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MANNA

Book 3 of
The Night Walkers

ONE JACK

Staring into the pit that had swallowed every answer I needed, I could still feel the earth shaking and the burning heat from the fire against my face. The frantic yells of the prisoners we'd set free echoed in my ears. Every shard of memory from the explosion at Benton Air Force Base—which had stolen away my mentor, my father—was still vivid. It had only happened a month ago, but I knew it would always be hard to forget something that had knocked the wind out of me and thrown me clean off my feet.

Especially when every time I remembered that night, my heart felt like it was happening all over again.

The wind blew cold at my back and chilled me in spite of the warm summer sun. I stood at the very edge of the crater, balanced on the brink. I gazed down into the deep shadows and rubble far below, wishing that the knowledge Danny—*no, my dad*, I mentally corrected myself—had taken with him could somehow drift like the dust through the air, up toward me.

Because from what I could tell, that might be the only hope I had of figuring out his damn puzzle.

"I wish we'd found another way," Parker muttered from a few feet to my right. I usually came here by myself, but he'd convinced me to bring him along this time. I was already regretting it.

This was where I always came when I ran into problems solving Dad's last riddle, his last assignment. Parker was a distraction here. Dad had given me a paper with directions and clues to piece together the formula for a new drug, and he'd told me I was the only one who could figure it out.

You'll be the answer. You'll know what to do.

Except I wasn't ... and I didn't.

And yet I was still expected to stop a war between the three different types of Night Walkers, a war that had been going on my whole life. Oh, and in order to do this, I had to solve Dad's

puzzle, make the Takers stop killing long enough to listen to me, and create a magical—and I believe untested—drug that would somehow save the day.

No pressure.

“This sure is a creepy old place to decide to build a society, isn’t it?” Parker asked. This time his question was directed at me and I couldn’t stay silent.

“Dad picked it.”

“Oh ... ” My brother sounded frustrated as he added, “See, that’s the kind of detail I’d like to know about him. Why would he pick a place like this?”

The smallest groan escaped my lips before I could stop it, and I could tell from the way Parker stiffened that he’d heard it. This was why I hadn’t wanted him to come. I came out here for time to think, and he wasn’t helping.

“The structure is sound, there’s plenty of space, and much of it is underground,” I said.

Parker’s reply was soft. “Now that actually makes sense. Thank you.”

I sat down near the edge of the hole, then picked up some rocks and tossed them inside. The last thing I wanted was to hurt my brother, but it was hard to even look at him anymore when every detail reminded me so much of our dad. It wasn’t Parker’s fault that he caused me pain with everything he did.

Giving up on trying to keep him quiet, I decided to smooth things over a bit. “What else do you want to know about this place?”

“Why did the Takers keep so many prisoners here?” Parker hesitated only a moment before sitting down next to me.

“They suspected some of them of being Watchers, like us. But the rest were mostly for leverage. They wanted to force people to give them what they wanted. We should know better than anyone that taking loved ones can usually get you anything you want.”

Parker nodded. “And if the base is so big and so much of it is underground, how do you know for sure the Takers left?”

“I’ve walked through every remaining hall—they’re gone. Dad’s explosion took out the majority of the space they were using,” I said. When Parker squinted at the other side of the base, I went on. “Yes, it’s huge. Much bigger than you’d think. There’s probably two-thirds of it left. ”

“So then *why’d* they leave?” Parker grabbed a handful of sand and dropped it into the hole. “They were taking more and more bodies in Oakville, so they seemed to be setting up something big. Why not move to the other side of the base and pick up where they left off?”

My voice dropped to a grim note. “Because they knew I’d come back.”

Parker didn’t speak, but I saw him turn his head to watch me.

“Plus, their entire plan revolved around Eclipse, and being able to set up a system nearby so a lot of Takers could take over Dreamers at will and not give the bodies back.” I pulled my shoulders up and tried to loosen the knot in my neck. “Since Dad destroyed Eclipse and any hint of how to make it, right now they’re scrambling. But once they get organized, they *will* come for us.”

I thought of the few times in this twenty-year war when our side—the Builders and Watchers—had made any kind of headway against the Takers. The Takers always came back harder and more violently than we expected. People always died. Waiting for them to regroup felt like waiting for a bomb to drop from the sky—one you knew for certain was coming but didn’t know when. And you couldn’t stop it.

