

**One**

When Tori woke me up, I was deep in a dream about Chloe. We were on the bus from Buffalo to Andrew's house, and I'd fallen asleep after showing Chloe the picture I'd drawn of her banishing the zombie in the abandoned house. So that's what I dreamed of. Only it wasn't Derek who'd come to her rescue—it was me.

In my version, I'd woken up first and seen the zombie. Like Derek, I'd tried to wake her up carefully and warn her. Like Derek, I didn't succeed. Pretty hard to tell someone "um, there's a zombie crawling over you" and *not* freak her out. Unlike Derek, I hadn't freaked back, shouting at her to calm down. My brother is a great guy, but subtlety really isn't his thing. I'd done it right—holding her hand and assuring her she could handle it, and I'd stand watch and make sure the thing didn't hurt her.

Together, we banished the zombie. Afterward, she was shaking, and I held her and told her how brave she'd been, and she apologized for screaming, and I said that was okay, I'd been screaming too—on the inside—and that made her laugh, and she leaned toward me and I leaned toward her and—

"Simon." Someone was shaking my shoulder. "Simon, wake up."

I cracked open one eye, praying it was Chloe and knowing it wasn't. There was no mistaking that screech. I saw Tori leaning over the seat and closed my eye again. Maybe if I pretended to be asleep, she'd go bug Derek instead. I had a dream to finish.

"Simon! Come on. This is our stop."

I sighed and opened my eyes. My sketchpad was still open to the picture of Chloe. I looked at it and felt a pang of regret that it *hadn't* been me who'd woken up the other night and come to her rescue. I should have. I would have too, if I wasn't such a sound sleeper.

I stretched and glanced over at the seat beside mine. It was empty.

"Chloe?" I said.

I blinked and peered over the seats. The bus had stopped. It was barely dawn, and most people were sound asleep. When I didn't see Derek's familiar dark head at the back of the bus, I pushed up.

"Where are Derek and Chloe?" I asked.

"Gone."

I looked around. "They got off already?"

"Do you see them?"

"No."

"Then they got off, obviously." Tori bent to squint at her reflection in the window and swiped a hand through her short, dark hair. "God, I look like shit. First stop, a bathroom. I am not going anywhere looking like this."

Someone from the back pushed past her and she turned on him. "Excuse me? Wait your turn."

“If you’re getting off, get off,” the man said. “The bus won’t wait forever, sweetie.”

“I’m not your sweetie.” She fluffed her hair again, then headed down the aisle as she waved me forward. “Come on.”

I grabbed my sketchpad, jacket and backpack. Still half-asleep, I stumbled off the bus. As the doors closed behind me, I peered around the parking lot. It was past dawn, but I didn’t see the sun yet, just gray fog, the street lights barely piercing it.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Who do you think? Derek? Chloe?”

“I don’t know.”

As the bus driver pulled bags from the storage compartment, I walked toward the tiny combination bus depot and snack bar. When I saw the snack bar sign, I smiled. Where there was food, I’d find Derek. Chloe must have gone with him. Good to see them getting along again. I hated it when they argued.

As I walked to the snack bar, I caught a glimpse of two figures along the side of it, nearly hidden in the fog. A tall guy and a short girl. The guy was leaning over her and she was looking up at him and—

The patch of fog lightened and I saw it was two strangers, a man and a kid, a father kissing the girl’s forehead before she headed off on the bus. Not Derek and Chloe.

Good. I mean *not* good, since I still had to find them.

“Oh my God.” Tori’s voice cut through the quiet. “They *locked* the bathroom? When does this dump open?”

She strode over to me. “The bathroom is locked.”

“So I heard.”

“Well, find Derek. He needs to break it.”

“Do you see him? Because I don’t, which means I have no idea where he is. You’re the one who saw them get off the bus. Which way did they go?”

“Who said I saw them get off?”

“What?”

She shifted her bag to her other shoulder. “I said they got off. I didn’t say it was here.” She looked around. “Where is here, anyway?”

I spun back toward the bus. It was pulling away. I ran after it, yelling and waving. The driver didn’t stop.

“So,” Tori said as she walked over to me. “Looks like we need a plan. That bathroom isn’t going to open itself, and I need to wash up.”

**Two**

Okay, seriously?

It's Tori. I just read Simon's so-called account of our "adventure" and I have one word for it: bullshit.

I know he wrote this for that comic book he's doing with Chloe, which means he wanted to make himself look good. But that doesn't mean he has to make me look like a twit. Or maybe it does, because that's the only way he's going to come out of this looking like a hero.

I get the concept of creative license. But when it comes at the expense of my reputation as a reasonably intelligent girl, I draw the line.

So I'm taking over this story. While I don't promise that it will be a completely unbiased account of events, it'll be more accurate than this crap.

Let's start over, shall we?

