



KELLEY ARMSTRONG'S
TERRITORIAL

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Territorial

Karl glanced over at the woman walking beside him, chattering away about the joys of Tae Bo, and he realized, with a gut-sinking burst of clarity, that he was no longer interested. It would have helped if he'd figured that out before he'd persuaded her to leave the party with him. But a fickle heart never makes life so easy, does it? What gleams under the candelabras of a charity gala loses much of its sparkle once that first blast of cold night air knocks away the pleasant buzz of three glasses of champagne.

The prize wasn't without value. Not terribly pretty. Too gilded, too bright, too colorful. While Karl considered himself a man of taste in most things, in others he never allowed taste to enter into the matter, and it certainly didn't with this. The moment he'd seen Cindy Mays on the dance floor, his pulse had quickened, and he'd smiled, feeling that first jolt of lust, knowing what would follow—the delicious chase and then . . . the reward. He wasn't sure which he preferred more: the pursuit or the prize. Didn't matter. They came entwined as one. A single delicious package.

But after he'd cajoled Cindy outside, he'd realized he no longer coveted this particular prize. He didn't question its value. That was clear enough. A twenty-four carat gold pendant of a

tiger's head, yellow sapphires for its stripes, emeralds for its eyes and diamonds for its teeth.

Tacky, yes. But worth more than all the dainty diamond drop necklaces and pearl chokers at the party.

As for Cindy herself, well, she looked like the sort of woman you'd expect to be wearing a two-inch tiger head around her neck. While he had been known to take a woman home and give her something in return for her jewels before he lifted them, this would not have been one of those times.

The necklace was too heavy to remove at the party without her noticing. But after a few more drinks at a bar, he doubted she'd notice if he absconded with her necklace, purse and all her clothing. Cindy had been rapidly descending from giddily drunk to falling-down-plastered before he'd charmed her from the gala.

Karl roused himself from his thoughts. Whether or not he had an interest in the lady—or her jewelry—he should keep up his part of the conversation. Ignoring her was rude.

“—and the philosophy of Tae Bo is mind working with spirit.”

“Interesting, so—”

“Once we harness the power of the mind over the body—”

Apparently, Cindy was one of those people who didn't require an active partner for conversation. From the looks she'd been giving him in the party, he suspected she didn't need an active partner for anything. Karl suppressed a small shudder, then chastised himself. Bad enough to lift a woman's jewelry; you didn't need to insult her as well.

He eyed the necklace again and struggled to feel some lick of hunger, of avarice even, but couldn't muster it. As they'd been walking, some random stimuli—a scent or a sound—had

triggered an association he hadn't made before and when he'd looked at the necklace, he'd been reminded of one that he'd had for almost a year now. A wolf's-head pendant.

The pendant was smaller and far more delicate than Cindy's tiger. While it still wasn't the sort of thing you'd expect a society matron to wear, it wouldn't look out of place on her daughter. He hadn't stolen that necklace, but had bought it. For a lady . . . though not for the usual reason.

He'd bought the necklace for a "sister," so to speak. Elena Michaels. A Pack werewolf with whom he'd cultivated a casual friendship. No, cultivated was the wrong word. It smacked of manipulation. While one could not say that a man who wooed women for their jewelry was any stranger to the art of manipulation, with Elena it was different—

Cindy stopped on the street corner. "So where is this bar, Kirk?"

He was sure he'd told her Kurt, his usual alias, but at this point, the point was moot. It wasn't like he planned to give her a chance to use it again anyway. Now, how to wriggle out of this without being insulting?

He looked up and down the street, as if distractedly searching for a bar. Then he jammed his hands in his pockets, sighed and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Cynthia, but . . ." He cast a look her way, eyes sliding down her black dress in a way that he hoped looked properly regretful "I can't believe I'm going to say this but . . ." . A resolute shake of his head. "No, I can't. My deepest apologies but I'm afraid I had one two many glasses of champagne in there and now, as my head clears, I'm ashamed of myself."

