

SLAYERS

C.J. HILL



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

New York



PROLOGUE

The reason parents don't tell their
children about their nightmares

Mrs. Harriet Davis had never been afraid of dragons—until now. The dragon in her dream hovered above Washington, D.C., watching traffic. Against the fading light of the evening, its body seemed first brown, then maroon, then the color of blood. The dragon turned its head side to side, presenting a face that looked like a cross between a crocodile and a cat, although with more disdain than a cat and less patience than a crocodile. In size and wingspan it was comparable to a small commuter plane, but the similarities ended there. It darted toward the street, its batlike wings outstretched while it searched among fleeing pedestrians. It was all beast: a primeval predator with golden eyes that showed more than just hunger. Anger lurked there—purpose, something evil.

Harriet couldn't see the faces of the people who ran down the street, ducking into building doorways or under parked cars. Their panic blurred together in her mind. Her attention was riveted on the dragon.

It picked up a van with its claws the same way birds pluck fish from the ocean. The dragon drew the vehicle to its face, viewed the screaming occupants, then with a growl of disappointment let the van fall. It

crashed into the street, the sound of glass and metal mingling with car horns. When the van finally stopped shuddering, it lay on its side, wheels spinning futilely in the darkening night.

The dragon dashed upward, turned, and surveyed the scene again. Dozens of cars clogged the intersections. The ones that hadn't already stalled were rolling to useless stops. Harriet didn't understand why this was, just as she didn't know why the traffic lights had gone out.

The dragon swooped down, picked up a screaming blonde woman, and examined her. It seemed dissatisfied by her thrashing and dropped her.

Harriet tried to open her eyes, tried to make the dream stop. She didn't want to see the woman fall, didn't want to hear the sound that came when she hit the ground.

It didn't work. The events unfolded in perfect clarity.

The dragon pushed upward again and soared toward the tidal basin.

And then the dream changed and Harriet was no longer just viewing the events, she was standing there underneath the cherry trees, a soft breeze pushing against her maternity nightgown and the feel of cold grass beneath her feet. The Jefferson Memorial was the closest structure, but it didn't offer much protection. It was an outdoor monument with a huge bronze statue of Jefferson surrounded by columns underneath a domed roof. She didn't have a lot of choices, though. The dragon was tearing through the sky in her direction.

She wasn't sure how she'd gotten here or why she was out during rush hour in her pajamas. Time didn't allow for those thoughts. She ran. She wasn't fast. The baby, due in two weeks, pressed into her ribs with every step she took. Her already crowded lungs strained to take in enough air. Tourists rushed past her; one nearly knocked her down.

The monument was still a couple of minutes away and the dragon was drawing nearer. Screams behind Harriet drew her attention and she looked over her shoulder. The dragon had stopped long enough to scoop up another blonde woman.

Was there a pattern? Harriet didn't know, but wished her own hair wasn't blonde.

Her terror made her run faster. She stumbled up the memorial steps, breathing hard, then staggered the rest of the way across the stone floor. Once there, she huddled with two dozen people at the feet of Thomas Jefferson.

They weren't protected. Not really. The memorial had no doors or walls, just the large, marble columns. But perhaps the dragon wouldn't notice them here, out of the way.

She didn't mind the press of people around her. They were warm, and the cold from the floor seeped through her thin nightgown. She shivered, shook really. Inside her, the baby kicked and pushed, seemingly as alarmed as she was. Could he feel her fear?

She peered through the columns into the night. Not much was visible. What had happened to the lights? It was late enough that they should have come on.

"Where did that thing come from?" a woman next to Harriet whispered.

"Shut up," someone said. "We've got to be perfectly still. Perfectly quiet."

No one else spoke, although how could the dragon not hear them when Harriet's breathing was so loud, so fast?

The screams in the distance stopped. The sound of beating wings filled the air, and then silence.

Silence.

Silence.

She caught the whiff of something she couldn't place. Something oily and unnatural. Did dragons have a scent?

Harriet wished she had her cell phone so she could at least text her husband, Allen. She desperately wanted to tell him where she was and that she loved him. Had she told him that today? She couldn't remember.

A brownish red tail dropped down the side of the building. It swished back and forth. The dragon was sitting on top of the roof.

Harriet swallowed hard. Her pulse hammered in her ears, and she pressed her back farther into the foot of the statue. She could hear the domed ceiling above her creak as the dragon shifted its weight. Would the roof hold, or would they be crushed?

She took hold of a man's hand who sat next to her, even though she had no idea who he was. He squeezed her hand back. She put her other hand on her stomach, shielding her baby the best she could. They had already picked out a name for him. Ryker. Last week she'd stenciled it onto the wall of the nursery in flowing silver letters. She'd poured love into those letters, hope, promise, and now she couldn't do anything to protect him. This hurt worse than losing her own life.

The baby kicked against her hand, agitated, as though he wanted to tell her something.

Then the dragon's tail moved upward and disappeared.

Let it have flown away, Harriet thought, but she didn't hear the beat of wings.

Seconds passed. The dragon stepped down onto the concrete outside the monument. Each step made the ground vibrate. Harriet had to clamp her lips together so she didn't cry out.

The dragon's head came into view and she noticed for the first time that he had a white patch on his forehead, diamond-shaped, that stood out like a glistening tattoo. She didn't consider it for long. The dragon turned two golden eyes on the crowd, searching, and then his gaze narrowed in on her. He let out a screech of triumph. It intermingled with the crowd's immediate and unanimous scream.

The dragon lunged forward, pushing its head through the columns. Harriet stumbled to her feet, a shriek tearing at her throat. She had to get away.

The columns held the rest of the dragon back, and it snapped its

jaws in frustration. Its head reared back and breathed in a long, snarling breath. Harriet knew what would come next—fire. She, and everyone around her, scrambled to the other side of the monument. Some people ran out completely, but Harriet only made it to the far columns.

Then the fire came. Luckily Jefferson took the brunt of the attack. His bronze exterior blackened in the flames, his solemn expression erased in soot. The heat licked around Harriet, fluttering her nightgown against her leg and making her gasp. She raised her hand to protect her eyes.

Then the heat disappeared. And so did the dragon.

Where had it gone? More importantly, was it safer to run away or stay here? The night was growing darker, and she couldn't see a single light, not anywhere in the city.