**Three**

I was half-awake when the bus pulled into the station. I had no idea if it was our stop or not. The driver hadn't said anything and, as I squinted out the window into the gray early morning, I couldn't see a sign.

I rubbed my eyes and looked back to where Derek had been sitting. The seat was empty. I looked forward to Chloe and Simon's seat. Also empty.

"Shit," I mumbled.

Had they gotten off and left me? I wouldn't put it past the guys. Chloe would argue, not because she cared, but because abandoning me would be the wrong thing to do. If she'd been as sleepy as me, they might have been able to bustle her off the bus before she realized I'd been left behind.

I grabbed my bag and hurried down the aisle. As I approached Simon's seat, I saw he wasn't gone, just slumped over, sound asleep and drooling. Okay, maybe not drooling, but with a slack-jawed look that really wasn't attractive.

I shook his shoulder.

"Simon? Wake up," I whispered. Note "whispered" not "screeched." It was six in the morning, on a bus full of sleeping passengers. Even if I'd been awake enough to raise my voice, I know better.

He mumbled something and pushed me away. I stepped aside to let an elderly woman off, then shook Simon's shoulder again.

“Simon! Come on. I think this might be our stop.”

He opened his eyes and turned, not to me, but to the empty seat beside him.

“Chloe?” he mumbled.

Chloe. Always Chloe with him and his brother. I know I sound like a whiny brat when I complain, but I think I have a good reason. I’d just discovered that I was a witch and my mother was a bitch—the murderous kind. I was now on the run with three kids who didn’t want me along.

No matter how hard I tried to keep up and help out, the guys only cared about Chloe. If I ran in front of this bus to push her to safety, they’d race to *her* side to see if she was hurt. Probably give me crap for bruising her when I shoved her out of the way.

Simon looked toward the back of the bus. “Where are Derek and Chloe?”

“Gone. That’s why I’m waking you up.”

“They got off already?”

“I guess so. They aren’t here, and there’s no way they both fit in that bathroom.”

Speaking of bathrooms . . . One look at my reflection in the window told me I was in serious need of one. Not a priority now. I was running my hand through my hair when someone shoved me.

I wheeled on the guy—middle-aged with bad teeth. “Can you say excuse me?”

“If you’re getting off, get off,” the man said. “The bus won’t wait forever, sweetie.”

“I’m not your sweetie.” I moved to let him past, then waved to Simon. “We should go. Come on.”

I watched as Simon stumbled off the bus, yawning and blinking and generally looking idiotic.

No, I've said I'll be less biased, so I will admit here that, at the time, I did not think he looked idiotic. I thought he looked cute, and it pissed me off, because I really wanted to be past that.

Let's get this out of the way. When we were in Lyle House, I thought Simon was the cutest, funniest, nicest guy I'd ever met. I blame the meds. The truth—and I'm gritting my teeth as I admit this—is that Simon *is* cute and funny and nice. He's not the "most" of any of those qualities, but in Lyle House, I'd been going through a lot. I was confused and stressed and bored silly, and I chased Simon because it kept my mind off everything else.

Once I got out, and found out that I wasn't crazy—I was a genetically modified witch—every time Simon crossed my mind, he was followed by another thought: What the hell had I been thinking?

That is not—being honest here—to say that he wasn't someone I might have liked under other circumstances. But I have some pride. Chasing a guy who wanted nothing to do with me is humiliating. If I can't blame the meds, I'll blame temporary self-esteem issues. Either way, I was over Simon by the time we got on that bus, but that didn't stop me from looking at him now and then, and thinking he was cute.

We moved away from the bus. Simon was yawning, struggling to wake up as he peered across the foggy parking lot.

"Where are they?" he asked.

“I don’t know.” I looked around. “There’s a snack bar. Probably restrooms, too. They could be there.”

I walked toward the building. After a few steps, I glanced back. Simon was staring at the driver taking bags off the bus, still doopey from sleep. I continued on.

There was a man and a girl on the other side of the snack bar, and given the sizes, I thought it might be Derek and Chloe. It wasn’t. I walked around the building. The snack bar was closed.

I continued to the bathrooms and tugged on the women’s door. It didn’t budge. The padlock probably explained that.

I checked the guy’s bathroom too, then strode back to Simon. “The snack bar is closed, the restrooms are locked, and there’s no sign of them anywhere.”

“You’re the one who saw them get off the bus. Which way did they go?”

“Who said I saw them get off?”

“What?”

I shifted my bag onto my other shoulder. “I said they weren’t on the bus so they must have gotten off. I didn’t say it was here.” I looked around. “Wherever *here* is. We should probably just get back on—”

Too late. The bus was leaving. Simon waved and shouted as he chased it from the lot. I waved, too—didn’t much see the point of yelling, when it wouldn’t be heard over the motor. The bus kept going.

I walked to Simon. “Okay. Looks like we need a plan.”

