed space with potential enemies at every turn.

Logan shifted the rack to slide in beside me.

He smiled and shook his head. “You really don’t like humans, do you?”

I said nothing. My feelings about humans, like my feelings about other werewolves, could never be summed up under the simplistic, umbrella emotion of like or dislike. In this case, though, better to let my Pack brothers interpret my hatred of crowds as a dislike of humans rather than the panicked fear of a trapped animal.

Elena walked around a corner and I let out a soft sigh. My gaze followed her, grateful for something to cling to, something comforting and distracting.

“Have you asked her what she wants?” Logan asked.

“Don’t need to.”

She caught my eye, smiled and started searching for an open path through the crowd. Partway to me, she stopped, gaze snagged on a rack of sweaters.

“Word of advice, Clayton,” Logan murmured. “Save yourself some grief and ask for a list. Otherwise, you’ll screw up.”

Elena’s fingers flipped through the jewel-bright colors, frown deepening, then lightening. She paused on a dark burgundy, then shook her head. As she looked away, she stopped, and tugged out the arm of a deep royal blue sweater. A smile. A glance at the price tag. The smile faded and she turned away sharply, resuming her course to me. I glanced around at the store, committing it and the location of the sweater rack to memory, along with the other items that had caught her eye.

“You want me to ask her what she wants?” Logan said. “That might be easier. Then, at least, she won’t be expecting the things from you. I’ll make up a list—”

“Don’t need it.”

He sighed. “You’ll pay the price, my friend. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned to Elena as she approached. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for lunch. How about that food court we passed on the first level?”

Elena’s gaze darted my way, then back again too fast for Logan to follow.

“I don’t know how far along you guys are, but one more stop and my list is done,” she said. “Maybe we can grab a muffin or something, finish up, then swing through Chinatown on the way back, find someplace less . . . crowded. And more appetizing.”

“Works for me,” Logan said.

“So who do you guys have left?” she asked.

“Jeremy.” Logan looked at me. “And, I’m guessing, Jeremy.”

I nodded.

Elena laughed. “There’s always one, isn’t there?”

“Is there an art store here?” Logan said. “That’s the usual standby for Jeremy.”

Elena pulled a face. “And I’m sure when he picks up a gift from his pile, he’s going ‘hmm, paintbrush or paper?’ Let’s show some originality this year, guys. There’s a huge sports store in here. We’ll head there.”

Logan shot a look my way. “Uh, Jeremy’s not really the sports type . . .”

“Clay said he likes marksmanship, right?”

“Uh, sure. But—”

“Come on, then.”

On the way to the sports store, Logan kept aiming looks my way, clearly worried about what Elena had in mind, but not wanting to denigrate her efforts by saying so. I ignored him, but I was trying just as hard to think up a way out of this potential minefield. Jeremy . . . well, it was tough enough for us to pick something for him. I couldn't imagine someone who had never met him being able to do better.

Elena led us to a row of locked glass cabinets near the back of the sports store. Inside were tournament bows, BB guns, camping knives, and all the other sports paraphernalia that couldn't be put out on the shelves.

Logan pretended to survey the cabinets. "Ummm, you know, this would be a great idea . . . if Clay or I knew a damned thing about what kind of equipment Jeremy uses. I know, we should pay attention but, well, it's Jeremy's thing, and he's a pretty private guy." He shrugged. "Bullets, sights, arrows, they all look the same to me."

"Which is why I'm not suggesting that," she said. "Bullets and arrows are as bad as paintbrushes and paper. Supplies, not presents. A gift should be something different, something he doesn't already own." She moved down the row and stopped at a bow display. "Does he have a crossbow?"

I shook my head.

"Has he ever said he doesn't want one? Tried one and didn't like it?"

"Nope." I bent to look at the crossbows. "That's what I'll get him, then."

"You don't have to. It's just a thought—"

I looked up at her. "It's a great thought. He likes that kind of thing, trying new stuff. Thanks."

Her lips curved in a shy half-smile. “You’re welcome. Oh, but make sure you save the receipt. And pick out something not too expensive, so he won’t feel bad if he doesn’t use it.”

Logan bent beside me. “You know, that is a good idea.” He slanted a look my way. “Clay must have told you a lot about Jeremy, huh?”

Elena shrugged. “This and that. He sounds . . . well, I look forward to meeting him.” She blinked fast. “Assuming, I mean, that I will meet him. I’d like to, of course . . .”

“You will,” I murmured.

“Someday, right?” She hesitated, as if considering something, then said quickly. “Maybe you can set something up when you’re home for the holidays.”

“I . . . sure, I could . . .” I glanced to Logan for help, but he’d escaped to the side and busied himself with a racquetball display.

“Not a trip visit or anything big like that,” Elena hurried on. “Maybe we could meet halfway, like in Buffalo for dinner.”

“S—sure. I’ll—that would be a good idea.” I turned. “Hey, Logan. Help me pick out one of these bows, will you? I’ll buy the bow, you can pitch in with the arrows and stuff. Make it a joint gift, then get the hell out of here and track down lunch.”

Logan looked over at Elena, then nodded and walked back to help me.

That night, when I returned after walking Elena to her dorm, Logan was in the living room, flipping television channels. I stopped in the doorway.

“I gotta get one of these,” he said without turning.

“A TV?”

He gave an exasperated sigh and waved the remote over his head. “This. Mine is still one of those old ‘get off your ass and do it yourself’ jobs.”

“Speaking of getting off your ass, you can do that right now. Time for a run.”

He still didn’t turn. “You have to tell Jeremy.”

I wanted to say “about what?”, but I knew.

“I will,” I said. “As soon—”

“I know, all along I’ve been telling you there’s no rush. No need to worry Jeremy over something that would probably turn out to be a term-long fling. But obviously that’s not what this is—”

“I told you—”

“That you were serious. I know. But what the hell do you know? It’s your first time, and it always seems serious the first time. Then there’s Elena. She might not—” He paused, lifted the remote again. “But she does. So that’s that.”

He turned to another channel. Canned laughter filled the room. A quick flip and the evening news came on.

