

The Reckoning

by Kelley Armstrong

sample chapter excerpt – unproofed copy

One

After four nights on the run, I was finally safe, tucked into bed and enjoying the deep, dreamless sleep of the dead . . . until the dead decided they'd really rather have me awake. It started with a laugh that slid into my sleep and pulled me out of it. As I rose on my elbows, blinking and struggling to remember where I was, a whisper snaked around me, words indistinguishable.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Dull gray light shone through the curtains. The room was silent and still. No ghosts, thank God. I'd had enough in the last few weeks to last me a lifetime.

A scrape at the window made me jump. These days, every branch scratching the glass sounded like a zombie I'd raised from the dead, clawing at my window.

I went to the window and pulled back the curtains. It'd been nearly dawn by the time we got to the house, so I knew it had to be at least midmorning, but the fog outside was so thick I couldn't see anything. I leaned closer, nose pressed to the cold glass.

A bug splattered against the window and I jumped a foot in the air. A laugh sounded behind me.

I whirled, but Tori was still in bed, whimpering in her sleep. She'd thrown off the covers and was curled up on her side, her dark hair spiked across the pillow.

Another chuckle erupted behind me. Definitely a guy's laugh. But no one was there. No, strike that. I just couldn't *see* anyone. For a necromancer, that doesn't mean no one *is* there.

I squinted, trying to catch the flicker of a ghost and saw, off to the left, the flash of a hand that was gone before I could see more.

“Looking for someone, little necro?”

I spun. “Who’s there?”

A snicker answered me—the kind of snicker every fifteen-year-old girl has heard a million times from jerk boys.

“If you want to talk to me, you have to show yourself,” I said.

“Talk to you?” he said in an arrogant high school quarterback voice. “I think you’re the one who wants to talk to me.”

I snorted and headed back to bed.

“No?” His voice slid around me. “Huh. I figured you’d want to know more about the Edison Group, the Genesis experiments, Dr. Davidoff . . .”

I stopped.

He laughed. “Thought so.”

The four of us—Tori, Derek, Simon, and me—were on the run from the Edison Group after discovering we were subjects in the Genesis project, an experiment for genetically modifying supernaturals. My aunt Lauren had been one of the doctors involved, but she’d betrayed her colleagues by helping us get away. Now she was being held captive. Or so I hoped. Last night, when the Edison Group tracked us down, a ghost had tried to help me . . . a ghost who had looked like Aunt Lauren.

We were supposedly in a safe house owned by a group opposing the experiments. Now a teenaged ghost showed up, knowing about the project? I wasn’t about to banish him, however tempting it might be.

“Show yourself,” I said.

“Bossy little necro, aren’t you?” His voice slid behind me. “You just want to see if I’m as hot as I sound.”

I closed my eyes, pictured a vague male form, and gave a mental tug. He began to materialize—a dark-haired guy maybe sixteen, seventeen, nothing special, but with a smarmy smile that said he thought he was. I could still see through him, like he was a hologram, so I closed my eyes to give him another pull.

“Uh-uh,” he said. “You want more, we gotta get to know each other a little better.” He disappeared again.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He whispered in my ear. “Like I said, to get to know you better. Not here, though. You’ll wake your friend. She’s cute, but not really my type.” His voice moved to the door. “I know a place we can chat in private.”

Yeah, right. Did he think I’d just started talking to ghosts yesterday? Well, close—two weeks ago, actually. But I’d already seen enough to know that while there were some ghosts who wanted to help and some who just wanted to talk, there were more who wanted to cause a little trouble, spice up their afterlife. This guy definitely fell in the last category.

Still, if he was another Edison Group subject, one who’d presumably died in this house, I needed to find out what had happened to him. But I wanted backup. Tori had no experience helping me with ghosts and, while we were getting along better, she still wasn’t anyone I wanted watching my back.

So I followed the ghost into the hall, but stopped at Simon and Derek’s door.

“Uh-uh,” the ghost said. “You don’t need to bring a guy along.”

