

THE LAST STARLING by C.L. Denault
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PROLOGUE

The decades-old raven in the sycamore refused to blink.

It hadn't blinked in some time. A rugged, scruffy-haired boy had drawn its attention, yanking its sharp blue eyes from the trail of moonlight reflecting off the lake. Many years had passed since it had taken in this view. Dark, desperate years. It had longed for this moonrise. Needed to see it again, to remember something good.

Then the boy had come. Quietly, with padded footsteps. He had strolled directly beneath the gnarled branch where the raven sat, peeling back memories best forgotten. Startled, it had snapped from its reverie and stared.

Something was out of place.

It fixated on him now with intense focus. He wasn't like the others that had gathered to socialize. Dressed like them, yes. Laughed like them, walked as they did. Drank the same golden liquid from his red plastic cup.

But the raven sensed he was . . . different.

It found this disturbing. The escape had been last-minute, the journey here long and tiresome. There were those who would soon follow. It had hoped to find sanctuary here, to rest and reflect and determine its next course of action. Make peace with its past before moving on. It could not afford any more trouble.

A light breeze whispered through, rustling the fresh spring leaves dangling from the sycamore's dense cluster of branches. The raven shivered. Its iridescent black plumage ruffled, yet it did not blink.

It watched.

Waited.

Drew upon ages of instinct to pinpoint the source of agitation.

The next breeze identified it: the boy's scent. Strong and predatory, full of musk, earth, and blood. Powerful enough to make the raven screech in alarm. To remind it of the terrifying danger it had left behind.

And alert it to the new danger that lay ahead.

CHAPTER 1

I'm being watched.

Not looked at. Watched. There's a difference, one I can feel in the little hairs on the back of my neck. Right now they're standing at attention. The skin below them is tingling, like it does when I'm on patrol in the Starling woods and sense a Trespasser.

As usual, my first instinct is to freeze.

Which is kind of awkward while standing in a crowd of people. Every senior at Wolfe Creek High is here, myself included, celebrating the spring thaw with loud music, food, and cheap beer. I'm just here for the beer. I don't normally mingle, but this is a long-standing tradition. Missing it would spark gossip.

Not acceptable.

If there's one thing Gramps has drilled into me over the years, it's to avoid drawing attention to our family.

I can't disrespect Gramps. But I can't ignore my instincts either, and every cell in my body is urging me to go still and let my senses take over. Breathe shallow, look around, listen. Smell. Be totally aware of my surroundings. It's what helps me hone in on the Trespassers, and it's kept me safe since my first Shift. I rely on it to protect the Boundary.

And, of course, to stay alive.

I try ignoring it. The tingles only get stronger. I put my hand on the back of my neck and rub it casually, like I'm working out a kink. In reality, I'm checking the little hairs. They're getting stiff and bristly, the way they would in my non-human form—only there'd be a whole lot more of them, sticking straight up from my neck and shoulders. Making me look bigger. Letting my enemies know exactly what they were dealing with.

But there are no enemies here. Just clueless, warm-blooded humans. A group of them are huddled around me, laughing about something. I paste on a smile and go along with it. Like everything is fine and the back of my neck isn't turning into something that resembles a frightened porcupine.

My thoughts, though, are racing. Am I in danger? Are we all? I don't know. The likelihood of a Trespasser attacking a crowd this size is small. They prefer solitary prey. But it's possible one of them is lurking in the trees, waiting for someone to wander off. A guy needing to take a piss, a couple aching to make out. It won't take long the way everyone's drinking. Sooner or later, one of these idiots will sneak away.

Question is, will they come back?

Sipping my beer, I shift my weight to one leg and look around. The air blowing off Rigsby Lake is chilly, but that hasn't put a damper on the crowd. A bonfire crackles wildly near the shore. Someone's setting out food on a row of card tables, rickety in the sand. All around me are wide, beaming grins and hearty shouts of laughter. My graduating class is euphoric. Our school year's almost up. A couple more months and we'll be free to go our own way.

Well, most of us.

I won't be heading off to college anytime soon. Gramps has made it clear that my place is here, with the Wakefield pack, and nothing my dad says will change his mind. Alpha rules and all that. And because my younger brother is disabled, I can't rely on him to take my place.

Nope. I'm pretty much stuck here, doomed to live out my double life in this backwater Missouri town where nothing exciting ever happens and the local drug ring has the sheriff in their back pocket. I'll end up working for my dad at the local mill.

And, if the Universe is kind, settling down with a girl who can keep her mouth shut and tolerate the smell of wet dog.

A light breeze hits me. Cool and refreshing. I breathe it in, trying to pick up the scents it carries, see if there's a trace of Trespasser. They give off a distinct odor: a cold, metallic decay that makes me equally angry and nauseous. I can pick it up a mile off in my current form and triple that when I wolf out.

But there's no decay. All I get is sweat, alcohol, and wood smoke, along with a hint of the witchy-woo coming off Madison Grey. She's standing across from me with a cup of beer in her hand and her barely detectable eyebrows raised. Somehow she can always tell when I'm nervous.

She backs up a few steps, gestures at me with a subtle head tilt, and starts for the ugly old sycamore half-hanging over the water.

I hesitate. Not because she's a witch, but because her ice blonde hair and curves have been stirring up my dreams for months. I'm pretty sure the same goes for most guys here. Madison is drop-dead gorgeous and chock-full of brains. In short, irresistible. She's one of those girls you know you can't have, but want anyway.

I'm trying not to think of her like that. Romantic involvement with keepers of deep magick is forbidden to my species, and there's no use feeding my desire for something that can't happen. But the dreams have weakened my resolve. It's easy enough to avoid her at school.