Logan continued. “Jeremy was right. All that stuff he was talking about, how your moods were about searching for a mate . . . It sounded like bullshit to me. Jeremy taking the wolf stuff too seriously again. You’re a man, just like the rest of us. A little fucked-up sometimes, but still a man.”

Another channel change. A cooking host exhorted her audience to use only whole peppercorns, freshly ground. Logan turned the television off. He turned and looked at me.

“I’m getting worried,” he said.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about.”

I flexed my hands against the door-frame. “I’d never hurt her.”

“No? Are you sure?”

I met his eyes. “Absolutely.”

He locked gazes with me. “Good, because if you ever . . .” His eyes sparked with anger, then he jerked his gaze away and got to his feet. “You have to tell him. Soon.”

“I will.”

Chapter Twelve

Elena

Arms loaded with wrapped gifts, I twisted sideways to push open my dorm room door with my hip. Jenny sat on my desk and watched me struggle. Just watched . . . which explained why none of my presents was for her. I held the door with my foot, then managed to swing around and get out of the way before it hit me.

I lowered my load to the bed. The stack looked impressive, until you realized this was it, every gift I was giving this year. They were all for friends, stored and wrapped at Clay's apartment because I knew if I'd stored them here, one or two would be missing by wrapping-time. Not that Jenny would covet any of my friend's presents for herself—they weren't her style and certainly not her quality—but she'd likely have scooped one or two and passed them along as duty gifts, to cousins, aunts and the like, because, God knows, Christmas shopping can really take a toll on your social life.

I'd hoped she'd be gone by now; she'd said she was leaving this morning but, for Jenny, I guess morning was any time before dark. I could only hope she wasn't desperate enough to snag a pre-wrapped gift, in hopes it contained something suitable for Aunt Milly.

“He called five times,” she said. “I’m not your freaking answering service, Elena.”

Normally, “he” would mean Clay, but even he couldn’t call five times in the twenty minutes it would take me to walk from his apartment. Well, he could, and probably would, if something came up . . . or, more likely, he’d just let the phone ring until I got there. But if Jenny answered, he wouldn’t phone back, wouldn’t even bother leaving a message.

“*Who* called?” I said, unwrapping my purse from my arm.

“Your ex.”

“I don’t have—” I swore under my breath. “Jason, you mean. He’s not my ex.”

“Whatever. Just tell him to stop calling. Other people have to use this line, too, you know.”

“If he calls back, you have my permission to hang up on him.”

She was about to answer when the phone rang. I busied myself rearranging the parcels. Jenny grabbed the receiver and held it out to me without answering. I glared at her, and snatched it from her hand.

“Hello?”

“Hey, gorgeous,” slurred a male voice. “Why’d ya take off so early this mornin’? I wasn’t done—”

I held the phone out to Jenny. “It’s for you.”

So Jason was back. Not unexpected timing, considering he’d done the same thing for the past three years, using the holidays as an excuse to get in touch. He’d call and say he had a present for me. No strings attached. He just wanted to give it to me and say hello, maybe have a coffee. The first year I’d fallen for it, thinking it was the proverbial olive branch.

Of course, it wasn't, and I'd ended up getting groped in a dark parking lot behind the coffee shop, while he'd ended up with a knee to the crotch. I should have kicked harder. As it was, that little jab wasn't enough to convince him that the same ploy wouldn't work again, so the next two years he'd thrown out the bait again, and hoped I'd bite. I hadn't, but Jason wasn't one for taking a hint.

I didn't return Jason's call. Even calling back to tell him off only encouraged him. In a few hours, I'd be out to lunch with a few friends before they went home for the holidays. Then I'd be heading straight to Clay's for Christmas Eve. So there was no chance of having to deal with Jason before Christmas. I wasn't about to tell Jenny where I was going for lunch, and she didn't know Clay's name, let alone his phone number or address. If I could make it through the next few days without a Jason-encounter, his "Christmas gift" excuse would expire. Not that he'd care, but it was worth a shot.

I wrapped the gift I'd bought for Clay. One gift. Not even a very big gift. I turned it over in my hands, wondering whether there was still time to race out and buy something else. Maybe after lunch . . .

I did have another present for Clay. Something I couldn't wrap in a box. Something special. Well, for me it was special, but the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that this was the lamest gift idea I'd ever had. Not just lame, but probably inappropriate. A gift implies something you selflessly give to another person, with no expectation of deriving anything from it yourself. To apply that concept to the gift I had in mind was hideously old-fashioned, and just plain wrong. But couples gave each other "mutual" gifts all the time,

things they could both use, like a new stereo, or both enjoy, like a romantic getaway. So I was giving him this in that spirit, and could only pray he didn't get it and say "hmm, thanks, but I was really hoping for a new pair of socks."

Okay, the chances of him saying—or even thinking—that were next to nil, but I still worried about the appropriateness of my gift. That's why I'd bought him something else, a real present. Only now, wrapping it, I wished that if it couldn't have been more expensive, maybe it could have been better, more meaningful. When I thought of presents, I tended toward the practical, because that's what I liked to get, something I could use, but might not buy for myself. The gift I'd bought Clay wasn't as practical as new socks, but wasn't a whole lot more romantic either. I'd have to rely on gift number one to provide that . . . unless I chickened out on the "appropriateness" factor, and saved it for another day.

"Just one," Clay said, sliding his foot under the tree and nudging the pile of gifts. "Look, lots there. Opening one early won't hurt."

We were stretched out on his living room carpet, surrounded by shortbread and gingerbread cookie crumbs, two mugs of hot chocolate leaning precariously on the deep carpet pile. I'd made the drink from scratch, with baking chocolate and milk, spiked with a dollop of creme de cacao and topped with real whipped cream. I'd even grated extra chocolate on the whipped cream. Turned out pretty good, which was more than I could say for the gingerbread. They tasted fine but looked more like gingerbread circus freaks . . . one drawback to having two non-artistically-inclined people fashion cookie men without cutters.

Clay waved his cookie toward the tree, scattering more crumbs. “Go on. Open one.” He grinned over at me. “You’ve been eyeing them all night.”

“Have not.”

“Have, too.” He hooked one with his foot and punted it out. “There. It fell off the pile. Don’t make me put it back. Open it.”

“But if I open one, then you should open one, and I only brought—”

“I don’t need gifts. I already told you that. And I’m *far* more patient than you.”

