



BIRTHRIGHT

KELLEY ARMSTRONG

art by xaviere_daumarie@hotmail.com

For my song
Jeremy Danvers Lane
13876 Wilton Grove
Bear Valley
New York



Birthright

Logan peered out the car window at the long, wooded drive. Then he lifted the sheet of paper and double-checked the address. He didn't need to check it. He'd already memorized the entire note. Easy enough—there were only ten words on it, including the address.

The first contact he'd ever had with his father, and this was all he got. Ten words.

Jeremy Danvers, 13876 Wilton Grove Lane, Bear Valley, New York.

The note had arrived on Logan's eighteenth birthday, couriered to his college dorm room. He'd thought it was from his mother, probably a birthday check tucked inside a generic "for my son" card. He didn't mind the check—he always needed money—and it was better than the equally generic gifts she bought when she made the effort.

Logan used to swear his mother bought gifts for her children using the buying guides that appeared in magazines every Christmas, that she'd just go to the appropriate age group, and pick the first item on the list. She wasn't being lazy. The truth was that Susanna Jonsen didn't know her children well enough to know what they'd like. She wasn't a bad parent, not abusive or neglectful. Some women just aren't cut out to be mothers, and unfortunately it had taken Susanna three kids to realize she was one of them.

Logan considered himself the luckiest of the three. When he was two, his mother had met his stepfather, who hadn't wanted to take custody of a bastard of questionable parentage, so Logan had gone to live with his maternal grandparents, and grew up, if not with much money, with the kind of love and stability his mother couldn't offer.

If not particularly personal, his mother's birthday checks were always generous, usually a couple hundred dollars. As soon as the envelope arrived, Logan had started planning how he'd spend the money. He needed new school supplies, groceries, clothes, all those boring necessities that, sadly, one couldn't live without. But he was definitely putting some aside for fun, maybe taking his buddies out for pizza and beer.

He'd opened the envelope only to find another one inside. On it, written in barely legible black strokes: "For my son—important medical information." It wasn't his mother's spidery, precise writing, so it had to be from his father. That *should* be obvious—everyone was "son" to two people, but Logan had never met his father. He only knew that he'd been dark-skinned—probably African-American—and only that because, well, it was obvious that Logan's year-round tan and some of his features didn't come from his Norwegian mother. As for details, his mother refused to elaborate.

"He wasn't nothing but a sperm donor," she'd say. "Took off the day I told him you were coming. Don't spend another minute thinking about him, because he doesn't deserve it."

Of course, Logan did think about his father, and for the past two years he'd had cause to think about him more and more. Something was wrong with him, medically wrong, something his doctor laughed off with a slap on the back and a reminder that "it's puberty, boy, you're supposed to be changing."

There was more to it than that, and when Logan saw that envelope, he knew he'd been right. What ever "condition" he had, it was the birthright of his long-vanished father.

He'd paused a moment then, envelope in hand, the implications of its arrival suddenly hitting him. His father knew where he was. Not only remembered him, but knew his birthday, knew he was here, at college.

Logan had ripped open the envelope then, fingers trembling. He'd reached inside and plucked out a piece of note paper. On it, a name and address. That's it—just someone's address. This address.

He let the car roll forward, and craned to see through the thick evergreens, but if there was a house at the end of that winding laneway, he couldn't see it.

Another look at the paper. The eight could be a six, or vice-versa. Same with the ones and sevens. He knew it didn't matter. This was the place. Passing through Bear Valley, he'd stopped at the doughnut shop, ostensibly for coffee, but really to learn what he could about this Jeremy Danvers.

They hadn't been able to tell him much, just that Danvers lived with his cousin and the two "kept to themselves," but that Danvers was "good folk," whatever that meant around here. Logan hadn't pressed for more—he could tell they didn't like chatting with strangers about locals.

As for the address, the people in the doughnut shop couldn't confirm the exact number, but it was "way up Wilton Grove" and "on the left, just past the bridge" and "a big piece of land, mostly trees" with the house "tucked back in a ways." So obviously this was the right place, and the only reason he was still in the car, at the end of the lane, was that he was stalling. He was afraid of what he'd find at the top of this drive, or what he wouldn't find. The most obvious

answer was the one that sent his heart tripping: that this Jeremy Danvers *was* his father. And if he was? Logan didn't know how he'd handle that. Worse, though, he didn't know how he'd handle the disappointment if it *wasn't* his father.

He took a deep breath, then slammed the car into reverse and hit the gas. Dust billowed up as he zoomed backward on the dirt shoulder, past the mouth of the driveway. One more deep breath, then he jammed it into drive, veered left and roared into the laneway.