A little harder when she's *waving* at me to join her.

I go around my circle of friends and walk over to her. She's standing beside a huge chunk of gnarled driftwood a few yards from the sycamore. Her witchy vibe gets stronger as I come close. Strong enough to feel the magick coming off her incredible body. I wonder uneasily if people are noticing us, maybe speculating about why

we're talking alone. We can't be classified as a couple. If even a hint of that gets back to Gramps, I'm in for another long and boring stay-away-from-Madison lecture.

She doesn't seem to care what anyone's thinking. She just looks up at me with her enormous eyes, the same grayish-blue as the Rigsby on an overcast day, and blinks in concern. Her lips part. When she speaks, her voice is soft and trebled, like a songbird's.

"You okay, Jayce?"

Not really. My neck is tingling like crazy now. I can't tell where the danger's coming from, but moving away from the crowd has made it more intense. Couple that with Madison's effect on me and I feel overwhelmed, like being caught in a sudden storm.

I give her the only answer that isn't a lie. "I don't know."

"You were looking funny back there. Like, on edge."

On edge doesn't really cover it. My instincts, which have been alerting me to the presence of Trespassers for years, are trying to warn me. But I'm not picking up any scent.

It's got me baffled.

"I just . . . had a weird feeling," I admit.

"Okay." She says it cautiously, knowing I'm able to pick up on things she can't. Her ability to detect the supernatural is good, but doesn't hold a candle to my canine sensitivity. "What kind of feeling?"

I can't describe it. There aren't adequate words for the way I sense danger. It's sort of the way a dog would, but deeper. It has something to do with the magick that comes from the earth. I'm connected to it. My whole pack is, and though it speaks to us, the language isn't verbal.

So I keep it simple. "Like I'm being watched."

“Well, you *are* in a crowd,” Madison points out, as if the most obvious reason hasn’t occurred to me. “That’s not exactly your norm. You should expect some curious looks.”

She’s not wrong. I’m kind of a hermit. No football games, no wrestling matches or basketball tournaments. I don’t participate in anything. Not by choice, as some might think. My situation demands it. More importantly, Gramps forbids it. Emotions can easily trigger a Shift, he says. Until my inner beast is fully under control, I can’t risk exposing my family’s secret.

But this feeling has nothing to do with my antisocial behavior. “It’s not the crowd,” I tell her, rubbing the back of my neck. The hairs practically poke through my fingers. Not a good sign. If this keeps up, my body will take over. “I’m sensing something else.”

Her eyebrows shoot skyward. They’re so pale they almost disappear into her now-wrinkly forehead. “A Trespasser?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not catching their scent. You feel anything?”

“No. But I can check it out.”

Unzipping her coat, she reaches for her heart-shaped onyx pendant. A talisman of some kind. I’ve never seen her without it. Even when we were kids, chasing each other around the playground, it flopped at her chest. I wonder briefly if she showers with it—then banish the thought before it gets me worked up.

She wraps her fingers around the onyx. Her eyelids flutter closed, her lips pursing as she chants something beneath her breath. Latin, probably. It’s as close to the language of nature as you can get, and it’s powerful. Magnetic. As her spell gathers momentum, it calls to me.

Stirs up things I shouldn’t be feeling.

I fight the urge to step closer. Damn witchy-woo. It’s a double-edged sword, the one reason I can’t have her and the very thing that

most attracts me to her. Especially now. She's so tempting, standing there with her shiny hair and pink lips, all perfumed with magick. It eats at me that I'll never be able to do anything about it.

Another cool breeze blows by. I drink it in, grateful for the distraction, inhaling deeply. Still no decay. I sniff again to be sure. There's a little bit of bird smell mixed in with the tangy, sweet-sour odor of the sycamore, but that's nothing to—

A shrill cry rips through the air.

Madison's eyes pop open. Above us comes a crash of rustling leaves and wings, and we jerk our heads up as a raven bursts from the tree. Swooping over us, it tears off into the night, screaming like crazy.

We look at each other, startled.

Then she laughs—sweet, bubbly laughter that eases the tension. It's infectious. I start laughing with her, eager to shake off the intensity of her spell, then realize the tingling's stopped. I feel along the back of my neck. The hairs are soft now, downy against my skin.

I sniff, check the crowd, and sniff again.

Something's changed.

I'm no longer being watched.

CHAPTER 2

“You’ve been drinking.”

Dad’s comment, delivered from his position at the kitchen stove, is casual rather than accusatory. I shuck my jacket and toss it on the living room sofa in silence. There’s no use arguing with him. He could smell alcohol on me as soon as I hit the front porch.

Just like I could smell his cooking from the driveway. It’s got my stomach rumbling. I passed on the carb-heavy stuff at the party and am paying for it. My mouth waters at the smell. Heading into the kitchen, I scoop up a handful of the bacon he’s cooling on layers of paper towels.

“How was the party?”

I shrug. “Eh.”

“That good?” He transfers cooked bacon to the bare spot I created and adds raw pieces to the skillet. They sizzle furiously as they hit the hot grease. Reducing the flame, he steps back and waits for the fat to quit popping. “As I recall, the spring thaw parties can get pretty wild.”

“Maybe in your day.” I chow down on a strip of bacon, eyeing the apron around his waist. It’s one of my mom’s, all pastel and frills, but doesn’t make him look any less masculine. He’s built like a pro wrestler: tree-trunk neck, massive chest, biceps bulging through his sleeves. His short hair is thick and brown, his beard closely trimmed. We actually look a lot alike. I wear my hair longer, just because I can, but most of my appearance comes from him.

The rest comes from my werewolf gene.

“Gramps up?” I ask.