I snorted a laugh. “Who burned his tongue on the hot chocolate, after I told him it was too hot to drink?”

“That’s different. That was food.”

He twisted and stretched over to the end table, reached up and grabbed a tissue. Then he took two cookies from the plate and wrapped them.

“There, a gift for me,” he said.

“But you already know what it is.”

“Doesn’t matter. If it’s edible, I’m not complaining.” He unwrapped the tissue. “Oh, look, a hunchback cookie. Thank you.”

He bit off the head.

“There,” he mumbled around the mouthful of cookie. “I’ve opened and accepted my gift. Now your turn.”

I laughed. He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to him. He kissed me and I laughed again, tasting gingerbread. The kiss deepened and I pressed against him, feeling the first lick of heat. My mind tripped to what I had in mind for tonight, and the heat spread, confirming what I already knew, that I was ready for that last signpost, and had been for a while. I was glad

I'd slipped into the bathroom a few minutes ago to prepare. I only hoped I'd put the darned thing in right.

After a few minutes of kissing, Clay pulled his head back. He shifted and twisted away as he reached behind him.

"Now for your gift," he said.

I grinned. "You mean *that* wasn't it?"

"Nah, I don't reserve that for special occasions, darling, or I'd have to make up a whole lot of them. Two month anniversary, two month and one hour anniversary, two month, one hour and twenty-three minute anniversary . . ."

He lifted the gift and rolled back to see me staring down at him.

"What did you say?" I said.

"I said I don't reserve that for special occasions, or I'd—"

"No, in the middle."

"Middle of what?"

"What did you call me?"

"Call you?"

"Maybe I misheard. I hope so, because if you have to call me something—" I shook my head. "Never mind. Just give me the gift."

He grinned. "So we've gone from 'oh no, I don't really want one early' to 'hand it over'?"

"I didn't say—"

I sighed and snatched the gift from his hand. It was rectangular, about half the size of a shoe box, with something inside that jangled.

"It's a present, not a psychic test," he said. "Just open it already."

I ripped off the paper, opened the box, reached inside and pulled out . . . a set of keys. Two keys, actually, looking remarkably similar to a two-key set I had in my purse.

“They’re for the apartment,” Clay said.

“That’s what I thought.” I lifted them from the box. “Oh, wait, it’s a new keychain. No . . . that’s the free one they give you at the key-cutting place, isn’t it?”

“The keys are the gift, not the chain.”

“A set of keys to match the set I already have?”

“Right.”

I looked at him.

“Backup keys,” he said. “I piss you off, you get the urge to throw my keys away or throw them at me or whatever, go ahead. You now have backups.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Only if the purpose is really to break up with me. If you just want to tell me I’m being a jerk and I’d better shape up or you’ll break up with me, then this works fine. Symbolic key whipping and stress relief, without the risk of keyless inconvenience.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I could get you a nicer keychain.”

I laughed, and flicked cookie crumbs off the carpet at him. As I took another swig of hot chocolate, I glanced at the tree again.

“What, eyeing the pile, hoping there’s something better in there?”

“No, I was just—” I leaned toward the presents. “What happened to that one? Looks like you used a whole roll of tape on it.”

“I ran out of paper, so I covered the hole with tape.”

I inched toward the tree. “Meaning, if I look closely, I can probably see right through it?”

“Don’t you dare.”

As I lunged for the present, Clay scissored his legs around my waist. I squirmed, and almost got free before he pushed up off the floor and grabbed my arm. I knew better than to struggle. Clay had a vise-grip—once he got hold of me, I wasn’t getting away.

I sighed and let him tug me away from the tree. When he let go of my arm, I shot back toward the gift pile. My foot accidentally struck his jaw. He let out an oath and I turned to see him wincing as he ran a finger along his front teeth.

“Shit,” he muttered. “It’s loose.”

“Geez!” I scrambled back to him. “I’m so sorry. Which one is—”

He grabbed me around the waist and yanked me off my feet. His hold slipped as my shirt pulled from my jeans, and I managed to twist almost out of his grip, but he moved fast, tugging me down as he rolled on top of me. We tussled for a few minutes, laughing and cursing, depending on who had the upper hand. Soon his mouth found mine and he pinned me, arms over my head, grip slack, letting me know I could get away any time.

I caught his lip between my teeth. He growled, the sound sending shivers through me. I slid the tip of my tongue between his teeth and he let go of my hands, his fingers sliding to the back of my head to kiss me deeper. I counted to three, then pushed out from under him, scuttling to my feet. He grabbed for me, but I danced out of the way. He rose up on one knee, then crouched there, body tight, as if tensing for the pounce.

His gaze lifted to mine and his lips curved in a tiny smile. The look in his eyes sent my pulse racing, and I could hear my breath coming in pants, part exertion, part excitement. I took a

slow step backward, smiling a challenge. His eyes sparked and he let out a rough chuckle, almost a growl.

He pushed to his feet. I stepped back again. He matched me, step for step, keeping a small gap between us. When I feinted to the left, he quickstepped right, gaze locked with mine. Another feint left. He started to match it with a step right, then lunged left and wheeled around me so fast he was behind me before I knew it. As his fingers brushed my hips, I twisted and leapt out of his way. He followed. I backed up . . . and hit the wall. He gave another chuckling growl and took a slow step forward, stopping close enough for me to smell the cookies and chocolate on his breath.

“Clay . . .”

“Hmmm?”

“I want to stay the night.”

He tilted his head, as if not quite sure . . . Then his lips curved in a slow grin that licked fresh heat through me.

“You sure?” he murmured.

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure.”

A flash of a grin, then he leapt, grabbing me around the waist and whirling me around. His mouth went to mine and we crashed over the ottoman, hitting the floor hard, still kissing. I seized the sides of his shirt and yanked. He lifted his hands and wriggled out as I pulled. Then he grabbed the back of my shirt. When it caught, twisted around my torso, he wrenched, and the fabric ripped, the sound cutting through the room. He froze in mid-pull.

“Sorry. I should—I’ll slow down.”

My fingers slid to his waistband and I popped the button on his jeans. “I don’t want you to slow down.”

