

WOLFEN

by Alianne Donnelly

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my friends. All of you. The end of the world just wouldn't be the same without you—and I mean that in the most loving way possible. Here's hoping we all make it long enough to hook up with the Wolfen!

*P.S. to Rebekah Lewis:
Sorry it took so long, but here you go, dearie.
Now write me Melancton!*

“We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet.”

-Stephen Hawking

THE END

2015 Common Era, Chernobyl

“You can always tell the Wolfen children from the inerts. Although the term is misleading, given the broad spectrum of animal traits mixed in vitro, they truly do behave like a pack. The two oldest of this batch, Alpha Seven and Beta Twelve, are growing like weeds, and their intelligence quotients are off the charts.”

Dr. Leslie Jerome watched the two boys on screen, playing quietly in one corner of the playroom, while the rest of the children chased each other and fought for toys. Her smile ebbed. “It worries me sometimes. I can see it in their eyes, they just...know.”

She set her voice recorder down, popped a piece of gum into her mouth, then tossed the wrapper in the general direction of the trash bin. Orderlies normally kept the lights on in the room, but Leslie preferred the dark. It was more intimate, and it forced her to pay attention to the monitors and nothing else. “Dr. Hallemann’s file said that during the last round of tests, Alpha Seven noted a mistake in his serum formula. He’d pointed out that, at those levels, the acid content would burn a hole in his arm when injected.” Leslie chuckled to herself. “Hallemann’s recordings show him arguing proper test administration techniques with a ten-year-old. The child turned out to be correct.”

Alpha Seven and Beta Twelve were brothers—the genetic equivalent of fraternal twins, born three years apart, and the only instance in which a particular cocktail of DNA fragments resulted in more than one viable embryo. Now, they were Chernobyl den’s pride and joy, playing with construction puzzles, building intricate towers and castles. Every so often, one of them looked up to survey the playroom, his eyes catching the light like an animal’s.

Such serious children they were. They never smiled anymore, not since the regeneration experiments had begun. And although Leslie knew them to have vast vocabularies on par with college students, the brothers never spoke, unless absolutely necessary, as in the case of the mistaken formula.

“The psych team has declared them at risk of being compromised, but fit to continue being tested—with caution. They’re to be monitored closely during interactions with other children, but they rarely play with anyone else.”

Sometimes a younger child would approach them for help with a puzzle, and they would help. But once the puzzle was solved, they’d turn their backs and let the child wander away. “They’re deliberately setting themselves apart,” Leslie said. “I’m sure they have a reason for it, but I can’t for the life of me figure out what it is. It goes against their social nature, and has to be hard on them...”

She trailed off when one of the inert boys pushed a Wolfen girl, making her lose her balance and fall over a pile of hard wooden blocks. When the girl broke into tears, the brothers paused and looked up at the same time. The culprit faced them immediately, and as the brothers stared at him, he stared right back.

None of the other children noticed the three holding preternaturally still, but Leslie gaped, held her breath, and waited.

After a full sixty-seven seconds, the brothers exchanged a speaking look, then ducked their heads back to their own game. Too easy. This was in no way over.

Leslie frowned. "Their protector instinct is strong. They do not tolerate dissent within the group, but pick their battles and only engage when they can get away with it. Technical note: Move cameras in the play den. They've found them again."

The lights flicked on, blinding her for a moment. Leslie rubbed her eyes and swiveled away from the monitors to give the intruder a piece of her mind, but stopped short when she saw her colleague darkening the doorway.

Dr. Sallinger was a distinguished intellectual with a pair of glasses on his nose and another on top of his head, overdressed in a starched white lab coat. His real name was Dimitri Andreyevich Roskoff, but he liked to pretend he was a man apart. Tablet in hand, he barely looked up when he announced, "Sigma Nine is to start testing today. Have her prepped and ready in an hour."

It took Leslie's mind a moment to redirect and catch up. "So soon?" she asked. "She's only just transitioning."

There were certain biological thresholds which marked the end of childhood in all things. In humans, it was puberty. In these children, it was a little more complicated. Generally speaking, a conversion could be considered a threshold to failure. Children who converted were the result of a destructive combination of DNA flaws; they became more animal than human, incapable of higher thought function. They were incredibly fast when they wanted to be, yet had a lumbering gait that bespoke of an inner ear defect, which also accounted for their poor hearing. Having observed several of these for a number of years, Leslie recognized them for what they were. Monsters.