“Nah.” Dad leans back against the butcher-block table crammed in the middle of our already too-crowded kitchen. “He turned in early. Wasn’t feeling well.”

A tremor of anxiety hits me. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired. He’ll be up soon, though.” Dad smiles through his beard. “Call of nature.”

I smile back. Anyone else would think that meant a trip to the bathroom, but in our case, a call of nature is literal. Like our canine relatives, slumber comes in short bursts. We never sleep through the night.

“Did you need him for something?” Dad asks.

I mumble through more bacon, “It can wait.”

Not too long, I hope. The strange feeling I had at the party is bothering me. It came on fast, hit hard, and left without warning, leaving no trace of origin. That’s not typical. Then again, I’m not up to speed on all things werewolf.

Gramps will know what it means.

Swallowing the rest of my bacon whole, I grab a glass from the dish drainer and fill it from the faucet. I’m not supposed to do that—swallow without chewing. It doesn’t hurt me, but it’s a sign of what I am. People get weirded out when they see it. Dad’s made me promise not to do it in public. Here, though, it’s the quickest route to easing my hunger.

“Open the window, will you, Jayce?” Dad is back at the stove, turning the bacon, and the kitchen’s getting thick with smoke. Draining my glass, I set it aside so I can raise the window.

Crisp, clean air from the Starling drifts in. I rest my hands on the edge of the sink and take a good whiff. The smell of the woods in spring is familiar: budding trees, undergrowth, grass pushing

through wet soil. Rodents. Nocturnal birds. Foraging deer and damp moss. It's refreshing. Breathing it in comforts me.

I glance out the mesh screen. The edge of the woods backs up to our property, the tree line a good fifty yards off. But I see it perfectly. My wolf-sight works even in human form. I spy a snowy owl perched in an elm, peering back at me with its golden eyes. It heard the window open and is checking me out.

Our gazes lock in contest.

My dad turns from the stove. I hear him rather than see him, but I know he's facing me. "Something out there?"

"Just Boo. He's staring at me."

Dad pauses. "You're staring back, aren't you?"

"I'm going to win this time."

"Won't happen."

"Dad, I can do this."

"Keep telling yourself that." Chuckling, Dad goes back to his bacon while I maintain eye contact with Boo, trying to stay focused. He's an expert, but I'm determined. I will beat him at this game. Master him. One of these days, he'll be the first to look away.

We've been at this since I was twelve. It started after my first Shift, when I caught him watching me change back into human form. Dad was there with me, deep in the heart of the Starling, helping me through it. As if anything could help. I thought I knew pain. I was wrong.

I remember the second my body went back to normal. The panic, the disorientation, the urge to cry, scream—or both. The way I flipped onto my back with a gasp of sheer agony, staring at the treetops, wondering if I was about to die.

That's when I saw Boo.

He wasn't afraid. He simply looked down at me from his lofty perch, taking in my naked, trembling body with wise eyes. Eyes that had seen that kind of thing before. Seen . . . and understood.

Somehow, we connected. I focused on those eyes with all my strength, using them to ground myself, to come back to reality. He reached me in a way Dad couldn't, and I'll never forget it. Him looking at me. Me looking at him. Two creatures of the night staring each other down.

It's been a thing with us ever since.

As I'm engaging Boo in stare-battle, I hear someone enter the living room. Gramps. I know by his scent and the slow, measured shuffle of his house slippers on the planked flooring. Painfully slow. A little ache tugs at my heart as he comes into the kitchen.

He stops, and I listen for the inevitable scrape of a kitchen barstool being pulled away from the table. It doesn't come. He's probably wondering what has my attention. When a werewolf fixes its gaze on something and doesn't move, it's either curious or alarmed.

Seconds tick by before he figures it out. A barstool inches across the linoleum, then creaks. His slippers softly touch the footrest. I hear hot water pouring from the carafe on the table. Smell chamomile tea from the bag he drops in.

As it steeps, he says, "My money's on the owl."

I just smile. Gramps knows all about me and Boo. When I told him what happened after my Shift, he was intrigued. The owl and the wolf are legends in the spirit world, he said. Nature's fiercest predators. They don't bond very often. But when they do, they make powerful allies.

I'm not sure if Boo considers me an ally. He's glaring at me pretty hard, head down, the tops of his eyes slanted toward his beak. He

looks intense. More so than usual. I brush it off as competitive drive and stare back at him.

Behind me, Dad flips bacon while razzing Gramps about his poor medicine-taking skills. “You need to be more careful. This isn’t a hit-or-miss scenario. It’s important not to skip a dose.”

“I don’t skip doses,” Gramps mutters.

“You sure about that? Because Meg counted your pills before she went to bed, and there were a lot more in the bottle than there should have been.”

Gramps utters a grunt. “So I’m a little forgetful. But I don’t skip.” He takes a long, loud slurp of tea. “Not on purpose.”

“Maybe you should let her help you. Have her bring you the dose instead of trying to remember on your own. We need you strong.”

“I’m fine, Sam,” Gramps says, all confidence. He doesn’t think anything’s seriously wrong with him, though Doc Bennett—the only physician our pack trusts—would disagree. “Besides, Meg has her hands full with Jordan. She doesn’t need to waste time on me.”

“Waste?” Dad’s spatula clanks against the skillet, and I hear him spin. I don’t have to see him to know how he feels; frustration seeps from his pores. “How can you say that? You’re Jordy’s only protection.”

“Not true. We’re all protecting him.”

“Okay, but you’re our Alpha. The Clan trusts you, not me. Not after what I did. And you *know* what they’ll ask me to do when you’re gone.”

A light thud tells me that Gramps set his mug down. “When I’m gone, you’ll take over. You’ll make it right with them.”