A sharp intake of breath. He grabbed for my shirt again, then stopped, tensed, as if holding himself back. “I’ll be careful. I know it’s—I’ll be careful.”

I looked him in the eyes. “I don’t want you to be careful.”

When he hesitated, I lifted my mouth to his. Only a split-second pause then, with a growl, he pulled me to him in a crushing kiss, mouth hard and insistent, hands ripping away the rest of my shirt. Our pants followed, off so fast I didn’t even notice until I felt his bare legs against mine. Underwear followed, just as quickly.

I felt him between my legs and my brain fogged, a shiver racing through me. I wriggled into position, felt the tip of him brush me, closed my eyes, held my breath and—

“Are you sure?”

My eyes flew open. His face was over mine, so close I could see only his eyes.

“Are you sure?” he said again, words coming in raspy gasps.

I pressed my lips to his and arched my hips up, pushing against him, feeling him slide into me. A moment’s . . . something, maybe pain, though my brain refused to interpret it as such. He threw back his head and inhaled sharply.

Then his head whipped forward, lips slamming into mine, kissing me hard as he thrust. Only a few thrusts, and my nails were digging into his shoulders as the waves of climax rocked through me. I heard him growl deep in his throat, the sound hard and dangerous, and I gasped as he shuddered, arms tightening around me.

A moment later, he looked down at me. “It’s supposed to last longer than that, isn’t it?”

“How the hell should I know?”

We collapsed into a fit of laughter, limbs still entwined. Then he rolled over, pulling me on top of him.

“So was that my gift?” he asked, grinning.

My cheeks heated. “Uh, no. Of course not. I just thought . . .”

His grin grew. “It *was* my gift, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. “And you only get it on special occasions. Valentine’s Day is next. Maybe Groundhog Day, but I’m not making any promises.”

He laughed and tugged me down in a kiss. Then, lips still close enough to feel them tickle mine, he said,

“You know this is it for me, right? *You’re* it. First and last.”

I looked up and met his gaze. “Same for me. First and last.”

Chapter Thirteen

Clayton

I arrived at Stonehaven early on the twenty-seventh. I sailed through those first few days, riding the high from my Christmas with Elena, finally reassured that we were heading in the same direction. Christmas Eve had proven that. Sex might mean little to Nick and the rest of the Pack, but to me it meant a life commitment, and I knew it was the same for Elena. One lover, one partner, one mate for life; that's how we were made.

For three days, I coasted on that high, enjoying my visit, playing with Nick, hanging out with Jeremy, hunting with the Pack, calling Elena when I could, for once feeling no guilt, no warring loyalties. Whatever came, we'd work through it.

Not having Logan at Stonehaven helped with the guilt. Since I'd been coming home late, he'd decided to spend Christmas at his half-sister's place. They weren't a tight-knit family—never had been—but they liked to maintain the illusion of closeness once a year, at Christmas, and if he skipped out, he'd feel the cold front all year.

While I was in a great mood, Nick seemed off, one minute bouncing along on whatever adventure I suggested, talking nonstop, then next minute reflective and quiet. I'd catch him studying me with an odd look on his face, or turn and see him hovering in the doorway, as if waiting for me to acknowledge him before he'd enter. I asked him if anything was wrong—trouble with his human friends, problems with women, tension with his father—but he'd just give me that piercing look, then mutter something and walk away.

On the second night, as I waited for Nick in the sun-room, I watched the snow falling outside the window. It reminded me of Christmas night, when Elena and I had gone out after dinner. We'd hoped the long trek to High Park would give time for our turkey dinner to settle so we could run, but when we got there, Elena was still stuffed, so we'd walked through the ravine instead.

When it had started to snow, I'd pulled her to the side for a warm-up. As we'd kissed, I'd slid my hand under her shirt and she'd jumped, laughing at my cold fingers. When I'd asked if I should stop, she'd smiled, unzipped her jacket, unbuttoned her shirt and let it fall open, bra-less underneath. I'd grabbed her under the armpits and lifted her up, mouth going to her breast, her nipple cold and hard against the heat of my tongue—

“There you are!”

I jumped as Nick swung through the sun-room doorway.

“Ready for that run?” he said.

“In a minute,” I said, brushing past him.

“What?” He followed me into the hall. “Where are you going now?”

“Shower.”

“Shower? It’s ten o’clock at night. What the hell do you need—”

I bounded up the stairs to my room, cutting him short as I closed the door behind me.

When I came out, I found Nick in the guest room, tense and snappish, almost sullen, declaring he didn’t want to go for a run anymore. After ten minutes of teasing and cajoling, he gave in, but grudgingly, as if he was doing me a favor. As I ushered him from the room, I decided I’d talk to Antonio in the morning, see if anything was wrong at home.

We finished our run in the early hours of the morning. Still in wolf-form, we stretched out in the snow and dozed. Jeremy, Antonio and Peter weren’t back from their evening in Syracuse, and probably wouldn’t be for an hour or more.

When the car sounded in the drive, we roused ourselves to Change. The rousing part came harder for me—I’d been in the midst of a sleepy daydream about Elena, and was reluctant to leave it. So by the time I was pulling on my pants, Nick was already done. I was buttoning up when I noticed him standing, uncharacteristically silent, behind me.

“Trying to sneak up?” I said without turning. “Thought you knew better by now.”

“What’s on your back, Clay?”

“Huh?”

I reached over my shoulder, and found healing nail-tracks from Elena. I grabbed my shirt and twisted around.

“Did I lie in the mud again?” I said. “Never fails. Spring, summer, winter, fall, if there’s mud back here, I’ll find it.”

“There are scratches on your back, Clay.”

“Yeah?” I snorted. “Figures. The ravines up in Toronto? They’re in the middle of the damned city. Only safe way to run is through forest so thick I get covered in scratches.”

He said nothing as I pulled on my shirt. Then he looked at me.

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you?” he said quietly.

“Tell you what? I’ll tell you I’m starving—if you can’t hear my stomach growling already.” I headed for the path. “Jeremy better not have forgotten the takeout this time. And it better not be curry. Last time he brought curry . . .”

I kept talking, filling the space as fast as I could. I was almost at the house before I realized Nick wasn’t behind me.

