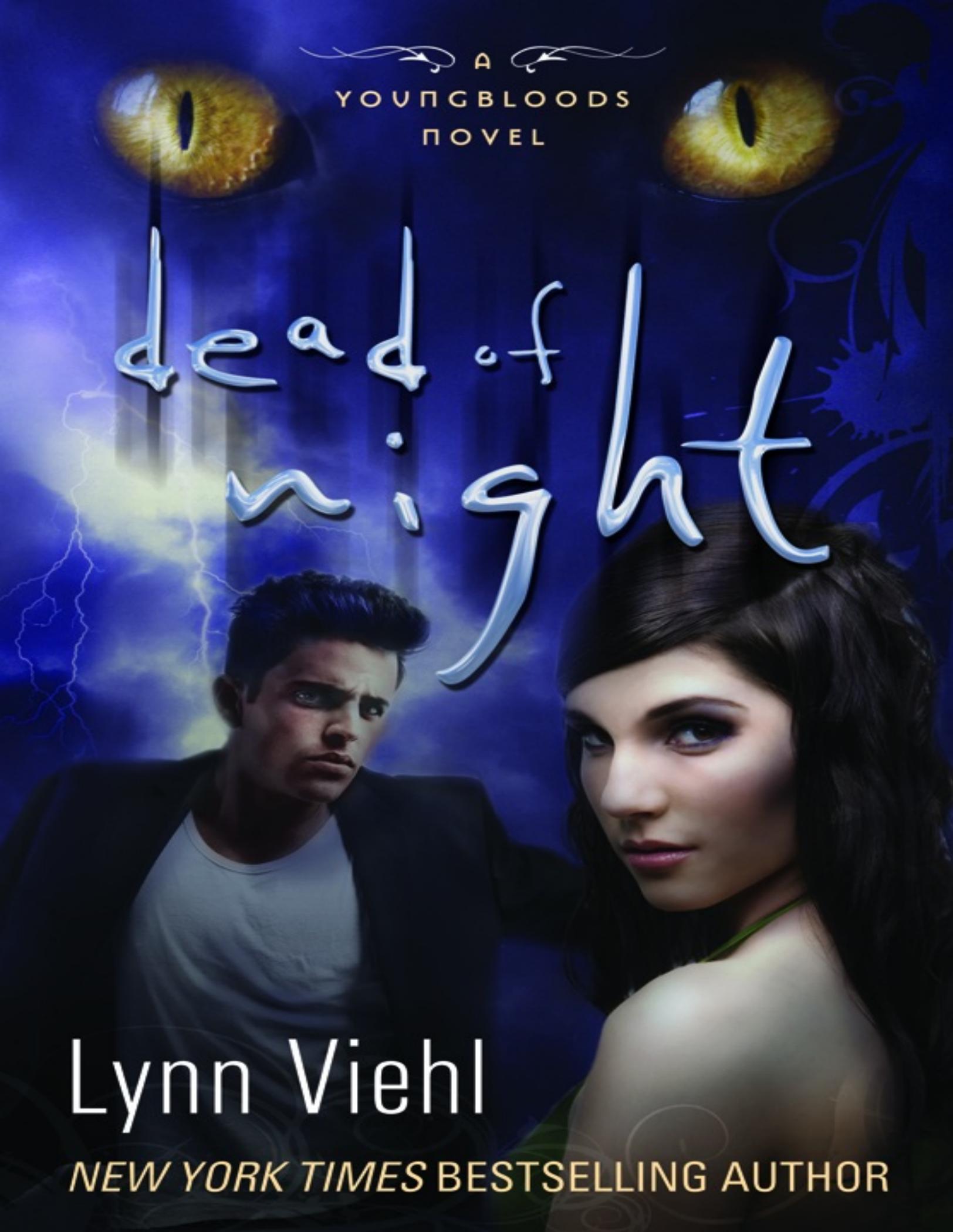


A
YOUNGBLOODS
NOVEL



Dead of
Night

Lynn Viehl

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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One

Most people have two lives. One is the life we carry on in the open where everyone can see it. It's who we are to our family, friends, and even strangers. In this life we are part of the real world. It's our day-to-day life, our normal life.

We also have another life, one that we have on the inside, out of sight. It's like a reflection of normal life, only with everything we feel and think and dream of and want to do added to it. Sometimes people close to us sense that life, or we trust them enough to share bits of it with them, but mostly we live it alone. That's our inner life, our personal life.

When we have to hide who we are inside from everyone in our real life, then we start living a third life. A secret life. And no matter how careful we are, it's what happens in the secret life that can ruin all the others.

That cold December morning I began in my normal life: living on a horse farm in Lost Lake, Florida. I was doing chores inside while my two brothers, Patrick and Grayson, were working with our new horses. Gray and I had just started winter break from school, so we wouldn't have to go back until January. Trick, who was thirty and our legal guardian, had quit his job and moved us from Chicago to Lost Lake so we could settle down and he could have his dream of breeding horses.

My normal life was nothing special. To everyone in town I was Catlyn Youngblood, a fifteen-year-old girl who had just moved to town in August. I hadn't been at school long enough to make many friends, but I'd never been much of a social butterfly. I liked to ride my horse, Sali, read lots of books, and sometimes write bad poetry.

Most of that was even true.

After breakfast I finished my kitchen chores and started the laundry. It would have been nice to have a mom to handle the housework, but our parents had been killed in a car accident when I was little. By the time I folded the last load of towels and put them away, I checked the time. It was only 10:15 a.m., which made me wonder if my watch needed a new battery. But no, the wall clock in the kitchen also read quarter-past ten. Trick had promised to take me into town for my job interview, but the appointment wasn't until three.

That left me four hours and forty-five minutes to do the rest of my chores, make lunch, decide what to wear and practice looking responsible and reliable so I'd get hired and earn some extra spending money.

Most of that was true, too.

"Cat?"

I thought of Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet, my favorite poem of all time, and recited it in my mind as I walked back to the kitchen. *When in disgrace with fortune and in men's eyes, I all alone beweeep my outcast state ...*

Trick stood at the back door, and hay and dirt covered his black T-shirt and jeans. "I need the first aid kit."

I stopped thinking about troubling heaven with bootless cries, whatever they were. "What now?"

"Flash had another tizzy. Gray's hurt." He held up one dirty hand. "Not bad, but—"

I didn't wait to hear the rest, but grabbed from under the sink the big white plastic case with all our first aid supplies. "How bad is not bad?"