**Four**

“Okay,” Simon said, reading the posted pages on the snack bar. “According to this, the next bus is in an hour.”

“Two hours,” I said, flashing my watch.

“Two hours for the next one heading in the direction we *were* going. One hour for the bus heading back.”

“Why would we go back?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe to find Chloe and my brother.”

“And where do you plan to find them?” I poked the schedule. “Last we know, they were with us in Syracuse. There are four stops between here and there. If Derek was with us, then sure, I’d say let’s do that—he could hop off at each one and sniff for a trail. Without him, we’re guessing.”

“I don’t—”

“Derek’s a smart guy, right? Knows how to look after himself? How to buy a bus ticket? How to get to your friend Andrew’s place?”

“Sure, but—”

“I doubt Chloe could read a bus schedule if her life depended on it, but that’s because she’s sheltered, not because she’s stupid. She’s sensible. Annoyingly, boringly sensible.”

“Which I happen to think is a good—”

“I know. You think everything about Chloe is perfect and magical. Point is, we have no idea why they got off the bus. Knowing Derek, he was hungry and knowing Chloe, she went to keep him company because that’d be polite. Whatever the reason, the first thing those two will say is ‘we need to catch the next bus and get to Andrew’s.’ So going back to find them is ridiculous. We should push on to his place.”

Simon’s jaw set. “No. We go back for Derek and Chloe.”

“Why? Because I said we shouldn’t? Fine. We’ve got an hour anyway. Plenty of time to think about it. You need to get something to eat, don’t you? Aren’t you on some kind of scheduled diet?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Derek says you can’t—”

“And you’re not Derek, so I’m not taking that from you, too. Despite what everyone thinks, I’m perfectly capable of handling my diabetes. It’s six in the morning. I don’t need to eat yet. I’ve got food in my bag. I’ll eat on the bus.”

“Fine. I’ll go find something for myself, then.”

He didn’t offer to come with me. I didn’t expect him, too. Chloe would have. I know I shouldn’t bitch about her being so nice, but imagine if someone only hung out with you because it was “the right thing to do.” Not exactly BFF material.

Simon said he was perfectly capable of handling his diabetes. I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself, too. Been doing it all my life.

My mother—I refuse to call her Mom anymore—worked for the group that did the genetic modification on me. On all of us. She was one of the top people at the company, which meant she needed to put in a lot of overtime. Or that’s what my dad always said. I think the truth is that she preferred being at work to being at home with us. I’m not even sure she saw me as her daughter. Maybe just a live-in test subject. No, that sounds like self-pity and I won’t do self-pity.

So my mother worked at all hours. My dad ran a sporting goods business, which meant he didn’t exactly work nine-to-five either. Like Chloe, I had a live-in housekeeper. At least I did until I was twelve, when my mother declared it was an unnecessary expense. I was old enough to look after my sister and myself before and after school and on weekends. Never mind that I had a social life and clubs and sports, or that we had enough money to hire two housekeepers. But that’s more self-pity, isn’t it? I’ll stop there.

My fifteen-year-old sister Lara is a brat. Unfortunately, no one sees it but me. To everyone else, she’s adorable. She’s tiny and blond and sweet and as helpless as a kitten . . . or she pretends to be. Yes, that was my biggest issue with Chloe. She reminded me of Lara. The difference is that Chloe really is as sweet as she seems and she isn’t as helpless as she looks.

Lara milks her adorability for all it’s worth, meaning she never has to do anything. Oh, sure, she has chores, but I usually end up doing them, because if they don’t get done, our mother freaks out. Then Lara cries about how much homework she has and how not everyone can find school as easy as I do, and my parents would say that I should help my

sister out, and when I argued, they'd make me feel like I was the lazy one. The difficult one. Eventually I started doing Lara's chores on my own. It was easier that way.

It doesn't help that I'm not adorable. Not sweet or helpless either. I know what I want and I go after it. If someone pisses me off, I say so. I don't put up with any crap.

I'm difficult, as my parents always say. I'm the bad child; Lara is the good one. It doesn't matter if I'm on the honor roll and I'm popular and I don't drink or do drugs or sneak out at midnight with guys. It doesn't matter if you can't say that—any of that—for Lara. I'm still bad and she's still good.

I went off on a tangent there, didn't I? I guess it's been on my mind a lot lately. I thought I'd gotten over the resentment years ago. Just accepted the way things were, lifted my chin and marched on. But after those months in Lyle House, fighting to get well and end the episodes, my mother pushing me to overcome them, only to discover she'd known all along that I *couldn't* overcome them. That she was responsible for what I was going through. Then, what she said in the warehouse, all the things she said . . .

I wish I wasn't her daughter. I hope she's happy with Lara. Silly, vapid Lara. I hope she realizes, someday, that I was the child she could have been proud of, if only she'd bothered getting to know me.