The next day, Nick and I picked Logan up at the airport, and the pressure started almost the moment he got off the plane. We went to collect his luggage and, as soon as Nick got separated from us by the crowd, Logan glanced around, then asked,

“Have you told them yet?”

I shook my head.

“Are you going to tell them? And I don’t mean someday. You have to tell them this trip—at least Jeremy. The guy’s going to figure it out eventually.” He grabbed his suitcase from the conveyor belt. “Christ, I can’t believe they haven’t *all* figured it out by now. Every time they start floating theories about your good mood, it’s all I can do to keep from groaning.” He

shook his head. “Guess when it’s the last thing you expect, it’s the last thing you see, no matter how obvious it is.”

I snagged his other bag and hefted it on my shoulder.

“They’re going to figure it out, Clay. No matter how improbable such a thing may seem, they’re going to realize you’re involved with someone. Remember what Plato said: ‘Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.’” He pulled a face. “Or was that Sherlock Holmes? Damn, I need a break. Two weeks after my last exam and I’m still reeling. But the point is—”

“Nick!” I called, lifting my hand.

A dark head in the crowd turned. Nick threw up his hands, and hurried over to us.

I’d been hoping that once Logan arrived, it would be easier to phone Elena. With Nick around, it had been damned near impossible. He didn’t follow at my heels all day, but at any given moment he was liable to drop whatever he was doing and seek me out for a change of activity. If I announced I was going into town, he’d naturally want to join me. And if I didn’t announce it, he’d know something was up—I never left Stonehaven without asking whether he wanted to come along. So I’d been getting by on short, furtive calls when he was in the bathroom or doing something I knew would keep him busy.

With Logan around, Nick would have someone else to hang out with, making it easier for me to slip away. Or so I thought. Yet I’d wait for the two of them to get talking, then sneak from the room . . . only to hear Nick’s footsteps in the hall before I could even finish dialing Elena’s number.

“You want some help?” Logan asked, after my third attempt of the day was thwarted.

“In return for what?”

His eyes widened in mock-outrage. “Geez, maybe a thank-you, if it wouldn’t be too much to ask.”

“Yeah, okay. I’d appreciate it. Thanks.”

“Good. After dinner, then, I’ll tell Nick I’m calling a friend. Let me talk to her for a bit—”

“A bit?”

He shrugged. “Fifteen, twenty minutes . . .”

“And it’s *me* you’re helping by making this call, right?”

“So I’ll chat, make it look good, then you slip in and take over, and I’ll keep Nicky occupied for a few minutes.”

“A *few* minutes?”

“Hey, I’m doing my best here. You in?”

I paused. “You have to call collect. Then I pay Elena back.”

“Will do.” He paused, expectantly, then looked at me. “. . . and where’s the ‘gee, thank-you, Logan, you’re such a pal’?”

I snorted and headed for the kitchen to start dinner.

After we ate, Logan told us he was going to call a friend and left us in the weight room. I gave him fifteen minutes with Elena, then headed upstairs. When I got there, though, he took another ten minutes “saying goodbye,” meaning I got to talk to her for exactly sixty-five seconds before I heard a creak in the hall.

Logan stalled Nick while I signed off. When I got in the hall, Nick was standing there with a look on his face that I hadn't seen since we were teens, and I'd gotten into a scrap at his friend's party.

"I want to talk to you, Clayton," he said, barely unlocking his jaw enough to get the words out.

"Sure," Logan said. "Let's all talk. Better yet, let's go into town, get a drink—"

"I want to talk to Clay."

Logan laughed. "And why the hell would you want to do that? *I* am, by far, the more engaging conversationalist. Come on, let's grab our coats. Hey, did I tell you about my Christmas Eve? Had all-star wrestling, right in my sister's living room. Her husband and my brother were absolutely wasted, started bickering about—"

"Who's Elena?" Nick cut in.

"The girl I just called," Logan said. "Friend of mine from school. We went out a few times, didn't really go anywhere, you know how it is. Stayed friends, though, which is—"

"It's okay," I said. "I've got this."

Logan shot me a "you sure?" look. I nodded and waved Nick to my room.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nick said before I could start.

"I was going to, but—"

"Twenty years, Clay. We've been pals for twenty years and I have never—*never* kept anything from you."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

“Fifteen years, I’ve been trying to get you a girl. Fifteen years of worrying about why you didn’t want one, feeling bad for you, wondering what I could do. ’Cause I’m your friend, and I feel like I should do something about it. I set you up. I give you advice. I take you to gay bars. Hell, I even bought you a hooker for you for your birthday. But nope, you aren’t interested. And when you finally are, I have to find out about it by listening at the door.”

I pulled the chair over from my desk. “I didn’t expect—I wasn’t looking. It just happened.”

“And you ‘just happened’ to tell Logan about it first?”

“I didn’t tell Logan anything. He showed up in Toronto and found out for himself. Otherwise, I sure as hell wouldn’t have told him before I told you. Like I said, I wasn’t looking. I met someone and it just . . . happened.”

He struggled to keep his scowl, but a tiny smile broke through. “About time.”

“Guess it took the right girl. Even then, it took a while for me to figure it out, but now, yeah, everything’s changed, and we’ve been going out for a while, so—”

“Going out?”

“Yeah.”

“How long?”

I shrugged. “Couple months now.”

“Couple—” Nick groaned and thumped backward onto my bed. “Damn it, Clay, this is why you should have talked to me. I always said, you get interested in a girl, talk to me, I’ll tell you how—”

“I’m doing fine.”

He lifted his head. “You’ve been seeing the same girl for two months. That’s not—you don’t have to do that. Yeah, sure, lots of girls, that’s what they’d like. And sometimes, it’s what

they expect. That's why you have to be careful. You have to let them know, right up front, what you're looking for—a little fun, no strings attached. Be honest, that's what my dad always said. Don't ever let them think it's going to turn into something else and, if they do, apologize for the misunderstanding and cut out. Be nice, be respectful, but most of all, be honest."

"I have been honest." I took a deep breath. This was why I hadn't been looking forward to telling Nick about Elena. He wouldn't understand, and nothing I could say would make him understand. "This is what I want. Elena and I—it's not—"

"You're in love," he said.

"What?"