The first thing Logan noticed as he stepped from the car was the smell of trees. A year ago, if anyone had told him trees had a smell, he'd have laughed and said "I've never gotten close enough to sniff one." Raised in the city, with no interest in things like hiking, camping, or fishing, he'd never even gone to summer camp. Then, almost a year ago, he'd been cutting across campus and picked up a smell as clear and alluring as his Gramma's freshly baked cinnamon rolls. He'd followed it and found himself in a stand of trees, and there'd been nothing there but the trees.

He'd stood there, drinking in the sharp tang of greenery and the loamy smell of damp earth, and he'd known this was what a forest smelled like. He recognized the scent from his dreams, the ones he'd started having almost two years ago. Dreams of the forest, of running.

Sometimes, in the dreams, he was being chased, heart pounding, feet pounding, blood pounding as he ran, knowing he couldn't stop, if he did stop they'd— And that was where the thought always ended. He never knew who they were or what they'd do, only that he had to be prepared, he had to take shelter, and that shelter wasn't just a "where," it was a "who." Another elusive "they," *his* they, that would protect him from *those* they. He chalked it up to anxiety.

His last year of high school, then his first of college, of course he was stressed, and some days it felt like the whole world was a big *they*, determined to keep his ambitions in check.

In the other forest dreams, the more common ones by far, he was just running. Running for the sake of running, barreling through the forest, wind in his hair, ground flying by in a blur under his feet. A strange feeling for a guy whose idea of strenuous exercise was a weekly game of basketball. He was fit enough—he just didn’t much see the use in athletics. He wasn’t good enough to make a career at it, but he was smart enough to make a career using his brain, so that’s what he concentrated on. Yet now he dreamed of running. Not only that, but he’d never been better at his weekly game. He could jump better, react better, move better, and even his friends had started to notice.

As he walked to the front door, he had the sense he was being watched, but when he looked around, listened around, and sniffed around, no one was there. Yes, sniffed around, something he’d never admit doing. Forests weren’t the only thing he’d learned had a smell. Everything did, and these days, sometimes he could smell his friends coming long before he saw them. His hearing had improved, too. Sight stayed the same, as did his sense of taste. So when he listened and smelled, and found no one, he knew there was no one there.

He stepped onto the front porch, and lifted his hand. Then he stopped. Behind this door could be his father. His father! Was he ready for this? What would he say? How would he react? What if, after sending the note, his father had changed—

“Looking for someone?” drawled a voice behind him.

Logan wheeled to see a young man step onto the porch. He was around Logan’s age, maybe a couple of years older, well-built, with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes, a strong jaw the only thing keeping him from tipping over into “pretty-boy” territory. The kind of guy who

walks into a party and looks across the women—including the one on your arm—with the arrogant insolence of a billionaire at a car show, knowing he can walk out with anything that catches his fancy.

“You looking for someone?” he repeated.

Logan squared his shoulders and hoped he wasn’t being too obvious about it.

“Jeremy Danvers,” he said.

The man’s eyes went from cool to icy. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Is he home?”

“You think this is a good idea?”

“Wha—?”

“I’m asking if you want to reconsider. Maybe you made a mistake.”

Logan met the man’s stare. “If Jeremy Danvers is here, I want to see him.”

The young man gave a slow nod, and opened his mouth as if to say something. Then his fist shot out, plowing into Logan’s jaw before his brain even registered seeing it coming. Logan slammed into the stone wall behind him and everything went dark.

Logan’s face sank into something soft and warm, and he inhaled the faintest scent of laundry detergent. He lifted his head. Pain throbbed through the back of his skull and he let out a soft moan, then dropped back onto the pillow and closed his eyes. Just a few more minutes of sleep, and then he’d—

His eyes snapped open as he remembered where he was . . . or where he had been.

Now he was lying on a twin bed covered with a clean bottom sheet, but no top sheet or blankets. In front of him was a bare wall. He picked up the slight scent of dampness. A basement—albeit a clean one. He rolled over and saw . . . bars.

Logan started jumping up, but the pain forced him down, and he bit back a wave of nausea at the sudden movement. Jail? He was in jail? Oh, God what had he gotten himself into?

He'd heard about things like this, rumors of college kids venturing into some backwater town, who looked at a local wrong, and wound up in jail. Well, if that was the case, these yokels would be in for a shock. He wasn't some dumb kid who didn't know his rights. He was a law student . . . well, pre-law, even if his only "law" course had been in high school, and hadn't really covered anything vaguely useful.