"Not that bad." He looked down at me as I pushed past him. "I can take care of it."

"Sure you can," I said, heading toward our barn. "You can also give him a nice infection."

He caught up with me, dusting his palms on the sides of his jeans before glancing at them and sighing. "All right, but I'll warn you now, there's some blood."

"When Flash throws a fit, there usually is." I saw our problem child palomino tied and hobbled in the front training pen. Gray's horse looked angelic with his creamy golden hide and silky white-blond mane and tail. Which he most

certainly was not. As soon as Flash saw me he swung around so I was looking at his rear.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I muttered. “Talk to the hindquarters.”

Inside the barn Gray was sitting on a bale of hay. He looked pale, and held an old rag against his left temple. The blood staining it and the front of his shirt made my stomach clench.

“I’m okay,” he muttered as I reached him.

I put down the kit and tugged the rag and his hand aside. The distinct shape of the ugly gash on his temple made me take a quick breath. “Flash did this?”

“He didn’t mean it.” My brother tried to put the rag back, but I tossed it out of his reach. “Come on, Cat.”

In the past Flash had never hurt Gray. Now he was injuring him almost weekly. I didn’t buy it. “This is, what, the fourth time he didn’t mean it?” I demanded as I opened the kit. “Or the fifth?”

My brother put on his sulky face. “It’s not that deep. Just give me some band-aids.”

“Only if you put them over your mouth.” I checked his ears for bleeding, but found none. “Any headache?”

His broad shoulders moved.

I made a victory sign with my hand in front of his nose. “How many fingers?”

“None. Claws? Two.” He flinched as I yanked his too-long golden locks out of his face. “Hey.”

“Look at me.” I used a pen light from the kit to check his pupils, both of which dilated normally. “You keep up this feud with Flash and I’m going to have to take another first aid course. The one for treating reckless brothers who don’t know how to hold their horses.”

Gray muttered some words he wasn’t supposed to use under his breath.

“Nice language.” I used some antiseptic to soak a gauze pad. “This is going to burn like blazes. You want a stick to bite down on, tough guy?”

“I told you, it’s not—” His voice turned into a pained grunt as I began cleaning the hoof-shaped cut. “For crying out loud, will you take it easy with that stuff?”

“As often as that stupid horse has been clobbering you lately, I should keep the bathtub filled with peroxide and dip you twice a day.” Now that I had wiped

away most of the blood, I saw that the cut was mostly superficial, although my brother was probably going to end up with a spectacular bruise.

I applied some antibiotic ointment as I glanced at Trick. “The Red Cross instructor said even minor head wounds can be unpredictable. We should take him over to the E.R. to be checked out.”

“I’m not spending the rest of the day sitting in a waiting area.” Gray got to his feet. “Where’s Flash?” He didn’t wait for an answer but stalked out of the barn.

“Let him go, Catlyn,” Trick said, catching my arm as I tried to follow. “He’s embarrassed.”

I turned on him. “He got kicked in the *head*, Patrick. He’s lucky his brains aren’t leaking out of his ears.” Now I saw a dark, wet patch under the dirt on his shirt and pointed to it. “What is that?”

Trick glanced down. “Gray’s blood.”

“It better be.” I looked past him at the horses, all of whom had their heads over the stall doors to watch us (next to humans, horses were the nosiest creatures on earth). That’s when I noticed the empty space between Sali and Jupiter. “Where’s Rika?”

“By now”—my brother rubbed the back of his neck—“on the other side of the farm.”

Paprika, a pregnant mare my brother had recently bought, had been causing trouble since coming to the farm. An elegant Arabian the exact color of her namesake spice, Trick had told us she seemed good-tempered. And she had been, until we’d led her out of the trailer. The minute she’d stepped off the ramp she’d started fighting her bridle. Even after Trick had hustled her into her new stall she’d fussed for hours.

My brother intended to return her and get his money back, which was when he discovered Rika’s former owner had moved out of the state the day after he sold her to us.

Since we were stuck with Rika, we tried to make the best of it. Gray, who had trained our other horses, began trying to gentle her. His experience dealing with Flash’s tantrums made him a lot more patient than me or Trick, and his quiet, calm handling usually soothed the most aggressive mule-heads. For some reason, however, the Arabian didn’t like him.

Gray had tried everything: training her alone, letting her run first, putting her on a lead rope, and sticking her in the smallest pen. Where, I suddenly realized, Flash was now in his timeout.

“Did Grim put Flash in with Rika?” I demanded. Grim was one of my nicknames for my brother, as was Grouch, Gross, and every other Gr-word that fit his surly personality.

“He tried to.” My brother’s expression turned wry. “For about ten seconds.”

I couldn’t believe it. Pairing a steady, well-trained horse with a troublemaker was one way to reinforce herd behavior; but Flash was about as calm as a hurricane. “Trick, when you want to put out a fire, you don’t throw gasoline at it.”

He glanced at the barn door. “Gray knows he screwed up,” he said in a lower voice. “Now let it go.”

“Yeah, sure.” The frustration I felt was not so much about my brother’s carelessness as the reason behind it. Ever since the Halloween dance Gray had been making a lot of dumb decisions, and some of that was my fault. I closed the first aid kit and went to grab my saddle, a coil of rope and a set of blinders.

Most pregnant mares became a little jumpy when they were ready to deliver; with her personality Rika would be ten times worse. “Could she be getting ready to foal?”

“Not yet, she’s only thirty-two weeks.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “You don’t have to go after her.”

“Of course I do.” I opened Sali’s stall and led her out. “She’s not going to let you or Gray get anywhere near her now.”

Once I had my Sali saddled, I had to force myself to use the mounting crate. If I were by myself I would have just jumped up from the ground to her back, but like a hundred other things it wasn’t something I could do in my so-called normal life.

Pretending to be good old clueless Catlyn was the only way I could keep living my normal life. That didn’t mean I had to like it.

Sali’s hide, the color of bittersweet chocolate, gleamed in the mellow sunlight. I kept her to a walk until we passed Gray, who was checking Flash’s front legs. I looked into my middle brother’s sky-blue eyes, but all I saw there was anger and

resentment. “You’d better put him in his stall before I get back with her.”

I tapped Sali’s sides with my heels, and we took off. Normally I would keep her in her walking gait to start off a ride, but we had to catch Rika. Sali raced easily across the pasture at a smooth, gliding lope. I spotted some fresh clods of dirt and grass and guided her to follow them.