“How?”

“You know how.”

Silence fills the kitchen. Not a good silence either. I've heard this argument a dozen times, and it always ends the same way, with Dad angry and Gramps resolute. Mom usually intervenes. She's our negotiator, the voice of reason in a houseful of unreasonable logic. But she's not awake. She's upstairs, getting the rest she needs to take care of Jordy.

Leaving me to referee.

I really don't want to. For one thing, I can't be neutral. I'm on Dad's side and don't agree at all with Gramps. For another, it will piss me off. The thought of losing Jordy is already getting me irritated. If I join the debate, I'll just end up yelling, and Gramps doesn't need that right now.

Dad breaks the silence. "I won't do it."

"Won't?" Gramps challenges him. "Or can't? Being Alpha means taking care of your responsibilities. You've already backed down from one. What about the rest? Will you be able to handle them?"

"This isn't about responsibility. It's about my son."

"Your son *is* your responsibility." Gramps heaves himself off the barstool with a groan. Another not-so-good thing. Standing up means he's exerting his authority. "I stepped in for you, Sam. It weakened my standing with the Clan, and it'll be up to you to regain that standing."

"I'll find another way."

Gramps's voice turns hard. "There is no other way."

My fingers clutch the sides of the sink. Anger simmers in my gut, and I focus on Boo, on the game we're playing. He still has that intense look. His eyes penetrate the darkness like the high beams on my battered truck. Maybe he's picking up on the tension. I'm on edge now, like I was at the party, and maybe he can sense that.

"I won't," Dad says sternly.

Gramps raises his voice. “You’ll *have* to.”

Time to jump in. If I don’t, they’ll get loud and wake Mom. She’ll come down to stop them, and it’ll be hours before she gets back to sleep. Trying to think of something to say, I’m getting ready to turn around—and lose yet another staring contest—when Boo blinks.

That’s a first. He never blinks when we’re stare-battling. But he just did, and then he blinks again. His feathers ruffle. He jerks his head up, eyes going from slanted to wide. Agitated, he shuffles from one side of his branch to the other.

There’s only one reason he does that.

Fear.

“Uh, Dad,” I say.

“Not now, Jayce.”

“I think we have a—”

The scent drifting in negates my need to finish. We know immediately that we have a problem. One that smells like blood and death and is coming from our side of the Boundary.

Gramps growls low in his throat. He projects a wolf-thought, shooting it deep into my brain. Dad’s too. The three of us connect as one, our minds linking instantly, bonded by the message:

Trespasser.

CHAPTER 3

Dad's spatula clatters to the floor.

I spin on my heel and find him ripping off the frilly apron. As he works frantically at his shirt buttons, Gramps heads for the phone. They don't squabble; the threat we now face overshadows all topics of conversation.

I grab the hem of my T-shirt with both hands and tug. There's the brief smell of beer—some got sloshed on me at the party—before I get it over my head. The shirt quickly joins Dad's abandoned spatula. I kick my shoes off and am balancing on one foot, prying at a stubborn sock, when a cry rings out upstairs.

We all look up. At the same time, mad confusion suffocates our mental link. Dad stops undressing with a wince, and I lose my balance. Down on my ass I go, gripping my head with both hands.

"Block it," Dad says, "the way I taught you."

I picture a gate in my mind. A mighty one, fifty feet high and ten feet thick, all cold rolled steel. One not even Hercules could get through. I slam it down on the link, shut out the chaos, and look over at Gramps.

Who, of course, is fine. He's been filtering mind chatter his whole life and knows how to handle it. Pausing his phone conversation, he thrusts a meaty finger at me. "Get him in the shed."

I nod, and my last sock comes off. Racing through the living room, I head up the creaky wooden staircase, taking the steps two at a time until I reach the second floor. Nothing but bedrooms up here. Mom's already out of hers, jolted awake by Jordy's cry.

I catch up with her at his door. Her slick brown hair falls across her face as she looks up at me, a familiar question burning in her eyes. My answer is the one she dreads most: "Tranquilizer."

She says nothing. Her expression goes blank, a reaction stemming from years of living with the secrets of the pack. But the word gets her moving down the hall. Back to her room, where she'll prep the injection we're going to need—and soon, judging by the commotion I hear behind Jordy's door.

I flip the deadbolt and dart inside. Moonlight filters through the barred windows, throwing silver beams across the long-bodied wiener dog crouched beside the bed, yipping. Her barks pierce the air like bullets. I cringe at the assault on my eardrums.

"Take it easy, Pip," I say, moving toward the lump thrashing under the covers. Between the mental link and Pip's barking, Jordy's a wreck. He rolls back and forth in agony, his hands on either side of his head like I was doing in the kitchen.

I stop at the edge of his bed. "Jordy."

He hoots in response.

"Jordy, it's me."

Another hoot.

"Hey." I punch the mattress to get his attention.

He stops rolling. Registers my presence without looking at me.

"It's shed time, buddy," I say.

Jordy's eyes go from panicked to semi-clarity. Though he doesn't speak, his receptive language is spot on, and my words get through. He knows what I mean. He knows we have to go.

Unfortunately, he also knows what comes next.

His hands ball into fists as I scoop him up, covers and all. Only twelve, he hasn't grown into the Wakefield stature, but he's still heavy. He packs a punch too. I take a hit to my neck as I carry him to the door.

Getting down the hallway is a challenge. Jordy can't stand being touched. He flops like a hooked fish, and since my hands are full, all

I can do is turn my head to avoid his fists. Pip races after us, yapping with all her crazy, mini-dachshund might.

I growl at her to shut up. She growls back, then goes thankfully quiet. The only sound now is Jordy hooting in protest. It's deeper than it was before. Not good. He lashes out again, and this time I feel the sting of claws against my cheek.