Ah, shit, he thought and closed his eyes. *I'm in trouble.*

At the rustle of the page turning, Logan looked left to see the guy who'd decked him. He sat on a folding chair outside the cell, and was reading what looked like a textbook, a pencil between his fingers. The young man frowned, and jotted something in the margin, then continued reading.

A student? Logan looked around. He wasn't in jail; he was in someone's basement, with an older student standing guard. Now it made sense.

"It was a set up, wasn't it?" Logan said.

The young man didn't jump at the sound of a voice, just lifted a finger, telling Logan to wait, as if he'd known he was awake.

"The letter, the address, it was all part of it," Logan continued.

A soft sound, almost like a growl, and the young man slapped his textbook shut.

"Part of what?" he said.

“The hazing.”

“Hazing?”

“For Pi Kappa Beta. I told Mike I didn’t want to join, but he signed me up as a pledge, didn’t he?”

The young man met Logan’s gaze with a steady stare. “Do I look like a fraternity brat?”

Logan sized him up. Blonde, blue-eyed, ridiculously good-looking, athletic, probably a jock with not much going on above the neck line . . .

“Yeah, you do.”

The young man snorted and shook his head. “You want to get out of this alive, you’re going to need a better story than that.”

“A—alive?”

“Dumb kid,” he muttered. “You’re lucky you *are* just a kid. A couple of years older, and I’d be digging your grave out back, not baby-sitting you.”

Logan lowered his eyelids so the young man wouldn’t see the flash of fear. *Get a grip*, he told himself. It’s hazing. Bury me in the backyard? Please. Couldn’t Pi Kappa Beta come up with something more believable than that?

“Did you really think you’d get away with it?” the young man continued. “Barely Changed, and you’re going to challenge the Alpha? That first Change at addle your brain?” He met Logan’s eyes. “Or was it so bad that this seemed like an honorable way out? Suicide by Pack?”

Logan blinked, brain struggling to make sense of what the young man was saying, and fighting against the dawning realization that maybe he wasn’t locked up as part of a hazing ritual, but had been taken captive by a madman.

A distant door clicked open. “Clayton?”

“Down here,” the young man—Clayton—called. “We have a problem.”

“So I smelled,” a deep voice murmured as light footsteps sounded on the stairs.

A moment later, a man rounded the corner. He was tall and slender, dark-haired with a close-trimmed beard and dark eyes. He couldn’t have been more than a few years older than the other young man, and wore a polo shirt and trousers. Logan let out a soft breath of relief. Definitely a frat hazing.

The dark-haired man stopped short, nostrils flaring as he saw Logan. Something like dismay flickered in his eyes.

“New,” he murmured.

“Very new,” Clayton muttered. “And stupid. Walked right up to the door and asked for you.”

“For—?” Logan began. “You’re Jeremy Danvers?”

The dark-haired man gave a small twist of a smile. “Not quite what you expected?”

Logan told himself that didn’t matter, that he already knew this was a prank, and hadn’t still hoped to find his father. And yet . . .

“What’s your name?” Danvers asked.

Logan only glared at him.

“Logan Jonsen,” Clayton said, lifting a driver’s license. “Doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Jonsen?” Danvers said. “No.”

“Hey,” Logan said. “That’s my wallet.”

“Be glad that’s all I took. I was thinking of taking fingerprints, too. . . with your fingers still attached.” He looked at Danvers. “What do you want done?”

Danvers paused, then said, “I think we’ll give Mr. Jonsen the chance to reconsider.”

He stepped closer to the cell. Clayton tensed, as if Logan might spring and reach through the bars.

Danvers continued, "I don't know what you thought you were doing, but if you ever do it again, it will be the last time. And if you share this story with any of the others, I will reconsider my decision. Is that clear?"

Logan opened his mouth to argue, but then he met Danvers's eyes . . . and the words dried up. When he dropped his gaze, his hands were shaking. He clenched his fists. Again, Clayton tensed, ready to lunge forward.

Danvers started to pull back, then stopped. He took a deeper breath and his chin jerked up.

"You haven't Changed yet, have you?" he said.

Before Logan could answer, Danvers stepped forward again and inhaled, then glanced over at Clayton.

"I can tell he's new," Clayton said. "But that's it. If he hasn't Changed, he's damned close."

Danvers looked at Logan. "You *haven't* had your first Change yet, have you?" He studied Logan's eyes, then blinked. "Not only that, but you have no idea what I'm talking about . . ."