Brushing my hands against my jeans, I hopped to my feet. “When they come, we need to be ready.”

“You think we can be ready by working on the formula Dad gave you?” Parker stood up beside me but kept his eyes on the crater. “You really feel sure this one won’t go bad, the way Eclipse did?”

“Eclipse caught Dad by surprise when it let Takers take over Dreamers permanently.” My gut wrenched inside me. I shared Parker’s fear but was trying to keep it buried. “I’m sure he wouldn’t let anything like that happen again.”

I turned to walk back to Parker’s car, but my brother caught my sleeve and stopped me. His questions were making me feel smothered, and it took enormous control not to yank my arm out of his grasp.

“Jack, Dad was Divided. At the end, he was pretty far gone ... ” Parker let the question hang in the air, and it stung to hear it.

“I trust him.” I spun back to face my brother, despite the pain it caused me to look into his ice blue eyes that were so much like Dad’s. Looking at them

made me feel like I was ripping open wounds that were still too fresh to heal. “Maybe you should too.”

“Okay, okay.” Parker held his hands up in front of him as a sign of surrender and took a step back.

I immediately regretted my reaction. I considered apologizing, but instead turned to walk back to the car.

“Tell me this, though.” It only took three steps for him to catch up with me. “This new formula is supposed to help the Takers sleep like Dreamers—like regular people?”

I nodded.

“Would it work on Watchers too? Could it make us not need Builders anymore?”

It was a good question, one I’d looked into myself when Dad was first trying to come up with the formula. “No. Each type of Night Walker has a different brain chemistry. It wouldn’t do the same thing to Watchers because it’s designed to work in the brain of a Taker.”

Parker scratched his cheek. “Okay, that makes sense. Well, at the very least it should put us on more even footing, right?”

“What do you mean?” I kept walking.

“I mean, Watchers would die too without Builders to help them get real sleep. So this drug should, theoretically at least, do what the Builders do ... but for the Takers instead of the Watchers?”

“Yeah ... what’s your point?” When I reached the car I opened the driver’s side door, but Parker shook his head.

“You aren’t driving again,” he said.

“Why not?” Did everything have to turn into an argument with him? Every time we talked it felt like I was trying to swim upstream.

“Because it’s *my* car.” Parker lowered his chin, but I just stared at him and waited. I’d wanted to bring my motorcycle. The only reason we’d even taken this crappy car was because Parker had insisted on coming with me.

He knew it. I just had to wait for him to realize it.

With a sigh, he tossed me the keys and climbed into the passenger seat.

After I'd shoved the keys in the ignition, he continued, obviously irritated. "My question is, if the formula we're trying to make is supposed to help them, then why don't we just tell them that? Wouldn't they want to help us help them?"

I laughed.

"What?" Parker's anger was growing. "Chloe might be the only Taker I know, but she doesn't seem *that* unreasonable."

"Yeah, sure." I shrugged and then threw him a piercing look. "She just tried to take Finn over permanently and then kill you for finding out about it."

Parker frowned. "But she also helped me set him free, and she hasn't tried anything since she's been back in her own body."

"That we know of ... "

"You don't know—"

"People don't change, Parker. It isn't in them." I gave a firm shake of my head and tightly gripped the steering wheel.

"Why do you have to be so frustrating?" He growled the last word out low, but his voice still echoed across the tiny car.

"Better watch it." I put the car into gear. "You're starting to sound like *him*."

Parker deflated immediately and looked like I'd punched him in the gut. I almost regretted my words ... but he needed to remember what it felt like, didn't he? How else could he try to prevent his darker side from breaking free again?

He slid down into his seat, completely silent as I drove toward the main road. Every minute of his silence added to my guilt until I filled the void with the answer he'd been asking for in the first place.

"The Takers won't help us help them because they don't think it's as simple as choosing to 'live' or 'die.' They believe that with Eclipse they had the power to be like gods, and they want to find a way to get that back." Parker turned his head enough toward me that I could tell he was listening, so I went

on. “To them, this is a choice between living like gods, or losing that ability and becoming normal.”

Parker slouched down in his seat. “For so long, I would’ve done anything to just be normal. You’re telling me there aren’t any of them who would choose that?”

“Those who would are going to be hard to find, let alone organize. Dad told me they spent years basically being brainwashed by a man named Steve Campbell. He was the leader of the Takers and started this war to begin with.”