One hundred and forty acres around the old farmhouse belonged to us, so Sali and I had a lot of ground to cover. At first I worried the Arabian might have made for the woods bordering our land so she could hide; the density of the trees and the brush growing there would force me to go after her on foot, and I didn’t feel like playing hide-and-go-seek. But the tracks she’d left made a beeline to the open back pastures, where only a handful of enormous, ancient black oaks still grew.

Sali lifted her head to sniff the air, and then turned as we both saw a reddish blur of movement along the back fence.

“All right, girl.” I reined in Sali, reaching for my coil of rope and adjusting the slipknot. “This has to be quick but careful. You ready?”

Sali snorted a small cloud of white breath in the chilly air. She was always ready.

I leaned forward and hooked the reins over the horn to free both my hands. “Now.”

Sali took off toward the fence, and once we were within sight of our runaway I released two coils of rope.

Rika’s sides already bulged with the bulk of her unborn foal; now sweat and foam made dark diagonal streaks over it. As soon as she saw us she veered away from the fence; she was smart enough to avoid getting boxed in between Sali and the wire. But the burden of the foal slowed her, and she couldn’t keep ahead of us. As soon as we got within ten yards I tossed the end loop of my lasso high over her head. As the loop came down I jerked my wrist, pulling it back so that it fell over her head. Immediately I hauled back the slack, tightening the slipknot.

Rika fought to free herself from the lasso, and jerked the line across the back of my wrist. I ignored the rope burn and her caterwauling as I came alongside her and hustled her over toward the fence.

“Okay, okay,” I said in a soft, soothing voice as I swung off my saddle and got

in front of Rika's head. "You've had your fun, now it's time to think of the baby and settle down. Settle down," I repeated as she kicked out with her hind legs.

Sali whickered her annoyance with Rika as I kept a tight hold on the rope. I also kept talking as I inspected the Arabian. Her dark red sorrel hide made it hard to make out fresh wounds, but I found some scratches on her forelegs and her right flank, and a bald spot on her tail. I didn't see any signs of the edema at the bottom of her belly, and she didn't have any fluid streaks on her hindquarters that would mean she was delivering the foal too soon.

"I've got bad news, girl," I told her as I kept my hand on her back and made my way around to her nose again. "You're going to live."

Rika's head drooped, and her nose touched my shoulder briefly.

"Believe me, I feel the same way." I stroked her short nose before I looked into her eyes. I knew it was safer to put the blinders on her, but she looked so defeated I didn't have the heart to. "Listen, I know you don't like it here, and my brothers scare you, but there's no place else to go. So come back to the barn with me and Sali now, okay?"

Rika looked as if all the fight had gone out of her, but I knew better, and kept her tethered until I was mounted again. She fussed a bit more, nipping at Sali, who showed her dominance as lead mare by head-butting Rika until she quit.

"Here we go, ladies. Let's take it nice and slow."

I kept both horses at a walk all the way back to the barn. Rika didn't give me any trouble until we came within sight of the pen, but fortunately Gray had put Flash away. I led the Arabian to the back of the barn instead of the front, where I dismounted and led Rika into the treatment pen where we put the horses for vet checks and vaccinations. I couldn't give her too much water, which would have made her sick, but I put enough in the trough to keep her occupied while I put Sali away.

"You'll be next," I promised my mare, giving her an apple cookie and kissing the white blaze on her nose before I went to the supply cabinet.

It was too expensive to call the vet for every little thing, so we did a lot of simple doctoring ourselves. First I checked the rope burn on my wrist, which wasn't bad, and then grabbed the horse kit. After bathing the Arabian with a lukewarm spray, I rubbed her down and smeared some salve over her scratches.

Once I finished I put a little of the special pregnancy formula feed in the fence bucket as a treat. Rika shuffled over, giving me one last suspicious look before dipping in her nose.

“You’re welcome,” I said, and turned to see my oldest brother leaning against the fence. “Not interested in helping?”

“You had everything under control.” Trick came and examined my handiwork. “Looks like she tangled with some wire. I’ll check her records and see when she had her last tetanus shot.” He took the dirty towels and jar of salve from me. “Now *you* need a bath.”

“Now I need to take of Sali,” I corrected him.

“I did that while you were washing Rika.” He smiled a little. “Thanks for catching her.”

“Anytime. And I don’t mean that.” I glanced over my shoulder at the Arabian before I added, “Trick, there is something wrong with that horse. She’s not just bad-tempered or wild. Something is setting her off.”

“Arabians are usually wound pretty tight,” he reminded me.

“No horse is that tight all the time.” I followed him into the barn. “And I don’t think it’s personal. I think she’d be this way with anyone, anywhere. It’s like she hates the world.”

He thought about it for a minute. “I haven’t found any scars on her that would indicate she was abused in the past.”

“Maybe her old owner didn’t beat her.” I knew how stupid that sounded, but my brother knew a lot more about horses than I did. “Could he have locked her up, or starved her?”

“She’s not underweight, she doesn’t have any significant scars, and her muscle tone is fine.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll call Dr. Marks and see if he still has her old records. He may have treated her for a fall or a bad injury.”

Severe stress could cause horses to misbehave, and getting hurt was extremely stressful. While the injury could heal in a few weeks or months, the memory of what caused it stayed with most horses. Some could never again be ridden or worked.

Rika had challenged me and Sali, but only after we had cornered her. She should have responded well to Sali’s presence, as horses had herd mentality and

for them two were always better than one. Something else had made Rika run, something that made me wonder just what had happened with Gray and Flash.

“You should ask the vet if he knows who trained her,” I said. Some owners hired professionals who were harder on the horses than was necessary; the type who always referred to training as “breaking in.” If Rika had been bullied during training, she might always associate it with fear.

My brother nodded. “I’ll give him a call later.”

The slant of the sunlight through the barn windows made me glance at my watch. “It’s almost noon. I’ll take a shower before I fix lunch. You can still drive me into town for my interview, right?”

“I said I would.” Trick closed the supply cabinet door. “I don’t like the idea of you working through the holidays, though, especially in town by yourself. If you need money for clothes or Christmas gifts, just ask.”

“What I need is something to do besides clean the house, bake cookies and sing ‘Frosty the Snowman’ until winter break is over.” Those weren’t the reasons I was applying for a job in town, but they sounded convincing enough. “It’s just part-time anyway, and whatever I earn will go right into my college account. Minus whatever I spend on you and Grim for Christmas,” I tagged on.