“They’d like to talk to you, too.” I raised my voice, praying Derek would hear me. He usually woke at the slightest noise—werewolves have superhearing. All I could hear, though, was Simon’s snores. There was no one else upstairs. Andrew, the guy who’d brought us here, had taken the downstairs bedroom.

“Come on, necro girl. This is a limited-time offer.”

You know he’s up to no good, Chloe.

Yes, but I also needed to know if we were in danger here. I decided to proceed with extreme caution. My subconscious voice didn’t argue, which I took as a positive sign.

I started walking.

We’d gone straight to bed after we got here, so I hadn’t gotten a good look at our new place. I only knew that it was huge—a rambling Victorian straight out of a Gothic horror movie.

As I followed the voice down the hall, I had the weird sense I was in one of those movies, caught in an endless narrow corridor, passing closed door after closed door until I finally reached the staircase . . . heading up.

From what I’d seen of the house as we’d driven up, it was three stories. The bedrooms were on the second floor, and Andrew had said the third was an attic.

So the ghost was leading me to the dark, spooky attic? I wasn’t the only one who’d seen too many horror films.

I followed him up the stairs. They ended at a landing with two doors. I paused. A hand appeared through the door in front of me, beckoning. I took a second to prepare myself. No matter how dark it was in there, I couldn’t let him see my fear.

When I was ready, I grabbed the doorknob and—

It was locked. I turned the dead bolt latch and it clicked free. Another deep breath, another second of mental preparation, then I swung the door open and stepped in—

A blast of cold air knocked me back. I blinked. Ahead, fog swirled.

A dead bolt on an attic door, Chloe?

No, I was standing on the roof.

Two

I wheeled as the door swung closed behind me. I caught the edge, but something hit it, hard, and it slammed home. I grabbed the handle as the dead bolt clanked shut. I twisted the knob, sure I was mistaken.

“Leaving so soon?” he said. “How rude.”

I stared down at the handle. Only one very rare type of ghost could move stuff in the living world.

“An Agito half-demon,” I whispered.

“Agito?” He twisted the word with contempt. “I’m top-of-the-line, baby. I’m a Volo.”

Which meant nothing to me. I could only guess it was a more powerful type. In life, a telekinetic half-demon could move objects mentally. In death, they could move them physically. A poltergeist.

I took a careful step back. Wood creaked underfoot, reminding me of where I was. I stopped short and looked around. I was on a kind of walkway that circled the third floor—the attic, I presumed.

To my right was a nearly flat section littered with rusty bottle caps and beer cans, like someone had used it as a makeshift patio. That calmed me down. I wasn’t stranded on a roof, just a balcony. Annoying, but safe enough.

I rapped on the door, lightly, not really wanting to wake anyone, but hoping Derek might notice.

“No one’s going to hear you,” the ghost said. “We’re all alone. Just the way I like it.”

I lifted my hand to bang on the door, then stopped. Dad always said the best way to deal with a bully was not to let him know you were frightened. At the thought of my father, my throat tightened. Was he still looking for me? Of course, he was, and there was nothing I could do.

Dad’s advice for bullies had worked with the kids who mocked my stutter—they gave up when they couldn’t get a reaction from me. So I took a deep breath and went on the offensive.

“You said you know about the Edison Group and their experiments,” I said. “Were you a subject?”

“Boring. Let’s talk about you. Got a boyfriend? I bet you do. Cute girl like you, hanging out with two guys. You’ve gotta have hooked up with one of them by now. So which one?” He laughed. “Dumb question. The cute girl would get the cute guy. The chink.”

He meant Simon, who was half Korean. He was baiting me, seeing if I’d leap to Simon’s defense and prove he was my boyfriend. He wasn’t. Well, not yet, though we seemed to be heading that way.

“If you want me to stay and talk, I need some answers first,” I said.

He laughed. “Yeah? Doesn’t look to me like you’re going anywhere.”

I grabbed the doorknob again. A bottle cap pinged off my cheek just below my eye. I glowered in his direction.