The town wasn't exactly overflowing with good eating options. Not at this time of the morning anyway. I bought a coffee and a muffin, then returned to Simon. He was right where I'd left him.

We talked for a minute, then I said, "So, has your brain had a chance to wake up? Realize your plan is moronic?"

I shouldn't have said that. When I'd first walked over, he hadn't exactly welcomed me back, but he'd been friendly enough, asked if the coffee shop was far, maybe he'd wash up before we left. When I made the crack about his plan, Simon's expression changed. Completely.

"I'm going back for Derek," he said. "I don't know what happened to him. For all I know, he's in trouble."

"How? Do you honestly think someone managed to drag a guy Derek's size off the bus?"

His scowl deepened. "Of course not. But have you forgotten that bounty on Chloe's head?"

"It's not a bounty. It's a reward for finding her—"

"If she got off the bus to use the bathroom, Derek would have followed. They both could have been stopped. Sent back to Buffalo." He gazed down the road. "I'm catching the bus back. It'll be here in five minutes. You can come with me or go to Andrew's."

"But I don't know Andrew or how to get—"

I realized that sounded like whining and stopped. I knew everyone was tired of looking after me. I was even more tired of needing it. I'd love to say "Sure, I'll do that." Not like I couldn't ride a bus and find a house.

What would I do when I got there, though? This Andrew guy didn't even know we were coming. Was I going to ring his bell and say "Hey, remember Kit Bae? That friend you had a big fight with a few years ago? Well, I don't know him, but I do know his sons and I'm hoping you'll let me stay at your place until they get here."

He might slam the door in my face. Still, I *could* do it. I wasn't afraid to do it. Not really.

"Fine," I said. "Just give me the address and directions from the bus station."

Simon took out his notepad. As he flipped past a sketch, I saw it was a picture of Chloe with a zombie. Remembering that scene, I can say with certainty that she wasn't nearly as calm and determined as she looked in Simon's drawing. Not at first, anyway. Was that how he saw her? I guess so.

What was it like to have guys draw your picture like that? Do I sound envious? I don't mean to. I don't have any trouble getting boyfriends—present company excepted. Keeping them away is usually the problem. Yet, I'm never the girl who inspires bad poetry and crappy love songs.

On second thought, the way I worded that might explain why I don't get poetry and pictures and love songs. I'd like to think I'd appreciate the effort, however bad the results, but . . . Yeah, guys are better off saving the artsy, sentimental stuff for other girls.

I took the address. The directions were half-assed. Not Simon's fault. He'd never gone there by bus. I'd have to get directions to Andrew's street, then follow Simon's notes from there.

"If you don't find Derek and Chloe, will you come to Andrew's later?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm not abandoning you, Tori."

"That's not—" I meant that I wanted to be sure he wasn't wandering around for days, maybe not looking after his diabetes well enough and passing out behind a truck

stop or something. But I couldn't say that, not without sounding like I was still crushing on him.

“Never mind,” I said. And we sat in silence waiting for the bus.

**Five**

The bus came. Simon got on it, ticket money in hand. He chatted to the driver so long that I wanted to give him a shove and say, “if you’re getting on, get on already.” Typical Simon. I don’t have any problems talking to adults, but he’s one of those kids who talk to them like there’s no difference between us and them, like he doesn’t expect to be treated any differently either.

Then his voice rose. Just a bit, but enough for me to notice. He sounded pissed off. I got up from the bench and walked to the bus.

“I *am* fifteen,” he was saying. “I’m in tenth grade. I’ll be sixteen in a few months. I was born in—”

“Then you gotta prove it,” said the woman behind the wheel. “Either a parent has to accompany you or you need ID that says you’re fifteen. You don’t look fifteen.”

“How old do I look?”

She tilted her head and studied him. “Thirteen. Fourteen, tops.”

“What?”

“He is fifteen,” I called.

Simon spun to see me at the bottom of the steps. “So how old does *she* look?” he asked as he waved at me.

“Fifteen,” said the driver.

He started to protest, then stifled it and took a moment. When he spoke again, his tone was calm and reasonable. “Okay, but we all know that teenage girls look older than

boys. So if she looks a little older than me, that probably means that we're the same age."

"Then I guess you're both fourteen. So neither of you is getting on my bus."

She shooed Simon off. He kept arguing until she threatened to call the police.

I'd backed onto the bench. As Simon stalked over, he glowered at me.

"You did that, didn't you?" he said.

"Did what? Cast a spell to make her refuse to sell you a ticket? Um, I don't know any spells, remember? That's the problem. Magic just happens with me. If there is such a spell, you'd be the one who knows it."

"Not if it's witch magic. Sorcerer magic is different. But no, I didn't think you cast a spell. I think you signaled her or mouthed that I was under age. You were right behind me."

"Not until I heard you fighting. Then I tried to help. You can always catch the next bus."