Another threshold distinguished Wolfen from inerts, and it was determined by a measure of pheromones. A higher level in one or the other usually predicted which way a child would develop.

Sigma Nine had only shown an imbalance of pheromones last week. It was tentative at best, so they'd been holding off further testing until she'd matured a little more.

"Apparently there's some confusion in her blood tests," Sallinger said. "We need to know where she falls."

"Why?" she demanded, mentally preparing for an argument. She couldn't help it. Sigma Nine was only four years old.

"Don't know, don't care." Sallinger lowered the tablet with a put-upon sigh, and deigned to look at her. "Will you do it, or shall I call in Michito?"

Leslie frowned. "Michito is here?"

"Tick tock, comrade." Sallinger made a face and tapped his wrist. He didn't close the door behind him when he left, a signature Roskoff passive-aggressive jibe to get her moving.

The voice recorder was still on. With a sigh, Leslie spoke into the mic. "I've just been informed that Sigma Nine's timeline has been expedited, so... I guess I better get going." She was reaching for the stop button, when the Wolfen brothers caught her eye. Jonah had stepped

out on break, and the brothers were putting their puzzles aside, watching the inert boy who'd hurt the Wolfen girl.

An odd thought occurred to Leslie. "Observer commentary: A few months back, we received a message that the Fukushima den was having issues. I know the protocol is to limit contact, but we haven't had any updates or progress reports since then. Now one of the Japanese team leaders is here, and this thing with Sigma Nine..." She rubbed her brow. "I don't know, maybe I'm being paranoid, but something just doesn't feel right. My gut tells me Michito wouldn't be here unless something was wrong." She chuckled at herself. "Listen to me. A seasoned geneticist having *feelings*. Ignore that last remark. It's apparently been a longer day than I realized."

Leslie turned off the voice recorder as Alpha Seven and Beta Twelve closed in on the inert boy. The others instinctively moved out of the danger zone. Fights like this occurred regularly among the subjects, and they were allowed, considered as an integral part of development. Unless blood flowed, the orderlies did not interfere.

But this was different. When the first blow came, it wasn't the childish slap Leslie would have expected. Alpha Seven drew back a fist, fingers tucked in like a champion boxer, and drove it into the boy's midsection. The inert boy went down, curling in on himself, and already the brothers were easing away.

It should have ended there.

But instead of staying down and accepting defeat, the inert boy pulled himself up and faced off with Alpha Seven, a mean gleam to his eye.

Beta Twelve cocked his head and leaned in to sniff the inert boy. He met eyes with his brother and both nodded.

Leslie frowned. Had she missed something?

She was about to page Jonah to get back into the playroom, when Beta Twelve curled his fingers into claws and slashed them across the inert boy's neck. Quick as a snap; one swipe, and blood sprayed, sending the other children into a screaming panic. Leslie gaped. She couldn't have just witnessed a seven-year-old commit cold, calculated murder against another.

She zoomed in on the inert boy gurgling blood on the floor. The pool spreading around him was too bright to be healthy. Pressing a shaky hand to her mouth, Leslie sat back. He'd converted. And the Wolfen boys had smelled it on him.

But he'd tested safe!

Children weren't allowed into social units until doctors determined them either safely inert or Wolfen. How could he have converted so late?

By the time Jonah came back, the brothers had wiped off the convert's blood and returned to their game. Though still visibly shaken, the other children seemed to sense the threat had been eliminated, and following the brothers' example, quieted as well. They went back to their smaller groups, giving the now-dead boy a wide berth. Inert or Wolfen, they all trusted the apparent alphas of the pack, instinctively adhering to the subconscious social structure. Amazing.

Jonah herded the children out of the room and away from the corpse. He looked uneasy, as well he should. None of the children moved until the brothers did, recognizing their authority over them as greater than Jonah's.

Leslie was still pondering this as she walked down the Green corridor to the nursery. The hallway was quiet. This level didn't usually see much activity, what with nothing here but the guts of the facility—control rooms, nurseries, and incubation chambers. A horizontal green line ran its length as a directional. At the next intersection, a red line ran down another hallway that led to the convert testing rooms and loading/unloading docks.