"Shit," I mutter. He does it again, but I'm able to evade. "Mom?" I call out. "Is it ready?"

She steps out of her room and into the darkness. Flipping on the light would send Jordy into even greater turmoil, so she's using a flashlight. She tucks it under her arm as I come close.

"I need his shoulder," she says.

I pivot so she can get to his upper body. But his claws are fully extended now. He takes a swipe at Mom, who flinches out of the way. I drop his legs and go for his flailing wrists. My grip is firmer than I intend—he howls in pain, and my wolf-hearing picks up a soft crunch. Damn it.

He's starting to Shift.

"Hurry," I say.

Mom shoves Jordy's sleeve up and jams the needle into his flesh. He howls again—an urgent, primal sound that makes my heart race. The call of a pack member in distress. A brother in trouble, needing help.

My body instantly responds. Blood rushes through my veins, pounds in my ears, and heats up my face. Thuds deep in my heart. My fingers and toes start to elongate—painfully—and claws inch through my skin.

Closing my eyes, I fight it.

Over the mind link, Gramps and Dad sense my struggle and come to my aid. Their thoughts hit my brain, words tumbling over one

another like stones rolling downhill. Dad telling me to hold on. Gramps urging me to stay strong. I can't filter them all.

A gasp erupts from my throat.

Mom puts her hand on my arm. Her touch is soft and cool, and I smell the fragrance she added to her nightly bath. Lavender. I force myself to concentrate on it, breathe it in deep. The scent relaxes me. My heart slows a little, and my claws retract. I sigh in relief.

Then Jordy's body goes still.

"He's out," Mom says quietly.

I catch him as he starts to slide from my grip. Scooping him into my arms, I give Mom a nod of thanks. She smiles faintly without saying anything. Offering silent support is her way. Which bothers me, because it didn't used to be. She grew into it, first by keeping quiet about our way of life, then by raising a non-verbal child.

Guilt chews at me as I carry Jordy down the stairs. Every time this happens, I see the pain in her eyes. Sense it in her heart. She chose this role and never complains about the sacrifices she makes.

But I know they hurt her.

She follows me downstairs with Pip in her arms. Gramps is out on the front porch, waiting. Dad is at the back door in his boxers. He holds it open for me, then Mom, and rushes ahead of us to unlock the shed.

I hurry toward it, damp grass crunching under my feet. The cool air feels good, a balm against my hot skin and the steaming bundle of dead weight in my arms. Once a Shift starts, it's impossible to stop, and Jordy's already burning through the trunk. He won't be out for long.

The shed door creaks as Dad swings it open. Heaving Jordy inside, I lay him on the dirt floor and peel off his covers. Heat rises from his body as I strip him down. I check his pulse—steady—and roll him

onto his stomach, turning his face to one side. Balling up his sheets and clothing, I race outside and hand them to Mom.

She takes them in numb silence. The shed door closes with a bang, but she doesn't flinch. She just turns and walks back to the house, Pip at her heels. My heart aches for her. She shouldn't have to do this. Her life shouldn't include leaving her disabled son naked in the dirt, alone, with a Shift coming and nothing to ease his pain.

"Jayce. It's time."

The strain in my dad's voice knocks me back to reality. He's kneeling beside the shed, fully undressed, his back arched. He groans, and I know what I have to do.

My heart pounds.

I shed the last of my clothing, then drop to my hands and knees. The wild thump of my heart initiates the process. Blood races through my body, activating the gene that jump-starts my transformation. Every inch of my skin tingles, itches, thickens.

Burns.

Fine brown hair sprouts from my body. Claws extract from my fingers and toes. There's a sharp pain in my ears as they widen and extend into points. The cartilage in my nose bellows out. Elongates. Makes it hard to breathe. I open my mouth and suck in a lungful of cool air.

The exterior is done.

Now for the hellish part.

My back arches. I cry out as the bones in my spine crack. They start at the top of my neck and work their way down, breaking. Reforming. My tailbone fills out. It lengthens, piercing my skin, and I yelp. Dig my hands and knees into the grass.

Groan. Sweat profusely.

Muscles knot and twist. My body hitches as each bone in my ribcage expands, creating a chest cavity with room for bigger, stronger lungs. Arm bones break. Then the ones in my legs. They reshape, curving into limbs that can run like the wind. My hands and feet lengthen, my heels push up. Snout extends.

Almost there.

The morphing of my internal organs is excruciating. Liver, lungs, stomach, eyes—they go from human to canine in seconds. In those seconds, I can't move or breathe. Time stops. The world blurs.

My existence reduces to one blinding pinpoint of pain.

I come out of it with a snort. Shake out my body and look around. The yard is different, ripe with colors I didn't see before and smells that weren't as strong. My ears twitch as they pick up the sound of an approaching vehicle. Dad is already loping for the house. I test my muscles, find them strong, and follow him.

We stop at the porch. Gramps is there, waiting on the truck that careens to a halt in the driveway. Two husky males—my uncle and cousin—jump out and race for us. They shuck their clothes.

Drop to the ground.

As they Shift, my wolf-eyes scan the trees for Boo. He's always around for the hunt, and we understand each other better when I'm like this. Spying him in the tree line, I chuff softly at him. He hoots back a reply. He's ready.

So are we.

Gramps projects a wolf-thought to bring us close. He sniffs the air, and we do the same. The smell of the Trespasser is still there. Dark and menacing. Something lurks in the Starling, a territory long forbidden to those who drink blood to survive. My pack growls in unison. For us, this is more than just a threat.

It's an insult.