"You're in love. She's the most amazing girl you've ever met and you want to spend the rest of your life with her."

"Uh, yeah."

"And that's why you didn't tell me. Because of the whole 'no long-term relationships' rule. You didn't want to get me involved, tell me something that could get me into trouble with the Pack."

"Yeah . . ."

He leaned forward and thumped me on the back. "I'm still pissed, but I understand."

"You do . . .?"

"Your secret is safe with me. No need for the others to find out." As he started leaning back again, he stopped. "When does your term end?"

"April."

A small, almost superior smile. "Should be just about right." For now, though, it's my turn to educate you. I've been waiting a long time for this. Make up for all those days you left me in

the woods to help me get better at tracking. I know tricks you wouldn't believe—make your girlfriend so happy she'll never let you out of bed.”

“Thanks, but I think I'm doing pretty good—”

“Sure you are.” That small, superior smile again. “Now, the first thing you need to remember is that girls aren't like us. They need foreplay—the more the better. It's like exercise. If you want to get the most out of it, you can't skip the warm up. Takes time and it can be kind of frustrating, but it's worth the effort . . .”

As he continued, I considered telling him that Elena didn't seem to need much warming up, but he looked so happy at finally having the chance to advise me, that I couldn't bring myself to interrupt.

My last night at Stonehaven, I had a dream. Hardly surprising for most people, but I don't dream much. Never have. Even when I do, it's usually a nonsensical mishmash of images. This one came as clear as a daydream.

I was at Stonehaven with Elena. We were out back. Running—only I'd changed to wolf-form and was play-chasing her, the sound of her laughter leading me. Finally, I saw her hiding in the bushes, naked, peering out and trying not to laugh. I snuck up behind her and dropped into a crouch. When I pounced, I was careful, making sure I hit her only with my body weight, keeping my fangs and claws clear of her bare skin. When I pinned her, I resisted the urge to put my mouth around her throat, even in play.

She laughed and crawled out from under me, and I Changed back right there beside her as she waited, patient and unperturbed. When I finished catching my breath, she jumped up and ran

again, and I chased her, catching her easily this time. We fell, laughing and rolling, then kissing and groping, working each other to a fever pitch before I slid inside her.

We started rolling again, mock wrestling as we made love. Her teeth nipped at my upper arm, her nails digging into my back, each dart of pain only adding to the pleasure. My mouth went to her shoulder. I felt her skin there, under my teeth, but held back, knowing I couldn't. One last thrust and I came, and as I did, I felt my teeth close on her shoulder, felt them chomp down in a hard bite. I pulled back, but it was too late.

I wiped the blood from her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

Only I didn't feel sorry. I felt relieved.

I woke up streaming sweat. I pressed my palms to my eyes and tried to push back the images. But it wasn't the images that were making my heart pound—it was that overwhelming sense of relief.

As I gulped air, my half-open door eased open another foot. Jeremy looked around the edge.

"S—something wrong?" I asked, struggling to get the words out.

"You cried out."

"Me?" I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and shoved the covers off me. They were soaked with sweat. So much for playing dumb. "Nightmare, I think. Can't remember." A pause, heart thudding, then I forced myself to look up at him. "Did I . . . say anything?"

He shook his head. "Just a shout."

I mopped my face on the sheet, then kicked it off the bed and laid down, hoping he'd leave. All went quiet, but I could still hear his breathing.

After another couple of minutes, he said, "If you ever want to move out, Clayton, you can. Things . . . change. I know that. Most kids grow up saying they never want to leave home." A small laugh. "I know, you were never most kids, but I still didn't expect you to stay forever. If you're staying because you think I need you—the company, the protection—then, as much as I appreciate that, it isn't necessary. I'd be fine."

"I'm not leaving. Not until you kick me out."

Another soft laugh. "You know I'd never do that, no matter how badly you tempt me sometimes. This is your home and you can stay as long as you like. But . . ." A pause. "Being away these last few months, it obviously—well, you certainly don't seem to be suffering. Maybe that means something, even if you don't want it to."

I mumbled something and feigned a yawn. I doubt Jeremy bought it, but he recognized an "I don't want to talk about it" when he saw one so, with a quiet goodnight, he closed my door.

I stayed awake, thinking about the dream. That initial rush of emotion past, I could analyze it logically. Did I want Elena to become a werewolf? Sure I did. Had I thought about it? Of course I had. Did I plan to give her that option when I told her the truth about myself? Absolutely.

The process would be difficult, but not dangerous. Sure, some people didn't survive a werewolf's bite, but that was because they were bitten and abandoned, as I'd been, left to deal with the physical changes unaided and unprepared. Elena wouldn't have that problem. She was young, physically fit and strong-willed, and she'd have Jeremy to guide her through it, as he had for Nick and the others. Like them, she'd know what was happening, and what to expect, which

is why it had to be her choice, an informed, unequivocal personal choice. Anything else . . .
well, nothing else would do.

Chapter Fourteen

Elena

The day Clay left, Jason called. He'd probably been phoning since Christmas Eve, but I hadn't been back to my dorm since then. Had I been thinking, avoiding Jason would have been the perfect excuse to take Clay up on his offer to spend the week in his apartment. Instead, I was stuck in my crappy little dorm room, answering the phone every time it rang in case it was Clay. Half the time it ended up being Jason. For two days, I fielded his calls with excuses, demurrals and, when that failed, hang-ups. Then, on my way to the gym, I walked out the side door and saw Jason heading in the front.

My first thought was "whew, I missed him." Then, on the verge of making a run for it, I turned around and strode to the front of the building.

"Jason!" I called.

He stopped and squinted my way, shielding his eyes against the sun. As I drew closer, confusion passed behind his eyes, but he flashed a wide smile.

"Merry Christmas, baby." He lifted a garish metallic bag. "Thought I'd better deliver this present in person, or you'd never get it."

“Thanks.”

When I reached for it, he didn’t move, just clutched the bag and stared at my outstretched hand. Then, almost reluctantly, he passed it over.

“I —uh—hope you’ll like it.” As he regrouped, his gaze shifted past me and fixed on the path leading into the bushes. “How about we grab that coffee I was talking about? We can cut right through there and head up to Bloor.”