No one would ever call my oldest brother clueless or stupid, so I endured another of his silent, measuring stares. I kept my expression normal.

Just when I thought I might not have pulled it off, he patted my shoulder. “All right, little sister. We’ll see how it goes.” He went to look at Rika.

I smiled at his back. *Oh no, you won’t.*

Two

After fixing lunch for me and Trick (Gray didn't come in from the barn when I called him), I went upstairs to pick out what I was going to wear to my interview.

I didn't have a lot of choices; I was the only girl in the family, and living in the country all my life had never turned me into a fashionista. Most of the time I wore jeans, T-shirts and flannel shirts. Sometimes when it got hot in the summer I wore shorts and a tank top, but that was about it.

I'd have to break out my Justin case.

I took out the old garment bag and draped it across my bed to unzip it. Inside were seven outfits: three dresses, two blouse-and-skirt sets, one pants suit and Old Reliable. Girl clothes made me nervous. When I wore jeans and T-shirts, no one noticed how skinny my legs were. The stuff in the bag was just in case I needed a nice outfit (which is why I called it the Justin case).

I wanted to wear my dark purple pants suit, but it was made of silky material that didn't seem right for a job interview. I looked at the dresses, which were pretty but kind of young, and the blouses and skirts almost shrieked schoolgirl. I wanted to look mature; someone who could be depended on to work by herself.

Finally I took out Old Reliable. The black dress didn't have any frills or lace or girly stuff, and the fit and knee-length hem made me seem a little older. It wasn't like I had anything better, so I carried it into the bathroom.

Ever since applying for the job I'd been experimenting with my hair to come up with a better style than how I always wore it (loose, ponytail or braid). I hated using pins and barrettes, which hurt my scalp, but sometimes while I was reading I would twist up my hair and use a pair of black and mother-of-pearl

chopsticks to hold it off my neck. I tried that and liked the way it looked.

I went to get my flat-soled black shoes, and nearly walked into Grayson.

“Hey.” He shuffled backward and stuck his hands in his back pockets. “You look nice.”

This from Gray, who barely spared me a grunt when he was in a good mood, and had been mostly mute around me since Halloween. I decided he should get a taste of the silent treatment, and walked around him.

Gray followed me to my bedroom, where he caught the door before I could close it in his face. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I looked at him while I began silently counting to sixty.

“Trick said I should ... ” He stopped and braced an arm on the door frame. “I mean, I apologize. For this morning.”

So it wasn’t his idea. That made the apology so much more sincere. I shook my head and tried to close the door again.

He stopped it with one huge hand. “I’m also sorry I’ve been kind of a jerk lately.”

Kind of? Understatement of the millennium. I started tapping my foot.

“It’s not your fault. It’s me. So I’m sorry. Okay?”

He still wouldn’t look me in the eye, and I was tired of standing there. I turned my back on him and went to find my shoes.

“Cat, you don’t have to go work in town,” Gray said. “I’ll move out to the barn.”

Laughter bubbled up inside me, and I let it loose. I couldn’t help it; the thought of Gray spending all of winter break sleeping in the hayloft was just too funny.

“I’m serious.”

So he sounded. I slipped on my shoes and came out to see him standing by the window. Sometimes I stood there to look out and admire the birds that sometimes perched in the pine tree next to the house. Sometimes I did other things which I didn’t think about when I was around my brothers. “You’re not moving out of the house.”

He glanced at me, his expression wary but hopeful. “I’m not?”

“You’ll freeze out there, or our new problem child will bust out of her stall and

trample you to death.” I pointed at the wound on his temple. “I know it was Rika who kicked you in the head.”

“How?”

“The dent in your skull is too narrow; Flash has a wider hoof. Besides, the only thing that palomino loves more than sulking is you.” I picked up my purse to make sure I had my wallet and some lip balm. “I’m not getting a job so I can avoid you. You’re off the hook.”

He walked over to me. “Then why are you doing it?”

Trick must have put him up to this, I realized, to see if I’d tell Gray something different. When it came to interfering in my life, my brothers were like a championship tag team.

“You can’t tell Trick,” I warned. When he nodded, I sat down on the edge of my bed and put on my best woeful face. “There’s this guy I want to see.”

“Yeah?” He reached back and shut the door. “Who is he?”

“He’s really amazing,” I confessed. “Tall, dark, kind of big but not fat. He’s a bit older than me, but I think once he gets to know me the age difference won’t matter.”

Gray’s throat moved as he gulped. “How much older?”

“I don’t know.” I pretended to think. “It’s really hard to tell exactly how old he is. But that doesn’t matter to me. He’s dreamy. A real strong, silent type.”

“Cat, listen,” Gray said quickly. “Whoever this guy is, he sounds like bad news. You can’t—”

“But he’s not. Bad, I mean. I mean, yeah, he might come across that way, but he’s not.” I produced a heartfelt sigh. “He can’t be bad. He’d get fired.”

“Fired?” my brother echoed.

“From his job, silly. I mean, he is the guy in charge around here.” I fluttered my eyelashes. “I love that about James.”

“James?”

I nodded. “James Yamah.”

“You have a crush on Yamah.” He eyed me. “*Sheriff Yamah.*”

“I know, he’s married and an adult, but that’s no big deal.” I waved my hand to emphasize this. “By the time his divorce is final, I’ll be old enough to get hitched. Then I’ll finally have the life I always wanted. Taking care of Jim,

vacuuming out his patrol car, dusting off his gun belt, polishing his mirrored sunglasses—”

His shoulders slumped. “Okay, I get the joke now.”

Knowing he didn’t, I smiled. “Good. When you tell Patrick that you apologized, you be sure and mention that I’m getting a job so I can have something to do over winter break. Something that does not include two nosy, overprotective brothers who never want to let me out of their sight.”

He shuffled his feet. “We care about you.”

I heard the anger and guilt behind the nice words, and had to bite my own tongue to keep from exploding with rage. I couldn’t even think about why I was so angry; I didn’t dare.

It had only been a month, and already this situation was driving me crazy. How was I going to live this normal life for two and a half more years, until I was an adult and could move out?

“I’ve got to go now or I’ll be late for my interview.” I tucked my purse under my arm and walked around Gray to the stairs. I could feel him watching me, but he didn’t follow me down. He was probably waiting for me and Trick to leave so he could search my room for love notes that weren’t there.

