CHAPTER 1

The Heir

The first thing Rick Vincent saw from his truck was a boy on his knees in the frost. The second was the blood on the boy's hands.

Rick left the engine running. The other trainees had made a circle and were staring into it. He had to ask twice for room before they moved.

"What happened?"

"Shifted too fast," the boy said. A fang had gone through his lower lip. He was holding the cut together with both hands, ashamed of the blood. He couldn't have been more than thirteen.

Rick knelt. "Look at me a minute. You can take your hands away now."

The boy's eyes had gone bright, the color Rick's had gone the first time his own father called him out of a shift. Gideon had made it sound simple. Come back, son. It had taken Rick years to figure out that he'd come back for the word son.

“You’re all right,” Rick told the boy. “We’ll wait till you’re ready.”

Behind them somebody snickered. Rick didn’t turn his head. By the time the boy had his mouth under control, the whole yard was quiet. Rick got him up, put his own clean handkerchief into his hand, and sent him inside to get warm.

Then he went to park the truck properly. It was ridiculous to leave it running. His father had pointed that out enough times that Rick could hear it in Gideon’s voice. He could also hear the first thing his father would ask once he found out about the boy. Who’d been in charge before you got there? Rick hadn’t asked. He’d been too busy getting down on his knees.

When he came back across the yard, the trainees had found an excellent reason to start stretching again. Two women by the fence stopped talking. Rick was six foot three, with dark hair that refused to lie flat and gold eyes that made people think he was staring when he was only trying to hear them. He was wearing the same gray shirt he’d worn to fix the training barn roof. There was still a crescent of tar on the cuff.