“That was only a warning shot, little necro.” A nasty tone edged his voice. “Around here, we play *my* game by *my* rules. Now, tell me about your boyfriend.”

“I don’t have one. If you know anything about the Genesis experiment, then you know we aren’t here for a vacation. Being on the run doesn’t leave much time for romance.”

“Don’t get snarky with me.”

I banged on the door. The next bottle cap hit my eye, stinging.

“You’re in danger, little girl. Don’t you care?” His voice lowered to my ear. “Right now, I’m your best friend, so you’d better treat me good. You’ve just been led into a trap and I’m the only one who can get you out.”

“Led? By who? The guy who brought us here—” I thought up a fake name fast. “Charles?”

“No, some total stranger, and Charles just happened to bring you here. What a coincidence.”

“But he said he doesn’t work for the Edison Group anymore. He used to be their doctor—”

“He still is.”

“H-he’s Dr. Fellows? The one they were talking about at the lab?”

“None other.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’d never forget that face.”

“Huh, well, that’s weird. First, his name isn’t Charles. Second, he’s not a doctor. Third, I know Dr. Fellows. She’s my aunt, and that guy downstairs looks nothing like her.”

The blow hit me from behind, striking hard against the back of my knees. My legs buckled and I fell on all fours.

“Don’t toy with me, little necro.”

When I tried to rise, he hit me with an old plank swung like a baseball bat. I tried to twist out of the way, but he got my shoulder and knocked me into the railing. A crack, and the railing gave way. I toppled, and for a second, all I could see was the concrete patio two stories down.

I caught another section of railing. It held and I was steadying myself when the plank swung straight for my hand. I let go and scrambled onto the walkway as the board hit the railing where my hand had been so hard that the top rail snapped and the plank snapped, too, splinters of rotting wood flying.

I ran toward the flat section of roof. He whipped the broken board at me. I stumbled back, bumping into the railing again.

I caught my balance and looked around. No sign of him. No sign of anything moving. But I knew he was there, watching to see what I'd do next.

I ran for the door, then feinted toward the flat part of the roof. A crash. Shards of glass exploded in front of me and the ghost appeared, lifting a broken bottle. I backpedaled.

Sure, that's a great idea. Just keep backing into the railing, see how long it'll hold.

I stopped. There was nowhere to run. I considered screaming. I've always hated that in movies—heroines who scream for help when cornered—but right now, caught between a broken-bottle-wielding poltergeist and a two-story fall, I could survive the humiliation of being rescued. Problem was, no one would get here in time.

So . . . what are you going to do? The superpowerful necromancer against the bullying poltergeist?

That was right. I did have a defense, at least against ghosts.

I touched my amulet. It'd been given to me by my mother. She'd said it would ward off the bogeymen I'd seen when I was little—ghosts, as I knew now. It didn't seem to work that well, but clutching it helped me concentrate, focus on what I was.

I pictured giving the ghost a shove.

“Don't you dare, little girl. You'll only piss me off and—”

I squeezed my eyes shut and gave him a huge mental push.

Silence.

I waited, listening, sure that when I opened my eyes, he'd be right there. After a moment, I peeked and saw only the gray sky. Still, I gripped the railing tight, ready for a broken bottle to fly at my head.

“Chloe!”

My knees shook at the shout. Footsteps thudded across the roof. Ghosts don't make footsteps.

“Don't move.”

I looked over my shoulder to see Derek, in jeans, a T-shirt, and bare feet.

Three

Derek made his way across the flat section of the roof.

“Watch out,” I called. “There’s broken glass.”

“I see it. Stay where you are.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just back up and—” The wood creaked under me. “Or maybe not.”

“Just stay there. The wood’s rotting. It’s holding your weight as long as you stand still.”

“But I walked out here, so it must be—”

“We’re not testing that theory, okay?”

There was none of the usual impatient snap in his voice, meaning he was really worried. And if Derek was worried, I’d better stay right where I was. I gripped the railing.

“No!” he said. “I mean, yes, hold on, but don’t put any weight on it. It’s rotted through at the base.”