Even saying Campbell’s name made every emotion in me twist into a tight ball of rage. I’d deliberately kept Parker unaware of all the details about the man and what he’d done to ruin our lives.

“He’s dead now,” I continued, “but he did plenty of long-term damage while he was still around. He convinced the Takers that even if their lives are shorter than Watchers’ or Builders’ lives, being able to use other people’s bodies and invade their minds is an immense power. Because of him, they believe that they truly *live* more in twenty years than a normal person does in a lifetime.”

Parker shook his head. “That’s crazy.”

“Exactly.”

TWO

JACK

The crumpled paper in my pocket felt like a branding iron waiting to mark me as a disappointment, a failure. Even from the grave, Dad was managing to give me challenges that felt impossible.

I scanned down the laptop screen that I'd already read three times, knowing that it held nothing that would help me figure this out. There was a simple truth here ... either Dad had screwed up, or I was missing something important.

Moving to lean against the wall, I stared hard at all the lab equipment I'd managed to gather from Dad's warehouses over the last few weeks. He'd rented storage spaces throughout Oakville and kept full labs in each one in case he needed to work. He said it ensured he'd always have a lab he could go to, and we'd never have to lug his equipment around when we had to suddenly bolt in the middle of the night.

When Parker's mom agreed to let me use the storage room between Parker's bedroom and the door to the garage, I'm sure she didn't expect me to set up a laboratory. But she hadn't said anything.

Maybe she did expect it ... after all, she *had* been married to our dad.

But despite all of my hard work, the equipment and chemicals were going mostly unused. Nothing, including visiting Benton Air Force Base yesterday hoping for some kind of inspiration, had provided the answers I still needed.

"Jack?" Chloe stared at me as she leaned against a table on the other side of my lab, waiting. She'd asked the same question every day for the last month: when will the new drug for the Takers be ready? I still couldn't give her the answer she wanted.

The formula Dad had given me was fairly basic, nothing overly complicated. The only problem was that in place of three of the ingredients, he'd scribbled in the numbers 1, 2, and 3. Dad had always loved puzzles, and he was beyond paranoid at the end of his life, but so far I'd had no luck filling

in those blanks. I'd hoped maybe to find a clue at one of his labs, but there was nothing.

And I was going to have to tell Chloe the truth sometime.

I wasn't sure I even wanted to make this formula in the first place. Takers had been responsible for my mother's death as well as my father's. Why would I want to work so hard just to save the people I'd spent my life hating?

But I knew why—it was because Dad had asked me to. He wanted this war between the different types of Night Walkers to end, and he was sure the incomplete formula in my pocket was the way to do it.

So I would figure this out ... even if it killed me.

There was one extra word scribbled in at the very bottom of the formula. It was the main reason I'd gone out to the base to begin with, and even though I'd had no luck there, I had to believe he'd written it for a reason. The word was "buried."

Not my idea of hopeful, but hey, that was Dad ...

"The new drug isn't ready, and it won't be for a while."

I stood with my back straight, hoping that once I told Chloe everything, she would stop asking, at least for a couple of days. She'd been around a lot since Parker had separated her from Finn's body. Some days it wasn't half bad ... I mean, she was obviously hot when she wasn't pissed at me.

"I'm working on it," I added. "It's just not going to be as simple as I hoped."

"The deal was, I help baby-bro Parker save his buddy Finn and you help me survive. Right?" Chloe shifted her weight and stepped closer. Her stance was casual, but her eyes were gray storm clouds. As always, they begged for a fight.

A fight I could handle, but the darkening circles of sleep deprivation beneath her eyes made me look away. They were a reminder that this latest challenge from Dad was taking longer than either of us wanted.

Chloe was the only Taker I'd ever spent more than five minutes with and not tried to throw any of my knives at. Actually, that wasn't true. I did throw a knife at her once, but it was when she'd taken over Finn's body, so I'd missed

on purpose. I rubbed my fist against the rivets on the right leg of my jeans, trying to decide if that counted or not.

Grabbing the neat stack of clean clothes from the corner, I threw them into my duffel bag, on top of everything else I'd never quite unpacked. I kept my voice perfectly calm. "Yes, that was the deal, but—"

"But what?" she demanded. "It sounds pretty damn simple to me!"