I found Trick sitting at the kitchen table and reading a pamphlet the vet had given him on immunizing breeding stock. He had also changed into clean clothes which were, like everything in his closet, black.

“Hey, we match.” I pretended to pat my hair. “Almost.”

“I could shave your head, too, if you’d like.” He inspected me. “That dress makes you look very grown-up.”

“Good, then maybe she’ll be fooled and pay me adult wages.” I glanced at the clock. “You ready to go?”

“Sure.” Trick stuck the pamphlet in his back pocket and took down from the wall rack the keys to Gray’s truck.

We made it all the way out to the driveway before he asked, “Did you and Gray bury the hatchet?”

“He volunteered to spend the winter in the barn.” I shrugged. “I’m still considering the offer.”

“You’re tough.” He opened the truck door for me.

The tight feeling in my chest didn't start until fifteen minutes later, as we left behind the farmland and crossed over into town. Downtown Lost Lake wasn't very big—a pitcher with a good arm could probably throw a curve ball from one end to the other—but the townspeople had packed plenty of shops along the two main roads. I'd be spending thirty hours a week here, working alone inventorying books while Mrs. Frost was up north visiting her grandkids.

If I get this job.

As we passed the town's cemetery, Trick had to veer around two men unloading an angel from the back of a delivery truck. I looked across the headstones at some other men who were digging around the biggest of the family tombs. "Did someone important die?"

"I don't think it's a funeral," he said. "I read in the paper that some vandals damaged one of the tombs. They're probably fixing it up."

"That's gruesome." My voice cracked on the last word. "Sorry, I'm a little nervous. When you were working for that computer company, did you ever hire anyone? I mean, do interviews with them?"

He nodded. "A few times. Why?"

"I think I need a practice run." I sat up a little straighter. "Okay, ask me some interview questions."

He thought for a moment. "How many programming languages do you know?"

I glared at him. "First pretend you're the little old lady owner of a bookstore café."

In a deliberate falsetto, he asked, "Who wrote *War and Peace*?"

"Tolstoy. That's too easy. And quit it with the silly voice."

He nodded. "Who was the author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?"

"Dr. Maya Angelou." I crossed my arms over the butterflies filling my stomach. "Ask me something about me."

He pulled the truck into one of the slanted parking spaces along main street. "Have you lied about anything on your application?"

I felt bewildered. "Why would I lie?"

"You'd be surprised." He put the truck in park and shut off the engine. "What do you consider your greatest personal strength?"

I'm a great liar. Not that I could say that to Mrs. Frost or Trick. "I'm a hard worker, and I don't need to be supervised." Which made two strengths, not one. "Which is the better answer?"

"Either one." He turned toward me. "Now what's your greatest personal weakness?"

"I don't have any job experience." That didn't sound so great, and then I knew what to add. "Yet."

"I think you're ready."

I looked down the block at the powder-blue and white front façade of Mrs. Frost's shop. The hand-painted sign hanging from a bracket by the door made me want to giggle—or maybe it was hysteria setting in. I got out and joined my brother on the sidewalk, and fought back the impulse to call the whole thing off so he could take me back home.

I felt so jumpy I could have hopped all the way home. "I'm glad the shop will be closed for the holidays. If it were staying open, she'd probably make me say, 'Welcome to Nibbles and Books' to everyone who came in the door."

"She still might have you answer the phone that way, if anyone calls." He looked past me. "Whenever I went for a job interview, I always pretended like I was meeting a good friend, and just hanging out and talking with them."

I couldn't imagine Trick hanging out with anyone, but then his life had been very different before he'd gotten custody of me and Gray. "Does that work?"

"Did for me." He gave me a one-armed hug. "I've got to go run an errand at the town hall. Meet me there when you're through."

I squared my shoulders and walked down to the bookstore café. From outside I could see most of the little tables in the front were occupied, and more customers were browsing the shelves in the back. I took a deep breath, opened the door and went inside.

The inside of the shop smelled of gingerbread, coffee and books, an odd but nice combination that made me feel a little more cheerful. Although there were at least twenty people in the shop, it was fairly quiet, and those who were talking kept their voices low, as if they were in a library or church.

Behind the long counter two ladies were busy making sandwiches and pouring drinks, which a third woman loaded onto a tray to carry to the tables. As the

waitress saw me, she unloaded her tray and came over. “Table for one, Miss?”

“Ah, no, thank you. I have an appointment with Mrs. Frost.” I’d picked up and dropped off my job application at the café counter, so I hadn’t yet met the shop’s owner.

She waved toward the back. “Her office is behind Women’s Fiction. Just knock first in case she’s on the phone.”

I thanked her again before I headed back to the office. After I knocked, an impatient voice responded with, “Come in, come in.”

The bookstore’s office had to be the most untidy, cluttered space I’d ever seen. Stacks of boxes and books lined the walls and occupied every flat surface; dozens of posters about bestsellers and photographs of authors papered the walls.

A lady I assumed was Mrs. Frost sat behind the desk, a ledger open in front of her. As neat as her office was untidy, she wore her silver hair pulled back with combs. The navy-blue dress she wore was even plainer than mine, but her understated makeup and dainty pearl earrings added an aura of elegance.

“You’re my three o’clock, which means I’m running later than I expected,” she said without looking up from the check form she was filling out. “I’m Martha Frost, and you’re Catherine?”

“It’s Catlyn, ma’am. Catlyn Youngblood.” I watched her shift two boxes from the chair next to her desk. “If you’re busy I can come back later.”

“That’s kind of you to offer, but if I don’t make a decision today, I’m going to miss my plane to Baltimore.” She gestured at the chair, and as I sat down she skimmed through a stack of applications.

I hadn’t considered that so many other people would be applying for the same position. As bad as the economy was, a lot of people were probably looking for work. My heart sank a little as I realized I’d have to be the least-qualified applicant.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Frost put on a pair of reading glasses. “You’re fifteen years old, you live in the farming community, and you’re a sophomore at Tanglewood. Straight-A student, very good.” She turned the page over. “You live with your brothers?”

“Yes.” There was never any easy way to say it, so I kept it short. “Our folks were killed in a car accident. My oldest brother Patrick is my legal guardian.”

She asked me a few more questions before she set aside the application. “As I mentioned in the ad, the job entails working thirty hours a week around the holidays. I need someone to inventory the shop’s stock as well as catalog a collection of rare books I’ve just acquired. The work has to be done during the evening, as I’ve rented the shop to a college testing assistance service that will be holding their tutoring classes here during the day. Have you heard of Julian Hargraves?”