Tipping back his head, Gramps draws a deep breath. He expels it in one long, drawn-out howl. A howl that pierces the night, uniting us as a pack and sending a message to our enemy. *We know you're out there*, it says. *You're not welcome here*.

Dad sprints for the woods. We follow in pack hierarchy—my uncle, then me, and my cousin last. Our minds link, connecting mentally to each other and Gramps.

As we break through the tree line, our Alpha howls again. One last time. A message to the creature roaming our hallowed ground. *We're coming for you*.

CHAPTER 4

We are fluid streaks of fur against the night.

Dad blazes our trail. His paws hit the ground with heavy thuds as he shoots through the woods, dodging limbs and undergrowth, choosing the path of least resistance. There are many miles standing between us and our prey. He wants to get there fast.

My uncle is close behind him, head down, legs pumping. Bits of dirt fly up from his paws. They shower my face, and I slow down a little. Behind me, Aiden slows too. He doesn't have much choice. This part of the Starling is so thick we have to run single file.

Scents come to me as I gallop. The same ones I detected in the kitchen, only sharper. My sense of smell is stronger now. I make out squirrels nesting overhead. A stag was here recently, rubbing the trees. There's a rabbit nearby. I even smell Boo flying above us.

Mostly I smell Uncle Scott's hindquarters.

We race through the trees, the lingering trace of Trespasser our only guide. The position of the moon—peering faintly through the branches—tells me we're heading east. If we keep going this direction, we'll end up near the Rigsby. Close to the party cove.

Interesting.

Maybe what I felt earlier wasn't random.

Five or so miles into the woods, Dad stops us at a clearing. He emerges into the open space and sniffs, then motions to us with his snout. We huddle up to regroup and catch our breath, which plumes from our nostrils as we wait on Dad for a plan.

He sniffs again, his sable fur ruffling in the breeze. As wolves, we're the same color as our human hair. Dad and I are both dark brown. Uncle Scott is a lighter version of us, and Aiden's the color

of Mom's morning toast. Gramps—if the doc gave him permission to Shift—would be a rich shade of copper mixed with gray.

I miss patrolling with Gramps. The last time was a few years back, before his heart weakened. He took me to the Boundary and then, for the first time as wolves, beyond it. We snuck out of the Starling and into bloodsucker territory. An area ruled by the Rothchilds. He wanted me to know where they lived, what they did to people on unprotected land.

Show me what we were up against.

East. Dad's wolf-thought pushes across our link. *Near the lake.*

Uncle Scott cocks his head. *Split up?*

Not yet. Soon. Dad trots to the middle of the clearing and lifts his nose to the breeze. As he does, Aiden nudges my flank with his snout. He leaps back playfully, crouching. I take the bait and lunge at him. Knock him off his feet. We roll around a bit, snapping, until Uncle Scott stops us with a growl.

Rising, we shake off our tussle. But I see the grin in Aiden's eyes. He's more pup than adult and likes to play. He comes close, rubbing my flank, then drapes his head over my shoulders. His wolf-thought hits me.

Pair up, you and me?

I push him away and bare my teeth. He knows better. When we split up, I'll go with my dad and he'll stick by his. He hasn't hunted enough times to know what he's doing. He could put me in danger.

Not that I haven't killed before. I have, and the memory sends a dark chill of pleasure through me. Stalking, leaping, biting. The fear in my enemy's eyes as I tear into its throat. Taste its flesh, its life-blood. No matter that the blood belongs to someone else. It's stolen property.

There's no greater thrill than slaughtering the thief who took it.

My excitement rings through the link. Aiden trots in place, and my uncle lopes eagerly in Dad's direction. We want to go—now—end this before the Trespasser crosses safely into its own territory.

Dad catches the scent and takes off in a run. Spurred by his action, we go after him, blurs in the moonlight. The rustle of wings overhead tells me Boo is with us. I don't worry about his presence. He won't hoot or screech or anything else to alert our prey. He's a watcher, a keeper of secrets. His job is to observe.

I sense his eyes on me as we exit the clearing. We're back in the trees again, skirting them with ease, our powerful legs pushing us forward. The cold, metallic smell is stronger here, and my heart races. We're close now. So close. I can feel it.

Veering a little, we move downwind, and Dad gives the signal. We break off—Uncle Scott and Aiden darting to the left while I angle to the right, following my dad. I know this plan well. We'll circle through the woods and come back together.

Cut off the monster.

The smell intensifies. I stay behind Dad until he begins to slow, then draw up next to him. We lope side by side through the trees, eyes on alert for movement. There's little of that now. Our presence has scattered most natural creatures into hiding.

But not the unnatural creature we're hunting. Dad sees it first, stops, and backpedals. I follow suit, trying not to gag on the stench. We go still and watch. Wait for the others to appear.

Until then, our eyes are locked on the Trespasser.

The thing is crouched, its back to us—a slender, fully clothed back with a mound of smooth blond hair on top. It's dressed like a teenager: T-shirt, ripped jeans, sneakers. Trying to blend in and avoid detection.

Its human appearance doesn't fool us. Aside from the god-awful smell, it doesn't move quite right. I see the cat-like way it flexes, the quick, furtive movements as it feeds. My ears pivot forward, picking up deep grunts and swallows. It's completely absorbed.

Fully into its kill.

I can't help but feel sorry for the victim. Was it a stranger, camping alone? Someone out for a hike? It can't be a hunter—the Starling is off limits to them. Maybe it's another teenager, enticed by the Trespasser's mysterious charm, then lured into the woods with the promise of intimacy, alcohol, or drugs.

Drugs would be my first guess. Use is rampant around here, thanks to our friendly neighborhood sheriff looking the other way, and both the Rothchild and Calder covens use that to their advantage. A dulled mind is easier to entice. Makes for a more convenient feed.