Zipping the bag closed, I double-checked that I'd put my cell phone in the pocket of my jeans. Taking a breath, I mentally braced myself for the fight that was bound to come after I told her the whole truth. "Look, I'm trying, but what Dad left me about the formula ... it isn't complete."

She stepped away from the wall, all pretense of this being a casual chat shattered. Her voice turned to a whispered hiss. "What?"

I stood my ground and met her hard gaze, despite the fact that she was a Taker and I had made it a goal to *never* meet the eyes of someone like her. "He gave me most of it, and a clue to find the rest, but I need time."

"Time isn't always something we can get more of." Chloe took another step closer. She masked it well, but the roiling emotion behind her stiff expression was hard to hide. "I don't understand. If he really created this formula to help the Takers, then why wouldn't he give you the whole thing?"

"Because he's learned through years of experience not to trust people like you."

She looked away, but I wasn't done.

"Because even when he was trying to help Takers, he felt he had to build in safeguards. He had to make sure you needed his sons alive in order to make it." I stepped a bit closer, and her eyes came up to meet mine again. "He didn't want your kind to be able to grab the formula, kill Parker and me, and make it yourselves."

"Fine," she muttered. "I get it."

"Good."

"Even so." She rubbed her eye with her right hand and the shadow beneath it stood out in even stronger contrast. "It sure would've been nice for me to know this little detail *before* we made that deal, don't you think?"

“I’m working on the problem.” I pulled the duffle bag’s strap over my shoulder.

“That’s not good enough, Jack.” Her hands curled into small fists at her sides. After our last conversation, I already knew she wasn’t afraid to use them to work out a little frustration. My quick reflexes were the only thing that had kept her punch from landing.

Not that I blamed her for being frustrated; what she was facing was terrifying. To be dying slowly, your mind eroding away from lack of sleep, with no way to stop it—any Watcher could understand how that felt. That was why this formula was so important.

I walked around her toward the door. “Well, it has to be enough. This is my responsibility, and—”

“Screw responsibility! This is my *life*, Jack!” Chloe grabbed my shoulder and jerked me back until I was staring into her eyes. She took down her mask completely, wanting me to see the desperation and fear she was feeling. I drew it all in, meeting her gaze, willing her to believe I really *was* on her side.

I couldn’t guarantee I would always be on her side ... but for right now, I was.

I understood too well the weighty responsibility that rested on my shoulders: the fate of not only her life, but the lives of many, *many* more. All of the Takers’ lives—plus the lives of ordinary people, which the Takers could and would destroy if I didn’t find a way to stop them.

Watchers my age had been raised to despise all Takers. We were polar opposites in many ways—Watchers learned how to blend in when we were in the mind of someone who was dreaming. As much as possible, we tried not to disrupt the Dreamers. Takers did the opposite. They took over the actual bodies of Dreamers while they slept, and often left nothing but rubble in their wake.

I shook the thoughts from my head. The Takers had been my enemies for a very long time, but for right now I had to focus on a different part of our relationship: the similarities. The Takers were still Night Walkers, just like me. And so no matter how much I disliked them—and yes, at times even Chloe—I would still find a way to save them. Dad sacrificed himself to save Parker and me, so I would finish the task he gave me.

As tough as Chloe always tried to act, her fingers trembled as they gripped my arm.

“I know *exactly* how important this is, Chloe.” I enunciated every syllable as I backed slowly toward the storage room door, and her hand fell back to her side. “So please, let me do what I need to do. I want to keep my promise.”

The door opened behind me and hit the back of my shoe, but I didn’t turn when I heard my brother’s voice.

“Uh, am I interrupting?”

“No.” I stepped forward and shifted my bag so Parker could open the door the rest of the way. When I turned around, his gaze was on my duffel. He raised his eyes to mine and I pulled out my phone, studying it like it held some fascinating secret.

“You’re leaving right now?” His face fell into a deep frown.

I didn’t look up as I answered. “I told you that last night on the way home from the base.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his thumb along his chin and added, “You said the same thing the night before that, and the night before that.”

Finn, Parker’s best friend, poked his head around the corner, shaggy pieces of auburn hair hung across his right eye. “You’re really going?”

I groaned. “Yes, if you two will stop blocking the door.”

Finn shuddered when he saw Chloe standing behind us and jerked backward out of the room. He’d been avoiding her—more specifically, avoiding eye contact with her—as much as possible. It had been very awkward ever since she’d taken over his body ... not hard to see why.