I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing. “That doesn’t lead to Bloor. Or to any coffee shops. But I’m sure we could find a nice shadowy parking lot somewhere.”

His gaze went blank. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Jason, but I don’t have time for coffee. I was just heading out to meet my boyfriend. So thank you for the gift, and please, give my regards to your mother—”

“Boyfriend?”

“Right. You’ve met him, remember? A few months ago? In the park?”

A flash of recognition with a chaser of fear. Then the “lovesick boy” look vanished. “Is that a threat, Elena?”

“No, it’s a hint. A hint that I’m with someone else and never was—or will be—with you.”

The hurt look fell over his face again. “Aww, baby, I know we’ve had some problems—”

“But if you choose not to take that hint, then yes, it will become a threat. Not a threat that I’ll sic my boyfriend on you. He has nothing to do with you and me. What does have to do with you and me is the little matter of a restraining order. I’m tired of doing this the nice way, Jason. If you phone me again, visit me again, or ‘accidentally’ bump into me again, I will go to the police. Not just call them, but go straight to the precinct and not leave until they pay you a visit. Is that clear?”

“Geez, baby, you don’t need to get mad—”

I stepped toward him and lowered my voice. “It had better be clear, Jason, because I’m serious, and a hundred nasty phone calls from your mommy won’t change my mind—it’ll only going to piss me off more. Understood?”

I gave him a moment to answer. When he didn’t, I turned and walked away.

Jason didn’t call again, or stop by again, or “accidentally” bump into me again. With any luck, my outburst had solved the problem. And if it hadn’t? Well, it had felt damned good, so I didn’t regret it, effective or not.

Clay came home in as good a mood as he’d left, proof that things were finally hitting an even stride. Better yet, those strides were advancing in the direction I wanted, because almost the first words out of his mouth were “When do you want to meet Nick?” Not only was I going to meet Clay’s best friend, but he seemed as happy and excited about it as I was.

Nick’s visit didn’t happen as soon as either of us hoped. Clay invited him, and kept inviting him, but Nick was always busy. Work commitments, he said, which made sense to me, but only seemed to infuriate Clay. I didn’t care. The point was that Clay wanted me to meet his best friend. It was only a matter of time before he introduced me to everyone else in his life, and I could stop worrying.

Clay's next big "relationship move" step was, quite possibly, the last I would have expected. The night before Valentine's Day, we went to a movie, and Clay insisted on cutting through the mall instead of heading out the theater's rear exit, which was the first sign that something was afoot. When he steered me into a jewelry store, my heart sank. I knew what was coming: he'd want me to pick out a gift for myself. Very sweet, but I'd been hoping he'd follow-up on hints about my fraying knapsack instead. Clay had never been the "roses, candy and jewelry" kind of boyfriend, and I liked it that way. But I guess Valentine's Day brings out a certain set of expectations in even the least conventionally romantic lover. So I slapped on an excited smile and let him lead me to the jewelry counter.

A salesperson flitted over, her smile as wide and fake as my own.

"Can I help you, sir?" she trilled.

Clay waved her away. She didn't leave, but he acted as if she had, turning sideways to face me.

"That what you want?" he said, tapping his fingers on the glass.

Inside the case were rings. Diamond rings. Diamond engagement rings.

I bit back a laugh. "Uh, wrong type, Clay. I think what you want is over there." I pointed at the regular ring display on the other side. "Offer me one of these and you'll find yourself forced to make good on that first and last thing."

"Yeah, so? That's the idea, isn't it?"

My heart skipped. For a minute, I stared, certain I'd misheard. When I finally opened my mouth, Clay's gaze slid to the hovering clerk. He tugged me aside and lowered his voice.

"That is what you want, isn't it?" he said. "Marriage? Doesn't matter to me. I said first and last, and I don't need a piece of paper to hold me to it. But it's important to you, right?"

“I, uh, well—” Oh God, were we really having this discussion in a shopping mall? “I don’t need it. Not now, that’s for sure. I’m only twenty. But someday, of course, well, that *is* where I’d like to end up . . .”

“It’s important, then. Getting married.”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s important to me.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. Whenever you want it. But even if you don’t want that—” He jerked his thumb at a bridal photo. “—just yet, maybe you should have *that*.” He nodded at the ring display case. “Make things clear.”

I smiled. “You mean, maybe if we’re engaged I’ll stop being so damned stubborn and move in with you?”

“Makes sense. That roommate of yours—”

I lifted my hand. “I’ve heard all the arguments, and I’m not going to promise that an engagement ring would change my mind. I’m . . . funny about that, I guess. Old-fashioned.”

“You want to do it right. So do I.” He nudged me back toward the counter. “If I’m going to do it right, I want to make sure I get something you like.” He pointed at the biggest rock in the display. “How about that?”

I laughed. “You can’t afford that.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

The clerk sidled back again.

“Even if you could, I wouldn’t want it,” I said. “Definitely not my style.”

“So pick your style. Anything you’d like.”

I surveyed the selection. “None of them are really . . . I don’t know. Something simpler, I guess. Any ring can be an engagement ring, right?”

The clerk cleared her throat. “The diamond ring is the traditional choice, and you have lovely long fingers, perfect for showing off a large solitaire—” At a look from Clay she swallowed the rest of the sentence. “Or, if you’d like something nontraditional, it is, of course, your choice.”

I moved to the standard rings, frowning as I looked them over.

“I want something simple,” I said. “But . . . I don’t know. It should still *look* like an engagement ring, I suppose.”

“How about this?”

Clay pulled a box from his pocket. Now it was the clerk’s turn to glare, arms crossing over her chest. Clay opened the box. Inside was what looked like two rings, one crossed over the other. When I looked closer, I could see that the thin bands were fused in the middle. The outside one was white gold with diamond chips across the front. The other was yellow gold, inscribed with a delicate pattern that looked like runes. Definitely different. Very simple . . . and yet not simple at all.

“Wow,” I said.

“You like that?”

“It’s—wow.” I stared at the ring for another moment, speechless, then blinked hard, pulled my gaze away and smiled up at him. “Can I try it on?”

“Nope.” He snapped the box shut and shoved it back into his pocket. “Haven’t proposed yet.”