A surge of anger rises up, and I growl. It's low, just under my breath, but enough to alert the Trespasser. Pausing, it jerks its head up and looks around. I get a glimpse of its profile in the dark. Just as I suspected, it's young. Newly turned, probably, and not used to being hunted.

It goes back to feeding, and Dad smacks me with his snout. I shouldn't have growled. These things move fast, and if recently turned, even faster. We don't want it bolting. He glares a stern warning at me.

My muzzle smarts as I glance away, my gaze wandering past tree clusters to the dark stretch of water beyond. The Rigby is close, maybe a quarter mile from here. I can see the shore of the party cove, its sandy surface pale under the moon.

A slim form is standing there.

Curious, I stretch my head forward. A wolf's eyes are better for seeing movement than details, and it's hard to catch identifying markers. Looks like a human. The hair is long, swept around by the breeze, and very dark. A girl?

Alarmed, I turn back to the feed and project an image of the lone figure across our link. The others need to know. A nearby human presents a problem if the Trespasser tries to flee—

A twig snaps.

The creature before us looks up. Releasing its kill, it rises slowly and wipes the blood from its mouth. It's wary now. It can't smell the way we can, but its feline eyes see better in the dark—they dart around wildly, looking for danger.

A breeze brings in the musky smell of wolf. Dad crouches low, and so do I. On the other side of the feeding spot, two sets of yellow eyes glow in the darkness. Glancing over, the Trespasser sees them.

Hissing, it recoils.

Dad's wolf-thought explodes across the link. *Now!*

He and Uncle Scott spring first. They rocket through the air and hit the creature from opposite sides, going for its throat. It darts forward, knocking them aside—jeez, it's fast—but Dad leaps and seizes it by the neck. They go down. I see him clinging to it, his jaws locked tight. He gives it a vicious shake.

Uncle Scott recovers and moves in, avoiding the fierce thrash of the creature's hands. Which is smart—one ill-timed swipe of those claws could tear him open. He waits, then advances. Gets hold of a wrist.

Leaping in, I aim for the other wrist. I catch it between my jaws and bear down with a thousand pounds of wolf-pressure. Our prey is screaming now. A high-pitched squeal that makes my ears ring.

Aiden's turn. We have the thing under control, immobilized, and he needs the practice. He races forward and stops. Assesses. Goes straight for the gut. His teeth tear in, ripping through fabric and skin. He pulls back, sees his work isn't done, and dives in again. Only when intestines bubble up around his snout does he back off.

We have it.

My dad clenches his jaws. A loud crack rings through the air, and he lets go. Moving back, he gestures for the rest of us to do the same. Our prey is still alive, but its neck is broken. It can't move or speak. It lays there in a pitiful torn heap, lips peeled back, fangs bared in futility. We crouch, tense, as Dad glances around at us.

His eyes land on me. He nods.

I don't hesitate. Full of rage and adrenaline, I spring forward and sink my teeth into the Trespasser's throat. Feel its windpipe crush between my teeth, taste innocent blood in my mouth. I enjoy a moment of intense pleasure before bearing down. Then I pull as hard as I can—hear a nasty ripping sound—and leap back.

Standing there, the throat of my enemy in my mouth, is a crowning moment for me. I feel it burn its way into my brain, a memory that will surface again and again as I patrol. It will serve as a reminder, a reason for staying sharp and keeping my guard up.

Keeping pack territory safe.

My dad chuffs quietly. His eyes shine with pride while Uncle Scott yips his support and Aiden does a little wolf-dance in the dirt. Above us, Boo lets out a hoot. Holding my prize, I bask in their approval. The times of regret, of feeling stuck here, fade away. This is what I was born to do.

This is who I am.

Our mind link shivers. It's Gramps. He can't project at this distance, but he can make us aware of his presence. The shiver means he wants to know what's going on, if we're okay.

Dad tips back his head to reply. His howl shatters the silence, joined quickly by similar howls from the others. Dropping my prize, I raise my blood-flecked snout to the tree canopy. Close my eyes, open my throat.

And howl in triumph.

CHAPTER 5

The raven whispers to me.

Perched in the ugly sycamore, it's barely visible through the screen of leaves. I walk to it and look up in confusion. How is it talking? Birds can't do that. But this one can. It opens its beak, black and sharp under riveting blue eyes, and whispers again.

"They're coming."

I jolt awake in the middle of the living room. What the hell? Why am I dreaming about a talking bird? Never done that before, and I don't like it at all. I decide not to think about it.

That raven was . . . creepy.

As I sit up, the real world greets me in vivid detail. Dawn peeks through the windows. Above me is the high-beamed vaulted ceiling; beneath me, the bearskin rug Gramps inherited from his father. The warm weight of Aiden's leg rests on my shin. Dad's sprawled across the couch, his arm dangling off, and one of the armchairs holds Uncle Scott.

We're all in our underwear. Shifting raises our temps, and they stay high long after we're back in human form. Even when it drops, we're unusually warm. Which is why I didn't bother dressing Jordy last night.

He was asleep in the shed when we got back. Lifting him out of the dirt, I ignored the fresh scratches on the walls and took him upstairs naked. Pip wanted him—she'll curl up next to anything hot—so I put her beside him and ran back downstairs to revel in pack victory.

I push Aiden's leg off me and yawn. We were up pretty late giving Gramps the details of the hunt. He always wants them, always bombards us with questions. Was the Trespasser young? Old?

Newly turned? How far past the Boundary did it get? Were any humans killed? And, as usual: What coven was it from?