He glanced at her ring finger, with mega-carat engagement ring and platinum wedding band.

“You’re married,” he continued. “And this isn’t right. It was wrong of me to approach you. I offer my sincerest apologies, for what they are worth, but when I saw you out there, on the dance floor . . . I couldn’t help myself.”

That part, at least, was true.

Cindy lifted her ring finger. “This is what’s bothering you?”

“Yes, I know it seems old-fashioned but—”

She yanked off the rings and dropped them into her purse, then gave him a tight smile.

“There. Problem solved.”

“Simply concealing the fact does not change—”

“I’m separated, okay? My lousy cheating husband ran off a month ago.”

Funny, when he’d first approached her, she’d said her husband was away on business. Karl looked out over the streetscape, weighing his choices. He could call her on her lie, but did he really want to cause a scene here, on a busy corner? No. If she was determined to have her fling with a stranger, perhaps a stolen necklace would teach her the dangers of such things.

That sounded remarkably like a justification. Karl almost laughed. No matter how many times he told himself he didn’t need a justification—it was how he made his living; simple as that—his conscience couldn’t resist pitching in now and then.

He turned to Cindy. “If you’re quite sure—”

“I am,” she said, collagen-filled lips trying to form a firm line, but only succeeding in pouting.

“All right, then. I believe I saw a neighborhood pub a block over. But if you should change your mind, at any time—”

“I won’t,” she said, and strode across the street, leaving Karl to catch up.

Having apparently tired of discussing exercise—or deciding Karl needed more “stimulating” conversation—Cindy launched into a description of her latest lingerie shopping spree. Karl listened as far as “. . . and I said to the salesgirl, does it look like I need cleavage enhancement?” before letting his mind slide back to thoughts of the Pack.

With Elena gone, he stood little chance of having his request for territory heard, much less granted. Just last week, he’d had occasion to take Peter Myers, a Pack wolf, to dinner, when Peter had been passing through town. Over the meal, Karl had raised the subject of territory. Jokingly, of course, with self-deprecating jabs about his advancing age, and thoughts of retirement.

“You know Jeremy can’t do that, Karl,” Peter had said. “Territory is for Pack. It’s always been that way. But if you wanted to join the Pack, I’m sure Jeremy would consider it.”

Karl had flashed a smile. “Somehow I doubt I’m Pack material.”

“If you mean the thieving part, I don’t think it would be a problem. You’re discreet. That’s what counts.”

When Karl hadn’t answered, Peter had sighed. “Then I don’t know what to say. If any mutt was to be granted territory, it’d be you. You’re, what, forty-five? You aren’t likely to turn man-killer now. You keep your nose clean. You respect the Pack, never pick fights . . .”

“But . . .”

Peter had hesitated, then leaned forward. “Look, Karl, between you and me . . .” He’d shifted in his chair, as if uncomfortable with what he was about to say.

“Whatever you tell me, it will never get back to Jeremy.”

“Nah, that’s not what I’m worried about. I just don’t want to, you know, insult him, by speaking for him but . . .” He’d leaned forward. “Go ahead and pick a state, defend it against mutts . . . just don’t *call* it your territory. That’s the problem, see? Jeremy can’t grant you territory. It would break the Laws. And if he says yes to you, what does he say to every other mutt who ever wanted a place to call his own? Man-killers who want a safe place to kill humans with impunity. So just . . . take it. Unofficially.”

In other words, steal it. Take it, hide it and don’t let anyone else know you have it. Should be easy enough for a thief.

Karl knew Peter hadn’t meant it that way. He’d been genuinely sympathetic to Karl’s cause. That was what infuriated Karl most.

As with most people born into a class society, the Pack held fast to their “Laws” not because they necessarily agreed with them, but because that’s how they’d been raised, as had their fathers before them.

The back of his neck prickled and he slowed, eyes narrowing as he scanned the street. That sensation usually meant one thing: another werewolf nearby. Sensing them was one of the many lessons that had been a part of his childhood, along with how to live as a werewolf, how to steal, how to fight—seemingly endless lessons that he’d hated.