A few days ago she had heard a professor of medieval history—Dr. Bartholemew—on a radio program. He'd claimed that dragons were real and would be unleashed on humanity again. She had laughed and told Allen, "Well, at least Bigfoot will have someone to keep him company."

But this Dr. Bartholemew was right. She wished she had listened to the rest of the program.

"Is it gone?" a man beside her asked.

Before she could answer, a searing hot claw grabbed her shoulder from behind.

Harriet gasped, let out a strangled scream, and found herself sitting up in bed.

Allen threw off his covers and turned on the lamp on their nightstand. His blue eyes were wide, but not quite awake as he jolted out of the bed. "What is it? Is the baby coming?"

She shook her head and drew her knees up, trembling, gasping. "A dragon grabbed me! Its claws burned into my back!"

Allen stared at her a moment, then laid back down with a thump and shut his eyes. "Okay, let me know when it's the baby."

Harriet clutched the blanket, her voice choked with emotion. “It flew through the city killing people, but it was looking for me. I know it was.”

Allen flipped off the light. “It was a bad dream. The best thing to do—”

“It wasn’t a dream.” She reached around him and turned the lamp back on. “It was real. I can still smell it. Can’t you?”

He took a deep breath. “Nope.”

“My shoulder burns like crazy.” She slid her nightgown away from her skin and gasped. Three long welts ran across her shoulder and down her back. “Look!” she cried. It was proof she would rather have not found. A wave of nausea swept over her.

Allen sat up, squinting at the welts. “How did you get those?”

Her voice spiraled upward. “I told you. It grabbed me.”

“That isn’t . . .” He was completely awake now and examining the place where she’d slept. “It must have been something else—something stung you and you had a bad dream.”

She would have liked to believe him, but didn’t. “What would leave marks this big? Do you think we have a colony of steroid-taking scorpions in our bed that just happen to sting in rows?” She pushed the covers off and swung her feet to the floor, then put one hand over her stomach, protecting the baby. She walked to the TV that sat on her dresser. Certainly the news would have something on about the dragon attack.

She clicked through the stations, flipping through infomercials and late-night movies—all regular programming.

“What are you doing?” Allen asked.

She turned back to her husband, puzzled. “Maybe the news stations don’t know yet. I think there was some sort of power outage.”

“Harriet . . .”

In the span of a sigh, her panic shifted to frustration and then to tears. “It was real and it was evil. It wanted to kill me.”

He got up from the bed, walked over, and pulled her into a careful embrace so as not to touch her welts. "Harriet."

"You don't even believe me," she said, sobbing. Then she lay her head against his chest and repeated. "It wasn't just a dream."

The phone rang in Dr. Alastair Bartholemew's house. He rolled over and hit the alarm clock, then hit it again when the noise didn't stop. It took him a few more seconds to realize his alarm didn't play Beethoven's Fifth—that was the new phone. He blinked at the glowing numbers on the clock face: 2:11 a.m. If someone was calling him now, there must be an emergency. He clumsily grabbed the phone. "Hello."

"I'm sorry to call you so late, Dr. Bartholemew," a male voice said. "Especially since you don't know us, but we listened to you when you were on Coast to Coast, and, well, my wife wants to talk to you."

Alastair rubbed his eyes, and considered hanging up.

Alastair's wife, Shirley, opened one eye to check what the noise was. He waved for her to go back to sleep. "Radio fans," he whispered, his hand over the mouthpiece. Since the show last week, he'd heard from medieval buffs, people who thought they had been dragons in a past life, and people who thought they talked to invisible dragons.

Shirley groaned and turned over on her side, pulling a pillow over her head.

The man on the phone went on. "My wife thinks she saw a dragon. Or at least she dreamed of one, but she woke up with foot-long welts running down her back. She said that's where it grabbed her."

And then Alastair was completely awake. His glance fell on Shirley and the still healing slash that striped across her swollen belly. "Is your wife pregnant?"

"Yes," the man said, surprised. "How did you know that?"

"Do you live in D.C.?"

"Fairfax," the man said, his voice wary now.

It wasn't far away. "Give me your address," Alastair said, already out of bed and heading toward his closet. "I need to talk to your wife in person."

Alastair reached the Davises' home a little after 3:00 a.m. It was a small house but in an upscale neighborhood, the type where every bush and tree had been trimmed by a team of landscapers.

Alastair had thrown on some clothes but hadn't brushed his hair, and now he smoothed it down with one hand. His hair was prematurely graying and already more gray than brown at his bangs and temples, but he didn't mind. It counterbalanced a face that otherwise looked perpetually young. His university peers failed to take him seriously more often than not, and he wanted every appearance of age and experience he could get.

He knocked at the door, then stood impatiently, staring at the swirling woodgrain lines in front of him.

After a minute, Allen Davis opened the door. He was young, probably in his mid-twenties, with short black hair and rumpled clothes.

"Thanks for coming," Allen said, but his voice betrayed his doubt. He probably already regretted calling. He eyed Alastair uncertainly and motioned for him to come inside. "Harriet is looking at pictures on the Internet. She's trying to find a dragon like the one she saw."

They walked the short distance to the kitchen, where a blonde woman sat at the table, her laptop in front of her and a bottle of antacids opened next to it. She had a blanket wrapped around her even though it wasn't cold. From the size of her stomach, she was probably eight or nine months along.

Alastair smiled and shook her hand. "I'm glad you called. It's important that we talk." He pulled up the chair next to her and smiled again, keeping his voice casual. "My wife is pregnant, too. We're having a girl. How about you?"

She laid her hand across her belly. "A boy."

Allen sat down on a third chair. “So it’s normal for women to have crazy dreams when they’re pregnant, right? What I can’t figure out is the claw marks. How did those get there?”

Harriet ignored her husband and clicked on an image on her laptop. “I haven’t seen anything like the dragon I saw. The Chinese dragons are too skinny, but they have the whiskers right. It had wings like a bat.” She closed one image and opened another: an elaborately colored dragon whose neck should have belonged to a swan instead of something that breathed fire.

Alastair nodded at Harriet. “Did the dragon you saw have golden eyes and a diamond on its forehead?”

She turned back to him. “Yes, how did you know?”

He noticed, as though he were a foreigner coming to America, all the electric appliances in the kitchen. The fridge, dishwasher, oven, stove, lights, cordless phone, ceiling fan, and computer. How dependant they were on it. What a long way civilization had come from the Dark Ages when monsters lived.