Dad knew. I can't tell the difference between Rothchild and Calder, but he's killed more of them than I have. It was definitely a Rothchild, he told Gramps. Their flesh carries the scent of the North, an icy region they inhabited before the human population dwindled and forced them to migrate.

The Calders are older. From the Far East, wherever that is. All I know is it's across the ocean. They came here by ship, landed on the California coast, and spread from there.

Those are the only covens that bother us. Gramps says there used to be another—the Starlings—but they got wiped out. We had some sort of pact with them. A protection treaty. There was peace between us until they broke it, so we killed them. All that's left of them is the name they gave our woods.

Yawning again, I get to my feet and stumble to the kitchen. Mom's making breakfast, a huge one by the looks of it. Eggs, bacon, pancakes. Enough to feed an army, and this crew will eat like one. We're always starving after a hunt.

"Morning," she says.

I mumble something on my way out the back door. The air is fresh and cool, exhilarating as I walk past Jordy's shed and find privacy to relieve myself. Not because I'm too lazy to deal with a bathroom. There's just no sense using a toilet when you have territory to mark.

Aiden comes outside as I'm heading back. His eyes are crusty and his toast-colored hair's messed up, but he gives me a grin and fist bump as he passes. I merely grunt out a greeting. He's a morning person, bright-eyed and chipper the instant he wakes up. I'll need at least two cups of coffee before I can rise to his level.

The carafe is on the butcher-block table, nestled among cups, plates, napkins, and the stack of books Mom is working through. Being at home all the time, they're her only companions besides Pip and Jordy. One is open with a heavy ladle across it to keep the pages still. She glances at it between pancake flips.

I slump onto a barstool and pour myself some coffee. The first sip is amazing, flooding my sensitive taste buds with the complex mix of light and bold roasts Mom blends for us. I gulp it down fast—the scorching temp doesn't bother me—and am working on a second cup when Gramps shuffles in.

He eases onto the stool next to mine, grabs one of the cups, and then the carafe. His hand wobbles a little as he pours. When I reach out to help, he growls at me, so I back off. Independence is his thing.

He fills his cup and tops mine off for show. "How you feeling?"

"Tired," I say.

He smiles knowingly. "You should have eaten last night."

I shrug, unable to argue. Shifting requires an overwhelming amount of energy that only food can replenish. We all should have eaten. But we were on a high, celebrating our victory, too busy talking ourselves hoarse to think about food. We fell asleep one by one, dreaming of the hunt.

And I woke dreaming of a bird.

"Gramps?"

"Yep."

"You ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"All the time." He slurps his coffee, the rising steam fogging up his glasses. "Why?"

I set my cup down and pivot toward him. He's already dressed for the day, looking rugged in a red flannel shirt and jeans, and smells like soap. "I felt that way last night. At the party."

“One of your friends, maybe? You know how you get in crowds.”

“Yeah, but this was different. Like a Trespasser was nearby. The hairs on the back of my neck went up, and I felt wired. My instincts told me I wasn’t safe.”

“You get a whiff of one?”

“Not a trace.”

“The one you killed last night was in that area,” he says. “You could have been honing in on it.”

“Then why didn’t I smell it?”

Gramps stares into his coffee, thinking. He’s the one with the stories, the knowledge of who and what we are. He got it from his father, who got it from *his* father, back when there were more of us protecting the Boundary. There aren’t as many now, and we’re okay with it. Our reputation keeps most of the bloodsuckers away.

But we need the stories. At least, Gramps thinks we do. He told me that Life is a constant wheel of motion, turned by the hands of Time, and cycles have a way of repeating themselves. Knowing our history keeps us prepared. He started journaling it after his heart diagnosis.

Just in case.

He comes out of the past with a sigh. “I don’t know.”

The way he says it makes me wonder if it’s the truth. There’s reluctance in his tone, like he’s holding something back. But I know better than to press him about it. He’ll just clam up, and then I’ll never get an answer out of him. Better to let him stew on it.

“Madison Grey noticed.”

He perks up at that. “Noticed what?”

“Me,” I say. “She saw me reacting and asked me about it.”

“What did you tell her?” He turns serious, his brown eyes snapping behind his bifocals. “You didn’t say anything about us, did you? Or give her details about our pack?”

“No,” I put in quickly, before he can get angry. “I just told her that I felt funny. I asked if *she* felt anything, and then she started doing a spell, but it got interrupted.”

“By what?” he growls.

“A stupid bird. Sitting in the old sycamore by the cove. It burst out of the branches and streaked off like its tail feathers were on fire.”

His lips part in surprise. “A bird?”

“Yeah, a raven. Scared the hell out of us. Then we started laughing, and after that, the feeling went away.”

“Raven. Hmm.”

Gramps stares at his coffee again. More thoughtful this time. I want to ask what he’s thinking about, but Aiden strolls back inside, all smiles and good-mornings. He’s so cheerful, and I honestly don’t know where he gets it. I wasn’t like that when I was fifteen.

I kind of like it, though. Aiden’s a ray of sunshine raining down on the quiet seriousness the rest of us brood in. He comes up to me and slings his bare arm around my shoulders.

“I’m starving,” he says. “Breakfast ready?”

Mom turns from the stove. “Five minutes.”

“Awesome.” He grins at me and Gramps like an eager young pup ready for its next adventure. The only thing missing is his tongue lolling out. “So what’s the plan for today? Are we patrolling?”

I roll my eyes. I can’t believe he’s forgotten.

“Later.” Gramps drains the last of his coffee in one noisy slurp. “There’s something I want you and Jayce to do first.”

“What?”

Gramps puts his cup down and refills it from the carafe before turning to look at us. His expression is all Alpha, his voice full of authority as he gives Aiden the answer I already know.

“Get rid of the body.”

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