“Just what I read about him in the paper,” I admitted. “He was really old when he died.”

“One hundred and seven, bless him,” she said. “Julian collected rare books about all sorts of occult topics. He was not a friendly man, but on a few occasions when I delivered a special order to his home, he asked me to stay for tea. Just before he died, he instructed his estate manager to sell his entire collection to me for thirty dollars.”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. “You mean, thirty dollars a book?”

“Thirty dollars for the entire library.” She saw my expression. “It’s completely ridiculous, of course. Julian had books that individually were worth thousands of dollars; I know because I sold them to him.” Mrs. Frost smiled. “But enough about Julian. Why are you interested in working for me, Catlyn?”

“I love books,” I said. “I also want to earn some money for college.”

She nodded. “Are those your only reasons?”

“No, ma’am.” I didn’t have to hide behind the brick wall now, but I did have to be careful. “My brothers are great, and I love them, but I want to become more independent.”

She nodded. “If I hire you, how will you get back and forth to work?”

“I’m planning on taking the bus that runs from Farmer’s Market to downtown,” I said. “Both of my brothers drive, so if I miss it, one of them can drop me off or pick me up.”

She gave me a shrewd look. “What are your five favorite novels?”

I thought of my small collection of books. “*Valley of the Horses* by Jean M. Auel, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Mistress Devon* by Virginia Coffman, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle and *The Long Winter* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.”

“Interesting.” She seemed to relax. “You can often tell a great deal about someone when you know what their favorite books are. You enjoy stories with strong heroines placed in impossible situations.”

“I know heroes are more popular with most people, but I like girls who think for themselves and do something about their problems. Instead of waiting to be rescued by the hero,” I tacked on.

“I think I have just the book for you.” She opened a drawer and took out a worn paperback with dog-eared pages and yellowed edges. “This is one of my favorite novels.” The faded cover showed a dark-haired woman in a cloak, and looked a little like a romance novel. “Don’t be fooled by the artwork. The story is quite remarkable.”

I felt embarrassed. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t bring any money with me.”

“Consider it a welcoming gift.” She handed it to me. “If you can start tomorrow, the job is yours.”

“Really?” All the breath wanted to rush out of me. “But I didn’t think ... ”

“That I’d hire you?” The skin around her eyes crinkled. “You’re bright, you’ve never been in trouble, you know how to use a computer, and you love books. That’s all the experience I need.” She stood up and held out her hand. “I’ll see you tomorrow at three o’clock sharp. Wear something comfortable.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I shook her hand. “Thank you so much.”

Three

I practically floated out of Mrs. Frost's office. As I looked around the bookstore, everything seemed new all over again. I was going to work here. I had the job.

"Cat." A petite redhead waved at me from a table by the window where she was sitting with two other girls.

I grinned and walked over. "Hey, Tiffany." I nodded to her friends Amber and Gwen, who were also on the cheerleading squad at our high school. "Are you doing some shopping?"

"We're hiding from my mom. She's on a Christmas ornament bender for her ladies club swap. I'm about to overdose on red, green and adorably cute." She pushed out the empty chair and patted the seat, inviting me to sit down. "What are you doing in town?"

I sat down, trying not to beam like an idiot and failing. "I just got a job, working here. I'm going to be inventorying the shop while Mrs. Frost is up north for the holidays."

"Then you deserve a cookie." Tiffany handed me a little decorated gingerbread man. "If you ever need someone to come over and harass you, give me a call."

"Great." I bit into the cookie to hide my dismay. Just like everyone else in town, Tiffany didn't remember me, or that when I first moved here she had harassed me almost daily at school. It hadn't been her fault, but she didn't remember that, either.

"So did you hear about Sunny Johnson?" Amber asked. At my blank look, she pointed at the shop across the street. "Her parents own the Junktique."

"No." I glanced through the window but only saw a closed sign. "I don't think

I know her.”

“She mostly hangs out with the 4-H’ers,” Tiffany said, referring to the tight group of kids at Tanglewood whose parents were all working farmers. “Her boyfriend is Nick Starple. You wouldn’t know him; he dropped out last year.”

“Anyway,” Amber said, “Nick always picks Sunny up at school and takes her home. Only last Friday his car broke down so he couldn’t make it, and when Sunny’s parents got home that night, she was gone.”

I frowned. “Gone where?”

“They say she ran away from home again.” Amber looked around and lowered her voice. “She’s done it a couple times before, you know, because her dad is so strict and her mom just goes along with it to keep the peace. Lately Sunny has been saying how she and Nick might take off and go up north, like to Maryland or something, where they could get married without their parents’ permission.”

“It’s all Sunny talks about,” Gwen assured me. “She hates her parents and she’s crazy about Nick.”

“Then why would she leave without him?” I asked.

“She wouldn’t,” Gwen said.

Amber nodded. “Exactly. No one can figure out why she’d take off alone, least of all Nick. She didn’t have any money or a car. No one saw her at the bus station, and she hasn’t phoned anyone. Not even Nick, and she would definitely call him just to let him know she was okay.”

Gwen lowered her voice to a whisper. “What if Nick did something to her and is just trying to cover it up?”

“No way.” Tiffany sounded adamant. “I’ve known Nicky since kindergarten. He acts tough, but he’s not a bad guy. The only reason he dropped out of school was to take care of the farm after his dad got sick.”

Amber nodded. “Nick’s been talking to everyone, trying to find out if anyone has heard from Sunny. One of the shopkeepers thought he saw her talking to an old man near her folks’ shop that night after they closed, but he couldn’t be sure. Nick swears she would have walked to the shop when he didn’t show up, but no one can find this old man. He thinks something bad must have happened to her. Like maybe someone jumped her.”

“Or grabbed her,” Gwen added. “It’s happened a couple times before. That’s

why we have the curfew.”

Just before the Halloween dance I’d seriously thought about running away from home, but in the end I’d decided against it. A girl by herself in a strange place, who had no money, no transportation and no friends, was a walking target.

“I wish I could help, but I’ve never met Sunny,” I said. “I don’t even know what she looks like.”

“She’s pretty average,” Tiffany said. “Brown eyes, long brown hair, kinda skinny. She always wears this jacket Nick gave her for her sixteenth birthday. It’s pink satin with a white rabbit on the back. Really beyond tasteless, but she didn’t care. She loved it.”