Of course, there was a lot more to the whole Dreamer-Taker connection than just making the mistake of looking at a Taker. The Dreamer, Finn, would have to go to sleep after the eye contact, and Chloe would need to lie down and enter the Taker version of sleep—which looked like sleep, but was actually more like a light coma state. And Chloe would need to do this before making eye contact with anyone else. Although Finn basically knew all of that, it didn’t seem to make him feel any better about being around her. I guess once someone has trapped you in your own mind and tried to kill people using your body, forgive-and-forget isn’t really an option.

Reaching out one long arm, Finn yanked on the back of Parker's shirt until he too moved out of my way. I got one quick glance at Finn's shirt—*If history really repeats itself, I'm SO getting a dinosaur*—before it was out of sight. Although I didn't know him that well yet, even I had to admit the guy was pretty entertaining.

"Anyway, I think I know where I'm going now." I stuck my phone into my pocket and adjusted my bag. After Chloe stepped out, I locked the lab door behind me and stepped past Parker.

"Where?" Parker's expression was dark as he followed me down the short hallway. Even without looking him in the eye, I could see this argument coming from a mile away.

I looked around to make sure Chloe hadn't followed us. I'd been worried over the past month that she might be reporting back to the other Takers, even though she'd given me no hint of it. For the first few weeks I'd occasionally followed her, or grabbed her phone when she wasn't looking to check for texts or calls to her brothers. If Parker hadn't agreed to try to help her after she separated herself from Finn, I would never have let her hang around. She was a risk ... and a big one.

"Dad and I lived in a trailer outside Logandale a few years back," I said. "I need to go there." I muttered the part that concerned me under my breath: "I think."

Parker said, "How will this help exactly?"

"In the formula, there are numbers standing in for three missing ingredients. And the word 'buried.' Logandale is a place where Dad might have buried something he wanted me to find later." I crossed to the kitchen counter and leaned against it, trying not to get bumped as Finn dug around in the fridge beside me.

Parker popped the knuckles on his right hand. "So you think he buried a list of the missing information out on a trailer lot somewhere?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he told people the information and buried his address book. Or maybe there's nothing there at all. It's just a place to start."

"Could he have buried actual ingredients there?" Parker looked incredulous, and I couldn't deny that I had doubts of my own.

“I don’t know, Parker.” This was starting to feel like an interrogation, so I did my best to shut down any further questions he might have. “I think Danny—Dad—didn’t want anyone else to be able to make this formula without my help. It’s an insurance policy for both of us, because if the Takers hurt either of us, then I’ll burn every reference to it and they can all just die for all I care.”

When I turned around, I saw Chloe standing in the doorway. She caught my eye over Parker’s shoulder, and I immediately regretted my words when I saw the hurt in her expression. It’s not that I hadn’t meant what I said ... but I hadn’t intended for her to hear me say it.

Finn sidled across the room in the awkward silence and took up a post in the opposite corner of the room from Chloe.

Parker didn’t say anything, and his mouth pressed into a firm line. Then he sighed. “Fine, give me five minutes to pack some stuff.”

“No need. I shouldn’t be gone too long if it goes well. Logandale’s only an hour away, and I’ll let you know what I find.” I walked around him and propped the door to the garage open with my bag while I lifted my motorcycle keys off the counter.

Parker shook his head, looking frustrated. “You want me to stay here?”

“Yes, for now.” I braced myself for the argument I could see coming. “Would you move my bike out back and throw the tarp over it? It’s probably in your mom’s way, and I need to get on the road.”

Parker shook his head before I’d even finished my question. “I’m coming.”

“No,” I replied, trying to make it clear from my tone that there was no room for argument.

“You need my help.”

“I do, but not this time.” I tossed him the motorcycle keys and he caught them on instinct before they hit his chest. Chloe had left, probably angry with me for what I’d said, but I still lowered my voice when I continued. “You can help me most by staying here in case it takes longer than I think. Keep an eye on things. Watch Chloe, and keep her out of the lab. The Takers are still too shaken to do much—what Dad did set them back years. His explosion destroyed the little bit of Eclipse he’d made, as well as their only access to the

formula. But like I said, they'll be gearing up for a fight soon. You need to watch for signs of it coming."