Karl took a deep breath, but couldn’t pick up a scent. The “radar” wasn’t perfect—sometimes any threat could set it off. More often than not, though, it meant “werewolf.”

He looked each way, sniffing. While he tried to be discreet, caution was more important than discretion, and after a moment, Cindy looked over, arched brows arching higher.

“Allergies,” he murmured.

“If you need something for it, I have a remedy in my purse.” She winked. “Top grade.”

Karl doubted she was talking about high quality allergy medication. He stifled a dart of distaste, then almost laughed. He got his pick-me-up from stealing property and he sneered at someone who got hers from illegal drugs? People in glass houses . . .

As he smiled, Cindy looked over sharply.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just realized we’re going the wrong way. Apparently, I *did* have too many glasses of that champagne.”

He looked around, searching for the source of that uneasy feeling as he pretended to be getting his bearings.

“Skip the drink,” Cindy said. “Just hail us a cab.”

Had he been his father, he would have jumped at her offer—get into a cab and get away from danger. Of course, had he been his father, he wouldn’t have been with Cindy in the first place. Burglary was his father’s method of choice—quiet burglary.

A quiet man, never raising his voice, never picking a fight, that was Josef Marsten. And, as much as Karl had loved him, he’d never been able to squelch that tiny part of him that had heard some of his father’s lessons and called him a coward. Too late he’d realized there was a difference between cowardice and caution.

Cindy looked up, her toe actually tapping the ground in impatience.

“Well?” she said. “Are you going to hail a cab or am I?”

The urge to hail one, shove her into it, and slam the door was almost overwhelming. But one of the many lessons his father had taught him was consideration for others. If you had to steal their belongings, at least you could be nice to them the rest of the time.

“The bar is just over there,” he said, gesturing toward a road they’d passed. “I promised friends I’d stop in. We’ll make it a quick visit.”

From the look she gave him, she was beginning to suspect she was being strung along. Now, if only she’d decide that was the case and return to the party . . .

“A *very* quick visit,” she said, then swiveled and stalked back the way they’d come.

As they backtracked, Karl continued sniffing, but exhaust fumes from the steady traffic drowned all other smells. He searched for men between twenty and fifty, walking alone or with companions. Yet everyone was paired off or in groups, and all with women. No werewolf hunted with a woman at his side . . . unless it was Elena, but he’d recognize her or anyone likely to be with her.

The thought of Elena brought a fresh gut-twist of frustration—reminding him that he wouldn’t have these problems if he could claim territory, and how much less likely that was to happen with Elena gone.

He shook off the feeling and continued looking and sniffing. Still he picked up nothing. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling. A predator knows when he’s being stalked.

The problem with being known as an excellent fighter was that it made you a target for werewolves looking to build their own reputations. More likely, though, this was a territorial matter—a werewolf newly moved to town, clearing the region for his temporary stay. By nature they were territorial beasts. It was also a matter of safety. If a nearby werewolf causes trouble, you don’t want to be mistaken for him when the Pack descended.

His father had a simple way to deal with the matter of shared ground. When another werewolf came near, Josef had cleared out. Only once had he stood firm . . . and had only meant to delay their departure, not avoid it.

Karl had been sixteen, and the growing wolf in him had longed to settle and defend territory. So, when his father came home to tell him to pack—yet again—Karl had used the only stalling tactic he'd known would work: he told his father he needed to Change.

Karl had been Changing for only three months—still at the stage where every one was a struggle, and control was nearly impossible. When the urge came, it couldn't be denied.

So his father had hustled him into the forest behind their motel. The problem was that Karl didn't really need to Change. He'd crouched in a thicket, grunting and panting, as he tried to think of a way to persuade his father to stand his ground, to fight the intruders.

His father had waited outside the thicket, patient as always, whispering advice and encouragement. Finally the Change had begun, but slow, taking another twenty minutes before he even reached the halfway point. Then his father had burst in, something he'd never done before. When he'd noticed Karl in the midst of his Change, he'd done something almost equally rare—sworn. He'd even cursed in English, rather than German as he usually did, as if Karl hadn't figured out the rough translation of those words years ago.