“That’s ’cause Nick always calls her his Sunny Bunny,” Amber added wistfully. “I bet she was wearing it that day.”

After no one said anything for a few minutes, I decided to change the subject. “So what are you guys doing over winter break?”

“Avoiding our mothers,” Gwen said, making a pained face. “They always try to volunteer us for Sparklefest slave duty.”

I frowned. “Sparklefest?”

“A very dull and boring annual downtown tradition that starts a couple of days before Christmas,” Tiffany said. “The shopkeepers and the mayor like drape the entire town in lights, and then they have a parade on Christmas Day and a bunch of old guys make speeches about the history of Lost Lake. At midnight they turn on all the lights in the park at once, which is the really big thing. They usually have some oldies band play down by the lake, too. It’s mostly for the tourists, but we always have to go.”

“The food is pretty good,” Amber put in. “All the local restaurants and cafés set up booths, and it’s become kind of a competition to see who sells out first.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Frost will give you that night off,” Tiffany added. “That way you can enter the big relay race.”

“Sorry, I don’t run,” I told her. “Unless I’m being chased.”

She giggled. “It’s not that kind of race. It’s the final big thing they have the day after Christmas. They use horses and riders for the relay, out on the old track by the east side of the lake. It’s supposed to date back to something that happened like a hundred years ago, when the founding fathers first settled here.

Someone set fire to the town, and they had to send messengers on horseback to get help from the farmers before it burned down.”

“Really.” I felt a little shocked. “I guess it worked.”

“Yeah, they saved the day and everyone’s lives, so of course we have to reenact it every year.” Tiffany faked a yawn and patted her mouth. “Ancient history, if you ask me. I’d much rather go to a dance.”

“Yeah, like a winter formal. My older sister goes to one every year at her college,” Amber said, and began describing the event.

I recalled the last dance I had gone to, the school Halloween dance that had changed everything. Tiffany and the other girls didn’t remember that night, but I did. And I could never think about it at home, so all the details came rushing back into my mind.

Wearing a red dress and dancing with my dark boy. *You look like a grand duchess.*

Looking at the beautiful old ring in my hand, the ring that had brought us together. *You’re always with me.*

Listening to someone I thought had been a friend scream at me. *You hurt my Aaron.*

Kneeling beside my dark boy, both of us bleeding. *You have to stop me now, before I become a monster.*

Telling him how I felt, how I had always felt from the night we met. *I did mention that I’m in love with you, didn’t I?*

Standing up to my brother, Patrick, when it was over. When he found us together. *I have the right to a normal life.*

Seeing the anger, sadness and regret on Trick’s face just before he wiped away my memories. *I’m sorry, Catlyn.*

Tiffany touched my arm. “You okay, Cat?”

“Yeah, just zoning out a little.” I wasn’t okay, and I wouldn’t be until much later tonight when Tiffany, her friends, my brothers and the rest of the world were asleep. When I stopped being sister and friend and got to live my other life, my secret life, the one I could only live a few hours at a time, always in darkness. “I’ve got to go meet my brother. See you guys later.”

I expected my brothers didn't think I could get the job working in town, but neither Trick nor Gray seemed surprised by the news. That night at dinner we talked about juggling chores and schedules, and I promised to keep up with my part of the housework.

Gray didn't cook, but unfortunately Trick tried to, which was why I usually made dinner for us. Since I would be at work now, I had been making up ahead of time big batches of pasta sauce, chili and other things that froze well. I'd put out whatever they wanted to defrost before I went to catch my bus, and by dinner time all they'd have to do would be warm it up.

"One thing I do need is a house key," I said as I passed the chef's salad I'd made to Gray.

Trick looked up. "What for?"

"I'm taking the bus home," I reminded him. "I won't get back from work until after eleven. You guys will be asleep."

"I'll wait at the bus stop for you," Gray volunteered.

"You have to get up early to take care of the horses." I saw the way Trick was frowning. "The bus stop is only a two minute walk from the house. One minute if I run."

"I don't like the idea of you walking—or running—home alone that late at night." Trick turned to Gray. "I'll go to meet her at the bus stop tonight, and then we'll switch for her next shift. Whoever stays home gets up with the horses."

Gray nodded.

"Nothing is going to happen to me." When neither of them reacted, I blew out a breath. "All right. Keep treating me like a helpless baby who can't even cross the street by herself."

"If we were doing that," Trick countered, "you wouldn't have this job at all."

He was right, and I hated him a little for it. "Fine. Whatever." I got up and took my plate over to the sink.

As far as my brothers knew, I had no memory of the first five months we'd lived in Lost Lake, or anything I had learned during that time. Because of this, and a bargain Trick had made to keep things that way, they thought they had nothing to worry about at all.

I didn't tell them I remembered everything because I needed them to go on

believing that I was good old oblivious Catlyn. They trusted me now, and believed everything I told them. Especially when I said good-night to them at ten o'clock and went upstairs to go to bed.

Trick still checked on me occasionally without warning, so I did change into my pajamas, brushed my teeth and got under the covers. Sometimes I would read for a few minutes as I listened to the sound of Gray's footsteps as he went to the old garage that we'd converted into bedroom for him, or Trick pouring water into the coffee maker and the faint beeps as he set the automatic timer. Other nights I would just turn out the lights, roll onto my side, close my eyes and begin silently counting the seconds as they crawled by.

Tonight I heard the creak of the stairs under a heavy foot, but when my bedroom door opened a few inches I smelled sunlight, Gray's scent, not coffee, Trick's scent. He didn't come inside, but he did stand there watching me for a minute before he closed the door and went back downstairs.

Gray never checked on me, so this wasn't a good sign. Telling him the whole fake-crush thing about Sheriff Yamah had been a stupid stunt. I'd wanted him to be afraid, at least for a few minutes, but I'd only managed to make him suspicious.

Because of this, I waited an extra half-hour before I got up and changed into my riding clothes. I also didn't bother tip-toeing down the stairs but went to my window and opened it, taking a deep breath before I climbed over the sill and jumped to the ground.

If I'd been a normal girl, I'd have broken my legs. Instead I landed as silently as my four-legged namesake, straightening and holding still as I listened before I headed for the barn.

As always, Rika was the first one to look over the edge of her stall as I came in, but for once she seemed a little less hostile, and only snorted. Sali whickered to me, her big eyes shining, and tried to walk out of the stall before I'd gotten a bridle on her.