Great.

Derek looked around, like he was searching for something to use. Then he stripped off his shirt. I tried not to look away. Not that he looked bad without his shirt. The opposite, actually, which is why . . . Let’s just say friends are really better when they’re fully dressed.

Derek got as close as he dared, then knotted a corner of the T-shirt and tossed it to me. I caught it on the second throw.

“I’m not going to pull you in,” he warned.

A good thing, because with his werewolf strength, he’d probably wrench it from my hands and I’d tumble off the roof backward.

“Pull yourself along—”

He stopped, seeing I was already doing that. I made it onto the flat part, wobbled a step, then felt my knees start to give way. Derek grabbed my arm—the one without stitches, bandages, and a bullet graze—and I lowered myself slowly.

“I—I’m just going to sit for a minute,” I said, my voice shakier than I liked.

Derek sat beside me, his shirt back on. I could feel him watching me, uncertain.

“I—I’ll be okay. Just give me a second. It’s safe to sit here, right?”

“Yeah, the slope’s only about twenty-five degrees, so—” Seeing my expression, he said, “It’s safe.”

The fog was lifting, and I could see trees stretching into the distance on all sides, a dirt road winding through them to the house.

“There was a ghost,” I said finally.

“Yeah, I figured that.”

“I—I knew I shouldn’t follow, but—” I paused, not ready for the full explanation, still shaky. “I stopped outside your door, hoping you’d hear me. I guess you did?”

“Kind of. I was dozing. Woke up confused, so it took me a while to get out here. Got a touch of fever.”

I saw it now, the flushed skin and glittering eyes.

“Are you—?” I began.

“I’m not Changing. Not for a while. I know what that feels like now, and I’ve got a ways to go. Another day, at least. Hopefully longer.”

“I bet you’ll Change completely this time,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe.” His tone said he doubted it.

As we sat there, I snuck a look at him. At sixteen, Derek was more than a foot taller than me. Solidly built, too, with broad shoulders and muscles he usually kept hidden under baggy clothes, so he wouldn’t look as intimidating.

Since he’d started Changing, Mother Nature seemed to have cut him some slack. His skin was clearing up. His dark hair didn’t look greasy anymore. It still hung in his face—nothing emo, just like he hadn’t bothered to get it cut in a while. Lately, that would have been the last thing on his mind.

I tried to relax and enjoy the fog-laced view, but Derek fidgeted and squirmed, which was more distracting than if he’d just been his usual self and demanded to know what had happened.

“So there was this ghost,” I said finally. “He said he was a Volo half-demon. Telekinetic, but a stronger type than Dr. Davidoff. Probably the same kind Liz is. He lured me out here, locked the door, then started pelting me with stuff.”

Derek looked over sharply.

“I banished him.”

“Good, but you shouldn’t have followed him at all, Chloe.”

His tone was calm, reasonable, so un-Derek-like that I stared at him, the weird idea that this wasn’t Derek creeping through my head. Before I’d escaped the Edison Group laboratory, I’d

met a demi-demon, chained there as a power source. She'd possessed someone, but only a ghost. Could Derek be possessed?

"What?" Derek said as I stared.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just . . ." He rubbed the back of his neck, wincing and rolling his shoulders. "Tired. Feeling off. Really off. Too much . . ." He struggled for the word. "Being here. Being safe. I'm still adjusting."

That made sense. Derek's werewolf protective streak had been in hyperdrive for days, keeping him awake and on guard. Having someone else to watch out for us now would be weird. Still, not blasting me for blithely following a random ghost onto a roof was so totally not Derek that I knew there was more to it.

When I asked what was bothering him, he muttered that it was nothing. I backed off and was about to explain more about the ghost when he blurted, "It's Tori. I don't like her story about how she got away."

When the Edison Group had almost captured us last night, they'd nabbed Tori. Yet when they'd refocused their efforts on the biggest threat—Derek—they'd left the young witch with only a single guard. She'd locked him in a binding spell and escaped.

"You think they let her get away?"