“What—? Didn’t you just ask—?”

“No. I was just checking. Even I know better than to propose in a shopping mall.”

“So when are you—?”

“Eventually. No rush, remember?”

“I didn’t mean—”

He headed out of the store, leaving me sputtering. The salesclerk rolled her eyes. I ignored her, laughed to myself, and hurried after Clay.

I woke up early the next morning to make a surprise Valentine’s Day breakfast for Clay. The night before, I’d cracked open the blind so the sunlight would wake me. From the way Clay was snoring, though, I could have set the alarm and still not needed to worry about disturbing him.

I rolled over. Strange, seeing someone lying beside me. I slept over a couple of nights a week, but it still took getting used to, waking up and seeing him there. Not that I’d never awoken to find someone in my bed, but when it had happened, it hadn’t been by invitation. Those first few times with Clay—well, waking to the sight of another person in bed had brought back a rush of memories, and I’d scrambled back so fast I’d fallen out of bed. Now the neural pathways of my brain were slowly changing course, coming to accept that waking up with someone wasn’t a cause for panic.

Clay was sleeping on his stomach, his head half-buried under the pillow. I reached out to run my finger down a thin scar on his back. When I closed my eyes, I could trace it by memory. I loved that—the sense of knowing someone’s body that well, that you could close your eyes and still see every freckle, every mole, every scar. Next, I’d learn the story behind each of those scars. Someday when I feeling brave, I’d ask. I’d memorized the map; now I wanted to know what it meant.

When I reached the end of the scar, I opened my eyes. And I blinked, seeing something that didn't fit with the image in my mind—something on my finger. The engagement ring.

"Fits?" he said, voice muffled by the pillow as he peered over his shoulder.

"When did—?"

"Last night. While you were sleeping. Happy Valentine's Day, darling."

I said nothing. He flipped onto his back, face clouding.

"What's wrong?" he said.

I took the ring off. "I can't wear this."

"What?"

"I didn't accept."

"Wha—? Sure you did. In the jewelry store."

"But that wasn't a real proposal, remember? Therefore my answer couldn't have been real either." Struggling to keep a straight face, I dropped the ring on his chest. "Sorry. Maybe next time."

He growled and grabbed for me. I tried to scramble off the bed, but he caught me and pulled me down, then showed me—once again—the best part about not waking up alone.

Afterwards, I curled up against him, drowsy again, thoughts of my special breakfast giving way to plans for a special brunch instead. His arms tightened around me, and his mouth moved to my ear.

"Marry me, Elena," he whispered.

I put my hand out, and he slid the ring on.

By late March, those two night a week at Clay's apartment had increased to five, sometimes six. I still refused to formalize the move, but I kept so much of my stuff there that the point was moot.

Late one afternoon, when I swung by Clay's office after class to grab my jacket, I found a note.

Got a surprise for you.

Wait here.

Be back soon.

C.

I waited for forty minutes. By then, I'd run out of homework, and really needed to start working on the essay I'd left at the apartment. So I wrote an addendum on Clay's note, telling him I meet him there.

When I got to the apartment, I found the door unlocked.

"Hey," I said as I stepped inside. "I thought you wanted me to wait at the office."

I tossed my knapsack in the hall closet and followed the sounds of movement from the bedroom.

"If you're hiding that surprise you mentioned, you'd better hurry," I said.

When I stepped into the bedroom, the first thing I saw was a sweater in a man's hands, and I was about to backpedal and give Clay time to hide it. But then I recognized the sweater as the blue one he'd bought me for Christmas. My gaze traveled up to the man's face . . . and I didn't recognize *that*.

Before I could hightail it out of the room, I realized I *did* recognize the man staring at me. I'd never met him, but I saw a teenaged version of him every day, in a small watercolor Clay had pinned on the bedroom wall. Something about the face that was different, but all the pieces added up—dark wavy hair, olive skin, and heart-stopping big brown eyes in a classically handsome face. I realized what was missing. The smile. In the picture, he had a wide, easy grin that lit up his face. But there was no trace of that on the man holding my sweater by the edges, as if it was something he'd picked out of the trash.

"Nick," I said. "You must be Nick. I'm Elena."

I smiled and stepped forward, hand extended. He didn't take it. Didn't return the smile. Just stared at me with a look not unlike the one he'd given my sweater.

My gut clenched and I stood there, feeling like an idiot, hand still out, smile still pasted on. His gaze dropped to my other hand.

"You have keys," he said.

"Uh, yeah." I lifted my hand and tried to smile brighter. "Two sets, actually. Long story."

He blinked, shock darting across his face. I followed his gaze, not to the keys, but to the ring on my finger. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Clay barreled through the bedroom door and grabbed me from behind.

"Hey, darling. Didn't I say wait?" He swung me off the floor, then kissed me before plunking me back on my feet.

"Yes, and you also said you'd be back soon."

"Yeah, I know. I got tied up in the dean's office. So I see you've found your surprise."

He turned to Nick, who was staring at us with that same look of shock he'd given my ring.

Clay walked over and slapped his back. “Bout time he showed up, huh?” He bared his teeth in something that could be passed off as a smile. “For a guy who doesn’t believe in working, you’ve been doing an awful lot of it lately, buddy.”

Nick didn’t even seem to hear him.

“What?” Clay said, smile turning brittle. “At a loss for words? That’ll be the day. Come on. I bought some steaks—”

“I need to talk to you,” Nick said. A glance my way, one that didn’t even bother to meet my eyes. “Alone.”

The teeth-baring smile again. “Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Elena.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said. “You guys obviously have a lot of catching up to do, so why don’t I—”

Clay grabbed my elbow as I backed up. I hesitated. Then I looked at Nick, saw that gut-twisting expression on his face, the one I’d feared seeing when I finally did meet Clay’s friends and family, that look of bewilderment that said “what the hell are you doing with *her*?”

So this was why Clay had taken so long to start introducing me. Because he knew I’d be a disappointment. Exactly what I’d suspected, and feared, all along. Exactly what had happened to me every time a new foster family had taken me in. I didn’t measure up.

Dimly, I heard Clay say something, but the blood pounding in my ears drowned it out. I mumbled something, tugged free of Clay’s grasp and hurried out the door.