Parker still looked like he wanted to argue, so I turned and walked out the door toward the van before he got a chance. Besides, I did have a point, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Something told me the Takers weren't just going to forgive and forget how Dad blew up half the base, all of the Eclipse formula, some of the Takers who'd held him captive ... and himself.

My heart throbbed with an empty ache in my chest, and I pushed the thought away.

Living with a target on my back was never comfortable, but it was also the only thing I'd ever known. Dad had taught me to be smart and survive this way. He'd wanted Parker to have something different, a more normal life. I would do my best to make sure Parker still had it, even now.

As I passed through the garage, I grabbed a shovel and some rope.

"Planning to bury people, are we?" Finn asked in a cheery voice from somewhere behind me.

"Could be ... or to dig them up."

I guess they could tell I wasn't in a joking mood, because no one commented again.

I grunted as I hefted everything up and placed it in the passenger side of the white van we'd stolen from the Takers' base. When I'd learned that Mason, one of the prisoners we'd rescued, hadn't destroyed the van like we'd planned, I asked him to give it back. It came in handy for projects when my motorcycle just wasn't going to cut it.

I glanced around the yard to see if Chloe had come out here. I'd wanted to at least give her a quick wave before I left, but she was nowhere in sight. She must've disappeared again; not all that surprising. If there was anything I'd learned about her over the past month, it was that she had a tendency to come and go whenever and wherever she pleased, with no warning.

In that respect, I guessed she was a lot like me.

Parker was leaning against the driver's side of the van when I walked around. I wrapped one arm around his shoulder in a quick hug that also helped move him somewhat out of the way. "Take care of yourself. They

know who you are, but they'll probably be afraid to retaliate for everything when they're so desperate to get Eclipse back. They probably think we're the only people who might have a clue how to make it."

"You're the only one who might have a clue." Parker pulled back and frowned. "That formula Dad gave you looks like gibberish to me."

"First, they don't know you don't understand it, and *please* don't tell them." I leveled my gaze at him, forcing myself not to react to his eyes. "Second, without the last three ingredients, the formula isn't useful to anyone—myself included."

"Right." Parker didn't move from where he stood, blocking me from closing the door and leaving. "Are you sure you can't wait another day or that I can't come with you? I still have so many questions, and you promised to tell me more about Da—"

"I'm sure." I nudged him out of the way with my arm and closed the door. "And we'll have time for questions and answers later ... after I've finished this."

I stretched my neck to one side, forcing myself not to dwell on the hurt my brother was struggling to keep from showing on his face. This conversation was complicated, and I was itching to get moving. I was already past tired. It had been too long since I'd slept in a Builder's dreams. Addie, Finn's sister, was the only Builder I knew in this town, and since Parker and Addie had gotten their relationship problems worked out, it seemed weird to step in. Not to mention that she was busy being *his* Builder.

The more time I spent with Addie—awake or asleep—the more I had to remind myself that she was unavailable. I'd avoided her dreams except when things were getting really bad. And although her friend Mia was no Builder, her self-hypnosis-induced dreams had helped me more than I'd expected. But still, they weren't the same as a Builder's dreams.

And figuring out Dad's formula required me to be alert and rested. That meant one thing for certain—after I checked out the old Logandale spot, I would go to the Night Walker rebel camp at Cypress Crest and see Libby. I really was tired, and she was the best Builder I'd ever met. Plus, I missed her. The two months I'd been with Parker were the longest we'd gone without seeing each other since we were kids. It felt weird being apart like this.

And, between Addie and Parker being together and the newest romantic developments between Mia and Finn, there was yet another reason I needed to get out of here. It was getting very ... *gooey* lately.

Although I had to admit it was almost worth it to watch Chloe around Addie and Mia. She would get a stiff spine and a wary look in her eyes every time they were nearby—it was like she was afraid those girls might accidentally touch her and make her soft.

I'd tell her she could use a little softening, if she asked me—which was probably why she'd never ask.

“Well, I'd better get going.” I looked at Parker through the window of the van. “I have my phone. Keep me updated and be careful.”

He nodded reluctantly and took a few steps back.

I waved at Finn and put the van in reverse. The vehicle was far from nice, but it belonged to me now—I'd secured it with fresh plates after I got back it from Mason. It felt like a better choice for this mission than my bike, since I didn't know what or who I might need to bring back with me. Also, I could sleep in the backseat if it turned out Dad's paranoia would make this quest long and complicated.