"Sure, the one going the direction you want to go."

I didn't bother to answer. He was pissed off and nothing I could say would help.

"It's a different kind of magic you said?" I ventured after a few minutes.

He didn't answer. Okay, apparently he wasn't talking to me at all. I would have liked to discuss magic though. I didn't know much about it and he did.

Simon had been raised a sorcerer, like Derek had been raised a werewolf. They grew up knowing they had supernatural powers. Chloe and I didn't. She'd apparently been clued in by the guys, who'd figured out she was a necromancer because she was at Lyle House for seeing ghosts.

I'd worked hard at hiding my magical outbursts. If I hadn't, maybe they'd have realized what I was, too. Maybe things would have been different. But that wasn't how I handled stuff. If weird things were happening—things my mother insisted were signs of mental illness—then I would cope in private, take therapy, swallow pills, do whatever it took to get better. Only I couldn't get better. This was me. Victoria Enright, teenage witch.

My mother was a witch, too. Was Lara? Didn't know. Didn't care. Okay, that's not true. In spite of everything, she was still my sister and I worried that maybe she was a science experiment, too. I hoped she was okay.

I wondered how it had been with Chloe, when she'd confronted her aunt Lauren about knowing she was a necromancer. She *must* have confronted her—I'd seen how mad she'd been with her aunt at the lab. So we were in the same situation, betrayed by someone we loved. Only it wasn't the same situation, because I'd also seen the way Chloe's aunt Lauren responded to Chloe's cold looks. I'd seen how bad she felt. She'd helped us escape. She might have even been killed helping us.

And my mother? When I confronted her, she told me to grow up. Deal with it. Then she tried to befriend Chloe. Told Chloe she was the strong one. The daughter she wished she'd had. Even when I'd beaten my mother with magic, she didn't look at me any other way. She hadn't helped us get away, either. If Chloe's aunt was dead, it was because my mother killed her, trying to foil our escape.

So I knew nothing of what I was. Nothing of my power except what I'd experienced. Nothing of what it meant to be a witch.

“Yes, witches and sorcerers are different,” Simon said, after nearly twenty minutes of silence. “They have different kinds of magic. Apparently, sorcerers can use witch magic and vice-versa. I haven’t learned any of yours yet.”

“Why not? Because you aren’t good enough to learn it? Or because you think you’re too good for witch magic?”

“Yeah, clearly, either I suck or I’m a chauvinistic—” He stopped, and took a deep breath. “Our powers, like most supernaturals’, hit at puberty. I’m still learning sorcerer magic, so it doesn’t make sense to try something harder yet.”

“I would.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would. But I’m mastering my own magic first and that takes practice.”

“Not for me.”

“Because the experiment went wrong. That’s why you were in Lyle House.”

“What’s so wrong about not needing to practice and learn spells? If the point of the experiment was to improve supernaturals, then it sounds like it worked just fine. At least for me.”

He seemed to be biting his tongue. Hard. After a moment, he said, carefully, “Well, they thought it was a problem. Probably because it makes your magic harder to control. Chloe says—”

“Chloe’s been talking about me?”

“She said you have outbursts of magic. That could be dangerous.” When I opened my mouth, he lifted a hand to stop me. “I’m not trying to argue with you, Tori. I’m just saying you need to be careful.”

“No. You guys can be careful. I’ll be powerful.”

“You do that,” he muttered, and got up to recheck the schedule.

When the next bus came, Simon got on with me. He hadn’t said he would. He just did. Then he told the driver some sob story about us getting off to stretch our legs and being left stranded—he showed our tickets. The driver let us on for free. I was grudgingly impressed. Still, I’m sure I could have gotten the same result myself, by threatening to report the company for leaving underage kids stranded in the first place. Everyone has his own methods, I suppose. I can admire Simon’s, but I prefer mine.

We didn’t sit together. Not my choice. There were plenty of double-seats available. Simon plunked down next to an old man. Taking the hint, I retreated to the rear of the bus, and claimed a full seat for myself.

There’s nothing to say about the bus ride, except that I wished I had something to do. A book to read. A laptop to play with. And by “play” I don’t mean games. My future career is in software design. I’m not keen on the programming part, but I need some knowledge of it for my college application package.

College. Future career. Some might say this had been whisked out of my reach and I was being naïve to think my life could continue as I imagined it. I was living on the street. I couldn’t go home to my parents, keepers of my college fund. Couldn’t go back to high school to finish that. I will, though. How? I try not to think about that part. If I can’t go home, where will I go? I don’t know. Can’t think about it now. Just

concentrate on getting through each day. The future will come, and when it does, I'll be ready. I always am.

The walk to Andrew's was sheer hell. In summary, I'll just note, for future reference, that Simon shouldn't be allowed to give directions to the restrooms, much less anyplace more complicated.