Alastair dragged his attention back to Harriet. “Because they’re real. I’ve spent years studying them.” He hesitated, wondering whether he should add that he’d seen some himself. Most people labeled him as crazy when he made that claim, and once somebody thought you were insane, it didn’t matter what you said to them. But Harriet might believe the truth.

Allen let out a disbelieving grunt. “You studied them? How? By reading fairy tales? You can’t be serious.”

Which was the usual response. Just once Alastair wanted to say, “Look, I’m not an idiot. I wouldn’t have spent half my life researching dragons if I didn’t have proof.” But now wasn’t the time to snap. Patiently, he said, “Stories of dragons are found in nearly every culture—from Europe to China to South America to Hawaii. Even the Bible mentions dragons.”

Allen’s eyebrows dipped. “The Bible doesn’t talk about dragons.”

Alastair picked up Harriet's laptop and handed it to him. "Check. Run a search."

While he did, Alastair turned his attention back to Harriet. "I became a professor of medieval civilizations specifically so I would have access to early documents about dragons. Trust me when I say I'm an expert. The reason you dreamed of a dragon, the reason your body was so sure one wounded you that your skin blistered in response, is that your mind already knows dragons exist. It's genetic memory." Alastair tapped one finger against his temple. "Your subconscious is warning you that dragons are near, that you need to prepare for when they come back."

Harriet grew pale. She pulled the blanket tighter around her. "Come back from where? How?"

Alastair leaned forward, going automatically into professor mode. "Medieval records report that dragons can choose one of two gestation times for their eggs: a short span—which lasts between fifteen to twenty years, or a long span—approximately one hundred and fifty years. It's their way of escaping predators." He kept his eyes trained on hers. "Unfortunately, viable dragon eggs are somewhere in the D.C. area."

"You're sure?" Harriet's voice came out low, like a stone dropped into the silence of a pool. "Where do we go to escape from them? How do we get away?"

"We don't escape," Alastair said. "We fight."

Harriet gripped her blanket. "It picked up a van like it was a toy. It breathed fire. We can't fight it. You'd need missiles or military jets—"

He shook his head. "Dragons can outmaneuver planes and missiles. Their skin is radar absorbing, which means that they can't be tracked. They also have another advantage. When they roar, they send out an electromagnetic pulse that fries all electric components in the area." He went on shaking his head. "It's almost as if they were preparing, even back then, to fight us in the future."

Allen broke into the conversation. "This is what the Book of Revelations says about dragons: 'And she being with child cried, travailing in

birth and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon.’” He looked up at his wife and some of the color drained from his face. He skimmed the verses on the screen. “‘And the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child . . .’”

Allen turned to Alastair, his eyes wide. “This isn’t literally describing something that will happen, is it?”

“Those verses are probably symbolic of the Christ child. But the point is that even the Bible referenced dragons, so—”

Allen waved a hand at the computer. “I don’t remember ever seeing a dragon at the Christmas nativity scene. One did show up in my wife’s dream, though, and it tried to kill her and our baby son.”

“Let me explain some more,” Alastair said soothingly. “Do you remember back in the Middle Ages, how the alchemists tried to find a way to create gold? History got that wrong. They sought to create liquid gold—a substance that would give people the powers needed to conquer dragons. Luckily, they found it. Those superenhanced knights would have destroyed dragons altogether if some of the dragons hadn’t used their long gestation periods to outlive them.”

Allen wiped his palms on his jeans. “You know how to make this liquid gold stuff?”

Alastair realized he hadn’t explained that part. “I don’t need to. Once the knights drank the liquid gold, it changed their DNA. They passed that DNA down to future generations. When a dragon is close to hatching, its heartbeat emits a pulse that turns on the DNA of any of the dragon knights’ descendants who are within a mile radius.” He leaned over and put his hand on top of Harriet’s arm. “You had the dream because you’re a descendant of a dragon knight. At some point, you went near a dragon egg in the D.C. area.”

She yanked her arm away and let out a half-strangled gasp. “That’s why the dragon was searching for me? It knew I was a descendant?”

“Yes.”

She stood up so quickly her blanket fell away and her chair toppled to the floor with a sharp crack. She didn't bother to right it. “I'm not fighting that thing. I don't have any special powers.”

“You don't,” Alastair agreed. “But your son does. The pulse can only turn on the DNA of babies.” He gestured to her stomach. “Those who are still in the womb.”

Allen stood up, joining his wife. “Our baby is not going anywhere near a dragon.”

“Not when he's a baby,” Alastair said. “We could have a decade or two before the eggs hatch—but not longer than that. Otherwise the dragon embryo wouldn't have been developed enough to trigger your son's DNA and your genetic awareness of it. But when your child is old enough, I'll need to train him to use his powers. The new generation of slayers are our only hope for defeating the dragons when they come.”

Allen stepped in front of his wife, making a protective barrier between her and Alastair. “Wait. We're not agreeing to any of this.” His hands clenched and unclenched at his side. “You can't walk in here and tell us you're taking our son.”

This was the problem of getting ahead of yourself while trying to explain things. Alastair took a step back, to appear as nonthreatening as possible. “I'm not taking your son. He'll still live with you. I'll teach him when he's older—during the summers so he won't miss school. He won't be alone. There are other descendants. I'm not sure how many, but I know of one—my daughter. My wife had the dream, too.”

Harriet's head shook so quickly she looked like she was having a standing seizure. “If there are other children, then you don't need our son.”

“Of course he's needed.” Especially since Alastair didn't know where any of the other children were. After Shirley's dream, he had gone on the radio show hoping for a flurry of calls from pregnant women who had dreamed of dragon attacks. So far, Harriet was the only one.

“No,” Harriet said. “Absolutely not. We’ll leave. We’ll go someplace where it won’t find us.”

Allen’s lips thinned into a tight line. “You can’t seriously ask our son to fight—”

Alastair took a step toward Harriet. “You’ve seen a dragon. You understand what it will do to the city if we don’t stop it.”

She winced and took hold of her side. Pain, maybe labor pain, flashed across her face. Allen put his arm around her shoulder. “Go lie down,” he told her. To Alastair, he said, “It’s time for you to go.”

Alastair opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t know what to say. His own wife had been so much more understanding. But then, his wife had known dragons were real before she got pregnant. She’d realized having a slayer for a child was a possibility. “We’re all tired,” Alastair finally said. “You need time to process this.”

Allen stared. Harriet pressed her hand to her lips while tears pooled in her eyes.