“Stay here,” he said. “Karl? Can you understand me?”

Karl grunted.

“Wait here and don't move. Understand?”

Another grunt.

His father left, bushes crackling in his wake. Karl lay on his side, half-Changed, feeling that cold prickle on his neck that told him a strange werewolf was nearby. Whomever his father had scented in town had followed them here.

He had to finished. Now. He concentrated. His limbs twitched, but that was it. With a snarl, he slammed the process into reverse. Again, only that faint twitch of response, as if his muscles were exhausted.

“Looks like you’re stuck, boy,” a rumbling voice said behind him.

He twisted around. A man’s face shone above him in the dark.

The man pushed aside the bushes. Farther away, other bushes snapped, as someone barreled through the undergrowth, coming closer.

“Malcolm!” His father’s voice, sharp with panic. “Malcolm. I’m right here.”

The branches slid back into place as the man withdrew. Karl dropped his head to the ground, screwed his eyes shut and concentrated on Changing—backward, forward, it didn’t matter, he just had to Change.

Karl dimly heard his father’s voice. “You found me, Malcolm. If it’s a challenge you want, you have it. A fair fight. Tell your posse—your friends to stand down.”

Karl smacked his hands against the ground, as if that could jump-start his Change. It was Malcolm Danvers and his “posse.” Pack werewolves. Karl had never met them—his father made sure of that. “If you have to fight, Karl, don’t be afraid to do it,” his father always said. “But there’s one exception to that rule: Malcolm Danvers. If you see him, or any of his posse, run and don’t look back.”

But now his father was disobeying his own rule. Challenging Malcolm. To protect his son.

“You want to challenge me, Marsten?” Malcolm said. “Waste of my fucking time, don’t you think? Worse than that, an embarrassment. Word gets out I bothered with a no-name like you, mutts will be laughing behind their backs.”

Marsten gritted his teeth, straining to Change.

"How about you, Wally? You want take Marsten's challenge."

The sound of a man spitting was the only response.

Marsten felt his limbs start to tremble as the Change began. They lengthened, reverting to human form. Wolf would have been better, but this would do.

"Ray?" Malcolm called.

The Change came fast, so fast he missed Raymond's response and was back to human before Malcolm spoke again.

"Well, Marsten, seems we have a problem. No one cares to take you up on that challenge. What do you suggest we do about that?"

"Let me go, Malcolm. My boy and I—we're no threat to you."

"No? You're mutts. That's threat enough."

Karl flew to the edge of the thicket and pulled back the branches just in time to see Malcolm leap on his father. His father's eyes went wide, and his fist swung back, but Malcolm's hands were already around his neck. A wrench. A dull snap.

Marsten heard a low whimper. As the men turned, he realized the sound came from him. He watched his father's body slump to the ground, then turned on Malcolm Danvers, his whimper hardening to a warning growl.

Malcolm laughed. "At least someone in the family has balls. Looking for revenge, pup? Come and get it."

Karl was about to fly from the thicket. Then he looked into Malcolm's eyes, and understood what his father had meant. This wasn't a man he could fight. Someday, maybe. But this was one time when he'd have to take his father advice. He pulled back, as if preparing to leap, then turned sharp and—

“I thought you said it was down this road,” Cindy snapped.

“Road?”

“The one you’re walking across!”

A horn blast shattered the last of Karl’s reverie, and he found himself in the middle of the street, crossing against the lights. Behind him, Cindy was toe-tapping again. She was making an odd face, too. Presumably a scowl, but her surgically-smoothed features weren’t cooperating.

“Are you drunk?” she said as he stepped back onto the curb.

No, but I wish to hell I was.

“I’m so sorry—” he began.

“Stop apologizing. God, I hate that. People who say they’re sorry, then keep doing the same thing, as if apologizing makes it okay.”