Three hours after we left the bus terminal, we arrived at Andrew's place. Any other time, I'd have been gaping at the surrounding fields and woods, wondering how in hell anyone chose to live there, and praying I wouldn't have to stay long. Right now, though, the isolation looked safe and quiet and welcoming. In short, perfect.

As we walked up the long lane, I had visions of collapsing on the nearest couch, while Simon explained the situation to Andrew. When he rang the bell, I was craning to see through the front window, looking for that sofa.

Simon rang it a few times.

"Maybe it's not working," I said.

I rapped on it . . . and it opened.

"No, that was not a spell," I said. "It wasn't closed properly."

I pushed it open farther and started stepping in.

"Hey!" Simon said. "Manners?"

He nudged me aside and leaned in. "Andrew?" Then louder. "Andrew?"

"Now can we go in?" I said.

"No, he might be out back."

I sighed and plunked myself on the porch to wait while he checked. He came back saying there was no sign of Andrew and—finally—let us go inside.

**Six**

Andrew wasn't in the house. Simon searched every room, getting more anxious by the second, until he reached the kitchen. Then he stared into a half-full cup of cold coffee for almost a minute.

"Yes, your dad's friend is a slob," I said, waving at the cup and other breakfast dishes.

"He's not."

"I'm not insulting—"

"And I wasn't being defensive. Andrew is a neat-freak. He wouldn't leave the place like this. Towel dropped in the bathroom. Mail all over the floor. Dishes on the table. Something happened."

"Um, yeah. He got busy. It happens. I like things tidy, too, but come exam time . . ."

I was talking to myself. Simon had disappeared into the next room. When I caught up with him, he showed me a set of keys and a wallet.

"He didn't just leave. It's like what happened with my dad. He was there. And then he wasn't. Disappeared."

"A spell or something?"

"Magic doesn't work like that."

"Excuse me. I'm a little new to the magic thing in general."

"I didn't mean—"

"So this is how your dad vanished?" I walked to the fridge, opened it and took out a Diet Coke.

“You shouldn’t just take—” He began as I popped open the can.

I lifted my brows.

“I guess we can’t exactly ask first,” he said. “Go ahead. We’ll take food and drink.”

“Take it where?”

“Outside,” he said, opening a cupboard. “We can’t wait in here.”

“I really don’t think Andrew would mind.”

“No, and neither would whoever took him, if they’re after us. Get what you need.

I’ll leave a note for Derek and Chloe.”

We retreated to the pool house. It was lovely. Dark and dank and cold. Stunk of chlorine and mildew. We set up lawn chairs. Then we sat and ate. When Simon was finished, he stood.

“I think we should take a look around,” he said. “In case we’re being watched.”

“Seriously? You really like this running-for-your-life stuff, don’t you?”

“No, Tori, believe it or not, I’d really rather be safe at home right now. I’d rather know my brother was safe. I’d rather know Chloe was safe. I’d rather know my dad was safe.”

“But not me.”

He exhaled and slumped into the lawn chair.

“What?” I said. “Do you think I didn’t notice you left me off that list?”

“I left Rachelle off, too. I hope she’s okay, though. Same as I hope you’ll be okay.”

“Great. So the girl who’s been watching your back for two days gets as much sympathy as the one who betrayed you.”

“Watching my back? Like you watched Chloe’s with those gang chicks?”

“That was a mistake. I was running and I thought she was right behind me.”

“Did you check?”

“What?”

He turned to face me. “Did you check? One glance over your shoulder to make sure she was still there?”

I didn’t answer.

“No, you didn’t. I’m not accusing you of letting that girl grab Chloe so you could get away. I’m not accusing you of looking back, seeing her in trouble and deciding to do nothing about it. I know you didn’t look back. You never thought of it.”

“I was scared, okay? You want me to admit that? Fine. I was scared.”

“I’m sure you were. But Chloe would have looked back for you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course she would. Because Chloe is good and perfect.”

“No, because she thinks of others. I would have looked back, too, if you were behind me. Even Derek would have. Why? Because we’re a team now. We need to have each other’s backs. No matter what.”

“No matter what you think of the other person, you mean.”

He groaned and dropped his face into his hands.

“Oh, please. Don’t get all drama queen. I know you don’t like me.”

He lifted his head. “No, I don’t. When I first met you at Lyle House, I liked you well enough. But I let you know I wasn’t interested in you as a girlfriend. I tried to do it

nicely. It was nothing personal—I had too much else on my mind to think about girls—and I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. But you wouldn’t stop. Then Chloe came along and I paid attention to her because I thought she needed a friend, and you went nuts. You locked her in a basement crawlspace. Tied up and gagged.”

“I’d have gone back for her.”

“So that makes it okay? The only thing that made it even slightly okay was thinking you were mentally ill. That it wasn’t your fault. Only you weren’t.”

“I was on meds.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“What? I was. And I was stressed out.”