Leslie glanced sideways at it as she passed, and waved to an orderly jogging to get somewhere. He didn't see her. She shrugged, and kept going to the nursery. This chamber was separated into halves, with the far side walled off for newborns and an antechamber that served as the sleeping quarters and playroom for the one- to five-year-olds. It had gray walls and black floors; a deliberately bland environment to encourage imagination and mental development, while curbing overt excitement.

Sigma Nine sat at one of the plastic tables, coloring with crayons. Her brown curls fell over her forehead and she kept blowing them back with frustrated huffs. The cutest little angel. She still had her chubby cheeks, but Leslie could tell it wouldn't be long before Sigma Nine hit her growth spurt, and when she did, the girl would be a show stopper.

"Hey, Sinna," she said.

Sigma Nine looked up and gave her a ten million megawatt smile. "Hi, Gerry! Are you here to play with me?"

Oh honey, how I wish I could. Leslie struggled to maintain her own smile. "Not today, sweetie. I need to take you to do some tests. Is that okay?"

Sigma Nine pouted. "Will it hurt?"

"Maybe a little."

"Do I have to?"

Leslie nodded.

Sigma Nine bowed her head, put down the crayon, and came forward, holding out her hand for Leslie to take. She kept her gaze on the floor, but didn't drag her feet, as docile as a trusting little lamb despite her apprehension, and it broke Leslie's heart.

When they reached the lab, Leslie lifted Sigma Nine onto the exam table and performed a quick routine physical, noting the results on her chart.

She was just finishing up with the initials when Dr. Sallinger arrived. He checked the chart, scrubbed up, and held his hands out for gloves. His face mask, as always, hung around his neck, ready to be donned in a hurry. He pulled it up, saying, "You may begin, Dr. Gerome."

Leslie stared at him. "Me?"

"Did I not make myself clear?"

Leslie swallowed hard. Sigma Nine was watching her with an eerie calm. She couldn't make herself move.

"Are you unfamiliar with the procedure?"

Leslie shook herself. "No. I mean, I know what to do."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

She stepped up to the table and pulled the instrument tray closer.

"Secure the arm," Sallinger instructed, and she did, hating that he felt the need to talk her through this. "Now, disinfect the area. That's right. You'll want a number eighteen scalpel. Make a six-centimeter incision parallel to the ulna, beginning one centimeter from the styloid process."

Leslie's head snapped up. "Six centimeters?"

"Need I remind you we have two hundred and forty-seven other children to see to? I do not have time for this. Now, make the incision. Six centimeters parallel to the ulna, beginning one centimeter from the styloid process."

Again, Leslie swallowed hard, and tried not to look at Sigma Nine's face when she pressed the blade tip to the inside of the girl's arm. She made the cut smooth, but not fast enough to spare the girl pain, and Sigma Nine gasped and moaned. She started crying, but like all of the children,

she was trained not to move during testing. With a scalpel so close to her delicate skin, a sudden twitch could kill her.

“Starting timer,” Sallinger said, as blood began to flow. “Five seconds... Ten seconds...”

Leslie frowned. “She’s not healing.”

“Give her time. Fifteen seconds...”

Sigma Nine sobbed, her heart rate rising with her distress. And she kept on bleeding.

“Twenty seconds...”

Leslie shook her head. “Enough of this.” She grabbed a bunch of gauze and pressed it to the wound.

“What are you doing? I did not tell you to arrest the—”

“She’s not healing! I am not letting her bleed out on the table.”

Sallinger tore off his mask and gloves. “You have just contaminated the test and wasted my time, and you have achieved nothing except to ensure the test will need to be repeated.”

“Get out,” Leslie snapped. She’d been careful to make the cut shallow, but Sigma Nine was still losing too much blood. Pinching the girl’s skin together, she applied a clear solution to glue the edges closed. It wasn’t normally used for lacerations this long, but Leslie didn’t want to mar the poor girl with rough stitches and an ugly scar. It would have to be enough.

“I will see you fired for this—”

The lights went out with the disconcerting sound of a power-down as the entire facility sighed into darkness. Five seconds later, emergency generators kicked in and red bulbs flared, illuminating the room and the corridors outside.

“What’s going on?” Leslie demanded, winding a sterile bandage around Sigma Nine’s arm.

Sallinger cast her a dirty look. “Probably just a power outage. Stay here.”

“Gerry?”