She had a point, an unexpectedly astute one. At any other time, he’d have latched onto that, some sign that she wasn’t as inane as she appeared. But tonight . . .

He sighed. “Cindy, I’m sor—” A weak smile as he stopped himself. “No, I won’t say that, but the sentiment is sincere enough. This isn’t working out. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Perhaps my allergy medicine reacting with alcohol but—”

He stopped, body tensing as the faintest scent of a werewolf drifted past. A werewolf he recognized. In his mind he saw the scene of his father’s death again, and looked past Malcolm to the red-haired man beside him. Raymond Santos. But that couldn’t be. Raymond was dead. He’d seen to it himself.

After years of honing his fighting skills, Karl had been cheated. He’d sworn revenge against the Pack, only to have Malcolm and his posse leave the group, as Malcolm’s son, Jeremy, took the reins of leadership. So Karl had turned his attention to Malcolm himself. Then, just as he’d

been about to declare himself ready for the confrontation, another mutt had killed the aging champion. Wally Santos was long dead, killed by the Pack. So only Raymond remained. Karl had taken out Raymond, but had gotten no satisfaction from the kill—hadn't even taken credit for it.

“You're completely out of it, aren't you?” Cindy said, sympathy creeping into her voice. “Don't you read the medicine bottles? Never take allergy stuff with alcohol.” She sighed. “At least let me take you back to your apartment before you walk in front of a bus.”

“I can—”

“Hello, Karl.”

Karl wheeled and saw Raymond Santos standing behind him. Before he could react, the man stepped from the shadow of the overhang.

“Daniel,” he said. Daniel Santos. Raymond's youngest son.

“Bit jumpy there, old man,” Daniel said, flashing his teeth in a smile.

His mind still clouded by memories, Karl was certain Daniel had somehow learned who'd killed his father all those years ago, and had come to take revenge. He saw Daniel's grin, sharp and dangerous, eyes glinting with that taint of cruelty he'd inherited from his father and uncle. Yet, as smug and nasty as Daniel's smile was, there was nothing malevolent in it.

“What do you want, Daniel?”

“To talk. Got an offer you can't refuse.”

He continued to grin. Arrogant, smarmy little bastard. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

“Kirk?” Cindy said. “Who's your friend?”

“He’s no—” Karl turned to Cindy. “It’s time for you to go home. Here, I’ll call you a cab.”

“No need for that, *Kirk*,” Daniel said, gaze sliding over Cindy. “We could use a little female companionship.”

If what Elena had told him was right, Daniel had developed a taste for satisfying three of his werewolf hungers at once—violence, food and sex . . . not necessarily in that order. Seeing the look he was giving Cindy, Karl believed it.

He turned to Cindy. “Go home.”

“But—”

“Go home now!”

As he snarled, Cindy backpedaled. He resisted the urge to apologize, to pull the mask of civility back in place. After a moment, she turned and hurried off into the night.

“Now why’d you go and—” Daniel began.

“You want to talk to me? Talk. Then I’ll give you ten minutes to get out of this city.”

“You’re in a pissy mood tonight, Karl. Didn’t get what you wanted?” Daniel cast a smirk at Cindy’s fast retreating back. “Don’t worry. I think I have something you’ll like even better. I hear you aren’t making much headway getting territory from the Pack.”

“Who—?”

“With Elena gone, you don’t have a hope in hell. Not that you ever did. Jeremy Danvers plays a shrewd game, pretending mutts have more power under him than we did before, but we don’t really, do we? He might not hunt mutts like his old man but—” Daniel shrugged. “Blood will tell, won’t it?”

The apple never falls far from the tree. In this one case, Karl didn't want to believe that. And yet . . . Look at him. Look at Daniel. Not replicas of their fathers, yet lessons learned from their fathers ran deep.

When Karl looked at Daniel, he felt disgust and distrust. Not the traits one seeks in a potential partner. And yet . . . Daniel was a clever man. Ruthless and clever. Perhaps he had a plan Karl could use. Probably not. But there was no reason not to hear him out.

"One drink," he said.