I’m asking a difficult thing of her, Alastair realized. She’s just in shock. But now she knew lives were at stake. She would eventually do the right thing.

“You have my phone number,” Alastair said. “Call me when you want to talk again.”

Harriet didn’t call. After two days, Alastair drove to their house. He would address their worries. He would appeal to their sense of duty. He would beg, if necessary.

A FOR SALE sign stood in the middle of their yard.

Well, that was a bit drastic, wasn’t it?

He strode to the door, noticing a lock box already on the handle. He rang the doorbell. No one answered. He peered into the front window, his frustration growing. The furniture was gone. The whole place had been cleared out except for miscellaneous papers and books, things scattered on the floor that Harriet and Allen hadn’t bothered packing.

The disappointment felt like a puncture wound in his chest. They were running away from the dragon instead of staying to help to fight it—instead of helping his daughter fight it.

I've failed, he thought. I knew where another child was, and now he's gone. How could Alastair possibly find this boy when it was time to train him? And what's more, how could he find any other children without producing the same results from their parents? Going on the radio again might turn up more pregnant women with dragon dreams. But when he told them the truth, what would keep the rest of them from bolting?

The children needed training; without it, they'd probably all end up dead, victims of their inexperience. Like Nathan. Alastair pushed the thought away. This wasn't the time to think about his brother.

Alastair trudged around the outside of the house, checking each window. Looking for . . . well, he wasn't sure what he was looking for. He just had to make sure they were really gone.

He came to a small room, which, judging from the Noah's Ark stencils, was the nursery.

All his years of research and piecing things together. They meant nothing if he couldn't train enough heirs of the dragon knights. And now he had nothing to help him find this one.

Except for the child's name. Because there it was, stenciled on the wall. His name would be Ryker. Ryker Davis.

Alastair leaned against the window, staring at the name. "I will find you," he whispered. "I'll think of a way to find and train all of you."



CHAPTER 1

Seventeen years later

From the passenger side of her sister's BMW, Tori surveyed the camp parking lot. It was dirt, with no white lines, so cars were parked at odd angles. True, the surrounding forest had a picture-perfect beauty to it. The oak and maple trees crowded together, their thick branches perfectly still in the early summer sun. But the buildings seemed shabby. The paint was faded in places on the main lodge, and even if it hadn't been, it still would have looked boxy and spare—rundown, really.

The sign read *ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON*, with the word *CAMP* tacked up underneath the other words like it was an afterthought.

Tori made sure she had her registration confirmation, then slid her purse onto her shoulder. Her mom was supposed to have driven her here, but ended up having to host a party for senators and their wives instead. The job had then fallen to Tori's older sister, Aprilynne.

Aprilynne lowered her sunglasses enough to consider the stream of people making their way through the parking lot. "It's just what I thought. Riffraff, gangster wannabes, and probable orphans."

Tori refused to be disappointed, at least yet. “They’re normal kids,” she said.

“Exactly my point.”

“It will be fun.” Tori opened the car door, stepped out, and swatted at some gnats. Two teenage boys with squirt guns darted past and chased each other into the forest.

Aprilynne wrinkled her nose. “They’re not even clean now, and camp is just starting.”

“They’re campers, not doctors performing surgery on me.”

Aprilynne pushed a button on the dashboard and the trunk popped open. Tori slid out of the BMW and went around to the back to get her luggage.

Through the open window, Aprilynne said, “Why come here for a month when you could be at a *good* camp? What about that one you went to in Cancún last summer? I thought you liked it there.”

“That was a finishing school at a resort, not a camp.”

“I bet the mattresses here aren’t clean. You’ll come home with lice or something even more disgusting.”

Tori hefted one suitcase and then the other out of the trunk. Each weighed a ton. She had probably brought too many shoes and books. She had packed some romances in case camp turned out to be boring, and then had thrown in a few classics from her English reading list in case camp turned out to be really, really boring. She shut the trunk of the car with a thud. “Tell Mom I’ll call her later.”

It was probably better that her mom wasn’t here to see the camp, Tori decided. She undoubtedly would have found several reasons why it wasn’t suitable.

Aprilynne hung her head out the window. “You realize your friends have a bet going to see how long you’ll last here. Now that I’ve seen the place, I think I’ll wager a hundred dollars on three days.”

Tori grabbed her matching shoulder bag from the backseat of the BMW. “I’ve got my stuff. You can go now.”

Aprilynne started up the car, then glanced back again. “You know, there’s no point in being rich if you act poor.”

Tori ignored the comment. She should have never told Aprilynne that some kids came to Dragon Camp on need-based scholarships. Aprilynne wasn’t impressed by that type of largesse. She had only rolled her eyes and said, “You mean, not only is dragon camp made up of Renaissance Faire rejects, but they’re all broke, too?”

The BMW pulled out of the parking lot going too fast—Aprilynne’s normal driving speed—and soon nothing was left of her sister but a trail of dust and designer perfume hanging in the air.

Tori walked slowly toward the main building and the hand-printed sign that read REGISTER HERE. She pulled her two suitcases, wishing too late that she hadn’t brought the good luggage. The dust would probably ruin the canvas by the time she made it to her cabin. Still, she couldn’t very well pick them up and haul them around; they were too heavy. Several kids streamed around her, jostling by with backpacks and duffle bags.

How had they managed to fit everything they needed for a month into a duffle bag? Tori’s shoes alone took up that much space. Still, it had been a mistake to pack so much, or maybe just a mistake to come. Maybe Aprilynne was right. That occasionally happened. The beds would be hard, the food bad, and the stuff about dragon classes that had made her want to come in the first place—a bunch of hype to attract little kids.

Besides, she was too old for a camp like this. She was sixteen and a half, and most of these kids didn’t look much older than the required entrance age of eleven.

Tori pulled her suitcases harder. They bumped along on the uneven ground, nearly falling over.

She thought about the cell phone tucked into her shoulder bag. Aprilynne probably hadn’t even reached the main road yet. If Tori

called her now, the car would be back here in minutes. They could be somewhere shopping by early afternoon.

Tori stared at the road leaving camp and wondered who would win the bet. Had anyone wagered she would only last five minutes?

As Tori pulled, her biggest suitcase gave a shudder and tipped over. A cloud of dust rose from the ground at the point of its demise. She bent to straighten it, and as she did, her shoulder bag slid down her arm, knocking into her other suitcase, which then joined the first one on the ground. She let out a huff of exasperation, set the shoulder bag down, then righted her suitcases.