“It’s okay, Sinna. Just hang tight for me, all right? I’m so sorry I hurt you. I promise it’ll never happen again.” There was no reason; her lack of regenerative abilities confirmed her status as inert.

That’s what you thought about the dead boy, too.

She pushed the thought aside. If she studied the boy’s behavioral history, she’d probably find clues about his covert tendencies beginning from an early age. Sigma Nine was too gentle, too sweet. No, she was inert—for all intents and purposes, human.

When she finished with the girl’s bandages, Leslie freed her arm and sat her up, pushing her curls away from her face. “How are you doing, sweetheart?”

Sigma Nine’s chin wobbled, and more tears spilled.

Leslie hugged her tight, rubbing her back for comfort.

That was how Sallinger found them when he came back. His hair was disheveled and he was missing one pair of glasses. Gasping for air, he slammed the door shut and locked it. “They breeched the holding pens,” he said, heading for the security console.

“What?”

It took him three tries to enter his code, then the screen split into nine, showing security feeds from their wing. “I knew I shouldn’t have signed off on the transfer,” Sallinger rambled. “My God, they’ll kill us all!”

The break in his voice sent a chill down Leslie’s spine. “W-what are you talking about?”

Sallinger rubbed his sweaty face, shaking as he watched the screen. Two of the nine feeds showed groups of scientists herding several children in one direction. Two more showed the covert holding pens—empty. “The crazy Japs! Michito didn’t come alone. Fukushima den was

compromised. They were storing too many fully grown converts, and they broke free. Michito didn't want to lose twenty years of research, so he captured several of them and brought them here."

"Is he insane?"

Sallinger trembled so hard, he knocked his glasses off his nose trying to adjust them. He wheezed, on the verge of tears, and his distress sent Sigma Nine into wailing fits. Sallinger froze, staring at the child. "She knows," he said. "She can sense them. We can use her to get out."

"Don't you dare!" Leslie twisted to keep Sigma Nine away from him, but her gaze was fixed on the screen and all of those people nervously looking over their shoulders.

"Didn't you hear what I said? We're going to *die* if we don't get out."

Leslie circled around Sallinger to get to the screen. Her thumbprint would be enough to signal distress in the lab. "You're panicking over nothing. The guards will take care of this." They were highly trained mercenaries, paid well for their service, and their response time was usually less than seventy seconds. Of course they could handle this. She was certain of it. They'd come and escort the three of them to safety.

But Sallinger shook his head. "They're all dead! Fully grown converts are not like the children, Gerome. They feed and they breed, and they're unstoppable when the urge hits them. It's like a hive mind effect. The Fukushima ones were starved, and their frenzy riled up the converts here. The den is overrun!"

No. That couldn't be. He was in hysterics. When he calmed down, he'd realize how crazy that sounded. A small army of guards, dead? No way. She'd show him.

Adjusting Sigma Nine in her hold, Leslie typed one-handed, looking for a duty roster. Everyone on active shift could be reached directly in an emergency through a tracker in their radio unit. She called them with her digital page, one after the other, but no one answered. Throat suddenly dry, Leslie shook her head and tried again. One by one, the signals disappeared as if deactivated. Either every one of those radios had gotten smashed, or someone—*something*—had damaged the main controls in the lower level server hive. She couldn't call out. No one was coming. They were on their own.

Apprehensive and irritated by the red lighting, Leslie backed away from the screen. "What about the others?"

Sallinger hesitated.

"*What!*"

He jerked his chin toward the screen just as the last group disappeared from the shots. "They're already evacuating. The researchers and orderlies are gone, along with whatever children they had with them at the time. The rest they left for dead."

Leslie's knees buckled and hit the floor so hard, the impact jolted through to the top of her head. Sigma Nine clutched her, whole body shaking with sobs.

"Listen to me," Sallinger said. "There's an escape hatch at the end of the corridor. We can make it. If we can get to the surface before they detonate the charges, we'll be fine. We just have to get there. Give me the child."

None of his words had penetrated Leslie's haze of fear, but when he reached for Sigma Nine, something snapped. Why did he want her so badly? "No." She moved out of the way. "I'll take her."

Though he looked ready to throttle her, he somehow pulled himself together and nodded. "Very well. But you must calm her down. They will hear us."

A flicker of movement on the screen caught her eye, but she refused to look. “Give me a minute.”