"Shit," Clayton muttered.

"How did you get here?" Danvers asked.

"Someone sent me the name and address," Logan said. "Supposedly my father, some bullshit about medical information, but obviously it was someone's idea of a joke." He looked up at Danvers, but couldn't meet his eyes, and shoved his hands in his pockets, unable to muster any kind of fight. "Can I go? I just want to go, okay?"

Danvers pushed back his bangs, and shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, Logan. Not just yet. Clayton? Bring him up to the study.” Danvers turned and lowered his voice. “Nicely.”

Logan looked longingly at the window. Beyond it, he could see a field and a forest, and in that forest, the promise of freedom. They’d left him alone in here, and he told himself he could make it, open the window, climb out and run, even if Clayton had warned he’d hear him if he so much as stood.

In that forest, he’d find not only freedom, but the bliss of ignorance, where he could keep telling himself this had been an elaborate frat hazing . . . or a freak encounter with crazy people. If he stayed, he knew he’d discover the truth—that he was here for the very reason his father had sent him—to get medical information. And he knew that this “medical information” wouldn’t be the revelation of any normal condition.

He’d felt the strength in Clayton’s punch and in his iron grip when he’d led Logan upstairs. He’d seen Danvers’s nostrils flare when he’d first seen him, heard him say he’d already “smelled” the problem. He’d felt his own gut reaction when he looked into Danvers’s eyes. And he knew, whatever they were about to tell him, he almost certainly didn’t want to hear it. But as alluring as ignorance was right now, if he left, he’d regret it. So he stayed, and strained to hear the distant conversation of the two men.

“—fucking irresponsible mutts,” Clayton was grumbling. “What kind of father sends his kid to the Pack? If Dominic was still in charge, that kid would be dead.”

“But Dominic isn’t, and presumably Logan’s father knows that. He must hope I’ll be more sympathetic.”

“Sympathetic?” Clayton snorted. “He’s putting you in a hell of a situation. That’s inconsiderate, irresponsible . . . and stupid. This is a father’s job. He wants to advise his kid to join the Pack? Fine. But do it after he knows what he is. This way, if the kid reacts badly, what are we supposed to do? Say ‘oh well,’ and let him leave?”

Logan didn’t catch Danvers’s response. He strained to hear more, but they’d stopped talking.

A moment later, the two men appeared in the doorway. Danvers took the recliner. Clayton sat beside him on the fireplace hearth.

Danvers began. “Do have any idea what . . . condition your father was referring to?”

Logan shook his head. Danvers probed for more, asking how much he knew about his father, and the circumstances of his upbringing. Then he leaned forward and murmured something to Clayton. The younger man’s jaw set, and he was obviously unhappy with what he was hearing. He didn’t object though. Didn’t say a word. Just stood and glared at Logan, and in that glare, Logan read a warning as clear as if he’d spoken it, and he knew that the talk of cutting off fingers and burying bodies in the backyard wasn’t just talk. He swallowed hard, but Clayton only stalked past him and out the door.

With Clayton gone, Danvers continued asking questions, turning to symptoms now, asking and verifying and probing for details, as if assessing the progress of Logan’s “condition.” Then he moved to less concrete areas, asking about changes in behavior, urges and longings, emotions and dreams.

After about ten minutes, something clicked along the hallway floor. Danvers stopped, then glanced out the door and lifted a finger.

He turned to Logan. “I have no experience doing this, Logan, and I know that any way I do, it will be a shock.” He paused. “It would be better if you’d figured it out on your own. Do you have any idea, however wild or preposterous it might seem, about what’s happening to you?”

Logan hesitated, then shook his head.

“I think you do,” Danvers murmured. “If you prefer it this way, though, I’ll confirm your suspicions.”

He turned to the doorway and motioned. A wolf walked in, a huge gold-colored wolf. Logan resisted the urge to shrink back. He could hear his brain screaming denials . . . and wasn’t sure, not consciously sure, *what* it was denying.

The wolf walked to Logan. Its muzzle jerked, and it flipped something from his mouth onto Logan’s lap. Logan looked down to see his wallet. Then he glanced up at the wolf, looked into its blue eyes—familiar blue eyes fixed in a familiar suspicious glare. Clayton’s eyes.

His brain rejected the recognition with screams of denial. *It’s a trick. A trick. Don’t believe it. Get out now. Fight! Run!*

He managed to hold himself still until Clayton—the wolf—turned away. Then he sprang at Danvers. Even as he did, some deeper part of his brain cried out in protest, telling him that he shouldn’t dare or, and even if he did dare, that this was quite possibly the stupidest thing he’d ever done in his life.