Stupid dirt parking lot. Fine, it *was* a camp, but every camp Tori had ever attended had paved parking lots and sidewalks between the cabins. By the look of it, this one had neither. A worse thought came to her: What if this camp didn't have real toilets? What if it had out-houses?

She walked slower, searching for a restroom among the rustic log cabins that were scattered through the forest. The words from the brochure came to her mind: *Step into the world of dragon slayers. Campers will practice fencing, horseback riding, archery, and everything a young dragon slayer needs to save the world. Older campers can apply what they learn in medieval history class for college credit.*

The college credit part had been new this year and had finally sold her parents on the idea. She had wanted to go to St. George for the last four summers, but every time she'd asked, her parents had sent her to a camp they deemed better. One with a wider range of facilities. A higher camper-to-counselor ratio. More exclusive clientele. Ones for horseback riders, ice skaters, or debutantes.

But Tori had wanted knights, or answers, or perhaps magic. She had wanted a place where people understood her and her crazy dragon obsession, because then maybe she could understand herself.

Tori looked from the dirt parking lot to the huddled log cabins and

gray trash cans. This place had nothing even remotely magical about it. Probably all she'd get out of the summer was a succession of sunburns, a few rashes, and a healthy appreciation of bug spray.

Did any decent restaurants even deliver out here?

And did any of these kids really have lice? None of the kids who poured past her seemed to be scratching, but if Aprilynne mentioned it, then it might be a real concern. After all, Tori had never even been to a public school.

The thinking of her suitcases suddenly stopped, and the next moment she felt them lifted away from her.

She turned to see two guys about her age hefting her suitcases off the ground. Both wore mirrored sunglasses, and both were tall, perhaps six two. One was blond, with muscular arms covered in a layer of dirt. The other guy had wavy dark brown hair, or perhaps it was just uncombed. His biceps were equally impressive, or at least they would have been if they weren't holding onto her luggage. With the sunglasses hiding their eyes, she probably wouldn't even be able to identify them once they made off with her possessions.

Tori held onto her luggage straps fiercely. "There's nothing of value in here—only my clothes—and if you don't let go, I'll scream."

The brunet set her suitcase down and turned to the other guy. "I don't want her on my team. You get her."

The blond shook his head. "No way. It's my turn to choose, and I've already got Lilly. You get this one, pal."

The brunet peered over the rim of his sunglasses at Tori. "We're not stealing your luggage. We're carrying them to your cabin—unless you want to drag these things across camp by yourself." He picked up her suitcase again, moving it from one hand to another. "What do you have in here anyway, your lead collection?"

Tori blushed and let go of the luggage straps. "Sorry. I didn't know the camp had bellhops."

The blond groaned and walked past her. The brunet forced a smile in her direction. “We’re not bellhops. We’re campers who happen to be doing you a favor.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know . . .”

He walked past her shaking his head, which she supposed meant that tipping them was out of the question. She followed after him awkwardly. He picked up his pace. Not only were these guys strong, they weren’t going to wait for her. She tried to keep up, but her platform sandals proved more decorative than useful, and pebbles and bits of twigs wedged into them as she walked. With every step, she fell farther behind.

This was off to a great start.

“Maybe she isn’t—,” the blond said to his friend in a voice low enough that most people wouldn’t have heard it. Tori’s hearing had always been exceptional.

“Dr. B thinks she is. Why else would she be here?”

If the blond had an answer to this question, he didn’t give it, which was too bad. Tori was beginning to wonder herself.

The guys hauled her luggage into the lodge. Instead of setting her suitcases next to the front desk, where younger campers stood in noisy lines waiting to check in, the two went around the desk and down a hallway. The blond knocked on a door, only then glancing back to see if Tori had followed.

A voice called, “Come in,” and the guys disappeared inside. Tori went in, too, taking off her sunglasses to let her eyes adjust to the light. The room looked like any small office: shelves lined the wall and a large metal desk was parked in the middle of the room. Books, pencils, and photos frames cluttered its surface. A middle-aged man with wire-rimmed glasses smiled as she walked over. He was tall, slightly overweight, and his thick gray hair had a sort of Einstein disarray to it. He had no wrinkles to match the gray hair, though, and it gave him the odd appearance of being both old and young.

His office window looked out on the parking lot. He had probably seen her struggling with her luggage and sent these guys out to help her. He'd undoubtedly also seen her reaction, and now before she'd even registered, she'd done something wrong.

Tori wished she was more like Aprilynne, who didn't care what she said, but Tori felt the weight of her father's job too keenly. Politicians stayed in office by making friends, not insulting people. Their daughters were supposed to do the same.

The man held his hand out to her. She'd been wrong about the wrinkles. His eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Welcome to Dragon Camp. You're Victoria Hampton?" He had the hint of an accent, but she couldn't place it. British maybe? Australian?

She shook his hand. "I go by Tori."

"Tori, then." He gave her another smile, which was good news. He probably wouldn't have kept smiling if he was going to yell at her for assuming everyone at camp was either a thief or a menial worker. She relaxed, but only slightly. Why was she here instead of out in the registration line?

"I'm the camp director, Dr. Bartholemew. Most everyone calls me Dr. B. It's easier."

She remembered reading about him in the camp literature. He was a professor of medieval studies at George Mason, which was why his class was good for college credit.

Tori cast a quick glance at the two guys. Both had taken off their sunglasses, and it didn't make her feel better to see they were both on the extremely warm side of hot—as in, way to make a fool of herself in front of what were likely to be the only cute guys her age here.

She turned back to Dr. B with an inward sigh.

"I've always admired your dad," he said.

"Thanks." She wasn't sure whether to be surprised that he knew her father was a senator. Hopefully her mother hadn't called and made a big deal about it. Sometimes her mom liked to throw the title

around to drum up preferential treatment. Tori could imagine her phoning and saying things like, “You have adequate supervision, don’t you? The boys and girls cabins are chaperoned? It would be such bad publicity for your camp if anything happened to a senator’s daughter . . .”

“I’m glad you could join us at Dragon Camp,” Dr. B went on. He glanced at the guys and some hidden meaning passed between them before Dr. B returned his attention to Tori. “I noticed from your application that you signed up for the advanced section of horseback riding and fencing. You’ve done those before?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t sign up for the tae kwon do class.”

“I’m already a fourth-degree black belt.”