Parker walked back up to my open window and I kept my foot on the brake. “So, three missing pieces, huh?”

“Yep.”

“You really think you can figure this out?”

I let out a fast puff of air and the speedometer in front of me fogged. The tension from that one question tightened every muscle in my upper body. If we had the key to helping the Takers sleep—and survive, then there was hope they *might* come to an agreement with us. The Night Walker Society could finally be what it was intended to be when it was founded: a place of refuge for people who lived in a world of nightmares. A place to escape to a life worth living. It could be what Dad had always wanted it to be—what I still wanted it to be.

“Dad thought I could.” I swallowed hard and met my brother's eyes.

Instantly, my heart ached. While Parker had spent years getting used to the idea of never seeing Dad again, I'd only had a month ... and the gaping hole

Dad left didn't seem to be healing very fast.

“Guess his faith will have to be enough,” I added.

Parker put his hand on my shoulder and gave it one final squeeze. “That’s good enough for me.”

THREE

JACK

It took an hour to get to Logandale and another half-hour to find the remote patch of land where the trailer was parked when Dad and I had lived here. That was shortly after Mom had died and he'd come back to Cypress Crest to get me. When he took me away from the rebel camp and brought me out to the middle of nowhere, I'd wondered what he was planning to do with me.

I hopped out, grabbing the shovel from the passenger side. The brush on the land was wild, having gotten way past overgrown in the couple of years since I'd been here. One particular bush was still misshapen in the back from where I used to climb under it when Dad called out for me to hide. I could almost hear his barking order echoing across the open air, bouncing off the empty land: "Jack, now—GO."

It happened regularly. Sometimes someone was heading our way. Sometimes he just wanted to test me.

Either way, I'd gotten very good at hiding.

It felt so weird to be able to openly refer to Danny as my dad. I'd always known he was—it wasn't ever kept a secret from me, but it was something we never shared with anyone else. He told some people that he was looking out for a friend's kid, others that he was training me; whatever lie he felt worked best for the situation.

But I was *never* allowed to call him "Dad" even in private. He was afraid I might then slip up in public and somehow reveal our secret. Parker was the only thing he felt vulnerable about; he was terrified people could use Parker to hurt him. His son, his weak spot.

He could never let his enemies find out he had more than one of us.

In the back of my mind, I remembered the only time I'd called him Dad. I was eight, and it just took two seconds for him to lift me up and pin my back against the wall.

“*Danny*—not Dad,” he growled, glancing over his shoulder even though we were completely alone. “*Never Dad* ... do you understand?”

My lungs burned with the need for air, but I was proud I kept my emotions in check as I nodded. He released me and I slid down the wall.

He might have been rough, but his tactics worked. I’d never made that mistake again.

I surveyed the land, trying to remember everything as it was the last time I’d been here, five years ago. Ten feet in front of me stood the remains of the makeshift fire pit where we’d cooked our meals many nights. Ten feet to my right was the spot Dad had set up a target and taught me to use first a slingshot, then a BB gun, and eventually throwing knives. About a mile over the rise to the left, he’d set up a shooting range and taught me to fire a rifle and then a handgun. We’d been here longer than anywhere, but almost every sign of it was gone now. How fast Mother Nature could wipe away every footprint we’d left behind.

My feet took me further into the lot without a thought to guide them. There was a clear spot here where nothing grew. No weeds, no wildflowers—no beauty of the land broke through this soil. A vivid memory came floating back; Dad had poured so much rock salt in this spot I wasn’t sure if anything would ever grow here again. I smiled tightly and my chest twisted with bittersweet pain. Even nature couldn’t erase Dad completely.

Dust swirled around my feet as a breeze kicked up. I could still see Dad standing across the empty lot from me, waiting for me to attack—teaching me to fight—teaching me to kill.

“Come at me high.” He bent his knees and waited. His eyes, always rimmed with shadows and exhaustion, somehow still looked alert and ready for whatever attack I had planned.

I’d circled him, hands up, blocking as I searched his stance, his body, and his eyes for weakness. *Find the weakness and you’ve won.* He’d taught me that lesson time and again. There was always a weakness.

Then I saw it—the slight dragging of his right foot, the smallest hint there was something wrong. He’d been cornered by some Takers the day before. I knew there’d been a fight, but he’d said everything was fine when he came home. Standing up straight, I dropped my hands and stepped forward.

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