But it was too late. He was already in flight. He saw Danvers easily dive out of the way, and even as that deep-rooted part of his brain sighed in relief, he felt something hit his side. He heard Clayton’s snarl. As he fell, he twisted and saw Clayton’s fangs flash, saw them slash

down toward his throat, felt them close around it. And his final thought was that he had indeed made the biggest mistake of his life . . . and the last.

Logan buried his face in the pillow, now smelling more of himself than laundry detergent. *This feels familiar*, he thought. This time, when he lifted his head and saw bars, his gut reaction was not fear but relief. Overwhelming relief.

He should be dead. As crazy as that sounded, the thought that he could be killed—*killed!*—just for lunging at a guy, he knew it was true and, in the strangest, most surreal way, was neither shocked nor outraged, but only grateful to be alive.

He sat up. Blood rushed to his head, blurring his vision, and all he could see was an indistinct figure sitting outside the cell, reading.

“Clayton?”

A soft laugh. “No. Clay’s not very happy with you right now. It seemed best if I stood guard for a while instead.” Danvers sobered, and laid his book on the floor. “If you’re feeling up to it, Logan, we need to talk.”

Logan could only nod.

Danvers continued. “I don’t know your father, so I can’t judge his intentions. I believe those intentions were good, that he was somehow unable to tell you the truth about your . . . birthright himself, and that he wanted you here, in the Pack. That’s what it’s called. The Pack—a werewolf Pack.”

He paused, studying Logan’s face for his reaction. While part of Logan’s brain still dug in its heels and refused to believe, that deeper part was the stronger voice now, squelching logic

and telling Logan with unshakable gut-level conviction that this was true, that he was a werewolf and that maybe, in some way, Danvers was right, and he'd already known it.

When Logan didn't respond, Danvers nodded and kept going, "As for why your father would send you here, the Pack offers things outside werewolves don't have—security, training, companionship. Your father must have wanted that for you. But, in sending you here, not knowing what you are, he did, however unintentionally, put us both in a difficult position. Now that you know not only what we are, but who we are, and where we live—"

"I'm a threat," Logan said, his gut clenching. "You're going to kill me."

"I wouldn't have kept you alive just to explain why you can't remain that way."

"But Clayton—"

"Didn't try to kill you. He was furious, but I didn't need to stop him from finishing you off. You're young enough that he'll grant you a warning shot. But only one." Danvers met Logan's gaze. "If you ever attack me, or attempt to attack me, again, he *will* kill you. That is both his job and his nature. And I won't stop him. The same goes for Clayton himself or any other Pack member. An unprovoked attack warrants death. That is our Law. We face enough danger from without; we won't tolerate it within."

Logan paused and rubbed his bandaged throat. "So you'll trust me. If I promise not to tell anyone—"

"No. I'm afraid I can't take that risk. Right now you may accept what you've been told, but things could change when you leave here. You cannot be given any opportunity to reveal what we are until you know, for certain, that doing so would risk your own safety as much as ours. You'll remain here until your first Change—when you become a full werewolf."

"But—but I have school—"

“And right now, this takes precedence. I’m sorry, but even if you were to leave, when your Change does come—” He shook his head. “School would be the last thing on your mind.

You’ll be here, not just for our safety, but for yours, and you’ll see that soon enough.”

“So you’re keeping me *here*? In a cage?”

A small laugh. “I’m afraid you aren’t that big a physical threat yet, Logan. So long as you don’t attempt to run, you’ll be under what you might call ‘house-arrest,’ while we wait for your Change and I prepare you for it.”

Danvers rose and walked to the cell door.

“So that’s it?” Logan said. “I’m part of this Pack now?”

“That will be your decision, when you’re better able to make it. For now, you have other things to worry about.” He unlocked and opened the door. “Let’s go find some dinner. You’ve had a long day, and I imagine you’re hungry.”

He didn’t wait for Logan, just turned and headed for the stairs. Logan hesitated in the doorway, then shoved his hands into his pocket. There, at the bottom, his finger grazed the wadded note.

So this was his birthright? Not the riches of an inheritance or the glory of a proud past. Not even a name. The blood of a werewolf, that’s all his father had given him. He touched the folded paper. No, maybe that wasn’t all. An affliction, yes, maybe even a curse, but an involuntary one, passed along with something else, what every loving parent wants for their child: the chance of a better life.

Logan pulled his hands from his pockets and followed Danvers up the stairs.