“Ahh.” He sent another meaningful look to the guys. “Any other lessons you’ve taken?”

“Ice skating.” She had been competing since age twelve and had a shelf full of state and regional trophies to show for it. Her coach kept telling her she could go to nationals if she put in more practice time.

“Have you ever used a rifle?” Dr. B asked. “Gone hunting, perhaps?”

“I’ve done target practice.” Her father had originally taken her shooting to impress his NRA supporters, but she’d liked it and had kept going. “Why do you ask?”

Dr. B clasped his hands behind his back and grinned. “I’m always curious to see what kind of people come to our camp. You’ll find you have a lot in common with many of the other campers.” He gestured in the direction of the guys. “Both Dirk and Jesse are black belts, as well. Jesse is the state champion for his age in fencing, and Dirk, well, one day I think we’ll see him win a medal for archery.”

If Dr. B thought this information would make them feel friendlier, it didn’t work. Both guys regarded her with expressions that were at

best guarded and at worst disapproving. She wondered which was Dirk and which was Jesse.

The blond was probably the one most girls would go for first. He was good-looking in a flashy, sensual sort of way, and he had a swagger in his walk that said he knew it. His hair was a little too long and scruffy, but when you had a square jaw and perfect features, you could get away with that sort of thing. Tori tended to avoid guys that were cocky, though. They always ended up being trouble.

The brunet was handsome in a serious, understated way that Tori liked best. She let her eyes linger on him for a moment. His eyes were dark and piercing, as though they knew secrets.

“I see you signed up for the dragon mythology class,” Dr. B continued. “You have an interest in that topic?”

She had played an imaginary game of knights as a child, read every book she could find about dragons, and for the last few years perused websites on the subject. She probably knew more about dragons than Dr. B. “Yes,” she said.

“Then I’ll look forward to talking with you about them this afternoon in class.” He gave a pronounced nod, signaling the interview had ended. “Dirk and Jesse will take you down to your cabin.”

“Which cabin?” the brunet asked.

“Number twenty-seven,” Dr. B said.

The guys glanced at each other and then back at Dr. B. “You’re sure?” the blond asked.

“Quite,” Dr. B said, then smiled at Tori. “You’re in the same cabin as my daughter, Bess. She’ll be here tomorrow. Right now she’s busy with . . .” he hesitated, “something important.”

He made it sound mysterious, but didn’t elaborate. Instead, he picked up a sheet of paper from his desk and handed it to Tori. “I hope you’ll fit in well here. I hope it very much.”

Tori’s name was printed across the top of the paper, with her

schedule listed underneath. She noticed, without trying to, that hers had been the only schedule on his desk.

The brunet picked up her largest suitcase, swung it onto his shoulder, and headed out the door. The blond picked up her smaller suitcase and shoulder bag, then left, too. Tori had no choice but to go after them. As she shut the door behind her, Dr. B murmured, “Now if we could only find Ryker.”

But she could have heard wrong. It was an odd phrase for a person to say as he stood alone in a room.



CHAPTER 2

Tori hurried after Dirk and Jesse. They weren't waiting around for her. It was clear they didn't want to help her, which made her feel worse about having them carry her luggage. She followed them out of the door and around the side of the building to where a row of dusty, golf cart-looking vehicles stood. The guys hefted her luggage onto a rack, then climbed in the front seat, leaving the backseat open for her. As she got in, she glanced upward and noticed a small black camera perched on the corner of the roof. It didn't seem that unusual until her gaze drifted to the trees behind the building. Another camera was nestled into the branches, half-hidden in the leaves. Was there enough crime at this camp that they needed that much surveillance?

The brunet started up the cart. It was the noisy, gas-powered kind. He drove around the building and toward the cabins, not slowing for any bumps or curves in the trail. As he drove, he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and made a call. "She's on her way, so tell Lilly and Alyssa to move their junk off the extra bed." After a pause he said, "You'll see soon enough."

He was talking about her like she wasn't even there. Well, they had started out on the wrong foot, and apparently they were still there.

She tried to make amends by leaning forward across the back of the guys' seat and giving them her best politician smile. "What were your names again?"

"Dirk," the blond one said.

"Jesse," the brunet answered.

Jesse. She rolled the name around her tongue, nearly saying it out loud. It suddenly became a perfect name for ruggedly handsome guys. Then she made herself stop staring at him. She hadn't come here to meet guys. She had a sort-of boyfriend back home. Roland. He had been president of her sophomore class, spoke fluent French—his dad had worked at the embassy in Paris—and he was a straight-A student. He was only a sort-of boyfriend because they'd started dating at the end of the school year. By the time she got back from camp, he would be vacationing in Europe. Who knew how they'd feel about each other when school started again.

"Thanks for taking me to my cabin," Tori said.

Dirk stretched his legs. "Don't mention it. We're glad to do it since the bellhops have the day off."

Yeah. It was probably best not to comment on that subject. Tori scanned the map that had come with her registration information, then scanned it again. The cabin numbers only went up to twenty-five.

"Where exactly is cabin twenty-seven?"

Jesse momentarily slowed down to weave around some kids who walked across the trail. "Twenty-six and twenty-seven aren't part of the main camp. A group of us have come here for the last four or five years. Since we're older, Dr. B lets us have cabins that are off by themselves."

So that was why Dr. B had sent her to cabin 27 and why the guys resented it. She wasn't one of the regulars, but was too old to be with the rest of the campers.

And that meant she'd be seeing a lot of these guys during the month. She tried to think of some small talk that would help erase the awkwardness between them. "Five years. You must love this camp a lot." As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn't. They probably kept coming back because they were here on scholarship and couldn't afford to go anywhere else.

Really, all of her father's lessons on tact had deserted her.

"Oh yeah, I love it," Dirk said, with a tinge of sarcasm. "Mostly I love how we get to sleep in every day."

Tori checked the schedule in her hand to make sure she hadn't misread it. Nope. Breakfast was from 8:00 until 9:00. Her first class started at 9:30. That didn't seem too early. Maybe Dirk was one of those guys who liked to sleep until noon.

Jesse momentarily turned his head to appraise her. A flash of intrigue went through his brown eyes. "So what brings you here this summer?"

She didn't answer right away. It had been the lure of being with other people who spoke about dragons as if they existed. It had been, she thought dryly, her inner geekiness. Or worse, it was some broken part of her that didn't quite grasp reality the way it should. She hadn't been able to explain it to her own parents. She certainly couldn't talk about it to near strangers.