"I'm not saying . . . It's just . . . I don't have any proof."

And that's what was making him uncomfortable, that his misgivings were based on nothing but a gut feeling. The math and science whiz really preferred dealing in facts.

"If you're thinking she's been a plant from the start, she hasn't." I lowered my voice. "Don't tell her I told you this, okay? When she helped me escape, she only wanted to get away from the

Edison Group and run back to her dad. So she called him. Instead he sent her mom—the woman we'd just escaped. Tori was hurt, really hurt. In shock even. She couldn't have faked that."

"I didn't figure she was in on it from that far back."

"Just that she cut a deal last night?"

"Yeah."

"Would Tori turn us in for the promise of getting her old life back? It's possible, and we should be careful, but I *do* buy her story. Unless her mom told them Tori was figuring out how to cast spells—which I doubt—then, as far as they know, she just has random outbursts of power. Her binding spell could have taken out a single guard. I've seen her use it. She doesn't even need to say an incantation. It's like, if she thinks it, she can do it."

"No casting? No practicing?" He shook his head. "Don't tell Simon that."

"Don't tell Simon what?" said a voice behind us.

We turned to see Simon step out of the doorway.

"That Tori doesn't need to use incantations to cast," Derek said.

"Seriously?" He swore. "You're right. Don't tell me." He picked his way across the roof.

"Better yet, don't tell her that I need incantations and weeks of practice, and I still suck."

"You were good with that knock-back spell last night," I said.

He grinned. "Thanks. Now, do I dare ask what you guys are doing hiding out up here? Or is it going to make me jealous?"

Simon was smiling as he said it, but Derek glanced away with a gruff "Course not."

"So you weren't having another adventure?" Simon lowered himself on my other side, so close he brushed against me, hand resting on mine. "It sure looks like a good spot for one. Rooftop hideaway, old widow's walk. That is what that is, huh? A widow's walk?"

“Yeah. And it’s rotting, so stay off it,” Derek said.

“I did. So, adventure?”

“A small one,” I said.

“Oh, man. I always miss them. Okay, break it to me gently. What happened?”

I explained. As Simon listened, intent and concerned, he cast glances at his brother. Foster brother, I guess you’d say—one look at them and you knew they weren’t related by blood. Simon is fifteen, a half-year older than me, slender and athletic, with dark, almond-shaped eyes and spiked blond hair. When Derek was about five, he’d come to live with Simon and his dad. They were best friends and brothers, blood tie or not.

I told him as much as I’d told Derek so far. Then he looked from me to Derek.

“I must have been sound asleep if I missed all that shouting,” Simon said.

“What shouting?” Derek said.

“You mean that Chloe just told you that she followed a ghost onto a roof, and you didn’t blast her all the way to Canada?”

“He’s a little off this morning,” I said.

“More than a little, I’d say. Aren’t you going to ask her for the rest of the story? The part where she explains *why* she followed the ghost? Because I’m sure there was a reason.”

I smiled. “Thank you. There was. It was a teenage guy who knew about the Edison Group and the experiments.”

“What?” Derek’s head whipped around, the sound more growl than question.

“That’s why I followed him. There’s a dead kid here who might have been another subject, and if he died here . . .”

“Then that’s a problem,” Simon said.

I nodded. “My first thought, naturally, was ‘Oh my God, we’ve been led into a trap.’”

Simon shook his head. “Not Andrew. He’s one of the good guys. I’ve known him all my life.”

“But I haven’t, which is why I prodded the ghost, and it was clear he hadn’t recognized him. Andrew said this place was owned by the guy who started his group and was involved in the experiments. If there’s a link to this kid, I think we’ll find it there.”

“We can ask Andrew—” Simon began.

Derek cut him off. “We’ll find our own answers.”

Simon and Derek locked gazes. After a second, Simon grumbled something about making things difficult, but he didn’t argue. If Derek wanted to amuse himself playing detective, then fine. We’d be gone soon anyway, back to rescue those we’d left behind and take out the Edison Group . . . or so we hoped.