Removing herself to one corner, Leslie rocked Sigma Nine, crooned to her. “Easy, sweetheart. Breathe. You’re okay. You’re going to be just fine. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Hurry up,” Sallinger hissed, nervously watching out the window.

Leslie hummed and rubbed the girl’s back until her sobs eased. “That’s my girl. That’s my brave girl. Now, we’re going to play a game, okay? I want you to close your eyes, and stay as quiet as you can. We’re going to pretend we’re hiding from monsters.”

“Will they hurt me?”

Sallinger gasped. “Move it!”

Leslie glared at him. “No, baby. No one’s going to hurt you again, I promise. Are you ready?”

Sigma Nine sniffled and nodded against her shoulder.

“Good girl. On three, okay? One...”

She signaled for Sallinger to open the door. He did it slowly, peeking out to make sure the path was clear.

“Two...”

Silence out in the hall—no hum of artificial lights, no pitter-patter of rushing feet, not even alarm sirens. Just total, dead silence. And that terrified her. They were truly all on their own. Gritting her teeth, Leslie walked when Sallinger beckoned, and stepped out of the room.

“Three,” she whispered.

The race was on. Leslie focused on the ceiling hatch some thirty yards away. She headed straight for a wall ladder leading up to it, heart pounding, and Sigma Nine sitting heavy in her arms.

Of course, Sallinger noticed her readjust her hold. “Let me take her,” he offered. “I can carry her more easily.”

Leslie shook her head and quickened her step. Almost at the ladder. Shuffling noises from the other end of the corridor made her look back. “Oh, no...”

Two converts, an adult and a child, lumbered toward them. They looked marginally human, with patchy hair and thin bodies corded with lean muscle. But their long limbs ended in clawed fingers, and they had fangs instead of teeth. Because of their cold-blooded nature, their skin held a grayish tinge, but this condition didn’t seem to affect their metabolisms in any significant way, acting as a cloaking mechanism only. Matching body temperature to their surroundings made them invisible to heat sensors and infrared cameras.

Monsters. Boogeymen out of nightmares. Mindless, ravening beasts.

And they were coming closer.

“Climb!” Sallinger shouted.

“Hold on to me,” Leslie told Sigma Nine, and then she climbed.

The converts stopped and sniffed the air. Although their hearing was impaired and their eyesight compromised by the flashing emergency lights, their sense of smell remained unequalled. The moment it scented prey, the adult convert tossed its head back and screeched.

Several others answered from a distance.

Then it ran forward.

“Climb! *Climb!*” Sallinger shrieked.

Leslie climbed as fast as she could, arms burning with strain, Sallinger right on her heels. But they could only go so far before Leslie had to stop to open the latch. Sallinger clambered on top of her as high up as he could manage.

It wasn't far enough.

He screamed as the adult convert sank its claws into his leg and dragged him down to the floor.

"Keep your eyes closed, Sinna." Leslie trembled, vision blurry with tears, but she didn't dare take her eyes off her target as she touched the thumbprint pad to activate the latch mechanism. *Don't look down. Don't look down!* "Just hold on, baby girl," she whispered as monsters tore into Sallinger below. The sounds he made...

Please, God, get me out of here.

The heavy escape hatch slid open, and she moved, climbing higher to reach the pad on the other side. *Don't look down.* Just a few more rungs. Almost there. *Don't look down...*

Got it!

The three-inch metal hatch slid closed, sealing off all sight and sound.

Leslie pressed her forehead against the ladder, too shaken to keep going. They were still thirteen stories below the Chernobyl disaster site. To this day, few came to these parts for fear of radiation poisoning. Just as with Fukushima, it had been the perfect hiding place, with all contingencies accounted for.

Except for the crazy Japanese.

If Sallinger had been right, then somewhere on the surface, a researcher had his twitchy finger on a detonator that would entomb this place forever. Leslie had to get moving or she and Sigma Nine would be buried right along with it.

"Gerry?"

"It's okay, Sinna, we're safe. You can open your eyes now."

"I can't see anything."

"That's because it's dark." Leslie looked up. Twelve stories above, a small green light marked the exit—her north star. "I'm going to get us out of here," she swore. "We'll get out, and catch a plane to San Francisco. We can go check out the sea lions at Pier 39, would you like that?"

Sinna nodded.

"Good. Now just hold on."

Keeping her eyes on that little green light, Leslie reached up for the next rung.