“So it’s not your fault. No reason to take responsibility. Sure as hell no reason to apologize. You’ve treated us like shit, Tori. Me, Chloe, Derek. You’ve made it clear that you think we’re all losers and you’re only here because you have no choice. And you seem to think we should be okay with that. We should start to treat you better. You haven’t stuck a knife in our backs, so obviously you’ve changed and we’re jerks for not seeing that.”

When I said nothing, he pushed to his feet. “I’m going to scout outside. Are you coming?”

I didn’t answer.

He stood there a minute, then sighed again, said “Suit yourself,” and left.

After Simon was gone, I laid on the inflatable raft and closed my eyes. It didn't take long for me to start dozing. Not really sleeping, just slipping in and out of consciousness.

"Tori?"

A hand shook my shoulder. I leapt up, but no one was there. I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. I'd been dreaming.

I slid back onto the raft and drifted into the dream again, a hand on my shoulder, shaking me. I was back on the bus. It was dark and warm and I just wanted to sleep, but Chloe kept shaking my shoulder.

"Tori?" she whispered. "We're at a truck stop. It's Derek. He . . . he's not feeling good. It could be the Change again. He needs to get off the bus. I'm going with him."

"Mmmph."

"Are you awake? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, yeah. Derek Changing. You going. Okay."

She said something else, but I was already drifting back to sleep. Then she was gone.

I bolted upright in the pool house. Chloe had told me they were getting off the bus. Damn it! I'd screwed up. I'd really—

No, wait. I hadn't remember this before. Didn't that suggest it never really happened? That I'd just dreamed it now?

Of course. That was it. Damn Simon. He'd made me feel guilty and now I was imagining that I'd let them down.

Unless it really did happen. Unless I'd just forgotten because I'd been half-asleep and remembered when I was half-asleep again.

But Simon wouldn't believe that. He'd think I'd held out on him. Lied because I'd wanted to push on to Andrew's house, where I could get a soft bed and hot showers.

Chloe never told me anything. I was sure of it.

Now that I was awake, though, I couldn't stop thinking about what Simon had said. Had I ever apologized to Chloe for the crawlspace thing? I was pretty sure I hadn't. At least, not a real apology. But how do you apologize for something like that? How do you say you're sorry when, deep down, you still don't really understand how it happened,

Simon said I kept defending myself. But I wasn't just making up excuses. I really did think it was the meds or stress or a combination of the two, because otherwise . . . Otherwise, how do you explain it? I wasn't a bad person. I wasn't evil. I wasn't my mother. But I'd done a very bad thing, and no matter how hard I tried to figure out how it went so far, I didn't understand it myself.

I can't say I acted on the spur of the moment. I can't say I got angry, knocked her out and ran. I set it up. I put the rope and the gag in the crawlspace, and then I went and lured her to the basement. Knocking her out hadn't been part of the plan, but the rest had.

I'd wanted to teach her a lesson. I'd wanted to make her afraid of me, and I thought tying her up for a little while down there would do it. Later, when Derek said I could have killed her with the brick or suffocated her with the gag, my first thought was "That's nuts." But then I realized he was right. My plan could have gone very wrong, and I hadn't seen that. I hadn't thought it through. Just like I hadn't thought to look over my shoulder and check on her while we were being chased by those girls.

My mom always said I was insensitive. Inconsiderate. Dad said no, I was just impulsive, maybe a little thoughtless sometimes. I'd ignored them. Obviously they were wrong. After all, look what I did for Lara. Except now, lying here, I realized I hadn't done it for Lara. I hadn't picked up her slack to help *her*. I did it so I wouldn't get catch shit when stuff wasn't done. I did it because, in the long run, it made things easier.

But was it wrong to put yourself first? That's called survival, right? If you're running for your life, you don't get the luxury of being nice. They were going to learn that. It's fine to wave the pompoms for teamwork—all for one and one for all—but when push came to shove, these guys wouldn't be risking their lives for Chloe, maybe not even for each other. I was sure of it. Once things got worse, it would be every kid for himself. It always is.

**Seven**

When Simon didn't come back after an hour, I started getting concerned. By ninety minutes, I was worried. By two hours, I was freaked.

Maybe Simon wasn't just being paranoid. Maybe the house really was being watched. Maybe they'd already taken him captive. What if he'd been taken captive and they were searching for me? It wouldn't be hard to find me here.

I slipped out of the pool shed and looked around. Nothing.

The yard was surrounded by woods. I crept into them, then made my way to the front of the property. When I reached the road, I looked both ways.

We'd come in from the left, but I was pretty sure with Simon's crappy sense of direction, we'd gotten turned around. So if I was heading back to town, I should go the other way.

*Was I heading back to town?*

Sure. It was safer there than here.

And what about Simon? What if he was still scouting?

No, it'd been too long. He'd been taken.

But if he had, shouldn't I do something about that?