"I know," I said, stroking the warm arch of her neck. "I'm impatient, too." I kept my voice low so as not to alarm the other horses, although the rest of our new stock weren't much interested in me. Flash ignored everyone but Gray, so only Trick's big white stallion Jupiter stuck his head out to give me a you-bad-

girl glare.

Over the last couple of weeks I'd trained Sali to carry me on our midnight rides without a saddle or a bareback pad. It took some getting used to for both of us, but I found I actually preferred it. With nothing between us, she responded even faster to my body signals, and riding that way felt more natural to me. Sometimes I even felt like I became part of her, as if when we rode we somehow merged together.

Once we were clear of the barn and the stockyard, I leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "Take me to him, girl."

Sali probably didn't understand the words, but she knew what I wanted her to do whenever I said them, and took off. We both preferred to ride at a running walk, as hers was faster and smoother than any other breed's, but my own impatience got the better of me, and I urged her into a lope as we crossed the road and followed the winding trail into the dense, dark woods across from our farm.

The glow of a few candles lit the windows of the old manor house, and a big black stallion stood tethered outside. Prince turned his head and then shuffled around, his ears perking at the sight of Sali. She came up alongside him, touching his nose with hers before she stood still so I could dismount. Once I tied her beside him I gave both horses a pat and then walked over to the wide stone steps leading up to the front door, and the dark boy waiting there for me.

At five-foot-ten I loomed over most boys my age, but Jesse Raven stood a head taller. People would have called him lanky, at least until they saw him move; he had the slim, tough build of someone who had been riding horseback almost since he could walk. The paleness of his skin made his long, straight hair look like polished black silk, and when he looked at me the moon threaded amethyst light through the dark strands. He had dark gray eyes that even in the shadows glittered like marcasite, and a face so beautiful sometimes it hurt me just to look at him.

"Catlyn."

He had grown up speaking Romanian and Russian and a bunch of other languages I didn't know, and while he spoke perfect English, his accent added an extra syllable to my name, changing it into something strange and exotic.

Despite everything we had been through, seeing him still occasionally made me feel as if I were dreaming. That at any moment I would open my eyes and find myself in my bedroom, and he would be gone.

“Jesse.”

“You’re late.” He held out his hand.

“Better that than never.” I curled my fingers around his, shivering a little with how good it felt to touch him. “I’ve missed you.”

“How long have you missed me?” he asked as he drew me inside.

“Nine days, three hours, ten minutes and I made myself stop counting the seconds.” It didn’t matter how long we were apart; I could feel him every night, almost from the moment he woke. “I got the job in town.”

Jesse picked me up like I weighed no more than a kitten and whirled around, laughing with me.

“I never doubted you would,” he said as he set me back down on my feet. “But I am glad it is decided.”

Getting the job at the bookstore had been the simplest solution to our problem, namely of trying to see each other without my brothers or Jesse’s parents finding out about it. Our families regarded each other as natural enemies, and because of that felt they had the right to keep us apart. My brothers and Jesse’s parents had taken extreme measures to do just that, too. They hadn’t just erased my memories of moving to Lost Lake, meeting Jesse and falling in love with him; they’d made everyone in town forget me, Jesse, and almost everything that had happened since my brothers and I had moved to Lost Lake.

They didn’t understand who we were, or why we were together. It didn’t matter to Jesse that I was a Van Helsing, the granddaughter of a family of vampire hunters. It didn’t matter to me that Jesse was only one step away from becoming a vampire himself. We both knew, almost from the moment we first met, that we were meant to be together. The world might have wanted us to be monsters, but when we were together we were just a girl and a boy who were crazy about each other.

“There is one thing,” I said to Jesse. “Either Trick or Gray will be waiting for me at the bus stop every night I work. So you won’t be able to drive me home.” Which had been part of our original plan when Jesse told me about the job at

Mrs. Frost's.

"We will still have thirty hours every week for ourselves." He smiled and touched my cheek. "I think by the new year you will be completely bored with me."

"Oh, sure, that's going to happen." I rolled my eyes. "I have to recite Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet about a hundred times a day just so I don't think about you when Trick is around me."

We knew my oldest brother had the power to make me forget things; what I still didn't know for sure was if he could also read my thoughts whenever he wanted. I suspected he couldn't, because he would have known about me meeting Jesse from the beginning, but I wasn't a hundred percent positive yet. And it wasn't like I could ask my brother about his weird Van Helsing ability, so to be safe I never let myself think about Jesse around him but instead thought of the sonnet.

"I found out something else today that might help us," I told Jesse. "Mrs. Frost told me that she just bought a huge collection of rare books from the estate of a guy who was into the occult. I think we should look through them and see if we can find out anything else about vampires and the Van Helsing." Something occurred to me. "Did you or your parents know Julian Hargraves?"

"We knew the family, of course, but after they came to Lost Lake they kept very much to themselves," Jesse admitted. "Julian never married or had children, and after his parents passed away he inherited their home. Toward the end of his life he became quite reclusive. What are you hoping to learn from his books?"

"I want to know if there's a cure for this. Not just for you," I added. "For me, too."

My ability, which I still didn't quite understand, somehow gave me the power to attract and control cats. Not just the pet-type of cat, I had discovered, but any feline. Before erasing my memory, Trick had told me that all cats responded to my thoughts, but that was the sum total of what I knew.

Paul Raven, Jesse's father, had told me that all the Van Helsing children were born with special abilities that helped them hunt and destroy vampires. He thought I would use mine on Jesse, but we'd already passed that test. Wounded, desperate for blood and nearly out of control, Jesse had begged me in the

boathouse on Halloween night to kill him. Instead, I'd given him my blood. At the time I hadn't cared about the consequences—drinking human blood was supposed to be the final step that would transform Jesse into a vampire—but then we'd learned that my blood wasn't altogether human.

My father had been infected with vampire blood, just like Jesse and his parents. And because vampire blood also ran through my veins, drinking it hadn't pushed Jesse the rest of the way into becoming a full-fledged monster.

My heritage meant nothing to me. I didn't want to be a vampire, a vampire hunter, or anything else besides a normal human girl. Jesse wanted to be human again, too. So if there was some way for us to be normal again, I was going to find it.

Do you have to find it tonight?

No, I thought back to him. Since Halloween night, Jesse and I could read each other's minds. Part of a bond that formed between two vampires, it was just one more thing we were not supposed to be able to do.

It also still scared me, so I said out loud, "Let's take a ride over to the lake cabin."

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