She shrugged. "It looked interesting."

Dirk cracked a smile, revealing perfect teeth. "Well, you're right about that, at least."

They left the groupings of cabins, then drove past some stables. The calls and noise of the other campers faded and then completely disappeared. They kept driving down an uneven trail until it finally became more of a suggestion than an actual path. Birds, squirrels, and rabbits bounded away from the clatter and buzz of the cart.

"Just how far away is cabin twenty-seven?" Tori asked.

"Two miles," Dirk said. "It takes about ten minutes in the cart, and

then another five minutes of walking.” He cast a look back at her sandals. “Well, it’s five minutes if you’re wearing normal shoes.”

Two miles? Was he serious?

They breezed past a bright orange sign that read ENTERING PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO TRESPASSING.

This couldn’t be right. The guys were playing some sort of practical joke on her. Perhaps they had been so insulted by the parking lot incident they’d decided to drop her off in the forest and leave her to find her own way.

Tori leaned forward again. “Um, are we going in the right direction? That sign said ‘No Trespassing.’”

Jesse remained unconcerned. “Don’t worry,” he said, one hand casually draped over the steering wheel. “I know where I’m going.”

Dirk shrugged. “And even if we did wander off camp property, it’s still illegal to shoot trespassers.” He leaned back in his seat nonchalantly. “Of course, that doesn’t mean they can’t set their dogs on us.” He glanced over at Jesse. “You think this baby could outrun a pack of angry dogs?”

“Sure,” Jesse said. “Unless they’re big. Or fast.”

Dirk turned back to Tori. “We’ll be fine then. Most backwoodsmen only own poodles and Yorkies.”

Tori looked back at the trail, trying to gage how far they’d come. “Um, yeah. Does Dr. B know you guys go joy riding in the woods in his cart?”

“Relax,” Dirk said. “This is the way to our cabins. The sign is just there to keep the regular campers from wandering into the advanced camp. They’re not allowed down here, so don’t even tell them about it.”

“Uh-huh.” It was not only two miles away, it was a *secret* camp. Tori got out the map and looked over it again. There was no mention of an advanced camp, and both the cafeteria and her dragon mythology class were in the main area. Having cabins two miles away didn’t

make any sense. The advanced campers would have to carpool—or rather cart pool—back there every day. Why not just build cabins that were closer?

With every moment that passed, Tori was more sure this was some sort of prank or camp initiation. The guys were going to drop her and her luggage in the middle of nowhere and she would have to find her way back. She would be like Hansel and Gretel, but with designer luggage and no bread crumbs.

Then the cart went through an opening in the trees, and there it was: not just two log cabins but a completely different camp. It had another set of stables, a large grassy field, a good-size bathroom—that meant flush toilets—and three other buildings lined up around the field. One small, one large, and one that was long and flat.

“What are those?” she asked.

“Those are buildings,” Dirk said.

“What *kind* of buildings?” she asked, annoyed by his evasiveness.

He considered them with mock contemplation. “Rectangular ones.”
Very funny.

Jesse said, “The big one is the Dragon Hall, the long one is the indoor rifle range, and you don’t have to worry about the small one.”

She hadn’t been worried, just curious, but she didn’t ask any other questions. One of her father’s axioms was: Sometimes the most tactful thing you can say is nothing at all. Apparently that was the case with these guys.

Jesse drove the cart across the field and to the back of the rifle range, where three other carts were already parked. Jesse and Dirk got out, hefted her luggage from the back, and headed toward the cabins. She was fine while she walked across the grassy field, but the dirt path from the field to the cabins was littered with twigs and pebbles, which kept getting lodged in her sandals. She had to stop more than once to pull things out.

Two teenage guys on horses came out of the forest and ambled in their direction. They both looked to be about Tori's age. The first—who seemed to be more shoulders and muscles than anything else—smiled cautiously as he rode up. His sandy blond hair was cropped short and he had easy, likeable features. With his tan plaid shirt, he reminded her of a lumberjack or a cowboy. “So you're the new girl?” he asked with a southern drawl.

Cowboy. Definitely.

“I'm Tori Hampton.”

“Senator Hampton's daughter,” Jesse added, and maybe only she noticed the contempt in his voice. He didn't stick around for further introductions. He and Dirk kept walking toward the cabins, hauling her luggage toward the one with a 27 painted above the doorway.

“I'm Kody,” the broad shouldered guy said and motioned to the other rider. “This here is Shang.”

Shang nodded. He was muscular, too; you just didn't notice it so much next to Kody. His shiny, black hair was neatly combed, his brown eyes thoughtful. He was the only one of the guys who looked entirely clean. No streaks of dirt smudged his clothes or skin, and his black riding boots shined. He was probably one of those meticulous people who never threw their clothes on their bed. He smiled at her briefly, then went back to studying her.

She realized how they must see her, standing there in pressed white cotton shorts, a linen blouse, and impractically fashionable sandals. She hadn't given a second thought to her manicured fingernails and toenails, to the blonde highlights her stylist had worked through her long, honey brown hair, or the gold rings on her fingers and topaz studs in her ears. Everyone at her school dressed this way.

She had always loved that people told her she could pass for a model, but standing here overdressed, she wasn't sure how she could escape the other stereotypes people had about models: that they were shallow, vain, stupid.

Shang gave her a half smile. “Glad to finally meet you.”

“Finally?” she asked.

“Dr. B told us yesterday we would have an addition to cabin twenty-seven,” Shang said.

Kody added, “We old-timers come out the day before camp starts to help Dr. B set things up.”

Probably part of that whole scholarship deal.

She glanced over in time to see Jesse and Dirk disappear into cabin 27. “Well, it was nice to meet you. I’d better go unpack my things.”

She headed down the trail to her cabin, barely managing to hear Kody and Shang’s conversation behind her.

“She seems like an odd one,” Shang said.

Odd? It wasn’t what she expected in a first impression and the word stung. Odd, why? Because she obviously came from money?

“Lilly is either going to love her or hate her, that’s for sure,” Kody said.

“My guess is hate her.”

Tori didn’t slow her pace, but sometimes she wished her hearing wasn’t quite so good.

When Tori opened her cabin’s door, the conversation inside stopped. She hadn’t heard what Dirk and Jesse had been saying, because music was blaring, masking the words. Still, she’d managed to catch her name, which meant they were talking about her, probably relating the whole parking lot story.