Right, get myself captured for a guy who didn't give a damn about me. No, thank you. I couldn't fight men with guns. If Simon had been captured, he was lost.

But what if he hadn't been captured? What if he'd fallen down a ravine or something. Shouldn't I at least look around? I'd walked straight to the road. Never even tried to find him.

What did that say about me?

I sighed and trudged into the woods.

I'd been searching for twenty minutes. I didn't dare call his name, so I just kept creeping through the forest, hoping to see or hear him. Like that was going to happen. All I could see was trees and all I could hear were birds. Simon could be twenty feet away and I'd never spot—

I spotted him.

He *was* about twenty feet away, sitting on a log. His back was to me. Captured? Bound and gagged? Left there while they hunted for me?

No, he wasn't gagged, but his feet and hands were in front of him, and could be bound. He must be. Otherwise, why would he just be sitting there?

I looked around, then I took a slow step forward. Another step. Another—

A twig cracked under my sneaker. Simon leapt to his feet and spun, hands going up, lips moving. Then he saw me and stopped. My gaze went to his raised hands. Then to his legs. Neither was bound.

"Hey, there." He smiled. "You shouldn't sneak up on me. I have a killer knockback spell, you know. Could have made you stumble."

"What are you doing?"

“Nothing.”

“I see that. Why are you still out here?”

He shrugged. “Just sitting and thinking.”

“While I’m in the pool shed? Alone? You just left me there? Do you know how worried—?” I bit my tongue. “You’re a real jerk, Simon. You know that?”

I marched into the woods. Behind me, I heard him scramble off the log.

“Whoa, no,” he said. “I checked on you. You were asleep. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I turned before he caught up to me. “Bullshit. I haven’t been sleeping.”

“Well, you were. I took a quick look around out here, then went back to check on you, and you were asleep on the raft, so I left to take a better look and then I just . . .”

“Decided that you’d rather sit on a log than risk having to talk to me.”

He exhaled, and started to answer, then shook his head.

“Okay, you’re right. I stayed out there to avoid you, and that’s a shitty thing to say about someone, but I knew if I went back in there and you woke up, all we’d do is bicker. I’m worried about Derek and Chloe, and I wanted to think about our options if they don’t show up. But now you’re awake, so if you’d like to talk about that, we can.”

“Why? You won’t listen to my ideas anyway.”

“And you won’t listen to mine. So I guess we’re—”

Twigs crackled. Simon shot forward so fast I didn’t see what was coming until I hit the ground. He’d knocked me down, then dropped himself, covering me. He got off me fast, but kept his hand on my arm, holding me down and motioning for me to be quiet.

Then he gestured for me to stay put. He rose in a crouch, hands out, fingers splayed, ready to cast a spell.

A slow look around, then he laughed. When I followed his gaze, I saw a deer watching us. I brushed off my pants, and the sound made her bolt. I expected Simon to give me crap for scaring her off, but he only waved toward the house.

“Better get inside before she brings her herd back to trample us.”

We didn’t say anything as we went back into the pool shed. Once inside, we talked a bit, about how long we’d wait for Chloe and Derek. But that led to arguing about what we’d do next. He started it. Okay, maybe I started it. Anyway, it was getting dark, so I decided to rest, stretching out on the raft again.

I woke up to hear the pool house door opening, and Simon saying, “Relax. No windows. You didn’t notice the light, did you?”

A familiar grunt. I cracked open my eyes to see Derek and Chloe illuminated by the glow of a lantern.

“The longer she sleeps, the better,” Simon said. “It’s a good thing you two showed up because another day alone with her?” He feigned choking me.

“I saw that,” I said as I sat up. “Believe me, the feeling is mutual.” I swept my hair back as I yawned. “There’s nothing like spending a whole day alone with a guy to make a girl say, ‘What was I thinking?’”

“At least one good thing came of it,” Simon muttered.

I shot something back, but as I did, I remembered what he'd done out in the forest. He'd heard a sound and he hadn't only thought of his own safety. He'd pushed me down. Dropped on top of me. Shielded me.

A week ago, I'd have been in heaven, thinking it was proof he liked me after all. Now I knew better. He *didn't* like me, and maybe I couldn't blame him, all things considered. But he'd still knocked me out of harm's way. Instinct.

I couldn't quite understand that. I'm not sure I even agreed with the impulse. I didn't need the help—I could take care of myself.

But it was something to think about. I'd have lots to think about after today.

Not that I was giving Simon any props for “saving” me. I kept arguing with him until Chloe cut in and stopped the bickering.

And so, the four of us were back together. My team. Not exactly the one I'd choose, but I was stuck with them. And they were stuck with me. Maybe it was time to start making the best of it, see where that led. Who knows, I might even be surprised. I doubted it, but someone on this team had to be an optimist.

We talked for a few more minutes, then went inside the house to plan our next move.