She stepped inside and let the door swing closed behind her. The cabin was sparse. Bunk beds were pushed up against three of the walls, making room for six girls. Four of the mattresses already had blankets and possessions scattered across them—magazines, bags of chips, half-emptied backpacks. Mismatched dressers stood between each of the bunk beds, and faded curtains hung at the side of the only window.

Dr. B obviously had a low decorating budget. Was it too much to

hope that the bed would be comfortable? She should have taken that into consideration and brought an air mattress with her.

Her suitcases sat at the foot of the unoccupied bunk bed. Two girls stood by the far wall, talking to Jesse and Dirk. Both were toned and tanned, wearing cut-off shorts and tank tops that showed off their athletic bodies. Both girls also had shoulder-length, badly bleached-blond hair. They looked like they were trying to be carbon copies of each other.

The shorter of the two appraised Tori in the way a girl sums up a rival. "I'm Lilly," the girl said and gestured at her copy. "This is Alyssa."

"I'm Tori." Tori sat down on the bed. The mattress hardly gave at all. She might as well be sleeping on the floor. She jiggled it and wondered if her parents could FedEx an air mattress to camp.

Lilly turned down the iPod on her bed. "So you're a senator's daughter? You live on Capitol Hill?"

Nobody actually lived on Capitol Hill. It was made up of office buildings, not subdivisions, but Tori didn't point that out. "No, my dad just works there."

"Hmm," Lilly said as though proving a point. "Do you get to hang out with the president?"

"I've met him," Tori said. "But he doesn't hang out much with high school kids."

Lilly tilted her head. "Meeting him isn't such a big deal. I bet he meets thousands of people each year."

Tori slid off the bed. "I never said it was a big deal."

Her answer made Dirk laugh, but Lilly's eyes narrowed.

Well, camp was getting better all the time. Now Tori was stuck with girls that hated her on sight. It was sort of like high school, but without her friends around to deflect any of the cattiness hurled in her direction. The only reason Tori didn't leave right then was that she didn't know how to get her suitcases back to the parking lot.

Tori cast a look at the guys, hoping to seem grateful. “Thanks again for helping with my luggage.”

Jesse headed to the door. “As soon as you’re ready, I’ll show you around.”

Tori glanced at her Rolex—another thing she shouldn’t have brought, but had forgotten to take off beforehand. “I thought I was supposed to go to orientation.”

“That’s for people in the main camp. Dr. B asked me to get you familiar with the routine out here, to see what you can do.”

See what I can do? There had been a note of challenge in his voice.

At that moment, she knew she would stay—at least long enough to show him and everyone else that she could kick his butt in tae kwon do, or archery, or whatever else he was good at. Because she was surprisingly talented at all of it.

She lifted one of her bags onto the bottom bunk. “Okay. Give me your number, and I’ll text you when I’m done unpacking.”

“I’m right next door. Just come get me.” Jesse took hold of the door-knob, then turned back. “And change into some jeans and shoes. We’ll be riding.”

He and Dirk both left without saying anything else.



CHAPTER 3

*I*nside their own cabin, Dirk leaned against the side of his bunk. “Well?” he prompted Jesse. “What do you think?”

Jesse let out a grunt. “I think we’ve unearthed Barbie’s long-lost sister. She even comes complete with matching luggage.”

Dirk laughed. One of the things he liked about Jesse was his ability to work vocabulary like “unearthed” into casual conversation. It probably came from having teachers for parents. “Yeah,” Dirk said, “she doesn’t seem like one of us.” Her outfit, her makeup, her perfectly styled long, brown hair—that’s how girls dressed to go to photo shoots, not summer camp. The rest of the girls in 27 hardly ever did their hair, let alone put on makeup.

Although, to be completely honest, that was probably Dirk’s doing. Back when they were thirteen, he’d gotten so tired of waiting around for Lilly to beautify herself every morning, he stole her cosmetic case and refused to give it back until camp ended. Lilly had just borrowed Alyssa’s stuff, but all the girls had cut down their morning routines after that.

Jesse walked over to the only window in the room. Through it, you could see the side of the girls' cabin. "I bet Tori has never done a day of real work in her life. She'll probably act like a spoiled princess the entire summer and refuse to do anything we ask."

"Which is why I'm glad she's on your team," Dirk said.

Jesse turned away from the window to glare at him.

Normally Dirk would rib him some more. After all, Dirk had put up with Lilly's prima donna behavior for years. Lilly could tackle you during a game, then chew you out for breaking one of her fingernails. It was about time Jesse had someone to drive him crazy. But Dirk couldn't help being suspicious of the latest arrival. "If she's one of us, why did it take her so long to come?"

Jesse shrugged. "Maybe she was too busy touring the world with Mumsy and Dadsy to be bothered."

"Maybe she's not really one of us."

Jesse walked to his bed and sat down. "You heard what Dr. B said about her. Do you think her age and athletic ability are a coincidence?"

Dirk shook his head. He didn't think it was a coincidence, but that didn't mean Tori was legit, either. Everyone at camp already had counterparts except for Jesse and him. Dirk had always figured Ryker Davis was Jesse's counterpart because Dirk couldn't imagine having a counterpart himself.

Counterparts had a link that let them sense things about each other. They understood one another in an unspoken, almost mystical way. Dirk didn't believe there was anyone like that for him. He didn't want it, either—somebody knowing him so well. And besides, even if he did have a counterpart, it wouldn't be some pampered socialite. Tori probably didn't know how to do her own laundry, let alone have the ability to sift through what was going on in his mind.

“It might not be a coincidence she’s here,” Dirk said. “She could be a plant, trained by someone who wants to know who we are and what we’re doing.” He sat down on his own bed with an irritated thud. “Dr. B is too trusting.”

A frown creased Jesse’s brow while he mulled over Dirk’s words. “You could be right. We should be careful about what we say and do until we know for sure.” He paused. “But we’d do that anyway.”

Jesse lay down and stretched. Apparently, he thought the matter was closed. He picked up a book from the side of the bed and opened it. The Iliad. Only Jesse would bring ancient Greek literature to camp. Dirk was firmly ignoring his own reading list for next year’s English lit class. What was the point of summer if you had to do homework?

He walked restlessly to the window and stared at the girls’ cabin, even though he knew it wouldn’t look any different than any other time he’d seen it. He couldn’t help himself. Tori was inside, and he had no idea who or what she was.